

Single Mothers' Experiences during COVID-19 in Malaysia

A Data Snapshot

Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) | December 2024



Introduction: Who is a single mother?

Single parenting is not a new phenomenon. According to OECD (2015) reports, 17% of children aged 0-14 live in single parent households worldwide and approximately 88% of these households are headed by women. Globally, female headed households and single mothers are significant, with UN Women (2019) stating that in 89 countries, over 101.3 million homes are led by single mothers living alone with their children.

According to the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM) (n.d.), single mothers are defined as women who single-handedly head households with children living under the same roof, who:

1. Are widowed, divorced, permanently separated, and have not remarried and have unmarried children in the same household
2. Were never married but have an adopted or a child born out of marriage (illegitimate child), or
3. Have spouses who are ill and unable to work

In Malaysia, according to the 2020 census, there are 910,091 women who fall into the definition of single mothers (MalayMail, 2023). However, the figure officially registered with the Women's Development Department (JPW) is far lower, at 161,227 in 2020 (MAMPU, 2022), or 17.7% of single mothers in total. JPW is one of the main government bodies offering assistance to single mothers.

The disparity between the actual number of single mothers in Malaysia and those who are registered with JPW potentially signals an awareness gap in the assistance and schemes provided by the government. This gap is further compounded by overwhelming familial obligations that make it hard for single mothers to receive the information on the help available. To bridge these gaps and inaccessibilities, gender mainstreaming must be centred to ensure that single mothers are recognised as groups that require specific studies, analysis and data collection.

This data snapshot is an effort towards recognising the needs of single mothers in Klang Valley, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period of crisis that was especially tough on vulnerable groups such as single mothers.

Objective of data snapshot

Based on various studies and our experiences in working with single mother survivors of violence on the ground, this case study report highlights seven areas in which single mothers in Malaysia disproportionately face systemic challenges:

1. Accessing to skills training for economic empowerment,
2. Workforce participation,
3. Housing,
4. Financial aid,
5. Physical and mental health,
6. Children's schooling, and
7. Obtaining divorce and custody.

This list is, however, not exhaustive as single mothers are generally more vulnerable to social and institutional barriers. This exacerbates the situation as encountering barriers across numerous domains puts single women in a precarious and highly stressful position.

As such, the analysis generated in this report, from a small scale qualitative study undertaken by Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) in 2021, aims to provide a data snapshot of the numerous barriers single mothers in Malaysia experience.

While WAO aims to provide data and insights from the single mothers interviewed, we must also acknowledge the limitations of this study. Though comprehensive, these limitations affect the breadth and applicability of findings.

Firstly, this research primarily focused on women who are involved in WAO's Power Up! Programme, which limits the diversity of the respondents. As WAO is based in Klang Valley, perspectives from single mothers from other states, especially those in rural areas, are missed. Secondly, this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting interviews to online means, which could have impacted the participation of single mothers who did not have sufficient internet access or digital literacy. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the difficulties faced by single mothers and the challenges highlighted here pre-date the pandemic, but further study is needed to see how these issues may have persisted.

Profile of respondents

A total of 20 single mothers were interviewed. The selection was guided by a set of inclusion criteria to ensure the study focused on the most relevant population, with a focus on single mothers from the B40 community. Respondents were recruited from WAO’s network. The following is the sociodemographic profile of the respondents.

Figure 1. Monthly income of single mothers

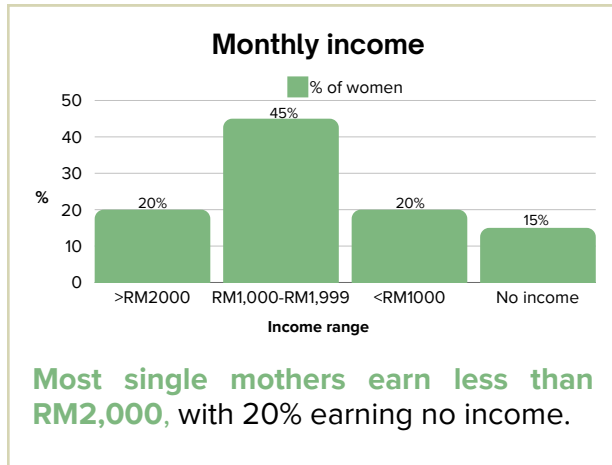


Figure 2. Age range of single mothers

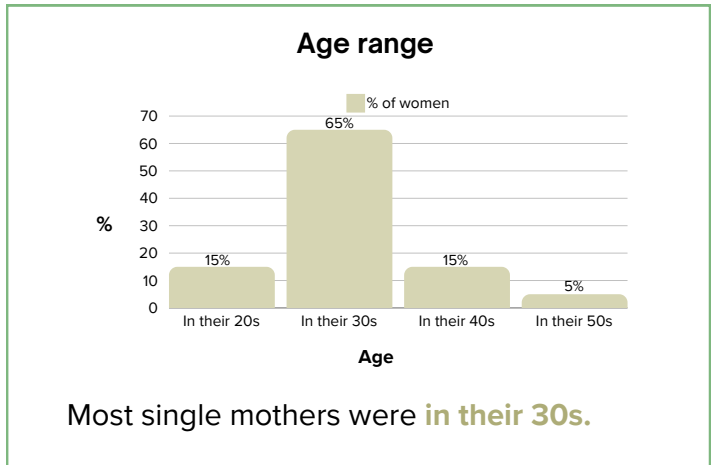


Figure 3. Location of single mothers

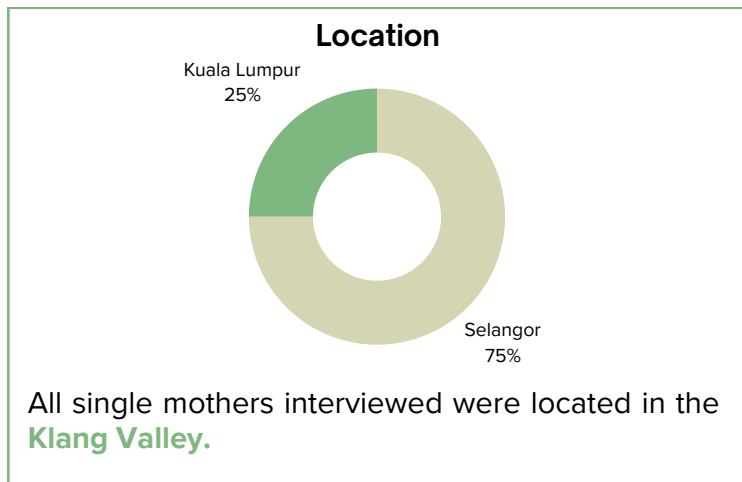


Figure 4. Nationality of single mothers

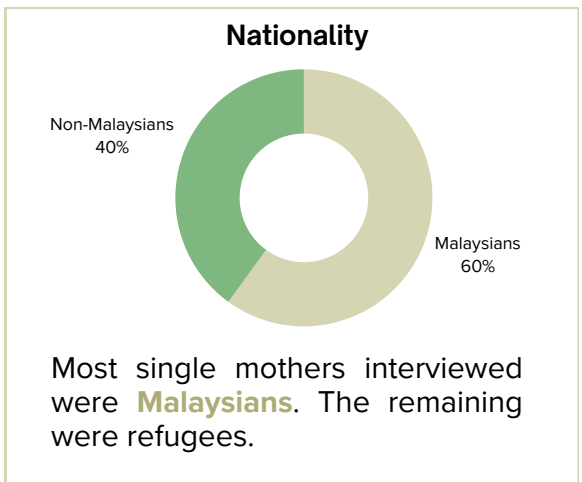


Figure 5. Marital status of single mothers

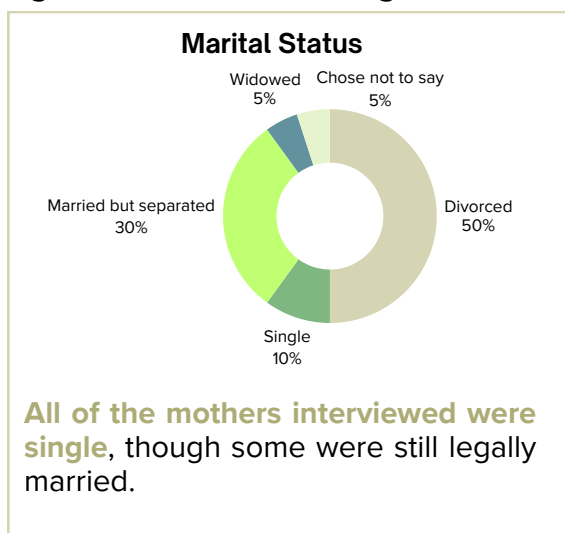
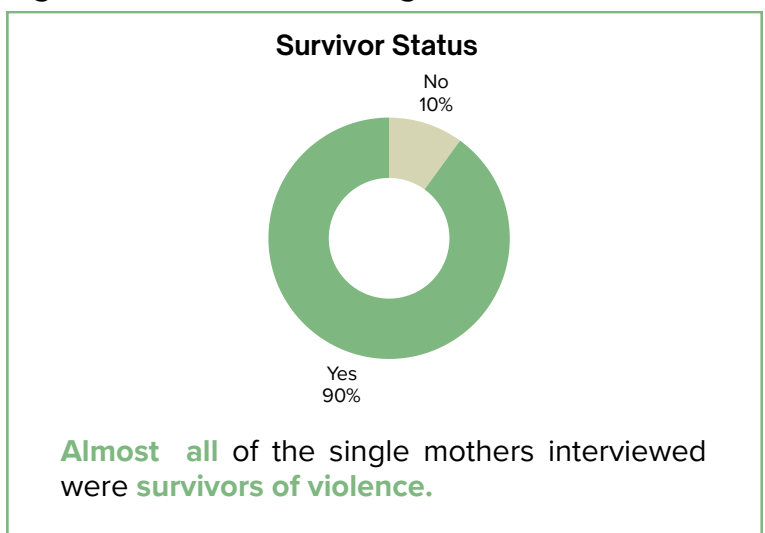


Figure 6. Survivor status of single mothers

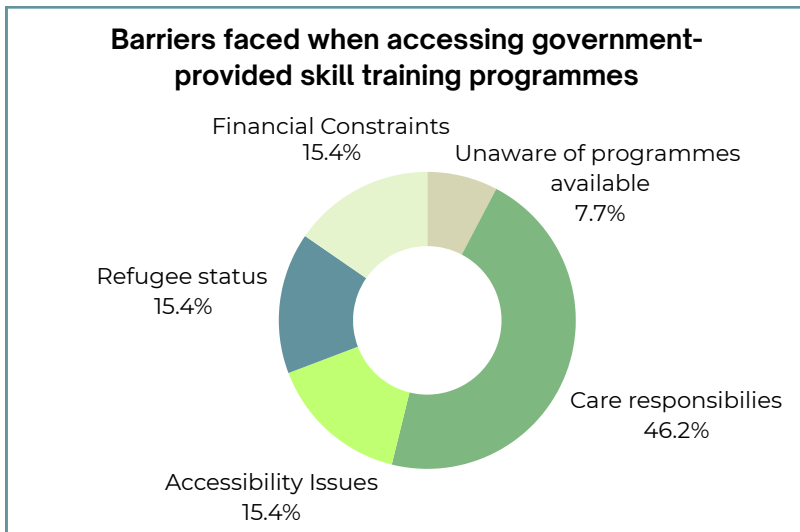


Issue 1. Single mothers face barriers accessing government-provided skill training programmes.

Out of the 20 single mothers, 19 reported facing significant challenges accessing training programmes and other opportunities. These programmes are crucial to women’s economic empowerment, but many found the programmes impossible to attend while managing childcare, housework, and their daily jobs. These obligations left little time to engage in these opportunities, suggesting these programmes must better consider the needs of single mothers.

“[I] didn’t attend anything because [it was] hard to find childcare for the children.”
—Sarah, 31

Figure 7. Barriers to accessing training programmes



46.2%
who faced barriers accessing these programmes cited **difficulty accessing support for care** as a barrier for accessing skill training programmes

15.4%
who struggled accessing these programmes reported **financial constraints** as a barrier.

“When I registered, they said every piece of equipment will be provided... But actually, **they didn’t provide anything**; they asked us to buy. It would be more helpful if they provided [the tools] because it’s a government course. They said it’s for people to join, learn, and in the future, they can earn. But actually, all the things were **very expensive**.”
—Amina, 35

Issue 2. It is difficult for single mothers to access the formal workforce.

Out of 20 single mothers, 16 reported facing various challenges in the workforce, revealing systemic and personal obstacles that impact their employment opportunities. These challenges mainly related to lack of work flexibility, care responsibilities and refugee status. Other barriers also include reduced wages due to COVID-19, transportation issues, and stigma of single mothers.

“As a refugee, it’s tough to find work. Even with a UNHCR card, **some employers don’t like hiring us.** Refugees often get paid less and are **expected to work 12-hour shifts.**”

—Atel, 28

Issue analysis: Caregiving and constraints

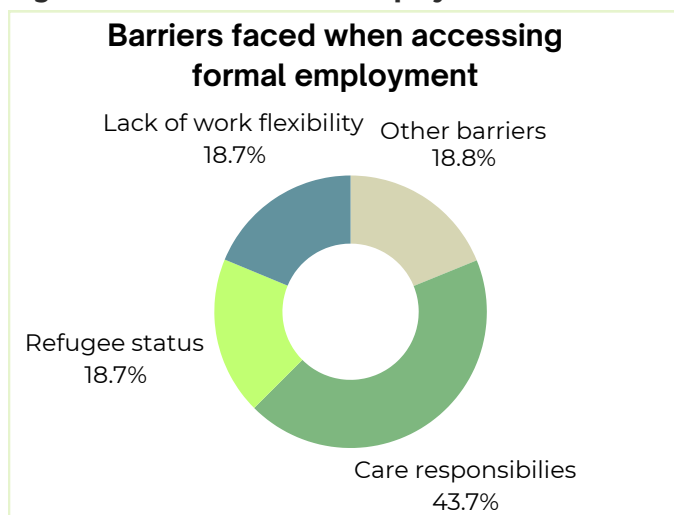
Societal expectations for women to be caregivers **compounds for single mothers**, who not only have to manage their caregiving but also contend with needing to earn enough to support their families.

Consequently, balancing caregiving with employment **proved extremely difficult**, especially for those with **young children and limited access to affordable childcare.**

“The main challenge is **the time.** I have to **work for 12 hours**, and some jobs only offer **one day off a month**, which isn’t possible for me. I also worry about things like shopping since the mall will be closed when I get home. **The location is too far**, which would eat up half my salary just in transport.”

—Julia, 27

Figure 8. Barriers to formal employment



43.7% of single mothers who had difficulties accessing the formal workforce cited **care responsibilities** as a significant challenge.

18.7% who struggled accessing formal employment cited **lack of work flexibility** as a challenge.

Issue 3. Affordability is a significant challenge for single mothers trying to find housing.

Out of 20 single mothers, 17 reported facing significant challenges related to their housing needs, with these challenges stemming from a combination of financial constraints, safety concerns, and difficulties in navigating bureaucracy to secure housing.

Many single mothers found that the cost of housing consumed a large portion of their income, leaving little for other necessities. The burden of high rent often forces difficult decisions, such as sacrificing quality of life or moving to less desirable, potentially unsafe areas. A few women highlighted concerns for their own safety, which warrants a closer look as 90.0% of the sample are survivors of violence.

Issue analysis: Safety

Safe housing is central to empowering survivors, and is especially crucial for single mothers who are looking to rebuild their lives.

The single mothers interviewed highlighted fears arising from the **poor conditions of low cost housing and actual instances of violence where they felt inadequately supported.** These issues are compounded for refugees.

As one single mother recalls:

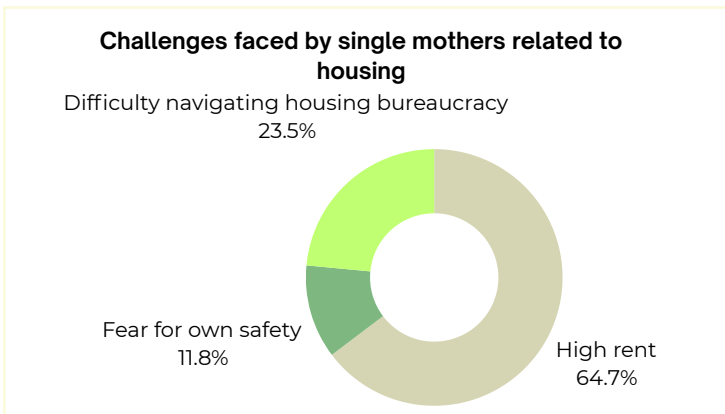
“I received threatening calls from strangers, **saying they would kill me.** I sought help from community organisations, but **they only advised me to make a police report.** However, **due to language barriers, I couldn’t go to the police alone.**”

—Angeline, 40

“My house rental is very high. When I compare it to my monthly income, **my rent takes up three-fourths of what I earn.**”

—Linda, 41

Figure 9. Challenges to accessing housing



64.7% of single mothers who had difficulties with housing reported **affordability of housing** as a significant challenge.

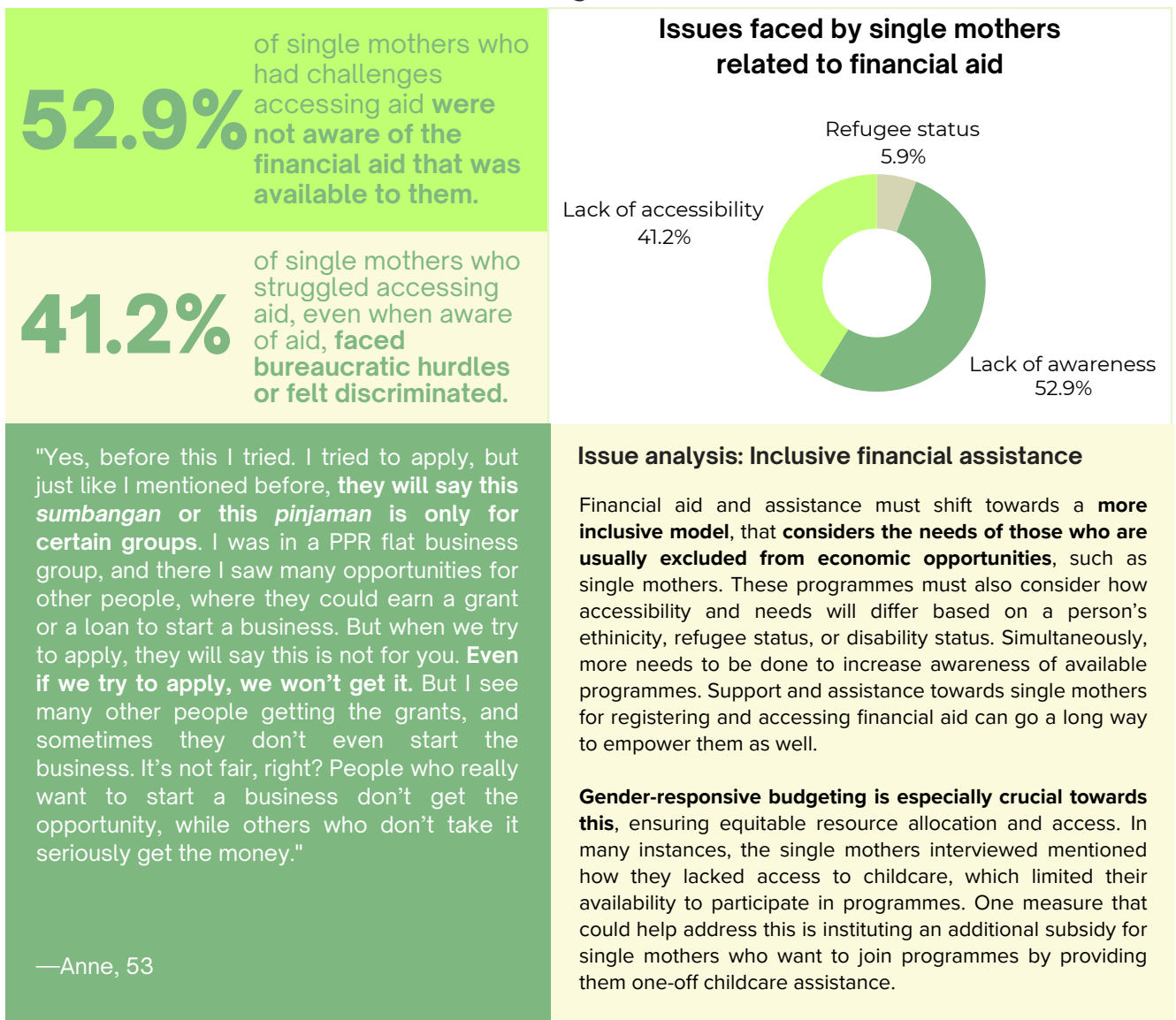
Issue 4. Single mothers either **did not receive any information about financial aid available or could not access aid offered.**

Out of 20 single mothers, 17 reported significant challenges in accessing financial aid. These challenges stemmed primarily from a lack of awareness about available aid, difficulties in accessing the aid, and the complications associated with refugee status. These systemic barriers can prevent many single mothers from receiving the support they need to improve their financial situations.

"No, I never applied, I don't know how to apply. No, I don't know how to find out how. Nobody suggested I should apply."

—Nurin, 33

Figure 10. Issues related to financial aid



52.9% of single mothers who had challenges accessing aid were not aware of the financial aid that was available to them.

41.2% of single mothers who struggled accessing aid, even when aware of aid, faced bureaucratic hurdles or felt discriminated.

"Yes, before this I tried. I tried to apply, but just like I mentioned before, they will say this *sumbangan* or this *pinjaman* is only for certain groups. I was in a PPR flat business group, and there I saw many opportunities for other people, where they could earn a grant or a loan to start a business. But when we try to apply, they will say this is not for you. **Even if we try to apply, we won't get it.** But I see many other people getting the grants, and sometimes they don't even start the business. It's not fair, right? People who really want to start a business don't get the opportunity, while others who don't take it seriously get the money."

—Anne, 53

Issue analysis: Inclusive financial assistance

Financial aid and assistance must shift towards a **more inclusive model**, that **considers the needs of those who are usually excluded from economic opportunities**, such as single mothers. These programmes must also consider how accessibility and needs will differ based on a person's ethnicity, refugee status, or disability status. Simultaneously, more needs to be done to increase awareness of available programmes. Support and assistance towards single mothers for registering and accessing financial aid can go a long way to empower them as well.

Gender-responsive budgeting is especially crucial towards this, ensuring equitable resource allocation and access. In many instances, the single mothers interviewed mentioned how they lacked access to childcare, which limited their availability to participate in programmes. One measure that could help address this is instituting an additional subsidy for single mothers who want to join programmes by providing them one-off childcare assistance.

Issue 5. Single mothers sometimes cannot afford to prioritise their own health.

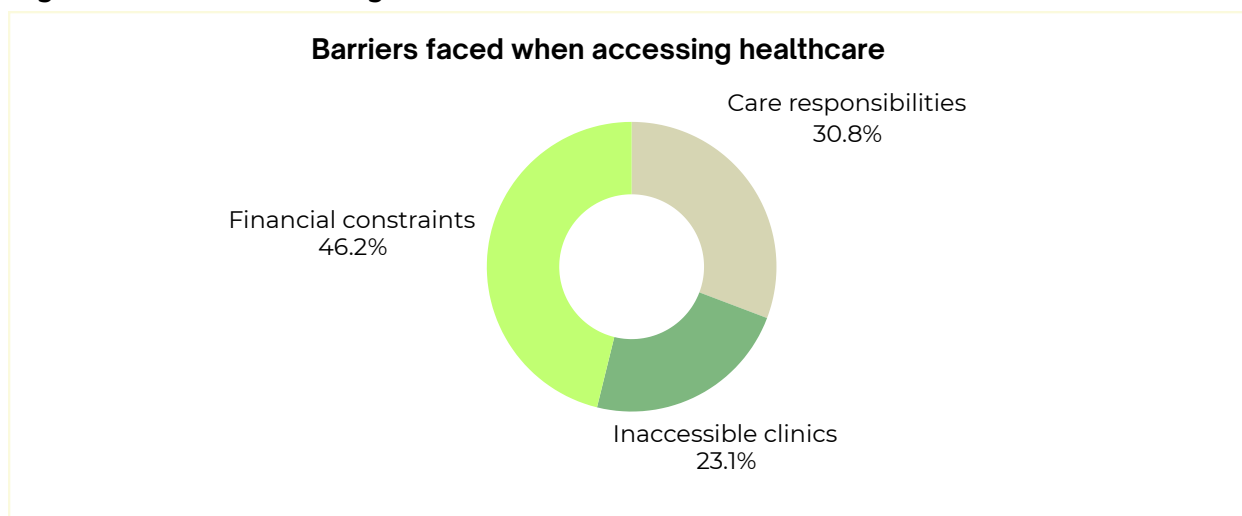
Out of 20 single mothers, 14 reported challenges in accessing aid for their physical and mental health. These challenges were primarily related to care responsibilities, inaccessible clinics, and financial constraints, which compounded their difficulties in seeking and receiving the necessary care. The experiences shared by these single mothers underscore the complex and often overwhelming barriers that hinder access to healthcare services.

When faced with choosing between addressing their health issues or carrying out their care responsibilities, the single mothers interviewed tended to prioritise their care responsibilities over their own health.

"I'm diabetic. We need so many things for our daily care. We need glucometer accessories, specific food, and medicine every day. **My medicine is also expensive. Currently, one of my friends gives me medicine as a present.** They said until I can afford it, they will buy it for me. But yes, medical is a problem. Since I am a single mother and live separately, **it's been more than 9 months now, and I've only seen a doctor once.**"

—Nana, 36

Figure 11. Barriers to accessing healthcare



46.2%

of single mothers who faced barriers accessing healthcare reported the **cost of healthcare as a constraint**, leading some to sacrifice their own health.

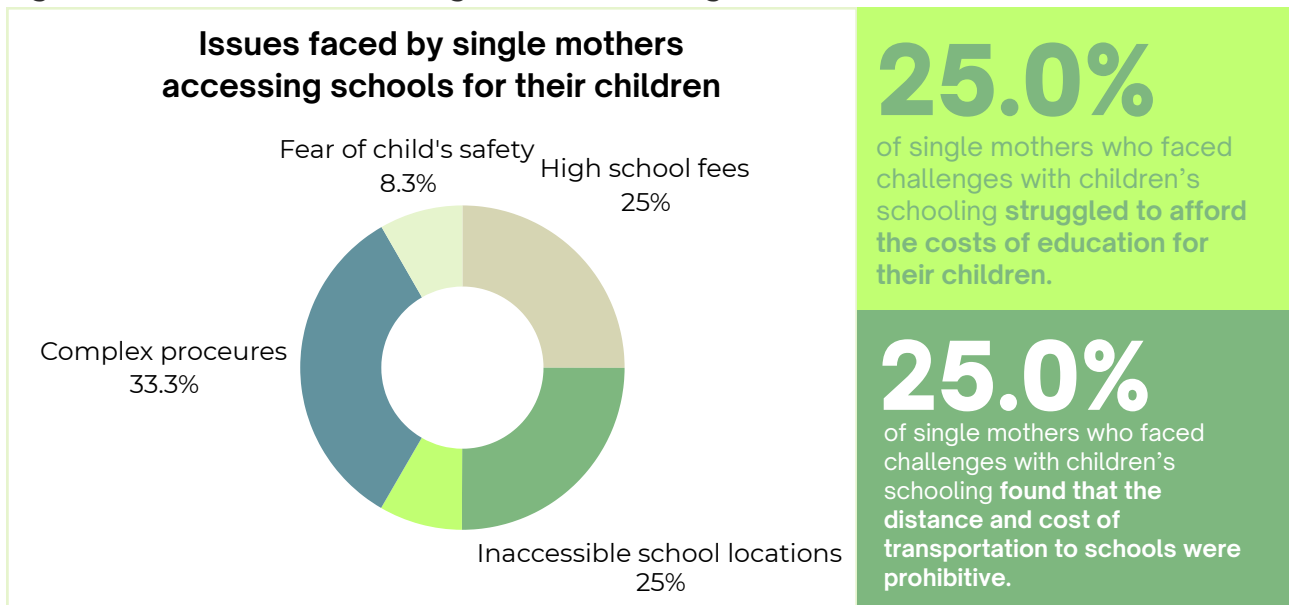
Issue 6. Single mothers face unique challenges when trying to access school for their children.

Out of 20 single mothers, 12 reported challenges in ensuring their children's schooling, with specific difficulties arising from concerns about their child's safety, refugee status, complex administrative procedures, high school fees, and the inaccessible locations of schools. These obstacles illustrate the multifaceted barriers that refugee and single mothers face in providing education for their children, often leading to significant stress and hardship.

“My children’s school is very far from our house. I spend approximately RM35-36 on [school] transportation every day. If my children take the bus, they have to leave the house before 6:00 AM, which is very quiet and dark, and it’s not safe for them. **I pay RM600 for transportation every month.**”

—Sim, 36

Figure 12. Issues related to accessing children's schooling



Issue 7. Uncooperative spouses are the biggest barrier for single mothers trying to obtain divorce and/or custody.

Out of 20 single mothers, 12 faced significant challenges in obtaining divorce and custody of their children, primarily due to uncooperative spouses, financial constraints, and complex legal procedures. These issues often co-occur, as highlighted by Rani and Linda (right), compounding strain in an already stressful situation.

Issue analysis: Why legal separation matters

Oftentimes, without divorcing and obtaining full custody, single mothers can be disadvantaged when receiving aid for their children, as government systems may still recognise them as within the same household as their spouse. This can result in assistance channelled to their absent or uncooperative spouse's bank account.

A lack of legal separation is an additional stress for single mothers, which can leave them in a limbo of uncertainty. This, ultimately, has a mental toll, and affects her ability to move on in life.

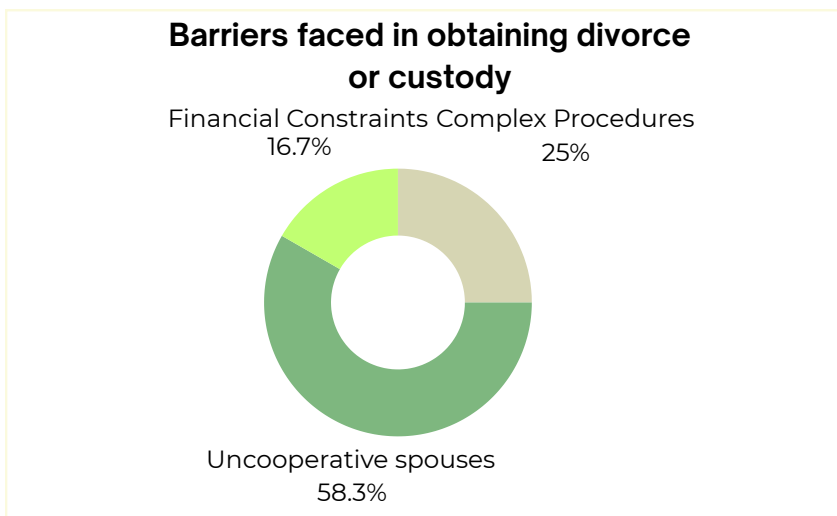
“I applied for divorce, but my husband did not approve. [I was advised by a legal firm] that it would be better to appoint my own lawyer rather than going through the government. But as a single mother, I found it very costly. I eventually had to stop because I couldn't afford my own lawyer.”

—Rani, 39

“If you're not financially ready or able, it's very hard to proceed. It's overwhelming. I need to find time to go to court and pay for everything. It takes too much energy to go to court—time, money, and emotional and physical energy. It's too much to handle, especially when you're already in bad shape. It adds more stress and pressure.”

—Linda, 41

Figure 13. Barriers to obtaining custody or divorce



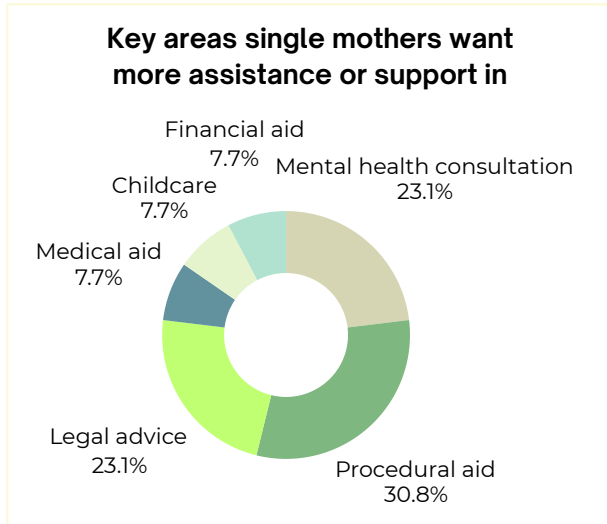
Conclusion. There are **three key areas** single mothers felt they could use more assistance.

This report has highlighted seven key areas where single mothers faced barriers or challenges.

When asked, thirteen of the single mothers interviewed highlighted three key areas they felt they would have benefited from receiving additional assistance, based on personal challenges they faced. These are potentially the key areas that need addressing moving forward to build a more responsive support system for single mothers.

The network of support systems available for single mothers is complex and fragmented. Accessing essential services—such as legal aid, healthcare, mental health support, and financial aid—can be particularly difficult due to these barriers. The combined pressures of childcare, emotional strain, and financial instability further complicate their efforts to secure the necessary help. This situation highlights the urgent need for more accessible and integrated support structures tailored to the unique needs of single mothers, considering their many intersecting identities, such as refugees, migrant workers, rural women, indigenous women, and women with disabilities.

Figure 14. Key areas for further support



30.8%

of these single mothers reported wanting procedural aid, reflecting the complexity and lack of clarity navigating support systems.

23.1%

of these single mothers reported wanting more legal assistance.

23.1%

of these single mothers reported wanting more mental health assistance.

“I am seeking help from community members for housing, but **I don't know where to turn for child custody issues**. The judge will decide, and I am unsure how organisations can assist with this.”

—Priya, 32

“**I usually ask my ex-husband for money or food**. I haven't approached government offices or ADUNs for help, although I did receive some food aid during CMCO from a local ADUN office.”

—Amina, 35

Endnotes

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YAYASAN

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About Women's Aid Organisation (WAO)

Since 1982, Women's Aid Organisation has provided free shelter, counselling, and crisis support to women and children who experience abuse. We help women and their children rebuild their lives, after surviving domestic violence, rape, trafficking, and other atrocities. Learning from women's experiences, we advocate to improve public policies and shift public mindsets. Together, we change lives.

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