

Building harmonious families among single mothers in rural East Java: A social resilience perspective

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Abstract:

The phenomenon of single motherhood in many regions is marked by economic constraints, dual caregiving and breadwinning responsibilities, cultural stigma, and limited formal support, yet family harmony can still be maintained. This study analyzes how single mothers in rural Jombang build harmonious family resilience through multidimensional maternal agency, religious-spiritual resilience, and strategic adaptation to gender norms. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, four weeks of observation, and source triangulation. The data were examined using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, guided by Ungar's social resilience framework. The findings reveal three key patterns. First, multidimensional maternal agency emerges from commitment to children, material and emotional support from extended families, and community involvement as socio-ecological resources that strengthen mothers' resilience in facing socio-economic pressures. Second, religious-spiritual resilience is shaped by participation in religious communities, faith as a basis for life meaning, spiritual togetherness, and the reconstruction of maternal identity as a sacred trust in Islam. Third, agency within constraints is reflected in navigating gender roles, managing culturally rooted stigma, reconstructing family meaning around maternal responsibility, and facing unequal access to socio-ecological resources. The study concludes that rural single mothers' resilience is formed through maternal agency, faith- and community-based spirituality, and strategic adaptation within structural constraints. Its policy contribution highlights the need to strengthen community social capital, empower religious institutions, and ensure equitable access to resources and social protection.

Keywords:

Single Mothers; Social Resilience; Ungar's Framework; Family Harmony; Social Support.



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of single motherhood in Jombang District, East Java, reflects the tension between changing women's social roles and patriarchal cultural expectations that continue to position men as heads of households. BPS–Statistics Indonesia, Jombang Regency (2023) reported that 8.4% (23,649) of households in Jombang are headed by women, indicating that single motherhood is an important social issue amid dual burdens and gender norms that remain insufficiently accommodative. Women become single mothers due to divorce, the death of a spouse, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, or other circumstances that require them to assume full responsibility, with the death of a spouse during reproductive age identified as a major factor (Hutasoit & Brahmana, 2021; Jasmita et al., 2024; Mishra et al., 2021). In patriarchal communities in East Java, single mothers face dual roles as breadwinners and caregivers, while social stigma further intensifies their psychological pressure (Jun, 2022). Their economic vulnerability is reflected in the dominance of informal employment with monthly income below IDR 1.5 million and a poverty rate of 18.7%, exceeding the national average of 9.8% (Statistics Indonesia (BPS), 2023). Social stigma related to marital status restricts single mothers' access to employment, forcing them to struggle harder to meet basic needs, raise children, and maintain emotional well-being without a father figure (Jones et al., 2022; Karunanayake et al., 2021). In conclusion, single motherhood in Jombang represents a multidimensional issue involving poverty, limited access, and mutually reinforcing stigma; therefore, integrated policies in economic empowerment, social services, and public education are needed to promote inclusive and equitable rural development.

Numerous studies have examined the resilience of single mothers within the family context. This study classifies the existing literature into three main streams. First, psychological-emotional resilience focuses on how single mothers manage stress, caregiving burdens, loneliness, and family pressure through close social support that strengthens their survival capacity (Caragata et al., 2021; Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024; Vik & DeGroot, 2021). Second, economic resilience emphasizes decent work, income stability, access to resources, and the ability to meet family needs independently (Giriskan, 2021; Darmaningrum, 2023; Munir et al., 2024; Asrofi et al., 2025). Third, socio-cultural and religious resilience highlights the roles of community support, social solidarity, religious values, and communal culture (Zhou & Taylor, 2022; Misriani et al., 2024; Hermita et al., 2025; Shitindi & Zhang, 2025). However, previous studies have not fully integrated maternal agency, socio-ecological resources, spirituality, and gender negotiation. Therefore, this study offers novelty by applying Michael Ungar's social resilience perspective to examine the experiences of single mothers within the socio-cultural context of rural communities in Jombang District, East Java.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how single mothers in rural Jombang build harmonious family resilience through multidimensional maternal agency, religious-spiritual resilience, and strategic adaptation to gender norms. The research questions addressed are: (1) how do single mothers integrate internal motivation and socio-ecological resources within maternal agency? (2) how does religious-spiritual resilience shape meaning-making and community togetherness? and (3) how is agency within constraints manifested through adaptation to gender norms and the reconstruction of family meaning? Theoretically, this study contributes to the expansion of socio-ecological resilience theory by positioning maternal agency as a relational, spiritual, and cultural process. Practically, this research provides a basis for strengthening community-based support programs for single mothers, psychosocial services, economic empowerment, and more inclusive, contextual, and responsive religious support for the vulnerabilities of rural women. It also encourages village-

level policies that support the sustainability of vulnerable families and promote children's welfare in an equitable, sustainable, and participatory manner.

This study is grounded in the argument that existing studies on single mothers' resilience have often been separated into psychological-emotional, economic, and socio-cultural-religious streams, thereby failing to capture the totality of mothers' experiences in navigating life pressures. The main issue is that single mothers not only face economic hardship, social stigma, patriarchal gender norms, and limited access to resources, but must also simultaneously integrate internal motivation, family support, community networks, spirituality, and cultural negotiation. This study seeks to reveal multidimensional maternal agency that brings these three streams of resilience into an integrated framework, particularly through religious-spiritual resilience and strategic adaptation to gender norms. By employing Ungar's socio-ecological resilience framework and Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, this study demonstrates that the resilience of single mothers is not merely an individual capacity, but a dynamic process of negotiation involving personal motivation, socio-ecological resources, religious values, community acceptance, and the reconstruction of family identity.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study used a qualitative case study design in Jombang District to explore single mothers' resilience experiences within social, cultural, and psychological contexts (Lochmiller, 2021). The approach was chosen to capture the subjective meanings of their lives and to examine resilience as a dynamic negotiation among individuals, families, communities, and cultural values. The case study focused on three interrelated dimensions: multidimensional maternal agency, which integrates internal motivation and socio-ecological resources; religious-spiritual resilience, which shapes meaning-making and community togetherness through faith; and agency within constraints, expressed through strategic adaptation to gender norms and the reconstruction of family meaning. Jombang was selected because of single mothers' economic vulnerability, informal work patterns, strong religious-cultural values, and geographical limitations, making it a relevant rural context for this study.

Data Sources

Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with six single mothers who were purposively selected based on the following criteria: having at least one child under the age of 18, serving as the primary caregiver for at least three years without a male partner living in the same household, residing in rural Jombang, being 25 years of age or older, and being willing to participate in interviews and observations. In addition, twelve supporting informants, consisting of family members, community members, and friends, provided complementary perspectives. Four weeks of participatory observation also served as a primary data source to strengthen contextual understanding. Secondary data included local government reports, records from religious institutions, community program documents, and relevant policy documents. The number of participants was determined based on data saturation, which was reached after the sixth interview, when no new thematic categories emerged.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews guided by Ungar's (2008) social resilience framework to explore single mothers' resilience narratives in a focused yet flexible manner. Additional interviews with twelve informants from family, community, and friendship networks were conducted to enrich and verify the data through source

triangulation. Participatory observation was carried out over four weeks to capture everyday interactions, community practices, and social dynamics that were not always revealed in the interviews. This process enabled the researcher to obtain rich and layered data by integrating participants' emic perspectives with etic observations. Data saturation served as the basis for terminating data collection and was confirmed by the recurrence of consistent response patterns among the final participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis framework through six stages: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and narrative synthesis. The process began with repeated reading of the transcripts, followed by line-by-line open coding, which generated 127 initial codes, such as "child-centered motivation," "dual-role burden," and "religious study groups as coping." These codes were grouped into nine candidate themes and, through review, were consolidated into three main themes aligned with Ungar's (2008) dimensions of social resilience. The analysis combined a deductive approach based on social resilience components and an inductive approach derived directly from the data. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source and method triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, prolonged field engagement, reflexive journaling, and thick description, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of single mothers' resilience in rural contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents three main themes derived from the thematic analysis: multidimensional maternal agency in integrating internal motivation and socio-ecological resources; religious-spiritual resilience that shapes meaning-making and community togetherness through faith; and agency within constraints through strategic adaptation to gender norms and the reconstruction of family meaning. These three themes indicate that single mothers' resilience does not stand merely as an individual capacity, but is formed through dynamic relationships among personal motivation, family support, community networks, religious values, local culture, and access to resources.

Multidimensional maternal agency: Motivation and socio-ecological resources

The findings indicate that single mothers' resilience is not merely an individual psychological trait, but a socio-ecological process shaped through the relationship between internal motivation and accessible external resources. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis generated three subthemes: maternal commitment, kinship networks, and community mutual assistance. Together, these subthemes form multidimensional maternal agency, namely mothers' ability to transform personal motivation into social action connected to family, community, and culture in sustaining harmonious family life amid rural socio-economic pressures.

Table 1

Thematic Mapping of Multidimensional Maternal Agency: Braun-Clarke and Ungar

Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis	Initial Codes	Subtheme	Ungar's Social Resilience Dimension	Analytical Meaning
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Identification of codes from mothers' motivational narratives	"children as the reason to endure," "maternal responsibility," "working hard for children's future," "refusing to give up," "children's educational aspirations," "perseverance despite exhaustion"	Maternal Commitment as the Foundation of Resilience	Capacity to act; visible resilience outcomes	Child-centered motivation serves as an internal source of energy that encourages mothers to continue working, caring, and sustaining family life.
Grouping of codes related to family support	"childcare by grandmother," "rice assistance," "school-fee assistance," "presence of siblings," "not feeling alone," "emotional support from family"	Kinship Networks as Economic and Emotional Support	Access to resources; community involvement	Mothers' resilience is strengthened by extended families that provide material support, childcare, emotional security, and a sense that mothers do not face hardship alone.
Grouping of codes related to community support	"arisan," "gotong royong," "mutual trust," "sharing stories," "neighbors' assistance," "reciprocal work," "community togetherness"	Community Mutual Assistance as a Social Support Mechanism	Access to resources; competence in negotiation; cultural meaningfulness	Social practices such as arisan and gotong royong enable mothers to access economic assistance, emotional support, and social recognition without losing cultural dignity within the community.

Source: Processed by the authors, 2026.

Based on the thematic coding process, the first subtheme shows that maternal commitment serves as the main foundation of single mothers' resilience. The informants' narratives indicate that children become the primary reason for enduring hardship, working hard, and refusing to give up. YP (38), a single mother who sells bread, stated, "I wake up early in the morning to prepare the bread I sell. After returning home, I still must take care of the household and support my children's education. Sometimes I feel exhausted, but I remind myself that my children depend entirely on me, so I must keep going" (interview, 12 May 2025). RS (42), who works as a laborer, explained, "As a laborer, my income is uncertain, but I always try to save enough so my children can continue their education. I do not want them to experience the same hardships that I have gone through" (interview, 14 May 2025). SM (45) emphasized, "Working as a daily laborer is physically demanding, but whenever I feel like giving up, I remember my children's future. Their dreams give me the strength to continue working despite the difficulties" (interview, 16 May 2025). AP (37), who sells fried snacks, added, "Selling fried snacks every day is not easy because the income is sometimes unpredictable. However, my children are my greatest motivation. I believe that if I continue working hard, they will have better opportunities in the future" (interview, 18 May 2025). These narratives demonstrate that child-centered motivation functions as a powerful internal source of resilience, encouraging single mothers to persevere through economic hardship while maintaining their caregiving responsibilities and striving to secure a better future for their children.

This maternal commitment reflects mothers' capacity to act in facing life pressures. Within Ungar's social resilience framework, resilience is evident in mothers' ability to maintain maternal responsibility, strive for their children's education, and remain persistent despite exhaustion and socio-economic pressures.

The second subtheme shows that kinship networks serve as important sources of both economic and emotional support for single mothers. The interview findings reveal that assistance from parents, siblings, and other family members enables mothers to balance their caregiving responsibilities with income-generating activities while reducing the psychological burden of single parenthood. SR (45) explained, “If it were not for my mother, I might have given up. She often looks after my children while I am working as a daily laborer. Sometimes she also helps by providing rice or other necessities when my income is insufficient” (interview, 16 May 2025). AP (37) shared, “My older sister occasionally helps me pay my children’s school expenses. She is not financially well-off either, but she always tries to help whenever she can. Her support makes me feel that I am not struggling alone” (interview, 18 May 2025). RS (42) stated, “My parents sometimes take care of my children while I am working. They also help with food whenever my earnings are not enough. Their assistance allows me to continue working without worrying too much about my children” (interview, 14 May 2025). YP (38) reflected, “I am grateful that my family is always there for me. Although they cannot always provide financial assistance, they encourage me, listen to my problems, and help whenever possible. Their presence gives me strength to keep moving forward” (interview, 12 May 2025).

These narratives indicate that kinship networks function as an essential source of resilience by providing childcare assistance, food support, educational assistance, and emotional encouragement. Such support enables single mothers to continue fulfilling both their economic and caregiving responsibilities while reinforcing the feeling that they are not facing life's challenges alone.

The third subtheme shows that the community serves as an important mechanism of social support for single mothers. The interview findings demonstrate that mothers receive support through *arisan* (rotating savings groups), *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), neighborhood solidarity, reciprocal assistance, and opportunities to share experiences with other community members. These social relationships help reduce financial pressure while strengthening emotional well-being and a sense of belonging. AP (37) explained, “I regularly participate in *arisan* with my neighbors. When it is my turn to receive the money, I use it to buy my children’s school supplies or household necessities. More importantly, we trust and support one another because everyone understands that life can be difficult” (interview, 18 May 2025). SM (45) highlighted, “I enjoy joining *arisan* not only because of the financial benefits but also because it allows us to gather, share stories, and encourage each other. Talking with other mothers makes me feel less alone in facing my problems” (interview, 16 May 2025). RS (42) stated, “When there is *gotong royong* or a community activity, we always help one another. If someone is facing difficulties, the neighbors usually help, whether through food, labor, or simply by checking on each other. That kind of support is very meaningful for me” (interview, 14 May 2025). YP (38) reflected, “Living in a supportive neighborhood gives me confidence. My neighbors sometimes help look after my children or buy the bread that I sell. We also share stories and encourage one another whenever someone is experiencing difficulties” (interview, 12 May 2025).

These narratives indicate that community-based practices such as *arisan*, *gotong royong*, reciprocal assistance, and neighborhood solidarity provide both economic and emotional resources for single mothers. Beyond material support, these social interactions foster trust, strengthen social relationships, and reinforce mothers' sense of belonging, enabling them to cope more effectively with the challenges of single parenthood.

The practice of *gotong royong* also illustrates how communities provide tangible assistance without relying on monetary-based transactional relationships. YP (38) described

her experience as follows: “When part of my house needed repairs, several neighbors came voluntarily to help. I did not have enough money to hire workers, but they worked together without expecting payment. Later, whenever they need help, I also do my best to support them” (interview, 12 May 2025). From Ungar’s perspective, the practices of *arisan* and *gotong royong* demonstrate that single mothers’ resilience is strengthened through access to culturally meaningful and socially accepted resources. These community-based practices enable mothers not only to receive practical and emotional support but also to actively participate in reciprocal relationships characterized by trust, solidarity, and mutual responsibility. Consequently, resilience is constructed through collective participation rather than individual effort alone, allowing single mothers to maintain their dignity, social inclusion, and valued roles within the community despite the challenges they encounter.

Religious-spiritual resilience in shaping meaning and community togetherness

These findings indicate that single mothers’ resilience is built not only through material resources but also through spiritual meaning-making and religious participation. Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis identified codes such as religious study groups, emotional comfort in the mosque, religious coping, and shared spiritual values, which form emotional support and life meaning. Within Ungar’s framework, resilience emerges through socio-culturally accepted religious and cultural resources embedded in mothers’ daily practices.

Table 2

Thematic Mapping of Religious-Spiritual Resilience: Braun-Clarke and Ungar

Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis	Micro-Codes	Subtheme	Ungar’s Social Resilience Dimension	Analytical Meaning
Identification of codes related to religious participation	“attendance in religious activities,” “participation in religious study groups,” “emotional comfort in the mosque,” “sharing problems in religious gatherings,” “advice based on Islamic teachings”	Religious Community as an Emotional Support System	Community involvement; access to resources	Religious study groups and mosque activities provide a socially safe, culturally legitimate, and socially accepted space for single mothers to share experiences, receive advice, and reduce feelings of loneliness.
Grouping of codes related to spiritual meaning	“spiritual meaning-making,” “religious coping,” “a test from Allah,” “patience,” “faith,” “Allah will help,” “children’s future”	Faith as a Source of Meaning and Self-Strengthening	Cultural meaningfulness; visible resilience outcomes	Faith helps mothers interpret suffering not merely as a burden, but as a test, a sacred trust, and a spiritual path that provides direction and hope in life.
Theme development related to religious togetherness	“shared spiritual values,” “not feeling alone,” “second family,” “strengthening one another,” “feeling valued,” “other mothers understand my situation”	Community Togetherness through Shared Religious Values	Community involvement; cultural meaningfulness	Religious communities create a sense of belonging and social solidarity that strengthens single mothers’ position in facing stigma, emotional pressure, and social isolation.

Source: Processed by the authors, 2026.

Following the thematic mapping above, the next section narrates how single mothers' religious-spiritual resilience operates concretely in their everyday experiences. Interview data show that religious study groups, mosques, and Islamic theological concepts function not only as spaces of worship but also as sources of emotional support, identity reinforcement, and life meaning formation.

Mothers' participation in *pengajian* (Islamic study groups) and mosque-based activities functions as an informal system of social support and emotional well-being. The interview findings indicate that these religious gatherings provide opportunities for single mothers to share experiences, receive encouragement, strengthen their faith, and develop a sense of belonging within their communities. AP (37) stated, "When I attend *pengajian*, I realize that I am not the only one facing difficulties. Many other mothers also have their own struggles, and we encourage each other to remain patient and strong" (interview, 18 May 2025). YP (38) added, "The *pengajian* feels like my second family. Whenever I share my problems, the other participants listen carefully and offer advice based on Islamic teachings. It helps me see my difficulties as a test from Allah that I must face with patience and faith" (interview, 12 May 2025). RS (42) explained, "I regularly attend *pengajian* at the mosque because it gives me peace of mind. I can talk with other mothers who understand my situation, and together we remind each other to stay grateful and continue striving for our families" (interview, 14 May 2025). SM (45) reflected, "If I did not participate in mosque activities, I think I would experience much greater stress. Through *pengajian*, I can share my experiences, receive encouragement, and feel appreciated by the community" (interview, 16 May 2025).

These narratives suggest that *pengajian* and mosque-based activities function not only as religious gatherings but also as important sources of emotional, spiritual, and social support. Through these activities, single mothers develop meaningful social connections, gain psychological comfort, and strengthen their resilience by interpreting life's challenges through shared religious values and collective encouragement.

Religious communities provide emotional support by normalizing openness to vulnerability. Unlike formal mental health services, which may carry social stigma, *pengajian* (community-based Islamic study groups) creates a culturally legitimate space for collective discussion and problem solving. Observational data documented weekly meetings with a consistent pattern: Qur'an recitation, informal discussions about personal challenges, and collective problem solving grounded in Islamic principles. Religious communities simultaneously operationalize three dimensions of Ungar's framework: community involvement through shared identity, cultural meaningfulness through religious framing of hardship, and the capacity to act through concrete spiritual practices.

The mothers used Islamic theological concepts to transform the status of single motherhood from a potentially stigmatized identity into a sacred responsibility. Their narratives demonstrate that religious beliefs provide a framework for interpreting hardship as part of a meaningful spiritual journey. Concepts such as *amanah* (divine trust), *sabr* (patience), and *jihad* (spiritual struggle) enable mothers to understand their caregiving responsibilities as acts of worship rather than merely economic or social obligations. YP (38) explained, "In Islam, a mother is highly honored. The Prophet taught us to respect our mothers because paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers. Even though I raise my children alone and face many difficulties, I believe Allah has entrusted them to me. Taking care of them is my responsibility and my *amanah*" (interview, 12 May 2025). RS (42) stated, "I always remember that Allah does not burden a person beyond their ability. Raising my children alone is a test from Allah. If I remain patient, work hard, and keep praying, I believe Allah will provide a better future for us" (interview, 14 May 2025). SM (45) reflected, "Being a single mother has taught me that I

am stronger than I ever imagined. I see this as my *jihad* my spiritual struggle. Every effort I make to earn a living and care for my children is part of my worship and my responsibility before Allah” (interview, 16 May 2025). AP (37) added, “Whenever I feel overwhelmed, I remind myself that Allah is always with those who are patient. Looking after my children is not only my duty as a mother but also an act of worship that brings me closer to Allah” (interview, 18 May 2025).

Agency within constraints: Strategic gender-norm adaptation and family meaning-making

This theme shows that single mothers’ resilience is a complex negotiation process involving culture, gender norms, family structures, and access to socio-ecological resources. Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis identified codes such as gender reinterpretation, dual roles, cultural acceptability, stigma, strategic visibility, redefinition of family harmony, geographical isolation, limited activities, and structural barriers. Within Ungar’s framework, resilience is understood as the negotiation of culturally meaningful resources, rather than merely individual psychological endurance.

Table 3

Thematic Mapping of Agency within Constraints: Braun-Clarke and Ungar

Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis	Micro Codes	Subtheme	Ungar’s Social Resilience Dimension	Analytical Meaning
Identification of codes related to gender roles	“selective gender reinterpretation,” “managing dual roles,” “a good mother and woman,” “a strong mother,” “Javanese woman,” “a good businesswoman”	Strategic navigation of gender roles	Cultural meaningfulness; capacity to act	Single mothers expand their economic roles without rejecting cultural norms; instead, they reinterpret motherhood and womanhood in ways that remain socially acceptable.
Grouping of codes related to stigma and social acceptance	“maintaining cultural acceptability,” “stigma management,” “strategic visibility,” “dressing modestly,” “acting professionally,” “maintaining values”	Stigma management through cultural acceptability	Cultural meaningfulness; competence in negotiation	Mothers build resilience through strategies that preserve dignity, honor, and social acceptance when entering economic and public spaces.
Development of codes related to family	“redefining family harmony,” “family survival,” “a responsible mother,” “a wife who ensures that the family survives”	Reconstruction of family meaning	Capacity to act; visible resilience outcomes	Family is no longer understood solely through the presence of a man as the breadwinner, but through the mother’s responsibility in sustaining family survival.
Identification of codes related to structural barriers	“geographical isolation,” “limited access to activities,” “absence of women’s community activities,” “distance to religious study groups,” “lack of money for transportation,” “family	Unequal access to socio-ecological resources	Access to resources; community involvement	Mothers’ resilience is strongly influenced by the availability of accessible family networks, community networks, religious activities, and social support systems.

living far away," "having
no one to contact"

Source: Processed by the authors, 2026.

Following the thematic mapping above, the following narrative illustrates how single mothers build agency amid social, cultural, and structural constraints. Interview data show that they do not confront gender norms directly but negotiate them through cultural strategies that enable them to remain socially accepted as mothers, women, and dignified members of the community.

Single mothers navigate the tension between traditional gender norms, which commonly position men as the primary breadwinners, and their responsibility to earn a living through strategic reinterpretation rather than rejecting prevailing cultural values. The interview findings reveal that mothers continue to embrace their identities as caring mothers while simultaneously fulfilling the economic role required to sustain their families. Rather than perceiving paid work as a departure from traditional womanhood, they frame it as an extension of their responsibility to protect and provide for their children.

YP (38) stated, "Some people in my neighborhood may think it is unusual for a woman to become the main provider for her family. Even so, I always make sure that my children are well cared for, the house is clean, and our daily needs are met. I want people to see that although I work, I still fulfill my responsibilities as a mother" (interview, 12 May 2025). AP (37) explained, "I work every day to support my family, but I also try to behave modestly and respectfully. I always make time to prepare food for my children and keep the house organized. I want my children and my neighbors to see that I can earn a living without neglecting my responsibilities at home" (interview, 18 May 2025). RS (42) reflected, "As a laborer, I often work alongside many people, including men. I always try to maintain good manners and work honestly because I want others to respect me as a hardworking mother who supports her family in a proper way" (interview, 14 May 2025). SM (45) added, "After becoming a single mother, I had to take on work that was previously handled by my husband. Even though I now earn the family's income, I still see myself first and foremost as a mother whose responsibility is to ensure that my children are cared for and our family continues to survive" (interview, 16 May 2025).

The mothers achieved resilience through "negotiated conformity," namely by maintaining culturally valued feminine roles while expanding their agency. Those with stronger community involvement were better able to navigate this process, whereas isolated mothers lacked the community relationships that made such reinterpretation possible. From Ungar's perspective, this condition shows that resilience does not lie solely in mothers' personal capacities, but in their ability to negotiate action within a culturally and socially acceptable framework.

Resilience is not infinitely available through individual effort; access to socio-ecological resources deeply shapes the possibility of resilience. RS (42) narrative illustrates structural constraints: "I live quite far from the town, and there are no activities for mothers in my village. Sometimes I can only cry alone." She further explained, "The nearest *pengajian* is five kilometers away, and I do not have money for transportation to attend regularly. My family also lives in another district, so I cannot rely on them for childcare support. When my children are sick or when I have problems, I have no one to contact. I feel very alone" (interview, 14 May 2025). Although Rina had the same maternal commitment as the other mothers, her geographical isolation seriously limited her access to community networks, religious activities, and mutual assistance systems. In contrast, YP (38) explained, "Even when I am tired and stressed, I know that I can go to the mosque tomorrow and talk with other mothers. This

knowledge alone already makes me feel better. I am never truly alone” (interview, 12 May 2025). AP (37) also stated, “I have many places to seek support: the mosque, neighbors’ houses, and *arisan* meetings. This makes me confident that I can overcome my problems because I have people around me” (interview, 18 May 2025).

Ungar’s socio-ecological framework explicitly recognizes that individual factors alone cannot explain resilience outcomes. Mothers with strong family networks, community participation, and religious involvement, such as YP, AP, SM, D, and S, reported sustained motivation and emotional stability. In contrast, mothers with limited access, such as Rina, reported emotional fragility despite having comparable internal motivation. This indicates that resilience is not merely a matter of individual determination but depends on the availability of resources.

Socio-ecological resources as foundations of single-mother resilience in Ungar’s framework

The three main themes collectively demonstrate that Ungar’s social resilience framework operates holistically in single mothers’ experiences. The first theme emphasizes that maternal commitment, as an internal capacity to act, can develop into a functional resilience force only when connected to access to family, community, and material resources. The second theme shows that religious participation not only provides material support through assistance programs offered by religious institutions but also forms life meaning that sustains mothers’ psychological capacity to continue undertaking difficult actions. Meanwhile, the third theme reveals that mothers’ success or failure in navigating cultural expectations depends strongly on their access to community relationships that enable gender navigation strategies to be enacted. Mothers with stronger community involvement tend to negotiate their social roles more effectively, whereas isolated mothers are more vulnerable to failure in this process.

Critically, the thematic analysis shows that resilience in the context of rural single mothers is multidimensional, relational, and interdependent. The coding trail demonstrates that each code cannot be understood separately from its connections with other codes. “Child-centered motivation” acquires resilience meaning only when it interacts with “access to family support” and “community participation.” Similarly, religious meaning-making can sustain the capacity to act only when embedded in actual participation in religious communities. Strategic navigation of gender roles also depends on mothers’ social position and the quality of their community relationships. Thus, Ungar’s framework can be fully operationalized only when all dimensions of resilience are analyzed integratively rather than partially.

Further analysis reveals differences in resilience outcomes associated with unequal access to resources. Mothers with strong kinship networks, community participation, particularly through religious institutions, and geographical proximity to villages with social activities, such as YP, AP, SM, D, and S, reported sustained motivation, low psychological vulnerability, and the ability to maintain family harmony. In contrast, mothers with limited access, such as Rina, reported comparable motivation but experienced greater psychological fragility and emotional vulnerability. This indicates that resilience is not a universal outcome of individual effort alone but emerges from specific socio-ecological conditions.

Data saturation was evidenced by the consistency of thematic patterns across all six primary participants, namely YP, AP, SM, D, and S, as well as by the convergence of themes in interviews with supplementary informants, with no new thematic categories emerging in the later interviews. The coding trail from 127 initial codes to 9 candidate themes and subsequently to 3 refined themes demonstrates a systematic process of reduction and

consolidation. The three main themes encompass all significant codes, while the relationships among codes are transparent and theoretically justified through Ungar's framework.

Discussion

The study findings show that single mothers' resilience in building harmonious families in rural East Java is reflected in three main patterns. First, multidimensional maternal agency is evident in the integration of commitment to children, material and emotional support from extended families, and community involvement as socio-ecological resources that strengthen mothers' resilience in facing socio-economic pressures. Second, single mothers' religious-spiritual resilience is formed through participation in religious communities, faith as a basis for life meaning, togetherness grounded in spiritual values, and the reconstruction of maternal identity as a sacred Islamic trust. Third, single mothers' agency within constraints is manifested through strategic navigation of gender roles, management of culturally rooted stigma, reconstruction of family meaning centered on maternal responsibility, and unequal access to socio-ecological resources. Thus, rural single mothers' resilience is formed through the integration of child- and community-based multidimensional agency, faith-based and sacred-trust-oriented religious-spiritual resilience, and strategic adaptation to gender norms amid structural constraints.

The resilience of single mothers in rural Jombang Regency reflects an increasingly relevant social reality amid the rising incidence of divorce and spousal death in Indonesia. The number of female-headed households continues to increase, yet their access to socio-economic resources often remains limited (Rifayanti et al., 2025). Multidimensional maternal agency and community-based mutual assistance are crucial when formal social safety nets weaken, particularly in the post-pandemic period, which has intensified household economic vulnerability (Gupta et al., 2021; Huynh & Bui, 2024). Religious-spiritual resilience demonstrates the use of faith-based social capital in navigating uncertainty; Dansu (2024) emphasizes that interactions within religious communities foster collective strength and personal development. However, limited access to community activities in remote areas can generate isolation and heighten psychological vulnerability, as social protection programs have not yet optimally reached regions with inadequate transportation access (Xue & McMunn, 2021). This study highlights that, amid limited infrastructure and public services, community networks and local values function as the last line of defense, while also emphasizing that without structural support, family resilience is difficult to sustain.

These findings enrich Michael Ungar's social resilience framework (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021; Ungar, 2021) by demonstrating that the resilience of rural single mothers is formed through three integrative patterns: multidimensional agency, religious-spiritual resilience, and strategic gender adaptation. In contrast to individualistic psychological approaches, the findings affirm that resilience is the product of negotiation between personal capacities and the availability of ecological resources, in line with Social-Ecological Resilience Theory (Ungar, 2011). Maternal agency is relational in nature (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000), embedded in communal obligations and sacred values that shape the meaning of sacrifice, and supported by community social capital (Cooper et al., 2016). The interpretation of the maternal role as a "sacred trust" indicates that resilience is not merely a form of coping, but a construction of moral identity that transforms burden into life purpose, reflecting the essence of meaning-based resilience (Mamo et al., 2025) and spiritual coping (Mancini et al., 2023). Critically, the findings on unequal access underscore that resilience is contingent; when social resources are unavailable, even strong internal motivation is insufficient to prevent psychological

vulnerability. This reaffirms the importance of structural support, as emphasized by the social determinants of health perspective (Battalova et al., 2024).

The findings of this study demonstrate that resilience is not merely an individual capacity to “bounce back,” but rather a reflection of the social ecosystem that enables individuals to endure. The fundamental wisdom captured from the stories of mothers in Jombang is that their greatest strength emerges from their relationships with their children, families, communities, and God (Mas'udah, 2022; Galán-Vera et al., 2025). When the mosque is described as “the most peaceful place” and the experience of “often crying alone” is expressed, this study demonstrates that resilience is relational; it flourishes in spaces of togetherness and weakens in isolation (Agashe et al., 2021; Silveira et al., 2022). These experiences also highlight the importance of an emic perspective in understanding resilience, showing that the meaning of “harmony” for rural single mothers may differ from normative definitions, as they celebrate endurance in simplicity and express gratitude for even the smallest forms of support from those closest to them (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024).

This study strengthens and extends previous research on the resilience of single mothers. In line with Djap et al. (2021) and Wahab and Jamil (2024), commitment to children and the performance of multiple roles constitute the foundation of resilience. However, this study offers novelty by revealing the role of religious communities as “hybrid” spaces, not only as spiritual arenas but also as networks of emotional and practical support that have rarely been explored in depth (Sarfaraz et al., 2025; Anggraini et al., 2023). Unlike Shawaqfeh (2024), who emphasizes social support in general terms, this study analytically distinguishes the roles of extended family and religious communities as two complementary sources of support. The findings on unequal access enrich the studies of Kılınc and Sis Çelik (2021), Mai et al. (2021), and Chavda and Nisarga (2023) by demonstrating how geographical isolation creates a “resilience gap” among mothers with comparable levels of motivation. This underscores that resilience is inseparable from spatial justice and access to social infrastructure, while also reinforcing the argument that the absence of social networks directly increases the psychological vulnerability of single mothers.

This study recommends several practical measures, including strengthening community-based social protection programs integrated with religious institutions, such as empowering religious study groups to function as spaces for counselling and economic assistance for single mothers. Local governments need to map remote areas with limited social access and provide mobile mental health services, given that isolation exacerbates psychological vulnerability. Economic empowerment programs should be designed by considering the time constraints and mobility limitations of single mothers, for example through group-based home enterprise schemes. Schools and early childhood education institutions can also be utilized as integrated service centres to reduce the burden of childcare. In addition, training is needed for religious and community leaders to increase their sensitivity to stigma and enable them to provide non-judgmental support. Social protection policy reform must recognize the diversity of family structures and provide direct assistance that is not conditional upon formal marital status.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the resilience of single mothers in rural Jombang Regency, East Java, is formed through three mutually reinforcing integrative patterns. First, multidimensional maternal agency combines commitment to children, extended family support, and community-based mutual assistance as socio-ecological resources. Second, religious-spiritual resilience is developed through participation in religious communities, faith as a foundation for meaning-making, and the reconstruction of maternal identity as a sacred

trust in Islam. Third, strategic adaptation to gender norms occurs amid structural limitations and is manifested through role navigation, the management of culturally rooted stigma, and the reconstruction of family meaning centred on maternal responsibility. These findings affirm that resilience is not merely an individual capacity, but rather the product of negotiation between internal motivation and the availability of ecological resources. When structural support is limited, community networks and local values become the last line of defence that determines the sustainability of family resilience.

This study contributes to enriching Ungar's social-ecological resilience framework by demonstrating that the resilience of single mothers is relational and embedded in communal obligations and sacred values. The finding that religious communities function as "hybrid" spaces that combine spiritual, emotional, and practical roles offers a conceptual extension of faith-based social capital. Practically, this study underscores the need for social protection policies that reach remote areas, given that geographical isolation creates a significant resilience gap. Effective interventions should integrate the strengthening of individual capacities with improved access to social infrastructure, while also recognizing religious communities as strategic partners in family empowerment programs. Thus, a holistic approach that integrates material, social, and spiritual dimensions is essential for building sustainable resilience.

This study has limitations in terms of its geographical scope, which is confined to rural areas in Jombang Regency, East Java Province; therefore, the generalizability of the findings needs to be examined in regions with different socio-cultural characteristics. The qualitative approach employed in this study has not quantitatively measured the level of resilience or its determining factors. Future research is recommended to develop resilience measurement instruments that are sensitive to rural contexts and local values, as well as to conduct comparative studies across regions with varying levels of infrastructure access. Longitudinal research is also needed to trace the dynamics of resilience over time; particularly how policy changes and socio-economic conditions affect family resilience. In addition, further exploration of the roles of single fathers and other non-traditional family forms may enrich a broader understanding of family resilience.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Eka Mariska Putri Imra: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Validation; Writing Review & Editing. **Febriandita Tedjomurti:** Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Methodology; Supervision; Validation; Writing Review & Editing. **Muhammad Faruki:** Formal Analysis; Validation; Writing Review & Editing.

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