

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES: SINGLE MOTHERS' RESILIENCE IN PARENTING A CHILD WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

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Abstract

Being a single mother in caring for a child with Intellectual Disability (ID) is a complex challenge that involves emotional, social, and economic aspects. This study aims to understand the resilience of single mothers in facing the challenges of caring for children with ID using a qualitative phenomenological approach. This study involved a single mother participant who has been parenting a child with ID for 26 years. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The results showed that resilience of single mothers is formed through three main aspects: social support, adaptation to economic challenges, and positive coping mechanisms. The findings highlight the importance of resilience as a key factor for single mothers in navigating their complex roles. This research provides practical insights for social service providers and mental health professionals to design interventions that support the well-being of single mothers with Intellectual disability children.

Keywords: *Intellectual disability, Resilience, Single mother.*

INTRODUCTION

Children with Intellectual Disability (ID) experience deficits in intellectual abilities and adaptive functioning that arise during development. Based on the DSM-5-TR, intellectual limitations include difficulties in reasoning, problem solving, planning, and learning from experience which are generally measured by IQ scores of around 65-75. Children with ID often experience barriers in communication, social interaction, and independence in daily activities, requiring ongoing support in various environments, such as home, school, and community. This condition certainly has an impact on families, especially mothers as primary caregivers, who need to face various challenges in supporting their child's development.

As noted by Jess et al. (2018), mothers in this role often have poorer mental health than mothers of typically developing children. The challenge becomes even more complex for mothers who have to perform a dual role due to the loss of a partner, either through divorce or death. These events often cause significant emotional distress, especially for single mothers caring for children with ID. Not only do they experience role changes, they also face the double burden of being the primary caregiver as well as the breadwinner (Levine, 2006). The higher needs of children with ID in terms of attention and developmental support further aggravate this condition.

In addition, single mothers with ID children often face excessive worry about their children's future, feeling burdened by economic responsibilities and more intensive care. Kulsum (2013) states that mothers as primary caregivers feel responsible for their child's development, which increases anxiety about the child's future. These concerns are also exacerbated by the limited time and energy that single mothers have, making them more vulnerable to depression and stress (Bakri et al., 2019).

On the other hand, dealing with these conditions requires high adaptability and resilience, a concept known as resilience. Resilience is defined as a person's ability to face and recover from life's difficulties, and to adapt positively to challenging situations (Masten, 2001). In the context of single mothers, resilience becomes a determining factor in living life with optimism and overcoming obstacles well, including in the care of ID children. Resilience in single mothers is not only formed through external support such as family and community, but also comes from the internal ability to adapt and maintain emotional balance (Cahyani & Rahmasari, 2019). According to Grotberg (2001), resilience consists of three important factors: I Have (external support that helps individuals feel safe), I Am (the self-confidence and self-strength that individuals have), and I Can (the ability to manage stress and

solve problems). These factors help single mothers to remain resilient, despite facing limitations in time, energy and support. Support from family, friends and strong spiritual beliefs can enhance the resilience of single mothers with ID children, providing stability and calmness in the face of daily challenges (Pargament et al., 2000). However, in conditions where external support is limited, single mothers must rely on their internal sources of strength to maintain mental health and emotional balance. This suggests that resilience in single mothers with children with ID requires a synergy between social support and self-adaptation to cope with diverse stressors (Taylor et al., 2004). Therefore, this study aims to identify and understand resilience in single mothers caring for a child with intellectual disability. By highlighting the factors that support single mothers' resilience, it is hoped that this study can provide new insights that are useful to the community and mental health practitioners in designing strategies that support the well being of single mothers.

METHOD

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative phenomenological approach with the participant a single mother with a child with Intellectual disability. This research aims to describe a specific phenomenon experienced by individuals by emphasizing experience, meaning, and understanding related to the phenomena experienced. The criteria for determining participants are: 1) Is a single mother who is the main breadwinner in the family, 2) Has a child diagnosed with Intellectual disability, 3) Has and is caring for a child with Intellectual disability who is an adult.

Participant

The participant in this study is a single mother of a child with Intellectual Disability (ID) who is 26 years old. The participant has experienced two marriages, where the first marriage ended because her husband passed away, while the second marriage ended in divorce. Currently, she is a single mother, fully responsible for the care and development of her child with ID. Participants were selected based on the criteria of compatibility with the research objectives. Before data collection was conducted, the researcher provided an explanation of the research topic, research objectives, and reasons for selecting participants. Participants gave voluntary consent to participate in this study and the data was documented. This data collection was carried out at the participant's home in April 2024.

Instrument

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the help of a mobile phone recorder. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a data collection method because the questions designed were able to encourage participants to provide detailed and rich descriptions of their experiences and provide opportunities to recall these experiences (Howitt, 2019). This process allowed for free sharing of experiences. The main questions asked to describe the life of a single mother with an intellectual disability were: 1) Can you tell me about your journey as a single mother in caring for a child with intellectual disability? 2) What are the challenges faced and how to overcome them?, 3) What makes mothers strong and survives?, 4) What are your hopes for your child in the future?. The results of the interviews were recorded and stored in the form of recordings and verbatim transcripts to explore the meanings expressed by the participants.

Data Analysis

This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a method to explore the deep meaning of the participant's experience, a single mother who cares for a child with Intellectual disability. The IPA approach was chosen because of its ability to capture individuals' subjective meanings of complex and personalized life experiences, which are highly relevant to the context of resilience in facing emotional, social, and economic challenges (Smith et al., 2014). In collecting data for this IPA method, sample sizes tend to be relatively small as in Stainton Rogers & Willig (2017) study which used one participant to discuss meaning formation in women who stopped working after having children. IPA focuses on the individual experience holistically and pays attention to the emotional nuances that may arise in the parenting process, where participants make meaning of social support, financial pressures, and environmental stigma faced. As stated by Howitt (2019), IPA is suitable for understanding phenomena that involve deep personal experiences and require interpretation of the meaning individuals give to their life events. In this study, an interpretation of the experiences and meanings of one single mother who has been raising and caring for a child with Intellectual disability for 26 years was conducted. The analysis process was conducted by identifying the main themes that emerged from the interview transcripts, such as social support, optimism,

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resilience, and coping mechanisms, where each theme reflects the emotional, spiritual, and independence aspects of the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In addition, all names mentioned were also masked.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION (TNR, 12 BOLD)

Through the IPA approach, the researcher explored how participants interpreted and faced complex challenges in carrying out the role of a single mother. In this analysis, the main themes that emerged reflected the participants' emotional, social, and spiritual experiences in shaping their identity and resilience amidst the pressures they faced. Based on the transcript data from the interviews that have been processed and interpreted by the researcher, 3 themes were found, namely: social support, adaptation and economic challenges, positive coping mechanisms.

Table 1. Superordinate Themes and Sub-Themes

| Superordinate Theme I: Social Support | Superordinate Theme II: Adaptation & Economic Challenges | Superordinate Theme III: Positive Coping Mechanisms |
|---|--|---|
| a) Social environment b) Spiritual c) Initiative to seek help | a) Economic sacrifice b) Adaptation | a) Optimism b) Gratitude c) Resilience in the face of criticism |

Social Support

Social support plays an important role in shaping participants' resilience. This support comes from various sources, including the social environment and religious beliefs, as well as active efforts by participants to seek help.

Support from family and social environment became the main foundation for emotional resilience in the participants' life journey. Participants felt that this support provided emotional strength and helped reduce the burden they carried. More than just practical help, this support was felt as a form of recognition for the struggles he was living every day.

"....Saudara yang kadang bantu ngasih ke ani pas lebaran kemaren, ada sepupu juga yang uda kerja tuh ngasih uang. Alhamdulillah bikin ani senang terus ngajak saya ke pasar buat beli barang - barang kebutuhannya mulai dari daleman juga itu neng, hehehe... Tapi ya gitu, kan seusia dia harusnya juga mikirin ibunya ya, tapi kan dia gak bisa jadi ya masih dirinya sendiri yang dipikirin. Ibu tidak apa - apa, cuma ya itu kasihan aja kalau lihat dia tuh."

The support she received not only provided material assistance but also confirmation of her worth. When receiving help from family, the participant felt that they recognized her struggle and identity as a single mother. This feeling of acceptance became important for her emotional stability, creating a sense of calm in the midst of pressure. According to Taylor et al. (2004), social support plays an important role in helping individuals deal with stressful situations, especially in the family context. The support received from family and social environment not only provides practical help but also recognition of the participant's struggle, which is very important for his emotional stability. This finding is also supported by the research of Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010), which states that social support can improve psychological well-being and help individuals to survive in stressful situations. The participant felt that everything she experienced was part of a destiny that had to be accepted. Belief in God's will became the foundation for her resilience, providing a sense of security and confidence that she was never truly alone.

"Ya ani ini yang ibu punya yang bikin ibu terus berjuang, ya mesti kalau malam ibu sering menangis doa sama allah semoga diberikan kekuatan dan kesehatan biar bisa sama - sama anak...."

".. Ya kayak gini kan ga mungkin lepas dari takdir Allah ya neng, jadi ibu nerima aja yakin kalau allah itu pasti bantu ibu. Gabakal dibiarkan sendiri..."

In difficult moments, this spiritual belief created inner peace for the participant. It gave her greater meaning to each of life's challenges, teaching her that every difficulty has a higher purpose. By leaning on these beliefs, she found emotional stability. Pargament et al. (2000) showed that religious beliefs often provide positive meaning and help individuals find inner calm in difficult situations. In this case, the participant's spiritual beliefs not only provided comfort but also strengthened her emotional resilience, helping her to accept life's challenges more sincerely. Despite

having the principle of independence, the participant does not hesitate to ask for help in certain situations, especially for her child's education. For her, asking for help is a proof of love for her child, to ensure a better education.

".....Saya keliling nganter ani kalau sekolah, saya juga minta keringanan biaya ke sekolah yang penting ani bisa sekolah mesti susah banget baca tulisnya tuh....."

Asking for help was seen as a form of adaptation that showed that the participant was not attached to the ego. For her, it was a form of sincerity to meet her child's needs, showing emotional flexibility and strength that went beyond mere independence. Carver et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of initiative in healthy coping mechanisms, where individuals proactively seek solutions to their problems. Participants in this study indicated that actively seeking help was evidence of their dedication to fighting for their children's rights and part of their emotional resilience.

Economic Adaptation and Sacrifice

Economic limitations pose a major challenge in the participant's efforts to provide proper therapy and education for her child. Despite facing financial pressures, she tried various creative ways to fulfill her child's needs, even if it meant postponing some other expenses.

".. Pernah di BPIP Unpad, harusnya mendapatkan beberapa terapi tapi tidak dilanjutkan karena ibu gak ada uang gak bisa terus - terusan bawa dia ke terapis dan psikolog disana.. Ya mau gimana lagi, kan ibu cari uang sendiri jadi ya harus sabar - sabar gitu neng..."

"Saya keliling nganter ani kalau sekolah, saya juga minta keringanan biaya ke sekolah yang penting ani bisa sekolah mesti susah banget baca tulisnya tuh."

For the participant, this economic limitation was not only a matter of material deprivation, but also an opportunity to reflect on her adaptability. The limitations made her more realistic and creative in finding solutions, demonstrating the flexibility that is part of her resilience as a responsible single mother. Research by Masten (2001) suggests that adaptation through sacrifice is a key element of resilience, especially in the context of single parenthood. The participant in this study chose to prioritize the needs of the child, reflecting a strong emotional commitment. These economic sacrifices reinforced her identity as a committed and loving mother in carrying out her role. Participants' efforts to send their children to special schools and take them to school themselves and try to provide therapy at BPIP for their children's recovery. It is very clear the form of effort made by single mothers towards their children starting from handling therapy, healing methods, suitable education, and providing understanding not only to the community but the closest people first for the conditions they experience (Evanurul Marettih & Wahdani, 2017).

The participant showed high independence in living her role. As a single mother, she feels that she must be the foundation for herself and her child. This independence shapes the meaning of sacrifice as an important element of her identity. It is not just an option, but a necessity that becomes a source of strength in the face of obstacles.

"Saya bisa kuat kayak gini ya karena ani, ibu berusaha mendampingi dia. Soalnya kalau bukan Ibu ya siapa lagi tempat bergantungnya ina....."

".....Suami saya yang pertama cerai, kemudian menikah lagi terus yang kedua ini meninggal suami ibu, jadi sekarang fokus aja ibu ke ina... Saya cari uang sendiri, dulu punya toko besar namun karena uangnya gak muter jadi bangkrut. Makanya sekarang jualan gorengan aja, tapi rencananya mau buka warung pecel lele biar bisa nambah penghasilan buat biayai anak - anak....."

".....Bapaknya itu gak ngasih uang ke ina, padahal kalau ngasih 50 ribu aja sebulan ibu uda bersyukur. Makanya saya agak benci gitu ya sama suami yang pertama ini. Makanya saya suka marah kalo ani nelpun tuh, soalnya ya kan gak ada kontribusinya. Selama ini saya berjuang cari nafkah sendiri, ngurusin ngerawat anak sendiri, kemana - mana cari bantuan sendiri... dia mana bantu apapun. Mungkin karena ngerasa bahwa anak kami gak menghasilkan apa gimana gak tau terserah deh"

Despite being a single mother who has a dual role, she is very aware that she cannot depend on anyone, she is basic that she must depend on herself in any case so that she can survive in carrying out her role as a single parent.

"....Kalau bukan Ibu, ya siapa lagi yang akan membantu ani...."

For her, this independence is not just a matter of survival, but also a tangible proof of her love and dedication to her child. The sacrifices she has made have become part of a role she accepts with pride, strengthening her emotional resilience and helping her form a resilient identity as a mother.

Positive Coping Mechanisms

The participant often faced negative responses from neighbors regarding the choices she made for her child's education. Comments that doubted her child's ability made her feel judged, but she remained firm in her belief to provide the best for her child.

"Ini banyak tetangga sama saudara yang bilang ngapain anak kayak gitu disekolahkan.. Yakan saya ibunya ya neng jadi ya suka - suka saya. Kalau bukan ibu yang nyekolahkan ya siapa lagi"

In the midst of criticism, the participant stood her ground, showing that these negative comments became an impetus to defend her child's rights. Through her attitude, she created a new meaning of motherhood that protected her child's rights and potential, regardless of others' judgments. This attitude strengthened her resolve. Bonanno (2004) mentions that constancy in maintaining self-beliefs is an important element in resilience, especially in situations where individuals face pressure or criticism from the surrounding environment. In this study, participants remained firm in their decision to fight for their children's education rights, despite having to face social criticism. This attitude shows that the participant was able to turn social pressure into a positive push, which strengthened her identity as a dedicated mother.

Despite the pressures, the participant showed optimism and hope for her child's future. For her, the ability to continue to hope is one of the ways she survives, even though the situation is often difficult and uncertain. It is undeniable by the participant that being a single mother with a child who has an intellectual disability is not an easy thing and even very difficult for her. On the other hand, she tries to think positively that one day her child will be able to live independently and normally like other children her age.

"Kadang pas saya tidur gitu, saya masih setengah sadar terus dia ngasih selimut gitu neng. Menyelimuti ibu gitu. Hal - hal kayak gini bikin saya sering sedih dan berharap dia bisa mandiri suatu saat nanti...."

This optimism became an emotional anchor for the participant, providing direction in her life amidst the stress. The hope for her child's independence served as a coping mechanism that gave her the mental strength to keep fighting. With this vision, participants found positive meaning that kept their spirits up. The struggle that the participant made against herself both from her status as a single mother and her child who had an intellectual disability did not make her despair and give up, she remained persistent in raising her child well. Participants believe that there will be wisdom behind their destiny as a single mother who has an intellectual disability child. Participants believe that there will be wisdom, a way out and help from God. According to Wini et al. (2020), a positive attitude of optimism can encourage individuals to always believe that everything that happens in their lives is the best. This optimistic attitude is seen in participants who hope that even though their children have limitations, they still want their children to be able to live independently, including being able to take care of themselves. Optimism possessed by single mothers also helps in identifying the problems faced. They tend to be more grateful because they believe that in every difficulty there is always a solution.

"Ada tuh temennya ini, dia malah lebih gabisa apa - apa. Suka tantrum juga, gak kaya ini. Jadi ya saya masih bersyukur bahwa bahwa ani itu masih bisa kalo dikasih tahu di nasehati. Cuma ya kadang itu, kalo lagi ngambek udah gak bisa dikasih tau."

Emmons & Mishra (2011) found that gratitude strengthens inner calm, increases happiness, and lowers stress levels. For participants, gratitude for the fact that their children could still be given education and love created feelings of contentment and calm, which strengthened their emotional resilience. This gratitude helped her assess her life from a broader perspective, allowing her to see the positive side of the challenges she faced. This acceptance gives her the space to feel sincere in living her role, which strengthens her mental resilience.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis in this study, it can be concluded that the resilience of a single mother in parenting a child with Intellectual disability is a complex process and involves various emotional, social, and spiritual aspects. Through the IPA approach, three main superordinate themes were found that describe participants' resilience, namely social support, adaptation and economic challenges, and positive coping mechanisms. Each of

these themes is broken down into several sub-themes that complement each other in shaping participants' identity and strength in living their role as single mothers. Support from the social environment and spiritual beliefs provide a strong emotional foundation, making participants feel accepted and empowered in facing challenges. Second, financial limitations faced with sacrifice and adaptation strengthened her identity as a loving and independent mother. Third, optimism, gratitude, and resilience in the face of social criticism helped her maintain emotional balance. Overall, the results of this study show that the resilience of single mothers is not only determined by external factors such as social support and economic conditions, but also by internal factors such as spiritual beliefs, optimism, and coping mechanisms used in facing life challenges. Thus, wider support is needed, both from the social environment and policies that support the welfare of single mothers so that they can continue to develop and provide the best for their children. The findings are expected to serve as a reference for understanding and supporting the emotional needs of single mothers in similar conditions. Given that this research was only conducted on one participant, a study with a larger number of participants would enrich the data. In addition, criteria related to the reasons for being a single mother need to be explored in future studies to understand the resilience of single mothers with Intellectual disability children more deeply.

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