SUMMARY

There has been a global concern regarding the changes in family dynamics and the rise in single parent families. Though much work has been carried out in the western countries regarding the impact of single parent families on the individual family members, in both mother headed and father headed families, relatively limited work has been carried out in the Indian context.

The present study was carried out to understand the family life experiences and psychosocial well-being among adolescents in female headed single parent urban families. The mother’s perspective and experiences were also documented since there is ample evidence that suggests that a majority of the single parent families are female headed. Also, the mothers form an integral part of the growing adolescents’ experiences in a single parent family. Further, to substantiate the findings of the present study data was drawn from a sample of mother headed single parent families in the United States. The main purpose of drawing a profile of single parent families (adolescents and their mothers) in India and the United States was to understand how the two countries face a common set of problems, their strengths, weaknesses, and the extent to which single parenthood varies with particular social and cultural factors.

The Indian sample comprised of 185 adolescents and their single mothers. In this sample, there were 113 adolescents with widowed mothers and 72 with divorced mothers. The adolescents were in the age group of 10-18 years with a mean age of 14.70 years (SD=2.09). There was a fairly balanced representation of adolescent boys (N=88) and girls (N=97) and of adolescents coming from nuclear (N=97) and joint families (N=88). A high percentage of the single mothers in the sample (N=145) were employed. The period of being single for the mothers was maximum in the more than five years range.

Indian sample for the present study was selected from the schools by contacting students after obtaining consent from school Principals. Advocates
were contacted in the District Court for additional addresses of the divorcees. Sample selection of the schools was based on the stratified random sampling method where the schools were purposively stratified into sectors in Chandigarh. From each set of sectors, schools (Government, Public/private) were randomly selected, regardless of the size of the zone. Additional sample was gathered from schools in Panchkula and Mohali in order to meet the requirements of the study. The final sample was gathered from 43 selected schools. Students were randomly selected from the lists made of the students in single parent households. The families were contacted personally at their residence.

In order to understand the family life experiences and psychosocial well-being of the adolescents and their single parent, the respondents in the Indian sample were administered with questionnaires that gathered information relating to their personal background and their perception of well-being and family environment, among other variables. The adolescents completed the PGI General Well-being Measure (Verma & Verma, 1989); Bell Adjustment Inventory (Bell, 1962); Self-esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1986), Family Environment Scale (Vohra, 1997), School Adjustment Inventory (Bhagia, 1968), provided details of their current scholastic records and gave exhaustive interviews regarding their experiences of being raised in a single parent family. The mothers completed a Background Information Form; Kapur's (1995) Developmental Psychopathology Checklist (to assess the mental health status of the adolescents); PGI General Well-Being Measure (Verma & Verma, 1989); Self-esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1986), Family Environment Scale (Vohra, 1997), and provided detailed interviews related to their perception of availability of social support to them.

For the US study, the sample was made available using date of a study, entitled ‘Parent Teen Project’, carried out by Prof. Reed Larson, from the Department of Human and Community Development, University of Illinois, USA. The data for the present study was analysed by the investigator when on a Fulbright pre-doctoral grant to the University of Illinois. The data comprised of
101 mothers and adolescents from single parent households. The data were collected from central Illinois, including families from small, and mid-sized towns. In this sample 94 mothers were employed. The adolescents were in the age group of 10-19 years (47 boys, 54 girls) with a mean age of 14.28 years (SD= 2.14). The families were recruited through newspaper and radio ads, fliers, and organizations dealing with divorced families. The participants took part in an interview and filled out a set of questionnaires.

The adolescents provided information on their personal background through a self-formulated student questionnaire and also responded to exhaustive interviews that gathered information regarding their academic performance, their current living arrangements, contact with their biological fathers, coordination between mother and father, important adults in their life, and their relationships with the mothers. The mothers filled out an 'Adult Questionnaire' that provided information on certain demographic variables, the availability of state support, payment of child support by the ex-partner, and financial difficulty, if any. Both adolescents and mothers rated the mother’s parenting on a shortened version of the Children’s Reports of Parental Behaviour Inventory (CRPBI; Larson & Gillman, 1999). The mother and the adolescent also completed a Feelings Inventory (Weismann, et.al., 1977) and a Family Environment Scale (Moos, 1974).

The Indian data was analyzed taking gender of the adolescents, family structure, and marital status of the mothers as the independent variables. The dependent variables were the scores obtained from the questionnaires of family life experiences and well-being of the adolescents. Mother’s data was analyzed by taking their marital status and the family structure as the independent variables. Scores obtained by the mothers in areas related to their family environment and well-being were taken as the dependent variables. Further, qualitative analysis was carried out from the interviews conducted with the adolescents and the mothers by taking the marital status of the mothers as the independent variable. Group differences were analyzed by applying General Linear Model Multivariate Analysis of Variance. Pearson’s correlation was
applied to understand the association between select variables and percentages were also computed to present the results of the qualitative data. The American data was analyzed by computing means and standard deviations and presenting a percentage profile of the adolescents and the mothers. Further, bivariate correlation was also applied.

Conclusions
Both sets of data (India and the United States) have provided their own unique profile of the lives of adolescents and their mothers in single parent families. A summary of the emerging results are provided:

India

Stressors for the adolescents

- **Family environment**
  - Girls when compared with the boys, adolescents with divorced mothers as compared to adolescents with widowed mothers, and adolescents coming from joint/extended families as compared to adolescents from nuclear families reported lower states of feelings.
  - Overall adolescents with divorced mothers in a joint/extended family setup were found to have the lowest value on the perception of their environment.

- **Experiences in the family**
  - Assuming adult roles at an early age
  - Conflicts due to tendency of relatives to say certain negative things about mothers of the adolescents.
  - Lack of ample time to spend with the mothers due to non-availability of time on mother’s side.
  - Wish of the adolescents to change certain traits in the mothers.
  - Stressors due to financial constraints.

- **Mental health and well-being**
  - Somatic disorders reported and also borderline symptoms of hyperkinesis, and emotional disorders.
- Adolescents with widowed mothers showed significantly greater problems. Also, adolescents with widowed mothers and staying in a nuclear family setup displayed greater problems when compared with the rest of the comparison group (widowed-joint, divorced-nuclear, and divorced-joint).

- Average states of well-being reported.
- A significant association emerged between the well-being of mothers and that of their children.
- Change in personality in own self, perceived by some adolescents after the demise/separation of their father.

- **Adjustment and academic performance**
  - Subjects experienced adjustment problems related to the home sphere, showed submissive social behaviour, and many times displayed a hostile attitude towards others.
  - Differences according to the marital status of the mothers were observed, with children of divorced mothers displaying significantly more problems in the areas of emotional, academic, and home adjustment than their counterparts with widowed mothers.
- The adolescents in the present study reported an average academic and scholastic performance in their respective grades.

**Stressors for the single mothers**

- **Stressors due to the family**
  - Divorced mothers and single mothers in joint families reported a lower perception of quality of family life experiences in the household.
  - Some of the mothers experienced difficulty in having a cordial relationship with the in-laws reported among some subjects.
  - Divorced mothers faced problems with ex-spouse and his relatives.
  - Cause of stress with family related to financial, household and property issues, differences in opinion, attitude problem, indifferent
nature of the people, people sticking to the past, spreading rumors, backbiting, and generation gap.

- The mothers in the present study suffered from consequences in the area of well-being wherein they report below average feelings.

- In-depth interviews carried out with the mothers revealed that within the one month of the study that the mothers participated in, they sometimes felt so depressed that it completely ruined their day and also faced stress regarding their jobs along with having disagreements with close ones.

- The feelings of depression, disagreements with close ones, and stress regarding job front was reported significantly more among the divorced mothers when compared with the widowed mothers.

- **Stressors due to the legal rights**
  - In the present study as low as 10 percent of the divorced mothers were getting child support.
  - The main reasons given by the single mothers for not pressing the husbands for child support was that they did not want to maintain contact with abusive husbands or because they were afraid that the fathers will try to gain custody of children.
  - State support to the single mothers was very low who had near negligible knowledge about the kinds of services available.

- **Stressors due to the family structure**
  - Mothers staying in a nuclear family setup faced difficulties regarding their finances, loneliness, insecurity, an increase in the workload, and lack of an elder person to look after the children.
  - Single mothers staying in a joint family setup faced stressors regarding interference by in-laws in personal matters, disagreements about joint finances/property feuds, and certain adjustment problems.
Strengths associated with adolescents growing up in a single parent family in India

- A majority of the children in the sample had been in a single parent family for more than five years (55.1%). Adolescents in the sample displayed significantly more problems in the area of well-being in the period of less than one year following the demise/separation of the father. However, the perception of well-being improved with a gap in the years of being in a single parent family, indicative of resilience.

- The family played an important mediator and provided an emotional buffer to the adolescents in the present study going through the initial trauma of father loss.

- Subjects recognized the importance of the immediate family members as having an important influence in their lives and acknowledged their understanding nature, love, affection, sacrifices made by them, and their ability to stand by their sides during moments of crisis.

- A very high percentage of adolescents in the present study reported getting a very strong network to share with them their concerns and worries.

- Adolescents in the present study reported certain positive aspects such as having the feeling that they had become more mature, responsible, independent, and relaxed.

- Strong sibling relationships and an even greater bonding after being in a single parent family than earlier reported among the adolescents.

- Optimism regarding future displayed among the adolescents.

- Despite the fact that the subjects reported facing economic consequences yet all of them were in a position to be able to continue their studies.
Strengths that the single mothers revealed in a single parent family in the Indian context

- The results from the present study indicate that irrespective of the marital status, both the divorced and widowed mothers had a strong social network that provided them with support when they are single. The support was mostly from the immediate family and close friends.
- The support from the immediate family members and in-laws (in many instances) dealt with providing support, care, guidance, and affection, and looking after the children when the mothers went out.
- Relatives also provided emotional, financial, educational, and psychological support to the children of single mothers.
- A high majority of the single mothers in the present study were working (N=145) but they reiterated the fact that the finances were managed with support from the immediate family.
- The mothers also had the confidence that during times of a financial crisis they would be able to cope because of the confidence of support from the immediate family members.
- Some of the single mothers who were staying on their own in a nuclear family setup felt lowered stress levels due to the fact that there was lesser tension and interference from the in-laws and they were also able to spend more time with their children.
- For the mothers living in a joint family, they reported that the financial, emotional, and social security that they get while living in a joint family always works towards their advantage.

The United States results highlights of experiences of adolescents and mothers in a single parent household

The results from the United States data point out the following:
- Despite the stressful life situation of divorce, the children in the present study report to be coping in areas related to academics, finances and emotional relationships by getting above average grades, doing part
time jobs to meet the finances, and having stable relationships respectively.

- Regarding communication with the ex-father, despite the changes in schedule and visitation rights the adolescents report to be in touch with their fathers and visiting them fairly often.
- The results also indicate that there was a greater shared household responsibility among the mothers and their children after being in a single parent family.
- Mother-adolescent bonding was reportedly strong as was revealed by the perception of the adolescents regarding the relationship that they shared with their mothers and the extent of involvement of the mothers in the daily routine of their children.
- The single mothers in the present study reported a strong network of family and friends.
- The single mothers felt financial pressures in the rearing up of their children since the major expense of running of the household fell on them.
- The mothers reported that the ex-spouse often violated the laid down terms of financial agreement. Also even though a portion of the sample was getting state assistance in helping cope with the finances of the house, the percentage of mothers who received assistance did not feel much satisfied with it.
- The relationship with the ex-spouse was reported to be cordial by the mothers. But they also mentioned areas of conflict especially when the children visited the fathers. The mothers felt insecure with the fact that the fathers might be a negative influence on the children.

Thus, as a conclusion and drawing reference from the Indian and the United States context of experiences that adolescents and single mothers have in single parent family units, the results indicate that in the Indian situation the single mothers usually turn to the immediate family members for support and
this support is probably more than what single mothers in the United States might receive from their families. There remains a need to adopt the best practices from both the cultures with a healthy balance of state services and support from the immediate network of family and peers. Supportive state interventions that look at a far greater participation of families, community, and non-governmental organizations to work towards a greater facilitation of removal of ignorance and a change of attitude towards the single parent families at the grass roots level is recommended. A focused priority for research, especially in the Indian context that has a multidisciplinary approach needs to be undertaken in order to understand the various factors that inhibit or promote the well-being in single parent families.