

# Mother's and Father's perception of the consequences of only-Child Family

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## ABSTRACT

The reduction in average annual rate of population growth, which is a global phenomenon, has primarily occurred due to reductions in fertility levels. An inevitable outcome of this drift is a reduction in family size and emergence of only-child families. These unique families are growing all over the world; they have influenced the structure of family, kinship network and have also penetrated the socio-economic and demographic composition of the society. The Review of literature highlights that it is an emerging trend especially among the urban educated sections of the Indian society. Now-a-days, couples are viewing parenthood as a huge liability and they are not ready to give up their personal and materialistic gains for large family size. In other words, a strong tradeoff is going on between child quality and quantity. These notions are strongly influencing the fertility decisions of the couples and encouraging them to limit their family size to only one child. The Steady increase in the proportion of this family size has fetched both positive and negative consequences for both individual and society as a whole. Through present study, an attempt has been made to identify who are the women and men who have only one child, by ascertaining their socio-economic profile, whether they have acquired this family size voluntarily or involuntarily. An attempt has also been made to study the mother's and father's perception about the consequences of this family size.

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## 1. Introduction

All over the world fertility rates have declined due to the combined effect of substantial socio-economic development, the effective implementation of family planning programmes and development of contraceptive technologies (Nanda. et al., 2015). The contribution of socio-economic development to fertility decline was mainly due to an increase in the cost of children rearing. It became irrational for many people to have large families. A main emerging feature in the modern family system is the changing attitude towards the value of children. In traditional societies, where human labour was a source of strength to the family, more children were preferred to fewer. But, now the emphasis is on the quality of life rather than the quantity of children. Child-bearing has become more of an option, and is seen as an expression of individuality rather than an essential stage of the life course. It is expected that in the foreseeable future, fertility will remain low and very small families with only one child will become an acceptable option. According to Falbo (1987), single-child family includes a couple or a single-parent who have only one child in their lifetime. Only or single-child families have always been there throughout ages, but their number was rather limited. Infertility of either of the spouse was cited as the main reason for it. The proportion of these families has increased manifold in last two decades. Review of literature highlights that it is an emerging trend especially among the urban educated upper and middle sections of the society (National Council of Applied Economic Research 2012). In urban areas, the individualistic and materialistic values seem to have accelerated this trend. Now-a-days, couples are viewing parenthood as a huge liability and they are not ready to give up their materialistic gains for large family size. In other words, a strong tradeoff is going on between child quality and quantity. These notions are strongly

influencing the fertility decisions of the couples and encouraging them to arrest their family size to only one child voluntarily.

## 2. Worldwide incidence of Single-Child Family

There are currently 20 million single-child families in the U.S. According to the 2003 current population survey single-child families outnumber two child families, 20% versus 18% in New York. Pearce et al (1999) shows One-child families are particularly common in Southern Europe; with 26% of Portuguese and 22% of Spanish women born in 1955 have one child. In France 20% of women have one child. So, single-child family is the fastest growing family in the U.S and in most of Western Europe. In countries like France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovenia, intentions to have single-child are more common. Among developing nations China is the only country in the world which experimented in 1979 for the creation of a nation of one-child families targeted to arrest growing population. This policy by the end of 1980 resulted in over 10 million couples in China to have one child (Goodstadt 1982)

In India despite rapid population growth there are few regions in the country, which have been observing sharpest decline in fertility since the 1980s. According to (2011 census) the lowest and below replacement rates of fertility are found in the geographically contiguous areas of Kerala, Tamilnadu and South Karnataka. National Council of Applied Economic Research (2012) reported that in India 10 per cent of the households are having only one child, and nearly a quarter of college-educated women say they would prefer to have a singleton. The trend is most noticeable among middle class

educated people in metropolitan areas. This trend reflects the gradual emergence of single-child families in India.

The present study on single-child family has emerged in the light of above arguments. Through present study, an effort has been made to highlight an unexplored area of concern for demographers, family sociologists and policy makers.

### 3. Consequences of Single Child Families

Demographers argue that not only the increase in population growth but also the reduction in population, results in a series of unintended consequences. Steady decline in the Total Fertility Rate all over the world and increase in the number of single-child families have brought about both positive and negative consequences for the individual as well as the society as a whole.

### 4. Positive Consequences

Emergence of single-child family has helped in reducing the population growth. Rosenberg & Hyde (1993), has estimated that China's one child policy alone, has reduced population growth to 1.3 billion from 300 million people. Single-child family has contributed to short and long-term economic gains for both single-child families and the states itself. Like, China has experienced unprecedented rates of economic growth due to the emergence of single-child families. One child also provides economic stability and helps in maintaining or enhancing the social status of the family. That is why; single-child family is considered a cheapest option by those who wish to enjoy parenthood while at the same time pursuing goals in other fields such as employment or leisure (Davies et al., 2000). Moreover, economically the future of the child itself is more secured in this family size because the child is the sole heir of the parents' resources. Only daughters in particular, are benefited for not having to compete for the resources with sons. To some extent, it has also increased the value of a girl child in these families (Therese et al., 2005). Emergence of single-child family is also improving the health and welfare of women and children. Moreover, parents of single-children are putting maximum inputs into bringing up their kids. Therefore exceptionally good socialization of the child is taking place in these families.

Xie & Hultgren, (1994), have documented positive aspects of child rearing practices in these families. They have found good parent-child relationship and interaction in this family size, leading to the development of positive personality traits in the child. Even the relatively high expectation placed by parents on their child's behaviour, motivates the child to achieve higher. In this family size, child does not compete for parental time and affection with any siblings. This benefits both child and the parents, providing emotional satisfaction to them (Smorti M, and Ponti L. 2018).

### 5. Negative Consequences

Along with positive results, it has also brought a host of unintended consequences. These include a high sex imbalance, with males outnumbering females and scarcity of girls resulting in 'marriage squeeze'. It has prompted actions like sex-selective abortions, abandonment and female

infanticide due to traditional preference for male child prevalent in some countries. Moreover, the rapid adoption of this family size, combined with stable or improving life expectancy, has led to an increased proportion of elderly people. There is a notable increase in the ratio between elderly parents and adult children. Emergence of single-child family has also resulted in the lack of social safety network for elders; it has been termed as the 4:2:1 problem. In this family size, every child faces the problem of caring for two parents and four grandparents with no sibling support (Christine et al., 2006). One of the worrisome repercussions of this family size is the dearth of future kinship network for the child. This family size is strongly linked to the over pampered treatment given to these children by their parents and grandparents. This is resulting into the generation of spoiled only children. This results in the development of various negative personality traits in them. A few studies have described them as problematic, maladjusted, spoiled, pampered, egoistic, and with undesirable personalities (Weiten, 1998). Further, Sachachter (1959), has stated that in the single-child family, parent-child relationship is characterised by heightened anxiety, tension, relatively high expectations and more attention. As a result, only child parents are prone to overindulgence in child rearing practices, resulting in undesirable outcomes. Another problem associated with this over pampered treatment is the rising rate of childhood obesity among single-children. These children are growing up on the diets from fast food culture with negative effects on their health. It has been estimated that by 2010, one in five children in China will be overweight (James, 2006). Moreover, in case of parental loss this family size is the most vulnerable family for the child.

In the context of above facts, it becomes important to study the perspective of mother and father regarding the consequences of this family size.

### 6. Objectives

In the light of above arguments, through present study, an attempt has been made to determine who are the women and men who have only one child, by identifying their socio-economic profile, whether they have acquired this family size voluntarily or involuntarily. An attempt has also been made to study their (mother's and Father's) perception about the consequences of this family size.

### 7. Methodology

The research design for the present study was exploratory; it was conducted at Chandigarh, a union territory and one of the modern planned cities of India. The locale of the study was selected keeping in view the popularity of this family size in urban areas. The unit of analysis was a conjugating couple having a single-child above the age of 10 years. The operational definition of unit of analysis is based on the observation that more than 90% of the second births in India take place within 5 to 7 years of first birth. Moreover sensitivity analysis done with 8 year cut-off, results remain similar due to small sample size.

It has been assumed that if there is a desire on the part of the couple to have an additional child, then 10 years' period is sufficient to have the second or subsequent children. For

selection of cases snow balling technique was used. The sample comprised of total 210 respondents (105 mothers and 105 fathers).

The parental perception about the consequences of single-child family was worked out on the basis of eighteen statements. These statements were both positive and negative. Positive statements focused on the positive attributes i.e. how single-child family helps in providing good health, quality time, good economic status etc. to the family members. Similarly negative statements pertained to negative perception, like it can adversely affect the sex ratio and age composition of the society, it can spoil or can develop negative personality traits in the child, it can make parents anxious, over protective or can lead to dearth of future kinship network for the child etc. both mothers and fathers were separately questioned and the responses were collected on five point Likert scale and the total score of the respondents could range from 18 to 90. The median was calculated to divide the responses between positive and negative categories.

## 8. Results

Table No. 1 depicts the Profile of the parents, in the present study a considerable proportion of the single-child parents was mainly found in two age categories i.e. 30 to 40 years and 40 to 50 years. In India, since most births take place after marriage, it seems quite reasonable to assume that age at marriage is likely to affect the number of children a woman eventually bears. In the present study, 42.9 per cent of the mothers were married in the age group 18 to 23 years, and 43.2 per cent got married in the age group 23 to 29 years. A majority of the single-child fathers was married in the age group 23 to 29 years and above

30 years. The age at marriage was comparatively higher among fathers than mother.

Education enhances age at marriage, creates awareness about birth control measures and thus influences fertility. Smorti and Ponti(2018), have also reports that only child tends to come from more educated families. Results show that a considerable proportion of the mothers and fathers in the present study were Post-Graduates or Professionals. While studying the occupational status, it was observed that a majority of the mothers was engaged in the paid work outside home, whereas 30.5 per cent of them were engaged in middle occupations and another 13.3 per cent each were engaged in menial and high level occupations. Torr&Short (2004), have also stated that only-children are more common among professional couples. They report that working women are more likely to postpone child-bearing and then run out of time to have more than one child, as the biological clock ticks.

Income is considered another important variable which influences this unique family size. Anderson (1998), reports that high cost of living and new material opportunities force parents to limit their families. Couples opt for single-children to maintain a comfortable standard of living. In the present study, a sizeable proportion of the single-child mothers and fathers were earning between Rs. 10,000 to 50,000 per month. On the other hand, only 8.6 per cent of the mothers and 26.7 per cent of the fathers were earning more than Rs. 50,000 per month. The representation of the only-child mothers and fathers in the menial occupations was negligible.

**Table 1: Profile of the single-child parents (Mothers and Fathers)**

Variables	Mother (N-105)		Father (N-105)	
<b>Present age</b>				
Less than 30years	4	3.8%	0	0
30-40	55	52.4%	40	38.1%
40-50	26	24.8%	37	35.2%
above 50	20	19.0%	28	26.7%
<b>Age at marriage</b>				
Less than 18- years	9	8.6%	0	0
18-23	45	42.9%	23	21.9%
24-29	46	43.8%	55	52.4%
Above 30	5	4.8%	27	25.7%
<b>Education</b>				
Illiterate	11	10.5%	5	4.8%
Up to high school	18	17.1%	17	16.2%
Graduate	14	13.3%	14	13.3%
Prof & Post graduate	62	59.0%	69	65.7%
<b>Occupation</b>				
Unemployed	45	42.9%	2	1.9%
Menial Occupation	14	13.3%	31	29.5%
Middle Occupation	32	30.5%	31	29.5%
High Occupation	14	13.3%	41	39.0%
<b>Income</b>				
No income	45	42.9%	0	0
Less than Rs. 10000	14	13.3%	27	25.7%
Rs.10000-50000	37	35.2%	50	47.6%
More than Rs.50000	9	8.6%	28	26.7%
<b>Social class</b>				
Upper-class	33	31.4%	33	31.4%

Middle-class	41	39.0%	41	39.0%
Lower-class	31	29.5%	31	29.5%
<b>Caste</b>				
Non-Reserved caste	92	87.6%	92	87.6%
Reserved castes	13	12.4%	13	12.4%
<b>Religion</b>				
Hindu	69	65.7%	69	65.7%
Sikh	33	31.4%	33	31.4%
Muslim	3	2.9%	3	2.9%
<b>Household type</b>				
Nuclear	71	67.6%	71	67.6%
Joint/extended	34	32.4%	34	32.4%
<b>Family type</b>				
Voluntary	60	57.1%	60	57.1%
Involuntary	45	42.9%	45	42.9%

The concept of social class is indispensable for understanding the only-child family as the review of the literature indicates that this is more prevalent in the urban upper and middle-classes all over the world. Bavel (2006), maintains that family size limitation is one of the strategies that are employed by the parents to invest more resources in fewer offsprings in order to help them achieve a better position in the social-class hierarchy. In the present study also this family size was found more prevalent in the middle and upper-class than in lower-class.

Caste is a deep-rooted social stratification system, in the Indian social structure. Ramesh (2003), has found that in urban areas, the fertility-rate increases from lower castes to upper castes, being minimum among Brahmins and maximum among the Scheduled Castes. In the present study a majority of the single-child parents i.e. 87 per cent belonged to the non-reserved caste category. The representation of the reserved caste single-child parents was negligible in the present sample

Researchers like (Verma&Rohini 2008), have found a strong influence of household type on fertility rate. Higher fertility-rate was found in the joint household due to collective responsibility and the availability of support system, whereas, it is missing in nuclear households. The present study also supports the above mentioned findings as a considerable proportion of the single child parents hailed from the nuclear families.

There are two distinct types of conditions through which single-child family can emerge. Gillespie (1999), suggests that couples who intend to have one child from the outset and fulfill their intention through planned decisions, can be said to have one child by choice (voluntarily). In contrast, the couples who initially intend to have more than one child but then are unable to have second child due to infertility, can be said to have one

child due to circumstances (involuntarily). In the present study also, single-child families have been grouped as voluntary and involuntary. There were 57.1 per cent parents who opted for this family size voluntarily and 42.9 per cent acquired this family size involuntarily due to circumstances. In-depth analysis revealed that a majority of the parents who opted for single-child family voluntarily were highly qualified, engaged in middle or high level occupations and belonged to the upper or middle-class. Contrarily those who acquired this family size involuntarily, a majority of them were less qualified engaged in menial occupations and hailed from lower-class.

**9. Parental perception about the consequences**

After analysing the profile of the single-child parents the consequences perceived by them about only-child family were studied. The consequences were classified into two categories i.e. positive and negative. In the study undertaken 63.8 per cent of the fathers and 51.4 per cent of the mothers perceived positive consequences about the single-child family. Among those who perceived negative consequences of this family size, the proportion of the mothers was higher than fathers, i.e. 48.6 per cent and 36.2 per cent, respectively. This variation indicates towards the gender role attitudes and power dynamics involved in the family. In the patriarchal system, husbands derive a measure of assertiveness from the social norms and the wives, a corresponding measure of deference, which results in 'husband dominance'. Generally, men play important role in family decision making and women are just following them. In these situations, mothering children is an important source of power, authority and autonomy for a woman. Moreover, women face more social pressure than men to achieve ideal composition of the family. As a result, women are more likely to view negative consequences of having only one child.

**Table 2: Distribution of the respondents according to the social class and the consequences of a single-child family**

Consequences	Upper-class		Middle-class		Lower-class	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
<b>Positive</b>	22 66.7%	28 84.8%	22 53.7%	29 70.7%	10 32.3%	10 32.3%
<b>Negative</b>	11 33.3%	5 15.2%	19 46.3%	12 29.3%	21 67.7%	21 67.7%

<b>Total</b>	33 100.0%	33 100.0%	41 100.0%	41 100.0%	31 100.0%	31 100.0%
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Different researchers have reported that people from higher socio-economic background have a preference for small family size. (Basu, & Desai, 2016; Bavel, 2006). The table No.2 reveals that a majority of the respondents from the upper and middle class background, perceived positive consequences of single-child family. However, a large proportion of the mothers and fathers belonging to the lower-class viewed negative consequences of the single-child family. It was found that a majority of them were not highly qualified and had acquired single-child family involuntarily. It is also important to mention here that an overwhelming majority of the voluntary single-child families was hailing from the upper and middle-classes. In other words, couples belonging to upper class, have a positive perception about the consequences of single-child family.

Gillespie (1999), has classified single-child family into two types i.e. voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary single-child family is marked by planned decision on the part of the couples to opt for this family size. On the other hand, involuntary single-child family shows no intention on the part of the couples, to acquire this family size. Their circumstances compel them to be a single-child family. Moreover, it has been found that women who involuntarily acquire one child are unhappy because such women fail to achieve their desired family size. It is in this regard that an attempt was made to study the relationship between the consequences of single-child family as perceived by the respondents, and type of single-child family.

**Fig 1: Distribution of the respondents according to the single-child family type and the consequences of a single-child family**

Consequences	Voluntary		Involuntary	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
<b>Positive</b>	39 65.0%	48 80.0%	15 33.3%	19 42.2%
<b>Negative</b>	21 35.0%	12 20.0%	30 66.7%	26 57.8%
<b>Total</b>	60 100.0%	60 100.0%	45 100.0%	45 100.0%

In the present study, out of the 105 single-child families, 60 couples had opted for this family size voluntarily, whereas, the remaining 45 couples had acquired this family type involuntarily. Among respondents having voluntary single-child family, 65 per cent of the mothers and 80 per cent of the fathers perceived positive consequences of this family. In-depth analysis reveals that a notable proportion of both mothers and fathers were from the upper and middle-class backgrounds and were engaged in middle and high-level occupations. Strikingly, a substantial proportion of them were having male children. However, a sizeable proportion of those who had involuntary single-child family, apprehended negative consequences of single-child family. This indicates that they were not happy with the size of their family. However, 33.3 per cent of the mothers and 42.2 per cent of the fathers visualised positive consequences of single-child family, despite acquiring this family size involuntarily. It can be due to the fact that they have accepted their fate and started enjoying their life with one child. Further analysis reveals that a considerable proportion of them were professionally qualified, engaged in high levels of occupations and were earning more than Rs. 50,000 per month. The findings indicate that these couples were satisfied with one child, even though the single-child family was not the family of their choice.

**10. Discussion**

There has been a progressive rise in the number of single-child families. Although earlier, single-child families were in existence exclusively due to involuntary reasons. But, now along with involuntary factor, in some cases, couples are opting for this family size voluntarily. This is evident from the present research as both involuntary and voluntary adoption of this family size was observed. Voluntary acceptance of this family

size was more prevalent among couples belonging to the upper and middle-classes. These couples were highly educated, engaged in high level occupations and were earning handsome salaries. They have perceived positive consequences of the single-child family. The cost of bearing and up-bringing a child is rising, due to which some couples from middle and upper are choosing to curtail their commitment just to one child. By doing so, they are successful in maintaining and enhancing their socio economic status in the society. The results support the findings of Basu, & Desai, (2016) and Bavel (2006), who have also reported that fertility decline was initiated by the middle and upper-classes to maintain or enhance their status.

Contrarily, involuntary single-child families were more common among the couples hailing from the lower-class. They were not highly educated and were engaged in menial occupations. They have perceived negative consequences of the single-child family. This can be explained in terms that when economic gains flow from the child to the parent, fertility desires is high because parents get economic benefit. In the lower socio-economic class, children generally start earning and contributing to the family income at a very early age. That is why; a large family size is preferred in this class. On the other hand, in the upper and middle-class, 'child quality' is preferred, due to which economic funds flow from the parents to the child, thus small family size is desired. The findings lend credence to the study which has described that parents hailing from the lower socio-economic status want additional children because of their economic utility (Narayana,1998). It is important to mention here that a majority of those who perceived single-child family positively and had opted for this family size voluntarily, were married at an older age. On the other hand those who perceived single-child family negatively and had acquired this

family size involuntarily, were married at an early age than others.

It is important to mention that there is a variation in the perception of father and mother understudy, regarding the consequences of the single-child family. Positive consequences of this family size were perceived by more number of fathers than mothers. This variation can be related with power structure in the family. In the patriarchal system, husbands enjoy a powerful position backed by social norms. On the other hand, mothering children is an important source of identity, power and authority for a woman. Thus, women face more social pressure

than men to achieve ideal composition of the family. Consequently, they are less likely to view positive consequences of the single-child family as single-child family is not an ideal family size according to the popular beliefs. The present study should be seen as presenting a glimpse of the demographic change taking place in some sections of the society. The findings of the present research are just an anecdote in the Indian context. This will help the couples and the policy makers in maximising the options, enhancing the advantages and controlling the disadvantages of the single-child family.

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