IMCC Journal of Science 2024, 4, 58-65
https://myjournal.imcc.edu.ph/

Lived Experiences of Working Solo Parents Pursuing Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of solo parents enrolled in higher education, focusing on how they navigate the complex demands of academic life alongside parenting and work responsibilities. Using a phenomenological approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with solo parent learners from various academic programs. The findings reveal that time management, emotional resilience, and a reliable support system are critical enablers of academic persistence. Despite facing persistent barriers—including financial constraints, childcare obligations, and psychosocial stressors—participants demonstrated a strong sense of purpose and adaptability. Institutional mechanisms such as flexible class schedules, access to financial aid, and psychosocial support services were identified as key contributors to their educational success. These insights have meaningful implications for higher education institutions, policymakers, and support service providers aiming to promote inclusive and equitable access to lifelong learning.

KEYWORDS: access to education, higher education, resilience, solo parents

ARTICLE INFO: Received: 11 November 2024; Revised: 07 December 2024; Accepted: 15 December 2024; Published Online: 27 December 2024; Volume: 04; Issue: 04; Type: Original Article

1. Introduction

Solo parenting, particularly among single mothers, is an increasingly visible social phenomenon that presents distinct challenges across cultural and economic contexts. Globally, the rise in single parenthood reflects broader shifts in family structures, with women disproportionately affected by the emotional, physical, and financial burdens of raising children alone. These burdens become significantly magnified when single mothers pursue higher education, as they must simultaneously manage work responsibilities, childrearing duties, and academic demands. In the United States, Richardson and Harrington (2022) estimates that 2.1 million single mothers are enrolled in college, the majority of whom face persistent poverty, limited access to affordable

childcare, and insufficient institutional support. The Institute for Women's Policy Research (2019) further reports that nearly 90% of these women live at or near the poverty line—an indication of the economic strain associated with balancing education and parenting.

In Southeast Asia, and particularly in the Philippines, solo mothers face additional barriers tied to cultural stigma, gender norms, and weak social safety nets. In areas like Marawi City, these challenges are intensified by post-conflict recovery, limited livelihood opportunities, and inadequate access to basic services. Many solo-parent students struggle to pay tuition fees on time, attend classes regularly, or complete academic tasks while caring for their families. Delays, school interruptions, and frequent illnesses due to emotional and physical stress are common, further impeding their educational progress.

Although existing literature—such as studies by Swingle (2013), Jaffer et al. (2023), and Patel and Sen (2020)—has documented the psychological toll of solo parenting, including anxiety, depression, and chronic stress, there remains a noticeable gap in localized research. Few studies have explored the lived experiences of single mothers who simultaneously work and pursue college education in under-resourced communities. This gap limits the capacity of institutions and policymakers to develop responsive interventions. This study investigates the lived experiences of solo-parent students enrolled at Lanao Central College in Marawi City.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of working solo-parent students pursuing higher education at Lanao Central College in Marawi City. Phenomenology was selected to gain a deeper understanding of participants' subjective experiences, emotions, and perceptions as they balanced academic responsibilities with parenting and employment. This approach allowed for a contextualized investigation of the challenges, coping mechanisms, and support needs of solo-parent students in a real-life educational setting (Alipio & Torres, 2023; Torres et al., 2021). Rooted in the works of Creswell (2013) and Moustakas (1994), this design enabled the researcher to draw out the essence of participants' lived realities while highlighting the social and emotional complexities of solo parenting within an academic context.

The research was conducted at Lanao Central College, a private higher education institution situated in Barangay Maletelet along Awar Street in Marawi City. As the only incorporated private tertiary institution in the area, it serves a diverse student population from various municipalities of Lanao del Sur. Marawi City—officially recognized as the Islamic City of Marawi—is part of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and is predominantly inhabited by the Maranao people. Despite being classified as a rural city, Marawi is home to academic landmarks such as the Mindanao State University and is surrounded by cultural and scenic attractions. The socio-cultural setting of Lanao Central College provided a relevant

backdrop for exploring the nuanced realities of solo-parent learners in a post-conflict, resource-constrained environment.

Participants in this study included five solo-parent students who were purposively selected based on specific inclusion criteria. Eligible participants were legally recognized solo parents with primary custody of at least one child, currently enrolled in a degree-seeking program, and employed for at least 20 hours per week. They were also required to be between the ages of 18 and 65 and willing to provide informed consent. Exclusion criteria included those cohabiting with a romantic partner or co-parent, individuals enrolled in non-degree programs, unemployed parents, and those with cognitive impairments that would hinder participation. The use of purposive sampling aligned with recommendations by Creswell (2013) and Patton (2002), ensuring the collection of rich and relevant data from those most knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study.

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews guided by open-ended questions. The researcher coordinated with the Graduate School and secured approval from the Dean of Lanao Central College to conduct the study. Interviews were scheduled at mutually agreed upon times in a quiet location to ensure privacy and minimize distractions. Each participant was provided with a written informed consent form detailing the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and confidentiality safeguards. Participants were informed that they could skip any question or withdraw at any point without consequence. Interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language, and responses were recorded using an audio device with full consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and enrich the contextual interpretation of the data.

Ethical approval for the study was granted through institutional endorsement by the Graduate School, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English, with all identifying information anonymized to protect confidentiality. Transcripts were securely stored on a password-protected hard drive accessible only to the researcher. Data collection concluded once saturation was reached, ensuring that the findings reflected a comprehensive account of the participants' lived experiences.

Thematic analysis was conducted using a five-phase interpretative phenomenological framework adapted from Sarantakos (1998) and Karlsson (n.d.), as cited in Delve (2023). The first phase involved transcription, where audio-recorded interviews were converted into written form, allowing the researcher to immerse in the data. The second phase, checking and editing, included reviewing the transcripts to identify significant units of meaning. In the third phase, analysis and interpretation, the researcher extracted core themes that captured participants' experiences of managing work, education, and parenting. The fourth phase, generalization, involved comparing patterns across the interviews to develop broader thematic categories. Finally, the fifth phase, validation, was conducted through peer review and transcript verification to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings.

This methodological approach allowed for a rigorous, ethical, and context-sensitive exploration of solo-parent students' experiences, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of their educational challenges and support needs.

3. Results

Eight key themes emerged in response to the research question on the lived experiences of working solo parents pursuing higher education: (1) scheduling to prioritize studies and family, (2) sacrifices in work and personal time, (3) guilt from limited family time, (4) emotional impact of separation, (5) insufficient resources for education and parenting, (6) dependence on family support, (7) desire for a better future for children, and (8) proving societal perceptions wrong.

Scheduling to Prioritize Studies and Family. Participants emphasized the importance of establishing structured schedules to balance their responsibilities in parenting, studying, and working. One shared:

> *"To manage my time, I've scheduled my classes on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Fridays are for rest and spending time with my child, while I work from Saturday to Monday. It's not perfect because I sometimes have to sacrifice study time to work or miss a shift due to school programs. Still, this approach has given me some sense of control over my situation." (P1)*

Sacrifices in Work and Personal Time. Participants acknowledged that their overlapping roles required them to give up income-generating opportunities and personal rest. One explained:

> *"Sometimes, my work time gets used for studying, especially when there is an exam or a program. I miss work, which affects my income and puts additional pressure on me. Deciding where my time is most needed is a constant struggle." (P1)*

Guilt from Limited Family Time. Participants described the emotional burden of being physically distant from their children, expressing recurring guilt. One mother shared:

> *"My eldest child would cry every time I left for school, making it incredibly difficult to be away from them. I often questioned if I was making the right choice. Balancing my studies and being a parent is a heavy emotional burden, but I remind myself it's for their long-term benefit." (P3)*

Emotional Impact of Separation. Participants expressed the emotional resilience required to continue their studies despite being separated from their children. One shared:

> *"The guilt and stress of choosing between my studies and my children's needs is something I would not wish on anyone. I have learned to compartmentalize my emotions to get through each day, but it is never easy." (P3)*

Insufficient Resources for Education and Parenting. Financial hardship was a recurring theme, as participants struggled to meet both academic and parenting expenses. One stated:

> *"My barista job only pays 300+ daily, and my estimated weekly budget is around 1,000. Whatever is left goes to my child. It is hard knowing I cannot fully provide for their needs while also trying to finish my education." (P1)*

Dependence on Family Support. Participants credited their families for stepping in to assist with childcare and financial responsibilities. One participant shared:

> *"My parents' support has been instrumental in helping me balance everything. They've taken on the responsibility of caring for my children and assisting with their studies." (P2)*

Desire for a Better Future for Children. Participants consistently cited their children as the primary source of motivation for pursuing education. One expressed:

> *"My primary motivation for pursuing my education was to secure a brighter future for my children. I want them to have opportunities that I never had." (P3)*

Proving Societal Perceptions Wrong. Several participants voiced their determination to challenge stereotypes and negative perceptions about solo parents. One explained:

> *"I was tired of hearing negative comments about them, such as 'they're the children of a womanizer.' I wanted to give them a future that silences those judgments." (P3)*

4. Discussion

This study revealed that working solo parents pursuing higher education face multiple challenges, with six key themes emerging: scheduling strategies, personal sacrifices, emotional guilt, separation anxiety, financial difficulties, and motivation for a better future. These findings align with literature highlighting the complex balancing of academic, work, and family roles among non-traditional learners (Soto, 2023; Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2022).

Scheduling was identified as a critical tool for managing competing priorities. P1 divided the week into designated days for classes, work, and family time, allowing for predictability despite occasional disruptions. P2 emphasized completing homework at school before work shifts to keep academic and family responsibilities distinct. P3 applied task breakdown and time blocking to maximize limited availability and avoid burnout. These approaches support Adler's (2020) assertion that structured scheduling fosters control and persistence in adult learners.

Sacrifices in time and income were common. P1 experienced lost wages when school demands conflicted with work, illustrating financial strain. P2 prioritized education over job opportunities that conflicted with class schedules, showing a commitment to long-term goals. P3 utilized weekends for study, indicating limited weekday availability. Such sacrifices reflect the emotional and practical burdens described by Julien (2023).

Emotional guilt over reduced family time was evident. P3 recounted the pain of leaving a crying child when attending school. P1 expressed concerns about being absent during critical family moments, while P2 shared feelings of regret. These experiences parallel Lackner et al.'s (2023) findings on the psychological toll of parental absence among student-parents.

Separation anxiety was also significant. P1 described worries about coping with limited physical presence for their child, underscoring the emotional toll of pursuing education while parenting solo. Although family support eased some burdens, it did not eliminate the underlying emotional hardship. This aligns with Julien's (2023) view of the resilience required to manage these challenges.

Financial constraints further complicated participants' experiences. P1's limited income prioritized child needs over personal or educational expenses. P3 highlighted difficult trade-offs, such as choosing between school supplies and medical costs. These findings confirm Kaya and Erdem's (2021) emphasis on the detrimental effects of financial insecurity on academic performance and well-being.

Finally, motivation to improve their children's futures propelled participants forward. P1 and P3 cited providing better opportunities as a key driver, while P2's decisions to forgo immediate earnings reflected investment in long-term stability. This resonates with Adler's (2020) research on educational perseverance rooted in aspirations for family uplift.

These findings suggest the importance of flexible academic policies, emotional support services, financial aid tailored to student-parents, and family-friendly institutional practices. While limited to three participants from Lanao Central College, Marawi City, the study offers valuable insights for enhancing support for solo-working parents in higher education. Future research should consider larger samples and longitudinal designs to further explore these dynamics.

5. Conclusion

This study concluded that working solo parents pursuing higher education face significant challenges balancing academic, work, and family responsibilities. Key factors impacting their experience include effective scheduling, personal sacrifices, emotional guilt, separation anxiety, financial constraints, and strong motivation to provide a better

future for their children. Addressing these challenges through flexible academic policies, targeted financial aid, and emotional support services is essential to help this population succeed.

Acknowledgment

Gratitude is directed to the two peer reviewers for the valuable comments and suggestions that greatly improved this paper.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions: The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation. The author has approved the final version of this manuscript.

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