Single-parent families in Peru: a systematic review

Familias monoparentales en Perú: una revisión sistemática

Carlos Alberto Vilchez-Ruiz
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3654-9639
CAVILCHEZV@ucvvirtual.edu.pe
Universidad César Vallejo
Lima-Peru

Diego Conrado Ludeña-Manco
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8680-3458
u20151b634@upc.edu.pe
Universidad Peruana de Ciencias Aplicadas. Lima-Peru

Gladys Angélica Moore-Meza
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5638-7456
gmoorem@ucvvirtual.edu.pe
Universidad César Vallejo
Lima-Peru

Nilton Isaías Cueva-Quezada
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1038-8884
ncuevaq@ucvvirtual.edu.pe
Universidad César Vallejo
Lima-Peru

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Abstract

Single-parent families have experienced significant growth both in Peru and globally, emerging as a reality that challenges traditional family models. Despite their growing importance, these families have historically been neglected in terms of state recognition and support, which has generated various socioeconomic and legal challenges. In this context, this study aims to analyze the socio-legal perspectives of single-parent families in Peru. To this end, a systematic review was conducted using the PRISMA method, compiling and analyzing scientific articles published from 2020 to the present. The search was carried out in international databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Scielo, Latindex, Dialnet, and Redalyc, and a total of 12 documents were selected. The findings reveal a marked precariousness in the recognition and legal protection of these families in the Peruvian context, as well as the existence of multiple economic, social, and legal challenges. It is concluded that the implementation of inclusive public policies that recognize and safeguard the rights of single-parent families, in alignment with international human rights standards, is urgently needed. Both the State and society must adapt their regulatory frameworks to the reality of these families, guaranteeing their well-being and equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Keywords: single-parent families, public policies, social vulnerability.

Resumen

Las familias monoparentales han experimentado un notable crecimiento tanto en Perú como a nivel global, configurándose como una realidad que desafía los modelos familiares tradicionales. A pesar de su creciente relevancia, estas familias han sido históricamente desatendidas en términos de reconocimiento y apoyo estatal, lo que ha generado diversos retos socioeconómicos y jurídicos. En este contexto, el presente estudio tiene como objetivo analizar las perspectivas socio-jurídicas de las familias monoparentales en Perú. Para ello, se realizó una revisión sistemática mediante el método PRISMA, recopilando y analizando artículos científicos publicados desde el año 2020 hasta la actualidad. La búsqueda se efectuó en bases de datos internacionales como Scopus, Web of Science, Scielo, Latindex, Dialnet y Redalyc, seleccionándose un total de 12 documentos. Los hallazgos revelan una marcada precariedad en el reconocimiento y la protección legal de estas familias en el contexto peruano, así como la existencia de múltiples desafíos económicos, sociales y jurídicos. Se concluye que resulta urgente la implementación de políticas públicas inclusivas que reconozcan y salvaguarden los derechos de las familias monoparentales, en alineación con los estándares internacionales de derechos humanos. Tanto el Estado como la sociedad deben adecuar sus marcos normativos a la realidad de estas familias, garantizando su bienestar y la equidad en el acceso a recursos y oportunidades.

Palabras clave: familias monoparentales, políticas públicas, vulnerabilidad social.

Introduction

Unfortunately, there are no official figures in Peru regarding the number of single-parent families. However, it is estimated that between 2009 and 2010, between 47% and 53% of households in the country were single-parent families. To date, the nuclear family consisting of a father, mother, and children is considered the traditional or “normal” family model that provides the best environment for children to develop harmoniously. Nevertheless, this erroneous notion has historically been used to stigmatize all families that do not conform to the established model. It appears that a single-parent family is deemed acceptable if the parent remarries and maintains traditional roles, where the husband resumes the role of father and husband, and the wife, grateful for the effort, takes a subordinate position. However, if adhering to traditional norms, only a man living with his children is considered a form of “natural” family, implying implicit discrimination against women who live with their children. Sometimes, the term “single-parent family” is restricted to those headed by the mother, typically widowed or separated, although it can also include the father in a similar situation.

Most studies on single-parent families are based on statistical analyses that reveal a significant increase in this type of household, making it an increasingly common family structure. For instance, single-parent families currently represent a considerable proportion of families with children in Europe.

At present, single-parent families are undergoing various stages of development in terms of recognition and social incorporation. Until the 1970s, in many countries, authorities, researchers, and educational institutions only recognized the traditional family model consisting of a father, a mother, and their children, heavily influenced by Catholic morality. However, starting in that decade, particularly in Europe, significant social changes in couple dynamics led to an increase in the number of single-parent families. This increase was primarily due to the decline in stability within legal unions. Initially, single-parent families were viewed as a deviation from the nuclear family, especially in cases of divorce. However, there are also single-parent families arising from informal separations between partners or situations where the mother is abandoned by the father in precarious contexts (Roldán, 2024).

Moreover, in the event of the father’s death, widows were expected to seek a new partner to restore order in what was considered a chaotic situation. This was reflected in regulations such as protective homes, which contributed to perpetuating the perception of immorality associated with single-parent families within society. Conversely, when the mother passed away, it was common for the father to remarry so that the stepmother would take care of the children. However, the increase in these new marriages led to a complicated period in the family group’s history, as the first type of family, considered “normal,” is one in which a father and mother care for the children they conceived within marriage, aligning with the model promoted by religious morality (Villa Guardiola & Hurtado Peña, 2021).

In the case of Peru, single-parent families have become a prominent demographic phenomenon. According to some estimates, approximately 1,710,000 mothers (88%) work and are heads of household, while around 230,000 fathers (12%) also work and assume this role. This scenario reflects a significant increase in women's labor participation as heads of families, which may imply changes in their familial, social, and economic

roles. However, these families may also face higher levels of vulnerability. It is important to highlight that many families in the country depend on the functioning of a single head of household, underscoring the need for support and recognition for these family structures (Pineda, 2024).

In this context, the current international and national landscape is not encouraging, as, in many cases, the head of the family faces difficulties in fully performing their role due to economic, social, emotional, and other factors. These limitations affect not only their personal well-being but also that of their family, especially when responsibilities shift toward the mother. Families that operate outside the “unique” and “traditional” model have generated multiple analyses and research aimed at understanding their performance in specific contexts where family structures are diverse.

In this sense, family organization is a social construct that varies according to historical, social, political, and economic contexts, shaping a complex and constantly changing reality. Today, the existence of various family configurations is recognized. Among them, single-parent families have been the subject of numerous studies focused on their dynamics and experiences. However, it is important to note that these families are not static or compartmentalized entities; they are the result of a continually evolving social context. Furthermore, it has been observed that these dynamics can influence aspects such as the academic performance of children, particularly among youth and adolescents (Caravedo, 2022).

Based on the above, the primary purpose of this study is to thoroughly explore the socio-legal perspectives surrounding single-parent families in the Peruvian context. This research focuses on a detailed analysis of the legal and social situation of single-parent families in Peru, aiming to identify the challenges, needs, and potential solutions that can enhance their well-being and protection in today’s society.

Methodology

This study is based on a comprehensive review of scientific articles related to single-parent families in Peru, utilizing the PRISMA method. The search was conducted in international databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Scielo, Latindex, Dialnet, and Redalyc, starting from the year 2020. This research adopted a qualitative approach, focusing specifically on single-parent families in Peru and following inclusion and exclusion criteria for article selection.

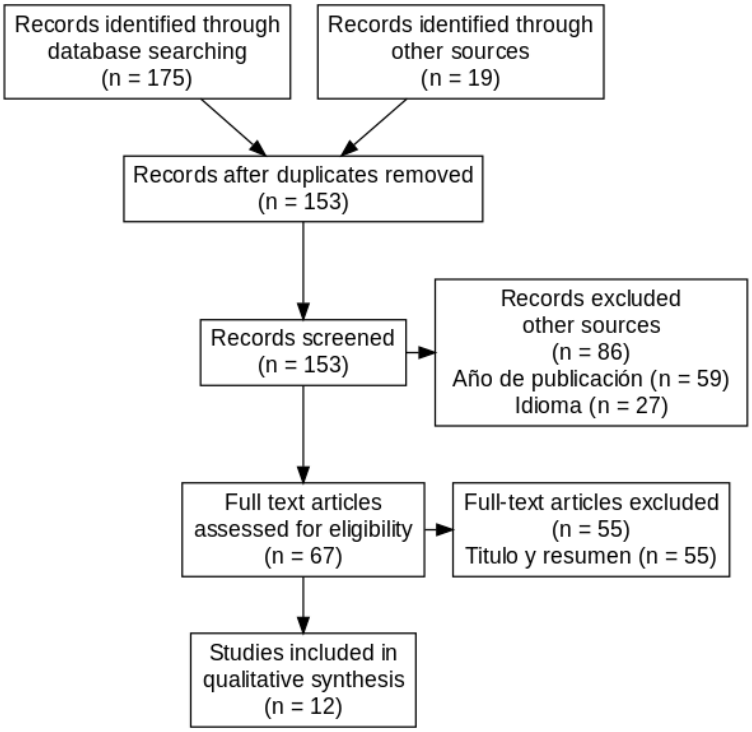
The inclusion criteria for the research encompassed studies specifically addressing single-parent families within the Peruvian context, with particular attention to publications from 2020 onward. Scientific articles that focused on socio-legal aspects related to single-parent families in Peru were considered, including research analyzing the impact of work-related stress, poverty, and state support on these family groups. Additionally, studies proposing recommendations aimed at improving the living conditions of single-parent families in the country were valued.

Conversely, the exclusion criteria encompassed research that did not focus on single-parent families within the Peruvian context, as well as studies published before 2020. Articles that did not specifically address socio-legal aspects related to single-parent families in Peru, and those that did not investigate the impact of work-related stress, poverty, and state support on these families, were also excluded. Furthermore, studies that did not provide concrete recommendations to improve the living conditions of single-parent families in the country were not considered.

Following the recommended guidelines, an exhaustive search for information on single-parent families was conducted in national and international databases. The following keywords were used in combination with the Boolean operator AND: “Perú” OR “peruano” AND “familia monoparental” OR “familias monoparentales” in Spanish, and in English: “Peru” OR “Peruvian” AND “single-parent family” OR “single-parent families”. Additionally, abstracts served as entry points to access the most relevant information from each work.

In the initial stage of the search, 175 articles were identified, along with 19 additional records through complementary sources. After removing duplicates, 153 unique records were obtained, which were preliminarily evaluated through the review of titles and abstracts. In this phase, 86 articles were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria, primarily due to the publication year and language used. Subsequently, 67 articles proceeded to a thorough text evaluation, of which 55 were discarded for not aligning with the study’s objectives based on their title and abstract. Ultimately, 8 articles met the criteria for inclusion in the qualitative synthesis, and 4 of them were also part of the quantitative synthesis. This rigorous process ensured the selection of relevant and up-to-date literature for analysis, guaranteeing the quality and relevance of the evidence considered.

Figure 1
PRISMA flow diagram of the scientific article selection process



Results

The results of the systematic review conducted on single-parent families in Peru provide a detailed and critical overview of the current situation of this type of family structure in the country. Through an exhaustive analysis of the scientific literature available from 2020 to 2024 across various international databases, a series of trends, challenges, and relevant aspects impacting the lives of single-parent families in Peru have been identified. This research has explored the socio-legal perspective of single-parent families in Peru, highlighting how factors such as work-related stress, poverty, and lack of state support influence the structure and dynamics of these families. Additionally, the crucial role played by single fathers and mothers in the upbringing and care of their children has been analyzed, along with the challenges they face in their daily lives.

Furthermore, the findings provide a comprehensive view of the experiences, difficulties, and achievements of single-parent families in Peru, emphasizing the importance of implementing social, economic, and legal policies that improve the living conditions of these households. It also highlights the need for effective recognition and adequate protection of single-parent families, in line with international standards of human rights and child protection. Below, the most relevant findings from this systematic review are presented, emphasizing the identified trends and key implications for understanding and addressing the reality of single-parent families in the Peruvian context.

Within the framework of the higher values of the legal system, the family holds a natural right to exist. According to Cruz et al. (2023), the family is the fundamental unit of society. Both marriage and stable de facto unions are protected, ensuring equality of rights between men and women, and eliminating any form of gender discrimination. The community and the State promote the family, ensuring its harmonious integration, the development of its members, and an environment conducive to their full development. Marriage is a contract regulated by law, based on mutual respect and equality of rights and duties between spouses. All children, regardless of their origin, have the same rights and duties. The family is founded on the equality of rights between men and women, allowing individuals to develop fully. However, although parity exists in theory between marriage and de facto unions, in practice, the law reflects different family structures.

In Peru, “de facto union” is used synonymously with non-marital family, meaning those that do not arise from marriage. This figure helps to reconcile some of the issues related to the plurality of family structures. According to Azócar González (2022), it is undeniable that individuals and family units, such as single-parent families, are recognized as the basic cell of society. These families are based on duties and rights and may stem from a family unit formed by a single woman, a single man, or both. However, responsibility can be attributed to the individual or the relationship existing between the ancestors.

In Western societies, the disintegration of the traditional family nucleus is observed, leading to new forms of cohabitation and a redefinition of the concept of family. Barbosa-González & Vanegas-Pérez (2023) highlight the systematic increase of single-parent families in developing countries, where a significant percentage of households are structured under this model. In many cases, women are the primary caregivers and educators of children, and these families are often referred to as “incomplete families.” In this context, it is crucial for the State to play a prominent role in establishing robust and effective policies that promote the recognition and respect of the rights and duties of these families.

In favor of advancing the full exercise of rights for individuals growing up in single-parent families, it is noted that both ratifications of international agreements and national regulations uphold a singular criterion: to protect minors and ensure that their rights are not subordinate to those of the parents. In this regard, Rondón (2024) points out that the Peruvian Constitution establishes that both the community and the State have a responsibility to provide special protection to children, adolescents, mothers, and the elderly in situations of abandonment. Moreover, it emphasizes the need to protect families and promote marriage, as stipulated in the constitutional text.

In this context, the current research suggests that regulations aimed at protecting Peruvian single-parent families, as well as other family models that differ from the traditional one, have been relegated by the State. This is due to the implementation of public policies oriented exclusively towards the traditional family, which consequently undermines both national and supranational legal frameworks, resulting in a situation of legal vulnerability for this group, which represents 34% of Peruvian households. Although studies such as those by Cavagnoud (2023) indicate that both National Law and Supranational Law encompass aspects related to single-parent families, there remain gaps in the specific protection of these families. In this respect, Tanta Sánchez & Vigo Gálvez (2024) highlight the importance of the American Convention on Human Rights, whose Article 17 recognizes the right of men and women to form and dissolve families, emphasizing the concept of family life and the protection of children.

Regarding constitutional guarantees and public policies, the recognition of new family entities imposes an obligation on the Peruvian state to issue specific policies for their protection. Ordóñez Torres & Sterling Casas (2022) explain that the Constituent Assembly recognized the natural right of human beings to cohabit and enshrined it as a fundamental right, establishing the state’s duty to guarantee it through the creation of assistance bodies and mechanisms. Furthermore, these authors argue that, although parentage is not necessarily part of marital life, the shared responsibility for the upbringing and education of children is. In this sense, the State must guarantee this right beyond established sociological conventions.

On the other hand, the family structure in the Peruvian context continues to transform due to the often abrupt social changes experienced by society. According to Cáceres et al. (2024), law, as a social science, is in a process of adaptation to understand and explain this reality. However, it is noted that the legal regime concerning the family is fragmented, which can lead to inadequate protection of the fundamental and customary rights of single-parent families.

Regarding current challenges, Esquirol (2024) emphasizes the need to harmonize roles within the family for the adequate formation of couples and the education of children. According to this author, human institutions must be organized in a way that favors an environment of harmony between personal and social values, enabling the comprehensive development of individuals. The family, as an institution, has the responsibility to provide stability not only to its members but to society as a whole. However, when discord arises within the family unit, it extends to other areas such as education, work, and community.

In this context, single-parent families, particularly those led by single mothers in situations of poverty or exclusion, find themselves in a position of special vulnerability. In this regard, Mafaldo Pacaya & Nuñez Pinedo (2024) warn that there are over 300,000 minors in situations of abandonment in Peru, highlighting the lack of parental responsibility, especially from fathers. In light of this reality, public policies with a rights-based approach have been proposed to ensure the protection of children and adolescents in situations of orphanhood, promoting their right to identity and non-discrimination.

Finally, Flores Martínez et al. (2022) argue that contemporary Latin America, especially Peru, is marked by profound socioeconomic inequalities that generate social exclusion. These inequalities affect access to resources and the enjoyment of fundamental rights for the most disadvantaged families. From a gender perspective, it is evident that the differentiated roles of men and women in family life contribute to the perpetuation of these inequities. In this sense, constructing a more equitable family model requires the implementation of inclusive public policies that recognize family diversity and promote equality in the exercise of rights.

In this same vein, Mejía (2022) notes that family structures today exhibit great heterogeneity. The author emphasizes that, within the nuclear family, there are various parental models, ranging from idealized and formalized structures to those that fulfill essential functions of upbringing and education. He also points out that legal parenthood is protected by legal norms that guarantee the exercise of these rights and establish penalties for non-compliance.

Discussion

The single-parent family, as a growing reality in Peruvian society, generates intense legal debate regarding the rights and duties arising from this phenomenon, posing significant legal challenges. Monteiro & Rangel (2021) highlight that this topic is of increasing interest and is in constant transformation, similar to the participation of women in the labor market. Furthermore, rising divorce rates and advancements in reproductive techniques are challenging the traditional family model.

On the other hand, Gupta & Kashyap (2020) argue that the presence of both parents traditionally ensures a balanced distribution of emotional and economic responsibilities, which are fundamental for the healthy growth of children. However, they acknowledge that when this structure breaks down, multiple challenges arise. The causes of single parenthood include divorce, separation, the death of one spouse, adoption by a single individual, and in some cases, prolonged migration of one parent. Moreover, both voluntary and forced decisions can lead to the formation of single-parent families, aligning with the assertions of Monteiro & Rangel (2021).

In the psychosocial realm, Harold & Kiranm (2023) note that work-related stress is common among single parents, constituting a significant challenge in their daily lives. These parents often face an increased burden of responsibilities and economic difficulties, complicating the balance between work and family obligations. Despite its relevance, there is a notable lack of extensive studies on this topic. Similarly, Hutasoit & Brahmana (2021) assert that women who take on the dual role of economic providers and emotional caregivers face numerous challenges, particularly in societies that value the traditional nuclear family structure.

However, Jones et al. (2022) approach the challenges of single parenthood from a more inclusive gender perspective, for the first time comparing the experiences of both genders in similar contexts of chosen single parenthood. Their findings reveal no significant differences in mental health between fathers and mothers, questioning the assumption that single fathers face more difficulties due to their gender. This suggests that the effects of single parenthood impact both genders with similar intensity.

Kocağ (2023) emphasizes the need for future research to delve deeper into the relationship between single parenthood and poverty across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts, clarifying that it would be pertinent to explore how social welfare policies, such as economic assistance programs and employment policies, can mitigate the effects of poverty in single-parent households. In this line, Kroese et al. (2020) indicate that although there are previous studies on single-parent families, it is necessary to expand the analysis to explore the relationship between this phenomenon and criminality. These studies have revealed a positive correlation between both categories, emphasizing that most research has focused on the impact of divorce without adequately exploring other causes of single parenthood.

It is important to note that, according to Lestari & Amaliana (2020), the literature on single-parent families has experienced significant growth, although most studies have focused on single mothers without adequately exploring the role of fathers as central figures in child-rearing. Conversely, Woodman et al. (2021) point out that most reviewed studies indicate that children raised by both parents tend to have better health and development outcomes, while those raised by a single parent face a higher likelihood of living in poverty, negatively impacting their overall well-being. Both studies agree on the need to broaden the analysis to include not only parents but also children, whose interests are directly affected by these family dynamics.

Conclusions

The research reveals that legal recognition and effective protection for single-parent families are insufficient, leaving them in a state of vulnerability. These families face various socioeconomic challenges, such as work-related stress, poverty, and lack of state support—factors that negatively impact their well-being and the

development of their children. However, it is observed that single fathers and mothers who implement effective strategies to meet their children's needs can achieve positive outcomes.

Therefore, it is essential to establish inclusive policies that specifically address the needs of single-parent families in Peru, aligned with international human rights standards. The evolution of family dynamics in the country requires a change in social perception and legislation to recognize the diversity of family configurations present in today's society. Additionally, it is crucial to consider the direct impact that the situation of single-parent families has on the well-being of children and adolescents, as they may face increased risks of poverty and developmental challenges.

Furthermore, the study highlights the need for comprehensive reforms in public policies to ensure that single-parent families receive the necessary support and adequate protection, thus safeguarding their rights and well-being in Peruvian society. These conclusions underscore the complexity and relevance of the topic within the Peruvian context, emphasizing the importance of approaching the issues associated with single-parent families in a multidimensional manner and implementing measures that promote their inclusion and well-being in contemporary society.

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AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION:

1. Conceptualization: Carlos Alberto Vílchez-Ruiz, Diego Conrado Ludeña-Manco;
2. Data curation: Gladys Angélica Moore-Meza, Nilton Isaías Cueva-Quezada
3. Formal analysis: Carlos Alberto Vílchez-Ruiz; Diego Conrado Ludeña-Manco
4. Research: Carlos Alberto Vílchez-Ruiz, Nilton Isaías Cueva-Quezada
5. Methodology: Nilton Isaías, Cueva-Quezada, Gladys Angélica Moore-Meza