

Original Paper

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Working Mothers: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

In this phenomenological study, we explored the experiences of 13 working mothers in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to this crisis, mothers in the workforce encountered barriers to their success. Study findings reflect that these challenges have been exacerbated during the pandemic as women experienced increased childcare and other second shift responsibilities. Results highlight participants' strategies for navigating pandemic-related disruptions. Participants' experiences further amplify the need for revision of women's second shift expectations as well as better support for mothers in the workforce.

Keywords

working mothers, COVID-19 pandemic, second shift, work-life balance

1. Introduction

Emerging research indicates that working mothers in the United States are a demographic significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Alon et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021; Heggeness & Fields, 2020; Raile et al., 2020). Prior to this crisis, women comprised approximately 50% of the labor force; and the participation rate for women with children under 18 was 72.3% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Yet by the end of 2020, there were 2.1 million fewer women in the workforce than before the pandemic (Ewing-Nelson, 2021). Heggeness and Fields (2020) reported that 32.1% of unemployed women were not working because they lost access to childcare. Additionally, researchers have theorized that women's attrition from the workforce was a result of pre-pandemic gender inequities at

work and at home, inequities exacerbated by the pandemic (Calarco et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021; Lyttelton et al., 2020; Raile et al., 2020). In order to provide working mothers with appropriate support (e.g., family-friendly work environments), it is essential to gain an understanding of the challenges they encounter. Thus, in this phenomenological study we explored working mothers' experiences during the pandemic.

Pre-pandemic research revealed that working mothers were already experiencing stress, guilt, and exhaustion as they attempted to balance their multiple roles in an era of rising workloads and heightened motherhood and homemaking expectations (Hermann et al., 2019; Hermann et al., 2020; Hermann & Neale-McFall, 2018). Furthermore, women continue to provide an inequitable amount of parenting and household activities, what Hochschild (2012) referred to as the "second shift" (p. xv) (Hermann et al., 2019; Hermann et al., 2020; Slaughter, 2015). Inadequate parental leave policies and discriminatory workplace norms create additional challenges for working mothers (Hermann et al., 2019; Hermann et al., 2020; Hermann & Neale-McFall, 2018; Slaughter, 2015), extending the "glass ceiling" to a "maternal wall" (Williams & Segal, 2003, p. 77). Thus, Collins (2019) concluded that even prior to the pandemic, it was harder to be a working mother in the United States than in any other developed country in the world.

Preliminary evidence indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified challenges for working mothers (Alon et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021; Heggeness & Fields, 2020; Raile et al., 2020). As shelter-in-place directives forced the closure of schools and daycares, childcare during the pandemic became severely limited. More mothers than fathers have provided the additional childcare necessary because of these closures (Alon et al., 2020; Calarco et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021). And though women reported adjusting their career goals because of their caregiving responsibilities prior to this crisis (Christopher, 2012; Lee & Tang, 2013), this trend has become even more pronounced during the pandemic (Alon et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021).

The underlying issues resulting in women's mass exodus from the workforce and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are unlikely to dissipate quickly (Alon et al., 2020). Thus, the purpose of the current study was to advance the exploration of themes from emerging research (Alon et al., 2020; Calarco et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021; Raile et al., 2020) in order to expand and enrich our understanding of working mothers' experiences during the pandemic. Through increased understanding of working mothers' lived experiences, the results of this study can inform policy and help to proliferate norms that better support this integral segment of the workforce.

2. Method

2.1 Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenological research has been described as "an in-depth inquiry into a topic with a small number of homogeneous participants" designed to increase understanding of a phenomenon (Glesne, 2016, p. 290). In hermeneutic phenomenology, interview data are used to reveal multiple perspectives within a

phenomenon (Crowther et al., 2017; Kafle, 2011), much like turning a prism illuminates its various dimensions (Kafle, 2011). As Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology aligns with the study purpose as well as our critical feminist ideology, this methodology guided data collection and analysis (Balkin & Kleist, 2017). The use of a feminist lens further highlights the unique experiences of women (Creswell, 2014; Enns, 1997) and how their experiences are "embedded in historical factors and situated in systems" (Enns, 1997, p. 73). The feminist perspective also supports advocacy efforts for social change that will enhance the lives of women (Balkin & Kleist, 2017; Creswell, 2014; Van Manen, 1990).

As the first two authors have experience navigating motherhood during a pandemic, prior to collecting data, we engaged in discussions about this phenomenon to bring further awareness about our experiences. This reflexive process continued through our data collection and analysis (Morrow, 2007). While not abandoning our insights related to our experiences, we took care to honor the participants' unique perspectives (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Morrow, 2007). Through the exploration of our participants' experiences, we deepened our understanding of the phenomenon (Haverkamp & Young, 2007).

2.2 Participants

After receiving institutional review board approval, we recruited participants purposefully using professional and social media networks (Balkin & Kleist, 2017) and snowball sampling techniques (Hays & Singh, 2012). Fourteen potential participants contacted us to express interest in the study. All of the potential participants met the study criteria of having a full-time job and at least one child who was living at home. Thirteen of the potential participants volunteered to be interviewed. Interviews were completed in the fall of 2020.

Participants varied in age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, geographic location, occupation, partnership status, number of children, and ages of children. Participants were between 29 and 61 years old. Ten participants identified as White, two participants identified as African American, and one participant identified as Vietnamese. Participants lived in five different states in various areas of the country. Five participants held a bachelor's degree, one participant held a master's degree, and seven participants had doctorates. Three participants worked more than one job. Participants' occupations included attorney, physician, professor, counselor, entrepreneur, real estate agent, higher education administrator, and special education administrator.

Ten participants were married, one was engaged, and two were divorced. All of the participants' partners worked full-time except for two partners who lost their full-time jobs during the pandemic. Two participants had one child, seven participants had two children, and four participants had three children. Three of the participants were mothers of twins. The ages of the participants' children ranged from 2 to 16 years old.

2.3 Data Sources

Consistent with Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology, we collected data through semi-structured interview questions, including demographic questions. We triangulated the data collected through these sources to increase understanding of the participants' experiences (Patton, 2002). The demographic questions included categories such as age, race/ethnicity, partnership status, and number of children. If participants had a partner, we also asked how household work and childcare was divided.

We conducted telephone interviews for the convenience of the participants, with the goal of eliminating the need for participants to obtain childcare. The interviews ranged from 35 to 67 minutes. The overarching interview question was "How would you describe your experience being a working mother during the COVID-19 pandemic?" Additional questions were based on relevant literature (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Hunt, 2011). Specifically, we asked questions related to the difference in the experience of being a working mother before and during the pandemic. We further asked about cultural expectations related to motherhood and household activities. We inquired about benefits of multiple roles, how they maintained wellness, and lessons learned from this experience. We used probes during the interviews to gain thick descriptions of the phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012).

In order to maximize trustworthiness, the participants were sent their transcripts to review for accuracy (Hays & Singh, 2012; Morrow, 2005). They were invited to edit the transcripts and expand on their responses. Most participants acknowledged receipt of their transcripts. No edits were requested.

2.4 Data Analysis

Using Van Manen's (1990) methodological suggestions, we identified essential themes in the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences. As themes emerged, we considered confirming and disconfirming data in order to further understand the complex nature of the phenomenon (Morrow, 2005; Van Manen, 1990). We completed this process independently in order to increase trustworthiness (Hays & Singh, 2012). A comparison of the resulting themes led to consensus on final themes and subthemes. We then identified quotes corresponding to the themes to highlight participants' voices and add richness and depth to the findings (Balkin & Kleist, 2017; Hunt, 2011; Morrow, 2005).

2.5 Limitations

Though this study provides rich data about the experiences of working mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study is not without limitations. Our use of telephone interviews did not allow us to assess the participants' nonverbal communication, which may have inhibited our understanding of their experiences (Suzuki et al., 2007). And though we recruited purposefully and achieved diversity in terms of race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, partnership status, and occupation, there was little variability in participants' socio-economic status. Researchers exploring the experiences of mothers across more diverse socio-economic status groups may gain additional perspectives.

3. Results

As participants contemplated their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, they described being a working mother during this time period as “stressful” “challenging” and “chaotic”. Participants noted that meeting current work and second shift expectations was “impossible”. And, they alluded to the ongoing nature of their pandemic challenges by statements such as “no one dreamed it would last this long.” The analysis of the data yielded six prevalent themes: *intensified second shift, pandemic work life, work-life integration, benefits of multiple roles, strategies for managing the pandemic, and silver linings*. Nine corresponding subthemes were identified as well. Quotes that illustrate participants’ lived experiences illuminate each theme and subtheme.

3.1 Intensified Second Shift

Participants experienced the “high expectations for mothers” before the pandemic and described intensified responsibilities during the pandemic. Four subthemes emerged from the data: *childcare, household responsibilities, eldercare responsibilities, and the inequitable share of the second shift*.

3.1.1 Childcare

Participants made comments such as, “I feel like my husband and I had our systems in place to keep our family going; [and because of the pandemic] I feel like we’ve lost a lot of the systems.” Most notably, participants lost access to daycare centers, babysitters, and the supervision of children provided by schools. A participant with a career that required a 70-hour work week provided the example, “I was spending a crazy amount of money every week on full-time nanny help.” The nanny “got them ready for school every morning, and took them to school, and picked them up from school, and took them to lessons, and helped them with their homework, and helped make dinner, and washed their clothes.” She continued that though the demands of her job had not lessened, “all that [support] is gone. I have no one.” Similarly, one participant added, “I am a single mother.... Everything fell on me.” Participants also experienced the new responsibility of supervising their children’s learning. They noted the time-consuming nature of this work and that this new responsibility was one of the most “difficult” and “stressful” experiences during the pandemic. And though participants expressed empathy for teachers who didn’t have the training to manage an immediate shift to online learning while taking into account “the impact of trauma on the experience of learners,” they also shared their frustration with the experience.

Participants explained that in the beginning, schools “didn’t have a plan in place” and “the kids didn’t know what they were doing.” A participant added, “so really the entire education day at that point fell on parents, which was extremely, extremely difficult.” Participants also noted that women were largely responsible for the supervision of their children’s learning, illustrated by comments such as “It’s falling on us. It’s not falling on the husbands so much, [though they] will help here and there.” One participant further revealed that in the first few months of the pandemic, “there were all these really pretty Pinterest boards that folks were posting on social media, showing this is how I’m setting up my home schooling, and we’re going to be so organized, and this is going to be wonderful and great. And as

mothers actually started doing it, it became clear that this isn't a Pinterest experiment. This is really, really hard."

By fall, several participants found that supervising their children's virtual schooling had become easier. Other participants had a different experience. One shared, "We are halfway through the first nine weeks" and the school schedule had changed multiple times. She added, "There was so much confusion... [my child] missed art one day because she thought she had PE." Another participant gave the example that the school had just transitioned to a new platform. She continued, "You just taught me three new platforms last week!" Like many participants, they wondered how they were supposed to keep up with all of these shifting parameters.

Several participants also talked about teachers not having time to grade assignments. One participant shared, "out of eight classes, only one teacher is grading; so I can't track to see if she is really understanding." Another participant commented that assignments that weren't graded looked like they had not been submitted. This participant noted it is hard to help your children when you don't even know what work has been turned in.

Participants with younger children emphasized that students only had "a couple of hours" of virtual school each day; and then "they're supposed to do a whole list of independent work," work "that is not possible for a young child to navigate." One participant provided the example that "the science video is not just a video, but it's a craft project that a first grader can't do by herself." She further explained that some parents "are able to be on those [virtual school] calls full-time" so "it's not on the first grader" to relay vital information. As a working mother, she was not able to be on any of the calls. Another participant added that young children are still "learning the fundamentals of math and reading and grammar . . . things that are so important for the foundation of education. So I feel like I'm spending so much more time with them, making sure they are getting it."

One participant sent both her child in preschool and her child in kindergarten to the same daycare center so that staff could supervise the virtual learning of her school-age child. She clarified, "I still need to keep track of the various rotating schedules.... And, I need to make sure that I print the materials ahead of time to send to the daycare center." She concluded, "I'm very fortunate that during the day he is somewhere safe, and there is somebody doing the supervision; but it still requires a great deal more involvement than if they went to school." Additionally, paying for supervision for school-age children resulted in participants incurring childcare expenses they didn't anticipate. One participant explained, "this was going to be the year that we could at least take one of them out of daycare because they would be in school." So though mothers had long-term budgets accounting for anticipated childcare expenses, a participant concluded, "that kind of blew up if you have younger school-age children."

Participants' children had varying experiences as they adapted to virtual learning. A few of their children made this transition easily. Other participants described their children's struggles with virtual learning. One shared that her children "are feeling overwhelmed." She continued, "it's a really hard for

them to learn from their teachers from a screen.” Another participant described her child’s “lack of motivation with virtual learning.” She continued by stating that usually her child was up and ready to go to school to be with her friends and teachers, but on “virtual days, I’m dragging her out of bed.”

Several participants had children with learning disabilities, which added challenges to virtual learning. For example, one participant explained, “they are having a really hard time keeping up with all of the work because of their struggles with the lack of structure in online learning.” Another participant shared her observations: “I work in special education and saw kids falling apart, just breaking down in virtual meetings.” She added that she has “seen kids who haven’t had seizures in years, now having seizures from screen time.” She further provided that some parents are trying “to work and provide supervision for their kids with significant learning disabilities.” Those experiences were “always eye-opening. Just when I think I’m super stressed here [because] the kids are fighting, and they’re not doing their chores, I see the impact that this pandemic has had on those families . . . and it makes me really appreciate my situation.” She noted that families with children with learning disabilities “have really, really suffered.” And she added that though her children had adjusted to virtual learning, she still worries “about how long we are going to learn this way” and “what are the physical effects on my kids?”

Most participants talked about having their children in a lot of activities prior to the pandemic. A participant reflected that her children “understand that life is different now, but when they can’t do the things that they are used to doing, that elicits an emotional reaction.” Another participant further explained that “the biggest emotional change for them is, ‘What do you mean we’re not going anywhere today? Okay, I’m not going to school, but I’m going to dance class, right?’” This participant was left explaining “no you’re not going to dance class; you’re not going to football practice; you’re not going to soccer.” Similarly, one participant explained that her daughter is only 11 years old, “so she doesn’t fully understand why she can’t go back to school while her friends are back at school.” Several participants also shared that their children were “getting upset and wanting to do stuff” with them while they were all at home. A participant found that she constantly had to explain “I wish I could do all these things, but I still have to work during the day.”

Participants also shared comments like “I had one child who was in 8th grade dealing with grief at not being able to go through a lot of the rituals of saying goodbye to her teachers and classmates.” She continued that her child was “really excited about going into high school, but so afraid [of the virus] that they didn’t want to go to campus.” So again they were grieving a loss – not being able to start high school in-person.

Participants found unique ways to address their children’s emotional well-being. A participant noted that her children were used to schedules, so she created them. She would tell them “okay we’re going to jump on the trampoline from this time to this time, and then we are going to ride bikes from this time to this time.” She added that “even though we had nowhere to be and nothing to do, I tried to make it seem like we did” so they would think things were normal. Another participant needed to address her

child's stress related to not knowing when her mother was working and shouldn't be disturbed. The participant chose one area of the house in which to work and told her daughter, "when I'm at the dining room table, I'm working." This arrangement also supported the participants' well-being as working in only one area of the house created better boundaries between home life and work life.

Participants found that helping their children manage their anxiety takes a lot of time and emotional energy. A participant further explained that she was trying to equip her children with the coping skills necessary for them "to cope with the day-to-day realities of COVID life." She concluded that they would have had to learn some of these skills anyway, but not at this young age. And another participant added, "I'm trying to comfort them, and I'm sad too."

3.1.2 Household Responsibilities

Participants talked about the impact of the pandemic on household responsibilities. Many of the participants discussed their new responsibilities of providing their family with three meals a day. Prior to the pandemic, participants' children ate lunch at school. And, most participants shared that pre-pandemic, one of their strategies for managing work and motherhood was eating dinner out several times each week. One participant explained that she had "always managed *not* to cook...but I have made every single meal here since March." She further noted the significant time expenditure related to planning and making meals. And, participants emphasized that increased cooking responsibilities meant going to the grocery store more often, a task that was more challenging during a pandemic. One participant elaborated that when you went to the grocery, you had to make sure you bought everything you needed; "you can't just run back [to pick something up] because the line is half an hour long to get into the grocery."

Participants also talked about trying "to maintain the same high expectations [for house cleaning] that we were used to pre-pandemic." They expressed thoughts like "we're home; I should have everything looking perfect." Yet they also noted that "it has been a little bit tricky now that we live at home, all the time." One participant shared, "I've struggled so much keeping my house clean... and I have someone to help clean a couple of times a month. But still, it never feels like enough. I always just feel like I can't keep up with the laundry; I can't keep up with the dishes; I can't keep up with keeping the kids' rooms clean; I can't keep up with the cat's litter box." A participant further explained that pre-pandemic "when we got home [from work], nobody had been home all day; so it looked the same as when we left." Now, "you are walking into a house that's completely chaotic." Another participant elaborated, "it literally looks like a tornado went through my playroom. And it just looks like that all the time, because [my child] is in there all day, every day."

Participants noted the dilemma expressed by one participant: if they kept up at work "then that's an accomplishment. But the laundry is not done; the dishes are not done; the carpet is not vacuumed." She continued, "I feel like all of it falls on me; and if I don't do it, it won't get done." She added, "I don't see my male colleagues experience things that way. They focus on their work... [whereas] it feels like we're expected to hold everything together."

3.1.3 Eldercare Responsibilities

Participants with older relatives discussed their additional responsibilities. One participant who saw her mother daily shared, “I’m terrified of this virus. If my mother got it, she would not make it.” She further explained that her mother was “normally very busy with activities,” activities that were no longer available. She continued, “keeping her calm and reassured has been really challenging at times.” Adding to this stress for two of the participants was increased eldercare responsibilities because of pandemic-related loss of access to caregivers for their older relatives.

3.1.4 Inequitable Share of Second Shift

The participants all still seemed to engage in more of the second shift than their partners. One participant did 100% of the second shift activities, and three participants described having at least 70% of the second shift. Other participants reported that they shared housework and childcare activities more evenly, yet they noted that they were the managers of the second shift. So they were the ones “making sure [their children] have everything they need for their school day, and making sure that the house is stocked with healthy foods, and that the laundry is folded.” One participant added that she had to provide her husband with “a to-do list for what to pack in the bag for daycare.” Participants further described their managerial role as being “the keeper of the [family] schedule.” And participants shared that “if [the children] are sick, or if they have a day off, I’m probably the one who will take the day off and attend to them.”

Participants further observed that men had a different experience with parenthood during the pandemic. Several participants had husbands that still worked outside of the home. A participant explained, “he left the house everyday and went to work.... He didn’t carry the burden as much.” And a few participants also noted that when their husbands engaged in childcare, it wasn’t “necessarily hands-on childcare; it’s just that he is an adult present at home.” Another participant elaborated, “he wasn’t playing with them or hanging out with the children,” he was just there if they needed anything.

Participants also shared that they are “the one who the kids come to and always want help from.” One participant explained that her husband “could be in the same room as them and I could be on the other side of the house, and they come and find me if they have a question.” This participant added that her children would tell her “Daddy doesn’t know how to do this, he can’t help me.” She further provided that “even if he would tell them the answer to something, they would come find me to make sure that he had given them the right answer.”

Participants also made comments indicating a lot of the second shift “just naturally falls on my shoulders because I want things a certain way.” Another participant echoed this sentiment by stating that some things “bother me and they don’t both him.” She added, “I don’t want to leave a dish in the sink. He could care less.”

3.2 Pandemic Work Life

Participants described their experiences at work during the pandemic. Three subthemes corresponded to this theme: *work responsibilities*, *support at work*, and *lack of support at work*.

3.2.1 Work Responsibilities

Almost all of the participants experienced the same or increased work responsibilities during the pandemic. Participants averaged working 50 hours a week. They shared experiences such as “all of a sudden, we’re asked to do so much more because the company has had to lay off half of the staff.” Another participant added that this has been “one of the most challenging times in my business life” as she was “figuring out how to manage a team remotely.” Similarly, a participant had to shift her in-person business online and “rebuild her business model from scratch.” And, one participant shared that she worked long hours before the pandemic. She concluded that “part of what would have helped me is to have less put on me at work, but instead, I’ve gotten a ton more dumped on me.” She continued, “I wish everybody could have pulled back a little bit . . . instead of going pedal down and plowing forward.”

Of the two of the participants whose spouses lost their full-time jobs during this time period, one of them shared that her wife “lost about 75% of her salary. [So now] everybody is heavily dependent on my salary.” She added that she had been considering giving up her second job; but because of finances, “now I can’t do that.”

3.2.2 Support at Work

Some participants experienced policies and norms at work that supported mothers. For example, one participant stated that she was able to take 12 weeks of paid maternity leave. She added, “I felt supported, and I wanted to stay with the company who valued me and made sure I would come back to work.” Participants further expressed their observations during the pandemic: “I am very fortunate that [my supervisor] understood. I feel like so many people who didn’t have little ones at home forgot what it’s like.” She continued that in her company, everyone was “making sure that I had what I needed [and they were] always initiating the conversation, ‘I know you have a lot going on. You do what you need to do, family first.’”

One participant shared that leaders at her work were “very communicative, very understanding of what everyone is going through.” Yet she added that this “was comforting, but it didn’t change the demands of the job.” Similarly, a participant provided that her supervisor had sent her an email encouraging her to take time off as she had been working so much she was accruing a lot of leave. She noted that with her pandemic-related increased job expectations, “right now, I don’t have the time to take time off.”

Participants also expressed concern about the effect of the pandemic on their long-term goals. One participant described her current supervisor as “flexible” and “gracious.” She continued, “but two years from now, perhaps I have a different supervisor; and they look back on this year’s assessment. Will they have the same level of graciousness?” She further reflected “that there is nothing on the evaluation form that says this is the year of COVID, and here are the allowances that we are making.” She added, “it’s a global pandemic, and we can’t just keep doing it like we have always been doing it. We need a different system in place to evaluate people during this time.”

3.2.3 Lack of Support at Work

Some participants discussed the lack of policies and norms that supported mothers in the workforce. Several participants had no paid leave when they had children. And one participant added, “there probably are all kinds of family-friendly policies, but my job has just never allowed me to even consider taking advantage of them. I didn’t even take maternity leave.”

Participants further explained that their colleagues made comments that were “definitely discriminatory and negative.” One participant provided, “a person in my department said to me that I need to be more conscious of my time in terms of how much time I spend with my children [at night and on weekends], because people may not think that I’m as serious about my work.” Similarly, a participant described remarks made “along the lines of having children could possibly stall my career path.” Another participant talked about applying for a promotion, and noted that the person who received the promotion was younger and had no children. Similarly, a participant shared, “I got as far as I could in that company as a mom.”

Even prior to the pandemic, several participants had changed jobs or modified their job activities to make their work more compatible with motherhood. For example, one participant talked about “spending four nights a week in a hotel room away from my family.” She added that she always felt like she was “working to get ahead, proving myself to this company, trying to break through the glass ceiling.” She noted that she finally realized “that I needed life to look different for me. I wanted to be home with my family, and I wanted to still have a career;” so she made the transition out of corporate America.

Almost all of the participants worked from home at the beginning of the pandemic, and they talked about how difficult it was “adjusting to virtual work at the same time as helping my child adjust to virtual school.” Several participants discussed the challenges of eventually having to return to work outside the home. One participant shared, “around June is when my company wanted me to go back out...so that was kind of scary.” She continued that her children “were not allowed to leave the house. They’re not allowed to be in school. But I can be in offices all day and exposed to God knows what, and then come home to them.” And she further explained that her company was clear with their expectations. The message was “so do it, or leave.... They said things like ‘Call HR if you don’t feel comfortable, and they’ll work with you.’ But you know, no one really feels comfortable doing that.”

Many participants experienced expectations that work not be impacted by the global pandemic. One elaborated that her work was being compared to women colleagues who did not have children and to men “who may or may not have children. But let’s be honest, it doesn’t matter. It all falls on the mom.” She added that “I’m competing with these people, and I have the same expectations and the job description; but they have a lot less challenges in their day than I do.” She continued that it would have been helpful if someone “on my management team or anywhere reached out to me and said, ‘Wow, I can’t imagine how hard this is, and you’re really handling it well; and you’re really doing a good job.’”

3.3 Work-life Integration

Participants described their experiences as they attempted to manage their multiple roles. Many provided observations such as “even when there is no pandemic, I am juggling a crazy number of things. But during the pandemic, it has been exponentially worse. It’s all the same issues, but just much, much worse.” One participant referenced a common expression about working moms: “We all have lots of balls in the air. It’s about figuring out which balls are the glass balls, and which ones are the bouncing ones, and which ones are falling. Now all the balls are all in the air; and they’re all glass, all the time. . . . Everything is happening all at once.”

Participants expressed that they were experiencing demanding work expectations, yet with no childcare they wondered “what am I supposed to do with my children?” Participants noted that prior to the pandemic, they would drop their children off at school or daycare and go to work. One participant explained, “I just took the mother hat off from 8:00 to 5:00.” She shared that during the pandemic, “I woke up, and all of a sudden I put all these hats on.” She added that “working from home, my mother hat is on 24/7.”

Participants found it hard to concentrate under the circumstances. One participant explained that the parts of her job that require “a great deal of quiet, concentrated time” are “impossible to do with two young kids at home.” And participants shared “you’re a mom one second, a professional the next second;” you are constantly switching roles. One participant further explained that “it was really hard for me to be able to do work tasks because the minute I would start to get into work mode and start to get focused on something, somebody had a question or somebody needed something . . . or my four-year-old wanted to play Barbies with me, or sit on my lap, or have a conversation, or have a snack.” A participant added that because of these interruptions, something like a short email “was taking me three or four times as long.” And one participant explained that “it’s really hard not only to find the time [to work], but even when the time exists, the worries about all of the other things make it hard to be able to give a task the attention it needs.”

Some participants also expressed that it was hard for them to be fully present with their children because of their work responsibilities. A participant elaborated, “my to-do list was always running through my head.” A common experience was explained as “if you are at work, you feel like maybe I need to spend more time with my daughter; she’s just sitting watching her iPad. And when you are playing with her, you feel guilty [and ask yourself] should I be working?” The consensus among many of the participants was “what feels impossible is just not doing anything to the best of your ability as a parent or as a professional.”

One participant provided an added dilemma, the norm of family invisibility at work. A participant reported, “so many times we’re told don’t talk about [motherhood] in the workplace, other than to share fun stories,” and that work is “not an appropriate venue” to discuss “the challenges or the realities of what it is like to manage and juggle work and family.” Another participant similarly shared that her company seemed to have a “don’t ask, don’t tell mentality, [so you’re told] you do what you need to do

but don't tell me." Yet, participants noted that working from home makes it much more difficult to keep family hidden. Participants referenced Zoom conference calls and talked about children "laughing in the background or arguing over a toy." A few participants also discussed their pets' cameos during their video calls. And a participant shared that her dog would bark when the doorbell rang, and noted the frequency of the doorbell ringing given all the pandemic-related deliveries.

One participant summarized "the politics of Zoom." She observed that "people are expected to show up to Zoom with perfectly composed spaces . . . and your house completely in order, like you have it all together, and you don't hear the kids screaming in the background or other family members walking through the picture on the screen." She continued that sometimes people are making assessments related to professionalism, including "whether or not people are actually working because they don't turn their cameras on for the Zoom meeting." She noted the expectation that a Zoom call should approximate the experience of meeting in a conference room. She added, "my home is not a conference room." She concluded that in the spaces she occupies, "very few people have had an explicit conversation about what it means to engage on these platforms, and the politics and the ways identities show up, and the judgment that we make about [them], and the implications for people who hold other types of historically marginalized identities who show up and try to be aligned with those unnamed expectations."

3.4 Benefits of Multiple Roles

In spite of the challenges during the pandemic, almost all of the participants discussed the benefits of their multiple roles. They shared that their profession was a large part of their identities. Participants frequently stated, "I love what I do." Several participants further expressed, "I'm proud of what I have accomplished." And participants summarized this subtheme as "I love working. I love being a mom. I have the best of both worlds."

Participants also talked about how being a working mother benefits their children. A few participants described how their children are "more independent and self-sufficient [because] they have had to do things on their own a lot." And several participants shared that they believed their children benefited from their modeling "how to have a full life, and how to have an enjoyable and productive career."

3.5 Strategies for Managing the Pandemic

Participants described their strategies for managing multiple roles. These strategies included having a *support system* and engaging in *self-care*.

3.5.1 Support System

Participants all spoke about the "importance of connection and the importance of relationships," especially during the pandemic. One participant referred to her colleagues as "her online tribe" and expressed how grateful she was to have their support. She added, "I think this is really important in this environment right now, because you can feel so isolated."

Many participants talked about their "amazing network of friends" and described "quarantining together" and the value of having other working mothers to talk to who understood "the juggle and the

hardships.” They appreciated “Zoom call happy hours” and “just being able to sit in someone’s driveway, six feet apart, and drink wine.” Several participants also expressed how important it was to just be able to “laugh about things we are all now dealing with.”

And participants’ friends provided more than just emotional support. Participants gave examples of “trouble shooting [virtual school] stuff constantly” and added “our husbands have no idea what is going on.” Some participants talked about how friends helped if they needed their children picked up or dropped off somewhere. And one participant shared the support she received from a neighborhood friend who is a former teacher and had a child the same age as her twins. When the participant was trying to figure out how she was going to work and help her young children with online learning, her friend offered to supervise her twins’ virtual kindergarten. The participant added, “they’re truly learning, and I’m not worried about them falling behind in their education.” She concluded, “I feel like despite the hardships, I’m truly blessed.”

Several participants talked about how their partners were a large part of their support system, and some participants referenced their parents’ support. One participant described the comfort she experienced when her mother would visit, and her family would do “simple things” like “play charades or do a puzzle.” Some of the participants’ parents helped with childcare as well. A participant with young children provided the example that when “things started to shut down and you get the call from daycare that the daycare is closing, so then that sets the immediate panic of who is going to help with your kids?” This participant’s husband had a 9-5 job outside of the home. She noted, “his life hasn’t changed; he still has to go to work.” She continued, “So in the beginning, I would put my kids in the car, and I would drive for four and half hours to my parents’ house” and stay for several days so her parents could help with childcare.

3.5.2 Self-Care

All of the participants talked about the importance of self-care. One participant described the physical toll of the pandemic, in spite of her self-care activities. “I actually had a herniated disc this past summer.” She added that her back injury was a result of stress and working from home all spring; all of those extra steps and movement were gone.”

Participants also discussed how engaging in self-care activities was more difficult during the pandemic, especially since places like gyms and nail salons were harder to access. So participants had to “become very creative” with their self-care. They found new ways to work out, including virtual yoga classes as well as investing in and using home exercise equipment. Participants also enjoyed taking walks with their family members and pets. Reading for pleasure and writing in gratitude journals were other strategies participants shared. One participant concluded, “even if it is just a few hours a week, you have to continue to do things that make you happy.” She provided examples that work for her including online shopping, cooking, and going to ALDI. “I had never been there before; and that’s my new hobby, going to ALDI!”

Participants made comments like “my self-care is a priority for me because if I don’t do that, I’m not

showing up as the best version of myself.” Another participant noted that when she engaged in self-care such as working out in the morning, “I just feel better all day. My head feels clearer. I feel less stressed.” And one participant shared that self-care was particularly important as she is “the face of the company” and is expected to dress well and approximate cultural beauty standards. She added, “I have to look good. I have to weigh a certain amount. And I get Botox because everybody else on my team is younger.”

3.6 Silver Linings

Many participants used the term “silver linings” as they spoke about the pandemic. Almost all of the participants talked about how much they appreciated the opportunity to spend more time with their children and engage in “really wonderful, quality family time.” They enjoyed being able to check on their children throughout the day, have lunch with them, and spend time with them in the evening instead of running around to a lot of different activities.

Participants also liked being “more of a participant in my children’s education.” One participant elaborated, “I love knowing what they are doing in school.” Another participant who has children with learning disabilities noted that before the pandemic, she “trusted that the school was doing the right thing” for her children. Since the pandemic started, she is now “more of an advocate for them than I was before.”

Participants talked about how the pandemic gave them perspective about “just how fragile life is” and how “valuable our time is.” A participant reiterated that the pandemic “forced everyone to slow down and prioritize what was important.” For example, one participant realized “what I’m most passionate about and what I’m least passionate about. . . . It’s just clearer to me what is important in my work and what isn’t.” Another participant shared that “even if there isn’t a crisis and global pandemic,” she wants to continue “setting really clear boundaries” and prioritizing her wellness.

Because of this experience, several participants noted they learned how efficient they could be at work. One participant described her strategy of “working in the pockets of your life.” She further explained, “I look at my kids’ schedule for the day; and when they are on Zoom with their teacher, I am on work calls.” She added, “I don’t have it perfect every day; some days are a hot mess.”

Additionally, some participants were hopeful that “flexible work arrangements will become much more standard” as workers have “demonstrated that people can do their jobs” working from home. One participant further explained, “the way I will be spending my time at the office is going to look different.” She continued, “before, I didn’t know any different. I just thought that I needed to be in the office five days a week for 10 hours a day to do my job.” She concluded, “I have now realized that it doesn’t need to be that way.” Other participants shared similar sentiments like “when the dust settles from all of this, so many women are going to take a step back and say ‘I’m not going to let that happen to my family again.’” And a participant added “I don’t think that I could go back to being so peripherally involved in my children’s lives.”

Participants noted that the pandemic didn’t necessarily create the challenges that women are

experiencing during the crisis, “but it continues to exacerbate them.” A participant commented, “I’m hopeful that expectations of mothers and other caregivers have gotten a little bit more realistic.” They further discovered “we don’t have to put that pressure on ourselves and make things seem perfect” or “be amazing at everything.” Similarly, a participant noted, “we wake up and put our capes on; we want to be it all, do it all. And I think sometimes it’s okay to wave the white flag and just say ‘this is hard.’” Another participant added she had accepted the fact that she needed to lower her standards: “Like if this house is a mess, it just has to be a mess; and that just has to be okay.” And, a participant concluded, “we are all in crisis, and we are all dealing with traumatic effects of this pandemic; and it’s going to have an impact on everything we do.”

A participant observed that because of the pandemic, “we have come to an historic moment, as we are past the ‘You can have it all, girl!’” rhetoric. She continued that mothers need to talk about how motherhood is difficult and “we need to figure out strategies together” instead of pretending like “we don’t really need any help.” She added that it would be beneficial to “go back to some of those historical roots [of the women’s movement] of being in solidarity and community with one another, regardless of if there’s a global pandemic or not.”

One participant explained, “I wish that workplaces provided more platforms” for mothers to network with each other, as colleagues would understand “the challenges of our particular workplaces.” She noted that “if we want our organizations to change, to be more family-friendly,” having allies across the organization who can “plan together, brainstorm, and strategize . . . would be incredibly powerful.” She concluded that though this time period is unique, “these challenges are not necessarily unique;” and we can utilize this global crisis “as an opportunity to rethink, reshape, re-imagine how we do all of this.”

4. Discussion

The findings in this study expand the working mother literature by illustrating the experiences of working mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Study results highlight that pre-pandemic challenges for working mothers were exacerbated by the worldwide health crisis (Calarco et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021; Lyttelton, 2020; Raile et al., 2020). And participants provided poignant examples of how the burden of managing the pandemic’s impact on work and family life has fallen disproportionately on mothers (Raile et al., 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, working mothers had systems in place to support their multiple roles, including childcare, housekeeping services, and outsourcing meal preparation (Herlihy & Hermann, 2019). During the pandemic, mothers had to operate without most of these systems. In a work-family balancing act that was already tenuous (Collins, 2019; Hermann et al., 2019; Hermann et al., 2020; Hermann & Neale-McFall, 2018), the significant increase in childcare responsibilities was particularly detrimental, especially for mothers of toddlers and younger school-age children (Alon et al., 2020; Calarco et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021). Participants’ experiences also reflected that keeping up with household responsibilities is complicated by the constant presence of family members (Calarco et al.,

2020). Furthermore, the participants highlighted that they had increased responsibilities in terms of providing their family with meals, as school lunches and dining out were not options during the pandemic. And, for several participants, their increased second shift responsibilities were compounded by increased eldercare responsibilities.

Participants illustrated that the intensive second shift expectations for mothers in this culture prior to the pandemic still remained, expectations that fathers do not experience as women are judged much more harshly than men on their parenting and the appearance of their homes (Hermann et al., 2019; Hermann & Neale-McFall, 2018; Lyttelton et al., 2020). The findings in this study also support research indicating that women still hold an inequitable share of the second shift (Hermann et al., 2019; Hermann et al., 2020, Hermann & Neale-McFall, 2018; Slaughter, 2015). Even when participants reported sharing second shift activities relatively equally, they still engaged in the often invisible mental labor of managing the second shift (Damingler, 2019; Hermann et al., 2019; Hermann et al., 2020; Slaughter, 2015). And this “mental load” had increased given all of the logistical challenges that had to be navigated during the pandemic (Damingler, 2019, p. 610).

In addition to managing their previous and new pandemic-related responsibilities, participants were expected to remain productive at work. Yet they described the challenges of working from home, including the lack of time to engage in “deep work” (Newport, 2016) as they were constantly interrupted by their children. They further referenced an additional challenge for work-family integration when working from home: the norms related to the invisibility of family in the workplace. And despite participants’ observations that video calls from home make it impossible to keep one’s family hidden, the implications of expectations that video calls mirror conference room environments remain unaddressed.

Some participants experienced support for mothers at work, including trauma-informed leadership. Participants described how support at work increased their commitment to employers. Yet, in spite of the support, many participants noted that the worldwide health crisis had not changed the demands of their jobs. Participants further expressed concern about the long-term implications related to their job performance during the pandemic.

Some participants’ experiences reflected literature on insufficient policies and norms for mothers in the workforce (Hermann et al., 2019; Hermann et al., 2020; Hermann & Neale-McFall, 2018; Slaughter, 2015). Several participants did not have access to maternity leave and other family-friendly policies. Some received discriminatory messages, including that if they attended to family responsibilities, they would not appear as committed to their jobs (Herlihy & Hermann, 2019). And a few of the participants had changed professions prior to the pandemic, because their work was not compatible with motherhood. These experiences further illustrate that the glass ceiling and the maternal wall continue to present barriers for mothers (Williams & Segal, 2003).

Participants also alluded to the mythical ‘having it all’ narrative (Connolly & Ghodsee, 2014; Culross et al., 2008). Their experiences reflected Culross et al.’s (2008) observation that “many women

internalize cultural myths regarding the ‘ideal’ mother and the ‘superwoman’ (‘I must do it all, do it all perfectly, and never ask for help’), thereby placing pressure on themselves to achieve unrealistic standards” (p. 156). Participants further described a heightened pandemic-superwoman narrative, as they were expected to manage significantly increased second shift activities with unremitting work expectations. And, participants noted they still were expected to approximate cultural ideals of beauty as well.

Participants shared strategies for managing multiple roles during a pandemic. These strategies included seeking social support as the health crisis created situations that could be distressing and isolating. Participants further explained that friends, family, and colleagues served as their support systems during the pandemic, providing examples reminiscent of the solidarity and community roots of the women’s movement in the 1960s (Collins, 2009).

Participants also clarified that in spite of the challenges they faced, they experienced numerous benefits from being in the workforce (Hermann et al., 2019; Hermann et al., 2020; Hermann & Neale-McFall, 2018). Furthermore, almost all of the participants talked about silver linings of the pandemic, including being able to spend more time with their children (Calarco et al., 2020). And as employers have realized that certain work tasks can be effectively completed from home, participants anticipated seizing this opportunity to advocate for engaging in more telecommuting in order to continue being a more integral part of their children’s lives.

Additional pandemic silver linings included the opportunity to reassess priorities. Many participants decided to opt out of contemporary motherhood standards as they realized they were impossible to uphold when dealing with the effects of a pandemic (Calarco et al., 2020). Thus, participants concluded that the pandemic has provided an opportunity to re-imagine working motherhood.

The circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic further amplify the need for continued revision of women’s second shift expectations as well as better workplace support for mothers. Participants’ narratives reflect the benefits of replacing superwoman ideals with supportive, communal motherhood norms. Study findings reiterate that modifying intensive work expectations and providing a family-friendly work infrastructure (e.g., paid family leave, affordable childcare) can increase mothers’ retention in the workplace, and will better align workers in the United States with workers in other developed countries (Calarco et al., 2020; Collins, 2019; Hermann & Neale-McFall, 2018; Miller & St. Julien, 2020; Slaughter, 2015). Participants’ accounts further highlight the need for leaders to acknowledge the impact of events such as a worldwide pandemic, and adjust expectations accordingly (Collins et al. 2021). Considering the pandemic has magnified the challenges that working mothers were already encountering, this crisis presents renewed urgency and a corresponding opportunity to create norms and policies that better support working mothers.

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