

Motherless Youth: Exploring Social, Emotional, and Economic Effects of Motherlessness on Youth in Madombidzha Village.

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Abstract

This study investigates the profound effects of motherless youth in Madombidzha Village, aiming to understand the social, emotional, and economic implications of this phenomenon. The problem of motherlessness is increasingly prevalent, leading to various challenges for young individuals, including increased vulnerability to mental health issues, lower educational attainment, and higher rates of delinquency. This study seeks to highlight these issues and their broader impact on the community. A qualitative research approach was employed, which is crucial for gaining in-depth insights into the lived experiences of youth affected by motherlessness. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with affected youths, community leaders, and social workers, providing a comprehensive understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives. The findings reveal that motherlessness contributes to a significant decline in self-esteem among youth, fosters a sense of abandonment, and correlates with increased risk-taking behaviors. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of community support systems in mitigating these effects. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform local policy, enhance community programs, raise awareness about the challenges faced by motherless youth, and contribute to the broader discourse on family dynamics and youth development.

Keywords: *Motherlessness, youth, Madombidzha Village, mental health, community support, qualitative research.*

Introduction

The phenomenon of motherlessness has emerged as a significant social issue that affects the development and well-being of youth across various communities. In Madombidzha Village, the absence of mothers has created

a silent struggle for many young individuals, influencing their emotional, psychological, and social development. This study aims to explore the multifaceted impacts of motherlessness on youth in this village, shedding light on the challenges they face and the implications for their future. By understanding the dynamics of mother absence, we can better address the needs of these youth and develop strategies to support their growth and resilience.

Motherlessness has emerged as a pressing social issue in many communities across the globe, and its consequences are often deeply felt by the youth (Raby & Anderson, 2025). It is a complex issue that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, with profound effects on youth's lives. In many African societies, including those in South Africa, the traditional role of the mothers extends beyond economic provision; mothers are also expected to be moral guides, protectors, and pillars of emotional support (Maqubela, 2021). When mothers are absent whether due to death, separation, migration for work, or abandonment the gap left behind can significantly affect the development and wellbeing of young people. Moreover, in many societies, mothers are seen as primary providers and role models, playing a crucial role in shaping their youth's values, behaviors, and aspirations (Phelps & Sperry, 2021). However, in Madombidzha Village, a significant number of youth grow up without the presence of their mothers, leading to a myriad of challenges. This absence can stem from various factors, including economic migration, divorce, abandonment, or even death.

Research indicates that motherless youth are at a higher risk of experiencing emotional and behavioral problems. They may struggle with issues such as low self-esteem, depression, and difficulties in forming healthy relationships. Furthermore, the lack of a mother figure can hinder their academic performance and limit their opportunities for personal and professional growth (Bogi et al., 2023). In Madombidzha Village, these challenges are compounded by socio-economic factors, such as poverty and limited access to educational resources, which further exacerbate the struggles faced by these young individuals.

The implications of motherlessness extend beyond individual experiences. These implications also affect the broader community. Youth who grow up without a mother may contribute to cycles of poverty and social instability, perpetuating a cycle that is difficult to break (De schutter et al., 2023). Madombidzha Village is one of the communities where the phenomenon of motherlessness is becoming increasingly visible. As social dynamics shift and economic hardships persist, many households in the village are led by single fathers or grandparents, with mothers either physically absent or disengaged from their parental responsibilities. While various studies have explored the broader consequences of motherlessness, there remains a need to investigate its localized impact, specifically how it affects the emotional, behavioural, academic, and social outcomes of youth in a rural setting like Madombidzha.

This study seeks to explore the silent struggles endured by motherless youth in Madombidzha, shedding light on their lived experiences. By understanding the depth and nature of these effects, the research aims to inform local interventions, support services, and policy frameworks tailored to the needs of motherless youth and adolescents within the community. Moreover, understanding the impacts of motherlessness in Madombidzha Village is crucial for developing targeted interventions that can support these youth and foster a more resilient community. This study will explore the lived experiences of motherless youth, aiming to provide insights that can inform policies and programs designed to address their unique needs and challenges.

Literature Review

Motherlessness has been extensively studied across different regions of the world, with a growing body of literature highlighting its multifaceted impacts on youth. The absence of a mother figure, whether due to death, divorce, abandonment, or migration, has been linked to a range of developmental challenges that affect the psychological, emotional, social, and academic growth of young individuals (Lamb, 2010). These effects often vary depending on the social, cultural, and economic context of the community in question.

Globally, research shows that youth raised without mothers are more likely to experience emotional instability, behavioural issues, and academic underperformance (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). These outcomes are attributed to the loss of paternal guidance, financial support, and the emotional security that a mother figure typically provides. Studies from the United States and Europe have established strong correlations between mother absence and increased risks of juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and school dropout rates (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). While these findings provide important insights, they may not fully reflect the realities of rural African settings, where extended families and communal parenting structures can sometimes play compensatory roles. In the African context, motherlessness is often shaped by unique socio-economic factors such as labor migration, HIV/AIDS, and cultural practices. In South Africa, mother absence has become a growing phenomenon, with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC, 2018) reporting that nearly 60% of youth live

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without their biological fathers. Many mothers are absent not by choice but due to structural inequalities, including unemployment, poverty, and the legacy of apartheid-era migrant labor systems. According to Ratele et al. (2012), these systemic challenges have weakened traditional models of motherhood and redefined the role of men within families. Research conducted in South Africa also reveals the psychological toll motherlessness takes on youth. Richter and Morrell (2006) argue that the emotional disconnection resulting from absent mothers can lead to identity crises, low self-esteem, and feelings of abandonment among adolescents. This is particularly true in rural areas, where resources such as counselling services and mentorship programs are often limited. Additionally, girls and boys tend to experience the absence of their mothers differently; while girls may become more vulnerable to early relationships and exploitation, boys may seek validation through risky behavior or gangs as substitute male role models (Eddy, Mphaka, & Thomson-de Boer, 2013).

While some studies have touched on the resilience of motherless youth in South Africa, few have taken a community-specific approach to understanding their lived experiences. For instance, in Limpopo Province, which includes Madombidzha Village, little research has been conducted to explore how motherlessness manifests in day-to-day life, and what coping mechanisms young people use in the absence of paternal support. Local studies, such as those by Mokwena and Makoae (2017), stress the importance of context-based interventions and the role of schools, churches, and community leaders in providing alternative support systems for vulnerable youth. Furthermore, the interplay between motherlessness and cultural expectations in Venda communities such as those in Madombidzha remains an underexplored area. In many traditional African societies, masculinity and motherhood are closely linked to social status and responsibility. When a mother is absent, young boys may struggle to internalize these roles, while girls may lack a model for future relationships and self-worth (Makusha & Richter, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby (1969), emphasizes the importance of early emotional bonds between youth and their primary caregivers often including fathers. It posits that the quality of these attachments can significantly influence a child's emotional and social development. According to this theory, a child's sense of security and ability to form healthy social and emotional relationships later in life are largely shaped by these early attachments. In the context of motherlessness, the absence of a stable paternal bond can result in insecurity, low self-esteem, and behavioral issues. The theory helps explain how the lack of a father figure can disrupt the emotional development of youth, influencing their interpersonal relationships and self-perception. The theory continues to help explain the potential emotional and psychological impacts on youth who grow up without a mother figure.

In Madombidzha Village, the absence of a mother can lead to insecure attachments, which may manifest as anxiety, depression, and difficulties in forming relationships. Youth who lack a mother figure struggle with feelings of abandonment and low self-esteem, which can hinder their ability to connect with peers and authority figures. This emotional turmoil can perpetuate a cycle of instability and insecurity, affecting their overall development and future relationships. Moreover, the link between attachment theory and motherlessness is evident in the way youth internalize their experiences. Without a mother, youth develop insecure attachment styles, leading to challenges in emotional regulation and social interactions. This can result in a range of issues, including behavioral problems and academic struggles.

Ecological Systems Theory

Complementing this, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) offers a broader perspective by situating the individual within multiple layers of environmental influence from the immediate family to larger societal structures. According to Bronfenbrenner, a child's development is shaped by interactions across five interconnected systems: the microsystem (family, peers, school), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystem (indirect influences like a parent's workplace), macrosystem (cultural beliefs, social norms), and chronosystem (life transitions and historical contexts). In this study, the theory helps situate motherlessness within the broader socio-economic and cultural realities of Madombidzha Village, such as poverty, traditional norms, and systemic gender roles.

In the context of this study, the microsystem includes the direct environment of the youth, such as family, peers, and schools. The absence of a mother can lead to emotional and social challenges, affecting relationships and support systems. This immediate impact is crucial for understanding the struggles faced by youth in Madombidzha Village. Therefore, ecological systems theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted impacts of motherlessness on youth.

Moreover, the mesosystem involves the interactions between different microsystems. For example, the relationship between a child's home life and their school environment can be affected by motherlessness. If a child lacks support at home, it may reflect in their academic performance and social interactions at school, further compounding their struggles. The exosystem includes broader social systems that indirectly affect the youth. For instance, community resources, local policies, and social services can influence the support available to youth without fathers. Limited access to these resources can exacerbate the challenges faced by these youth. Additionally, the macrosystem encompasses cultural values, societal norms, and economic conditions. In Madombidzha Village, cultural attitudes towards fatherhood and family structures can shape the experiences of fatherless youth.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically semi-structured interviews, to explore the lived experiences of youth affected by motherlessness in Madombidzha Village. A qualitative semi-structured interview is appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2018). The aim is not to generalize findings but to gain a deep, contextualized insight into the challenges, coping mechanisms, and social dynamics experienced by motherless youth in this particular village. The target population for this study includes youth aged 15 to 24 who are currently living without a biological or social mother figure in their household. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who can provide rich, relevant information regarding the research topic.

In total, 5 to 6 participants are selected to ensure both depth and diversity of experiences. Community leaders and local school counsellors assisted in identifying suitable participants while maintaining ethical considerations. Data was analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved the familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for patterns, reviewing themes, and refining them into a coherent narrative. Ethical approval is obtained from the relevant academic institution. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and parental consent was obtained for participants under 18. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Additionally, participants showing distress during the interviews were referred to local counselling services through an established support referral system.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Educational level	Occupation	Monthly income
P1	Male	19	High school graduate	Unemployed	No income
P2	Female	17	High school learner	N/A	N/A
P3	Male	16	High school student	Part-time worker	R500 per month
P4	Female	24	University student	Part-time worker	R1000 per month
P5	Male	15	High school student	N/A	N/A
P6	Female	17	High school dropout	Unemployment	No income

The sample consists of three males (P1, P3, P5) and three females (P2, P4, P6), presenting a balanced gender distribution. This equal representation allows for a more equitable reflection of perspectives between male and female participants, which is beneficial for qualitative or demographic studies seeking gender inclusivity. Participants' ages range from 15 to 24 years old, indicating a focus on adolescents and young adults. The distribution is as follows: Early teens (15–17 years): P2 (17), P3 (16), P5 (15), P6 (17), Late teens (18–19 years): P1 (19) Young adults (20–24 years): P4 (24). This age range reflects individuals in various transitional life stages such as moving from high school to tertiary education or from education into employment which may influence their socio-economic

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and educational experiences. The educational background varies across the participants: High school learners: P2, P3, P5, High school graduate: P1, High school dropout: P6, University student: P4. Most participants are still in or recently completed high school, with only one (P4) currently pursuing higher education. One participant (P6) dropped out of high school, which may have implications for employment prospects and income generation. This spread highlights different educational trajectories among youth. Participants show a mix of employment statuses: Unemployed: P1, P6, Part-time workers: P3, P4, N/A/Not employed or unspecified: P2, P5. Only two participants (P3 and P4) are engaged in part-time work, reflecting limited work opportunities for individuals in this age group. Youth unemployment or underemployment is evident in the group, which aligns with broader societal trends in many regions. Income levels further emphasize economic vulnerability among participants: No income: P1, P6, Low income: P3 earns R500/month; P4 earns R1000/month, N/A: P2, P5. Among the participants who reported income, the earnings are modest and insufficient to support independent living. This suggests financial dependence on family or external support. Participants with "N/A" for income likely do not work and therefore do not earn.

Table 2: Summary findings

Theme	Findings	Discussion of Findings
1. Social Effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Youth without mothers often lack consistent parental guidance.- Some experience isolation or feel excluded in peer or community settings.	The absence of a maternal figure limits access to emotional support and nurturing, which are crucial during adolescence. In a tight-knit community like Madombidzha, this can lead to social exclusion or stigma. Peer relationships may also be affected due to a lack of confidence or emotional grounding.
2. Emotional Effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Feelings of sadness, abandonment, and anger are common.- Some youth struggle with identity and self-worth.	Motherlessness contributes to emotional instability, especially during critical developmental years. Participants expressed grief, longing, and difficulty coping with loss. This often leads to suppressed emotions, mental health struggles, or behavior issues like aggression or withdrawal.
3. Economic Effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Most motherless youth live in financially strained households.- Several depend on relatives or social grants.- Limited access to basic needs like clothing, school supplies, and nutrition.	Mothers often play a key economic role in low-income households. Their absence exacerbates poverty, especially where fathers are unemployed or absent. Some participants (e.g., P3 and P4) attempt to contribute through part-time work, but earnings are minimal. Economic pressure often interferes with education.
4. Educational Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- High rates of school dropout or inconsistent attendance.- Lack of emotional and financial support affects academic performance.	The absence of maternal encouragement and supervision can lower motivation and academic ambition. Youth may skip school to assist at home or due to emotional distress. In P6's case, dropping out correlates with both emotional burden and financial hardship.

5. Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Some rely on extended family, religious communities, or peer groups.- Others suppress emotions or show signs of emotional numbing.	Coping mechanisms vary. Supportive relatives or community structures can provide a buffer, though not all participants have access to such networks. Emotional resilience is inconsistent, and those without support systems are more vulnerable to long-term psychological impacts.
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Discussion

This study sheds light on the diverse challenges that are faced by motherless youth in Madombidzha Village, highlighting the significant impact of maternal absence on their social, emotional, economic, and educational well-being. The findings emphasize the critical role mothers play in providing emotional support, economic stability, and guidance during adolescence, which is a significant period marked by significant physical, psychological, and social development for the youth. The absence of a maternal figure deprives youth of consistent parental guidance and emotional support, commonly leading to feelings of isolation and exclusion within their communities and peer groups (Nugin & Unt, 2025). In a tight-knit community like Madombidzha, the absence of a mother can intensify social stigma and restrict opportunities for these youth to build meaningful relationships. Peer relationships may be particularly affected due to a lack of confidence or emotional grounding, further exacerbating feelings of loneliness and disconnection (Sapiro & Quiroz, 2022). These findings suggest that interventions designed to foster inclusive community environments and provide mentorship programs could help alleviate the social challenges faced by motherless youth.

The emotional impact of motherlessness is considerable, with participants frequently expressing sentiments of sadness, abandonment, and anger. These emotions often manifest as emotional instability, suppressed emotions, and mental health struggles, potentially leading to behavioral issues such as aggression or withdrawal (Yuan et al., 2023). The struggle with identity and self-worth is especially concerning, as it can have long-lasting effects on psychological well-being (Alam & Mohanty, 2024). These findings highlight the urgent need for mental health support services tailored to the unique needs of motherless youth, including counselling and therapy to address grief, loss, and emotional regulation.

The economic instability observed in this study is a direct consequence of maternal absence, particularly in low-income households where mothers often play a crucial economic role. The reliance on relatives or meager social grants further highlights the financial strain these households face (Nzabamwita & Ndhlovu, 2024). Some youth attempt to contribute financially through part-time work, which often interferes with their academic pursuits, perpetuating a cycle of poverty (De Schutter et al., 2023). These findings suggest that economic support programs, such as vocational training and enhanced social grants, could provide a vital lifeline for these families. The high rates of school dropout and inconsistent attendance among motherless youth are alarming, reflecting the compounded challenges of emotional distress and financial hardship. The absence of mothers' encouragement and supervision appears to lower academic motivation and ambition (Goshin et al., 2021), with some youth skipping school to assist at home or due to emotional burden, these findings imply that targeted educational support, including tutoring, mentorship, and flexible schooling options, could help these youth stay in school and achieve their academic potential.

The findings reveal that the coping mechanism employed by motherless youth differs widely, with some relying on extended family, religious communities, or peer groups for support. However, other suppresses their emotions or show signs of emotional numbing, highlighting the inconsistency in emotional resilience among participants. The presence of supportive networks can provide a crucial buffer against the adverse effects of mother's absence (Smith & Pollak, 2021), underscoring the importance of strengthening community support systems and ensuring all youth have access to such networks.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the profound and far-reaching impact of maternal absence on youth in Madombidzha Village, affecting their social, emotional, economic, and educational well-being. The absence of a mother figure exacerbates vulnerabilities, leading to social isolation, emotional instability, economic difficulties, and educational disruption. To mitigate these adverse effects, comprehensive interventions are necessary, including

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mental health support services, economic empowerment programs, educational assistance, and community-based initiatives. By addressing the unique needs of motherless youth, we can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment, enabling them to overcome challenges and achieve their potential.

Based on the findings, this study recommends:

- Establishing mental health support services through developing and implementing counselling and therapy services tailored to address the unique emotional needs of motherless youth.
- Providing vocational training, microfinance initiatives, or enhanced social grants to alleviate financial strain and promote economic stability.
- Offering educational assistance through tutoring, mentorship, and flexible schooling options to help motherless youth stay in school and achieve their academic potential.
- Raising awareness about the challenges faced by motherless youth and promoting community engagement and support for this vulnerable population.

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