Article

Single, Divorced, or Separated? Factors That Impact the Lives of Women Who Are Heads of Household in Lima, Peru

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Abstract

The rupture of a conjugal relationship has both a positive and negative impact on the lives of immediate family members. Although for many women terminating marriage may signal freedom from an oppressive, even violent conjugal relationship, it is undeniable that this separation also results in strong social pressure and discrimination in certain contexts, a situation which limits the woman's freedom of action in and outside of the home. The purpose of this descriptive, phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of 15 Peruvian, urban-based mothers, all of whom made the decision to exchange marriage for single parenthood within the confines of a strong patriarchal system. The study follows the actions of the women as they seek to overcome obstacles related to parenting and the management of their respective households. Three emerging themes are identified in this study: (a) the development of the woman's relationship as wife and mother, (b) impact of the separation/divorce on the maternal role, and (c) experiences in the single parent household. Implications for social research studies and practice are discussed.

Keywords

single parent households, single mothers, Peru, divorced women, job market

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a notable rise in the numbers of single parent households in developing countries. Latin America, specifically, has seen a marked increase in the number of homes headed by single female mothers, these constituting more than a third of all households. This impacts the lives of women who are already facing a limited job market, reduced salaries, and the responsibility of single parenting without family support, factors aggravated by a dramatic rise in poverty levels (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe [CEPAL], 2004; Gindling & Trejos, 2005; Slon & Zúñiga, 2006). During the decades of the 1990s and 2000, the number of households headed by single female parents increased, in Latin America, from 10% to 12%. This growing tendency in recent years is principally due to the rising number of separated and divorced couples (Arriagada, 2007; Rico & Maldonado, 2011; Rodríguez, 2004), which contributes to greater vulnerability, mainly in the Caribbean region (CEPAL, 2013).

In the past decade, in Colombia, for example, the number of households headed by single mothers was a very prevalent factor in urban areas. This decade saw family organization and structure undergo diverse changes, resulting from shifts in female heads of households, whether unmarried, separated, or widowed women. Likewise, research about households headed by single mothers in other developing countries has also revealed similarly sharp rises: from 11.3% to 15.5% in Argentina, for example, 11.9% to 16.6% in Uruguay, 6.9% to 8.7% in Brazil, and 6.4% to 7.5% in Chile. This increase has impacted not only the structure of the traditional family unit but has also had a strong influence on the state of women in the labor force where their presence has almost tripled, making them not only the prime emotional but also economic support of their children (Alarcón, 2013; CEPAL, 2010, 2012; Gammage, 2009). These statistics are alarming when we take a global look at households. According to United Nations Children's Fund (2007), toward the end of the decade of the 1990s, around 20% of all households were headed by single mothers. This compares to 24% as regards Latin American households.

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In the case of Peru, statistics show that in 2013, 26.5% of the country's households were headed by women. Within this group, the reports present a division based on the condition of poverty. It was noted that in the group of homes not affected by poverty, a greater proportion of women were heads of household, specifically 28 out of every 100. In poor households, comparatively, 22 out of every 100 women were head of household (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática [INEI], 2014a). This would suggest that in the past several years, there has been an increase in both poor and non-poor households headed by women. As regards education level, INEI's report also shows a higher rate of illiteracy in single-person households and in extended single parent households: 15.2% and 14.2%, respectively. On the contrary, and according to the type of home they belong to, 42.6% of heads of composite households, 29.7% of single-person households, 28.8% of nuclear households, and 25.8% of extended households had received higher education. These statistics corroborate the studies focusing on one of the main causes of separation and divorce among couples, namely, when wives have a higher education level and greater economic independence than their spouses (Simonsson & Sandstrom, 2011). With respect to marital status, INEI (2010) points out that 22.6% of male/female heads of single parent nuclear family households and 17.4% of single parent extended family households are single, with no previous spouse. Divorced men/women heads of household predominate in single parent nuclear family units (2.7%) and single parent extended family units (2.4%).

However, the last two decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number of women on the job. This rose from 58.4% in 2001 to 64.8% in 2012, also taking into consideration that the gap between jobs traditionally held by males versus females has narrowed (INEI, 2014b). Nevertheless, these percentages tend to shift in cases of marital separation, which find women most affected due to the great difficulty they face trying to hold down a job while managing a household on their own. This problem ultimately results in a substantially higher number of single mother-headed households coping with the threat of poverty. Encuesta Nacional de Hogares's (ENAHO) reports indicate that 23.3% of nuclear households headed by single mothers are at poverty level versus 19.4% that are headed by men (ENAHO & INEI, 2008; INEI & Movimiento Manuela Ramos, 2010).

The statistics vary considerably when we look at the entire region. According to CEPAL's analysis, female heads of household are not necessarily at a lower income level than male heads of household. That is to say, there is no systematic difference in poverty levels of households headed by men or women. Some homes headed by women have less probability of operating at poverty level (CEPAL, 2003, 2004). This group would correspond to an increasingly greater number of economically independent young women from the region who are single parents.

Notwithstanding this economic independence, a global, gender-focused look at women reveals that they is still the group that is hardest hit by marital dissolution. Even before this separation, many women find themselves in a dependent economic situation, with respect to their partners, due to household and child-rearing duties either completely or partially preventing them from being wage earners. Likewise, its human capital gets hard hit in terms of greater access to education and work opportunities. Faced with the option to divorce or stay married, many women suffer through the former "because of the children," because to do the contrary would result in having to divide their time between caring for children, home, working part or full time, and, in many cases, being the sole support of their family (Poortman, 2000; Sorensen & Hill, 2004). Despite the serious emotional, social, and financial dilemmas that face the women on which this study focuses, their resilience demonstrates their strength in coping with the realities of being single parents.

For these reasons, it is imperative to understand the social, labor, and personal dynamic of households headed by single mothers in a way which also provides us with insight into their daily lives. There is a scarcity of studies that explore these realities from this specific angle. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of 15 Peruvian women who as a result of separation or divorce became the emotional, economic, and social mainstay of their children. This multiplicity of roles also carried with it a series of obstacles and limitations, as detailed in the study's interviews and observations, further ahead.

A Look at Identity Theory From the Standpoint of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism and identity theory provide the framework for this study. We analyzed the experiences of 15 Peruvian women as heads of household. We use the term *identity* in this study to mean the image that the participants have of themselves, as separated or divorced mothers, professionals, and heads of household, among other roles. This self-image, whether positive or negative, is generated through behavior that starts developing as they being their conjugal separations, as well as society's reactions, to the same transition. This involves, according to Burke (1980), symbolic means as much for the individuals in question as for the social group to which they belong. Individual behavior will tend to adjust itself in accord with past and present experiences, and also with that of the social group's expectations (Hollander & Howard, 2000). These individual and collective experiences are strongly related to issues of power that interactionists pay particular attention when it comes to oppressive and abusive relationships. Thus, there is a significant correlation between domestic conflicts and structural components of power, socio-economic situation, societal pressure, and the traditional patterns of beliefs that often influence

the individual's decision-making ability (Dennis & Martin, 2005; Scully, 1988). In this same scenario, Allen-Collinson (2009) states that symbolic interactionism leads us to examine conflict relationships from the individuals' experiences, and their struggles to make proper decisions when their sense of *self* and the situation are perceived as uncertain.

The construction of the *self* and identities happen through interactions with others; in his analysis on human interaction, Charon (1992) argues that interactionism explains how social agents negotiate and construct meaning in specific contexts and social interactions with significant others and the group in general. It is also a context in which identities are negotiated and influenced by conflicted relationships and situations (Lempert, 1994). In their study on identity construction and societal roles, Marks and MacDermid (1996) point out that we cannot reference a single type of identity; individuals take on different roles and, for this reason, assume multiple interacting and influential roles during their lives. If these roles and identities are considered adequate for society, they will be accepted and supported, if not, they will be rejected. In this way, according to the roles they exert, individuals are affected both socially and personally. In the case of single mothers who are also heads of household, societal messages are generally not very encouraging. It is hoped that women build a family consisting of paternal and maternal figures that play domestic and public roles. In this way, society forms the *self* that in turn assumes roles that represent diverse aspects of the social process (Turner, 1991). When women abandon this role, their situation becomes doubly complicated on many levels, principally the financial and social.

Through personal and social roles, identity theory signals an important aspect to keep in mind, namely, *agency*. This refers to the capacity of people to reach certain goals in spite of changes in their environment. When an individual possesses a great capacity for agency, he or she can adapt and overcome adverse situations. Social and cultural structures, however, also exert a strong influence over the attainment of an individual's goals (Tsushima & Burke, 1999). Thus, within a culture as strongly patriarchal as the Peruvian, single mothers that are heads of household encounter serious cultural and social patterns that, in many cases, limit the development of their goals.

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of 15 Peruvian woman who are single mothers, heads of household, and residents of Lima. Descriptive phenomenology was used as the best approach for critical and rigorous analysis of social groups. In accord with Streubert and Carpenter (2003), phenomenology helps us explain the essence of experiences and realities, and the meaning of specific phenomena. Brink and Wood (1998) describe descriptive phenomenology as a three-stage process: intuition, analysis, and description; and those were the strategies used for this study.

Furthermore, participants were encouraged to provide concrete examples of their experiences to support their statements. The criteria used for the selection of the participants were that they be professional women that resided in Lima; single, separated, or divorced; head of household; and have minor children living at home.

We used structured interviews, each of which lasted more than an hour. This form of interview helped us to produce consistent data that was compared across the participants. Our participants were selected using snowball sampling to identify significant cases about our study topic.

The interviews were done in Spanish language and recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). They were carried out in participants' workplaces or homes. Following the initial demographic-based questions, three emergent themes were explored: (a) development of the spousal relationship and motherhood, (b) impact of the separation/divorce on the maternal role, and (c) experiences in the single parent home.

Analysis and Discussion

We analyzed the experiences of 15 Peruvian women, all residents of Peruvian urban centers, single mothers, and heads of household, ranging in age from 26 to 61 years. All of the participants have higher education and work outside the home in the area of administration, education, and health care. All were separated or divorced at the time of the interviews, which took place between March and June 2014. The emerging themes that we opted to analyze, based on the experiences related in the interviews, were (a) development of the previous spousal relationship and motherhood, (b) impact of the separation/divorce on the maternal role, and (c) experiences in the single parent home.

Development of the Spousal Relationship and Motherhood

For this theme, we decided to explore the beginning of the relationship, initial conflicts, and development of the events that led participants to end their conjugal relationship and continue life as single women.

In terms of participants' views on what constitutes family life, all concurred about the importance of bonds of affection and mutual support. For the majority, traditional ideas of family persist: mother, father, and children as a goal to attain. Five of the 12 women interviewed maintain the traditional notion of family: mother, father, and children. They define family as "a united group" of members who work for a common ideal.

> My parents raised me to believe that family is the most important thing, so when I got married I thought it would be forever and that the two of us would work together to raise our children. (Francisca, 46)

I always dreamed of one day having the perfect family: Mom, Dad, and kids. For me this was always very important. (Naty, 42)

When we shift away from these ideals and explore the way participants themselves were raised, the women describe a strong patriarchy, with their father as the main provider and decision maker and their mother as the caregiver. They also relate situations involving their parents' separations, infidelities, and existence of "parallel families," that is, of a father's mistress and the children born from this extramarital union. Two participants described cases of sexual abuse and inappropriate touching within the family. The participants whose parents separated affirm that they did not have the "ideal" family.

My family has always been dysfunctional; my Dad went after any woman who crossed his path . . . (Juana, 61)

Mom was more intelligent and educated, but Dad was a bully, and so the bully would win out . . . they didn't fight, but neither did I see any love. (Ariadna, 47)

He (her former spouse) comes from the typical home where the Mom is a submissive, but happy slave. (Ariadna, 47)

The strong patriarchal system within the nuclear family represses, in the words of Denner and Guzman (2006), the identities of the women, situating them within the context of a dominant culture that leaves little space for their own voices. Products, for the most part, of repressive homes, the participants manifested two points to consider: five of them indicated that they got married after finding out they were pregnant, and nine indicated that this was their first sexual experience and that they decided to live with their partners to avoid shame and criticism of their social group. They also indicated that the violent, hostile environment of their own homes led them to make hasty decisions to escape these realities.

I fell in love and believed, like everybody, in the fairy tale. Back then I was blinded by love, eyes closed, no Mom to give me advice, and for Dad, all men were bad, "Look at me," he'd say. I married my first boyfriend, a mistake. That's why I let my own daughter get to know more people. (Chio, 39)

I needed somebody by my side, so I wouldn't feel lonely, because at 19 nobody thinks about getting married or having kids or any of those things. In my case it was because we didn't live with my Mom, we lived with some aunts, and we were mistreated. My sister took off with her boyfriend and I got married. (Naty, 42)

Following the participants from one family nucleus into another, we saw that the stories did not vary much. The brief romance lived gave way to long episodes of tense cohabitation. The women comment that they opted to initially continue their conjugal relationship, justifying acts of violence

to preserve the paternal image for their children. The marital break ensued when the justifications were no longer viable. The continuity of abusive relationships at the hand of a dominating male figure provokes, according to Gage (2005), an increase in violent situations that impact the physical and emotional stability of women and children. In spite of the serious irresponsibility of their partners with respect to the care and upbringing of their children, these women thought that time would change the situation. The opposite, in fact, happened.

The indifference displayed by the women's ex-partners is markedly seen in the division of roles. All of the women indicated that they spent more time than their partners on housework and child care, which interfered with work outside the home and generated much conflict. Four of the women in this study group were higher wage earners than their partners while married. They indicate that their work was hard and that they did not have sufficient spousal support in this sense. This corroborates studies that refer to the "double day," that is to the say, work performed by wives in and outside of the home, far surpassing in hours that of the husband's workday. The impact that this has on the wife's emotional and physical stability is damaging (Floro, 1995; Strober & Weinberg, 1980).

The participants expressed their frustration, recalling their expectations at the onset of the relationship, that their partners would provide economic support. As professionals, working outside the home, the participants did not depend economically on their partners; however, the women express that not only were they alone responsible for the care of the children but also for the complete economic and day-to-day management of the home.

I took care of the home and also worked. I had to ask him to help, but it was a problem and just created more conflict. (Ariadna, 47)

Share the housework? Nothing doing! I did everything, cared for the house, worked outside the home. His function and role as a father was minimal, and really bothered me. (Lucila, 47)

Making the decision to separate was a long process; the women looked (in the words of one participant) for "justification to stay with him." Performing exhausting household tasks on top of submitting to acts of psychological violence, from the subtlest to the most explicit forms, are constants in the interviews.

Cases of severe physical violence against the women and also their children were documented. There was also a case of rape (that resulted in pregnancy) described by the woman's spouse as a normal occurrence between a couple (Bennice & Resick, 2003). The participants also related cases of infidelity by their partners that, amid other conflicts, sparked the decision to separate.

Psychological abuse and jealousy were at the root of the worst conflicts for me. The insults and the jealousy, the fact that I

supposedly did "nothing for him," since I didn't iron his shirts or wash his clothes. I asked myself why I kept on in a relationship if he didn't respect me and was with other women. (Eli, 26)

He went looking for problems, I couldn't speak or think. He didn't want me to talk or express a thought, because he "didn't want noise." The aggressiveness was getting worse . . . Our youngest was the result of rape. In the end, after many years, I reported him to the authorities. (Chio, 39)

Raised, for the most part, in homes where their identities and voice were strongly repressed, the participants had chosen to live with men who continued the pattern violence that had begun for them in childhood. This tendency echoes the analysis concerning the exposure of children to acts of violence during their formative years, and the impact of these experiences on their adult lives (Early Intervention Foundation, 2014).

The Impact of Separation or Divorce on the Woman, How It Affects Her Maternal Role, and Its Impact on the Extended Family

After understanding the motives that led participants to end their relationships, we went on to explore the impact that this rupture had on their lives, as well as on their domestic and public surroundings. One of the greatest concerns of the women was on the effect that their conjugal separation would have on the lives of their children. Six of them initially decided to continue the relationship so as not to "shatter the paternal image," but over time, the women noticed that the children would be even more damaged if they did not bring the relationship to an end. This feeling concurs with the findings related to women's choices as to continuing or ending problematic relationships for fear of leaving their children without a father (Afifi, Davis, Denes, & Merrill, 2013).

I decided to seek a separation for my children. He tried to kill me twice. He wanted to smother me with the pillow, wanted to abuse me. My kids witnessed the abuse. At first I thought that they needed a father, but after I realized that this wasn't so. (Chio, 39)

My daughter took the separation well. My life was not easy with him. She doesn't talk much but I feel that with the help of the psychologist she is starting to understand. (Ariadna, 42)

My daughter is the one that asked me not to go back to her father. (MariEsther, 39)

The replies to the question about their emotions following the separation are almost all the same. All describe feeling relieved. In spite of feeling afraid of how to go forward with their lives, they feel freed from having to carry "one less burden." Two of the participants expressed feeling guilty after the separation. In this case, the women's immediate family

plays an important role not only in an emotional but also a material sense.

I feel a sense of relief. I feel somewhat guilty as well, but I also feel like a burden has been taken off of me. It's normal, we women tend to always blame ourselves. In terms of work, I feel less pressured than before, but my work is demanding. (Ariadna, 47)

At first I felt frustrated. Now I feel calm because I have the support of my mother. If it weren't for her, I'd be afraid. (Chia, 34)

It's as though I'd shaken a gorilla off my back, I was lighter . . . I've gotten my strength back, my spirit, my happiness, dreams, and the time that I never seemed to have before. (Juana, 61)

The women indicate that their families and close friends were an important factor at the moment of making the decision to end their relationship. At this moment, in accord with Ciabattari (2007), the individuals' social capital is fundamental, as it will be in providing valuable support during the difficult transitional stage.

As they started out on the path of single parenthood, the participants spoke of confronting a group of obstacles that were not new for them. As mentioned previously, even when they lived with their partners, they considered themselves as heads of household. During the interviews, we gave them a list of factors as related to their new status: social, familial, labor, economic, and emotional. All pointed out that their major concern, before making the decision to separate, was financial. Four participants indicated that they set about organizing their finances first. They also carefully organized their job schedule and then found assistance from family, friends, or domestic workers to help care for the children.

I made my financial plans before the separation; I calculated costs and then told myself, "Now I can go ahead and do it . . ." (Ariadna, 47)

Financially it worked out better. I found work, I got the kids better organized. He only gives me child support when he feels like it. (Chio, 39)

My siblings help me out with my kids when I get home late or when I need to travel. My friends and I help each other out taking care of each other's daughters. I'm creating a network of good friends. (Ariadna, 47)

After the separation I had to support myself. A friend found me a job. I had a young girl that helped me out. And on days that I didn't have anybody, I took my son to work. (Naty, 42)

In participants' descriptions, reference to the ex-partner's economic support is either absent, very limited, or given because of a court mandate. The participants, in general, also refer to their partners' "long-distance fathering," in which no

real effort is made to help with the care, education, or support of the children. This reality is a factor behind the high level of Latin American children that are growing up, according to Ali, Cleland, and Shah (2003), without a father's presence in their lives. This absence potentially impacts scholastic development, family life, and the behavior of the child himself or herself. While for the participants conjugal separation represented a "relief" and even an improvement in terms of their professional lives, for the children the breakup was processed in different ways: Some started to perform better at school, whereas others grew sad, withdrawn, and began to act out.

> My daughter has always been the top student at her school. (Ariadna, 47)

> My daughter was upset by Father's Day celebrations that happened at her school, they made her sad. This also happened at her birthday parties or Christmas celebrations when he wasn't present. (MariEsther, 39)

> I'm always encouraging them, and they've been diligent students, they earn diplomas, first places. (Gabriela, 53)

> I always get congratulated about my daughter, I admire her and she's a success; my son copies his sister. (Eli, 26)

However, leaving child care in the hands of others has an emotional cost which at times can result in the loss of participants' control over their children.

> I sometimes feel that I'm losing control over them because I don't see them, although we have created ground rules like always letting each other know where we are. (Lucila, 47)

For the participants, getting organized at work following the separation meant longer hours away from home due to the need to work full time or take on tasks of greater responsibility. In this study, all of the women stated that they worked an average of 8 to 12 hr per day that represents a great challenge in terms of finding a balance between work and family.

After analyzing the impact of the separation on their lives and immediate environment, we interviewed the participants about their identities, a term which, for Uhlmann (2004), refers to emotions, feeling, beliefs, and desires of social agents, which are strongly influenced by sociocultural contexts.

Their Experiences as Single Parents

The participants' decision to end their marriages indicates their will to exit violent, abusive relationships and wish to reconstruct their lives (Campbell, Woods, Chouaf, & Parker, 2000). In spite of having to assume the challenge of taking on greater responsibilities in terms of work and household management, these women are determined to seek out new horizons for themselves and their children.

Listening as they describe themselves as within this process of identity change (Burke, 1980; Marks & MacDermid, 1996), we hear them use an array of adjectives in reference to themselves: persevering, organized, responsible, depressed, among others.

> I am very complex, and my personality has many facets, from very shy to extroverted. I'm an amalgam of thoughts and feelings. I'm not simple and I love not being simple. (Ariadna, 47)

> I feel brave and I feel cowardly. I can be a crybaby. I don't dare do certain things, but the things that happen to me push me forward. (Mary, 59)

> I'm resilient, and I've learned to get through very difficult situations. I'm positive and I'm slow to react, but when I lose my temper, watch out! (Juana, 61)

> I am too hard working. I get up early, cook lunch, pack the kids' lunch boxes, clean the house and then leave. I've always been like this. (Gabriela, 53)

> I'm stubborn and tenacious and don't give up easily. I always fight for my objectives. I want to have my own home and my practice. (Lucila, 47)

The redefinition of participants' identities following the separations, show women who faced with adversity, have the ability to recover, acquire new skills (Flach, 1997), and cope with their new realities, seeking a sense of personal and collective well-being. This sense of resilience was observed over the course of our conversations with these women. They admit to feeling tired, but they agree that despite the added responsibilities, they feel "relieved and renewed."

In terms of social life, the time taken up by child care and access to new work opportunities resulted, in the cases of six participants, in women feeling as though their social lives had been put on hold. They do note, however, that as their children have grown up, they have had more freedom to revisit their social circles. One interesting point raised during the interviews was that of entering into a new romantic relationship. The replies, in general, show that all hope this happens, although not necessarily right away or in terms of representing a long-term relationship.

> The phrase "putting your life back together" is one I don't like, because my life is an integral, not a broken one. I'd like to find someone, but it's not the time yet. (Ariadna, 47)

> Yes, I'd like to be with another person, but I see it as complicated. It's a question of putting my mind to it. I've gone out with other people, and the truth is that they seemed worse than my ex. They were egocentric guys, only into themselves. Right now I'm dating a guy who doesn't take anything seriously. (China, 34)

> Yes, I'd like to meet someone new, but I don't want to make another mistake. Time will tell. (Francisca, 46)

The search and wish for a new relationship was another constant in the women's conversations, who described the burden placed on them by a society that associates marital breakup with failure. They talked about both men's and women's stereotypes concerning "single women."

> Married women are very jealous of divorcées, they think if we approach their husbands, it's because we have ulterior motives. (Lucila, 47)

> First of all, society looks at you as though you've failed at something. Men see you as alone and there's nobody to have sex with you. I don't see it as a triumph to be married, but a failure to divorce. I didn't feel they thought of me this way at work, because they have only seen me alone there. (Ariadna, 47)

> You know what happens when a man finds out you're a single woman? They start hanging around you as if expecting something. They think you're there for the taking. Sometimes they're really disrespectful! (China, 34)

> Since my separation I haven't gotten invited to any of their parties, my kids either. They think that because you're separated and you're smiling, they can treat you whatever way they want. (Naty, 42)

In her study on the problems that face divorced women in the professional sphere, Fausto-Sterling (1992) points out a constant struggle for them to reconstruct themselves in a society where people treat them in a way that departs from what is socially established. By "ignoring looks and comments" (China, 34; Chio, 39), these women are reacting against the androcentric message of what is truly valid and permitted for a woman: taking her place within the traditional family unit.

The participants are optimistic about their futures, which ideally include a stable financial situation and the well-being of daughters and sons, whom the women hope to see grow up and live independent lives.

> In the next 5 years I see myself going back to study and with my own apartment. (Eli, 26)

> I see myself as happy, with my daughter, financially well off. I like thinking about the way I'll be from here to 5 years from now, happy, peaceful, enjoying my achievements. (China, 34)

> In 5 years, I see myself as involved with someone, but not living under the same roof. I don't want to be wealthy; I want peace and time for myself. (Chio, 39)

> In 5 years I see myself not working for somebody else. I don't want to depend on a schedule, I want a more low key existence. I want my daughter to finish her degree, so that she won't be stuck in some job that runs her ragged. (Lucila, 47)

Based on the experiences of their divorces, separations, teenage pregnancy (in the case of Eli, 26), domestic violence, and irresponsible partners, one of the participants' greatest fears is that these patterns continue in the lives of their sons and daughters. In their study dealing with the impact of divorce on children, Cui, Fincham, and Durtschi (2010) show that although there exists a high likelihood of divorce in the lives of the children of divorced parents, it is not a total given and their ultimate decision to dissolve their marriage would depend on numerous factors. The mothers, in this study, are more determined to invest time and dedication to their own sons and daughters.

> I'm afraid. My fear is that the same thing will happen to my daughter. I have to help her so that my own story is not repeated. (Lucila, 47)

The subjects of this study—mother that are separated, divorced, professional, residents of urban centers of the capital city—ended their conjugal relationships and became single heads of household with the determination that their decision represented the wisest path for their own lives, and that of their children.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

The interviews reveal that the participants' decisions to become single parents have carried with them a heavy mental and physical toll. The women, nevertheless, feel that their status as professionals provides substantial leverage and solidity in terms of their economic independence, despite the longer workdays. To this is added the determination to terminate situations of domestic conflict for the well-being of their children. The women also reference a vision of a traditional family unit where the ideal continues to be "Mom, Dad, and the kids." This notion, for many of those interviewed, caused them to prolong conjugal ties despite their partner's infidelity, violence, and—in some cases—financial dependence.

The decision to become responsible heads of household, not only sole caregivers but also providers, brought with it a series of difficult challenges described by the subjects of this study. The participants—products of patriarchal families where their voices and identities were constantly suppressed since childhood, in great part—continued this pattern after beginning their own relationship and forming families. In spite of this, when faced with their partner's irresponsibility and domestic abuse, the women made the decision to reconstruct their lives through new identities and the redefinition of concepts about what it means to be separated or divorced in a powerfully androcentric society.

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of 15 women, residents of Peru's urban centers, in terms of their decision to become single heads of household within a solid patriarchal system. No study, to date, has researched and presented this theme through women's direct testimony. We feel that this investigation will represent a valuable contribution

for future studies. It is also important to explore the consequences of single motherhood on women's physical and mental health. The subject of depression and illness prior to, and following, conjugal separations should be analyzed through a phenomenological focus, in which experiences and direct testimony play a vital role.

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