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## **The Missing Half: Examining Single Parenthood and Child Vulnerability in India**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Single-parent families in India remain statistically invisible, despite emerging evidence of their demographic and economic significance. Using nationally representative data from the National Family Health Survey (2019-21), this study presents the first detailed population-level analysis of single-parent households and the vulnerabilities of their dependent children. About 1 in 18 families with children in India is headed by a single parent, with women constituting nearly 80% of such household heads. Weighted estimates indicate over 34,000 dependent children live in single-parent households, primarily adolescents aged 10–17. These families show a sharp socio-economic gradient, being disproportionately concentrated in the poorest wealth quintiles, in contrast to dual-parent households which are more evenly distributed. On nutritional and educational outcomes, insights from the study reveal that children in single-parent households experience higher levels of deprivation relative to those in couple-headed families. A policy gap analysis confirms that while countries such as the UK, France, and Canada have instituted targeted programmes to support single mothers and their children through financial assistance, childcare subsidies, etc., such policy provisions remain absent in India. The findings highlight a critical gap in Indian social policy and call for structured recognition of single-parent households as a distinct demographic group. Without this, millions of vulnerable children risk being left behind in welfare targeting and public provisioning.

**Keywords:** child vulnerability; deprivation; family demography; household survey analysis; single parents