

# Navigating Hardship: Lived Challenges of Solo Parent–Students in Higher Education

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**Abstract**— This study explored the lived challenges of solo parent–students enrolled in a state university in Claveria, Misamis Oriental. Guided by a phenomenological qualitative design, the research examined how solo parent–students navigate their dual roles while pursuing higher education. Using purposive sampling, seven participants aged 20 to 40 years old were interviewed through a semi-structured guide validated by experts. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework, allowing the researchers to identify patterns of meaning across participants’ narratives. Findings revealed four major themes describing the multifaceted struggles of solo parent–students: (1) Struggles in balancing the dual roles of student and parent, characterized by competing academic and childcare responsibilities; (2) Financial hardship and economic strain, as participants struggled to meet their own school expenses and their children’s needs; (3) Emotional burdens and worries in parenting alone, including persistent guilt, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy; and (4) Experiences of judgment, discrimination, and social stigma, often expressed through critical comments from family members, peers, or the broader community. These challenges reflect not only personal difficulties but also systemic and cultural barriers that shape the educational journeys of solo parent–students. The study highlights the critical need for higher education institutions to implement supportive and inclusive policies such as flexible learning arrangements, accessible childcare partnerships, targeted financial assistance, and strengthened mental health services. Through centering the voices of solo parent–students, the research underscores the importance of developing institutional structures that recognize and address the unique circumstances of this student population. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of their lived realities and provide a basis for institutional action aimed at promoting educational equity, retention, and holistic student well-being.

**Keywords**— Solo parent–students; lived experiences; phenomenology; role strain; higher education; thematic analysis.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Solo parenthood is an increasingly visible reality across higher education institutions, where students strive to complete their academic degrees while simultaneously fulfilling the demanding responsibilities of raising children. The complexity of balancing these dual roles creates significant challenges that shape the academic, emotional, financial, and social experiences of solo parent–students. While higher education promotes inclusivity and equal access, the lived realities of parenting students, particularly those parenting alone, often

remain marginalized, unaddressed, and poorly understood within institutional systems.

Existing literature highlights that student-parents commonly face role conflict, financial limitations, emotional distress, and heightened vulnerability to dropout compared to their non-parenting peers [1]. Solo parents, in particular, encounter even more compounded burdens because they carry full responsibility for childcare, household management, and economic provision [2]. These responsibilities frequently clash with academic expectations, resulting in guilt, stress, and feelings of inadequacy when they perceive that time devoted to academics takes away from their role as a parent [3]. Moreover, societal perceptions often attach stigma toward early pregnancy or single parenthood, further intensifying the emotional and psychological load [4]. Despite these challenges, many solo parent–students continue to pursue higher education as a pathway to economic stability, personal growth, and a better future for their children [5].

In the Philippine context, student-parents form a meaningful yet often overlooked group within public universities. Many of them pursue academic goals amid limited financial resources, lack of access to childcare, and cultural expectations that idealize motherhood or parental sacrifice. Solo parents, who do not have the advantage of shared financial or caregiving support, are particularly vulnerable to academic interruptions and emotional strain. Yet, despite their significant presence, there remains a scarcity of research that explicitly documents their lived experiences within local higher education institutions. Understanding their struggles is crucial, as it helps ensure that universities create equitable and supportive environments that address the specific needs of these students.

This study is anchored in the belief that higher education institutions have a responsibility to support diverse learners, including those navigating non-traditional educational pathways. In focusing on the lived experiences of solo parent–students in a state university in Claveria, Misamis Oriental, this research provides valuable insights into the real challenges that affect their academic persistence and overall well-being. The study explores four core areas of difficulty: balancing the dual roles of student and parent, financial hardship, emotional burden, and experiences of discrimination. These themes highlight not only the personal struggles of student-parents but

also the structural gaps within educational systems that may inhibit their success.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform institutional policies, welfare programs, faculty practices, and student support mechanisms. Through giving voice to solo parent–students, this research underscores the need for more compassionate, flexible, and responsive academic environments. The findings serve as a foundation for proposing institutional actions such as flexible scheduling, improved access to financial assistance, mental health support, and child-friendly services, interventions that can greatly enhance the retention, academic performance, and well-being of solo parent–students.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived realities of solo parent–students and advocates for a more inclusive, equitable higher education landscape where diverse student identities are recognized and supported. Their stories reveal not only the hardships they endure but also the resilience and determination that enable them to pursue higher education despite significant obstacles. It is in acknowledging and addressing their needs that institutions can truly uphold the principles of educational access, social justice, and student.

## II. METHODS

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design, which seeks to understand how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences. This approach is appropriate because the study aimed to explore the personal challenges of solo parent–students enrolled in a state university in Claveria, Misamis Oriental, capturing their subjective interpretations of balancing academic responsibilities with parenting duties.

The research was conducted at a state university in Claveria, Misamis Oriental, an institution known to have several student-parents pursuing tertiary education. This setting was selected because it provided a rich context for examining how solo parents navigate institutional demands while raising their children. The locale enabled the researchers to document authentic accounts of challenges, coping mechanisms, and lived experiences within a real academic environment.

The researchers used purposive sampling to select seven (7) solo parent–students enrolled during the academic year 2022–2023. Participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (i) they are currently enrolled solo parent–students in the identified state university; (ii) they voluntarily agreed to be interviewed and share personal experiences; (iii) they are within the age range of 20 to 40 years old; (iii) they are not legally married and not cohabiting, meeting the definition of solo parent; and (iv) they are capable of providing rich and relevant information aligned with the study’s objectives.

The sample size of seven was deemed sufficient because data saturation was achieved—the point at which no new themes, patterns, or insights emerged from the interviews. In qualitative research, saturation confirms that the data collected are adequate to fully describe the phenomenon under investigation.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide, allowing participants to express their experiences freely

while ensuring that all relevant topics were explored. The instrument was validated by three experts: a Registered Social Worker, an English teacher, and a Psychometrician, ensuring content validity. Although the questions were written in English, the interviews were conducted in the local dialect for clarity and comfort. Data collection took place from March to April 2023.

The researchers employed Thematic Analysis, following the steps of familiarization, coding, generating formulated meanings, clustering themes, and synthesizing findings into narrative form. Thematic Analysis was used within a phenomenological framework to capture the essence of participants’ lived experiences. Themes were developed based on recurring patterns drawn from participants’ significant statements, guided by the study’s research questions and supported by relevant literature.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Theme 1: Struggles in Balancing the Dual Roles of Student and Parent*

Solo parent–students consistently emphasized the overwhelming challenge of juggling their responsibilities at home and in school. Managing time between childcare and academic requirements emerged as one of the most difficult aspects of their lived experience. One participant shared, “*It is difficult to balance my time between taking care of the child and studying,*” highlighting the constant tension between academic deadlines and parental duties. Another participant echoed this struggle: “*It has been difficult for me as a solo parent and at the same time student, especially on how to manage my time as I need to study and also focus on my daughter.*” For others, the depth of the challenge is tied to emotional stress, as one mother expressed, “*Lisud kaayo kay dili nko matiman ug tarong ug permi nalang ta mag worry if okay lang ba siya ... mabahin sad ang imong oras ug attention.*” These accounts illustrate the persistent difficulty of fulfilling two full-time roles simultaneously, often leaving participants emotionally and physically stretched.

The struggles narrated by the participants mirror what existing literature has long recognized: single- or solo-parent students experience significant role strain, as the competing demands of parenthood, academic work, and oftentimes employment collide. Lovell and Scott [3] describe this conflict as a constant competition of responsibilities, where student-parents often feel guilty for “not giving their children enough time,” a finding that aligns with the participants’ reports of emotional worry and divided attention. Tehan [6] likewise emphasizes that single-parent students are a unique population with distinct constraints and responsibilities, making time management significantly more challenging compared to traditional students. Freeman [2] adds that even common stressors become amplified for single parents who must simultaneously schedule childcare, attend classes, and fulfill academic tasks.

The participants’ experiences also parallel international evidence showing that student-parents often feel inadequate in both roles due to mounting pressures. Cabaguig [1] reported that student mothers frequently experience guilt because they

must compromise one role to fulfill another—making them feel ineffective either as parents or as students.

Moreover, the difficulty in balancing roles is compounded by structural limitations such as lack of affordable childcare, a recurring issue in earlier research. Brown and Nichols, Cerven, and Estes [7], all highlight that securing reliable childcare is one of the biggest hurdles single-parent students face, often causing them to miss classes or struggle with coursework due to caregiving demands. Without institutional support, this struggle becomes a daily challenge—echoed directly in the lived experiences of the participant who stated that time and attention are constantly “divided.”

The theme reinforces what decades of research have established: solo parent–students face a unique and heavy burden in balancing school responsibilities with parental roles. Their narratives reflect role overload, emotional stress, and systemic barriers that make academic persistence significantly more demanding for this population.

### *Theme 2: Financial Hardship and Economic Strain*

Financial burden emerged as one of the most pressing and recurring challenges faced by solo parent–students. Participants described constant worry over tuition payments, school expenses, food, transportation, and the daily needs of their children. One participant shared, “*Mangita pakog kwarta para sa akong pag skwela din mangeta pako para pang bayad sa skwelahan sa akong anak,*” emphasizing the dual financial responsibility of supporting both their education and their child’s schooling. Another echoed this concern, stating, “*Lisud kaayo financially sa usa ka solo parent nga ga skwela ko samtang ga skwela pa pud akong anak.*” For some, studying full-time meant giving up employment, leaving them financially vulnerable, as another participant explained: “*Sa pagkakaran wala koy trabaho tungod kay ga skwela ko.*” These accounts illustrate a pattern of significant financial strain that shapes their daily decisions and limits their academic opportunities.

This lived experience is strongly supported by existing literature highlighting that financial instability is one of the key barriers affecting single-parent students in higher education. Stack and Meredith [8] (2017) identify financial concerns as both a primary reason single parents enter higher education—to improve their financial stability—and the primary reason many of them struggle to complete their degree programs. Gunn-Wright [9] further noted that many single parents lack access to adequate funding to even begin their studies, and those who manage to enroll often face ongoing financial hardship that threatens their persistence and academic success.

The financial strain described by participants aligns with Pendleton and Atella’s [10] findings that single parents often borrow more money than traditional students, taking out loans two to three times higher to cover childcare, housing, and educational expenses. This disproportionate financial burden creates a cycle where solo parents continue to struggle economically even after graduation. Similarly, Carlson [11] stressed that childcare is one of the most essential—and costly—needs for student-parents, and limited access to

affordable, safe childcare significantly affects their ability to attend classes and complete course requirements.

The emotional weight of financial strain also appears in the literature. Sallee [12] and Cox [13] documented that parenting students experience heightened levels of stress related to providing for their families while maintaining their studies. This aligns with the participants’ expressions of constant worry over meeting basic needs, particularly when the cost of education directly competes with the daily necessities of their children. Many solo parents prioritize their child’s needs over their own educational expenses—a pattern supported by Stack and Meredith [8], who found that single parents consistently sacrifice personal needs, including college attendance, to ensure their children’s well-being.

Moreover, the financial pressures described by participants exacerbate broader role conflicts identified in the literature. Lovell and Scott [3] emphasized that financial stress amplifies the difficulty of balancing multiple roles, as limited resources force student-parents to constantly choose between studying, working, and caring for their children. This mirrors the participants’ real-life struggle of stretching limited finances to support education while fulfilling parental duties.

The theme underscores that financial hardship is not merely an economic issue but a multi-layered barrier that affects solo parent–students academically, emotionally, and structurally. Their experiences reflect a well-established reality in scholarly research: financial constraints significantly shape the educational journey of student-parents, influencing not only their academic persistence but also their mental health, family stability, and long-term aspirations.

### *Theme 3: Emotional Burdens and Worries in Parenting Alone*

The emotional burden of parenting alone while pursuing higher education surfaced strongly in the narratives of solo parent–students. Many participants voiced persistent feelings of worry, guilt, and emotional exhaustion—often stemming from the belief that they are unable to adequately care for their children while fulfilling their academic responsibilities. One participant expressed the deep emotional strain of separation: “*Lisud para sa ako nga malayo sa anak... dli ako ang mag bantay niya,*” reflecting the pain of being physically distant from her child due to school demands. Another participant shared, “*I cannot take care properly and am always worried if he is okay,*” highlighting the constant anxiety that accompanies the dual role of parent and student. These feelings of inadequacy and guilt are common among participants, who often feel torn between their desire to provide a better future through education and their longing to be fully present in their child’s daily life.

This emotional conflict is widely documented in the literature on student-parents. Cabaguing [1] found that student mothers frequently experience guilt and feelings of inadequacy when they perceive that they must compromise one role to satisfy the demands of another. This aligns closely with participants’ expressions of not being able to care “properly” or personally attend to their children. Moreover, Lovell and Scott [2] noted that student-parents often report guilt over not having “enough time” with their children, which intensifies emotional

stress and contributes to mental fatigue—a sentiment strongly mirrored in the participants’ accounts of divided attention and emotional worry.

Beyond guilt, the emotional burdens of solo parent–students are intricately connected to broader uncertainties in transitioning between the roles of student and caregiver. Scharp and Dorrance Hall [14] emphasized that student-parents commonly experience uncertainty-induced stress when negotiating academic expectations alongside parenting responsibilities. This stress has been linked to adverse mental and physical health outcomes, adding weight to the emotional toll described by participants who constantly fear not meeting their children’s needs. Similarly, Gerrard and Roberts [4] observed that student-parents often report emotional strain related to navigating unfamiliar academic systems while simultaneously providing emotional and material support to their children—a double obligation reflected in participants’ descriptions of “worrying always” about their child’s condition while studying.

Furthermore, the emotional strain described by the participants also reflects a broader pattern of role overload documented in the literature. Tehan [6] identified that the emotional responsibilities of single parents extend far beyond physical caregiving, as they must simultaneously manage household demands, academic workloads, and, often, emotional caregiving for their children without the benefit of shared responsibility. This emotional overload can leave solo parents feeling depleted and overwhelmed, sentiments echoed in participants’ expressions of being emotionally stretched and in constant worry about their child’s well-being.

In addition, the literature shows that emotional burdens are compounded by a lack of institutional support. Cox and Sallee [13] argued that student-parents often feel unseen or unsupported by campus systems, making the emotional weight of balancing roles even heavier. When institutions are unable to provide support due to staffing or budget constraints, student-parents face these emotional challenges largely on their own. This aligns with participants’ narratives of feeling they must bear the worry, guilt, and emotional responsibility alone, without consistent external support.

This theme highlights that the emotional burden carried by solo parent–students is profound and persistent. Their experiences underscore the psychological cost of pursuing education while bearing full responsibility for their children—characterized by guilt, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and the constant fear of not meeting their parenting duties. These emotional struggles reflect well-established patterns in the literature, affirming that solo parent–students face not only academic and financial pressures but also deep emotional challenges that shape their educational journey.

*Theme 4: Experiences of Judgment, Discrimination, and Social Stigma*

An equally significant challenge shared by solo parent–students is the experience of judgment, discrimination, and social stigma from family members, peers, or community members. These experiences add emotional strain that compounds their already demanding roles. One participant

revealed painful encounters with gossip and labeling: “*Daghan na kaayo mga maretis karon... nay mo ana sa ako na ‘igatan daw ko.’*” Another expressed being blamed for early pregnancy, stating, “*Gina blame ngano nga early pregnancy, wala daw ko nag huna-huna.*” The hurt intensifies when stigma comes from close relatives, as one participant shared, “*Wala nay mo dawat nako nga laki kay kuno naa nakoy anak,*” while another reflected on the pain of being judged by her own family: “*Sakit lang huna-hunaon na mismo imong mga parente ang mo discriminate sa imoha.*” These accounts demonstrate how moral judgment and social labeling deepen the emotional and psychological burdens solo parents face while pursuing their education.

This lived experience of stigma is strongly supported by existing literature, which recognizes that single and solo parents frequently encounter social judgments related to gender norms, early pregnancy, and perceived moral failings. Brooks [16] emphasized that student-parents often struggle to be seen as “legitimate students” because of the stereotypes attached to their parental status, especially when pregnancy or single parenthood deviates from societal expectations. Similarly, Moreau and Kerner [17] found that parenting students frequently report feeling marginalized within academic spaces, not because of academic performance but due to social assumptions about their capacity, character, or priorities.

Stigma related to early pregnancy, as highlighted by the participants, also aligns with findings from Gerrard and Roberts [4], who documented that single mothers in higher education often face moral judgments rooted in cultural norms about appropriate ages, timing, and conditions for motherhood. These judgments can lead to feelings of shame, isolation, and diminished self-worth which are emotions clearly echoed in the participants’ accounts of being blamed and labeled.

At the family level, the literature also supports the participants’ experiences. Scharp *et al.*[14] noted that the personal views of relatives often intertwine with the struggles of student-parents, sometimes leading to unsupportive or critical attitudes that further heighten emotional distress. This parallels the participant who shared, “*Sakit lang huna-hunaon na mismo imong mga parente ang mo discriminate sa imoha,*” highlighting how family-based stigma can intensify the emotional difficulty of navigating higher education as a solo parent.

Moreover, social stigma exacerbates the role strain already experienced by single parents. Tehan [6] argued that single-parent students already face distinctive academic and emotional pressures, and discriminatory attitudes amplify the sense of being overwhelmed or inadequate. Lovell and Scott [3] also discussed how feelings of guilt and shame—often shaped by external judgments—can undermine parenting students’ confidence in both their roles and academic abilities.

These discriminatory experiences also reflect structural challenges acknowledged by Cox and Sallee [13], who noted that universities themselves sometimes struggle to fully support student-parents due to resource constraints or limited awareness. When institutional support is lacking, the weight of stigma is carried largely by the student alone, without adequate systems to buffer or counteract it.

This theme highlights how social stigma and discrimination create an added layer of adversity for solo parent–students. Beyond academic and financial strains, they must also navigate hurtful judgments rooted in cultural expectations, gender norms, and moral assumptions. These discriminatory experiences shape their sense of belonging, emotional well-being, and academic motivation—reinforcing the need for institutions to adopt inclusive, stigma-reducing policies that recognize the legitimacy of solo parent–students and support their educational aspirations.

#### *Institutional Basis for Action*

The findings of this study reveal that solo parent–students experience profound and multifaceted challenges—ranging from emotional burden and financial strain to role conflict and social stigma. These struggles indicate that higher education institutions play a critical role in supporting this often overlooked student population. The participants’ lived experiences—such as balancing childcare with academic deadlines, managing severe financial limitations, enduring emotional distress, and navigating discrimination—underscore the need for institutional structures that address both the academic and non-academic barriers to student success.

Existing literature affirms that student-parents benefit significantly from institutional support systems that reduce role strain and improve academic persistence. Studies highlight the importance of affordable childcare [18] flexible schedules [19] financial programs [8], and stigma-free academic environments [16] [17] in mitigating the structural challenges faced by solo parent–students. These documented needs align with the lived realities captured in this study, particularly the participants’ concerns about insufficient time for childcare, overwhelming financial obligations, and social judgment from others.

Given these findings, institutions of higher education must adopt policies and interventions that intentionally support solo parent–students. These include creating flexible learning modalities, establishing partnerships for safe and affordable childcare, offering emergency financial assistance, and strengthening mental health and counseling services tailored to the unique emotional load of solo parents. Additionally, institutions must actively promote inclusive and stigma-free environments by integrating awareness campaigns and ensuring that faculty and staff are trained to respond sensitively to the needs of parenting students.

In grounding institutional action in the lived experiences of solo parent–students, this study provides clear evidence that current support systems remain inadequate. Implementing targeted policies not only enhances academic success but also promotes equity, retention, and well-being. Higher education institutions are therefore called to recognize solo parents as a legitimate and significant student demographic who deserve responsive and compassionate support structures that enable them to succeed both as learners and as parents.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived challenges of solo parent–students in higher education and revealed a complex interplay of academic, emotional, financial, and social struggles. The participants’ narratives illustrated that balancing the dual roles

of student and parent creates significant role strain, as they face competing demands for time, energy, and attention. Their experiences underscore how emotional burdens—such as worry, guilt, and feelings of inadequacy—intensify when they perceive that their educational pursuits compromise their responsibilities as parents. Financial limitations further heighten their difficulties, forcing them to stretch limited resources to support both their education and their children’s needs. Beyond these personal struggles, the participants also experience discrimination and social stigma, often from relatives or community.

These findings affirm existing literature, which notes that student-parents consistently face structural barriers, including limited childcare options, financial instability, and lack of institutional support. The convergence of these barriers reveals that the challenges of solo parent–students are not merely individual hardships but reflect broader systemic gaps in higher education. Institutions therefore have a responsibility to respond proactively, ensuring that solo parent–students are recognized, supported, and provided equitable opportunities to succeed.

Hence, this study concludes that while solo parent–students demonstrate resilience, determination, and a strong desire to provide a better future for their children, their journey through higher education remains profoundly challenging. Addressing their needs requires intentional, coordinated efforts across academic, administrative, and support systems to create an environment where they can thrive both as learners and as parents

#### V. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that higher education institutions develop targeted and comprehensive support systems that address the unique challenges faced by solo parent–students. First, academic flexibility must be strengthened to accommodate their dual responsibilities. This includes offering alternative learning modalities such as blended, modular, or asynchronous formats, as well as allowing reasonable deadline extensions or excused absences during childcare-related emergencies. Institutions should ensure that faculty members are oriented and trained to adopt sensitive and inclusive practices that recognize the realities of student-parents.

In addition, the availability of childcare support must be expanded, as many solo parent–students struggle to balance coursework with childcare duties. Institutions may consider establishing on-campus childcare facilities, forming partnerships with local providers, or creating family-friendly spaces such as breastfeeding rooms and child-friendly study areas. Financial assistance is another crucial area of need; thus, schools are encouraged to create scholarship programs, emergency cash grants, or flexible work-study arrangements specifically tailored for student-parents, as well as offer financial literacy workshops that equip them with strategies for managing limited resources.

Given the emotional burdens highlighted in this study, institutions should also enhance counseling and mental health services that are responsive to the stress, guilt, and role conflict

commonly experienced by solo parents. Regular support groups and wellness programs may help reduce feelings of isolation while promoting resilience and healthy coping mechanisms. Furthermore, it is important for institutions to cultivate a stigma-free and inclusive campus culture. Awareness campaigns geared toward reducing discrimination and harmful stereotypes, combined with faculty and staff training on sensitivity and inclusivity, can help foster a more welcoming environment for student-parents.

Finally, institutions are encouraged to formalize policies that explicitly support solo parent–students. This may include guidelines on excused absences for childcare emergencies, maternity-related considerations, and academic accommodations. Involving student-parents in institutional planning or student governance may also ensure that their voices are represented in policy development. Through implementing these recommendations, institutions can create a more equitable, supportive, and compassionate educational environment that enables solo parent–students to succeed both academically and personally

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