

Rethinking Single Motherhood in Thai-Esan Culture: A Hybrid Conceptual and Contextually Grounded Analysis

Taisith Kruasom^a

Abstract

Single motherhood in Thailand is often approached through deficit-oriented narratives that emphasize individual failure, family breakdown, or social risk. Such framings obscure the structural, cultural, and relational conditions that shape the lived realities of single mothers, particularly in regional contexts. This article offers a conceptual rethinking of single motherhood in Thai-Esan society through a hybrid framework that integrates feminist family studies, cultural sociology, and context-grounded synthesis of regional literature. Rather than treating single motherhood as a uniform or pathological condition, the analysis demonstrates how its meanings and consequences are mediated by kinship density, gendered moral expectations, migration regimes, and community surveillance characteristic of Thai-Esan communities. Drawing on secondary ethnographic and regional studies, the article highlights how extended family arrangements, remittance flows, and local moral economies simultaneously mitigate material hardship and reproduce social stigma. The study contributes theoretically by reframing single motherhood as a structurally embedded social position rather than an individual deviation, and by showing how regional context conditions both vulnerability and resilience. Policy and research implications highlight the need for context-sensitive social support and underscore the

^a Faculty of Management Science, Ubon Ratchathani University, E-mail: taisith.k@ubu.ac.th. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7615-0734>

importance of future empirical studies on underexplored family forms, including single fatherhood and intergenerational caregiving roles, across various Thai regions.

Keywords: Single motherhood, Thai-Esan Society, Family Structure, Gender Norms, Contextual Analysis

Introduction

Single-parenthood has become an increasingly visible feature of family life worldwide, yet it continues to be framed through narratives of deficit and incompleteness. In much of the global and Asian literature, single-parent families are frequently associated with heightened risks of poverty, social exclusion, and educational disadvantage for children (Burciu & Parolin, 2024; Park, 2007). At the same time, studies of family functioning emphasize that children's wellbeing is shaped less by formal household structure than by the quality of family support, emotional climate, and everyday caregiving practices (Friedemann & Andrews, 1990). These findings suggest that the effects of single-parenthood are heterogeneous rather than uniform and that deficit-based assumptions risk obscuring important variations within and across families (Shabdenova & Verevkin, 2018).

Although the concept of single parenthood encompasses diverse family forms, this article deliberately focuses on single motherhood in Thai-Esan society. This scope is informed by the empirical and theoretical landscape of existing regional and ethnographic literature, which overwhelmingly documents the experiences, social positioning, and moral evaluation of single mothers, while offering only limited and fragmented insights into single fathers. Rather than treating this imbalance as an oversight, the article recognizes it as a structural characteristic of both the social reality and the knowledge production surrounding family life in Thai-Esan communities. Accordingly, the analysis centers on single motherhood as the most visible and socially regulated form of single parenthood in this context, while explicitly identifying single fatherhood and male caregiving roles as critical directions for future research.

Recent research has drawn attention to the adaptive strategies and resilience demonstrated by many single-parent families. Studies across different settings show that single mothers and other single parents draw on internal strengths, perceived social support, extended-family relationships, and informal social networks to manage economic constraints and parenting demands (Shabdenova & Verevkin, 2018; Taylor & Conger, 2017). These resources can support parental well-being and positive parenting, with potential benefits for children's adjustment. This perspective encourages a shift away from viewing single-parent

families solely as sites of vulnerability and toward recognizing the capacities and strengths present within them.

In Thailand, and particularly within Thai-Esan culture, single-parenthood is deeply entwined with moral discourses, gender expectations, and community-based evaluations of family life. Studies of single mothers in Thailand reveal how women who raise children outside of a conventional marital framework often face intersecting forms of stigma related to motherhood, sexuality, and class position (Cheung, 2023, 2024a). These forms of stigma can shape both how mothers see themselves and how they are treated by others, with implications for their economic opportunities, mental health, and parenting practices. Importantly, such social judgements operate alongside structural challenges rather than simply reflecting them.

At the same time, family life in Thailand is characterized by strong intergenerational and extended-kin networks that complicate simple distinctions between “intact” and “single-parent” households. Research on rural and regional Thailand highlights the central role of grandparents and other relatives in supporting children, particularly in contexts of labor migration and demographic ageing (Ando et al., 2023; Knodel & Saengtienchai, 2007). Patterns of child fosterage, in which children live with relatives other than their biological parents, are well documented and demonstrate how caregiving responsibilities are distributed across kin rather than confined to the nuclear family (Taylor, 2005). In such contexts, a household headed by a single parent may be embedded in a wider network of support that substantially alters the lived experience of single-parenthood for both adults and children.

The Thai-Esan region is thus marked by a tension between strong cultural ideals of family completeness and the practical reality of diverse, often fluid, caregiving arrangements. On the one hand, social norms continue to value co-resident two-parent families as markers of stability and moral order. On the other hand, migration, economic restructuring, and demographic change have produced family forms in which single parents, grandparents, and extended kin regularly share or transfer caregiving roles. Within this landscape, single-parent families are not isolated anomalies but part of a broader pattern of flexible household organization.

This article responds to these tensions by rethinking single-parenthood in Thai-Esan culture through a hybrid conceptual and context-grounded analysis. Drawing on international research on single-parent families and child outcomes (Burciu & Parolin, 2024; Park, 2007), together with studies of Thai family life, kinship, and stigma (Ando et al., 2023; Cheung, 2024b; Knodel & Saengtienchai, 2007; Taylor, 2005; Zhang, 2023), it argues that single-parent households in the region should not be treated as a uniform risk category. Instead, the article examines how emotional climate, kinship support, cultural meanings, and structural conditions interact to shape the everyday experiences and mobility trajectories of children in single-parent families. By situating single-parenthood within the specific cultural and socio-economic realities of Northeast Thailand, the analysis seeks to move beyond deficit narratives and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of family diversity in Thai-Esan society.

2. Conceptual Background

Understanding single-parenthood in Thai-Esan society requires a conceptual lens that goes beyond structural definitions and recognizes how families create meaning, organize care, and pursue mobility within specific cultural contexts. Insights from family sociology, cultural studies, and mobility theory help illuminate why single-parent households cannot be treated as a uniform or inherently disadvantaged category.

2.1 Rethinking Family Structures Beyond the Nuclear Model

Family research increasingly suggests that children's well-being is shaped not only by household structure but also by the quality of relationships and caregiving within the household. Emotional closeness, consistent routines, parental monitoring, and effective communication may provide stability and reduce behavioral risks. Research involving Thai families demonstrates that parenting practices, family rituals, parental closeness, and the intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs and practices are associated with adolescent behavioral outcomes (Chamratrithirong et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2011). These findings underscore the importance of examining family processes rather than inferring children's outcomes from nuclear-family composition alone.

This shift aligns strongly with Thai-Esan family realities, where multigenerational households and fluid caregiving arrangements are common due to labor migration, economic change, and long-standing kinship norms. A single-parent household may operate effectively when caregiving is distributed among grandparents and relatives, while a two-parent household may struggle with conflict or limited resources. Contemporary frameworks therefore encourage moving beyond binary categories of “intact” versus “single-parent” families and instead examining lived household dynamics.

2.2 Social Meanings and Stigma Surrounding Single-Parenthood

Cultural expectations shape how family forms are morally evaluated. In Thailand, gendered norms and Buddhist-influenced conceptions of women’s social and religious roles contribute to broader cultural understandings of appropriate femininity (Kirsch, 1985). Within this normative environment, divorce, separation, and raising children alone may be interpreted through gendered expectations concerning marriage and motherhood. Ethnographic research on single mothers in Thailand demonstrates that gender, socioeconomic position, ethnicity, religion, health status, and dominant ideals of motherhood can intersect to produce scrutiny, stigmatization, marginalization, and social exclusion (Cheung, 2024b).

Stigma affects both parents and children. Adults may face gossip or surveillance that undermines their confidence, while children may internalize messages that they are “different” or “less complete.” This social framing has material consequences, shaping children’s help-seeking behaviors, participation in school or community activities, and sense of agency. In the Thai-Esan setting—where reputation, community harmony, and social visibility carry significant weight—these cultural meanings can be especially influential.

2.3 Kinship Support and Extended-Family Systems

Extended kinship remains central to caregiving and intergenerational support in Thailand. In rural communities, labour migration frequently results in grandparents assuming primary responsibility for grandchildren in skipped-generation households. These

arrangements are shaped by caregiving obligations, limited childcare alternatives, financial needs, family relationships, and negotiations between grandparents and their adult children (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2018). Migration does not necessarily dissolve intergenerational support: migrant adult children may continue providing remittances, regular communication, and other forms of assistance, while co-resident or nearby family members contribute to everyday care (Knodel & Chayovan, 2008; Knodel & Saengtienchai, 2007).

Several forms of kinship support are central to Thai-Esan life:

- Caregiving delegation—grandparents raising children while parents migrate for work.
- Emotional buffering—relatives providing stability during transitions such as separation.
- Economic pooling—household members contributing income or remittances.

These dynamics challenge the assumption that single-parent households inherently lack resources. In practice, extended-family involvement can produce exceptionally strong environments for children's development and mobility aspirations.

2.4 Intergenerational Mobility and Family Influences

Intergenerational mobility research highlights both material and non-material pathways through which parents influence children's life chances. Parental aspirations, emotional support, and family routines carry significant weight alongside economic resources. In Thailand, studies show that spiritual values, family rituals, and shared meaning-making can reinforce resilience and protect adolescents from social and behavioural risks (Chamrathirong et al., 2010).

Thai-Esan families, including single-parent households, often emphasize self-reliance, respect for elders, and education as core pathways of advancement. At the same time, economic pressures—such as the need for children to contribute labor or income—can complicate educational mobility. Mobility trajectories thus emerge from the interaction of cultural norms, economic constraints, and household aspirations rather than from family structure alone.

2.5 Integrating the Concepts for a Thai-Esan Analysis

Drawing these threads together, three conceptual insights guide the article's analytical approach:

- 1) Family structure is not deterministic: Outcomes depend on family processes, caregiving quality, and emotional climate—not labels.
- 2) Cultural meaning matters: Stigma, gendered norms, and community perceptions actively shape experiences and opportunities.
- 3) Kinship systems modify household conditions: Extended-family support can compensate for constraints, reinforce stability, and shape mobility.

Together, these insights offer a culturally grounded foundation for rethinking single-parenthood in the Thai-Esan landscape. They illuminate single-parent households as diverse, adaptive social units shaped by cultural expectations, economic realities, and enduring kinship structures. The next section applies these concepts to grounded interpretations of single-parent families in the region.

3. Grounded Contextual Evidence from Thai-Esan Society

Understanding single parenthood in the Thai-Esan region requires close attention to the cultural, economic, and relational foundations that structure everyday family life. Ethnographic accounts and regional studies consistently demonstrate that Thai-Esan families operate through multilayered caregiving systems, flexible household arrangements, and context-specific moral expectations. Rather than functioning as deviations from an idealized family norm, these arrangements reflect long-standing adaptive strategies shaped by labor migration, kinship density, and local moral economies. Such grounded patterns illustrate why single parenthood in this context cannot be adequately explained through deficit-oriented models, but must instead be interpreted within culturally embedded logics and regional socioeconomic realities.

3.1 Diversity of Single-Parent Household Pathways

Single-parent households in Thai-Esan communities emerge through multiple pathways, including divorce, separation, parental death, labor migration, and economic

necessity. Divorce-related pathways, in particular, often attract heightened moral scrutiny and disproportionately affect mothers due to persistent gendered expectations surrounding marriage, sexuality, and caregiving. Recent analytical research indicates that divorce-driven single motherhood in Thailand is increasingly shaped by structural economic pressures and social vulnerabilities, rather than individual failure or moral deficiency (Wongveerapaiboon et al., 2025).

Migration-related single parenthood constitutes another prominent pathway. In many rural Thai-Esan households, one parent migrates to Bangkok, the Eastern Seaboard, or overseas for employment, while caregiving responsibilities remain with the parent who stays behind. Studies on rural–urban family separation demonstrate that migrating parents often continue to provide economic support through remittances, even as daily caregiving shifts to mothers or grandmothers (Knodel & Saengtienchai, 2007). These arrangements complicate simplistic classifications of “single-parent households,” as parental presence, economic contribution, and caregiving functions are frequently distributed across multiple actors rather than concentrated in a single individual.

Taken together, these diverse pathways underscore that the label “single-parent household” does not reliably capture the quality of caregiving, emotional support, or resource availability within Thai-Esan families.

3.2 The Central Role of Grandparents and Extended Kin

Multigenerational caregiving has long been a defining feature of Thai-Esan family life. Grandparents commonly assume primary or co-primary caregiving roles when parents migrate for work, exerting substantial influence over children’s daily routines, emotional security, and cultural socialization. Research on skipped-generation households in Thailand confirms that grandparental caregiving is both widespread and socially legitimate, even though it may place strain on elderly caregivers facing health limitations or economic insecurity (Tangchonlatip et al., 2021).

Beyond grandparents, extended kin—including siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins—frequently contribute to childcare, household labor, and supervision. In village settings, such role-sharing reflects not familial breakdown but adaptive coordination within

kinship networks. These practices challenge Western nuclear-family assumptions and reinforce the argument that Thai-Esan single parenthood must be understood through broader household and kin-based systems rather than individual parental status alone.

3.3 Emotional Climate and Child–Caregiver Relationships

Children’s experiences in single-parent households are shaped less by family structure itself than by the quality of relationships within the caregiving environment. Evidence from Thai studies shows that parent–child communication, monitoring, and emotional regulation play decisive roles in shaping adolescent outcomes, including behavioral risks and educational engagement (Rhucharoenpornpanich et al., 2010).

In many Thai-Esan households, children report close and trusting relationships with mothers or grandmothers who function as emotional anchors within the family. Such relationships often foster resilience, self-discipline, and a strong sense of moral responsibility. Emotional strain tends to arise not from single parenthood per se, but from prolonged parental absence associated with long-term migration. These dynamics highlight the tension between economic necessity and culturally valued ideals of parental presence, further reinforcing the need to interpret single parenthood within its specific social and economic context.

3.4 Community Surveillance, Gossip, and Social Reputation

In closely connected Thai-Esan villages, personal circumstances may become highly visible, and social reputation may carry considerable moral and practical significance. Within such settings, single mothers—particularly those experiencing economic vulnerability—may encounter gossip, community scrutiny, and moral judgment. Ethnographic research in Thailand demonstrates that the stigma attached to single motherhood intersects with class, ethnicity, religion, health status, and prevailing gender expectations, producing varied forms of marginalization, self-stigma, and social exclusion (Cheung, 2024a). These intersecting processes may deepen social precarity beyond material hardship, although their specific forms and intensity should not be assumed to be uniform across all Thai-Esan communities.

At the same time, community life in Thai-Esan contexts cannot be understood solely through the lens of stigma. Contextually grounded observations informing this

article suggest that families experiencing widowhood, parental illness, or economic hardship may draw on support extending beyond the nuclear household. At the national level, qualitative research involving children and parents in alternative care settings in Thailand demonstrates that family relationships continue to be enacted across physical separation and through interactions among birth families, caregivers, foster families, residential institutions, schools, and Buddhist temples (Rogers et al., 2023). These findings illustrate how “doing family” may extend beyond co-residence and involve both familial and institutional actors.

3.5 Economic Pressures and Household Strategies

Economic pressures constitute a central organizing force in family life in Northeastern Thailand. Households commonly combine agricultural income, remittances, informal labor, and seasonal mobility to manage economic uncertainty. Studies of rural and transnational Thai-Esan families reveal substantial variation in household economic strategies, including capital allocation, risk management, and resource pooling across extended kin networks (Chumnanmak & Somkaun, 2023).

Single-parent households frequently adopt adaptive strategies such as rotating childcare among relatives, diversifying income sources, or mobilizing sibling and kin support. While economic hardship can heighten vulnerability, it may also activate kinship-based mechanisms of redistribution that help stabilize children’s schooling and daily routines. Importantly, economic strain interacts with social norms—particularly expectations regarding contribution to the household and filial responsibility—which can either constrain children’s opportunities or motivate educational and occupational aspirations. These dynamics further underscore that economic disadvantage does not operate in isolation but is mediated by relational and normative structures.

3.6 Variation in Children’s Educational Experiences and Aspirations

Education remains a primary pathway for upward mobility in Thai-Esan society. Families—whether single-parent or two-parent—often prioritize schooling as a long-term investment in family well-being, even under conditions of limited material resources. Social norms, religious values, and expectations of intergenerational reciprocity frequently

reinforce children's commitment to education, especially in households that emphasize moral duty and collective advancement.

Nevertheless, children's educational experiences and outcomes vary considerably across social and family contexts. Cross-national evidence from Asia indicates that the relationship between single parenthood and children's reading performance differs across societies; notably, children in single-parent families in Thailand did not exhibit the educational disadvantage commonly assumed to follow from this family structure (Park, 2007). Stressful household conditions—such as economic insecurity, prolonged parental absence, or substantial caregiving burdens—may nevertheless disrupt educational engagement. Children's educational outcomes should therefore be understood as arising from the interaction of family resources, caregiving arrangements, social context, and individual motivation rather than from single-parent household status alone.

4. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this article integrates insights from family sociology, cultural studies, and contextually grounded observations of Thai-Esane community life. Rather than treating single-parent households as predetermined sites of disadvantage, the framework views family resilience as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by family relationships, cultural belief systems, organizational patterns, available resources, and interactions with the wider social environment (Walsh, 2016). It therefore provides a structure for examining how children in single-parent families navigate opportunities, constraints, and social expectations in ways that reflect both their household circumstances and the broader environments in which their families are embedded.

4.1 Core Assumptions Underpinning the Framework

Three core assumptions shape the conceptual orientation:

- 1) Family structure is not deterministic: Children's outcomes are shaped not only by household composition but also by family transitions, caregiving environments, parenting practices, emotional support, and

access to socioeconomic resources (Bzostek & Berger, 2017). Research on family adaptation further shows that supportive routines and rituals can provide predictability, reinforce relational bonds, and sustain family functioning under conditions of considerable strain (Harrist et al., 2019).

- 2) Cultural meanings shape lived experiences: Stigma, community reputation, and moral judgments influence how single mothers interpret their circumstances and how they are perceived and treated by others. Ethnographic research in Thailand demonstrates that the experiences of single mothers are shaped by intersecting forms of stigma associated with gender, socioeconomic position, ethnicity, religion, health status, and prevailing expectations of motherhood. These cultural and social processes can produce marginalization and social exclusion beyond what is captured by formal economic indicators alone (Cheung, 2024a).
- 3) Kinship networks modify family conditions: Extended-family members play essential roles in stabilising households, compensating for parental absence, and enabling consistent caregiving. Research on Thai families facing health and social challenges demonstrates how family and social relationships function as vital protective resources that buffer stress and enhance parental functioning (Rotheram-Borus et al., 2010).

These assumptions reflect the grounded realities of Thai-Esan society and help move the analysis away from deficit-oriented interpretations.

4.2 Key Components of the Framework

The framework consists of four interconnected components:

1. *Family Processes*: These include the emotional climate of the household, consistency of caregiving, communication patterns, parenting styles, and role modelling. In single-parent families, these processes are often influenced by:

- the strength of the parent–child relationship,
- the reasons for the household’s formation (e.g., divorce, migration, death),
- the stability of daily routines,

- the emotional availability of caregivers.

Positive family processes can foster resilience regardless of structural form.

2. *Cultural Meanings and Community Narratives*: Cultural beliefs often carry more weight than material reality. In Thai-Esan society:

- expectations regarding marital stability,
- perceptions of “proper” family life,
- gendered moral judgments, and
- gossip or community surveillance

shape how families are evaluated. These cultural meanings can serve as barriers when they generate shame or limit help-seeking behaviours. At the same time, they can also provide support when communities extend sympathy in cases such as parental death.

3. *Kinship Support Systems*: Kinship networks are a defining feature of Isan society. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings often provide:

- practical support (childcare, food, transport),
- emotional guidance,
- financial contributions (including remittances), and
- stability during transitions.

These support systems can significantly mitigate material constraints and reduce the emotional burden on single parents and children.

4. *Mobility Pathways*: Mobility pathways refer to the processes through which children form educational aspirations, accumulate skills, develop confidence, and pursue socio-economic advancement. These pathways are shaped by:

- access to resources,
- role models within the household or community,
- opportunities for schooling or work,
- personal agency and motivation.

Children from single-parent households often demonstrate high resilience and strong motivations for upward mobility, especially when they feel responsible for supporting the family in the future.

4.3 Interactions Among Components

The four components interact through dynamic mechanisms rather than linear cause–effect relationships. For example:

- A strong kinship system may buffer emotional strain associated with parental absence.
- Cultural stigma may suppress self-confidence, even in households with supportive caregiving.
- Consistent communication and emotional warmth can transform economic hardship into opportunities for resilience.
- Positive kinship involvement can reinforce children’s educational motivation, enhancing long-term mobility.

Similarly, vulnerabilities can arise when negative cultural meanings combine with weak kinship support or inconsistent caregiving. The conceptual framework therefore highlights conditional influences, showing how outcomes depend on multiple interacting dimensions.

4.4 Diagrammatic Representation

The conceptual relationships discussed in this article are synthesized in Figure 1. At the center is the *single-parent household*, which forms the starting point for understanding children’s experiences in Thai-Esan society. From this core, two primary domains—*family processes* and *cultural meanings*—shape daily life within the household. Family processes capture the emotional climate, routines, and caregiving practices, while cultural meanings represent the moral expectations, community narratives, and forms of stigma that influence how families are perceived.

These two domains operate simultaneously and often interact, creating conditions that either support or constrain children’s development. Beneath them, *kinship support systems* serve as a critical buffering mechanism. Grandparents, aunts,

uncles, siblings, and neighbors provide emotional, material, and caregiving assistance that can compensate for structural limitations within the household.

Together, these layers converge in shaping *mobility pathways*—children’s aspirations, confidence, skill development, and eventual socio-economic trajectories. The diagram therefore illustrates that mobility outcomes are not determined by family structure alone, but emerge from the dynamic interplay of family dynamics, cultural interpretations, and kinship-based supports within the Thai-Esan context.

Section 4 establishes the analytical foundation for interpreting experiences of single-parent households in the region. The following section applies this framework to a deeper interpretive analysis of how these mechanisms play out in everyday life.

5. Analytical Discussion

The conceptual framework outlined in the previous section emphasizes that single-parenthood in Thai-Esan society must be understood through the interplay of family processes, cultural meanings, kinship support systems, and mobility pathways. This section deepens the analysis by applying these concepts to interpret how single-parent families navigate everyday life, cope with structural and cultural pressures, and support children’s aspirations for social mobility. Rather than treating single-parent households as inherently problematic, the discussion highlights the conditions under which they either flourish or struggle, and the mechanisms that explain these divergent experiences.

5.1 Moving Beyond the Deficit Lens

A central issue in discussions of single-parenthood is the widespread use of deficit-oriented narratives that position these families as lacking something essential. In the Thai-Esan context, this deficit view is reinforced by cultural expectations surrounding marital stability, gender roles, and family unity. However, grounded patterns observed in Thai and regional studies show that the absence of a second co-resident parent does not automatically translate into diminished well-being (Moriarty & Wagner, 2004).

Many single-parent families display high levels of emotional closeness, clarity of roles, and consistent routines. Research on Thai adolescents indicates that stability and

caregiving quality—not household form—most strongly predict behavioral adjustment and wellbeing (Rhucharoenpornpanich et al., 2010). This suggests that internal family processes, rather than structural form, are the more meaningful determinants of wellbeing. Deficit labels overlook these lived complexities and fail to account for households that function effectively despite transitions.

5.2 Cultural Expectations and the Weight of Stigma

Despite these strengths, cultural expectations and stigma may continue to shape the experiences of single-parent households in Thai-Esan communities. Gendered norms and moral expectations surrounding women’s caregiving roles can make single mothers particularly vulnerable to scrutiny and judgment. Ethnographic research in Thailand demonstrates that single mothers may experience intersecting forms of stigma associated with gender, class, ethnicity, religion, health status, and dominant ideals of motherhood. These intersecting forms of stigma can influence mothers’ self-perceptions, social relationships, coping strategies, and experiences of social exclusion (Cheung, 2024a).

These judgments can affect children’s confidence, school participation, and willingness to seek help. Some children internalize these expectations; others respond by pursuing educational achievement as a strategy to counteract stigma. This variation underscores that stigma does not have uniform effects—it interacts with family processes and personal agency to shape mobility pathways. Importantly, stigma may function as a barrier even in households with strong emotional bonds and reliable caregiving.

5.3 Kinship Support as an Equalizing Mechanism

Kinship support is one of the most powerful equalizing mechanisms observed across Thai-Esan family contexts. Research on “doing family” under challenging conditions shows that Thai households regularly mobilize extended kin—grandparents, older siblings, neighbors—to distribute caregiving responsibilities in adaptive ways (Rogers et al., 2023).

Kinship support can serve as an important mechanism for reducing disparities in children’s access to care and developmental support. National evidence from Thailand

indicates that the involvement of co-residing relatives in child-centered activities supplements parental care and is positively associated with early childhood development, particularly among children in low- and middle-income families (Naknong & Pholphirul, 2025). Research on skipped-generation households further demonstrates how grandparents assume primary caregiving responsibilities in response to parental migration, employment demands, family disruption, and limited childcare alternatives (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2018).

In migration-related single-parent households, remittances from absent parents often contribute to financial stability, while caregiving is sustained by relatives who maintain routines and provide emotional guidance. Studies of transnational and rural Thai households confirm that resource pooling, kin-based labor sharing, and intergenerational caregiving form the backbone of resilience in family life (Chumnanmak & Somkaun, 2023).

However, kinship support is not uniform. When kin networks are weak or strained, primary caregivers may face overwhelming burdens, heightening emotional stress and reducing the household's capacity to buffer adversity. Thus, kinship systems serve as both protective and conditional mechanisms depending on their structure and availability.

5.4 Emotional Climate and Child Resilience

The emotional climate of the household is central to understanding how family life influences resilience and mobility. Research on single-parent families shows that recurring rituals centered on connection, affection, spirituality, recreation, and celebration can facilitate family cohesion, transmit shared values, and create continuity within changing family circumstances (Moriarty & Wagner, 2004). More broadly, family-resilience research identifies routines and rituals as adaptive systems through which families maintain predictability, relational connection, and shared meaning under conditions of stress (Harrist et al., 2019).

In Thai-Esan single-parent families, emotional closeness between parents and children is often particularly strong. Collaborative communication and mutual

dependence foster trust and reinforce educational motivation. These relational dynamics can transform adversity into a context for resilience. In contrast, conflict, emotional distance, or inconsistent caregiving may undermine confidence and focus, with external stressors—such as economic strain or community judgment—amplifying these vulnerabilities.

5.5 Intersection of Cultural Meanings and Mobility Aspirations

Mobility aspirations are shaped by the intersection of cultural meanings, family expectations, and personal motivations. Research involving Thai students indicates that obligations toward parents and other family members can influence decisions about migration and future mobility (Kingminghae et al., 2019). More broadly, research among adolescents from Asian and other cultural backgrounds shows that a stronger sense of family obligation is associated with greater academic motivation and a stronger belief in the value of education (Fuligni, 2001). These findings suggest that education may be understood not only as an individual pathway but also as a means of contributing to the family's future well-being.

At the same time, gender norms, religious expectations, and community reputation may constrain certain pathways, particularly for girls whose opportunities are shaped by structural and cultural factors. Research on women's status in Thai Buddhism demonstrates how religiously supported gender hierarchies can affect women's social status, access to positions of authority, and opportunities for public participation (Tomalin, 2006). Some children may pursue mobility as a means of improving their family's status, whereas others may limit their aspirations because of perceived stigma or fear of social judgment.

5.6 Conditional Vulnerabilities and Pathways Forward

The analysis demonstrates that although many single-parent households display resilience, vulnerabilities may emerge when emotional support is fragile, kinship networks are limited, or cultural stigma is pronounced. Financial hardship and limited social support are associated with an elevated risk of mental health difficulties among single mothers (Crosier et al., 2007), while research in Thailand shows that intersecting

gendered, socioeconomic, and cultural stigma can compound their experiences of marginalization and social exclusion (Cheung, 2024a).

Yet these vulnerabilities are conditional, not inherent. Strong family processes, supportive kinship networks, and inclusive community environments can substantially mitigate risks. This reinforces the need for context-sensitive interpretations of single-parenthood that account for variation in cultural meanings, household organization, and available resources.

6. Policy and Social Implications

The analysis presented in this article highlights that single-parent families in the Thai-Esan region cannot be meaningfully understood through structural labels alone. Instead, outcomes for children depend on emotional climate, kinship support, cultural expectations, and the ways communities interpret and respond to family arrangements. These insights have important implications for policy, community practice, and institutional engagement.

6.1 Recognizing Family Diversity in Policy Frameworks

Policy responses to single motherhood in Thailand need to account for the diversity of women's circumstances rather than treating single mothers as a homogeneous category. Research based on ethnographic evidence and an examination of Thai policy documents demonstrates that the disadvantages experienced by single mothers arise through intersecting conditions involving gender, socioeconomic position, ethnicity, religion, health, and social exclusion (Cheung, 2024b). Welfare, educational, and social-support interventions should therefore consider caregiving arrangements and the broader social contexts in which single-parent families live, rather than relying solely on household structure or income indicators.

A more inclusive policy approach would:

- recognize multiple caregiving arrangements, including grandparent-led and migration-split households;

- avoid deficit-based language that labels certain family forms as inherently problematic;
- design social programs that respond to emotional and relational needs, not just income levels.

This requires government agencies, particularly those operating at the local administrative level, to adopt family assessments that account for household processes and extended kinship networks. Evidence from rural Northeastern Thailand shows that community engagement, local knowledge, data-informed strategies, and participatory governance can strengthen integrated and culturally responsive child and family support arrangements (Wariloon & Boonsawasdgulchai, 2025).

6.2 Strengthening Community-Based Support Systems

Given the importance of extended kin in Thai-Esan culture, communities can play a significant role in supporting single-parent households. Practical measures include:

- strengthening village-level volunteer networks to assist with childcare, transport, and homework support;
- encouraging temples, community groups, and women’s associations to create safe spaces for emotional dialogue and mentorship;
- promoting local narratives that normalize diverse family forms and reduce stigma.

Studies of rural childcare in Northeastern Thailand show that community-based cooperation—especially through health volunteers and temple-led initiatives—can substantially improve developmental stability for children in vulnerable households (Wariloon & Boonsawasdgulchai, 2025). Likewise, community-driven models in border regions demonstrate how decentralized networks can mobilize social capital to support disadvantaged families (Suk, 2016).

When communities adopt supportive attitudes, children in single-parent families experience greater confidence, belonging, and motivation to pursue long-term goals.

6.3 Enhancing Educational Support and Reducing Stigma

Schools and educators wield substantial influence over children's self-perception and aspirations. Research on Thai parenting and adolescent development shows that a supportive school climate can counterbalance household limitations and strengthen children's emotional regulation and behavioral outcomes (Miller et al., 2011).

To support mobility pathways, schools should:

- train teachers to recognize the strengths, rather than presumed weaknesses, of single-parent households;
- implement counselling programs with sensitivity to cultural stigma;
- maintain communication channels with non-parent caregivers (such as grandparents), acknowledging their role as primary decision-makers;
- create non-stigmatizing school records that avoid classifying students by family structure unless necessary.

Removing stigma within the educational environment can have long-lasting effects on children's confidence and engagement.

6.4 Integrating Cultural Understanding into Social Services

Social workers, counsellors, and local officials should be trained to understand how Thai-Esan kinship systems function. This includes recognizing that:

- caregiving is often distributed across multiple households;
- financial responsibilities are shared through kinship pooling;
- emotional bonds may be stronger with grandparents than with biological parents.

Recent research in rural Northeastern Thailand demonstrates that effective community-based support depends on the integration of indigenous knowledge, informal social structures, participatory decision-making, and locally grounded multisectoral collaboration among caregivers, community leaders, service professionals, and local officials (Wariloon & Boonsawasdgulchai, 2025). Applying these principles to social-service

assessments may help practitioners interpret family circumstances within their cultural context and tailor interventions more appropriately.

Taken together, these implications highlight the need for policies and practices that respect family diversity, reduce stigma, and strengthen kinship-based and community-centered supports. Such approaches can enhance the mobility prospects of children in single-parent households and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of family life in the Thai-Esan region.

7. Discussion and Future Research

While this article focuses primarily on single motherhood in Thai-Esan society, the analysis also reveals important blind spots in the existing literature. One notable omission concerns the role of **single fathers** and **male caregivers**, particularly grandfathers, whose contributions to everyday caregiving remain largely invisible in both academic research and policy discourse. In Thai-Esan contexts characterized by labor migration and extended family arrangements, caregiving responsibilities are not always aligned with conventional gender expectations. However, the lack of systematic evidence on single fatherhood and intergenerational male caregiving limits our understanding of how gender norms are negotiated or reproduced under conditions of family disruption.

Future research should therefore extend beyond single motherhood to examine single father households and the caregiving roles of grandfathers, especially in migrant-sending rural communities. Comparative studies across Thai regions—such as the North, South, and urban centers—would further illuminate how variations in kinship density, stigma intensity, and migration regimes shape different trajectories of single-parent family life. Empirical investigations that integrate qualitative community-based research with household-level data would be particularly valuable in testing and refining the conceptual framework proposed in this article.

8. Conclusion

This article has reconsidered single-parenthood in Thai-Esan society through a hybrid conceptual and context-grounded perspective, challenging conventional

assumptions that position single-parent households as inherently and uniformly disadvantaged. By integrating insights from family sociology, cultural interpretations, and grounded regional patterns, the analysis shows that children's outcomes in single-parent families are shaped not by household structure alone but by the interaction of emotional climate, kinship support, cultural expectations, and everyday economic strategies.

The lived realities of Thai-Esan families reveal that caregiving is often fluid, distributed, and anchored in strong intergenerational ties. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings play central roles in stabilizing children's lives, offering emotional security and practical support—functions that extend far beyond the traditional nuclear family model. At the same time, cultural stigma and moral judgment toward single-parenthood continue to influence how families are perceived and how children make sense of their own identities and aspirations. These cultural forces can constrain or motivate social mobility, depending on the strength and responsiveness of familial and community relationships.

The conceptual framework developed in this article highlights the conditional nature of both resilience and vulnerability within single-parent families. When emotional bonds are strong, family processes are supportive, and kinship networks are active, children often demonstrate high levels of adaptability, determination, and forward-looking aspirations. Conversely, when stigma intersects with weak support systems or economic instability, opportunities for mobility may be narrowed, even in households that are deeply committed to their children's wellbeing.

Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of moving beyond deficit-based interpretations and adopting a more nuanced, culturally informed understanding of family diversity. Policies and community practices that recognize the strengths of single-parent households, reduce stigma, and empower kinship support systems can meaningfully enhance children's pathways to social mobility. Future research would benefit from deeper ethnographic engagement and comparative studies

across regions to clarify how cultural and structural factors jointly shape family life in contemporary Thailand.

Figure 1 summarizes this argument by visually mapping how single-parent households in Thai-Esan culture are positioned within a web of family processes, cultural meanings, kinship support systems, and mobility pathways. It highlights that mobility outcomes emerge not from family structure in isolation, but from the dynamic configuration of relationships, resources, and interpretations that surround single-parent families.

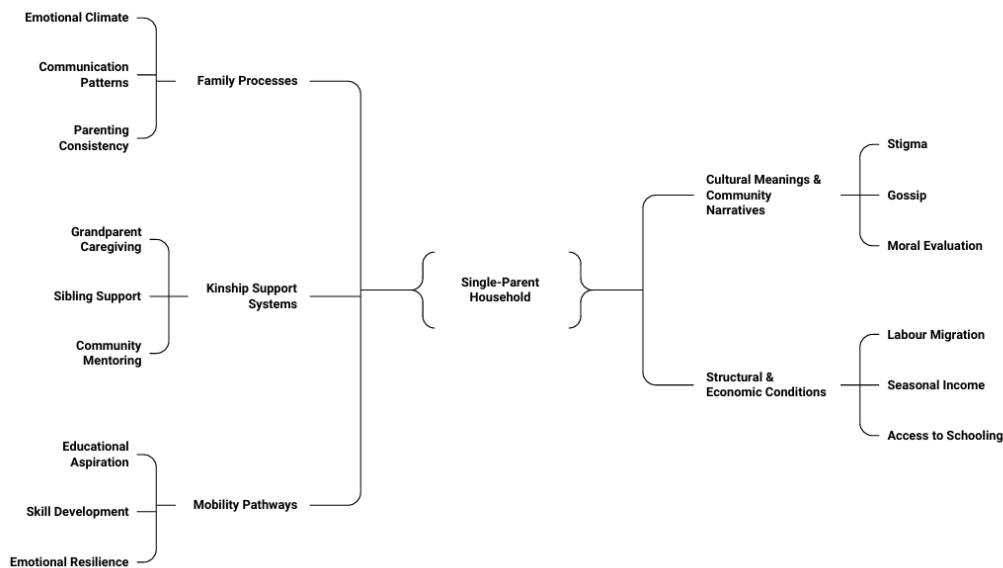


Figure 1 Conceptual-Contextual Framework of Single-Parenthood and Social Mobility in Thai-Esan Society (Source: Author)

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