

Navigating Solo Parenthood in the Philippines: Societal Perceptions, Legal Frameworks, and Lived Experiences

Grace F. Lucero-Dueñas
University of Baguio

Corresponding Author: Grace F. Lucero-Dueñas luceroGrace8@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: solo parenthood, Philippine family policy, gender and disability, legal frameworks, lived experiences

Received : 12, April
Revised : 28, April
Accepted: 21, May

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences, societal perceptions, and legal challenges faced by solo parents in the Philippines, particularly solo mothers and persons with disabilities. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, feminist theory, and attachment theory, the research employs a qualitative document analysis to examine coping mechanisms and evaluate the implementation of Republic Act No. 11861. Findings highlight emotional trauma, economic hardship, and social stigma as primary stressors, while resilience emerges through community support, faith-based practices, and extended family networks. Despite policy advancements, legal gaps and inconsistent implementation persist. The study recommends broadening legal definitions, improving inter-agency coordination, and adopting trauma-informed, inclusive services to ensure equitable support for all solo parents in the country.

INTRODUCTION

The Filipino family has long been idealized as a cohesive nuclear unit, typically composed of a mother, father, and children living under one roof. This traditional configuration, deeply embedded in Philippine culture, religion, and policy, has shaped normative expectations around parenting and household roles (Abalos & Yeung, 2025). However, contemporary social dynamics—such as increased migration, changing gender roles, and shifts in marriage and partnership patterns—are disrupting this dominant model. Among the most significant developments is the rising number of households headed by solo parents. Recent estimates place the number of solo parents in the Philippines at approximately 15 million, or around 14% of the national population (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2024; World Health Organization, 2024). These figures point to an evolving reality that demands a recalibration of public perceptions, policy frameworks, and scholarly inquiry.

Despite the significant number of solo parents in the country, there remains a dearth of qualitative studies that center their voices and diverse experiences. The literature is dominated by demographic and policy-oriented data, with limited attention given to the nuanced psychosocial realities of solo parents navigating gender, disability, and institutional frameworks. For instance, most existing studies fail to interrogate how social stigma and patriarchal norms intersect with state policy to shape outcomes for solo parents (Javillonar, 2023; UNFPA, 2021). This gap leaves policymakers without sufficient qualitative grounding to design inclusive support mechanisms. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of intersectional analysis that accounts for how solo parenthood is experienced differently by women, men, and persons with disabilities. By contributing rich narrative and document-based evidence, this study fills a vital empirical and theoretical gap, offering insights that can inform policy development, social advocacy, and academic discourse.

Solo parenthood in the Philippines arises from diverse circumstances, including spousal death, abandonment, separation, annulment, rape, or voluntary single parenting. Republic Act No. 8972, known as the Solo Parents' Welfare Act of 2000, and its expanded 2022 amendment, RA 11861, provide legal recognition and a framework for state support (Congress of the Philippines, 2022). The revised law promises increased benefits, streamlined access to Solo Parent IDs, and expanded coverage of support programs. Nonetheless, implementation gaps persist. Recent research indicates that many solo parents—especially solo mothers and solo parents with disabilities—continue to face limited access to social protection, precarious employment, and gendered stigma (United Nations Population Fund Philippines, 2021). These challenges are compounded by enduring patriarchal norms and inadequate coordination among service-delivery agencies (Javillonar, 2023).

Notably, more than 90% of solo parent beneficiaries under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) are women (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2024), underscoring the gendered nature of solo parenthood. As with global trends, the Philippines is experiencing an upward trajectory in single-parent households due to factors such as increased women's autonomy, shifting

marriage patterns, and evolving views on family and caregiving (OECD, 2023; UN Women, 2019). Yet, the lived realities and coping mechanisms of these parents, especially those at the intersection of gender and disability, remain underexplored in local literature.

This paper contributes to knowledge enrichment in three key ways. First is on empirical grounding. By documenting the everyday struggles, strategies, and support networks of Filipino solo parents, the study provides granular, first-hand insights absent from most policy reports and aggregate data. The second is on policy evaluation. It critically examines the implementation and perceived effectiveness of the Solo Parents' Welfare Act and its 2022 amendment, providing evidence-based recommendations for improving support mechanisms. The third is on theoretical contribution. Through an intersectional lens, the study challenges monolithic representations of the Filipino family and advances a more inclusive conceptualization of parenthood, care work, and vulnerability.

By situating the experiences of solo parents within broader socio-legal and cultural frameworks, this research aims to inform more responsive, equitable, and inclusive family policies in the Philippines. Ultimately, it advocates for a reimagining of family life that recognizes and supports the diverse forms of caregiving and kinship that characterize contemporary Filipino society.

This study seeks to address critical gaps in scholarship and policymaking by:

1. analysing the lived experiences and coping mechanisms of Filipino solo parents, particularly solo mothers and persons with disabilities (PWDs); and
2. evaluating the effectiveness of legal frameworks and institutional support structures in addressing the unique needs of solo parents.

Through an intersectional and context-sensitive approach, this study aims to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of Filipino family life and promote policies that empower all parental identities.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

To understand the complexity of solo parenting, the study draws from several theoretical frameworks:

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasizes that a solo parent's experience is shaped by interactions within and between systems: microsystem (family, peers), mesosystem (school-community links), exosystem (workplace, government policies), and macrosystem (cultural and legal norms). This framework helps contextualize the lived realities of solo parents within a multilayered environment that includes both support and constraint.

Studies affirm this theory's applicability to solo parenting. Fatma et al. (2021), Manansala (2024), and Shelton (2024) argued that environmental stressors such as unstable employment or limited state support significantly affect parenting capacity, particularly among low-income solo parents. A UN Women (2021) Philippine report further supported this, showing that disruptions in the

exosystem (i.e., COVID-era lockdowns and policy delays) left solo mothers disproportionately burdened.

However, some critics argue that the model assumes a level of systemic responsiveness that does not always exist. For example, the Philippine Statistics Authority (2024) data shows that despite formal laws such as RA 11861, many solo parents still struggle with accessing support due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, highlighting that improvements in macrosystem structures do not always trickle down effectively.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory frames solo parenting, especially solo motherhood, within the context of gender inequality, labor division, and the undervaluation of caregiving work. It posits that the burdens faced by solo mothers are not just familial but systemic.

Benstead (2021) and Stivers (2022) support the feminist view by highlighting how caregiving remains feminized and undervalued in patriarchal societies. In the Philippine context, solo mothers are expected to shoulder both economic and emotional labor, while simultaneously facing moral scrutiny, reinforcing systemic gender bias (Aloro et al., 2024; Arcilla et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2022). Furthermore, UN Women (2019) notes that Filipino solo mothers were disproportionately affected by pandemic-related job losses, with minimal gender-sensitive support from institutions.

Critics of feminist theory argue that it can sometimes underplay the agency of women or homogenize solo mothers' experiences. For example, some solo mothers in Lee et al.'s (2022) study described a renewed sense of independence and personal growth after separation, suggesting empowerment rather than victimhood. Thus, while feminist theory explains structural disadvantage, it must be balanced with recognition of individual agency.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is crucial in understanding the psychological effects of solo parenting on children, especially when parental absence is due to trauma, loss, or abandonment. It helps assess how disruptions in early attachments may influence a child's emotional development and behavior.

Attachment-detachment phases are echoed in the Philippine studies (e.g., Aloro et al., 2024; Arcilla et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2022; Maro et al., 2024), where children of solo parents showed behavioral signs of denial, anxiety, and depression following parental separation or loss. Internationally, studies by Griffin (2021) and Jehangir and Khalid (2024) affirm that secure early attachments, even in solo-parent households, can still be achieved with consistent caregiving, highlighting the importance of parenting quality over family structure.

Some contemporary studies challenge the deterministic tone of early attachment theory. For instance, several studies (e.g., Konge Nielsen et al., 2023; Marra et al., 2023) suggest that multiple adult figures (grandparents, mentors, extended family) can serve as secondary attachment figures, compensating for the absence of one parent. This indicates that with adequate social support,

children in solo-parent homes can develop secure attachments and emotional resilience.

METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative and employs a document analysis method. The primary data source is a detailed narrative document containing reflections, legislative reviews, theoretical perspectives, and anecdotal evidence of solo parenting in the Philippines. The material includes references to personal interviews, expert commentary, and policy documents such as Republic Act No. 8972.

Data were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2017) six-phase approach: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually and iteratively, guided by the research questions. The analysis was deductive and theory-informed—anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Feminist Theory, and Attachment Theory—which allowed for the identification of patterns across ecological, gendered, and emotional dimensions. Codes and themes were triangulated against legislative texts and recent secondary sources to ensure validity. Two independent coders reviewed the thematic structure to minimize bias and enhance credibility. NVivo software was used in the final round of coding to visualize co-occurring themes and frequency patterns.

Themes were identified and categorized based on the two main research objectives. Thematic coding was used to highlight areas concerning emotional and economic stress, societal response, coping mechanisms, and legal frameworks.

RESULTS

The Lived Experiences and Coping Mechanisms of Filipino Solo Parents (Solo Mothers and Persons with Disabilities)

From the thematic analysis, several key findings emerged:

1. Diverse Pathways to Solo Parenthood

Data from document analysis revealed multiple categories of solo parents, including those who are solo by choice, by decision (e.g., separation, annulment), by circumstance (e.g., death of spouse, rape), and institutional or temporary solo parents. The most represented groups were solo mothers who had separated from their partners and widows raising children alone.

2. Key Stressors Identified

Solo parents in the Philippines face a range of recurring stressors that significantly impact their well-being and capacity to provide for their families. One of the most prominent is the emotional trauma resulting from spousal loss or abandonment, which often leaves solo parents to navigate grief and emotional upheaval while simultaneously taking on full parental responsibilities. Financial instability is another major challenge, as many solo parents rely solely on a single income to support their households, making it difficult to meet basic needs and plan for the future. In addition to these economic pressures, many also grapple

with the social stigma attached to their status, which leads to diminished social acceptability and feelings of isolation. The psychological burden of raising children alone – without the support of a partner – further compounds the stress experienced by these individuals. Finally, legal and institutional barriers, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and limited awareness of available government services, often hinder solo parents from accessing the support they are entitled to under the law.

3. Coping Strategies and Support Systems

Solo parents adopt a variety of coping strategies to navigate the complex challenges they face. Many find emotional healing through faith, therapy, and the support of peers who share similar experiences. Spirituality and religious practices serve as sources of strength, while professional counselling and group discussions help process grief and stress. Economically, solo parents adapt by taking on side jobs, starting home-based businesses, or enrolling in retraining programs to improve their employability and income-generating capacity. They also rely heavily on extended family networks, often turning to relatives for assistance with childcare or temporary housing. Additionally, participation in support groups and church-based initiatives provides a sense of community and practical assistance, offering both emotional and material support during difficult times.

4. Gender and Social Inequities

Female solo parents, especially those from low-income backgrounds or with disabilities, face compounded discrimination in employment, legal protection, and public perception. Some fathers also face barriers, such as social expectations of masculinity or the reluctance of partners to accept "instant families."

The Effectiveness of Legal Frameworks and Institutional Support Structures in Addressing the Unique Needs of Solo Parents

Despite the enactment of Republic Act No. 8972 and its expanded version, RA 11861, solo parents continue to experience significant gaps in the implementation of these laws. Many report limited awareness and understanding of their legal rights and the benefits they are entitled to, which hinders their ability to access support effectively. Delays and inconsistencies in the issuance of Solo Parent IDs and the disbursement of benefits further exacerbate their challenges. Additionally, certain categories of solo parents – such as those who are single by choice – are not explicitly recognized within the legal framework, leaving them without clear protection or eligibility. Moreover, there is a glaring lack of specialized services for solo parents who are victims of sexual violence or who live with disabilities, highlighting the need for more inclusive and responsive policy measures.

DISCUSSION

Filipino solo parents, particularly solo mothers and persons with disabilities (PWDs), continue to navigate a challenging social and economic environment marked by emotional distress, financial strain, and social stigma. Emotional trauma due to spousal abandonment, death, or separation often mirrors

the stages of grief identified by Kübler-Ross (Tyrell et al., 2023), including denial, anger, depression, and eventual acceptance. These emotional experiences are further intensified among solo parents with disabilities, who face additional physical limitations and discrimination (Powell et al., 2024).

Despite these adversities, solo parents show remarkable resilience. Many draw strengths from faith-based practices, peer support groups, and therapy, aligning with coping frameworks discussed in Siena and Fernandez (2022) and Arcilla et al. (2025). Economic coping strategies include side jobs, microenterprises like sari-sari stores or handmade goods, retraining, and returning to school (Estrella & Cardona, 2022; Manansala, 2024). Extended family networks remain critical sources of childcare, emotional support, and temporary shelter (Manansala et al., 2024). Church and community-based initiatives also play important roles, reinforcing the collectivist ethos embedded in Filipino society (Aloro et al., 2024; Arcilla et al., 2025).

However, acceptance within broader society remains uneven. Many solo mothers, especially those separated or single by choice, face judgment based on traditional gender roles and religious expectations (Mackenzie, 2023; Mendez, 2022). These norms are reinforced by older generations and some religious institutions, which often emphasize maintaining marital unions despite infidelity or abuse. Nonetheless, a growing number of solo mothers report a renewed sense of autonomy and identity post-separation, contradicting assumptions of dependency and victimhood (Redoña, 2023; Stivers, 2022). This transformation is further supported by feminist theory, which recognizes solo parenting as a site of both struggle and empowerment (Stivers, 2022).

Republic Act No. 11861, the Expanded Solo Parents Welfare Act of 2022, marks a critical legal advancement in the protection and empowerment of solo parents in the Philippines. The law guarantees additional benefits, including a ₱1,000 monthly cash subsidy for low-income solo parents, 10% discounts and VAT exemption on essential child care items, additional parental leave, and priority access to housing, PhilHealth, and livelihood services (Department of Social Welfare and Development, 2024).

Yet, implementation remains inconsistent. Numerous reports indicate that many solo parents have not received their benefits due to budget constraints and a lack of local government compliance (Business Mirror, 2023; Manila Standard, 2024). Senator Bong Go and Representative Erwin Tulfo have both called for a review of the law's enforcement, noting that the law's promises are not being felt by many on the ground (Business Mirror, 2023; Manila Standard, 2024).

In response, the DSWD has launched coordination efforts with other agencies to fast-track service delivery and prioritize solo parents under its Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations (AICS) and Sustainable Livelihood Program (SLP) (DSWD, 2024). Further, regional initiatives such as the Gender and Development (GAD) Learning Sessions in Region XII aim to educate solo parents about their rights and entitlements under RA 11861 (DILG Region XII, 2024).

However, gaps remain. Categories like single-by-choice parents and institutional caregivers still fall outside the scope of the legal definition, creating

inconsistencies in coverage and protection (Aloro et al., 2024). More troubling is the lack of targeted services for solo parents who are victims of sexual violence or live with disabilities—groups that require trauma-informed and disability-sensitive interventions.

While RA 11861 represents a landmark effort to institutionalize support for solo parents, the law's effectiveness is curtailed by uneven implementation, underfunded local systems, and limited public awareness. Strengthening inter-agency coordination, streamlining Solo Parent ID issuance, and broadening the legal definitions to include diverse realities of solo parenthood are essential steps toward inclusive family policy reform in the Philippines.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Solo parenthood in the Philippines is a dynamic and multifaceted reality that continues to challenge traditional conceptions of family, caregiving, and state responsibility. While the Expanded Solo Parents Welfare Act of 2022 (RA 11861) signifies important progress in recognizing the rights and needs of solo parents, its uneven implementation, narrow legal definitions, and limited inclusivity highlight the persistent disconnect between policy and lived experience. Filipino solo parents—particularly solo mothers and persons with disabilities—grapple not only with emotional and financial burdens but also with systemic barriers and deep-seated societal stigma. Despite these challenges, their resilience and adaptive strategies underscore the strength of community networks, faith-based support, and personal agency.

The findings highlight the urgent need for a more inclusive and equitable family policy in the Philippines—one that recognizes the diverse realities of solo parenthood and dismantles barriers to accessing support. Specifically, the following measures are recommended:

1. Policymakers should develop family policies that are inclusive, responsive, and intersectional.
2. Government agencies and legislators should ensure that policies reflect the varied pathways to solo parenthood.
3. Social welfare institutions and relevant government bodies should work to eliminate structural inequalities that limit solo parents' access to support services.

FURTHER STUDY

This study is limited to qualitative data derived from several documents. Future research should include empirical studies involving interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions with solo parents from diverse regions and backgrounds. There is also a need to investigate the perspectives of children raised by solo parents, as well as longitudinal studies tracking their psychological and social development over time

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researcher extends her deepest gratitude and utmost admiration to the solo parents—especially the solo mothers, and most particularly those living with disabilities—who graciously shared their stories. Their courage, resilience, and unwavering dedication to raising their children and building a secure home, often against overwhelming odds, have provided invaluable insights and inspiration for this work. She also wishes to express her heartfelt appreciation to Ms. Jerrel Panayo for her professional guidance, scholarly assistance, and mentorship. Her support was vital in transforming this modest research endeavour into a meaningful and coherent academic article.

Lastly, the researcher dedicates this work to her beloved daughters, Aigee and Toni, and her wonderful granddaughter, Anuea. You are the constant source of inspiration behind this study. As a solo mother, the researcher affirms—through your lives—that the enduring love between a mother and her children can overcome all obstacles.

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