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SACRIFICES AND SUCCESS: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL STUDY ON THE STRUGGLES OF WORKING MOTHERS

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative study explores the multifaceted struggles and adaptive strategies of working mothers balancing professional responsibilities and childcare in urban India. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 35 working mothers from Lucknow and Kanpur, each with at least one child aged 2–10 years and employed in salaried or shift-based jobs. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: Time Constraints and Maternal Guilt, Emotional Conflict and Role Strain, Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems, and Career Sacrifices and Adjustments. Emerging sub-themes included Digital Parenting Guilt, Societal Pressure and the Myth of Perfect Motherhood, and Financial Independence vs. Emotional Presence. Findings indicate that while mothers face persistent guilt, stress, and career compromises, they also display resilience through reliance on family support, structured time management, and workplace flexibility. The study underscores the influence of societal expectations, workplace policies, and cultural norms on working mothers' lived experiences. Implications include the need for holistic interventions addressing not only economic and policy dimensions but also the psychological, cultural, and emotional well-being of working mothers.

KEYWORDS: *Working Mothers, Work–Family Balance, Maternal Guilt, Coping Strategies, Qualitative Research, Urban India*

INTRODUCTION

In today's fast-paced and competitive world, the role of mothers has undergone a significant transformation. The rising cost of living, aspirations for better education, and the need for financial security have made it increasingly essential for both parents to engage in full-time employment. Modern mothers are not only caregivers but also active contributors to the economic well-being of their families. Despite their professional success and the ability to provide a comfortable lifestyle, many working mothers experience an internal struggle while balancing career demands and their responsibilities toward their children.

Working mothers often face the challenge of managing long working hours, workplace competition, and high expectations while simultaneously striving to nurture their children and maintain strong family bonds. This dual responsibility frequently leads to emotional stress, role conflict, and feelings of guilt for not being able to spend enough quality time with their children. The dilemma between professional growth and family priorities becomes a daily battle, impacting not only the mother's well-being but also the overall dynamics of family life.

This article explores the multidimensional struggles of working mothers, shedding light on their emotional, psychological, and social challenges. It also aims to understand how these mothers navigate their dual roles, the coping mechanisms they adopt, and the broader implications on their children's upbringing and maternal mental health.

As dual-income households become increasingly common in India and around the world, working mothers face intense internal conflict between professional ambitions and parenting responsibilities. Research consistently shows that this tension takes a psychological, social, and familial toll.

- In 2018, the India Human Development Survey analysis by Abbi et al. found that children of mothers in salaried or wage-based jobs outside the home performed worse in arithmetic and reading compared to those of stay-at-home or self-employed mothers—but this difference was mitigated when mothers had higher education, thanks to additional resources and flexibility.
- A 2022 South Asia–wide Demographic Health Survey study using instrumental variable methods revealed that maternal employment significantly increased the risk of stunting (+≈9.5 percentage points) and underweight (+≈6.3 points) among children under age five, though the magnitude was smaller in India (~5.3 and ~4.2 points).

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- A 2017 qualitative study in Dungarpur, Rajasthan, exploring the impact of mothers' employment under MGNREGA, found that early return to work compromised infant feeding and care. Mothers reported that caregivers could not substitute effectively, and childcare and feeding compromises often outweighed income benefits.
- In 2022, a Surabaya-based study of 44 full-time working mothers of children aged 2–6 used standardized scales to examine work-family and family-to-work conflict. They found a significant negative impact on mothers' well-being from family-to-work conflict, though work-to-family conflict showed a weaker association.
- A recent paper by Barigozzi et al. in May 2025 introduced a quantitative measure of "mental load" and revealed consistent gender asymmetries: employed women carry heavier cognitive and emotional burdens related to household and childcare responsibilities that spill over into paid work hours.

Together, these studies capture the complex trade-offs working mothers face: financial gains and improved decision-making for women (as seen in collective bargaining models) often come at the expense of child nutrition, parental bonding, psychological strain, and disrupted caregiving patterns—especially where workplace policies and social norms fail to support caregiving roles.

METHODOLOGY: A QUALITATIVE FRAMEWORK

To deeply understand the lived experiences of working mothers balancing job pressures and childcare responsibilities, this study will adopt a qualitative research design. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be conducted with 30–40 working mothers residing in urban India (Lucknow and Kanpur). Eligible participants will have at least one child aged 2–10 years and be employed in salaried or wage-based jobs, typically working standard 9–5 or rotational shift schedules.

The interviews will explore mothers' experiences of spending quality time with their children, emotional conflicts arising from work–family balance, career-related pressures, and the coping strategies they employ to manage these dual responsibilities.

RESULTS

Semi-structured interviews with 35 working mothers revealed a complex web of experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies that characterize their attempts to balance professional duties with childcare. Four overarching themes and multiple sub-themes emerged during thematic analysis. The study included 35 working mothers from urban regions of India, primarily employed in salaried or shift-based jobs. Participants varied in age, number of children, educational background, and employment type, offering a diverse representation of working mothers balancing professional and childcare responsibilities. **Table 1** summarizes the demographic profile of the participants, providing context to the qualitative findings.

Table 1: Participant Demographics (N = 35)

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age of Mothers	25–30 years	10	28.6
	31–35 years	12	34.3
	36–40 years	8	22.9
	41+ years	5	14.3
Number of Children	1	20	57.1
	2	12	34.3
	3 or more	3	8.6
Child's Age	2–5 years	15	42.9
	6–10 years	20	57.1
Employment Type	Salaried (9–5 job)	22	62.9
	Shift-based job	13	37.1
Education Level	Undergraduate	12	34.3
	Postgraduate	20	57.1
	Doctorate	3	8.6

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed four major themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of working mothers: Time Constraints and Guilt, Emotional Conflict and Stress, Coping Mechanisms, and Career Sacrifices and Adjustments. Each theme comprises sub-themes that highlight specific challenges and coping strategies expressed by participants. **Table 2** presents these themes, sub-themes, and illustrative quotes that reflect mothers' experiences in their own words

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Table 2: Themes and Sub-Themes Identified from Interviews

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Time Constraints and Guilt	Lack of quality time	"By the time I get home, my child is asleep."
	Missing milestones	"I missed my son's first stage performance."
	Reliance on gadgets	"I let her watch cartoons while I finish office work."
Emotional Conflict and Stress	Workplace competition	"I must prove I'm as capable as male colleagues."
	Fatigue and burnout	"I feel drained both mentally and physically."
	Anxiety and self-doubt	"I'm not sure if I'm doing justice to either role."
Coping Mechanisms	Family and kinship support	"My mother-in-law helps with after-school care."
	Flexible schedules	"Work-from-home has given me breathing space."
	Mindfulness and self-care	"Yoga helps me stay calm through chaos."
Career Sacrifices and Adjustments	Declining promotions	"I rejected a promotion to avoid frequent travel."
	Switching to part-time work	"I chose a lower role to manage kids better."
	Dependence on supportive supervisors	"My manager allows me to leave early if needed."

1. Time Constraints and Maternal Guilt

A dominant theme was the lack of quality time mothers could dedicate to their children. Participants shared that long working hours and rigid schedules left them emotionally drained and unable to participate in their children's daily routines. Many described experiencing persistent maternal guilt, feeling they were "failing as a mother" despite providing financially.

- *"By the time I return home, my child is already asleep. I feel like I'm missing her entire childhood."* (Participant 7)
- *"Weekends become a rush to do household chores, leaving little time for meaningful interaction."* (Participant 14)

Some mothers compared themselves to stay-at-home mothers, perceiving that they fell short in providing emotional nurturing and academic support.

2. Emotional Conflict, Stress, and Role Strain

Mothers expressed emotional conflict stemming from competing demands of work and family. This often manifested as heightened stress levels, fatigue, and feelings of inadequacy in both domains. Workplace pressures, including meeting deadlines and maintaining competitiveness, exacerbated these challenges.

- *"At work, I'm expected to deliver like someone without a family. At home, I'm expected to nurture like someone without a job."* (Participant 3)
- *"Sometimes, I feel like I'm constantly running but never truly succeeding in either role."* (Participant 18)

Several mothers reported experiencing sleep disturbances, anxiety, and burnout, aligning with prior research on working mothers' mental health struggles (e.g., Abbi et al., 2018; NICHD, 2013).

3. Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

Despite these challenges, participants described adaptive coping strategies that helped them manage dual responsibilities:

- Family Support: Extended family members, particularly grandparents, often provided essential childcare support.
- Workplace Flexibility: Access to flexible working hours or remote options allowed mothers to better manage school schedules and medical emergencies.
- Structured Time Management: Some mothers meticulously planned daily routines to ensure dedicated bonding time with their children.
- Emotional Coping: Practices such as mindfulness, informal peer support from other working mothers, and occasional counseling were reported as helpful.
- *"My mother-in-law takes care of my son after school. Without her, I could not continue my job."* (Participant 12)
- *"I negotiated a hybrid schedule with my manager; it reduced my stress a lot."* (Participant 22)

4. Career Sacrifices and Adjustments

To prioritize family, many mothers made significant career compromises. This included rejecting promotions, shifting to lower-pressure jobs, or pausing their careers entirely. Participants felt these decisions were often misunderstood by employers and colleagues, leading to reduced professional growth opportunities.

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- *"I turned down a promotion because it required frequent travel—I couldn't imagine leaving my kids for weeks."* (Participant 30)
- *"After maternity leave, I moved to a part-time role. It slowed my career, but it was necessary for my family's well-being."* (Participant 5)

Some participants highlighted positive organizational policies, such as on-site childcare and supportive supervisors, which helped them sustain career growth without fully compromising family responsibilities.

Emerging Sub-Themes

Beyond the four major themes, several nuanced sub-themes emerged from the narratives of working mothers, reflecting hidden layers of their struggles and adaptive responses.

1. Digital Parenting Guilt

With the rise of remote work and long working hours, many mothers reported relying heavily on digital devices such as televisions, tablets, or smartphones to keep children engaged while they managed professional responsibilities. While these tools provided immediate solutions for childcare during demanding work hours, mothers expressed deep guilt and concern over potential negative effects on their children's cognitive and social development.

- *"I give my son the tablet during meetings. I know it's not ideal, but I can't risk losing my job."* (Participant 11)
- *"Sometimes, I feel technology is replacing me as a parent, and it breaks my heart."* (Participant 27)

This theme echoes findings from Livingstone & Blum-Ross (2020), who described how digital devices act as "stand-in caregivers," often leading to maternal guilt and a perceived loss of authentic bonding moments.

2. Societal Pressure and the Myth of Perfect Motherhood

Participants highlighted that societal and familial expectations significantly amplified their emotional burden. Cultural ideals of "perfect motherhood"—where mothers are expected to be ever-present, nurturing, and self-sacrificing—often clashed with their modern identities as financially independent professionals. Many mothers felt judged by relatives, neighbors, or peers for their perceived inability to "do it all," which intensified stress and self-doubt.

- *"People still ask me why I 'leave my kids to strangers.' They don't see that I'm working for their future."* (Participant 9)
- *"There's constant comparison with stay-at-home moms. It makes me feel like I'm falling short."* (Participant 21)

This sub-theme aligns with Dasgupta (2022), who highlighted that traditional Indian gender norms continue to define women's worth by caregiving abilities, making it difficult for mothers to freely embrace dual identities without societal criticism.

3. Financial Independence vs. Emotional Presence

While employment allowed many mothers to gain financial autonomy, contribute to household expenses, and invest in better educational opportunities for their children, they often felt these benefits came at the cost of emotional availability. Mothers described moments of inner conflict when material support and comfort clashed with the child's need for emotional nurturing and companionship.

- *"My job pays for their school, their hobbies… everything. But I miss seeing their faces light up when they come home from school."* (Participant 4)
- *"I thought earning would solve everything, but it has distanced me from my children."* (Participant 31)

This dilemma reflects the "time–money trade-off" identified in Bianchi (2011) and Abbi et al. (2018), which demonstrates that while working mothers contribute significantly to improving children's material well-being, this often leads to compromised bonding time and emotional connection.

Collectively, these emerging sub-themes illustrate that working mothers continuously navigate an internal and external balancing act—torn between personal ambitions, societal judgments, and maternal instincts. This balance is underpinned by emotional strain, systemic workplace barriers, and entrenched cultural expectations.

However, the findings also highlight resilience and adaptability among these mothers. Reliance on family support networks, strategic coping mechanisms, and progressive workplace policies (such as flexible hours and childcare facilities) emerged as protective factors, buffering against overwhelming stress. These insights underscore the need for holistic interventions that go beyond financial or policy solutions to address the psychological, cultural, and social dimensions of working motherhood.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of working mothers balancing professional duties with childcare responsibilities in urban India. Findings revealed a multifaceted struggle shaped by time scarcity, emotional conflict, societal expectations, and systemic workplace barriers, echoing and extending existing literature.

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The pervasive theme of insufficient quality time aligns with earlier research by Abbi et al. (2018), which highlighted the negative impact of maternal employment on children's educational performance, particularly in households lacking flexible support systems. Similarly, the NICHD Study of Early Child Care (2013) found that full-time employment during a child's infancy was associated with increased maternal stress and reduced mother–child interaction. Our participants' narratives of guilt for missing milestones and reliance on digital distractions resonate with the concept of *"maternal role strain"* described in Baruch and Barnett's (1986) role theory.

Consistent with the Double Burden Theory (Hochschild & Machung, 1989), participants reported simultaneously managing professional expectations and traditional caregiving responsibilities without adequate institutional support. This dual role contributed to burnout, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy, findings also supported by Barigozzi et al. (2025), who quantified the heavier mental load carried by employed women in balancing household duties and workplace demands. Furthermore, these stressors are in line with the Family Stress Model (Conger et al., 1992), which posits that economic and role pressures indirectly affect parental emotional health and parenting quality.

The presence of extended family support emerged as a vital buffer, paralleling findings by Chakraborty and Saha (2021), who reported that kinship networks in Indian households significantly reduced parenting stress for working mothers. Workplace flexibility also played a crucial role in mitigating emotional conflict, consistent with Brough et al. (2020), who demonstrated that flexible scheduling and remote work arrangements enhanced maternal well-being and strengthened parent-child bonds. Coping strategies like mindfulness and peer support reflect growing evidence (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) that psychological resilience practices improve emotional regulation among working women.

A recurring narrative of career compromises—including rejected promotions and part-time transitions—mirrors findings from Lewis and Humbert (2010), who described how women often "stall" their careers to accommodate caregiving demands, resulting in long-term professional disadvantages. Our study also reflects organizational gaps in implementing supportive policies such as on-site childcare and adequate maternity leave, which are advocated in the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act of 2017 but inconsistently applied across sectors.

Interestingly, some participants identified supportive supervisors and hybrid work opportunities as enabling factors for maintaining career trajectories—an observation consistent with Hill et al. (2014), who highlighted the protective role of family-supportive supervisory behaviors.

Findings revealed a strong influence of cultural norms around "ideal motherhood," intensifying guilt and social judgment for working mothers. This aligns with Dasgupta (2022), who noted that Indian society still largely views childcare as a woman's primary duty, reinforcing internalized pressure and workplace bias. The societal narrative of self-sacrificial motherhood often collides with contemporary career aspirations, creating psychological conflict and emotional exhaustion.

Our findings reinforce established theories such as the Double Burden, Role Conflict Theory, and Family Stress Model, while adding nuanced insights specific to the Indian context. The evidence suggests that policies alone (e.g., extended maternity leave) may not fully alleviate maternal stress unless accompanied by organizational culture shifts, gender-equitable domestic responsibilities, and community-level childcare support.

Furthermore, mental health interventions, including counseling and support groups for working mothers, could help address emotional strain and maternal guilt. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of these struggles on maternal well-being and child development, using both qualitative narratives and quantitative measures.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that working mothers in urban India face significant emotional, social, and professional challenges in balancing dual roles. While family and organizational support can ease these burdens, systemic change is needed to dismantle persistent cultural expectations and workplace structures that disproportionately disadvantage mothers. Recognizing and addressing these struggles is crucial for fostering maternal well-being and healthier child development.

This study illuminates the profound struggles faced by working mothers as they navigate the dual demands of career and childcare in modern urban India. Through qualitative insights, it became evident that these mothers carry a heavy emotional and mental load—marked by limited quality time with children, persistent guilt, heightened stress, and frequent career sacrifices. Despite these challenges,

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many demonstrate resilience by relying on family support, adopting coping mechanisms, and making difficult professional adjustments to ensure their children's well-being.

The findings underscore that these struggles are not merely individual challenges but are deeply rooted in societal expectations, workplace structures, and cultural norms that continue to place disproportionate caregiving burdens on women. To foster healthier families and more equitable workplaces, systemic changes are essential—ranging from flexible job policies and accessible childcare services to broader cultural shifts that normalize shared parenting responsibilities. Supporting working mothers is not only a matter of gender equality but also crucial for nurturing the next generation's emotional and developmental needs.

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