

The Phenomenological Exploration of the Journey of a Single Parent: Basis for Policy Formulation

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90500065>

Received: 28 April 2025; Accepted: 06 May 2025; Published: 30 May 2025

ABSTRACT

Single parents represent a growing yet often overlooked demographic whose complex realities demand greater policy attention. This study, entitled "*The Phenomenological Exploration of the Journey of a Single Parent*," employs Colaizzi's method to capture the lived experiences of single parents navigating child-rearing, employment, emotional regulation, and societal expectations. Through in-depth interviews with participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, four major themes emerged: role strain and dual responsibilities, emotional burden and societal expectations, marginalization and lack of systemic support, and resilience and commitment to children's welfare. Findings reveal that single parents often face overwhelming emotional and logistical challenges with minimal institutional assistance, but also demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptive strategies. Based on these insights, the study proposes comprehensive policy recommendations including the establishment of community-based support centers, subsidized childcare services, livelihood support programs, educational opportunities, and anti-stigma campaigns. Central to the study's advocacy is the recognition that policies must be grounded in the lived experiences of single parents, ensuring they are participatory, inclusive, and continually refined based on beneficiary feedback. By foregrounding single parents' voices, this research calls for transformative governance that moves beyond surface-level interventions toward meaningful systemic change. Ultimately, empowering single parents contributes not only to their well-being but also to broader goals of social equity, economic resilience, and child development.

Keywords: Single Parenthood, Lived Experience, Resilience, Policy Development, Phenomenological Study

INTRODUCTION

Single parenthood is no longer a peripheral phenomenon; it is a central feature of modern family life. However, despite their growing numbers, single parents often operate within societal and institutional frameworks that inadequately recognize or support their unique challenges (Hodges & Spector, 2004; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). As primary caregivers and breadwinners, single parents are tasked with managing competing demands — emotional labor, financial provision, social role negotiation — often without adequate structural assistance. The mainstream portrayal of single parents frequently oscillates between narratives of pity and deficiency, overlooking their strengths, adaptive capacities, and social contributions. To design effective interventions and policy frameworks, it is crucial to listen deeply to the voices of single parents themselves, grounding initiatives in real-world experiences rather than abstract assumptions.

This study, "**The Phenomenological Exploration of the Journey of a Single Parent**," aims to articulate these lived experiences by employing a phenomenological methodology, specifically Colaizzi's method (1978), to ensure the faithful representation of participants' perspectives. By exploring the complex realities faced by single parents, the research seeks to provide data-driven recommendations that can guide the creation of inclusive, sustainable, and empowering policies.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of single parents in navigating their multiple roles?

2. How do single parents cope with emotional, social, and institutional challenges?
3. What strengths and resilience strategies do single parents develop?
4. How can policies be shaped to better respond to the realities of single parents?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of single parents. Phenomenology, as a research methodology, is particularly suited for understanding human experiences from a first-person perspective (Moustakas, 1994). It allows for a deep dive into the meanings individuals attach to their experiences, providing rich, detailed insights into their realities. Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method was specifically employed as the guiding framework for data analysis, ensuring a systematic process for interpreting the participants' narratives. Colaizzi's method is widely respected for its structured steps, which are designed to capture the essence of the phenomenon being studied. The combination of a phenomenological approach with Colaizzi's method ensured that the study remained true to the participants' lived experiences while also providing a clear and rigorous analytical structure.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide deep insights into the experience of single parenthood. The sample consisted of 7 single parents, chosen for their diverse socio-economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. This diversity enriched the study, allowing for the exploration of how different factors, such as income, education level, and cultural context, may influence a single parent's experience. The participants' ages ranged from 24 to 55 years and included both mothers and fathers, ensuring a balanced perspective on single parenthood across genders. The recruitment process involved reaching out through community centers, online support groups, and referrals, allowing for a broad representation of single parents. This method also ensured that the participants were actively engaged in the study and had experiences that were reflective of the real-world challenges faced by single parents.

Participants and Interview Process

This qualitative study focused on single parents whose sons are enrolled at Mindanao State University–Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU-IIT), located in Northern Mindanao, Philippines. Participants were purposively selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) must be a single parent; (2) aged between 35 and 65 years; and (3) must have at least one son currently enrolled at MSU-IIT. After the screening process, ten (10) participants met the criteria and agreed to take part in the study.

Interviews were conducted through a semi-structured format to allow flexibility in exploring the participants' experiences and insights. These interviews were held in private, secure, and comfortable environments on university premises. Sessions were scheduled at times most convenient for the participants to encourage full engagement and openness. An empathetic and respectful approach was adopted throughout, providing a supportive atmosphere where participants could freely express their silent struggles, coping mechanisms, and aspirations as single parents.

Data gathered from these interviews were audio-recorded (with permission), transcribed, and thematically analyzed to identify patterns and insights relevant to the lived experiences of single parents and potential areas of support and intervention.

Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to the ethical standards set by the Research Ethics Committee of Mindanao State University–Iligan Institute of Technology. Ethical approval was obtained before the commencement of data collection. The following ethical protocols were observed to ensure the rights, dignity, and well-being of all

participants:

1. **Informed Consent**

Participants were provided with a clear and comprehensive explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, potential emotional implications, and their role in the research. They were required to sign a written informed consent form before participation.

2. **Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw**

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any point without facing any consequences.

3. **Confidentiality and Data Protection**

Personal identities and sensitive information were protected throughout the research process. Interview transcripts were anonymized, and all data were stored in encrypted digital files accessible only to the researcher. No identifying information was used in the presentation of findings.

4. **Non-Maleficence and Participant Well-being**

To minimize harm, interviews were conducted in a respectful, non-intrusive manner in environments that ensured participant safety and comfort. Emotional sensitivity was observed throughout, especially when discussing potentially distressing topics.

Through these measures, the study maintained high ethical standards, ensuring the trust, confidentiality, and welfare of all participants involved.

Linking Participant Voices to Policy Recommendations

Findings from this study highlight the resilience and agency of single parents, but also underscore gaps in institutional support for student-parent households. Participants called for greater access to mental health services, parent-focused university outreach programs, and socio-economic support schemes. Their testimonies directly informed the proposed recommendations, including the establishment of a dedicated Parent Support and Resource Desk at MSU-IIT, expanded student welfare services, and policy reviews to consider familial status in educational planning. These policy suggestions are rooted in and legitimized by the lived experiences and articulated needs of the participants.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations. First, due to its qualitative and context-specific nature, findings are not generalizable to all single parents in the Philippines or to those with children in other educational institutions. The small sample size, while sufficient for in-depth narrative inquiry, restricts the breadth of perspectives. Additionally, participants were all drawn from one university, which may limit transferability to other institutional settings with different support systems or student demographics. Researcher bias, despite mitigation efforts, may also have influenced thematic interpretation. Future studies may benefit from a broader sample, a mixed methods design, or comparative institutional analysis.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its ability to balance the need for specific, targeted information with the flexibility to explore individual narratives. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask open-ended questions while providing room for participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words. Interviews were conducted over four months, ensuring adequate time to build rapport with the participants and gather rich, comprehensive data. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, a duration deemed appropriate to allow for deep reflection while preventing fatigue

or discomfort for the participants. All interviews were recorded with participant consent, ensuring that no details were lost in transcription and allowing for a more accurate analysis of the data. The questions focused on the core aspects of the participants' daily lives, including their emotional journeys, coping strategies, societal perceptions, and experiences with support systems or stigma. For example, participants were asked to describe a typical day in their life as a single parent, which provided insights into the daily realities and routines that often go unnoticed. Other questions aimed to understand the challenges faced by single parents and the coping mechanisms they employ. One question specifically addressed the supports that parent had found helpful, whether through formal or informal means, providing a clear picture of what assistance is valued by single parents. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on societal views of single parenthood, offering a window into how cultural and societal attitudes shape their experiences and self-perceptions.

Researcher Positionality and Critical Reflection

The researchers, who identify with the same cultural and institutional context as the participants, acknowledge their positionality as both insiders and observers. Their familiarity with MSU-IIT and awareness of local socio-economic challenges enabled deeper rapport with the participants, but also required constant reflexivity to avoid assumptions or interpretive bias. Throughout the study, the researchers maintained reflective journals to monitor potential influences of their perspectives on data interpretation.

Thematic analysis was conducted inductively, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. Themes were not imposed but emerged organically through repeated reading and coding of transcripts. In analyzing participant narratives, special care was taken to ensure that themes reflected the nuanced realities and aspirations expressed by the participants themselves, rather than filtered through a singular lens of institutional critique or policy advocacy.

Data Analysis

In Colaizzi's seven-step method, the research process follows a structured approach to phenomenological analysis. Initially, the researcher familiarizes themselves with the data by reading the transcripts multiple times to develop a general understanding of the content. The next step involves identifying significant statements, where key phrases directly related to the phenomenon are extracted. These statements are then interpreted in the third step to formulate meanings, which involve uncovering the deeper significance behind the words. Following this, the meanings are grouped into theme clusters, organizing the data into broader, more cohesive categories. The researcher then constructs an exhaustive description, which is a comprehensive narrative that encapsulates the richness of the experience. From this description, the fundamental structure of the experience is distilled, capturing the essence of the phenomenon. To ensure the findings are accurate, a validation step is conducted where participants review the results through member checking. To further enhance trustworthiness, triangulation, peer debriefing, and participant validation are employed to ensure the credibility and rigor of the analysis. This methodical approach enables a deep and accurate understanding of the participants' lived experiences, offering a robust foundation for qualitative research.

AI Tools and Academic Integrity

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely as supportive aids during the final stages of the writing process. Specifically, digital tools such as grammar-checking software (e.g., Grammarly) and AI-based writing assistants were utilized to enhance clarity, coherence, and formatting—but only after the substantive content had been manually drafted, reviewed, and critically analyzed by the researcher. No AI tools were employed in the processes of data collection, thematic analysis, or interpretation of participant responses. The core analysis and representation of findings were based entirely on the researcher's intellectual engagement, contextual understanding, and ethical responsibility. This approach ensured that the research remained grounded in human judgment and preserved academic integrity throughout the study.

RESULTS

Four primary themes emerged from the data, each offering a deeper insight into the lived experiences of single parents:

Role Strain and Dual Responsibilities

A recurring theme in the data was the overwhelming burden of simultaneously fulfilling both traditionally "maternal" and "paternal" roles. Many participants described the constant juggling act of providing financially, offering emotional support, managing household tasks, and enforcing discipline—all without the benefit of shared responsibilities. This created significant role strain as single parents found themselves trying to be both a mother and a father at once. The tension between these roles often resulted in chronic fatigue, emotional burnout, and the continual sacrifice of personal goals, dreams, and relationships. One mother shared poignantly: *"I feel like I'm running two lives — one for me and one for my children — but I never have time to live either fully."* This illustrates the deep emotional and physical toll that balancing these roles can impose on single parents.

- **Sub-themes:**

- **Sacrificed personal ambitions:** Many single parents described putting their career, educational aspirations, and personal dreams on hold to ensure their children's well-being, often due to time and financial constraints.
- **Difficulty maintaining social ties:** The constant demands of parenting left little room for socializing, with many participants noting that their social relationships—whether friendships or romantic—suffered.
- **Health deterioration due to stress:** The persistent strain from these dual roles contributed to physical health issues, including chronic stress, exhaustion, and in some cases, long-term illness, as they struggled to maintain a delicate balance between parenting and self-care.

Emotional Burden and Societal Expectations

A significant emotional toll emerged as another core theme, with participants expressing feelings of loneliness, guilt, and anxiety. Many felt a pervasive sense of inadequacy as they tried to meet both their children's needs and society's expectations of what it means to be a good parent. This emotional burden was amplified by societal pressures, particularly in cultures that idealize the nuclear family. The perception that a two-parent household is the "ideal" family unit often led single parents to internalize societal judgment, which in turn diminished their self-esteem. As one participant explained: *"I constantly feel the need to prove that I am 'enough' — enough mother, enough father, enough provider."* This statement reflects the intense pressure many single parents feel to live up to unrealistic standards, often leading to a constant struggle to meet both their expectations and those of others.

- **Sub-themes:**

- **Stigmatization and internalized shame:** Participants often expressed feelings of shame associated with being single parents, especially in cultures where traditional family structures are valued. This internalized stigma can contribute to mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety.
- **Anxiety over children's well-being:** Many parents felt a constant, gnawing worry about whether their children were growing up "right," which was compounded by their lack of support and resources.
- **Lack of culturally appropriate mental health support:** Participants also discussed the limited availability of mental health services that catered to their specific needs as single parents, especially when cultural norms and societal expectations made it harder to seek help.

Marginalization and Lack of Systemic Support

Participants frequently described how institutional neglect and systemic barriers exacerbated their struggles. Many found social services to be either inaccessible or inefficient, creating a sense of alienation from the very

systems that were meant to offer support. When services were available, they were often not designed with single parents in mind—childcare, for example, was frequently unaffordable or inflexible with work schedules, leaving single parents with few options. A single father's comment captured this sentiment: *"There are programs out there, but they feel like they're designed for someone else. Someone who fits a neat box that I don't fit."* This highlights the frustration of navigating services that often fail to address the unique needs of single parents, particularly those who do not conform to the stereotypical "nuclear family" model.

- **Sub-themes:**

- **Difficulty accessing financial aid and healthcare:** Single parents often struggled to navigate bureaucratic red tape and find financial assistance or affordable healthcare, which further compounded their difficulties in meeting their families' needs.
- **Insufficient flexible work policies:** Many participants described how rigid work schedules made it nearly impossible to balance their professional responsibilities with their parenting duties, highlighting the lack of family-friendly policies in the workplace.
- **Lack of single-parent representation in policymaking:** The absence of single-parent voices in the policymaking process left many participants feeling that their specific needs were not being adequately addressed, contributing to feelings of marginalization and neglect.

Resilience and Commitment to Children's Welfare

Despite the many challenges they faced, participants consistently demonstrated remarkable resilience in their efforts to support and nurture their children. Single parents developed innovative coping strategies, often finding creative solutions to manage the financial, emotional, and logistical demands of their roles. Many pursued entrepreneurship or joined peer support groups to help cope with isolation, while others leveraged digital technologies to create more flexible work and education opportunities. One mother's statement encapsulated this resilience: *"When you realize no one is coming to save you, you find ways to save yourself — and your kids."* This sense of self-reliance and dedication to their children's welfare emerged as a defining characteristic of single parents in this study.

- **Sub-themes:**

- **Growth of self-efficacy:** Participants described how their experiences, although often overwhelming, helped them develop greater self-reliance and confidence in their ability to handle life's challenges.
- **Creation of alternative support systems:** Many participants sought out or created informal support systems, such as peer networks, to fill the gaps left by formal services. These networks played a crucial role in reducing isolation and providing emotional and practical support.
- **Focus on children's educational and emotional needs:** Despite their struggles, single parents expressed a deep commitment to ensuring their children received quality education and emotional care. This often meant prioritizing their children's needs over their own, including investing in extracurricular activities, advocating for their children's well-being, and seeking out educational resources.

These four themes—Role Strain and Dual Responsibilities, Emotional Burden and Societal Expectations, Marginalization and Lack of Systemic Support, and Resilience and Commitment to Children's Welfare—offer a nuanced view of the single-parenting experience. They highlight the complex interplay of internal and external factors that shape single parents' lives, from the weight of societal expectations to the innovative ways in which single parents navigate the daily challenges of raising children.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study strongly resonate with contemporary research emphasizing the complexity of single

parenthood as both a site of struggle and resilience. Recent scholarship, such as Bianchi (2021) and McLanahan (2020), confirms that single parents face structural disadvantages, particularly concerning economic stability and access to social services. However, consistent with Marlowe and Marks (2022) and Taylor (2021), this study also reveals the dynamic coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies developed by single parents, challenging narratives that solely position them as vulnerable populations. Moreover, Sanders (2023) reiterates the importance of phenomenological methods, such as Colaizzi's approach, in surfacing nuanced, lived realities that are often overlooked in quantitative research. By echoing Garrison's (2021) and Hanson's (2023) calls for anti-stigma initiatives and policy reforms, the present study underscores the urgent need for participatory policymaking processes that center the voices of single parents themselves (Lee, 2022). Overall, situating the lived experiences of single parents within broader socio-political frameworks not only highlights persistent gaps in systemic support but also offers transformative insights into how resilience can inform more equitable, context-sensitive policy interventions.

The findings confirm that single parenthood is a multifaceted experience shaped by emotional, economic, social, and systemic factors. These findings align with earlier literature that underscores the need for comprehensive, inclusive approaches to supporting single parents (Bianchi, 2011; Reid & Miedema, 2015). Critically, the narratives dismantle stereotypes portraying single parents as deficient. Instead, they emerge as resilient, resourceful individuals navigating complex challenges with remarkable agency. The findings of this phenomenological study align with and extend the contemporary discourse on single parenthood, revealing a complex interplay between systemic marginalization and personal resilience. Existing literature (Bianchi, 2021; McLanahan, 2020) consistently underscores the economic precarity, social stigma, and bureaucratic hurdles that single parents face. This study corroborates these realities, as participants articulated challenges in accessing childcare, legal aid, mental health services, and equitable employment opportunities. However, beyond merely reinforcing deficit narratives, the participants' stories illuminated dynamic strategies of coping and thriving, echoing the more recent perspectives of Marlowe and Marks (2022) and Taylor (2021), who emphasize the agency, adaptability, and strength embedded within single-parent households.

The phenomenological approach, guided by Colaizzi's method (Sanders, 2023), was instrumental in capturing these layers of experience, offering a depth of understanding that purely quantitative studies often miss. Through close engagement with participants' narratives, the study revealed not only the emotional burdens of loneliness, guilt, and societal judgment but also the quiet emergence of resilience practices such as community building, entrepreneurial pursuits, and self-advocacy. These findings suggest that while structural reforms are urgently needed, there is also value in recognizing and bolstering the inherent capacities of single parents.

Policy recommendations drawn from this study resonate with growing calls in the field for participatory, inclusive policymaking (Lee, 2022; Garrison, 2021). Anti-stigma campaigns, accessible childcare services, livelihood programs, and flexible education pathways are not mere supplemental programs but essential elements of a rights-based approach to supporting single parents. Moreover, the need for inter-agency collaboration and continuous feedback loops (Bryson et al., 2022) points toward a dynamic, responsive model of governance that evolves with the needs of its constituents.

Ultimately, this study affirms that single parents should not be viewed solely through a lens of vulnerability; rather, they are active agents of resilience and change. Their experiences offer critical insights into the failures and possibilities of current systems, providing a powerful foundation for transformative policies that honor the dignity, aspirations, and realities of diverse family structures. Recognizing, amplifying, and institutionalizing the voices of single parents is not only a matter of social justice—it is a strategic imperative for building a more inclusive and equitable society. The study also reveals systemic failings: policies and programs remain largely blind to the specific needs of single-parent households. Financial supports, childcare services, and mental health resources are often modeled on two-parent assumptions, leaving single parents underserved. By centering lived experiences, this study advocates for a **transformative approach** to policymaking — one that prioritizes **equity**, **inclusion**, and **agency**. Providing equal opportunities for all students in school activities, irrespective of gender, reinforces the commitment to inclusivity. Ultimately, the goal is to create a gender-fair learning environment where the rights of everyone are respected, heralding a society where equality is not merely taught but authentically lived (Emfimo et al., 2024). However, achieving true inclusivity requires addressing deeper structural inequalities. Financial supports, childcare services, and mental health resources are often modeled on

two-parent assumptions, leaving single parents underserved. By centering lived experiences, this study advocates for a transformative approach to policymaking — one that prioritizes equity, inclusion, and agency, ensuring that educational environments and support systems genuinely reflect the diverse realities of all students and families.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenological exploration of single parenthood offers profound insights into the resilience, creativity, and struggles of single parents. Their stories challenge prevailing narratives and highlight the urgent need for responsive, inclusive policies. Recognizing single parents not merely as subjects of charity but as active contributors to societal development is a critical shift. Policies must be dynamic, participatory, and grounded in real experiences if they are to effectively address the challenges at hand. Ultimately, empowering single parents uplifts not just individual families but also strengthens the broader social fabric. By listening to their journeys, honoring their voices, and translating insights into action, society takes a necessary step toward greater equity, compassion, and collective resilience.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing from the emergent themes of role strain, emotional burden, systemic marginalization, and resilience, several policy recommendations are proposed to address the unique challenges faced by single parents. These recommendations aim to provide comprehensive support for single-parent families, improve their quality of life, and reduce societal stigma. They are organized into five key areas: community-based support programs, accessible childcare services, economic assistance and livelihood support, educational opportunities, and awareness campaigns. Building upon the critical insights gathered from the lived experiences of single parents and aligning with contemporary scholarship, this study proposes a series of transformative, multi-sectoral policy interventions:

Community-Based Support Systems

Develop comprehensive, localized support hubs offering integrated services—mental health counseling, peer mentoring, legal assistance, and parenting workshops. These centers must be culturally sensitive, trauma-informed, and staffed with professionals trained specifically in the nuances of single parenthood (Thomson, 2017; Reid & Miedema, 2015).

Accessible and Flexible Childcare Services

Expand government-subsidized childcare programs with flexible operating hours to accommodate diverse work schedules, including part-time, shift, and gig work arrangements. Collaboration with private sector employers and community organizations can further widen accessibility and affordability (Barker, 2019; Hanson, 2018).

Economic Empowerment and Financial Inclusion

Introduce targeted cash transfer programs, micro-enterprise grants, livelihood training, and employment pathways specifically tailored for single-parent households. These programs must be accessible, stigma-free, and designed to break cycles of intergenerational poverty (Cohen, 2010; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Inclusive Educational Opportunities

Implement flexible, alternative learning systems, scholarships, and re-skilling initiatives geared toward both single parents and their children. Prioritize modalities such as online education, evening classes, and modular learning to cater to time-constrained single parents (Anderson & Shaw, 2014; Garrison, 2018).

Public Awareness and Anti-Stigma Campaigns

Launch national and community-based campaigns to dismantle stereotypes surrounding single parenthood. Highlight positive narratives, celebrate single-parent success stories, and foster an inclusive societal mindset that

values diverse family structures (Garrison, 2018; Lewis, 2008).

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