



# THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SELECTED FILIPINO FEMALE SOLO PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER DURING A STATE OF HEALTH EMERGENCY

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the lived experience of selected Filipino female solo parents raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) during a state of health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing qualitative phenomenological investigation, semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The study employed purposive sampling and snowball techniques to gather valuable data. Results highlighted that solo parent of children with ASD encountered exacerbated difficulties, including emotional burdens, communication challenges, financial constraints, and adjustments to remote learning. They also grappled with the role of a full-time solo parent, isolation from social life, and navigating changes in social interactions. Despite these hardships, participants reported receiving support from both their immediate families and communities. They embraced protective roles for their children with ASD, adopting specialized caregiving techniques while setting boundaries and discipline. As they moved forward, these solo parents demonstrated acceptance of their children's conditions, acquiring specialized child-rearing skills, and strengthened faith.*

**KEYWORDS:** autism spectrum disorder, COVID-19, Female solo parents, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, solo parents.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic posed problems for many families. However, for single parents, the unexpected responsibility of caring for children whose schools and recreational facilities have been closed and whose usual caregivers are unavailable can be particularly daunting. Coping with the daily demands of life during quarantine, which may include managing remote work or dealing with the consequences of unexpected job loss, is stressful in and of itself. When you consider the lack of interaction with other adults in one's social circle, the role of single parenting can appear overwhelming (Garey, 2022).

A single mother is a woman who finds herself living independently due to reasons like divorce, the loss of a spouse, or an unexpected pregnancy (Naz, et al., 2020), remarriage, separation, and divorce (Ciletti, 2023). A single mother is responsible for providing for her own needs and is also responsible for the well-being of her children. These single mothers must address a multitude of requirements, which necessitates increased efforts to fulfill their family's needs. These requirements encompass basic needs, and the educational needs of their children, as highlighted by Meilianna & Purba (2020). The pandemic exacerbates this predicament as the nation's economy deteriorates and health complications may emerge as additional burdens.

Amid the ongoing pandemic, single mothers are also prone to heightened stress levels because they must simultaneously earn a living and ensure that their children's educational success, as highlighted by Hertz & Mattes Jane (2020), along with Knoef & Van Ours (2016). The efficiency with which they manage their responsibilities greatly influences their willingness to consider taking on overtime work to support their children, as noted by Rahayu (2017).

The experiences of single mothers struggling to provide for their families gave rise to another challenge: economic vulnerability. Kramer et al. (2016) argued that single mothers are more likely to experience poverty and attain lower levels of education compared

to single fathers where income levels serve as a metric for measuring poverty, as they pose obstacles to securing a better standard of living, particularly for single mothers, as discussed by Chi et al. (2017).

The struggles faced by single mothers become even more profound when they have children with special needs, leading to heightened stress levels. Children with special needs demand increased attention due to their susceptibility to illnesses. Furthermore, single mothers must shoulder additional responsibilities, such as monitoring dietary requirements and maintaining hygiene in clothing, as outlined by Schilling et al. (2016) as cited in Djap, et al. (2021).

## II. METHODOLOGY

This research aimed to explore the personal experiences of solo parents in the Philippines who have children with ASD during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative studies are employed to investigate various phenomena through personal accounts, allowing researchers to delve into different contexts and situations. To fulfill the research goal, a qualitative phenomenological approach was chosen, aiming to provide comprehensive insights into the experiences of Filipino solo parents facing the challenges of the pandemic alongside their children's ASD condition. Creswell (2013) emphasized that qualitative research seeks to describe, analyze, and interpret phenomena, focusing less on hypothesis testing and more on gaining an in-depth understanding.

To collect and analyze data, semi-structured interviews were conducted using the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). IPA aims to uncover participants' unique experiences and meanings attributed to them. Rather than striving for an objective depiction of an event, IPA relies on individual perspectives or accounts. As explained by Finlay & Gough (2003) and cited in Cunanan & Yabut (2019), IPA is concerned with how individuals interpret and make sense of their personal and social realities. It doesn't seek to confirm a hypothesis; rather, it investigates the phenomenon in detail.



To comprehensively grasp respondents' lived experience, hermeneutic phenomenological and idiographic analysis approaches were employed. The fundamental objective, as described by Creswell (1998) and cited in Cunanan & Yabut (2019), is to describe the significance of lived experience concerning a particular phenomenon for multiple individuals. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as outlined by Laverly (2003) and cited in Cunanan & Yabut (2019), delves into the lifeworld and human experiences to establish meaning and understanding.

The IPA process involves double hermeneutics, a two-stage interpretive process. The participant interprets their environment, and the researcher interprets the participant's interpretation. This approach enables a thorough exploration of the participant's world, as explained by Smith & Osbourn (2007) and cited in Cunanan & Yabut (2019).

Furthermore, IPA adopts an idiographic mode, where data is gathered through the analysis of each individual case. This approach aims to provide specific insights into the perceptions and understandings of the particular group under study, avoiding making broad generalizations prematurely.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Theme 1: Economic Struggles and Social Isolation.** The interviewed solo parents of children with ASD shared that they have simultaneously experienced multiple challenges and discrimination while raising their child during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges may have existed prior to pandemic but intensified when COVID-19 pandemic started. This theme highlights the ordeals that these solo parents went through based on their statements during the interview.

Economic struggles and social isolation can be significant challenges for female solo parents of children with ASD. These struggles are rooted in a combination of economic and social factors that intersect to create a complex set of difficulties for these families. Raising a child with ASD often involves significant financial costs. These can include therapy, medical expenses, specialized education, and assistive technologies. Female solo parents may bear the full financial burden without a partner's income to share the costs (Montes & Halterman, 2007). Also, female solo parents of children with ASD struggled in balancing the demands of caregiving and employment as it can be particularly challenging for them. They may need to reduce work hours or even quit their jobs to provide adequate care for their child with ASD (Parish, et al., 2012).

This theme has identified three (3) subthemes, namely: *experiencing multiple plights; dealing with discrimination; and sacrificing personal life over parenthood.*

**Experiencing Multiple Plights.** Experiencing multiple plights refers to facing various challenges and difficulties that occur simultaneously, often compounding the burden on individuals. In the context of financial struggles, individuals may encounter economic hardships, job losses, or increased financial responsibilities, creating a strain on their ability to meet basic needs and fulfill other obligations.

**Dealing With Discrimination.** The Equality Act of 2010 of England defined two types of discrimination, both direct and indirect. Direct discrimination occurs when an individual is subjected to disparate and unfair treatment because of the person's disability while indirect discrimination is when an existing organization or group of persons have anti-discrimination practices put in place but makes the person feel at a disadvantaged way (Mind, 2019). These ordeals are apparent

on the nine (9) subthemes that were identified from the interview transcripts.

**Sacrificing personal life over parenthood.** Becoming parents marks a significant period that brings about considerable effects on new parents, both as a partnership and as individuals. One of these is sacrificing personal life for the sake of parenthood, which is a compelling phenomenon that underscores the profound dedication and commitment of individuals to their roles as caregivers.

**Theme 2: Balancing Caregiving in Adversity.** Balancing the responsibilities of caregiving during challenging times poses an intricate and multifaceted dilemma, particularly for single mothers raising children with ASD amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Caregiving encompasses the provision of physical, emotional, and often financial aid to those in need, such as children, elderly relatives, or individuals with disabilities or illnesses. Adversity can manifest in various forms, including financial difficulties, health crises, natural disasters, and personal stressors. Successfully managing caregiving in the face of adversity demands thoughtful consideration of both the caregiver's and the care recipient's needs, along with accessing the available resources and support systems. Within this context, three key subthemes emerged: *safeguarding parental role; instilling discipline; and utilizing available resources.*

**Safeguarding Parental Role.** The Significance of safeguarding parental roles has been recognized within the field of child development and psychology. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), parents are situated at the heart of the microsystem, which comprises the immediate surroundings that impact a child's growth. Parents assume the roles of primary caretakers and exemplars, molding the child's interactions and perception of the surrounding world.

Safeguarding parental roles becomes even more critical when considering children with specific needs, such as ASD. Solo parents of children with ASD often face unique challenges in ensuring their children's well-being and development. The parental role in this context entails understanding and addressing the specific needs, communication styles, and sensory sensitivities of children with ASD.

**Instilling Discipline.** Similar to all parents, solo parents of children with ASD also have the responsibility of addressing their children's errors. Engaging in discipline is a crucial parental duty, particularly when they recognize that it contributes to maintaining the approach used by therapists to guide the child in leading a functional life.

**Theme 3. Empowerment Through Support and Religiosity.** The third major theme that was identified stresses that empowerment through support and religiosity underscores the transformative potential of both social support systems and religious beliefs in fostering individuals' strength, agency, and resilience in the face of challenges. The combined effects of interpersonal support networks and spiritual beliefs contribute to a comprehensive framework that enables individuals to navigate adversity with a sense of purpose, self-efficacy, and hope.

In essence, empowerment through support and religiosity signifies a holistic approach to resilience-building. Drawing from interpersonal relationships and spiritual convictions, individuals are equipped with a multidimensional arsenal that fortifies their psychological resources, nurtures their sense of agency, and imbues them with the courage to face adversity head-on, which in this case is the COVID-19 pandemic while fulfilling the role of a solo parent to a child with ASD.



**Acceptance and Moving Forward.** Acceptance and moving forward represent a dynamic process through which individuals confront challenges, acknowledge their circumstances, and proactively engage in constructive responses to adversity. This multifaceted approach involves acknowledging both the limitations and possibilities presented by life's difficulties and taking deliberate steps towards growth and adaptation. The synergy of acceptance and forward momentum has garnered attention within psychological literature as an integral mechanism for fostering resilience and well-being.

**Experiencing Faith and Religiosity.** After enduring numerous challenges, facing discrimination, juggling diverse roles, and dealing with limited resources amid the COVID-19 pandemic, solo parents of children with ASD have expressed a heightened reliance on their faith in the Divine. This phenomenon was found to potentially offer protection against psychological distress.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about many challenges to all people alike, worldwide. In all these plights, it also shed light on the role of female solo parents of children with ASD during the pandemic. The respondents have shared that their multiple plights as solo parents to children with ASD has intensified and that they have received both direct and indirect discrimination from both inside and outside their family. Part of the multiple struggles they went through are related to communication problems; financial difficulties; sacrificing their career to fulfill the role of a fulltime solo parent; social life is disengaged; and adjusting socially relating to how they are when around their friends and outside their homes.

The participants also conveyed that amidst the challenges and adaptations they encountered, they found solace in the support provided by both their immediate families and the community, all the while enhancing their role as caregivers for their children with ASD. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it is notable that the respondents became notably more vigilant and protective, acquiring specialized caregiving skills tailored to their children's specific needs, while also establishing boundaries and implementing disciplinary measures to facilitate their children's enhanced functionality.

Moving forward, solo parents of children with ASD embraced the reality of their children's circumstances and recognized how their roles needed to evolve to meet their children's requirements. Along with this acceptance, their faith in the Divine has become bigger in the sense that they saw a purpose despite what they went through.

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