

THOUGHT, ATTITUDE AND ACTION: The Struggle of a Single Mother Raising the Children in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this narrative study is to explore how a mother as a single parent copes with the challenges of raising children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. Applications such as Zoom, WhatsApp video call and text were agreed with the participant to be used in the interview process as it was conducted during the pandemic. Thematic analysis was used to examine the participant's narratives about her struggle in raising children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview data were read several times thoroughly before it was lexically coded; phrases and sentences were coded using different colours. Based on the thematic analysis procedure, the coded data were classified into several themes and interpreted discursively. Data analysis shows that the participant faced various challenges such as time management, difficulty focusing on work, concerns about children's education, and financial needs. Therefore, it can be inferred that physical, mental, and spiritual strength has a crucial role in determining how parents think, manage, and face the challenges of raising children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *struggle, single mothers, children, COVID-19 pandemic*

INTRODUCTION

A single parent consists of only a father or mother, who is responsible as the main caregiver in the upbringing of the children (Ubah, 2012). It has been a global phenomenon (Sylvester & Bojuwoye, 2011) and has become the accepted norm in all countries. Single parenting is done by more women than men (Modise, A. M., 2015). In Indonesia, for example, 24% of single parents are by mothers and only 4% are fathers (Nuraini, Wahyuni, Windiarso, Oktavia, & Karyono Y, 2015). This clearly indicates that the number of mothers as single parents in Indonesia is much higher than that of fathers.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and spread globally, it affected people of all levels, including parents or single parents. Single parents, in many parts of the world, experience a new stressor that threatens their health, security, and economic well-being (Brown, Lechuga-Peña, Watamura, & Koppels, 2020) due to the pandemic. A survey conducted in America shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased childcare

responsibilities and other domestic accountabilities among mothers and fathers (Miller, 2020). Survey also reveals that mothers have greater responsibilities compared to fathers because they, for instance, should accompany children to study online at home. On the other hand, the responsibility of a single father in raising children is probably not as bigger as a single mother as a father devotes his time mostly to work and asks for help from family members to do domestic tasks, one of which includes taking care of the children (Lee dan Hofferth, 2017). Therefore, the pandemic has brought changes in the accountabilities of particularly single mothers in raising children.

A study on the changes in the responsibility of mothers as single parents during the pandemic discloses that mothers are imposed to reduce working hours, and some even leave the labour market due to the closure of schools and child-care centres during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shafer, Schilling, & Milky, 2020). The increased responsibility of single mothers both towards family and work during the pandemic instigates stress, fatigue, and guilt because of the inability to differentiate between the workplace and home (Hertz, Mattes, & Shook, 2020). Moreover, child upbringing and home-schooling have been included as household chores (Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020). Bahn et al., (2020); Power, (2020) conclude that the disruption caused by the pandemic situation reinforces the recognition of the work of single mothers in the domestic area, such as taking care of the home and children.

Understanding the changes in the responsibility of a single mother towards the family could disclose the unusual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women. Some evidence has shown the impact of the pandemic on the responsibility of single mothers. However, most of the studies are surveys on the changes in workload and factors associated with the changes as well as the impacts on single mothers and are not based on the narrative of experience and challenges of single mothers raising their children during and after COVID-19. The narrative is required to intensely understand the struggle and challenges they face. Thus, this study aims to narrate how a single mother ponders and acts in raising children both during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic. The narrative is expected to provide an overview of the strategy the single mother used in the upbringing of her children before and after the pandemic. In addition, this study is expected to give information to institutions that have the authority to create policies and provide better service to single parents.

It is a truism that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed almost all aspects of human life, starting from the health, economic, social, financial, and educational aspects. Cleland, McKimm, Fuller, Taylor, Janczukowicz and Gibbs (2020) affirm that COVID-19 interrupt various life aspects especially the economy for it has an enormous impact on the workers to be at risk of being laid off. In the educational sector, the pandemic has obliged the government to issue a policy that the teaching and learning process is carried out online. This is opted by the government to diminish the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Blankenberge & Williams, 2020; Murphy, 2020). The online learning policy creates a problem for parents in facilitating and assisting their children to learn. Parents are, implicitly, pushed to be a teacher of their own children. This situation is another level of challenge for parents, even more for single parents. In addition to dealing with time management for work and family, a single parent must also become a teacher for her or his children's online learning process. This complexity of problems faced by single parents, especially mothers, underlies this research.

The complexity of problems faced by single parents exists long before the COVID-19 pandemic hits. Single parents are susceptible to stress and guilt as they cannot always be there when their children need them or if they cannot fulfil their children's necessities or wants (Modise, 2015). Collings, Jenkin, Carter, and Signal, (2014) discover the economic situation is one of the major factors affecting the deterioration of single mothers' mental health. This is consolidated by Musick, Flood, and Dunifor (2016) stating that single mothers tend to experience higher levels of desolation, stress, and fatigue in contrast to those having a spouse due to financial constraints. Housewives must work, raise children, and fulfil family needs. As a mother who is also a 'father', a single mother is required to manage finance, work, and children's upbringing (Indrayanti, Jenny Ratna Suminar, Siswandi, and Sentianti, 2017). Single mothers are believed to experience more pressure due to demotion, layoffs, accidents, critical diseases, and relationships with their own parents (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds & Froehner (2014), children upbringing, and financial and mental health crises (Choi, S., Byoun, S.-J., & Kim, E. H, 2020; Hertz, Mattes, & Shook, 2020).

Single parents have become a global issue. It becomes a critical issue in many parts of the world, including Indonesia. Countless studies have been carried out to reveal single parents' experiences, one of which is narrative, a study that emphasizes the chronological dimension. Clandinin and Caine (2012) state that narrative research scrutinizes the

contextual phenomena of participants in particular, and their relation to time, situation, and social interaction from the participant's point of view. In this study, the narrative approach used refers to the thematic analysis (Widodo, 2104).

METHODS

This study was conducted in one of the 'red zones' areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. It aimed to examine the experience and challenges faced by a single mother in raising children during and post-pandemic through a narrative approach. It was carried out from early June to mid-August 2022. A narrative is an approach that focuses on the participants' social interaction over time in various locations (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The sociocultural context and dimensions of space and time affecting the complex and dynamic discourse of participant experiences are the emphasis of the narrative approach according to Craig, Zou and Poimbeauf (2014).

The participant is a 38-year-old single mother with four children (who are still in school) and has been divorced from her husband since 2016. The participant is a friend of one of the researchers, thus having an emotional connection with one of the research team. That is why she was selected as the participant in the first place. In addition, the participant was willing to share stories about her life experiences with the researchers. The third reason is the exceptionality of the participant. She is a single mother with low educational background and works in two different places a day to meet the needs of her family.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview that allow the researchers to extend or improve the questions asked. Confidentiality, anonymity, and emotional comfort were guaranteed so that the participant can construct the experience thoroughly. To ensure safety and health during the pandemic, the researcher used applications such as Zoom, WhatsApp video and text for the interview process. Harvey (2015) asserts that the participant's emotions can be observed through the use of technology in the interview process. The researchers provide internet quota and a cellphone that can be used by the participant during the research process.

The interview was completed three times. The decision to part with her husband, and the challenges faced adapting to the family, workplace, and society once her status changes to a single mother were explored during the interview sessions. The focus of the interviews was to profoundly scrutinize the condition of the participant during and post-pandemic in raising children. The in-depth interviews disclose how the participant thinks,

behaves and plans for the future. Data that have been saved in the form of recording or text were then reviewed to identify the information highlighted by the participant. Open-ended questions were also probed to investigate the participant's experience facing the pandemic situation.

Narrative analysis is a research method that can be used to discover the meaning of a dynamic story that contains values (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) and was used for the research. The discourse of the participant's story is inseparable from its context, location, and time (Fridani Lara, Elfiah Ulfa, Ali Aschawir, 2020). In the context of this study, the participant's narrative was analysed thematically using thematic analysis (Widodo, 2014). Data were initially organized into written data to look for lexis or words that present important information. Using different colour codes, a thorough reading of data and coding of lexis, phrases and sentences were carried out. To link and summarize the data, the coded data were grouped into several themes based on the thematic content analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were then interpreted in a discursive interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The study found four themes related to the challenges and attempts that have been done by the participant in raising children during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges are (1) financial; (2) time management; (3) assistance provided to children in studying online; and (4) children's negative behaviour.

Financial

The social restriction policy issued by the Indonesian government to prevent the spread of Coronavirus has influenced various aspects of life at every level of society. Small traders were found to lose buyers or customers. As a food trader, the participant also lost customers as expressed in the interview:

Before the pandemic, I usually sell rice cake (lontong) in the morning. I could sell 2 – 3 kg of lontong in a day. In the afternoon, I usually sell side dishes. Many customers usually come even before I open the store. But since the pandemic, let alone 3 kg, 1 kg has often not been sold out. Likewise, only a few people come to buy the side dishes and many of the dishes are then eaten by the children. I don't know what to do. It is very difficult to make ends meet, even after the social policy restriction has been revoked, it is still difficult to regain customers (HS, Zoom interview, 2 June 2022).

The loss of the participant's customers significantly affects the income she earns every day. Consequently, this situation influences the participant's ability to fulfil the family's needs, including the children's school needs. Likewise, it is challenging for her to purchase the basic ingredients of the food (rice cake and side dishes) she sells such as rice, chilli, coconut, gas, and others.

Since my husband left me and the children without any financial help, we survive on the food I sell every day. When I cook the food to sell, my children and I also have the food for our meals. So, it is an advantage for us. Though the profit from selling food is not huge, I could still meet daily necessities such as paying for electricity, gas, security fee, condolence money, accomplishing my children's school needs, and sometimes, I could save the money for my own. But now, it is difficult to meet the daily needs of the family with my children. When the school was closed and the learning should be done online, all my children spent time at home and this situation increases the cost of eating and electricity. It is worsened by the increase in the basic commodities cost. I have no idea how to meet the children's needs, especially for their education. One thing that I am grateful for, though, is that we live in our own house. If we do not own this house and must rent and pay for it, it could drive me crazy just to think about it. (HS, Zoom interview, 2 June 2022).

We did get financial help and commodities help from the government during the pandemic, but it was not enough because I have four children, and all of them are in their infancy. However, I was grateful for the government's support. Also, the internet credit given by the school was not adequate. Although it is not handed out regularly, my friends and relatives do sometimes give me financial help or food (HS, Zoom interview, 2 June 2022).

Despite her desperation in confronting challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the participant feels a little relieved that there was some assistance from the government, relatives, and friends. The support is probably not substantial, but it nonetheless can entertain the participant. The internet credit received by the children from school can save the children's online learning costs. The support from the government, family, and friends is fuel for the participant to keep enthusiastic to survive during the pandemic. Jayatlika and Rana (2020) found that intrinsic motivation affects individuals in survival.

Time Management

According to the participant, the biggest challenge she had to face was when she decided to work as a part-time housemaid, which she does after closing the food stall in the morning. She has been working this way up until now. The pandemic leaves her no choice but to work two jobs a day for her children. The participant' description can be seen as follow:

Since I started working as a part-time housemaid at a neighbour's house, I feel like I cannot manage my time. It feels like the day passes so fast for me. Actually, I do not want to be a housemaid, yet I have no choice. The benefit I get from selling food is inadequate to support our life even though the situation is normal with no social restrictions now. There are only a few buyers (HS, Zoom interview, 2 June 2022).

Now, I spend all day making a living with the minimum result. I wake up at 4 in the morning to prepare the food that I will sell two hours later. Sometimes, I fall asleep while waiting for the customers. At 11 in the morning, I close the stall and cook some meals for the children. Then, I work as a housemaid and come back home at 6 in the afternoon, or sometimes at 8 if there is extra work. When I arrive home, I feel exhausted and fall asleep. I have no more time to take care of the children or the household. In fact, I often fall asleep when my youngest child asks me to help with the homework (HS, Zoom interview, 2 June 2022).

The pandemic has completely changed my schedule and activities. I have no more time to pray maghrib in a congregation at the mosque, no more time for "yasinan" and social gatherings or watch soap operas on TV, and even to take care of the flowers I have cared for so far, I have no time. Working as a maid oftentimes gives me pain and headache (HS, Zoom interview, 8 June 2022).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the participant could manage the time to work, take care of the house and educate the children at home. Moreover, the participant still has the time to socialize through an activity called "yasinan" once a week, and the social gathering that is held once a month. In the evening, the participant sometimes still has the time for entertainment such as watching soap operas and she feels like having a work-life

balance even without a husband. The participant's contentment began to disappear during the pandemic because she cannot socialize with her friends and neighbours. A study conducted by Candra (2012) found that in comparison to men, Asian women consider the imbalance between work and other activities in life as a major problem. The finding is supported by another study by Sullivan (2015) stating that physically and psychologically healthy individuals are the ones who have a work-life balance. Consistent with the participant's declaration, the social and religious activities she has participated in can reduce the burden and desolation as a single mother with four children. The activity of praying in concert in the mosque helps her to feel peaceful and meeting friends and neighbours during the social gathering gives her enjoyment. Moreover, taking care of her favourite flowers can help her to forget the struggle she has been dealing with, even for a while.

Assistance Provided to Children in Studying Online

Helping children when studying online is another level of challenge for the participant. Online learning is a new thing that she never imagined would happen to her children. There are two key issues of online learning policy that concern the participant. They are providing online learning facilities and the means to assist children to learn online. Both problems are detailed by the participant in the following excerpt:

The initial implementation of the study-from-home policy shocked me so much that it was difficult for me to sleep. I have four children and I only have one phone. So, they often have conflicts fighting over the phone which will be used for studying online. For that reason, I used my saving that is intended for emergencies to buy a used phone for my children, so they do not argue anymore. I made a deal with the children by asking them to use a cell phone for two and take turns. I promised to buy them a cell phone each if I have the money. Yet, once the problem with the cellphone was done, another problem regarding internet credit emerged. The government had not yet provided free internet data for school children at that time. To solve the problem, I tried to save on food expenses and strictly control the use of electricity to buy internet data for the children. Thank God, the government has revoked the online learning policy and now the children study at school (HS, Zoom interview, 8 June 2022).

Assisting children to study online at home, especially one who is in primary school, takes up a lot of my time and thoughts. I felt overwhelmed. I do not understand the tasks given by the teachers and they always give many homework every week. My children always cry and get angry if I cannot help them. I ask her to study with her sister or brother, but she rejects it because she said that they are grumpy. So, I go to a neighbour's house whose child is also in primary school to ask for help with the material and tasks given by the teacher. I often feel sad and cry to be in this situation. I am afraid that my children's grades will not be good enough, and I also feel like I am useless to them. Let alone meeting their learning facilities, even assisting them in learning, I am not capable to do it well (HS, Zoom interview, 14 June 2022).

An online learning policy was issued to prevent the spread of Coronavirus. From a psychological perspective, the policy creates negative emotions both in parents and children (Spinelli et al. 2020). As conveyed by the participant, her children get annoyed if she cannot assist them to study online, and the participant was overwhelmed by the additional assistance she must do. Women have more workload compared to men in terms of parenting both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Amin, 2020; Ehsan, S. M. A, and Jahan, F, 2021). In another view, the online learning policy encourages gaps in access to education in society. This is caused by the limitation of facilities owned by students. Students from the low-income group will find it difficult to access the learning material due to the absence of facilities such as computers, laptops, or tablets. In contrast, those from the upper-middle class are much easier to access online learning material owing to the facilities they possess (Garcia et. al., 2020).

Children's Negative Behaviour.

The last problem faced by the participant during the pandemic is associated with children's negative behaviour particularly peaks during the implementation of the study-from-home policy. These negative behaviours include coming home late at night, getting irritable, slamming the door, and spending too much time watching TV instead of studying. These negative behaviours were expressed by the participant as follows:

At the beginning of the pandemic, I did not find any change in my kids' behaviour. However, after the online learning process run for a quite long time, my children's attitude

began to change. My older son would leave the house if he could not use the phone because of his younger brother using it and would come back home late at night. This worried me a lot. I am worried that he would get infected by the coronavirus, or that he might do harmful actions with his friends to vent his annoyance. I was confused because I am not sure what to do for my kid (HS, Zoom interview, 20 July 2022).

My second child has a different attitude. She gets so irritated and slams the door if she cannot understand what she has learned online. She would nag about her teacher whom she said was only capable of asking students to do many tasks. She was also annoyed by the expression uttered by the teachers when she was not able to do what the teacher has assigned. She also frequently sleeps very late at night. If I try to give advice, she will answer it curtly that there are many school assignments to finish. Luckily, my third and fourth children are not acting up. Yet, I rarely accompany them to study since they were kids, so now they spend more time watching TV (HS, Zoom interview, 20 July 2022).

The result of the interview above elucidates how the online learning policy during the COVID-19 pandemic has changed children's behaviour towards negative behaviour and this worries the participant. The policy imposes children to study at home and it runs for months, thus completely changing the learning circumstance. Consequently, children develop depression and fatigue, and this increases their stress levels (Roy et al., 2020). The situation is exacerbated by verbal abuse from the teachers as the teaching and learning process differs from the typical face-to-face procedure. That is why children generally feel oppressed and **tend** to show negative emotions and behaviour. In this situation, parents are usually the first to be concerned about the change in the children's attitude because parents are oftentimes perceived as the ones mostly responsible to instill good deeds in children. Only the anxiety level of a mother is generally much higher than that of a father. Women are inclined to put emotion first, so they seem excessive in responding to problems, including the ones elicited during the pandemic (Umamaheswari, J. and Tan, C, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to narrate the thoughts, attitudes, and acts of a single mother with four children in coping with the challenges of raising children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The single mother's thinking, attitude, and actions are manifested in

the adaptation strategy used in the public and domestic spheres. The participant works as a seller of food in the morning and a part-time housemaid in the afternoon. Working on two different jobs a day is done to meet daily needs including children's education costs. The participant also acts as a teacher because she must assist her children in studying online at home despite her ignorance and unfamiliarity with ways to assist children in learning at home. This study provides empirical evidence of how demanding it is for a single mother from the lower class of society to survive during the pandemic. The main obstacles are finance and childcare. Hence, single mothers necessitate financial assistance and parenting support and advice. This research is expected to provide data and information for the authority in creating a gender justice policy. Assistance given to society must have the principle of justice and cannot generalize between single parents and those having a spouse. In addition, the government through relevant authorities or agencies should fulfil children's online learning facilities and issue a guidebook about online learning assistance for parents.

However, this study cannot be generalized for all single parents due to the limited cost and time of the research. It was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pekanbaru, Riau – Indonesia with a single participant; a single mother who was willing to share her experience of the children's upbringing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The dynamic of emotional changes has not also been profoundly revealed because data were merely collected through interviews conducted three times using applications such as Zoom and WhatsApp. Thus, social interaction was very limited. Further research needs to involve male single parents in not only examining the psychological aspects but also the physical and spiritual aspects with disclosure carried out in depth.

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