Barriers to Workforce Re-Entry among Single Mothers: Insights from Urban Areas in Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract

Life can be challenging for single mothers unable to secure employment. However, little is known about the barriers that hinder single mothers' re-entry into the workforce, more so in the context of urban areas in developing countries, the landscape of which differs from that of rural areas and developed countries. To address this gap, a study was conducted to investigate the barriers that single mothers encounter when re-entering the workforce in urban areas in developing countries, using a survey of 373 single mothers in urban Sarawak, Malaysia, as a case. The findings suggest that single mothers in urban areas considered family reasons as the main barrier to workforce re-entry, followed by work-life balance, personal, and workplace reasons, which remained true regardless of whether single mothers intend or do not intend to return to the workforce. Implications for theory and practice, limitations, and future research directions conclude the article.

Keywords: Single mothers, barriers, re-entry, workforce, urban, developing country, Sarawak

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Introduction

Single-parent families, especially those headed by single mothers, face uphill struggles. Recent studies show that single-parent families are significantly more at risk of living in poverty than two-parent families (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015), that single mothers earn significantly less than single fathers (Kramer, Myhra, Zuiker, & Bauer, 2016), that single mothers participate in fewer numbers in the labor force (Ericksen, Jurgens, Garrett, & Swedburg, 2008), and that single mothers with young dependent children are the poorest and most disadvantaged of all groups (Hsieh & Leung, 2015), and thus, they have a greater risk of job-family role strain (Perry-Jenkins & Gillman, 2000). Moreover, the number of single mothers around the world has grown significantly over the years. For example, 80% of about 12 million single-parent families with children under the age of 18 in the United States are headed by single mothers (Lee, 2018), whereas about 3% of the total population of about 32 million people in Malaysia are single mothers (Mulia, 2017). The increase in the numbers of single mothers, in turn, has indirectly contributed to the increase of households living in poverty (Damaske, 2017).

In light of this issue, many scholars, practitioners and policymakers have recognized the important role that mothers play in raising and nurturing the future generation, and many have responded to the issue by initiating and supporting reforms to alleviate poverty and the job-family role strain among single mothers. However, a stark contrast exists in the reforms introduced in developed and developing countries. Specifically, the reforms in developed countries are focused on moving single mothers on welfare to work, such as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in the United States (Lerman & Ratcliffe, 2001; Youngblut, Brady, Brooten, & Thomas, 2000), whereas the reforms in developing countries are focused on single mothers receiving welfare, such as charity aid and monthly assistance, rather than (re)entering the workforce (Kasuagi, 2017; Mulia, 2017). Indeed, the reforms in developed countries, such as the United States, which were informed by rich findings on the barriers and challenges faced by its single mothers, have produced unprecedented increases in employment, with more than one million single mother welfare recipients re-entering into the workforce (Brown & Lichter, 2004; Clampet-Lundquist, Edin, London, Scott, & Hunter, 2003; Lerman & Ratcliffe, 2001; Lichter & Crowley, 2004; Son & Bauer, 2010). However, the same cannot be said about single mothers in developing countries, such as Malaysia, who may receive welfare, would like to work, but may discover finding and retaining employment in competition with dual earners and balancing the job-family task to be

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increasingly challenging. Needless to say, these single mothers are at risk of getting left behind socio-economically, and even more so if studies on single mothers in developing countries continue to be infertile in driving a sense of urgency for developing informed reforms to assist single mothers in developing countries to re-enter the workforce. Moreover, though scarce, studies on single mothers in rural areas in developing countries are emerging (e.g. Mainthia, Reppart, Reppart, Pearce, Cohen, & Netterville, 2013); yet, little is known about the situation of single mothers situated in urban areas in developing countries, especially with regard to workforce re-entry. More important, the urbanization of rural areas and the rise of urban poverty highlight the importance of research in this direction so as to preclude the marginalization of single mothers in existing and new urban areas in developing countries (Appleton, Song, & Xia, 2010; Desmond, 2012; Hew, 2003, 2007; Sattelberger, 2017).

To this end, this article aims to investigate the barriers to workforce re-entry among single mothers in urban areas in developing countries using a sample of single mothers in urban Sarawak, Malaysia, as a case. To do so, this article begins by setting the conceptual boundaries of single mothers, followed by a review of the existing literature on single mothers, employment structure, and workforce re-entry, an elucidation of extant gaps in the area, an explanation of the methods used in the study to close those gaps, a report on the study's findings, and a discussion of the implications of those findings for theory and practice. In doing so, this article hopes to shed greater light on the barriers that single mothers encounter with respect to workforce re-entry, specifically in urban areas in developing countries, as well as to influence policymaking to mitigate these barriers and to provide single mothers a more seamless re-entry into the workforce. It is also hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to reducing the risk of poverty and job-family role strain among single mothers, especially those in urban areas in developing countries.

Theoretical and Contextual Background
Conceptualizing Parenting, Single Parents, and Single Mothers
Parenting is a caregiving activity where parents, traditionally consisting of a mother and a father (but increasingly in many countries that have legalized same sex marriage, include two mothers or two fathers), nurture and raise a child (or children) (Abraham, 2017; Brooks, 2012; Schumm & Crawford, 2019). This activity typically involves the process of promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood (Abraham, 2017; Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Simons, Chen, Simons, Brody, & Cutrona, 2006). However, not all children grow up with care given by both parents. In many cases, children are raised by a single parent without the support of the other parent. Parents who find themselves in such a situation are called single parents.

Most often, single parents are women, who are often referred to as single mothers. They typically have to parent singlehandedly whilst juggling their responsibilities of breadwinner and caregiver concurrently (Priyatna, Rahayu, & Subekti, 2019). However, the term "single mothers" has been considered by many as "confusing," "inexact," and "wide" (e.g. Evans, 2011; Hew, 2003). This situation may be because of a variety of reasons, such as the existence of different biological relationships (e.g. adopted, biological) and marital statuses (e.g. single, divorced, separated, and widowed), as well as the absence of an abled father (e.g. bedridden, disabled, thereby placing the mother in the position of the sole breadwinner of the family) (Lai, 2015). This ambiguity, in turn, may become problematic for policymakers and support groups, who may find it difficult to determine the actual target group, especially its inclusion and exclusion criteria, for welfare support and empowerment.

Moving forward with greater clarity, this article contends that the term "single mothers" should encapsulate *all women who legally parent, nurture, and raise a child (or children), who*

may or may not be a biologically-related dependent, in the absence of an abled father, regardless of marital status. This contention is predicated on the rationale that caregiving for a child dependent on the mother without the other abled parent is likely to be equally challenging for most women regardless of biological relationship and marital status. However, caregiving by single mothers needs to be carried out in accordance with the law (e.g. right to parenting legally registered for both adopted and biological children—e.g. adoption certificate and birth certificate respectively) for the benefit of the child dependent on the mother (e.g. citizenship, right to education). Therefore, single mothers, under this new definition, will include unmarried women who legally adopt children and mothers who legally register biological children who are dependent on their care but may be single and unwed, widowed, divorced, separated from their partners (i.e. married but living apart—e.g. mothers abandoned by their husbands), or supporting partners who are not able to work (e.g. disabled, bedridden), among others. This new definition, however, will not include mothers with children who are dependent on fathers (i.e. single fathers), independent (e.g. when children dependent on mothers become working adults), and/or unlawful (e.g. not legally adopted or registered; so as to discourage unlawful caregiving).

Single Mothers, Employment Structure, and Workforce Re-Entry

Most studies in the existing literature concerning single mothers, employment structure, and workforce re-entry have mainly focused on developed countries, with some shedding light on realities in urban (or metropolitan) and rural (or non-metropolitan) areas. In the UK, successive British administrations have introduced and relied on a system of "in-work benefits" in the form of direct wage subsidies (e.g. wage supplementation through Family Income Supplement and Working Families Tax Credit) to ensure that single parents, especially single mothers, have an incentive to work that is greater than the value of welfare benefits for people who are out of work (Marsh, 2001).[4] Indeed, the mechanics underpinning the UK system correspond to the incentive theory of motivation, which suggests that the rewards for workforce re-entry must be substantial to justify the effort needed to overcome the barriers that single mothers face to re-enter the workforce (Fluellen, 2016). Similarly, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was introduced in the US in 1996 to encourage economic self-sufficiency by placing strict limits on the receipt of cash assistance and food stamps (Blank, 2002). To gauge the impact of workforce re-entry policy reforms, Brown and Lichter (2004) employed data from the National Survey of Family Growth to examine single mothers' economic livelihoods in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in the US. Their investigation indicated that unemployed single mothers in the US had a family income that is 11 percent above the poverty line (i.e. income-to-poverty ratio is 111). Interestingly, single mothers who are working full time in non-metropolitan areas in the US had significantly lower income-to-poverty ratios than their metropolitan counterparts (i.e. an income-to-poverty ratio of 186.5 in non-metropolitan areas as compared to 244.1 in metropolitan areas). More important, their study evidenced that full-time employment was strongly associated with greater economic wellbeing, whereas part-time employment, including working multiple part-time jobs, was only half as effective as full-time employment at one job.

Further scrutiny of the literature indicates that single mothers face unique, significant challenges. More specifically, existing studies suggest that the stressors experienced by single mothers are often linked to the financial demands of raising a family single-handedly, the multiple roles and responsibilities they hold (e.g. mother, daughter, employee), and the challenge to strike a balance between work at home (e.g. childcare, housework) and in the

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[4] Unlike couples with children, single parents in the UK are not required to seek work until their youngest child is 16 or 18 years old and in full-time education (Marsh, 2001).

workforce (Hancioglu & Hartmann, 2014; Hsieh & Leung, 2015; Knoef & Ours, 2016; Rose, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of affordable childcare and the need to satisfy basic family needs, such as shelter, food, education, and childcare, have pushed many single mothers, especially those who are living in poverty because of low levels of education and insufficient skills required by the job market, into part-time work (Brady, 2016; Shirahase & Raymo, 2014). While the flexibility of part-time work allows single mothers to carry out their childcare responsibilities, such work is invariably low-paid and insecure, with little chance of promotion (Lleras, 2008). This corroborates the findings of several studies investigating single mothers on welfare-to-work reforms that many single part-time working mothers remain poor, with some finding themselves worse off than they were before participating in welfare-to-work reforms (Danziger, Danziger, Seefeldt, & Shaefer, 2016; Gingrich, 2010). Moreover, many employers doubt the ability of single mothers to be fully committed to their work on account of demanding family and household responsibilities, which further impedes their chances of securing employment (Kendig & Bianchi, 2008). These instances, in turn, have caused single mothers to experience higher levels of chronic stress, personal and work burnout, and greater episodes of depression as compared to married mothers, who have a partner to pool resources with for the family (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000; Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Racine, 2003; Robinson, Magee, & Caputi, 2016; Taylor & Conger, 2017).

Single Mothers in Sarawak, Malaysia

Malaysia is a developing country in Southeast Asia, consisting of 13 states and two federal territories. Sarawak, which is the geographical case under study, is a self-governing state that is ranked ninth highest in terms of single mothers in the country (Hew, 2007). Research on single mothers in Sarawak and Malaysia is scarce but emerging.

In 1999, the Sarawak Women's Bureau conducted a major study on single mothers in Sarawak to better understand the position of single mothers in the state and to use that understanding to formulate welfare policies and programs for single mothers, most notably the identification and registration of single mothers living in Sarawak (Hew, 2003). The next major study was conducted by Hew (2007), who investigated the state of single mothers without tertiary education in Sarawak. Hew's study provided unique insights using a geographical lens on the barriers that impede the ability of single mothers to enter the workforce. In particular, Hew's study revealed that single mothers in rural areas of Sarawak had little schooling opportunities, which led to high rates of low levels of literacy, causing single mothers in rural areas to face greater difficulty in securing employment as compared to their counterparts in urban areas in the state. Nonetheless, Hew's study indicated that single mothers in rural areas of Sarawak had greater support from their extended families (e.g. parents and grandparents) while single mothers in urban areas of Sarawak either did not have any network of support or had to rely on their neighbors and friends for support. Such factors often caused single mothers in urban areas of Sarawak to face greater difficulties in obtaining childcare as compared to their rural counterparts, which, in turn, became a major impediment for their re-entry into the workforce.

Major policies and programs to support single mothers took off in Sarawak and Malaysia from 2010 onward. The National Action Plan to empower single mothers was developed in 2010 and launched in 2015 by the Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development's Department of Women Development and the United Nation Development Programme (Bernama, 2015). The plan consists of 18 strategic measures predicated on three main pillars in the form of economic empowerment, improved social welfare, and enhanced research and coordination for the development of single mothers in Malaysia. The implementation of this plan is spearheaded by a task force comprising of 27 government agencies, higher learning institutions, and non-governmental and private sector

organizations. This, in turn, has led to a plethora of initiatives focused on empowering single mothers, such as the Skills Upgrading Program by SME Corporation Malaysia to equip single mothers with entrepreneurial skills and the Women Exporters Development Program by the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation to help single mothers accelerate the exports of products from their entrepreneurial ventures.

Despite heavy investment by myriad stakeholders in initiatives to empower and support single mothers, little empirical evidence that showcases its success exists. Instead, what is available tends to cast these initiatives in a negative light. More specifically, Ali, Som, and Bujang (2004) found that the government has taken a concentrated focus to bring single mothers out of poverty by means of entrepreneurship. However, their study also indicated that entrepreneurial activities by single mothers were rarely successful because of limited knowledge, lack of institutional support, and intense competition. Roddin, Sidi, Yusof, Mohamed, and Razzaq (2011) concurred that most single mothers did not achieve the intended benefits of these programs, with many still solely reliant on government assistance to alleviate them from poverty. Ismail, Husin, Rahim, Kamal and Mat (2016) explained that entrepreneurial success and sustainability among successful single entrepreneurial mothers were highly contingent on their tolerance for ambiguity and risk-taking behaviors. However, Kian, Mi, and Chun (2016) noted a decline in the numbers of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia because of low entrepreneurial spirit and difficulty in merging labor market activities with family obligations. This is supported by Kadir and Ali (2012) and Teoh and Siong (2014), whose work identified cultural barriers such as the traditional expectation of women as caregivers being ingrained among single mothers, which, in turn, limit their economic performance and involvement in entrepreneurial activities.

Extant Gaps

Contemplation of workforce re-entry can be a difficulty that single mothers face with anxiety, confusion, and uncertainty (Ericksen et al., 2008). The existing literature suggests that the importance and meaning that single mothers ascribed to employment is influential in assisting single mothers to overcome their actual and perceived barriers to workforce re-entry. For example, Green, Moore, Easton, and Heggie (2004) found that single mothers were more likely to find ways of coping and overcoming barriers and problems if they were highly invested in paid work. Indeed, the trajectory of findings on single mothers in developing states like Sarawak, Malaysia suggests that the barriers that single mothers encounter when re-entering the workforce has not been fully understood, which, in turn, has led to poor returns on investment for both single mothers and support groups.

In addition, the review of extant literature sheds light on the need for further exploration of the barriers of workforce re-entry among single mothers in urban areas in developing countries due to the differences between single mothers in developed and developing countries and rural and urban areas in these countries (e.g. availability of support groups, differences in educational backgrounds, and poverty levels) (Brown and Lichter, 2004; Hew, 2007). Furthermore, the review of existing literature in the context of Sarawak and Malaysia indicates that the strategies to encourage workforce re-entry among single mothers need to resonate more closely with voices from the ground. While entrepreneurship is touted as a solution to alleviate single mothers from poverty, it is arguably pragmatic and wiser to take a demographic route to empower and support single mothers. That is to say, academics, practitioners, and policymakers who aim to address the barriers to workforce re-entry among single mothers should be able to yield more fruitful outcomes by deeply listening to and personalizing initiatives based on the voices of single mothers themselves. This should begin by understanding how work is perceived by single mothers, what factors are considered to

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facilitate or impede their re-entry into the workforce, and what their preferred fields of work are should they wish to join upon re-entering the workforce (and why).

Indeed, it is beyond debate that single-mothered families, especially those in urban areas in developing countries who may lack the support networks that exist in rural areas and the advanced institutional and infrastructure support that exists in developed countries, need more stable incomes. Increased labor market participation in the form of workforce re-entry over the long run should, hopefully, provide a significant part of this sustainable increase. Hence, it is important to identify the profiles of the single mothers pertaining to the barriers for re-entry into the workforce, especially among single mothers in urban areas in developing countries, such as in urban Sarawak, Malaysia.

Methodology

An exploratory research approach in the form of a survey was conducted among single mothers in urban areas in Sarawak, Malaysia, to explore the barriers that impede their re-entry into the workforce, as surveys are suitable for exploratory goals, where no assumptions or models are postulated and where relationships and patterns are explored (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). In addition, the survey approach has been recommended by established scholars as a useful approach for exploring the field and for collecting data around as well as directly on the topic of study, so that issues can be brought into focus and the ways forward worth pursuing are suggested with clarity and confidence (Moser & Kalton, 1972). Further information about the methods and procedures for data collection and analyses to achieve the study's goal can be found in the Methodological Notes (see Appendix).

Findings

Socio-demographics

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic background of single mothers who participated in the study. In particular, most single mothers in the study were indigenous (94.9%), in their thirties and forties (70.5%), and their first language was Malay (81.7%). In addition, most single mothers in the study were either divorced or widowed (85%) without tertiary education (94.6%). For these single mothers, many of whom intend to return to the workforce (72.4%), childcare emerged as the main reason for leaving (42.5%) and not returning (37.2%) to the workforce. These statistical majorities, where available, correspond to that reported on single mothers in existing studies (e.g. Hew, 2007; Ismail et al., 2016).

Barriers to Workforce Re-entry

Tables 2 and 3 present the macro-level discriminant and micro-level rank-order analyses on the barriers to workforce re-entry among single mothers in the study.

From the macro-level discriminant analysis, the study finds that single mothers in urban Sarawak considered family reasons as the main barrier to workforce re-entry, followed by work-life balance, personal, and workplace reasons (as evidenced by the rank-order analysis of barriers, which were measured by adequately reliable sub-factors (or items), as evidenced by the Cronbach's alphas from the reliability test, which were above the threshold of .50 for all barriers; Lim & Ting, 2012). This finding was found to be true regardless of whether single mothers intend or do not intend to return to the workforce (as evidence by *t*-test, the results of which can be taken as it is given that the homogeneity of variances is established from the non-significant results in Levene's test for all barriers; Lim & Ting, 2012).

From the micro-level rank-order analysis, the study makes several notable observations. In terms of personal factors, single mothers in urban Sarawak lack the necessary educational background and hands-on experience required for the career (or job) that they aspire to, which may explain the difficulty they experience with respect to their career plan and their ability to convince employers of the value that they could offer, as evidenced by the average scores of three and above in the top six out of 16 sub-factors (or items) measuring the barrier to workforce re-entry emerging from personal factors. In terms of family factors, single mothers in urban Sarawak found it challenging to meet childcare needs without affecting their career prospects, as evidenced by the average scores of three and above in the top four out of eight sub-factors (or items) measuring the barrier to workforce re-entry resulting from family factors. In terms of workplace factors, single mothers in urban Sarawak struggled to gain the support of colleagues who are able to help them advance in their careers, as evidenced by the average score of three and above in the highest ranked sub-factor (or item) measuring the barrier to workforce re-entry emerging from workplace factors. Lastly, in terms of work-life balance factors, single mothers in urban Sarawak suffered from inflexible working hours that prevented them from carrying out their family responsibilities, as evidenced by the average score of three and above in the highest ranked sub-factor (or item) measuring the barrier to workforce re-entry emerging from work-life balance factors.

Needs and Preferences for Workforce Re-entry

Table 4 presents the findings of a rank-order analysis on the needs and preferences for workforce re-entry among single mothers in urban Sarawak. More specifically, the study finds that single mothers in urban Sarawak prefer full time (i.e. 45.8%) self-employment (or running their own business) (i.e. 30.8%). In order to re-enter the workforce in their preferred job structure and industry, they recognize that they would need to acquire skills that would allow them to successfully make a sale, such as business management, business skills, communication, creativity/innovation, customer relations, marketing, networking, sales, and soft skills (i.e. 60.1%). This, in turn, provides an indication to training providers on the type of training that single mothers in urban areas need in order for them to return to the workforce and deliver value in their preferred way (i.e. full time, self-employment).

Table 1. Socio-demographics

Socio-demographics		Frequency (*n*)	Percentage (%)
Age	16 to 19 years	1	0.3
	20 to 29 years	38	10.2
	30 to 39 years	115	30.8
	40 to 49 years	148	39.7
	50 years and above	71	19.0
Ethnicity	Chinese	18	4.8
	Indian	1	0.3
	Indigenous—Bidayuh	34	9.1
	Indigenous—Iban	22	5.9
	Indigenous—Malay	261	70.0
	Indigenous—Melanau	25	6.7
	Indigenous—Orang Ulu	5	1.3
	Indigenous—Others	7	1.9
First language	Malay	304	81.7
	English	7	1.9
	Chinese	11	2.9
	Other indigenous languages (e.g. Bidayuh, Iban)	51	13.6
Marital status	Single, but never married	30	8.0
	Unwed mothers	9	2.4
	Widowed	107	28.7
	Divorced	210	56.3
	Abandoned (by husband)	17	4.6

Table 1. Socio-demographics (cont.)

Socio-demographics		Frequency (*n*)	Percentage (%)
Highest level of education attained	Primary school certificate (or Year Six equivalent)	31	8.3
	Lower secondary certificate (or Year Nine equivalent)	57	15.3
	Upper secondary certificate (or Year 11 equivalent)	217	58.2
	Diploma (or Year 12 equivalent)	17	4.6
	Bachelor's degree	3	0.8
	Other: Certificate of completion for short course/workshop	48	12.8
Reason for leaving the workforce	Taking care of children	179	42.5
	No transportation	66	15.7
	No suitable job opportunities	48	11.4
	Having to take care of other family members	35	8.3
	Discrimination at the workplace	29	6.9
	Work-life balance	28	6.7
	Financial stability	17	4.0
	Lack of part-time options	14	3.3
	Sickness	5	1.2
Intention to re-enter the workforce	Yes	270	72.4
	No	84	27.6
Reasons for not returning to the workforce	Taking care of children	138	37.2
	No transportation	53	14.3
	No suitable job opportunities	48	12.9
	Work-life balance	33	8.9
	Having to take care of other family members	31	8.4
	Discrimination at the workplace	21	5.7
	Lack of part-time option	17	4.6
	Financial stability	16	4.3
	Lack of self-determination	14	3.8

Table 2. Macro-level Findings on Barriers to Workforce Re-entry

Rank	Barrier	Rank-order Analysis		Reliability Test	Levene's Test		*t*-test	
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha	*F*-value	*p*-value	*t*-value	p-value
1	Family	3.0685 (3.0588/3.1345)	.63135 (.63912/.60266)	.736 (8 items)	.160	.689	-.961	.337
2	Work-life Balance	2.8559 (2.8701/2.8611)	.95802 (.96978/.94594)	.811 (3 items)	.026	.873	.075	.940
3	Personal	2.8300 (2.8366/2.8528)	.68763 (.66780/.73741)	.888 (16 items)	1.642	.201	-.189	.850
4	Workplace	2.6908 (2.7088/2.7004)	.81983 (.81526/.83795)	.601 (6 items)	.356	.551	.081	.935

Note:

1. Figures in brackets in rank-order analysis represent the means and standard deviations of responses by single mothers who intend and do not intend to return to the workforce respectively—i.e. (intend to return/do not intend to return).
2. The description in brackets in reliability test represents the number of sub-factors (or items) measuring each barrier (i.e. family, work-life-balance, personal, and workplace). The description of each sub-factor (or item) is available in Table 3.
3. Further information about these quantitative analyses can be found in the Technical Notes (see Appendix).

Table 3. Micro-level Findings on Barriers to Workforce Re-entry

Rank	Barrier	Mean	Standard Deviation
	Personal		
1	Lacking the necessary educational background for the job/career I want.	*3.3016*	1.16111
2	Lacking the necessary hands-on experience for the job/career I want.	*3.1585*	1.17181
3	Changing my mind again and again about my career plans	*3.1306*	1.16035
4	Unsure of how to advance in my job/career.	*3.0471*	1.11948
5	Unsure of how to "sell myself" to an employer.	*3.0137*	1.13939
6	Unsure of my career goals	*3.0000*	1.11924
7	Lacking the required skills for my job/career (e.g. communication, leadership, decision-making).	2.9973	1.12999
8	Lacking the required personality traits for my job/career (e.g. assertiveness).	2.9348	1.15288
9	Unsure of what my career alternatives are.	2.8795	1.09335
10	Being undecided about what job/career I would like.	2.7935	1.13154
11	Being dissatisfied with my job/career.	2.6877	1.10764
12	Not feeling confident about my ability on the job/career.	2.6158	1.12023
13	Experiencing problems with my health that interfere with my job/career.	2.5831	1.16307
14	Not feeling confident about myself in general.	2.5125	1.11706
15	Having a disability which limits my choice of career.	2.3536	1.14387
16	Becoming bored with my job/career.	2.2705	.98131
	Family		
1	Needing to take time off work when children are sick or on school breaks.	*3.8378*	.92787
2	Not being able to find good day-care services for my children.	*3.1961*	1.13483
3	Difficulty in re-entering job market after taking time off to care for my children.	*3.0904*	1.13357
4	Difficulty in maintaining the ground gained at my job after having children.	*3.0190*	1.10578
5	Needing to relocate because of my job/career.	2.8127	1.10139
6	Unable to deal with physical or emotional demands of my family.	2.5149	1.13375
7	Not receiving support from my extended family members.	2.3005	1.03558
	Workplace		
1	Not knowing the "right people" to get ahead in my career.	*3.1870*	1.21604
2	No opportunities for advancement in my career.	2.8828	1.19358
3	Having a boss or supervisor who is biased against people of my racial/ethnic group.	2.8152	2.39367
4	Experiencing racial harassment on the job.	2.6795	2.85938
5	Experiencing racial discrimination in hiring for a job.	2.5341	1.08425

Table 3. Micro-level Findings on Barriers to Workforce Re-entry (cont.)

Rank	Barrier	Mean	Standard Deviation
	Workplace (cont.)		
6	Experiencing discrimination in hiring for a job because I have a disability.	2.2555	.96336
	Work-life Balance		
1	Having an inflexible work schedule that interferes with my family responsibilities.	*3.0082*	1.14415
2	Feeling a conflict between my job and my children.	2.8033	1.13809
3	Unable to maintain a healthy balance between work and family demands	2.7562	1.09163

Note:

1. Figures in *italics* represent the mean scores of sub-factors (or items) that are three and above, which is the threshold employed to flag noteworthy issues under each barrier to workforce re-entry among single mothers in urban Sarawak.

Table 4. Findings on Needs and Preferences for Workforce Re-entry

Needs and Preferences		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Preferred industry	Own business/self-employed	115	30.8
	Private sector business	84	22.5
	Agribusiness/food processing	71	19.0
	Others	48	12.9
	Government	18	4.8
	Healthcare	11	2.9
	Banking and finance	10	2.7
	Information and communications	9	2.4
	technology	7	1.9
	Education sector		
Preferred job structure	Full time	194	45.8
	Part time	95	22.4
	Self-employed/entrepreneur	91	21.5
	Volunteer/community services	28	6.6
	Seasonal/temporary	13	3.1
	Internship	3	0.7
Training needs	Business skills	183	14.9
	Sales	103	8.4
	Marketing	99	8.1
	IT skills	89	7.2
	Business management	75	6.1
	Soft skills	65	5.3
	Networking	62	5.0
	Communication	59	4.8
	Creativity/innovation	47	3.8
	Customer relations	45	3.7
	Time management	43	3.5
	Accounting	38	3.1
	Problem solving	38	3.1
	Bookkeeping	36	2.9
	Stress management	36	2.9
	Cooking skills	35	2.9
	Caregiver	33	2.7
	Human resources	29	2.4
	Administrative skills	25	2.0
	Sewing skills	24	2.0
	Baking skills	22	1.8
	Negotiation	20	1.6
	Others	15	1.2
	Cleaning services	7	0.6

Discussion

The present study was driven by the need for greater clarity on the barriers to workforce re-entry among single mothers in urban areas in developing countries. Using a sample of single mothers in urban Sarawak, Malaysia, as a case, this study offers fresh insights that advance theory and practice related to single mothers in several ways. These are discussed in the sub-sections that follow.

Theoretical Implications

Findings from the study offer three noteworthy implications for theoretical advancement on research related to single mothers.

First, the study considers and resolves the ambiguities and complexities around the concept of single mothers (Evans, 2011; Hew, 2003). This is done by consolidating existing definitions and proposing a new, encompassing definition of single mothers that can be used in future research on single mothers; that is, all women who legally parent, nurture, and raise a child (or children), who may or may not be a biologically-related dependent, in the absence of an abled father, regardless of marital status.

Second, the study sheds additional light on the challenges that single mothers experience through an urban area and developing country perspective, which differs from that of a rural area and developed country perspective (Brown and Lichter, 2004; Hew, 2003, 2007). In particular, the study finds that single mothers in urban areas considered family reasons as the main barrier to workforce re-entry, followed by work-life balance, personal, and workplace reasons, which remained true regardless of whether single mothers intend or do not intend to return to the workforce. These findings, in turn, extend the caregiving priorities that commonly characterize single mothers by demonstrating that a clear order of importance exists between family and work, with family emerging as the top priority and workplace being given the lowest priority.

Third, the study offers new insights into the profiling of single mothers in urban areas in a developing country as well as their needs and preferences if they are to return to the workforce. More specifically, the findings of this study show that poverty does exist in urban areas and that not everyone in urban areas receives tertiary education, as in the case of single mothers in urban areas under study. Moreover, the needs and preferences of single mothers in urban areas are highly focused on independence, given that they prefer to work full time through self-employment and that they recognize the entrepreneurial skills they need to acquire in order to run their own businesses, which is a positive sign, given the negative implications of part-time work that have been revealed by existing studies (e.g. Danziger, Danziger, Seefeldt, & Shaefer, 2016; Gingrich, 2010). These findings, in turn, provide new ground on single mothers caught in the urbanization of rural areas from the perspective of a developing country (Appleton, Song, & Xia, 2010; Desmond, 2012; Hew, 2003, 2007; Sattelberger, 2017).

Practical Implications

Findings from the study provide four noteworthy recommendations that can be adopted by policymakers and support groups to empower and support single mothers' re-entry into the workforce, especially single mothers in urban areas in developing countries, such as Sarawak, Malaysia.

First, the definition of single mothers established herein can be used by policymakers and support groups to determine the actual target group of single mothers with respect to its inclusion and exclusion criteria for empowerment and support initiatives.

Second, the findings on personal factors indicate that education and upskilling initiatives are necessary to equip single mothers with the necessary knowledge and skills that will not only help them gain clarity on the career paths that they can consider, but also to

convince, with confidence, employers of the value they bring should they choose to work for others when they return to the workforce (and, in turn, overcome the negative perceptions that employers generally have about single mothers' work ethic; Kendig & Bianchi, 2008), or themselves should they pursue an entrepreneurial route to move from welfare to work to generate greater income to support the family that single mothers spearhead.

Third, the findings on family factors signal good potential for starting and scaling up childcare services, including in the workplace, to allow single mothers to overcome the challenge of childcare and return to the workforce. Also, given that single mothers are generally worried about their career prospects should they attend to their child who fall sick, it is recommended that childcare providers, or employers who provide childcare services, establish a standard operating procedure that allows the child to access professional medical attention and service, with the consent of single mothers, so that single mothers—who, in urban areas, lack the family-relative network that generally exists in rural areas (Hew, 2007)—have the option to continue working, knowing that their child is in safe hands despite falling sick (or to allow for quicker checks on the child by single mothers if childcare service is provided by the employer at the workplace).

Fourth, the findings on work-life balance and workplace factors suggest the need for mentoring programs to assist single mothers to navigate the challenges between family and work and to advance in their careers in order to encourage their re-entry into the workforce. This may be implemented through associations and support groups for single mothers in partnership with professional associations and support groups (e.g. Lean In), thereby making single mother associations and support groups a one-stop resource where single mothers can network, share, and support one another.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Notwithstanding the theoretical and practical contributions that can be drawn from the present study, two major limitations exist with respect to the design and findings of this study. More important, these limitations, in turn, pave the way forward for future research on single mothers and workforce re-entry.

First, the generalizability of the findings of the present study is limited as the sample used consists of single mothers in urban areas in only a single developing country, that is, urban Sarawak, Malaysia. Though the findings might resonate, to a certain extent, for single mothers in regional developing countries, such as urban states in Indonesia, future research is highly encouraged to examine the barriers of workforce re-entry among single mothers in urban areas in other developing countries, such as those in the African, American, and European continents.

Second, the design of the study is limited to exploratory insights, and thus, its solutions cannot be taken as conclusive or final. Instead, future research is strongly encouraged to adopt a causal research design to test the cause and effect of proposed solutions in order to gain a more accurate projection on its effectiveness in mitigating the barriers and engineering workforce re-entry transitions among single mothers, especially those in urban areas in developing countries.

In short, the insights into the barriers to workforce re-entry among single mothers herein are seminal in the sense that they focus on an important but underexplored area in the form of urban areas in developing countries. It is hoped that the insights herein will become an impetus to stimulate greater research interest in this area, and more importantly, improve the wellbeing of single mothers in the area.

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Appendix

Methodological Notes

Research Instrument

The study's survey employed questionnaires as its research instrument for data collection. In particular, the questionnaire was co-developed and co-refined by the investigators of this study with the president, secretary, committee members, and regular members of Persatuan Ibu Tunggal Sarawak (or the Sarawak Single Mothers' Association) over three roundtables, with an average of 12 single mothers in each roundtable (i.e. a total of 36 single mothers). More specifically, each roundtable consists of the president, secretary, and a mix of 10 committee and regular members of Persatuan Ibu Tunggal Sarawak, all of whom were single mothers in Sarawak.

To assist in the brainstorming and refinement of surveyed areas and questions, several questionnaires on family and work from the existing literature were distributed during the roundtables (Carlson, Kacmar, Wayne, & Grzywacz, 2006; Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw; Subramaniam & Arumugam, 2013; Wang & Cho, 2013). More specifically, the distribution of questionnaires used in the existing literature was requested by the roundtable attendees as a guide to help them structure and refine the questions that were co-developed.

The final questionnaire consisted of questions on categorical scales, such as demographics (e.g. age, ethnicity, first language, marital status, and highest level of education attained), reasons for leaving the workforce, intention to re-enter the workforce, reasons for not returning to the workforce, preferred job structure, and preferred industry, as well as questions on a 5-point Likert scale (i.e. with '1' representing 'strongly disagreeing' to the statement on one end and '5' representing 'strongly agreeing' to the statement on the other end), such as the barriers to workforce re-entry in the form of personal, family, workplace, and work-life balance factors.

Sampling

A simple random sampling approach was employed to select the locations for questionnaire distribution in urban Sarawak, Malaysia. Five urban areas were selected from a list of 12 urban areas in Sarawak; that is, Bintulu, Kuching (i.e. the capital of Sarawak), Miri, Samarahan, and Serian. Following the selection of sampling locations, a purposive sampling approach with the following selection criteria was used to select the sample participants for study: (i) a single mother in urban Sarawak and (ii) a non-participant in the workforce. More specifically, the criterion of qualification as a single mother in urban Sarawak was predicated on the definition of single mothers established in this article; that is, all women who legally parent, nurture, and raise a child (or children), who may or may not be a biologically-related dependent, in the absence of an abled father, regardless of marital status. The criterion of qualification as a non-participant in the workforce is based on the definition of unemployment, which includes people who are not employed by an employer or who are not an employer themselves. Voluntary consent was obtained, and participants' rights were explained prior to questionnaire distribution to those who met the sampling criteria of the study. In total, 420 questionnaires were distributed, but only 373 questionnaires out of the 400 questionnaires that were returned were deemed to be usable on the basis of fully completed questionnaires, resulting in a usable response rate of 88.8% (i.e. 373 out of 420 questionnaires).

Data Analysis

Three main analyses were conducted as part of the exploratory study. First, a descriptive analysis of socio-demographic factors was a preliminary analysis conducted to describe the background of single mothers who participated in the study. Second, a discriminant analysis was a macro-level primary analysis performed to delineate the significance of the barrier factors in impeding workforce re-entry among single mothers who intend and do not intend to re-enter the workforce. Third, a rank-order analysis was a micro-level primary analysis that was conducted for each barrier factor (i.e. personal, family, workplace, and work-life balance factors) to determine the importance of the sub-factors under each barrier factor in impeding single mothers' re-entry into the workforce. This analysis was also conducted on the preferences and needs of single mothers should they choose to re-enter the workforce. As a whole, these analyses provide evidence and insights from the perspective of single mothers in urban Sarawak, Malaysia, which should be helpful for advancing theory and practice with respect to understanding and overcoming the barriers to workforce re-entry among single mothers in urban areas in developing countries.

Technical Notes

Rank-order analysis is an analysis that ranks the responses from the highest to the lowest value (e.g. mean or average of responses, standard deviation or the degree of difference in responses).

Cronbach's alpha is a reliability statistic that assesses the reliability of sub-factors (or items) measuring each factor.

Levene's test is an inferential statistic that assesses the equality of variances between groups under study, and in the case of our study, the variance between single mothers who intend and do not intend to return to the workforce. The *p*-value provides an indication on whether homogeneity in variance exists or does not exist.

t-test is a test statistic that assesses whether a significant difference in responses exist between groups under study, and in the case of our study, the response between single mothers who intend and do not intend to return to the workforce. The *p*-value provides an indication on whether a significant difference in response exist or do not exist.

See Lim and Ting (2012) for additional information.