

The Challenges and Resilience of Single Parents in Raising Children

Mujhirul Iman¹, Topan Iskandar²

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia,

²Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Nurul Ilmi Tanjungbalai, North Sumatra, Indonesia

Corresponding author e-mail: mujhirul1986@gmail.com

Article History: Received on 1 July 2025, Revised on 20 August 2025,

Published on 2 September 2025

Abstract: The purpose of the research is to explore the challenges, parenting strategies, and forms of family resilience in facing structural limitations and social stigma. The approach used is qualitative with a case study design, involving 15 single parents (mothers and fathers) selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were obtained through observation, in-depth interviews, and document studies, then analyzed using reflective thematic analysis with a family resilience framework. Validity is maintained through triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Finding shows that single parents face economic constraints, social stigma, and the burden of dual roles, yet they still build family resilience through consistent affection, simple routines, and instilling values of independence. Support from extended family, religious communities, and informal social networks are important factors, although access varies across ethnicities and environments. These findings emphasize that family resilience relies not only on individuals but also on collective resources and local cultural values.

Keywords: Family Resilience, Parenting Challenges, Single Parent

A. Introduction

The family plays a central role in shaping the personality, psychological development, and well-being of the child (Rees, Beeber, Sampson, & Lietz, 2023). In this unit, parents are expected to work together to fulfill emotional, financial, and educational responsibilities (Basudewa, Lesmana, Mahardika, Arief, & Kenwa, 2025). However, social and economic pressures, divorce, or the death of a partner often lead to the formation of single-parent families, where one individual must bear the dual role of caregiver and breadwinner (Sartor, Lange, & Tröster, 2022).

In Indonesia, the phenomenon of families with single parents is becoming more apparent as the rates of divorce, labor migration, and the complexities of urban life increase (Parwata & Valentina, 2025). Medan City, as a metropolitan area with high ethnic diversity and socio-economic dynamics, provides a relevant context for studying this phenomenon. Single parents in Medan face layered challenges: on one hand, they are required to meet the family's economic needs, while on the other

hand, they must still fulfill roles in parenting, education, and character building for their children. Moreover, the rich socio-cultural context of Medan, which is filled with collectivism yet still looks down on single-parent status, adds psychological pressure in the form of stigma and social discrimination.

Research in family psychology has extensively documented the challenges faced by single parents, including financial strain, role overload, and social isolation, and how these factors can negatively impact children's emotional development, behavior, and academic achievement (McCrossin & Lach, 2023). However, the existing literature often remains generalized, frequently overlooking the critical influence of unique social and cultural contexts. A significant gap exists in the exploration of how multi-ethnic norms, community support systems, and parental resilience interact to shape the experiences of single parents in specific settings, such as urban Indonesia.

A recent study in Indonesia by (Nuraeni, 2025) observes that while research has heavily emphasized individual coping strategies among single mothers, the social-ecological aspects of their resilience remain underexplored. The study argues that resilience is not merely an individual trait but is cultivated through interactions with extended family, community networks, and cultural norms. In urban centers like Medan, factors such as familial ties, social solidarity, and cultural stigma are pivotal, either bolstering or impeding a single parent's capacity to fulfill their role. This identified gap underscores the critical need for research that contextualizes single parents within their complex social, economic, and cultural ecosystems.

This research aims to fill this gap through a case study approach that highlights the experiences of single parents in Medan. The novelty of this research is evident from several aspects that are integrated into the research design. First, by placing the research in a multi-ethnic urban context, this study highlights how cultural norms and community dynamics influence the challenges and coping strategies of single parents. Second, this research uses a family resilience framework that not only looks at individual aspects but also at extended family support, community involvement, and access to social policies as an analytical lens. Third, this research emphasizes daily parenting practices as a form of resilience in situations of structural and cultural constraints, providing insights that go beyond the dominant focus on psychological and economic burdens.

Practically, the findings of this research are expected to provide input for local policies, particularly in designing psychosocial, economic, and educational support systems that are in line with the realities of single parents in Medan. Thus, this research not only enriches the academic literature on single-parent families and family resilience in urban Indonesia, but also presents a new perspective on how single parents are able to survive, adapt, and continue to perform their caregiving roles optimally amidst complex structural and cultural challenges.

B. Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is capable of exploring subjective experiences, meanings, and the dynamics experienced by participants in depth (Creswell, 2020). The case study design was selected because the research focuses on intensively examining the phenomenon of single parenthood in a specific context, namely the City of Medan, while taking into account the accompanying social, cultural, and economic factors.

The research was conducted in Medan City, North Sumatra, known as a multi-ethnic city with unique socio-cultural complexities. The research participants are single parents (either mothers or fathers) who have been raising children for at least one year. Participant selection was carried out using purposive sampling, considering specific criteria such as status as a single parent, having school-aged children, residing in Medan, and willingness to participate voluntarily. To broaden the reach, snowball sampling techniques were used with the help of recommendations from local communities and social workers. The final number of participants who reached data saturation was $N = 15$. A demographic overview of participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation	Number/Age of Children
P1 (Mrs. M)	42	Female	Batak	Trader	2 (age not specified)
P2 (Mr. R)	39	Male	Javanese	Daily Laborer	1 (age not specified)
P3 (Mrs. S)	35	Female	Minangkabau	Honorary Teacher	1 (age not specified)

Data were collected through three main techniques. Participant observation, particularly of the daily interactions between parents and children, was used to capture real dynamics in the field. Semi-structured in-depth interviews explored challenges faced, parenting strategies, and forms of resilience. Document studies, such as school records or family documents, were used to reinforce and validate the data from the interviews.

The data were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis following (Braun & Clarke, 2019), through the stages of: (1) repeatedly reading the interview transcripts; (2) conducting open coding on the meaningful units related to challenges and resilience; (3) grouping codes into thematic categories (axial coding); and (4) formulating main themes that explain the dynamics of resilience in single parenting. This process was then interpreted in the light of the family resilience framework, particularly the domains of belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication/problem-solving. The framework guided the interpretation of how resilience processes operate within single-parent households.

The validity of the data was maintained through source and technique triangulation, namely comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was conducted by asking participants to review summaries of the interview results, while peer debriefing was undertaken by engaging in discussions with colleagues to reduce subjective bias (Moleong, 2000) ethical considerations were strictly observed. These included obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality of personal data, and respecting participants' rights. Each participant was given the freedom to withdraw at any time, and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

C. Results and Discussion

Multicultural Local Context in the Dynamics of Single Parent Raising

The results of the observations in the city of Medan indicate that ethnic diversity provides both support and challenges for single parents. Support is seen in the values of kinship and mutual assistance that are still upheld by some communities. However, the social stigma attached to the status of being a widow or widower creates psychological pressure for both parents and children. Additionally, single parents must adapt to cultural values related to gender roles in parenting. Although there is support from social and religious institutions, many still rely on informal networks. Thus, the experiences of single parents in Medan are very complex, influenced by the interplay of cultural, social, economic, and religious factors. To strengthen the findings of the observations, the researcher also presents the following interview results. Interview with Mother M (42 years old, single parent, Batak ethnicity, works as a trader): *"Since my husband left me, my extended family has been very helpful, especially my parents and siblings. They help take care of the children when I need to trade. In Batak culture, family is still considered important, so I don't feel completely alone. But sometimes there are also negative remarks from neighbors saying that I have failed at my household. That is indeed painful, but I focus more on my children."* Interview with Mr. R (39 years old, single parent, Javanese ethnicity, daily laborer): *"As a single father, my challenges are mostly related to providing emotional support for my child. People often assume that men are not good at taking care of children, so sometimes I am underestimated. But I keep trying. Fortunately, neighbors often help, for instance by babysitting when I work. Nevertheless, I still feel the burden because not everyone can accept my position as a widower."* Interview with Mrs. S (35 years old, single parent, Minangkabau ethnic, honorary teacher): *"In my environment, there is a kind of stigma against widows. Sometimes people like to associate my status with negative things, even though I just want to focus on raising my children. Fortunately, there is a study group at the mosque that often provides support, both moral and material. From there, I feel a strength to remain resilient. I have learned that the community can be a shelter, even though not everyone provides the same acceptance."*

Daily Parenting as the Actualization of Resilience in Situations Full of Limitations

Based on field observations, it appears that the daily parenting patterns of single parents in Medan City occur under considerable limitations, yet they continue to demonstrate strong resilience. In terms of meeting basic needs, single parents work hard to ensure their children receive adequate food, access to education, and attention to health. These efforts are often made by taking on extra jobs or reducing personal needs for the benefit of their children. Emotionally, single parents strive to create a warm home environment, even though their time is limited due to work demands. Simple activities such as accompanying children while studying, eating together, or chatting before bed serve as consistent forms of attention to maintain closeness with their children. This indicates that affection is made the foundation of family resilience.

In addition, parenting patterns are also directed to instill values of independence and discipline. Children are encouraged to help with household chores, manage their own study schedules, and learn to manage their pocket money. Thus, the limitations experienced actually provide room for instilling responsibility from an early age. Other findings indicate that social support plays a crucial role in daily parenting. Extended family, neighbors, and religious communities often provide assistance, whether in the form of moral, financial, or practical support such as babysitting while parents work. However, the level of dependence on this support varies, depending on the socio-cultural conditions and networks of each family. To reinforce the findings of the observation, the researcher also presents the following interview results. Interview with Mrs. H (38 years old, single parent, Mandailing ethnicity, works as a vegetable trader in the market): *"Every day I leave for the market since dawn, so the children spend more time with their grandmother until I get home in the evening. Nevertheless, I always try to spare some time at night to accompany them while they study. I know they need attention, so even though I'm tired, I still make time to chat before bedtime. For me, the important thing is that the children feel they are not alone. Although it's tough, I believe that I can still give them love."* Interview with Mr. A (42 years old, single parent, Javanese ethnicity, works as a public transport driver): *"As a single father, I am often considered less capable of taking care of children, especially regarding affection. In fact, I strive to accompany them as much as possible. I teach my children to be independent, to manage their study schedules, and to help with household chores. When it comes to finances, it's tight, but I teach them to be frugal and responsible. Sometimes, neighbors help out, for example, by watching the kids while I still drive the minibus until night."* Interview with Mrs. R (35 years old, single parent, Minang ethnic, working as an honorary teacher): *"Since being on my own, I have felt a lot of stigma, especially from my surroundings. There are always comments that associate widowhood with negative things. But I try not to be affected, because my focus is on raising my child. Fortunately, I receive support from the study group at the mosque, both morally and materially. From there,*

I feel stronger, as if I have a new family that always reminds me to remain patient and sincere."

Discussion

Dual Role of Multicultural Context

The multi-ethnic context in the city of Medan adds a complex hue to the dynamics of single parent upbringing. Observational results and interviews show that the social life of single parents in a large city with ethnic diversity such as Batak, Javanese, Minangkabau, Karo, Mandailing, Malay, Chinese, to Indian cannot be separated from the influence of cultural norms, family values, and the social stigma attached.

Social support has become one of the prominent findings. In the Batak community, the *dalihan na tolu* kinship system has been proven to function as a collective mechanism that supports the continuity of caregiving, especially when single mothers have to work to earn a living. This is consistent with research (Salleh & Tang, 2022) which shows that the value of collectivism in Batak society strengthens the solidarity of the extended family as a social support network. Similarly, in Minangkabau society, the values of mutual assistance and religious community networks such as study groups serve as a platform for moral and material support for single parents. These results reinforce the findings (Janvier, et al., 2022) that practices of religious communities can be an important coping strategy for single parents in dealing with psychosocial pressures.

Social stigma remains a significant challenge. An interview with Mrs. S shows that the status of being a widow is often associated with negative stereotypes in society. This is consistent with research (Satriawati, Rokhman, Saputra, Anggraini, & Abou-Samra, 2023) which found that single mothers in Indonesia often face symbolic discrimination that affects their self-esteem and psychological well-being. In fact, as shown by (Dwinandita, 2024), Stigma against widowers also arises, although it is less frequently discussed, with the assumption that men are not capable of providing emotional care. This phenomenon is evident in Mr. R's experiences, who is belittled by his surroundings, even though he is making a great effort to fulfill the emotional role for his child.

Interesting findings also emerged from the aspect of cultural adaptation. In communities that emphasize the father's role as a central figure, such as in some Batak and Mandailing traditions, a single mother is required to seek a replacement figure through a grandfather, uncle, or customary leader. Meanwhile, single fathers face limitations from cultural constructs that restrict male expressions of affection, making it difficult for them to establish emotional closeness with their children. This situation supports the research findings (Cheatham & Fernando, 2022) which

explains that single parenting in Indonesia is shaped not only by economic factors, but also by prevailing cultural and gender values.

Access to community and social institutions in the city of Medan provides opportunities for single parents to gain participation space. This support usually comes from religious organizations, study groups, or ethnic-based social communities. However, as emphasized in the research (Leonard & Kelly, 2022), The distribution of that support has not been equitable, and most single parents still rely on informal networks such as extended family or close neighbors. This finding is relevant to Mrs. M's statement that she feels very supported by her parents and siblings in taking care of her child when she has to sell goods.

Thus, the dynamics of single parenthood in Medan can be understood as a layered experience influenced by social support, cultural stigma, gender constructs, and community networks. A multi-ethnic city like Medan presents two contradictory sides: on one hand, it strengthens resilience through socio-cultural solidarity, but on the other hand, it increases vulnerability through stigma and normative demands. This reinforces the view (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) about the developmental ecological theory, that micro contexts (family, neighbors) to macro (culture, norms) simultaneously influence the experiences of single parent upbringing.

Daily Practice of Resilience

Research findings indicate that the daily parenting of single parents in Medan occurs in situations of significant limitations, yet still presents forms of family resilience. In terms of meeting basic needs, single parents work hard to provide food, education, and health for their children. Strategies such as taking additional jobs and reducing personal needs align with the findings (Sartor, Lange, & Tröster, 2022), which states that single parents in urban areas often prioritize personal sacrifice to ensure their children's well-being.

In addition to the material aspect, the emotional dimension also becomes a main focus. Interviews with Mrs. H and Mr. A show how they continue to make time to accompany their children despite having limited time due to work. This supports the research from (Kalalo & Tony, 2024) which emphasizes the importance of emotional warmth in single-parent families to minimize psychological impacts on children. Simple activities such as eating together or talking before bedtime hold significant value in strengthening affective bonds.

Other findings indicate that the values of independence and discipline are also instilled from an early age. Children are encouraged to help with household chores, manage their study schedules, and handle their pocket money. This condition aligns with the research (Chairunisa, Rachmawati, & Rahmah, 2024) which found that economic limitations in single parent families can actually encourage children to

develop a sense of responsibility and independence faster than children from intact families.

However, it cannot be denied that social support plays an important role. From the interview with Mrs. R, it appears that religious communities such as study groups can serve as a source of moral and material strength. This finding supports the research (Zhang, et al., 2022) which states that social networks such as extended family, neighbors, and religious communities function as social capital that strengthens family resilience. Thus, social support serves as a 'second pillar' for single parents facing stigma and limitations.

Social stigma also arises as a major challenge, especially for single mothers. Mother's R statements regarding the negative stereotypes of society towards widows align with the findings (Zhao & Fu, 2022) which shows that single mothers are often regarded as failures in household matters and must struggle harder to gain social acceptance. However, the coping strategy employed through active involvement in religious communities serves as a means of actualizing emotional and spiritual resilience.

Overall, the results of this research indicate that single parenting in Medan is not just a form of survival, but also an actualization of multidimensional family resilience, encompassing the fulfillment of basic needs, emotional strengthening, character building, and utilization of social networks. This aligns with the concept of the family resilience model which emphasizes that family resilience should not only be viewed from an economic standpoint, but also from the quality of relationships, the values instilled, and the social and cultural support that sustain the continuity of parenting.

D. Conclusions

This study explored the parenting practices of single parents in Medan within the context of economic, social, and emotional limitations. The findings highlight that despite constrained resources, single parents demonstrate resilience through affection, consistency, and reliance on extended family and community support. In answering the research question, the study shows that daily parenting in single-parent households is characterized not merely by material provision but by emotional warmth, meaningful routines, and persistence in overcoming stigma. This resilience ensures children's psychological stability and nurtures their development in challenging circumstances. Theoretically, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of family resilience in multi-ethnic urban settings, particularly by showing how informal social networks and cultural values underpin adaptive parenting practices. Practically, the study suggests the importance of culturally sensitive community-based support programs for single-parent families. Policymakers should design interventions that strengthen neighborhood solidarity,

while social workers need to engage more actively with extended family structures to enhance child well-being. This study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample and focus on Medan limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research could adopt quantitative approaches to measure the prevalence of these experiences or conduct comparative studies in different cultural settings across Indonesia. Overall, this research emphasizes that resilience in single-parent families emerges not only from individual strength but also from collective and cultural resources, offering valuable insights for both theory and practice.

E. Acknowledgement

We thank to all friends who help us in this project.

References

Basudewa, D. G., Lesmana, C. B., Mahardika, I. K., Arief, R. F., & Kenwa, K. W. (2025). On the Marriage of Gelahang and Its Psychological Impact: A Narrative Review. *Paedagogy: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Dan Psikologi*, 5(1), 91-98. <https://doi.org/10.51878/paedagogy.v5i1.4676>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. New Yourk: Harvard University Press.

Chairunisa, N., Rachmawati, I. N., & Rahmah, H. (2024). Nursing Intervention Strategies to Reduce Postpartum Maternal Anxiety Due to Separated Care: A Systematic Review. *Media Penelitian Dan Pengembangan Kesehatan*, 34(2), 250-262. <https://doi.org/10.34011/jmp2k.v34i2.1986>

Cheatham, K. L., & Fernando, D. M. (2022). Family Resilience and Parental Stress in Families of Children with Autism. *The International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC)*, 30(3), 207-218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807211052494>

Creswell, J. (2020). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches (4th edition)*. Thousand Oaks: CA: Publikasi Sage.

Dwinandita, A. (2024). Islamic Child Parenting Practices and Muslim Family Resilience in Southeast Asia: A Systematic Literature Review. *Al-Athfal: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak*, 10(2), 83-105. <https://doi.org/10.14421/al-athfal.2024.102-01>

Janvier, A., Bourque, C. J., Pearce, R., Thivierge, E., Duquette, L.-A., Jaworski, M., Luu, T. M. (2022). Fragility and resilience: parental and family perspectives on

the impacts of extreme prematurity. *The content of ADC Fetal & Neonatal*, 108(6), 89-105. <https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2022-325011>

Kalalo, & Tony, R. (2024). The Role and Function of Single Parents in Special Needs Children to Combat Loneliness. *Jurnal Psikiatri Surabaya*, 13(1), 119-135. <https://doi.org/10.20473/jps.v13is1.62669>

Leonard, M., & Kelly, G. (2022). Constructing the “good” mother: pride and shame in lone mothers’ narratives of motherhood. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 42(9), 852-864. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-06-2021-0151>

McCrossin, J., & Lach, L. (2023). Parent-to-parent support for childhood neurodisability: A qualitative analysis and proposed model of peer support and family resilience. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 49(3), 544-554. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.13069>

Moleong, L. J. (2000). *Qualitative Research Methodology*. Remaja Rosdakarya.

Nuraeni, H. A. (2025). The Implementation of Tawhid Values in the Family: Shaping Individual Character and Enhancing Professional Performance. *TADBIRUNA*, 4(2), 182-195. <https://doi.org/10.51192/jurnalmanajemenpendidikanislam.v4i2.1310>

Parwata, N. P., & Valentina, T. D. (2025). Stages of Building Resilience in Single Mothers After the Death of a Husband: Literature Review. *Innovative: Journal Of Social Science Research*, 5(1), 6264-6282. <https://doi.org/10.31004/innovative.v5i1.18206>

Rees, E., Beeber, S. N., Sampson, R., & Lietz, J. P. (2023). Empowering Single Parents: Navigating Socio-Economic Challenges and Fostering Resilience in Family Well-being. *Law and Economics*, 17(2), 131-150. <https://doi.org/10.35335/laweco.v17i2.5>

Salleh, N. S., & Tang, L. Y. (2022). An Explorative Study of Affiliate Stigma, Resilience, and Quality of Life Among Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare*, 15(1), 2053-2066. <https://doi.org/10.2147/JMDH.S376869>

Sartor, T., Lange, S., & Tröster, H. (2022). Cumulative Stress of Single Mothers - An Exploration of Potential Risk Factors. *The International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC)*, 31(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807221104134>

Satriawati, S., Rokhman, M., Saputra, N., Anggraini, S., & Abou-Samra, R. (2023). The Parenting of Single Parents in Forming Discipline for Ibtidaiyah Madrasah Students. *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education*, 4(3), 401-413. <https://doi.org/10.31538/tijie.v4i3.506>

Zhang, Q., Song, D., Liu, Y., Chang, L., Li, C., & Li, Y. (2022). Sleep quality, caregiver burden, and individual resilience among parents of children with epilepsy. *Epilepsy & Behavior*, 135(1), 108873. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yebeh.2022.108873>

Zhao, M., & Fu, W. (2022). The resilience of parents who have children with autism spectrum disorder in China: a social culture perspective. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 68(2), 207-218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2020.1747761>