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Research Article

Live, Love, and Suffer: The Lived Experiences of Trans Women Parents with Children in Cebu

Hans Bacus, Christine Silvery Herames, Sean Joseph Solibaga, Roque Luis Manuel Villamor, John Stephen Cimafranca, Diana Marie Talens, Sarah Jean Maghanoy, Flordeliza S. Gagani*

Basic Education Department Senior High School University of San Carlos, Cebu City, Philippines

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*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

fsgagani@usc.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

Parenthood entails daunting responsibilities, even more so if parents are of a different gender spectrum such as trans women. Against a rigid heteronormative society, this phenomenological study explored the challenges and the struggles, as well as the coping mechanisms, of the trans-women parents in Metro Cebu, Philippines. Through Husserlian's descriptive phenomenology, five participants were chosen through snowball sampling to share their experiences through in-depth interviews in 2023. Utilizing Colaizzi's method of data analysis, the study revealed seven (7) recurring themes: (1) Financial Instability; (2) Societal Acceptance; (3) Shifting Family Dynamics; (4) Lack of Legal Government Protection; (5) Employment Possibilities; (6) Perseverance; and (7) Communication. These findings provided insights into the lives of trans-women parents in the Philippines and offered recommendations for policies that could help address the issues faced by this sub-group of parents. Moreover, this study served as a contribution to the literature on non-heteronormative families through the lived experiences of trans-women parents in a heteronormative society like the Philippines.

Keywords: *Children, Discrimination, LGBTQIA, Metro Cebu, Phenomenological Study, Transwomen Parents*

Introduction

Along with society's diversity and openness to new concepts and structures comes the steady rise of LGBTQ+ parents, specifically transgender parents. In both the United Kingdom and the United States, between 25% and 49% of the adult transgender population are

believed to be parents (Imrie et al., 2021). There is no doubt that transgender parents are unique, but they are just like any other kind of parents--heterosexuals, adoptive—as "good parenting is good parenting, regardless of gender identity." (Transgender Parents, 2022; Fernandez, 2023).

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Notwithstanding, transgender parents have to deal with the detriments of a rather heterosexist and homophobic society. As parents, their suitability to raise children has been put under constant scrutiny and has even led to many legal and political debates (Gates, 2015). In the United States, for example, misconceptions and prejudices about transgender parents are used as grounds for custody and visitation disputes (Transgender Parents, 2022). The capacity and suitability of transgender parents to raise their children have also been put into question by many social scientists (Gates, 2015).

The little empirical literature that exists on trans parenthood has primarily centered on LGTQIA parents in general (Gates, 2015). As such, explorations on trans women's parenthood have been rather narrow to date, with studies mostly focused on discrimination (Joseph, 2012). Despite the scarcity of evidence, assumptions about the capabilities of trans-women parents in raising their children (Green, 1978; Green, 1998; Freedman et al., 2002) and parent-child relationships (Gates, 2015; Imrie et al., 2020) seem to be widespread.

In this regard, this study aimed to shed light on the unique journey of trans women mothers and how they face a different set of challenges and experiences than heterosexual parents. The study focused on diving deeper into their lived experiences and discovering if there were any differences relating to transgender women (TW) in the context of the Philippine setting, specifically in Metro Cebu in Cebu Province. The study used Phenomenology to examine and contextualize the highlights of their lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms. This is anchored on the ontological philosophical assumption which responds to the question 'what is there that can be known?' or

what is the nature of reality?" (Guba and Lincoln, 1989 in Ahmed, 2008).

Research following this kind of assumptions embraces the idea of multiple realities as seen by the different individual perspectives ("Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design, 2018). Considering this view, the researchers then had assumed that the world they have been exploring is populated with human beings who have their own unique feelings, experiences, and inner thoughts.

Hence, this study described and sought to understand the first-person perspective of trans women with children. This study would benefit students, educators, trans women parents, the LGBTQIA+ community, service providers, and policymakers.

Objectives

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of trans-women parents in Metro Cebu in the year 2023. Specifically, the study aimed to determine the highlights of their lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms.

Methods

Research Design

This study was qualitative and utilized the descriptive phenomenological design by Husserl (1859-1938) (Rabuya et al, 2023 & Dusquesne University, 2022) to understand the lived experiences of trans-women parents with children in Cebu City, Philippines. This study was conducted across Metro Cebu in Cebu Province. Snowball sampling was used to select the five (5) participants required for the study.

Participants of the Study

The participants involved met the following selection criteria: (1) trans women residing in Metro Cebu and (2) trans women with children.

Table 1. Participants of the Study

Participant No.	Code Name	Age	Marital Status	No. of Children
1	Alpha	55	Single	2
2	Bravo	40	Single	1
3	Charlie	43	Single	1
4	Delta	41	Single	2
5	Echo	20	Single	2

Instrument of the Study

This study used an interview schedule as a tool in gathering the data. This tool contained a semi-structured questions were approved by a set of panelist during the research defense. The schedule contained an introduction, a body and a conclusion. Sample questions include highlights of the experiences, challenges, feelings, emotions, and reactions of the participants based on their experiences. Data was recorded as agreed by the participants.

Data Gathering Procedures

First, the researchers secured an approval form from the Research Coordinator, research panelists, and the Principal to start conducting the interviews. This was followed by letting the participants sign an informed consent form. They were informed beforehand that the interviews were recorded so as not to miss anything and to ensure the accuracy of the data. Issues of confidentiality were also tackled and were discussed with the participants. The interview lasted for about an hour to ensure that data saturation was reached.

Data Analysis

After the data were collected from the interviews and questionnaires, they were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method for data analysis (Colaizzi, 1978) was employed to generate the themes of the study that capture the lived experiences and their meaning and essence of the lives of trans women parents with children (Depakakibo et al., n.d.; Rabuya et al, 2023; Amolo et al., 2024). Transcripts were read and the reduction method was applied to obtain the themes. To ensure the full credibility and trustworthiness of the data, the researchers set aside their own biases and views with the method of bracketing, cross-examination, and focus group discussion to triangulate the results using multiple sources (Patton, 1999).

Results

After the data were collected from the interviews and questionnaires, they were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method for data analysis (Colaizzi, 1978). Transcripts were read and re-read and the reduction method was applied to obtain the themes. Table 2 presents the themes of the study.

Table 2. Themes of the Study

No.	Theme
1	"Maybe he looks at his dad differently.": Fluidity in Familial Structures
2	"Society doesn't look at transgender people to be raising children on their own especially if we have kids.": Societal Inclusivity
3	"I'm just looking for more money": Financial Instability
4	"Most of the struggles that I have, are governmental sanction struggles.": Legal Vulnerability
5	"I'm not sure if it's possible to do a normal job.": Scarcity of Employment Opportunities
6	"I looked for an easier way.": Perseverance
7	"Talk to him.": Communication

Theme #1. "Maybe he looks at his dad differently.": Fluidity in Familial Structures

"Of course, maybe it's just a challenge because, of course, because he doesn't have that father figure, maybe he looks at his dad differently."

P3, Transcript 3, Lines 13-15, 04222023

"I let them feel that even with the absence of the real parents, I can be their real dad or real mom because I am here to support and love them."

P4, Transcript 3, Lines 28-29, 05072023

These two interviews, which talked about the influence of gender identity on family dynamics are centered around the two participants, Charlie and Delta. Charlie presented a problem where she expressed concern about her son's reaction to his biological father coming out as a transgender and identifying as a woman. This shares a potential problem when

it comes to raising a child without a proper father figure. On the other hand, Delta openly accepted the situation and cited raising her sibling's children as her own. This means that, while demanding respect as a Parent, she also committed towards a proper upbringing for the children. Both participants have issues with family roles, but still oriented things in a morally just direction, given their gender identity.

The interview unveiled transformational change in family roles and norm-challenges. Pioneering a ceaseless embrace of the authentic selves, individuals were forced to adjust their feelings. Thus, a tremendous amount of patience, compassion, and firm determination to learn about oneself was required. Nonetheless, the force of family love in revitalizing ties was strong enough to outlive the traditional gender structure and create anew due to the mutual acceptance of identity.

For Charlie and Delta, respect was key in their parenting, which was in accordance with existing literature based on parenting. Regardless of gender identity, parenting styles are the most significant determinant of children's overall well-being. In a study, Gates (2015) did not observe any significant differences in family dynamics between straight and trans parents which furthermore reinforce that the quality of upbringing and balance are most important.

The interview validated McGuire's Transfamily Theory (McGuire et al., 2016) as participants described acceptance processes, role redefinitions, and family attempts to reconsider views on gender. Charlie's discussion highlighted attempts at gender redefinition within families, unintentionally challenging established gender norms. The findings supported the theories of the study and aligned with existing literature on trans parenting.

Theme #2. "Society doesn't really look at transgender people to be raising children on their own and especially if we have kids": Societal Inclusivity

"Society doesn't look at transgender people to be raising children on their own especially if we have kids already." P2, Transcript 1, Lines 2-4, 04222023

"I don't know what generation you call yourself now, but your generation now is more of embracing the totality of the diversity of everything. You are more accepting. The fact that there are people who are different and you do not judge people by the way how they live, and how they look. Like it's almost different from my generation."

P2, Transcript 2, Lines 22-26, 04222023

"And I hope that the next generation will be very much of an accepting generation rather than more of a prejudicial and judgmental society that I belong to before."

P2, Transcript 2, Lines 33-35, 04222023

"It seems that society is also accepting those who are like that, so not the same as the first time that it's unusual."

P3, Transcript 5, Lines 28-29, 04222023

The participants discussed societal changes due to generational gaps, highlighting a shift from a conservative stance towards trans women to a more accepting society. Bravo, displaying openness and determination, praised the current generation for embracing diversity. Charlie, expressing surprise at the contrast between old and new societal acceptance, also acknowledged relief at the positive shift.

Both participants noted the vast differences between the prejudicial past and the present accepting society. They emphasized the challenge of disproving assumptions that trans people cannot be parents, especially in a society that is more accepting of the LGBT community now. The participants observed and welcomed the increased acceptance of families with transgender parents.

The participants, however, also had to deal with social integration and had to adjust to the dynamic nature of the community. However, the widest gap was the connection between generations. Most of the older generations could not tolerate transgender identities and

created prejudices while the younger generations were more open-minded but were mostly not aware or educated of the past hardships. It is essential to go beyond the mere recognition and appreciation of gender identity diversity, as not only does it break the stereotypes but also brings about the positive changes and the inclusivity for trans women in the next generations.

Theme #3. "I'm just looking for more money": Financial Instability

"I'm just looking for more money, so that I can live with the children, so that they will grow up, from my five years of care."

P1, Transcript 2, Line 6, 04152023

"Sometimes I have a hard time, but I just find a way, that I can earn money so that I can live with them, that I can buy food."

P1, Transcript 3, Lines 9-10, 04152023

"I don't just think about myself if I can eat today or if I can eat tomorrow; I'm thinking as a whole if there's going to be food for my kids tomorrow, am I going to be able to support them for school tomorrow and the future."

P4, Transcript 5, Lines 43-45, 05072023

"We look at them and wonder what future they will have since we struggle to feed them, and provide for their needs, even if we are poor."

P5, Transcript 2, Lines 12-13, 05092023

Three of the participants had disclosed their own experiences of financial difficulties, of which, was driven by their parental concern to meet their children's needs. Alpha had frequently conveyed about her sense of sympathy towards her children, most likely struggling due to the pressures of her responsibility. Delta, who had maintained a neutral expression throughout the duration of the interview, had carefully calculated her replies but was still able to demonstrate her sincerity in sharing her

own sets of difficulties. Echo, on the other hand, due to the surprise of the sudden question, covered her chest with her palms, a sign of her heartfelt honesty of the question.

This financial strain, marked by their rising expenses and limited opportunities, had significantly affected the participants. Within their homes, there could be felt a tangible sense of despondency, one that grows as the participant's financial limitations have affected their children's lives. Yet, despite the challenges, the participants still prioritize their children's needs above all else.

Participants have all exhibited their fair share of resilience despite confronting their challenges. This is shown through their ways of prioritizing their children despite their limited resources. A true dedication and love in the face of adversity.

Theme #4. "Most of the struggles that I have, are governmental sanction struggles": Legal Vulnerability

"Most of the struggles that I have are governmental sanction struggles."

P2, Transcript 4, Line 57, 04222023

"I wanted to have a baby and I applied with the DSWD to become a parent. And I was disapproved because I was a member of the LGBT."

P2, Transcript 4, Line 62-63, 04222023

"After how many years, after six to fifteen years, I processed the adoption papers of my daughter"

P2, Transcript 4, Line 72-73, 04222023

"And for me to go an extra mile compared to other straight parents, I'd go an extra mile for these kinds of applications."

P2, Transcript 1, Line 17-18, 04222023

Trans women participants face a concerning lack of government protection, leaving them vulnerable to societal prejudice and systemic barriers. Beta brought up the lack of legal protections and rights, stating that her

daughter did not have access to her own medical records, nor was she allowed to travel with her. Despite the introduction of the SOGIE Bill in Congress, it was never actually approved or signed into law, and until today, a glaring gap in protective laws for the LGBTQIA Community persists. This had given Beta an unnecessary burden when it comes to basic necessities for her daughter, as she has to go through various processes, whereas it is straightforward for non transgender parents. The complete absence of a proper legal framework, alongside inclusive social services specifically designed to deal with these situations, have hindered individuals such as Beta and have made them vulnerable to discrimination and social stigma while denying them of basic needs such as proper healthcare. With no proper support, they are thus isolated from society, which in turn hinders their personal lives and advancement.

Governments must address these gaps by enacting comprehensive legislation, promoting inclusive policies, and establishing support structures to ensure the safety, well-being, and equitable treatment of trans women participants.

Theme #5. "I'm not sure if it's possible to do a normal job": Scarcity of Employment Opportunities

"So I juggle from work to different work and you know with our society right now, mostly accepting transgender people are actually in call centers only. If you want to work in a bank, I'm not sure if it's possible to do a normal job. I don't think it's possible, so yeah."

P4, Transcript 4, Lines 36-38, 05072023

"I just try hard every night and day so that I can get the needs of my children because that's what I've been looking for, instead I've tried call centers but I can't because it's lacking."

P5, Transcript 4, Lines 25-26, 05092023

"Every day it's not that easy, because we also need things ourselves, we looked

for a way as trans and as parents to have something to eat."

P5, Transcript 4, Lines 27-29, 05092023

Participants face financial instability due to the challenges of securing regular employment, often resorting to multiple jobs to support their families. The lack of proper job opportunities for trans individuals in the Philippines contribute greatly to their struggle. Despite being engaged in multiple jobs, the general income most of the time remains insufficient which reflects a recurring issue.

This economic instability, however, is also a factor that compromises the well-being of the participants and their socio-economic advancement and, in the long run, contributes to the continuation of inequality and the marginalization of the poor. The shortage of job opportunities leads to social inequalities that make the situation worse and create poor quality jobs and block the opportunities for growth. Exclusionary practices and hiring policies that are not effective in the high-paying jobs are the main factors that make the participants remain the same class. This issue necessitates the synergies by governments, employers, and the society as a whole to end discrimination, promote inclusion, and establish a work environment where everyone has equal chances.

Theme #6. "I looked for an easier way.": Perseverance

"Just look for a job, so that I can provide for their needs, I will always find a way."

P1, Transcript 3, Lines 9-10, 04152023

"So I looked for an easier way to make a living"

P5, Transcript 4, Lines 36-37, 05092023

The participants, especially Alpha and Echo, emphasize perseverance as the main motivator in combating their struggle from the financial crisis and supporting their children. Alpha, while talking about her struggle to do several jobs at once, showed body language of a closed-up person, which was a sign that the subject the

matter was sensitive. Echo focused on the fact that one can succeed despite the obstacles, devoting herself to the creation of a good place to live for her children by accepting the part-time jobs that were demanding. Despite the lack of stability in their lives, the participants' familial bonds and the comfort they provide enable them to face challenges together.

In the face of financial hardships, participants showcase remarkable perseverance, navigating challenges with determination and resilience. Despite economic constraints and societal barriers, their unwavering commitment to their children serves as inspiration, propelling them toward a brighter future. The demonstrated strength of the parental bond and the resilience of the human spirit shine through in their unwavering love, sacrifice, and determination.

Theme #7. "Talk to him.": Communication

"Of course, talk to him, always spend time together, so that he won't wonder why his father is different from the others"
P3, Transcript 4, Lines 29-30,
04222023

Charlie dedicated time and energy to communicating with her child, demonstrating sentimentality for the topic. Prioritizing dialogue, participants foster understanding and acceptance, creating a safe space for their children. Transparent conversations dispel misconceptions about gender identity, nurturing empathy and respect. Ongoing communication and mutual support convey that parents' gender identity doesn't diminish their capacity to provide love, guidance, and support.

Data from three (3) out of five (5) participants, stated that their children did not mind their identities, which were aligned with the findings of the study. Children of trans women tend to be accepting, consistent with existing research on non-heteronormative families. Previous literature affirms that children in these families do not face negative well-being effects due to their parents' gender identity.

Additionally, previous related literature regarding non-heteronormative families has already established that there is no evidence to support that children in these families grow up

with their well-being being negatively affected due to their parents' gender identity (Green, 1998 & Freedman et. al., 2002) Despite this, the number of protective laws implemented for non-heteronormative families is far between.

Despite this evidence, protective laws for non-heteronormative families remain limited. Teresa de Lauretis' Queer Theory (Few-Demo et al., 2016), applied to Participant 3's experiences, reveals how questioning heteronormative roles can influence family reactions. Gender and sexuality identity development is complex and multifaceted, influenced by various factors. Unfortunately, non-conformity to traditional norms can lead to discrimination and marginalization.

Discussion

"Fluidity in Familial Structures," is where participants emphasize that they worry about how their own gender identity may affect their child's upbringing. Given that trans parents develop their families in the context of marginalization and systemic discrimination (Downing, 2012), their deep seated worry highlights their increasing dedication to ensuring that their children experience a nurturing and accepting family environment, making the participants more fluid in their roles as their children's caregivers.

The second major theme, "Societal Inclusivity" focuses on the participants adjusting to the fact that both societies that they have lived through are vastly different from each other and that they are still adjusting to the new changes of a societal landscape that lacked the understanding and acceptance they deserved. This is further backed by a survey report by the Pew Research Center (2020), the Philippines is found to be very accepting of homosexuality with seventy-three (73) percent of Filipinos stating their acceptance, showing that most Filipinos are accepting of the LGBTQ community.

Additionally, "Financial Instability" encapsulates the primary concern of the participants to meet their children's needs and wants despite their struggles with financial instability. A study by Fernández et al. (2023) that looks into the child rearing styles of queer parents iterates that even though different children have different requirements, parents understand

that these needs should be provided to them. This theme highlights the fact that financial stability is a key factor in the life of trans-women parents as it is the key to provide their children with a quality life and better future.

The fourth theme "Legal Vulnerability" exposes the challenges trans women mothers face due to the scarcity of laws present in our legislation that protect the LGBTQ community and the struggle they experience due to the lack of legal protection and more rigorous processes that need to be done due to their gender identity. The most relevant topic on the matter is the long impediment of the SOGIE bill which advocated for the rights of the LGBTQ community, which was further pulled back by major religious groups and members of the senate (Hapal, 2023). With trans parents facing discrimination in the process of adoption and other formal processes (Stotzer et al., 2014), the bill would've been a great help to lessen the rigorousness of the system, especially to trans parents that are genuine in their intent to become parents.

Furthermore, the fifth theme "Scarcity of Employment Opportunities" revolved around the participant's struggles due to the difficulties of juggling through different work paths causing them to be frequently in financial instability due to the limited job opportunities that are available to them. In Cebu City alone, members of the LGBTQ community have some difficulties finding employment with the struggle regarding work not ending in being employed. More often than not, discrimination would occur in the workplace, making it harder for them to keep their jobs, causing lost economic opportunities (Mangumpit et al., 2019).

The sixth theme of "Perseverance" exhibits the participants' remarkable perseverance as they navigate the arduous path toward stability and well-being while being able to express themselves truthfully. As a report on trans parents discusses, the lives of trans parents teaches us many things, because they teach us to show our parenting strengths in spite of the things occurring against us, highlighting the importance of both strength and authenticity (Pyne, 2012). And yet, despite the lack of stability that hinders certain aspects of their lives, their familial bond had been the sole object that

strengthens them to persevere through life's challenges together.

Finally, the last theme of "Communication" presents a reflection about the participant's concern towards her child's upbringing. The participant strives to shield her child from any differences attributed to having transgender parents and is dedicated to ensuring that her child grows up without feeling different from their peers. Oakley et al. (2017) as cited in Murry and Lippold (2018), states, "open dialogue about issues of heterosexism and stigmatization of the LGBTQ community may be more developmentally relevant for older children whose engagement with a broader social context might have important implications for identity and psychosocial development." Moreover, a study by Tabor (2019) discusses how the children of trans parents would have to navigate delicately on the ambiguity and ambivalence of their parents' changing roles and titles in the family, exemplifying how the role of communication is important within their families. This strong emphasis on trans parent dialogues is a common thread among the participants as it essentially highlights their efforts in fostering understanding and acceptance within their families.

The researchers were able to discover what their study is intended for, which was to understand the lives of single trans women raising children in the Philippines. Numerous highlights were found throughout the whole duration of the interviews but one conclusion is definite:

"The fact that we exist and a relationship of, me, as a transgender parent, and my daughter truly exists. It's nice, it's beautiful. It's a beautiful relationship. It's more of love, rather than being judged by my daughter." quoted by Participant 2 (P2, Transcript 5, Line 120-123, 04222023) led the researchers to the consensus that among the five (5) single trans women parents the researchers interviewed, is that despite their differences, difficulties, and sufferings, they all hold the same drive to properly parent and provide for their children. The participants all had different challenges and struggles to face, not only due to their gender identity as a trans woman but also as a parent raising a child or children. However, one problem the

majority of them shared was financial instability due to the limited job possibilities open to them. Their driving force or motivation, which is their children, is their primary coping method for enduring all of these difficulties. The participants frequently expressed fear and concern about their futures, as well as their need to be able to meet the requirements of their children and to secure their future as well.

Conclusion

After thoroughly examining the transcripts, key statements, and meanings from individual and focus group interviews, the essence of the lived experiences of trans women parents with children in Metro Cebu can be understood as follows:

A trans woman parent is someone who is just like any other parent. Their styles of parenting do not differ from their heteronormative counterparts. As a trans woman parent, financial instability, legal vulnerability, and scarcity of employment opportunities are the main challenges that these women face in their daily lives, affecting not only them but also their families. The experiences of a trans woman parent are not only defined by these challenges, but also by the fluidity of their familial structures, social inclusivity, perseverance, and communication. They do not let their challenges define their worth, rather, they let it make them stronger, not only as a person, but also as a parent whom their children look up to. They are responsible and dutiful providers to their children. A trans woman parent can live, love, and suffer but they always come up on top as someone larger than life.

The trans-parent participants of the study described their experience in parenting as something just like any other parent would experience. Their family dynamics might change, but fostering communication with their children and providing them with necessities has been their utmost priority, though the latter would be proven to be a challenge as inequalities due to their gender identity affect their

chances of being financially stable and are diminished by unequal job opportunities. Though society is slowly changing to become more accepting, an advancement in inclusivity and legal protection has still a long way to go. They iterate how often they still have to endure rigorous processes because the system in our society rarely accommodates persons who are in the sexually diverse spectrum. Despite this, they continue to persevere and strive harder for the good of their children, to show that they are stronger than what the world makes them seem to be. Trans women's parents show how resilient they are by adapting through time but they are still wishing for better change. Ultimately, trans women's parents live by these experiences to live and love despite their sufferings.

Recommendations

With these results, the researchers recommend any future researchers to take a deeper dive into the topic to shed more light on the experiences of these transgender parents. Additionally, there is a need to call for more advocacies surrounding equal opportunities and policy changes that will serve to ensure the rights of every and all transgender individuals. All of this is so that transgender parents have a sure way of accessing the resources they need to face their own distinctive challenges.

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