

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
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SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY



**LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EMPLOYED MOTHERS RAISING
TODDLERS IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA**

By

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*A Thesis Submitted to College of Education and Language Studies School of
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College of Education and Language Studies
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Declaration

I, the undersigned, declare that this study entitled “Lived Experiences of Employed Mothers Raising Toddlers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia” is my original work and has not been presented for a master’s degree in any other university, and that all sources of materials used for the study have been duly acknowledged.

Declared by: Hawi Birhanu

Signature _____

Date _____

Certificate

This is to certify that the Thesis entitled “Lived Experience of Employed Mothers Raising Toddlers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia” submitted to Addis Ababa University, School of Psychology for the award of Masters of Developmental Psychology and is a record of research work carried out by Miss Hawi Birhanu under our guidance and supervision. Therefore, we hereby declare that no part of this Thesis has been submitted to any other university or institutions for the award of any degree or diploma.

Research Advisor: Dr. Teka Zewdie. (PhD)

Signature _____

Date _____

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Abstract

This study evaluates the lived experiences of employed mothers raising toddlers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It explores the experiences of employed mothers navigating childcare in the settings of changing gender roles, rapid urbanization, and limited institutional support. Although the essential developmental requirements of children between the ages of one and three are well acknowledged, there has been less focus on the emotional and practical challenges faced by mothers managing both work and caregiving responsibilities. The study was inspired by the shortage of research tailored to African, urban, especially in areas where formal childcare options are limited and cultural norms emphasize the importance of a mother's presence and used qualitative phenomenological methodology. Data was collected through in depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with ten employed mothers in Addis Ababa raising toddlers between the ages of one and three years, who were chosen through purposeful sampling and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was done. The findings revealed four key themes: (1) persistent role conflict and emotional distress, e.g., guilt, concern, and social criticism; (2) adaptive coping strategies such as time management, in-formal support systems, and reframing of emotions; (3) transformation in maternal identity through resilience and restructuring of success; and (4) perceived impact on toddler development, particularly in emotional attachment and quality of stand-in care. These interactions underscore the trade-offs mothers consistently need to make within the context of weak institutional systems and high cultural demands. The study concluded that without responsive and culturally appropriate interventions, both maternal health and child development remain at risk. It recommends policy actions such as expanding access to well-regulated and low-cost childcare provisions, promoting flexible workspaces, and establishing community-based support systems reflecting the life circumstances of working mothers in Ethiopian urban setting.

Keywords: Working Mothers; Toddler Care; Role Conflict; Coping Mechanisms; Ethiopia

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Acronyms

1. WHO: World Health Organization
2. UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
3. CSA: Childcare Support Arrangements
4. IPA: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
5. SES: Socioeconomic Status
6. MD5: Message-Digest Algorithm

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

A child's earliest years, between the ages of 1 and 3, mark a foundational social, emotional, and cognitive development period. Children undergo rapid development at this period and could learn or acquire such things as language, social skills, and basic cognitive abilities. Experiences influence physical health, future learning, and emotional resilience in those initial years. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), an enriching, stable, and supportive environment in those formative ages is essential for a child's well-being and long-term development. The period is consequently critical for childcare and tends to fall to mothers, who have historically been assigned to be the primary caregivers. Maternal care is key in developing secure attachment and emotional resilience, which is integral to healthy childhood development (Bowlby, 1982). Despite evolving conceptions of parental roles toward shared responsibility, most societies still tend to conceptualize mothers as primary caregivers (Lamb, 2010).

Although considerable efforts have been focused on fulfilling the developmental needs of young children, realities experienced by those who offer this care, particularly employed mothers, have not yet gained as much importance, at least in urban African settings. In Ethiopia, urbanization and economic changes force more women into labor (CSA, 2022), forcing mothers to balance demanding jobs and care for their young. Double pressures arise due to social, cultural, and financial dimensions created by their daily lives (UNICEF, 2020).

Most existing research on maternal workforce participation and childcare has been in Western societies in which support systems, such as subsidized childcare and paid leave, have been relatively well developed (Lewis & Campbell, 2007). Even in South Asia, research tends to concentrate on rural communities. Thus, little is known in existing literature about the specific challenges urban mothers in urban centers such as Addis Ababa, where support institutions are weak and affordable childcare is in short supply.

For the mothers, this juggling act between work and child-rearing is a daily battle of fatigue, emotional guilt, and worry. Most employed mothers in Addis Ababa find themselves torn between the demands of their work and the desire to be physically and emotionally present with their toddlers. The lack of cheap, reliable childcare often leads them to place their children in lower-quality arrangements, leaving them to experience fear and inadequacy. In addition, cultural norms that identify ideal motherhood as a constant presence also heighten their stress, as they are judged against unattainable cultural ideals. These functional and emotional pressures not only affect their well-being but also limit their ability to be immersed fully in either sphere, care, or work, without concern. For example, in Addis Ababa, urbanization and rapid economic growth have disintegrated support networks such as extended family childcare, so mothers have few choices for childcare beyond unreliable and informal arrangements (Tiruneh, 2019).

In doing so, critical components of young childhood care, emotional attachment, consistent daily routines, and interactive responsiveness, become at risk. However, existing local Ethiopian literature concentrates more on childcare infrastructure and employment trends rather than mothers' personal experiences in managing such problems (Ayele, 2021).

Since mothers play a crucial role in future generations' well-being and development, understanding how they manage the double burden of work and childcare in fast-developing urban environments is necessary. This research aimed to fill an important gap by investigating the daily lives of employed mothers who are raising toddlers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. From a qualitative perspective, this research explored mothers' coping mechanisms, emotional strain, and creative adjustments in managing work and care. These insights are necessary in developing culturally responsive and pragmatic policies to support working families and enhance early childhood development in Ethiopia.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

With growing numbers of mothers in Addis Ababa joining the workforce, they encounter the multifaceted challenge of balancing professional responsibilities, and the intensive care demands of toddlers (CSA, 2022). Early childhood requires predictable emotional support and sensitive

care, yet this is hard to maintain in an environment in which institutional support for employed mothers, as accessible daycare, or flexible work policies, is low (UNICEF, 2020). Even though studies have frequently investigated the impact of mothers' employment on child development, research has generally focused primarily upon quantifiable measures rather than mothers' everyday lived experiences.

The current literature concerning maternal work and childcare centers primarily in Western societies, in which support institutions like subsidized daycare and paid parental leave are common. This leaves a large gap in understanding specific issues for mothers in urban African environments like Addis Ababa, in which such support is minimal. Little research investigates how limited affordable and dependable childcare arrangements affect child development and mothers' well-being in such settings. In Addis Ababa, growing economic development has weakened traditional support networks, like extended family-based child-rearing, leaving mothers to turn to low-quality, unavailable caregiving arrangements. These demands are further intensified by ideological requirements to idealize constant mother-child interaction, which adds further emotional pressure to employed mothers. Limited support institutions not only limit mothers' work and care balance realization but also have immense implications for child development.

Inadequate and non-responsive care can undermine such foundational components of infant and toddler care as emotional attachment, predictable routines, and social interaction necessary for brain and emotional development. In addition, the psychological burden of leaving children in substandard care settings can contribute to greater feelings of stress and emotional conflict for mothers, impairing them from achieving overall well-being and quality nurturing care when they do manage to be at home. This research aimed to address these gaps through an investigation of employed mothers' lived experiences in Addis Ababa, highlighting this gap and its impact on mothers' well-being and child development. In this manner, the research attempted to provide context-specific research-based policy and support systems for understanding and accommodating employed mothers' specific requirements in urban Africa.

1.3 Research Questions

This research will be based upon the following research questions:

- How do employed mothers in Addis Ababa perceive and describe their experiences of motherhood and work?
- What are the meanings that they assign to their role as employees and mothers?
- What are the coping strategies that they develop to balance or manage the dual roles?
- How do these experiences shape their perceptions of motherhood, work, and childcare?

1.4 Research Objectives

1.4.1 General Objective

To examine the daily lived experiences of employed mothers in Addis Ababa with toddlers, focusing on how they experience and navigate the challenges of work and childcare.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

- To explore mothers' lived experiences and perceptions of balancing work and motherhood.
- To identify and explore coping strategies used by employed mothers in balancing dual roles.
- To examine how such experiences influence mothers' perceptions of their roles as caregivers and professionals.
- To identify and assess how such experiences affect the social, cognitive, and emotional support mothers provide to their toddlers.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research aimed to shed light on the daily lives of employed mothers who have toddlers in Addis Ababa, gaining rich qualitative insights into caregiving challenges, emotional dynamics, and work-life balance strategies they embrace each day. With its emphasis on personal testimonies rather than aggregated data, the research uncovered mothers' ways of coping with combined demands of formal labor and toddler care, and explored the kinds of support, such as emotional, institutional, and social, that best enrich their caregiving.

Academically, research contributes to developmental psychology and work-family research by broadening the perspective from statistical correlations to mothers' lived realities. It advances knowledge about what influences maternal caregiving behavior in terms of environmental and socio-cultural constraints at a critical stage of development. This qualitative emphasis is specific in an Ethiopian context, in which economic transformation, deeply ingrained gender conventions, and weak state/economy-based provision generate specific pressures upon employed mothers, circumstances largely unaddressed in research using Western-based frameworks.

For mothers who work and for caregivers, the research provides pragmatic insights into navigating child-rearing in toddlerhood, decision-making about childcare, and maintaining emotional well-being. Policy makers can use the lessons learned to develop more responsive, family-supportive policies, available daycare programs, and employer-sponsored support programs. Childcare workers can also use an understanding of mothers' lived worlds to design nurturing, culturally responsive environments consistent with child development theory and parental needs.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The study is organized into four principal dimensions: methodology, conceptual emphasis, timeline, and participant selection. Methodologically, this research concentrated on a strictly qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of formally employed mothers raising toddlers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Data collection primarily involved semi-structured interviews designed to understand rich personal accounts of the emotional, practical, and social challenges these mothers face. Furthermore, informal observations and detailed descriptive field notes were used when the interviews were conducted, enhancing the contextual depth, and understanding of participants' experiences. The qualitative methodology helped capture the narratives and insights into how employed mothers explore the demands of caregiving and employment.

Conceptually, the research focused on mothers' experiences of balancing childcare and formal employment. Raising toddlers, a phase marked by emotional and physical caregiving demands. Key themes explored include the notion of work-life balance, internalized societal expectations of motherhood, emotional challenges related to maternal absence, the role and impact of support systems, and mothers' views and reactions to their toddlers' developmental processes. The study

deliberately emphasized mothers' subjective perceptions and decision-making processes regarding childcare within their unique economic and socio-cultural contexts. It explicitly did not investigate measurable outcomes related to children's physical, cognitive, or educational development, such as motor skills or school readiness.

Employed Mothers' selection was geographically limited to various districts within Addis Ababa, strategically representing diverse work sectors and childcare arrangements. Employing purposive and convenience sampling methods, the research included rich, detailed information reflecting differences in socio-economic status and working conditions among mothers. The study excluded informal workers, self-employed women, and other primary caregivers (e.g., fathers, extended family), focusing narrowly on formally employed women with toddlers aged between one and three years to deeply understand the challenges faced by this specific demographic.

The research spanned nine months, providing actual time for establishing meaningful interviews and performing a rigorous thematic analysis. This duration allowed for extensive engagement with participants, deep exploration of recurrent themes, and sufficient examination of mothers' lived experiences in balancing work and caregiving within the urban context of Addis Ababa. The scope remained strictly limited to the city's context.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of employed mothers raising toddlers in Addis Ababa, it has certain limitations. The research focused exclusively on formally employed mothers, excluding informal sector workers and self-employed women, which limits the generalizability of the findings to these groups. Additionally, the small sample size of 10 participants, though appropriate for a qualitative phenomenological study, may not capture the full diversity of experiences across different socioeconomic backgrounds or professions. The study also relied on self-reported data, which could be subject to biases such as social desirability or recall inaccuracies. Lastly, the research was confined to Addis Ababa, and its findings may not be applicable to rural or other urban settings in Ethiopia with differing cultural and institutional contexts.

1.8 Operational Definition of Terms

Employed mothers: Women working in paid jobs outside the home, either full-time, part-time, or on a contract, and at the same time being responsible for caring for toddlers of one to three years of age. This excludes women in unpaid household work, informal activity, or self-employment.

Work-life balance: Whether a mother can balance business responsibilities with caregiving duties. This refers to her ability to manage time, stay resilient, gain the support of both informal and formal networks, and balance the competing needs of work and family.

Childcare arrangements: Methods of mothers to secure the care of their toddlers during the workday. These can include formal care, in the form of licensed day care centers and preschools, or informal care by relatives, neighbors, or household workers in home-based, unlicensed environments.

Support systems: Formal support (such as employer benefits, governmental programs, and institutional childcare) and informal support (such as support from spouses, extended family, neighbors, or networks in the community) that help enable mothers to balance their caregiving and work obligations.

Socioeconomic status (SES): An aggregate measure of a mother's education, income, and type of employment. SES will potentially shape the availability and quality of childcare, the flexibility of the workplace, and the presence of social support, and will be accounted for in sampling design and analysis to put participants' experiences in context.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter critically reviews literature related to employed mothers who are raising toddler children in urban African contexts. It integrates theoretical frameworks and findings from research about early childhood development, maternal employment, emotional well-being, childcare arrangement, and attachment, and identifies gaps in literature with regards to the lived experiences in low-resource urban environments like Addis Ababa.

2.1 Theoretical Literature Review

2.1.1 Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is credited to the works of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Bretherton, 1992). John Bowlby (1982) states that the need for attachment is natural and that aspects of children's growth cannot be understood fully without assessing the relationship with the mother or mother figure. He emphasizes that early emotional interaction between infants and caregivers, usually mothers, is central to healthy psychological and social growth. Ainsworth et al. (1978) from their research, concluded that children can develop different patterns of attachment based on caregivers' characteristics such as levels of responsiveness, sensitivity, and consistency. Disrupted attachment in the period of early childhood (ages 1–3) can result in emotional insecurity, problems in self-regulation and behavior all through adolescence, regardless of the caregiver relationship during the later years. (Ispe et al, 2017; O'Conner et al, 2019)

2.1.2 Erikson's Psychosocial Theory and Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory

Erikson's psychosocial theory (1950, 1963) views toddlerhood (ages 1.5–3 years) as a stage of development marked by the struggle between autonomy and feelings of shame or doubt. During this time, children strive for independence, and reliable caregiving helps them build self-assurance. In contrast, inconsistent presence, due to a mother's other obligations such as work obligations, can lead to insecurity and increased dependence.

Piaget's (1952) cognitive development theory states that the evolution of a child's learning happens in four different stages. The second stage, which is the preoperational stage (ages 2–7),

highlights children's dependence on symbolic thought and their egocentric viewpoints. Parenting during this phase requires patience, verbal support, and the ability to manage emotions, all of which can be influenced by maternal exhaustion and a lack of available time.

These developmental theories emphasize the significance of consistent, responsive caregiving in early childhood. Mothers who work and have restricted time for direct interaction might struggle to be consistently present to help the children navigate doubt and develop autonomy or to facilitate activities such as imaginative play, narrative evolution, and reasoning discussions that are important for a child's development.

2.1.3 Ecological Systems Theory and Maternal Work-Life Navigation

Bronfenbrenner (1979), in his Ecological Systems Theory, describes that development is affected by an interaction of different aspects or systems of the environment. These systems are the microsystem (family, childcare), mesosystem (inter-system relations), exosystem (indirect effects like workplaces), macrosystem (societal expectations and norms), and chronosystem (change over time). This theory illustrates how mothers' and children's experiences are shaped not just by direct interaction but also by larger structures and expectations.

The microsystem is the actual face-to-face encounter between child and the parent. Day-to-day interruptions, like having a toddler get ill, are loaded onto mothers in the guise of having to perform daily trade-offs between work commitments and caregiving, resulting in constant stress and emotional exhaustion causing microsystem tensions. (Cooklin et al., 2015).

The lack of coordination between workplaces and childcare facilities forces mothers into spontaneous arrangements which leads to disconnects in the mesosystem. Fragmentation within institutions leads to elevated stress levels and impaired job performance or insecure care arrangements (Mousaid & De Moortel, 2022).

Ethiopian cultural expectations continue to situate women as caregivers (Debsu, 2009), despite heightened female labor. Incongruity accounts for intrapersonal dissonance and extra personal criticism, particularly remembering widespread suspicion of non-parental care.

In Addis Ababa, the lives of employed mothers are situated in intersecting systems: quality of childcare (microsystem), employer policies (exosystem), cultural norms (macrosystem), and urban family role changes (chronosystem). Rather than fragmenting into separate isolated problems, this system allows us to see how system forces build stress, caregiving, and maternal health.

2.1.3 Role Strain Theory: The Hidden Labor of “Double Shifts”

The Role Strain Theory is a fitting construct to theorize employed mothers' psychological and emotional burdens of performing multiple roles. Work and caregiving responsibilities clash when these two come to the foreground; duties outpace accessible time, energy, or resources (Goode, 1960). They are particularly stringent in the situation of mothers with toddlers that need intensive care during the first years of development.

Within urban Ethiopia, this "double burden" is further augmented by cultural expectations placing women at the center as caregivers, and a further diminished access to formal childcare. Mothers bear not just professional obligations but also a massive amount of cognitive labor, such as sorting out medical check-ups, mealtimes, and milestone tracking, even when working as full-time employees (Daminger, 2020). This "invisible mental load" translates into long-term stress and emotional burnout.

The added emotional labor of having to stay calm and courteous at home after getting back from the workplace increases the strain even more. Maternal emotional labor is institutionally unsupported but socially expected, and performed by herself in most instances, with no institutional recognition (Lively et al., 2023).

Within collectivistic cultures like Ethiopia, family, and kinship obligations (like religious ceremonies, family care) may exist to offer economic support but carry cultural demands that lead to maternal burnout (Tadele, 2021). Rather than stigmatizing maternal burnout as individual failure, Role Strain Theory focuses on structural impediments, such as authoritarian work culture, meager maternity leave policies, and idealized gendered roles, as the normative sources of stress.

2.2 Cultural and Social Context in Ethiopia

2.2.1 Traditional Roles and Support Structures

The society within Ethiopia has deeply embedded cultural gender roles, with women, particularly mothers, being primary caregivers with emotional caregiving and domestic management responsibilities. Childcare with emotional support as well as assistance in caregiving tasks was at the center of extended family networks within historic contexts. But rapid urbanization and socioeconomic change undermine such established systems. Cities like Addis Ababa have more nuclear households, reducing kinship-based care and the prevalence of informal childcare regimes reliant on neighbors or unqualified domestic staff. Such informal systems, while crucial, might not always fulfill the developmental and emotional needs of toddlers due to heterogeneity in caregiving quality.

2.2.2 Impact on urbanization and Institutional Change

The speed of urbanization creates pressure on Ethiopia's traditional childcare institutions (Tefera & Hagos, 2016). Childcare facilities, though on the rise, remain limited and occasionally inaccessible or unaffordable to many urban households (Berhane et al, 2018). Thus, many working women must turn to extended family, neighborhood networks, or nonprofessional caregivers, which may not possess the ability of providing consistent, developmentally appropriate care. This transformation from traditional kin-based care to informal or inadequate childcare settings raises role conflict and personal tension. Mothers find themselves between social norms of constant availability, economic constraint, and the conditions of limited support, precipitating role overload and emotional distress.

2.3 Maternal Employment, Parenting, and Work-Life Balance

2.3.1 Navigating the Double Burden

Globally and in the local context, employed mothers of young children undergo a complex intermingling of work, caregiving, and personal health. This much-touted "double burden" captures the practical and emotional struggle to juggle paid employment with unpaid care labor.

In Ethiopian cities, where formal childcare options are limited (Melaku, 2019; Fajinmi & Naqvi, 2025) and maternal presence is embedded in cultural norms, these tensions are particularly acute.

Role conflict and role overload are the most used outcomes, with conflicting expectations between employment and care work generating tension, emotional tension, and reduced parental engagement. Maternal mental health acts as the mediating variable of central concern here: while role stress enhances, emotional functioning diminishes, which in turn reduces the capacity for responsive care and the development of a secure attachment during the toddler years (Belsky & Eggeleen, 2002; Greenberger et al., 1994).

2.3.2 Maternal Emotional Well-Being and Cultural Expectations

Cultural ideals in Ethiopia idealize the constant availability of mothers, increasing feelings of guilt or failure when mothers leave their toddlers to alternative or informal care arrangements. Such emotional pressures are also compounded by the lack of institutional support, i.e., affordable daycare, flexible working hours, or paid vacation, that would cause mothers to decide between personal or professional instability (Gebrekidan et al., 2020).

These emotional pressures also reframe how mothers view themselves in both work and family realms. Cultural expectations internalized might cause mothers to question their ability to meet the demands, especially when caregiving duties are conflicting with work performance or work obligations conflicting with caregiving roles. These emotional forces not only frame maternal identity but how mothers conceptualize children's growth and well-being.

2.3.3 Impacts on Toddler Development

While early research suggested that maternal work during toddlerhood could have a negative influence on behavior, most significantly where caregiving quality was poor (Belsky & Eggeleen, 2002), subsequent work has described the situation as more subtle. Research in the U.S. and other countries has shown that employed mothers' toddlers can do just as well or even better, provided they receive stable, emotionally attuned care from their mothers when not working or from consistent substitute caregivers (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2002; Maccoby & Lewis, 2003).

This outcome accentuates the importance of quality over quantity of care. Toddlers fare better when mothers can maintain emotionally engaged, interactive routines within restricted home time. Employed mothers push back against this with the creation of rituals of bonding, quality time, and the utilization of extended kin or childcare networks to provide emotional continuity.

2.3.4 Structural and Relational Moderators

Capacity to attain work-family balance and maintain high-quality parenting is highly influenced by structural factors. Mothers working in flexible, supportive occupations with sick leave, leave time, or breastfeeding benefits experience reduced stress. They are more emotionally available compared to those working in inflexible, low-wage jobs. Such mothers tend to experience increased stress, exhaustion, and lower parenting quality (Greenberger et al., 1994).

In collectivist societies like Ethiopia, large families can make maternal care easy and difficult. While family ties can deliver required child-rearing assistance, they can also reinforce patriarchal gender norms that place all the care labor on mothers even when they are working outside the home (Tadele, 2021).

2.3.5 Reframing Maternal Strain

Ultimately, infant developmental outcomes and maternal well-being are not a function of maternal employment per se, but a complex set of predictors, such as caring responsiveness, support networks, cultural attitudes, and working environment flexibility. Mothers' subjective experiences of constraint and resilience suggest institutional and societal attitudinal transformation necessary to facilitate women playing dual roles.

Rather than viewing mothers' work as universally problematic or universally beneficial, a more helpful approach analyzes how caregiving and developmental pathways are shaped by relational, cultural, and structural contexts. For mothers who work in Addis Ababa, recognition of their emotional labor, structural concerns, and adaptive strategies is necessary to designing helpful, context-specific interventions.

2.4 Traditional Institutions, Community Care, and Changing Support Dynamics

Traditionally, Ethiopian childcare was embedded in extended family and community networks. Grandparents, relatives, and neighbors played active roles in caregiving, creating a shared model that supported maternal well-being and child development. This collective system reduced the burden on individual mothers and fostered strong emotional and cultural ties.

However, urbanization and socioeconomic changes have weakened these traditional structures, especially in cities like Addis Ababa. Many employed mothers now rely on informal caregivers, such as neighbors or untrained domestic workers, whose availability and caregiving quality can be inconsistent. Without dependable extended family support, mothers face increased role strain and stress, especially when balancing full-time work with toddler care.

This shift highlights a growing gap in caregiving support, particularly for low-income urban mothers. The decline of communal care, coupled with the lack of affordable formal childcare, underscores the need for policy interventions that both supports employed mothers and rebuild community-based systems in modern urban contexts.

2.5 Cultural Context and Maternal Employment in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, traditional gender norms continue to cast mothers as primary caregivers, even as more women enter the workforce, especially in urban areas like Addis Ababa. This shift creates a “double burden,” where mothers are expected to perform exceptionally both at work and at home. The lack of affordable, quality childcare and supportive workplace policies deepens this strain, often forcing mothers to rely on informal care, such as relatives or domestic workers, that may lack the structure necessary for toddlers’ optimal development.

Cultural expectations around constant maternal presence can lead to guilt and emotional stress, especially when mothers struggle to meet societal ideals without adequate support. These tensions are further amplified by rigid work schedules, limited maternity protections, and scarce parenting resources, which negatively impact both maternal well-being and the quality of interaction with children.

Despite these challenges, many mothers create coping mechanisms, such as adjusting work hours, relying on extended family, or building informal care networks. While these strategies offer some relief, they often come at the cost of self-care and increased emotional labor.

Overall, Ethiopia's evolving socio-cultural landscape presents unique challenges to employed mothers of toddlers. Addressing these requires not only individual adaptation but also systemic interventions, such as flexible work policies, subsidized childcare, and mental health support, to promote healthier outcomes for both mothers and their children.

2.6 Gaps in the Literature

Despite empirical work on international affairs that took into account the interrelationship between mothers' work and children's development, context-specific evidence in Ethiopia for 1–3-year-olds' developmental outcomes is scarce. Ongoing literature primarily draws inferences from outcomes in high-income, Western settings with rather different cultural, economic, and institutional environments compared to low- and middle-income environments like in Ethiopia.

The only important lacuna in the current literature is the relative lack of concern for informal childcare arrangements common among urban Ethiopia. While most employed mothers do use extended family, neighbors, or untrained domestic workers for childcare, little research has been done on how these arrangements affect toddler development and maternal health. These informal arrangements are not always cognitively responsive, emotionally supportive, or physically caring to maximize developing.

In addition, few research studies explore the crossover of employed mothers and work environment, societal expectations, and gender roles in Ethiopia. Long working hours, lack of formal childcare facilities, and societal expectations based on caregiving roles for women are all causal factors to the complexity of work-life balance for Ethiopian mothers. Nevertheless, developmental, and psychosocial consequences of these complexities are insufficiently documented in the literature.

There is also a striking lack of qualitative studies on the lived reality of Ethiopian mothers. Although research is quantitatively driven, this cannot fully capture the intricacy with which

mothers carry out their two roles of professional and caretaker. There appears to be a clear necessity for qualitatively informed, longitudinal research in exploring how work and care activities are being negotiated among Ethiopian mothers and how adjustment affects child and maternal outcomes alike.

The current research aims at addressing such needs by putting its focus on employed mothers of toddlers in Ethiopia on their real experiences. It will examine critically how cultural customs, social norms, and caregivers' networks of informal care affect parenting practice and development trajectory. With a focus on cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development, the research will yield a deeper, culturally enriched understanding of maternal work in Ethiopia. Findings should be of useful information for policymakers, teachers, and health workers to assist families in early childhood.

2.7. Summary of the Literature Review

Literature review is founded on the everyday life of employed mothers with toddlers in Ethiopia, focusing on the intersection between mothers' work and child development and how it is influenced by social and cultural conditions. Several overarching themes were revealed in the literature review, and they illuminated the challenges and opportunities presented to employed mothers as they balance care and work.

It begins with an overview of the key theoretical frameworks guiding the understanding of maternal employment and child development. Attachment Theory emphasizes the importance of emotional interactions between mothers and toddlers, suggesting that secure attachments can be maintained even when mothers work, provided that alternative caregiving environments are nurturing and responsive. Ecological Systems Theory highlights how various nested systems, such as family, community, workplace, and societal norms, influence maternal experiences and child outcomes. Role Strain Theory focuses on the psychological and emotional burdens faced by mothers juggling multiple roles, leading to stress and emotional exhaustion, particularly in urban settings. These theories collectively underscore the complex interplay of individual, relational, and systemic factors shaping maternal well-being and child development.

The literature indicates that much current knowledge is predominantly quantitative and based on Western contexts, which may not fully capture the realities of Ethiopian urban mothers. Traditionally, extended family and community networks supported caregiving, but rapid urbanization and socioeconomic changes have weakened these structures, leading to increased reliance on informal care arrangements such as neighbors and domestic workers. These informal systems often lack the capacity to meet toddlers' developmental and emotional needs fully. Additionally, maternal employment in Ethiopia is closely linked to cultural expectations that place a heavy caregiving burden on women, resulting in a "double burden" that causes role strain and emotional stress.

Despite mothers' resilience and adaptability, these pressures impact both maternal health and child developmental outcomes. The literature reveals a significant gap in qualitative, context-specific research exploring how cultural norms, social support networks, and workplace policies interact to shape the lived experiences of Ethiopian mothers. Filling this gap is crucial to developing policies and interventions tailored to Ethiopia's unique socio-cultural landscape, ultimately supporting employed mothers, and promoting optimal development for their children.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A phenomenological research design is used for qualitative research, which depends on exploring and describing individuals' lived experiences regarding a specific phenomenon. The core focus is to uncover the fundamental meaning of these experiences by examining participants' views, feelings, and interpretations while consciously setting aside the researcher's preconceived notions or biases (Delve,2022)

A phenomenological design was selected as the most appropriate and powerful approach for studying the lived experience of mothers raising toddlers in Addis Ababa because it prioritizes their subjective realities, facilitates the discovery of the essence of their experiences, indicated rich and detailed data, gives voice to their unique perspectives, and inherently aligns with the goal of understanding "what" it means and "how" it is experienced within its specific context.

3.2 Research Approach

The research used a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research methodology focuses on understanding and interpreting individuals' or groups' meanings, experiences, and perceptions. It examines phenomena in depth through methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations, with the aspiration of reaching the depth and intricacy of human actions and social interaction (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative research was particularly suited to the examination of the lived experiences of working mothers of toddlers in Addis Ababa, as it allows an understanding of their individual stories, concerns, coping, and social relationships. It provided rich descriptive data that has the possibility of revealing the emotional and social truths about these women that could be missed by quantitative methods. Besides, qualitative design helped in exploring cultural matters influencing their experiences and perceptions in the specific context of Addis Ababa, yielding insights that are required in devising targeted support systems.

3.3 Study Area

The research was conducted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a rapidly growing capital city in which the expanding number of women in the workforce has resulted in more complicated work and care interactions on the part of employed mothers. The research targeted the mothers of Addis Ababa. Addis Ababa's unusual urban context, in which both formal and informal sectors of employment exist, gender values are shifting, and a variety of childcare arrangements are available, provides a fertile ground in which to examine the lives of employed mothers. Childcare in the city ranges from regulated centers to informal domiciliary care and traditional family networks, respectively, and in turn, impacts how the work and caregiving duties of the mothers are carried out. By sampling different neighborhoods, the research looked at how proximity to workplaces and the availability of facilities shaped daily lives and problems.

3.4 Population, Sampling Technique, and Sample Size

3.4.1 Target Population

The study population included formally employed mothers in Addis Ababa having toddlers aged from 1-3 years. It included mothers of different professions, including healthcare, education, the public sector, and private enterprise, and mothers using diverse childcare arrangements like day care centers, family care, and networks of neighbors.

In selecting participants, attention was paid to achieving variation across multiple social factors, such as age, socioeconomic status, educational level, and job type, to ensure the research reflects the diverse realities of urban employed mothers. These variables were documented during participant intake and used during data analysis to detect patterns, divergences, or contextual factors that shape maternal experience. The study targeted those mothers who have professional jobs (working at least 30 hours a week) to study work and caregiving conflicting duties, excluding self-employed and informal sector workers. Employed mothers were chosen because they are uniquely positioned at the intersection of professional and caregiving responsibilities, making them a critical group for understanding the challenges and strategies involved in balancing work and early childcare in an urban context. Their experiences offer valuable insight into institutional, social, and personal factors that influence maternal well-being and child development.

3.4.2 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where researchers intentionally select participants or cases that are most relevant to the research objectives. The goal is to gain in-depth understanding of specific phenomena by choosing information-rich cases that can provide detailed insights (Palinkas et al., 2015). This sampling method is used because it allows to focus on characteristics or qualities of a population that are relevant to the study, enabling a more detailed and nuanced exploration of the research questions. It is especially useful in qualitative research where depth of understanding is prioritized over generalizability (Tongco, 2007).

Purposive sampling criteria were developed to intentionally select participants who could best inform the lived experience of employed mothers who are raising toddlers. After establishing the purposive sampling criteria, Snow bowling recruiting tool was used to help find employed mothers who meet developed purposive sampling criteria.

The following table shows the criteria used for purposive sampling in a qualitative study on the lived experiences of employed mothers in Addis Ababa. These criteria were developed to choose participants who could offer rich, relevant, and varied insights for a phenomenological study. Participants were intentionally selected based on clear inclusion criteria that matched the objective of the research.

Table 1: Purposive Sampling Criteria

Criteria Type	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Gender	Identifies as a woman	Fathers or male caregivers
Employment Status	Formally employed (≥ 30 hours/week) in Addis Ababa	Unemployed, informally employed, or working irregular hours
Child's Age	Has at least one toddler aged 1–3 years	Has only children younger than 1 or older than 3
Motherhood Type	Both first-time mothers and mothers with two or more children included	None excluded based on number of children
Parental Role	Actively involved in toddler's daily care (even if assisted by others)	Fully delegates childcare to others (e.g., housekeepers, relatives)
Residence	Resided in Addis Ababa for 1 year or more	Resides outside Addis Ababa or recently relocated (< 1 year)
Childcare Usage	Uses external childcare (formal or informal) at least 3 days/week	Does not use any external childcare
Willingness to Participate	Willing and able to provide in-depth, voluntary interviews	Refuses to participate or withdraws consent
Language Proficiency	Able to communicate in Amharic or English	Language barriers that prevent meaningful participation
Emotional Readiness	Comfortable discussing personal and emotional experiences	Experiences distress discussing motherhood or work-related challenges

Based on the purposive sampling criteria presented in Table 1, due care was made to select participants from diverse occupation areas. This is because, the lived experiences of white-collar working mothers vary from the blue-collar mothers due to the nature of their jobs, societal expectations, practical and professional background. Accordingly, as part of the white-collar working mothers, the study has selected three master's degree holder participants with diverse

professional and practical background: university lecturer, project manager and auditor. Likewise, the study has selected three bachelor's degree holder participants (one pilot, one nurse and one lawyer) and one diploma holder who work as a secretary. In addition to selection of white-collar mothers as participants, the inclusion of blue-collar mothers instrumental to enhance the depth and richness of individual lived experiences. Thus, is because unlike the white-collar mothers, the blue-collar mothers usually face exceptional challenges in balancing work and family life. Thus, study has selected one grade ten completed participant who is working as a hairdresser and one high school completed participant working as a baker (Table 2).

Table 2. Socio demographic characteristics of study participants

Age	Education	Occupation	Number of Children	# of Toddlers	Childcare Arrangement	Hours Worked	Lived in Addis (Years)
32	Bachelor's	Pilot	1	1	Nanny & Aunt	50	32
31	Master's	Project Manager	1	1	At Parents	40	31
34	High School	Sales	1	1	In-laws	40	34
32	Master's	Auditor	1	1	Parents with Nanny	44	32
23	Diploma	Secretary	1	1	Grandmother	48	23
35	Master's	Lecturer	3	1	Daycare	40	15
28	Bachelor's	Lawyer	2	1	Daycare	40	10
37	Bachelor's	Nurse	4	1	Live-in Nanny & Father	48	20
27	High School	Baker	1	1	Neighbor	40	27
24	Grade 10	Hairdresser	2	2	Sister / Salon	55	24

3.4.3 Sample Size

This study included a total of 10 employed mothers living in Addis Ababa. In line with the phenomenological research design, the goal was not to generalize findings to a larger population but to explore the depth and richness of individual lived experiences. When it comes to qualitative research, especially in phenomenological studies, a small but information-rich sample can be appropriate. According to Creswell (2013) suggest a sample size of 5 to 25 participants is suggested for phenomenological research, while Dukes (1984) suggested 3 to 10 participants when conducting in-depth analysis. Therefore, the sample size of 10 was considered sufficient to explore the research questions meaningfully.

3.5 Instruments of Data Collection

The study employed qualitative measures to study the lived experiences of employed mothers of toddlers in Addis Ababa. The primary use was a semi-structured interview guide to have a deep understanding of daily routines, emotional challenges, and ways of coping with work and caregiving demands. Interviews focused on the experiences of the mothers rather than on assessing developmental outcomes of the children. Open-ended questions addressed the areas of work-related stresses, childcare decisions, support systems available, and social expectations. The interview format remained flexible so that new topics arising during the interviews could guide subsequent conversations but stayed in line with the primary study goals.

3.6 Procedure of Data Collection

The data collection started once ethical clearance was secured and occurred in several stages. During the first phase, ten (10) employed mothers were selected using purposive sampling from different areas and sectors of work within Addis Ababa. This aimed to capture participants with diverse levels of earnings, work conditions, and childcare practices. Clear and specific details of the purpose of the study, the rights of the participants, and the voluntariness of the participation were given to each potential participant. Informed consent was secured in writing before data collection began.

The primary data collection included in-depth interviews, ranging in duration from 30 to 60 minutes, at a time and place of the participant's choice, usually in their home or a quiet public place near their workplace. Interviews were audio-recorded and steered by the semi-structured interview guide, while also being left open to follow-up questions and new themes arising during the interview.

The last stage of the process entailed verification of the reliability of the interpretation by the researchers. Participants were also asked to examine preliminary summaries of the results, either in writing or in informal follow-up interviews, to establish if the interpretations capture their views accurately.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis adopted phenomenological procedures to examine the mundane lives of employed mothers. Interviews were transcribed and reviewed thoroughly. This began with a series of in-depth reads of the respective transcripts to familiarize oneself with the content and to identify preliminary patterns or recurring themes.

Open coding subsequently divided the text up into smaller parts, and each of these parts was analyzed in search of meaningful statements and expressions related to the study's purpose. These starting codes were created and consolidated under more general codes by axial coding, enabling the researcher to identify recurring patterns that depicted deeper meaning behind the experiences of the participants.

In the last step of the analysis, the emerging themes came together in a detailed and integrated account of the fundamental experience under research. This account captured both the events as they happened and how the participants interpreted those events. Findings were supported by a choice of excerpts from interviews and critical points of observation and provided a grounded and reflective account of the subject matter.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethics is a set of conduct codes that guide humanity and have a great deal of influence on its welfare (Cooper and Schilder, 2006). Ethical guidelines are essential to guarantee the worth and trustworthiness of the research work. It serves to shield the participants' rights, validate the findings of research, and promote responsible research conduct (Akaranga and Makau, 2016). The questions target the respondent's attitude regarding the outcome and are classified and kept private (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013). This research adhered to established ethical standards to ensure the protection of the participants' rights, dignity, and welfare during the entire research period. Every portion of the research was thoroughly examined to ensure any potential risks, and informed consent was given by the participants once a transparent explanation of the purpose of the study, the procedures, and their rights had been provided to them. The permission was modified to accommodate cultural values using translated papers and oral explanations when necessary to attain complete comprehension. Participants had their privacy ensured by the employment of pseudonyms, and personal data that might identify them were erased from the data records.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the study, thematically to portray the lived experiences of employed mothers in Addis Ababa negotiating the double demands of work and motherhood. The results are arranged in accordance with specific goals of the research: (1) lived work-caregiving experiences of mothers, (2) emotional costs and ways of coping with caregiving stress those mothers employ, (3) support networks and societal expectations that shape their experiences, and (4) implications for social, cognitive, and emotional development of their children. Through quoted words and close analysis, this chapter shed light on the findings.

The data were collected from 10 employed mothers using interview. The respondents are aged between 23 and 37. The participants of the study were from diverse professions including a pilot, project manager, sales, banker, secretary, lecturer, lawyer, nurse, baker, and hairdresser. The mothers have one to four children under age ten and they are relying heavily on informal childcare from family (parents, in-laws, and siblings), neighbors, or nannies.

The following table (Table 3) outlines key demographic information about the study participants, including age, education, occupation, number of children, and childcare arrangements.

Table 3: Key demographic features of study participants

Code	Age	Education	Occupation	No. of Children	No. of Toddlers	Childcare Arrangement	Hours Worked	Years in Addis
P01	32	Bachelor's	Pilot	1	1	Nanny & Aunt	50	32
P02	31	Master's	Project Manager	1	1	At Parents	40	31
P03	34	High School	Sales	1	1	In-laws	40	34
P04	32	Master's	Auditor	1	1	Parents with Nanny	44	32
P05	23	Diploma	Secretary	1	1	Grandmother	48	23
P06	35	Master's	Lecturer	3	1	Daycare	40	15
P07	28	Bachelor's	Lawyer	2	1	Daycare	40	10
P08	37	Bachelor's	Nurse	4	1	Live-in Nanny & Father	48	20
P09	27	High School	Baker	1	1	Neighbor	40	27
P10	24	Grade 10	Hairdresser	2	2	Sister / Salon	55	24

4.2. Lived Experiences of Balancing Work and Motherhood

This section describes the lived experiences and perceptions of employed mothers in Addis Ababa, and how they negotiate multiple aspects of balance between work and caregiving. It examines their daily activities, emotional world, and the societal presumptions and support structures around them. Direct quotes from the respondents were used to illustrate these experiences and perceptions, providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of their realities.

4.2.1. Daily Schedules and Routines

Most Participants have hectic daily schedules as they manage their working life along with the demands of motherhood. Most of them start very early in a bid to balance work and family, even as early as before dawn. The early morning rising allows them to prepare breakfast, dress children for school or daycare, and arrive at work on time. The need to extract as much as they can out of the limited time at hand creates the need for proper planning and time organization, so their mornings become a much-orchestrated set of activities.

“I usually wake up at 6 a.m. and start the morning rush—making breakfast, bathing the children, dressing them, and preparing for work. It’s a race every day”

(Participant P06, 31, Project Manager, 1 child)

“I wake up between 5:30 and 6:00 a.m. to get my daughter ready. I prepare her food, pack her things, and then drop her off at a neighbor’s house before going to work”

(Participant P04, 23, Secretary, 1 child)

The establishment and maintenance of routines are also widely cited as a requirement for managing the countless demands of work and motherhood. Routines provide structure and predictability to everyday life, allowing for the simplification of daily routine and the ease of mental load associated with decision-making. For instance, taking the time to prepare dinner beforehand, laying out clothes in advance for the following night, and maintaining regular times for homework and sleep can give a sense of order and control within an otherwise chaotic home. Routines are not only beneficial to the mothers, but they also give the children a sense of security and stability.

Participant 9 explains that *“I usually wake up around 5:30 a.m. to start preparing for the day. I get my daughter ready, make her something to eat, and then walk her over to our neighbor’s house where she stays during the day. I start work at the pastry shop by 7:00 a.m. and finish by 3:00 p.m. After work, I go straight to pick up my daughter, then we come home, rest a bit, and I prepare dinner. In the evening, I try to spend time with her—playing, singing, or just holding her while she falls asleep. It’s a simple routine, but it takes a lot out of me.”* (Participant P09, 27, Baker, 1 child)

She plans meals, homework, and bedtimes a week in advance and sets out everything, from the day’s attire to lunch boxes, the night before. By being proactive like this, she is able to become proficient in balancing the competing demands of work and family and remain calm and organized.

Not all employed mothers are so lucky, however. Those with unpredictable work schedules, such as Participant 1, find it more complicated to balance motherhood and work. The unpredictable schedules, night flights, and perpetual traveling can disrupt the family routine and make it hard to have a continuous presence in their children's lives. As Participant 1 explains,

"My daily routine is not the same each day. When I am flying, I wake up early in the morning and get ready for the flight. At times, I come back the same day, but at times, I return the following day." (Participant P01, 32, Pilot, 1 child)

This is a highlight to the challenges of maintaining a stable home life while working an irregular shift. The mothers must rely on support systems, whether nannies, family, or cooperative co-workers, to manage childcare and home duties in their absence. Flexibility and accommodation to fit into constantly changing schedules require a tremendous amount of resilience and flexibility. The findings highlight the complex challenges employed mothers in Addis Ababa face in balancing work and caregiving. Participants described long, irregular working hours and fragmented routines, reflecting a cultural presumption that mothers bear sole responsibility for childcare while excelling professionally. This aligns with Thabrew (2022) and Zhao et al. (2011), who emphasized how structural disadvantages and internalized gender roles exacerbate these pressures. The interference between work and family domains, evident in work-to-family and family-to-work conflicts, further strains mothers, particularly amid institutional constraints like wage disparities, limited workplace flexibility, and unaffordable childcare. These issues, amplified by shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic (Oleschuk, 2020), underscore the need for systemic reforms to address gendered labor divisions.

The findings demonstrate the dual burden of caregiving and employment placed on mothers in urban Ethiopia. Participants' highly regimented routines illustrate the invisible labor required to maintain household functioning before formal work even begins. This aligns with previous Ethiopian studies showing that working mothers perform most domestic duties, with limited male partner support (Tafere, 2021).

In the absence of institutional childcare, many participants depend on informal caregivers such as relatives or neighbors. This highlights the inadequacy of Addis Ababa's childcare infrastructure—characterized by limited availability, high cost, and questionable reliability (Kidane & Abate, 2022).

For mothers with irregular work hours, like P01 (flight attendant), disruption of routines further undermines the consistency critical for young children. From a developmental psychology lens, Erikson's psychosocial theory underlines the importance of structure during the stage of "autonomy vs. shame and doubt" (1.5 to 3 years). Inconsistent caregiving environments may prevent children from confidently exploring their surroundings, increasing anxiety and reducing autonomy (Erikson, 1950).

This daily structure is also important during Piaget's pre-operational stage (2–7 years), where symbolic thinking and social behaviors rapidly develop. Inconsistent parental presence may affect emotional security, limit stimulation, and lead to developmental stagnation (Berk, 2018).

4.2.2. Emotional Experiences: Guilt and Anxiety

The emotional experience of employed mothers is typically characterized by a difficult balancing act between guilt and anxiety because of the perceived incompatibility between the professional role and that of a caregiver. Guilt and anxiety are widespread among most Participants, when it comes to leaving their children in someone else's hands and going to work. This is often dependent upon the social presumption that mothers should care for children and that their absence will have a negative impact on the well-being of their children. The feeling of role conflict between professional and maternal responsibilities can be a chronic source of emotional distress.

"I feel guilty and sometimes even ashamed to leave my daughter with others, especially when she cries as I leave"

(Participant P02, 31, Project Manager, 1 child)

"Every day I feel a mix of relief and guilt. Relief that someone is watching him. Guilt that it's not me"

(Participant P03, 34, Sales Worker, 1 child)

"I feel guilty and sometimes worried. My neighbor is kind and has raised kids before, so I trust her, but still—I'm her mother. I sometimes feel like I'm missing out on her growing up. But I also know I have to work so we can survive."

(Participant P09, 27, Baker, 1 child)

Participant 9 feels "guilty and sometimes sad" having to leave her two-year-old daughter with a neighbor during the day. Participant 5 feels "a mix of relief and guilt" daily when she leaves her son with her mother. Participant 4 also finds it "very hard" to leave her two-year-old son with her parents, especially if he cries as she is leaving. These are verbatim quotes that point out the emotional challenges of balancing work and being a mother.

Added to the emotional burden, mothers are also afraid of missing out on important events in their children's lives, such as school events, milestones, or even simple moments of interaction. Missing out on seeing the growth and change of their children can make them feel guilty. This is especially sad for mothers who would prefer to be intimately involved with their children's upbringing and who are eager to create long-lasting memories. Having to be a good professional as well as a devoted parent can create an ongoing inner turmoil.

Participant 6 said that *"It's a mix of both. I sometimes miss small moments or events, and that makes me sad. But having a job also helps me feel secure and happy, and I think my kids feel that. They see that I'm working hard for them, and I believe that teaches them valuable life lessons"* Participant P06, 35, Lecturer, 3 child) Participant 5 *"Every morning when I leave my child with my mother, I feel a mix of relief and guilt. Relief because I know he's safe and cared for, but guilt because I wish I could be with him more. It's hard to shake off that feeling of missing important moments."* Participant P05, 23, Secretary, 1 child) This shows the deep emotional bond between mothers and their children, and the sacrifices made by the working mother

The emotional toll of balancing work and motherhood can be high, with increased levels of stress, burnout, and decreased well-being. The perpetual juggling act, the pressure to meet multiple competing needs, and the burden of guilt and anxiety can take their toll on their mental and emotional health. Without appropriate support systems and coping strategies, employed mothers might lose their well-being while attempting to provide the best possible care to their children. Identification and resolution of the emotional problems of employed mothers are critical to enable them to attain their overall well-being as well as retain their ability to excel as professionals and as parents. Participant 7 who has two children reported feeling *"Honestly, it's a mix. Emotionally, I sometimes feel guilty—especially on days when I leave early and come*

back late. That gap can't be filled with money. But on the positive side, my work brings financial stability and a sense of purpose, and I think my children benefit from seeing their mother work hard and provide for them" (Participant P07, 28, Lawyer, 2 children). Participant 3 with a one-year-old son feels *"I feel guilty every day for not being there enough—for not being fully present. My son isn't getting the attention he deserves from either parent, or that breaks my heart."* (Participant P03, 34, Sales, 1 child). These are explanatory quotations to capture the emotional weight employed mothers must carry as they struggle to reconcile the demands of home and work.

Participants reported profound psychological burdens, including guilt, inadequacy, and self-doubt, as they struggled to meet idealized standards of motherhood and professional competence. This mirrors Thabrew's (2022) findings on the emotional toll of societal expectations, which often lead to burnout and invisibility. The devaluation of women's labor, both paid and unpaid, perpetuates these struggles, especially in caregiving roles dismissed as "natural" for women (Salvage, 2018). The dual demands of work and family create a cycle of stress, where mothers feel torn between competing responsibilities, exacerbating emotional distress and reinforcing systemic inequities.

According to Erikson's developmental theory, children in the autonomy stage depend on stable caregivers to form early confidence. Erratic or unsafe care can lead to internalized shame and fear (Erikson, 1950). Similarly, consistent caregiving is vital during Piaget's pre-operational stage for fostering symbolic play, empathy, and secure attachment (Berk, 2018).

Local data confirm mothers' fears are not unfounded. A 2024 study by Mekonnen and Dessalegn found significant levels of physical neglect and emotional abuse in unregulated Addis Ababa daycare settings. Caregivers were often untrained and overwhelmed, leading to inadequate supervision and even dangerous practices (Mekonnen & Dessalegn, 2024).

Beyond individual anecdotes, the systemic absence of affordable, regulated childcare exacerbates these issues. The few licensed daycare centers that do exist are unaffordable for low- and middle-income families, pushing mothers toward informal and sometimes exploitative options (Kidane & Abate, 2022). These realities reflect structural gender inequities and underline the urgent need for government-supported childcare reform.

4.2.3. Societal Expectations and Support

Employed mothers mostly navigate a world that is full of social expectations and judgment, the potential consequences of which can influence their experience and perception directly. Employed mothers generally find themselves pressured to be perfect both in the workplace and in the home, attempting to achieve impossible standards of success in each. This is pressure born of cultural expectation that poses the "ideal" mother as both the ever-available, nurturing, self-sacrificing mother, and the ambitious, successful, hardworking career woman. The attempt to fulfill both of these idealized roles can lead to feelings of failure and constant self-criticism.

Participant 8 with two children said that “Being a working mother in our culture is like being pulled in different directions. Society expects you to be a perfect worker and perfect mother at the same time.”

(Participant P08, 34, Accountant, 2 children).

“Mothers are doing so much. We need help, not judgment. But you are either not enough for your children or not enough for your job—there’s no winning.”

(Participant P02, 31, Sales Worker, 1 child)

To make things even more challenging, there also lies a deficit of social acceptance and support of employed mothers that could complement their sense of isolation and stress. Most mothers feel that society does not value their efforts in their professional work and their families. This invisibility can be expressed in the guise of adverse workplace policies, limited access to affordable childcare, and overall lack of comprehension from colleagues, employers, and sometimes even family members. Feeling invisible or not being understood can be greatly demoralizing.

“People don’t realize how difficult it is to be a mother and a worker, particularly when you don’t earn much. We don’t need pity; we need support, respect, and opportunities.”

(Participant P10, 33, Office Admin, 2 children)

Participant 7 mentioned that mothers engaged in professional work can never try hard enough and are always stressed. She elaborated by saying, “All I want is to be respected for trying my best. Like many mothers, I’m doing everything I can with very little help.”

(Participant P07, 29, Marketing Officer, 2 children)

Conversely, supportive workplaces and supportive communities are necessary to help ease the burdens that employed mothers experience, and provide the resources and assistance they need to be successful. Supportive communities can give a sense of belonging, mutual support, and common understanding, while supportive workplaces can provide flexible work schedules, child-care assistance, and a culture of empathy and respect. Where employed mothers are able to rely on their employers and communities, they are more able to reconcile the opposing demands of their two roles and enjoy a greater sense of well-being. What employed mothers need is a more accepting and caring society to enable them to be empowered and reach their full potential.

Participant 5 said that *"My mother is my greatest support. She lives with us and takes care of my daughter while I'm at work. Without her, I don't think I could have kept my job. Knowing my child is safe and loved helps me concentrate at work with peace of mind."* (Participant P05, 23, Secretary, 1 child)

The study reveals a critical lack of societal and institutional support for employed mothers. Participants highlighted absent recognition and inadequate policies, echoing feminist critiques of labor systems that ignore caregiving needs (Salvage, 2018; Oleschuk, 2020). The exclusion of unpaid domestic work from policy frameworks perpetuates inequality, forcing mothers into unsustainable double burdens. Solutions require multifaceted interventions: workplace flexibility, expanded parental leave, affordable childcare, and cultural shifts to recognize care work's economic and social value. Without such changes, employed mothers will continue to navigate these challenges with minimal systemic recourse.

This theme reflects how gendered cultural norms in Ethiopia idealize motherhood in ways that undermine the lived realities of working women. Participants internalized social expectations to excel both professionally and domestically—a phenomenon deeply rooted in patriarchal social constructs (Tafere, 2021).

The presence of social support—particularly from female relatives—emerged as a vital buffer. This is consistent with studies emphasizing that collectivist cultural practices in Ethiopia can partially mitigate structural inequities when intergenerational family support is available (Kidane & Abate, 2022).

However, this informal support does not replace the need for institutional recognition—flexible work policies, accessible childcare, and equitable labor rights—which remain underdeveloped.

4.3. Coping Strategies Employed by employed mothers

Given the complications involved in their difficulties, employed mothers would rather rely on a variety of coping mechanisms that help them excel in their two roles. These involve obtaining support systems, applying time management and planning strategies, and cultivating emotional and mental well-being practices. By acquiring knowledge of such coping mechanisms, we learn of the resourcefulness and resilience of employed mothers in Addis Ababa.

4.3.1. Seeking Support Systems

Mothers and husbands are members of the family who keep the balance between working and motherhood going by providing personal attention, comfort, and the feeling of shared responsibility. The grandmothers are mostly left to take care of the children since they provide them with a secure place and attention while mothers are at work. Husbands who are self-aware help in sharing part of the childcare, domestic work, and emotional burden, making family life more coordinated. Participant 2 talked about the role of her Parents's support by stating, *My mother and my father are my great support; both are very loving, caring, and engaging. I feel lucky that my daughter gets all the love and feeling that she couldn't get from me or her father because of different reasons.*” (Participant P02, 31, Project Manager, 1 child). Participant 6 talked about her husband's support by stating, *"My husband is my biggest support. He does school drop-offs and handles morning routines when I have early classes. On weekends, he takes the kids out so I can rest or plan for the week. My mother also helps when things get really busy. Without their support, it would be too much to handle alone."* (Participant P06, 35, Lecturer, 3 children). Participant 4 responded that *“My family is my biggest support system. Whenever I consider quitting work, they encourage me to stay because they believe women should be financially independent. My mother, in particular, is very supportive. She was a housewife who raised eight children and*

gave up her own dreams for us. She doesn't want me to make the same sacrifice. She sees taking care of her grandchildren as a blessing and believes it's her purpose in this stage of life.".(Participant P04, 32, Senior Auditor, 1 child) These comments indicate how great a role family support plays in enabling women to deal with work.

Nannies and daycare centers also play an important role to play in childcare arrangements, taking care of the children in a secure, stimulating, and nurturing place while mothers work. The nannies take individual care and attention, becoming family members. Daycare centers provide an opportunity for socialization, learning, and fun activities, helping develop the children in all ways. Whether to hire nannies or use daycare centers is at times based on factors such as expense, availability, personal preference, and the needs of the children. Participant 6 utilizes daycare for her children while she works with no trouble. Participant 1 pays a nanny and obtains part time help from her aunt. Participant 8 explained that her children are "taken care of at home by a live-in nanny and supervised by their father," which reassures her when she is at the hospital. However, while nannies and daycare centers offer essential services, numerous participants and public reports have raised serious concerns about their reliability and safety in the context of Addis Ababa. Several mothers referenced news stories involving grave misconduct by nannies, including tying up children, feeding them inappropriate or spoiled food, and even drugging them with alcohol to induce sleep. Other extreme cases involve nannies disappearing with children or causing fatal harm. These incidents reflect a broader systemic issue, where many caregivers in both household and institutional settings lack formal training and qualifications. As Participant P08 explained: "Most daycares around my area are expensive and not even professional. I'm always scared to leave my baby. You hear all these horrible stories on the news – it makes you question if it's safe at all." This underscores the urgent need for regulatory oversight, caregiver certification, and affordable, accessible, and quality-assured daycare options to ensure the well-being of children and peace of mind for working mothers.

In addition to professional and family child care, community support, including neighbors and friends, can be invaluable assistance to employed mothers, with occasional babysitting, carpooling, or simply a listening ear. Neighbors are frequently a convenient and reliable source of support, especially in close-knit neighborhoods where there exists a sense of community and cooperation. The mother's friends can offer necessary emotional support in terms of shared experience, advice,

and an element of solidarity. Forming and enhancing these social ties can help employed mothers feel less isolated and more assured of being able to meet their responsibilities. Participant 9 reported her daughter *“My neighbor helps me the most. She watches my daughter while I’m at work and sometimes even feeds her lunch. Also, one of my friends at work watches my daughter if I’m stuck and can’t leave on time. It’s not perfect, but I’m very thankful for them.”*..(Participant P09, 27, Baker, 1 child) Participant 7 reported that *“... My neighbor helps occasionally with school pick-up if I’m running late. Since my husband is away most of the time for work, I’ve had to rely more on my community, and their help really means a lot.”*”.

Employed mothers in Addis Ababa heavily rely on both informal and formal support systems to mitigate work-family conflict. Informal networks, particularly family members like mothers and husbands, provide critical assistance with childcare, domestic tasks, and emotional support, aligning with Thabrew’s (2022) findings on stress reduction. Extended family involvement further reinforces a collective child-rearing model common in Ethiopian culture. This dual benefit, noted by Saputri and Risnawati (2024), not only eases maternal guilt by ensuring children’s developmental stability but also strengthens maternal well-being. Formal support, such as nannies and daycare centers, offers safe childcare solutions, though affordability remains a barrier for low-income mothers. The study advocates for subsidized childcare and regulated private providers to align with gender-responsive labor policies. Additionally, psychological resilience strategies (e.g., positive thinking, cognitive restructuring) mirror Wong et al.’s (2020) research on healthcare workers, suggesting that workplace wellness programs, including mental health care and peer counseling, could bolster mothers’ coping capacity.

4.3.2. Time Management and Planning

Time management and planning skills are crucial skills for employed mothers who seek to harmonize their work and family life. Creating routines and schedules allows employed mothers to be successful at time management, introducing order and predictability to their lives. These habits can include regular wake-up times, dinner preparation, assisting children preparing for school, commuting to work, accomplishing work-related activities, picking up children from daycare, preparing dinner, and bedtimes for children. By adhering to a routine schedule, mothers

can minimize wasted time and maximize their productivity in both fields. A participant learns that "Routines save me," and she has "a weekly plan for meals, homework, and bedtime." She also prepares clothes and lunchboxes in advance to have greater peace.

Yet even the most carefully laid plans can be undermined by unexpected circumstances, such as sudden children's illnesses, work emergencies, or transport delays. Flexibility and adaptability are the keys to dealing with such unforeseen contingencies, allowing mothers to replan and renegotiate as necessary. This may involve calling upon support networks, delegating tasks, or simply accepting that some things will not go according to plan. It is one of the most significant attributes of successful employed mothers to remain cool-headed and resourceful when under pressure. Participant 1 replied that "My daily schedule is not the same every day". Participant 10 alters her daily routine quite often, "Because of my job and my sisters' changing job shifts".

Effective time management and delegation emerged as key strategies for employed mothers. Participants emphasized structured planning and task prioritization, echoing Bekru et al.'s (2017) findings on workload management as a determinant of job satisfaction. Organizational policies like flexible schedules, telecommuting, and equitable work distribution could further alleviate time-related stressors, as evidenced by Olinder et al.'s (2022) research on systemic support in healthcare. Mothers also highlighted the need for employer-sponsored childcare to reduce logistical burdens. These findings underscore the intersection of personal agency and structural support: while individual planning (e.g., meal prepping, shared calendars) helps, institutional interventions are critical to sustainable work-life balance.

4.3.3. Mental and Emotional Well-being

Apart from practical solutions, employed mothers also use several emotional and mental coping mechanisms to deal with the demands of their two roles. A positive attitude and reminding oneself why work is a positive thing are what allow mothers to deal with feelings of stress and guilt. Directing their attention to the financial stability, personal satisfaction, and good role modeling their job brings can allow them to gain perspective and feel more in control. Positive affirmations can prove to be an effective strategy for remaining motivated and resilient. One participant related that "...I try to stay positive and remind myself that I am doing my best both as a mother and a

professional." (*Participant P05, 23, Secretary, 1 child*). Another participant keeps telling herself, "...You're working so hard so that your child can have more. That's what keeps me going." (*Participant P01, 32, Pilot, 1 child*)

Discussions with friends, relatives, or other mothers offer emotional support and decrease the level of stress, generating a feeling of belonging and mutual understanding. By telling their story, problems, and achievements to others in a similar situation, mothers need not feel isolated and can feel supported. Such discussions also offer helpful information, suggestions, and practical advice on balancing the two jobs of work and motherhood. It is essential to have a good network of positive relationships to ensure emotional health. One of the interviewee's attempts to communicate openly with her friends and relatives, and she also learned to take some time off during the day, even for a minute or two, to take a breath and start again. Participant 6 stated that "I have a few close female friends who are also mothers. We communicate with one another and tell each other about our experiences, and that aids me emotionally. It simply helps me not to feel alone knowing someone else comprehends." (*Participant P06, 35, Lecturer, 3 children*)

Finally, welcoming flaws and trying one's best is a common coping mechanism for employed mothers' coping mechanisms so that one can let go idealized expectations and develop an empathetic stance towards self and situation. The Understanding that one can never be good enough at all things and mistakes can be a natural part of the process can help the mothers minimize self-criticism and develop a tolerance approach. By working to their strengths, celebrating little victories, and being able to learn from their failures, employed mothers are able to be resilient and maintain healthy self-esteem. Participant 3 stated, "Accept that I can't do everything perfectly and that's okay".(*Participant P03, 34, Sales, 1 child*). Participant 1 stated, "Some days will be harder, and I've accepted that." (*Participant P01, 32, Pilot, 1 child*)

4.4. Influence on Mothers' Perception of Their Roles

Balancing work and motherhood often challenges women to redefine their perception of success, enhance their abilities and skills, and deal with inescapable contradictions and sacrifices. By understanding such shifts in perception, we are given a glimpse into the transformational experience of employed mothers and the evolution in their identity.

4.4.1. Redefining Success

Employed mothers are inclined to redefine success as both career achievement and family joy, beyond the traditional standards of professional achievement. This new perspective reflects an increasing recognition that success is not solely defined by career achievement but also the health of their relationships, the happiness of their children, and even their own satisfaction. Before motherhood, the achievement of Respondent 4 was gauged in career advancement and achievement. She now defines success more broadly, which shows a shift in focus to an all-inclusive one embracing family as well as work. She now considers motherhood as "a journey of sacrifice, strength, and deep love," (*Participant P04, 32, Senior Auditor, 1 child*) and she explained it by saying, "Appreciate my mother even more"

Motherhood does encourage a broader perspective and greater appreciation for relationships and influences the way employed mothers perceive their roles. Taking care of and raising children often fosters a greater sense of empathy, compassion, and understanding that enhances their relationships and the quality of their lives. Such a mindset shift can lead them to become more interested in creating memories that will last a lifetime, forming emotional connections, and enriching the lives of their loved ones. Respondent 5 supplemented that "It has made me more empathetic and organized. I used to be only deadline-oriented and grades-oriented, but now I know the importance of relationships and patience." (*Participant P05, 23, Secretary, 1 child*)

Providing economic security and a positive example for their children becomes a core aspect of the identity of employed mothers. employed mothers would see work as a way of providing opportunities for education, self-enrichment, and a better life for their children. They also appreciate hard work and being committed to becoming better, as an example to help their children work towards their dreams and goals. According to Participant 10, "I take my work more seriously because my child's well-being depends on it," (*Participant P10, 36, Hairdresser, 2 children*) and she reminds herself all the time "not to quit, because my work supports his life.". Another considers herself "a future role model, not a great mom," thinking that when she is mature enough to understand, her daughter will be proud of her educated and responsible mother.

The study participants demonstrated a significant evolution in their conceptualization of success, transitioning from conventional career-centric metrics to a more holistic framework that equally

values family well-being. This paradigm shift aligns with Thabrew's (2022) findings regarding contemporary employed mothers' broader success criteria. As Kelly's (2010) community psychology model suggests, this reframing serves as an adaptive strategy that fosters sustainable engagement in both professional and domestic spheres. Participants redefined success as meaningful contribution across domains rather than flawless performance in either role, challenging traditional workplace evaluations that prioritize singular career dedication. This reconceptualization represents a fundamental departure from organizational norms that still equate professional commitment with exclusive work focus.

4.4.2. Enhanced Skills and Strength

The work-mother balancing experience most often leads to the development of additional skills and strengths that women bring with them into their own lives. Work-mother balancing enhances empathy, organization skills, and patience skills, enabling women to deal with difficult situations with greater insight and competence. The need to manage a number of tasks, balance conflicting needs, and accommodate the different needs of their children and peers brings a sense of increased empathy and one's capacity to relate to others at a deeper level. Participant 2 noted that "It has made me more empathetic and organized. I was accustomed to focusing on academic success and deadlines only, but now I understand the importance of relationships and patience." (*Participant P02, 31, Project Manager, 1 child*)

Employed mothers acquire resilience, inner strength, and confidence in their ability to multitask multiple responsibilities, facing challenges and obstacles with determination and resourcefulness. Ongoing shifting between work and family demands requires high flexibility, problem-solving ability, and efficacy in decision-making. These experiences build resilience and self-efficacy, which allow women to be confident at tackling new challenges. Participant 6 noted that "Balancing motherhood and work has made me stronger and more confident" (*Participant P06, 35, Lecturer, 3 children*). Participant 2 was unable to imagine that she was patient and strong enough for motherhood, but after she gave birth, "it came naturally".

In addition, motherhood also enhances a better understanding and appreciation of one's own mother, as women have a firsthand experience of the challenges, hardships, and blessings that come with raising children. Such appreciation can bring closer family relationships and create an

intergenerational sense of belonging, as women value the shared experiences and insights that bind them to their mothers and grandmothers. This can lead to increased appreciation of family history, cultural tradition, and the enduring strength of mother love.

Participants reported substantial skill development stemming from their dual roles, particularly in empathy, multitasking, and conflict resolution. These findings substantiate Thabrew's (2022) assertion that work-family pressures can cultivate transferable competencies. The skill enhancement process mirrors Eneli et al.'s (2008) empowerment-through-trust model, where individuals develop adaptive capacities from challenging circumstances. Many mothers described bidirectional skill transfer: applying professional competencies (e.g., Participant 2 principles) to parenting, while caregiving experiences enhanced workplace emotional intelligence. This reciprocal relationship suggests organizations may undervalue the professional relevance of parenting-derived skills, potentially overlooking a valuable dimension of employee development.

4.4.3. Trade-offs and Conflicts

Despite all the benefits and enhanced competencies that may arise from juggling professional and motherly responsibilities, employed mothers continue to experience role conflicts between their professional and caregiving roles, leading to tough decisions and emotional costs. Role conflicts may be manifested as missed deadlines, scheduling problems, or the inability to attend important events in their children's lives. The ongoing juggling of these competing demands can generate a feeling of overwhelm and of not being completely present in either role. One participant compares herself to *"I see myself as someone constantly walking a tightrope. At work, I'm organized and respected; at home, I'm nurturing and emotionally available. But yes, these roles clash often like when I miss my sons's school events because of meetings. It's painful, but I try to compensate with quality time."* (Participant P05, 23, Secretary, 1 child). It was said by Participant 3 that "Being a working mother will make this ten times harder than it already is, since I cannot control anything as I have dual responsibility." (Participant P03, 34, Sales, 1 child)

Missing school plays, sporting events, or birthday parties in their children's lives leads to feelings of guilt and regret, as mothers are torn between doing their job and being a part of bringing up their children. These missed opportunities threaten to instill feelings of loss and worry that they

are not emotionally caring for and giving attention to their children appropriately. Participant 5 who calls herself a tightrope walker also finds it "painful" to miss her son's school events due to meetings.

Trading off the competing demands of family and work involves making hard choices and decisions, as mothers weigh potential career gains against their children's and families' needs. This can include making tough choices regarding professional decisions, working hours, and child care, which can compel them to forgo personal aspirations or financial objectives to serve their families. Participant 3 balances work and motherhood due to her support network and the amount of payment she is ready to give to the nanny. Participant 3 feels that making them work in a small beauty salon and taking them along sometimes is not good for their upbringing or health, but given the state of the economy presently, she does not have any other option.

Despite adaptive strategies, participants consistently experienced emotional strain from persistent role conflict. The necessity to make painful compromises - missing children's milestones for work obligations or foregoing career opportunities for family needs - generated significant psychological tension. These findings corroborate Al-Azzeh and Diab's (2025) research on the psychological costs of maternal role negotiation, though occurring within rather than across national contexts. The emotional labor invested in continually balancing these competing demands emerged as an unacknowledged burden of dual roles, with mothers reporting exhaustion from the cognitive effort required to manage conflicting priorities. This hidden toll highlights the unsustainable nature of current work-family paradigms that place disproportionate negotiation burdens on individual women rather than addressing systemic inequities.

4.5. Impact on Social, Cognitive, and Emotional Support of Toddlers

This section examines the influence of employed mothers on the social, cognitive, and emotional support received from their toddlers. It talks about how employed mothers ensure they have quality time and bonding with their kids, participate in activities that promote their social and cognitive development, and handle emotional conflicts arising due to maternal absence. Through this, we are able to appreciate the process by which employed mothers attempt to foster children's development and balance the requirements of their profession.

4.5.1. Quality Time and Connection

Despite the time constraints brought about by their working schedules, employed mothers prefer to spend quality time with their toddlers owing to the need to ignite their growth and development as well as establish a strong parent-child bond. employed mothers prefer spending quality time with their toddlers and doing such activities as reading, playing, and talking to make the most out of their scarce time together. This may involve making a special effort daily for focused interaction, free from interruptions such as work emails or household chores. It is hoped that in doing so, some special moments of connection are formed that bring the mother-child bond even closer. One of the Participant shares "I spend time with my children after school checking homework, reading stories, or just talking about their day". (*Participant P06, 35, Lecturer, 3 children*) Participant 4 ensures that they have a special daily routine every evening by reading to him a story and playing with him no matter how tired she is. Participant 5 tries to come home early enough so that she can spend more time with her son, and even just playing with him, laughing, or being silly will calm her down.

Implementing routines, such as a bedtime story, provides a sense of safety and closeness, establishing a structure and calming experience for toddlers that increases their sense of closeness and being loved. Routines may include singing songs, playing games, or even simply cuddling and talking. The predictability and routine of these rituals can reassure toddlers to feel loved, safe, and secure, even when their mothers are working away from home for most of the day. Participant 6 who ensures that they have a special routine every evening also plays children's songs, both Amharic and English, in order to assist their language.

Moreover, conscious parenting and emotional responsiveness are brought into focus to balance out time away since mothers intend to be fully present and involved during the moments they spend with their children. This can involve putting away worry and considering only their child's needs, hearing them out attentively, and responding in a compassionate and understanding manner. By being available and emotionally present, mothers are able to have a good sense of contact and let

their kids remember their support and love. One of the interviewees tries to compensate with quality time. The interviewee makes sure her time with them is filled with connection.

Study participants demonstrated remarkable intentionality in maximizing limited time with their toddlers through high-value activities like reading, play, and focused dialogue. This practice aligns with Thabrew's (2022) concept of "time deepening" - intensifying interaction quality to maintain attachment bonds. Mothers instinctively applied Tol et al.'s (2012) principles about protective factors in child development, transforming routine moments (morning preparations and bedtime) into meaningful bonding opportunities that challenge conventional quantity-versus-quality debates in developmental psychology. These micro-interactions represent strategic adaptations to time constraints, where mundane daily rituals become deliberate connection points.

4.5.2. Social and Cognitive Development

In addition to providing quality time, employed mothers also actively engage themselves in activities that add to the social and cognitive growth of their toddlers, aware of the importance of exercising their brains and developing their social lives. Employed mothers actively engage themselves in activities that promote the social and cognitive growth of their toddlers, such as reading to them, playing cognitively stimulating games, and engaging in creative activities. These events will help stimulate the curiosity of their children, enrich their knowledge, and sharpen their problem-solving abilities. A mother and her husband are very intentional in raising their children. They engage the children in playtime, sing songs, have picnics, or swim with them during weekends. Socialization with friends and family helps develop social skills and emotional adjustment, allowing toddlers to discover the working of interacting with other individuals, sharing, cooperating, and empathy.

It can involve arranging playdates with friends, visiting grandparents or other relatives, or participating in community events. These social interactions can help toddlers work through their social skills, build confidence, and learn how to manage others in complex social situations. A parent and child go to the park or cousins to play and interact. Providing learning materials and areas to discover enables cognitive growth, stimulates the curiosity of toddlers, expands their understanding, and develops their problem-solving skills.

This may be in the way of providing them with books, puzzles, art supplies, or learning websites or mobile applications. By sparking exploration and discovery, mothers can cause their children to love learning and be educated for the rest of their lives. Participant 4 tries to keep her daughter occupied so that she may develop her learning routines by buying colored learning materials, dolls, and instruments.

Employed mothers actively fostered their toddlers' development through scaffolded learning activities, particularly book reading and social interaction facilitation. Their approaches mirror Subramanyam et al.'s (2018) multisensory methodology for early childhood development, remarkably paralleling techniques recommended for special needs groups. This finding holds particular significance in Ethiopia's context where formal early education remains inaccessible to many families. Participants demonstrated innovative bidirectional skill transfer, applying workplace competencies (e.g., organizational skills) to structure home learning environments while simultaneously developing parenting skills that enhanced professional capacities like patience and emotional intelligence.

4.5.3. Emotional Impact of Maternal Absence

Despite their best efforts at providing quality time and support, employed mothers are concerned about the emotional impact of their absence on their toddlers and realize that separation is hard on young children. Toddlers can become emotionally distressed when their mothers are away, i.e., they can be clingy, tearful, or apprehensive, which can manifest in countless different changes in behavior. These habits are generally a normal aspect of development, since toddlers start adapting to separation and developing independence. They are a source of concern for employed mothers who worry about the long-term effects of their absence. The sometimes sees her daughter become clingy or upset when she packs a suitcase. Participant 5 said if she came home late, it makes her son angry and hard to handle for his nanny and everyone around him.

To militate against these possible harmful effects, mothers try to provide a sense of security and love despite their physical absence by taking care to have regular routines, communicate regularly, and show their love through words and gestures. These steps help to reassure children that they are loved and valued even though their mothers are absent. Participant 8 indicates that she is

comfortable and safe since her husband is very much involved and responsible, and they have a thoughtful and well-skilled nanny. They make sure that the children are loved even when she is away.

However, the long-term effects of mothers' employment on the emotional development of toddlers remain to be investigated since the impact may vary depending on a number of factors, such as the quality of the care arrangement, the schedule of the mother while working, and the child's temperament. One has to consider the unique circumstances of each family and refrain from generalizing the effects of children's emotional adjustment due to employed mothers. Participant 3 will every now and again worry that being out of the house during the day will affect her son emotionally, but she believes that her employment ensures that she can provide him with a more favorable life. Participant 5 her son knows the time they typically arrive to pick him up and stays near the door, a sign that her absence has a negative effect on his emotions.

The study revealed sophisticated "emotional bridging" strategies - using notes, calls, and transitional objects - to maintain bonds during physical separation. These practices align with Altena et al.'s (2020) findings on emotion regulation, as mothers developed dual coping mechanisms for both their own and their children's separation anxiety. Most participants established predictable "transition rituals" (departure/reunion routines) resembling therapeutic techniques for anxiety management. However, socioeconomic pressures exacerbated these challenges, creating what might be termed a "triple burden": economic needs requiring employment, cultural expectations demanding domestic perfection (as noted in Panggabean & Basrowi's 2024 breastfeeding research), and structural constraints limiting support options. Participants frequently described painful trade-offs between work obligations and child health emergencies, reflecting Habte and Demissie's (2015) findings about how economic pressures cascade into childcare quality and family wellbeing.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the general conclusions from the study, the interconnection of the lived experiences and coping strategies, and changing perceptions of employed mothers in Addis Ababa while oscillating between conflicting demands of work and motherhood. In view of a return to the purpose of the study, this chapter delves into the interconnection of the themes. The chapter further offers practical suggestions that are directed to policymakers, employers, and communities with the dream of establishing a kind of environment that enables mothers to blossom both at work and as individuals.

5.2. Conclusion

The process of the research into mothers' daily lives and learning discloses the challenging experience of combining work and motherhood in Addis Ababa. Employed mothers will experience more extended working hours, shift work, and a lot of emotional exploitation, such as anxiety and guilt. These emotions will probably be based on societal expectations where a mother should be the carer, therefore, provoking self-doubt and inadequacy. Most employed mothers believe that they have to be perfect both at their workplace and at home, thus achieving unattained expectations of achievement in both environments. The study also mentions the need for more societal awareness and understanding and appreciation of employed mothers.

Employed mothers in Addis Ababa employ various coping strategies, including, for instance, seeking help from husbands, mothers, relatives, and friends, and developing efficient time management and planning. Family members, particularly mothers and spouses, are the most vital in helping them to balance work and motherhood responsibilities. Nannies and daycare centers also have an important role to play in childcare, offering a protective, caring, and stimulating environment for children as their mothers work. Lastly, holding a positive attitude and remembering the advantages of working helps mothers overcome the guilt and stress of working. The study's exploration of how such experiences influence mothers' perceptions of their professional and caregiving roles identifies a reconceptualization of success, enhanced skills and competence, and balance of inevitable conflict and compromise. Professional and family well-

being are redefined by employed mothers as comprising both professional achievement and family well-being, perceiving that work in each setting is of equal worth and interdependent. Emerging situations are being dealt with much better by strengthening skills such as empathy, organization, and patience in the pursuit of work-life balance. While highly advantageous, employed mothers tend to develop role conflict between their identity as caregivers and professionals, bringing about complex trade-offs and emotional crises.

Lastly, the review of the study on how such experiences influence mothers' cognitive, social, and emotional support to toddlers underscores the importance of quality time and attachment, activity participation that enables development, and efforts to counteract the emotional price of mother absence. Working moms always weigh against the quality time they spend with their toddlers: reading, playing, and talking about stuff to make efficient use of this valuable little time they spend together. They also always get involved in activities promoting social and intellectual development for their toddlers, like reading to them and providing them with interaction among members of their family and friends. Though toddlers experience emotional distress because of being away from their mothers, employed mothers ensure that they give them a sense of security and love, though they are not physically present.

5.3. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, this section presents a set of practical recommendations to improve the employed mothers' challenges in Addis Ababa, their work-life balance, and that of both mothers and children support systems. Recommendations revolve around enhancing workplace flexibility, expanding access to low-cost childcare, promoting mental health support, and building society's sensitivity towards employed mothers' double role. The details are elaborated below:

- To Government Bodies (Federal and City-Level):
 - Expand investment in community-based public childcare centers, especially in large employment companies. These centers should operate with clear regulatory frameworks and be subsidized to ensure affordability for low- and middle-income mothers.

- Enforce existing labor provisions, such as maternity leave and breastfeeding breaks, and consider policy reforms to promote flexible work schedules, particularly for mothers of children under three years old.
- To Employers and Workplaces:
 - Encourage medium and large employers to establish on-site daycare units or partner with nearby childcare facilities to reduce commuting stress and improve toddler-care consistency.
 - Develop and promote family-friendly workplace cultures, including allowing staggered working hours or remote work options where feasible, particularly in sectors such as education, health, and ICT.
 - Integrate periodic mental health check-ins or counselling support for employed mothers as part of employee wellness programs.
- To Community Leaders and Local Administrations:
 - Mobilize kebeles and women's associations to create neighborhood-level informal caregiving cooperatives; rotational systems in which trusted caregivers support working mothers in small clusters.
 - Promote public awareness campaigns that address social stigma around employed mothers

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can determine the long-term consequences of work by mothers on children through longitudinal studies, as well as examine work-life conflict problems across different sectors in Ethiopia. Future research could also examine the role of fathers in caring for their children, evaluate the effects of in-work interventions like flexible working arrangements and day care facilities, and explore shifting cultural attitudes towards employed mothers in urban and rural settings. Second, analysis of the economic benefits of supporting employed mothers and technology-based solutions in easing work-family balance would be valuable evidence for policymaking and employer policies. In aggregate, these research directions would strengthen evidence-based interventions for supporting employed mothers in Ethiopia and similar settings.

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APPENDIX I

Addis Ababa University

College of Education and Behavioral Studies

School of Psychology

This interview has been prepared as part of the research titled 'Lived Experience of Employed Mothers Raising Toddlers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia' which aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of employed mothers. I would like to thank you for taking your time to conduct this interview.

My name is **Hawi Birhanu**. I am a Master's degree student in Psychology at Addis Ababa University. I wanted to interview you to get information about your life experience as a working mother and the interview will serve as one of the sources of information for my thesis. The interview will take between thirty minutes and one hour. I will need to record the entire interview with a voice recorder so that I can capture your thoughts. I ask for your permission to do so. All information in the interview will be kept confidential and your identity will be kept confidential. This means that the information you provide will not be shared with any third party under any circumstances. When the research report is submitted, there will be no mention of your participation in the interview. Please note that you are not required to provide any information that you do not wish to discuss. You may terminate the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

Thank you for your cooperation and please confirm your consent by signing the consent below.

Signature _____

Date _____

Demographic Information

1. Age: _____
2. Educational background: _____
3. Occupation: _____
4. Number and age of children: _____

5. Type of childcare arrangement: _____
6. Hours worked per week: _____
7. Length of time living in Addis Ababa: _____

Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your typical day as a working mom?
2. How do you feel when you leave your child in someone else's hands and go off to work?
3. Can you recall a recent day that was especially tough or memorable in juggling care and work? Why was it memorable?
4. How do you deal with your feelings of juggling work and childcare?
5. Have you developed any habits, routines, or attitudes that help you cope with your daily responsibilities?
6. Who or what helps you most in managing your dual role? How does this help you?
7. How do you see yourself as a mother and as a working professional? Do these roles ever come into conflict?
8. How have your experiences as a working mother influenced how you view motherhood in general?
9. In what ways has being a working mother changed your personal or professional identity?
10. In what ways do you try to support your child's learning, emotional well-being, and social growth while working full-time?
11. Do you feel your work situation positively or negatively affects your child's development? Why?
12. What changes, at your workplace, in the community, or in public policy, would help you better balance work and childcare?
13. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience as a working mother in Addis Ababa?

APPENDIX II

አዲስ አበባ ዩኒቨርሲቲ

የስነ-ትምህርት እና ባህሪ ጥናት ኮሌጅ

የስነ-ልቦና ትምህርት ክፍል

ይህ ቃለ መጠይቅ “በአዲስ አበባ የሚኖሩ ተቀጣሪ እናቶች የእለት ተእለት የኑሮ ልምድ” በሚል ርዕስ ለጥናት የቀረበ ጥያቄ ነው። ይህን ቃለ-መጠይቅ ለማድረግ ጊዜዎን ስለሰጡኝ ከልብ ላመሰግንዎት እወዳለሁ። ስሜ ሀዊ ብርሃኑ ይባላል። በአዲስ አበባ ዩኒቨርሲቲ የሳይኮሎጂ የማስተርስ ዲግሪ ተማሪ ነኝ። ቃለ መጠይቅ ላደርግልዎት የፈለግሁት እንደ ተቀጣሪ ሰራተኛ እናት የእርሶን የሂዎት ልምድ ላይ መረጃ ለማግኘት ሲሆን ቃለ መጠይቁም ለማዘጋጀው የመመረቂያ ጽሑፍ አንዱ የመረጃ ምንጭ ሆኖ ያገለግላል። ቃለ-መጠይቁ የሚወስደው ጊዜ ከሰላሳ ደቂቃ እስከ አንድ ሰዓት ይሆናል። ከእርስዎ የማገኘው ሃሳብ እንዳያመልጠኝ ሙሉውን ቃለ-ምልልስ በድምጽ መቅጃ መሳሪያ መቅዳት ይኖርብኛል። ለዚሁም ፈቃድዎ እንዲሆን እጠይቅዎታለሁ። የቃለ-መጠይቁ ሙሉ መረጃ በሚስጥር የሚያዝ ሲሆን የእርስዎ ማንነትም ፍጹም የማይገለጽ መሆኑን አረጋግጥታለሁ። ይኸውም የሰጡኝ መረጃ በማንኛውም ሁኔታ ለሌላ ሦስተኛ ወገን ተላልፎ አይሰጥም። የጥናቱ ሪፖርት ሲቀርብም እርስዎ በቃለ-መጠይቁ መሳተፍዎን የሚገልጽ ነገር አይካተትም። ልብ ይበሉ፤ መናገር በማይፈልጉት ጉዳይ ላይ ምንም ዓይነት ሃሳብ እንዲሰጡ አይገደዱም። ያልተመቸዎት ሁኔታ ካለም በማንኛውም ጊዜ ቃለ መጠይቁን ማቋረጥ ይችላሉ። ስለ ትብብርዎ ከልብ

እያመሰገንኩ ፈቃደኝነትዎን በፊርማዎ ያረጋግጡ።

ፊርማ _____ ቀን _____

አጠቃላይ መረጃ

1. እድሜ: _____
2. የትምህርት ደረጃ: _____
3. ስራ: _____
4. የልጆች ብዛት እና እድሜ: _____
5. የህጻናት እንክብካቤ አይነት: _____
6. በሳምንት ውስጥ የሚሰሩበት የስራ ሰአት: _____
7. በአዲስ አበባ ውስጥ የኖሩበት የጊዜ ብዛት: _____

ቃለ መጠይቅ

1. እንደ አንድ ተቀጣሪ ሰራተኛ እናት የቀን ውሎዎ ምን ይመስላል?
2. ልጅዎን በሌላ ሰው እጅ ትተው ወደ ሥራ ሲሄዱ ምን ይሰማዎታል?
3. በቅርብ ጊዜ በተለይም በእንክብካቤ እና በሥራ ላይ ከባድ ወይም የማይረሳ ክስተት ያስታውሳሉ?

ከአስታወሱስ ምን የማይረሳ አደረገው?

4. ስራዎን በማካሄድ እና ልጆችንም በመንከባከብ የሙከራ ሂደት ውስጥ ስሜትዎን እንዴት ያስተናግዳሉ?
5. የዕለት ተዕለት ኃላፊነቶቻችሁን ለመቋቋም የሚረዱዎትን ልማዶች፣ ልምዶች ወይም አመለካከቶችን አዳብረዋል?
6. ተደራራቢ ስራዎችን ወይም ሚናዎን በመምራት ረገድ ውስጥ በዋናነት ማን ወይም ምን ይረዳዎታል? ከሆነ እንዴት ይረዳዎታል?
7. እንደ እናት እና እንደ ተቀጣሪ ሰራተኛ ባለሙያ ራስዎን እንዴት ይገልጹታል? እነዚህ ሚናዎች ግጭት ውስጥ ገብተው ያውቃሉ?
8. እንደ አንድ ተቀጥራ እንደምትሠራ እናት ያለዎት የሂዎት ልምድ ለእናትነት ባላቹ አመለካከት ላይ ምን አይነት ተጽዕኖ አሳድሯል?
9. ተቀጣሪ ሰራተኛ እናት መሆኖ የግል ወይም ሙያዊ ማንነቱን በምን አይነት መንገዶች ለውጦታል?
10. የሙሉ ጊዜ ስራ በሚሰሩበት ወቅት የልጅዎን ትምህርት፣ ስሜታዊ ደህንነት እና ማህበራዊ እድገትን ለመደገፍ በምን አይነት መንገዶች ይሞክራሉ?
11. የስራዎ ሁኔታ በልጅዎ እድገት ላይ አዎንታዊ ወይም አሉታዊ ተጽእኖ ያሳደራል ብለው ያስባሉ? ለምን?
12. ስራን እና የልጅ እንክብካቤን የተሻለ እና ሚዛናዊ ለማድረግ በስራ ቦታዎ፣ በማህበረሰብዎ ወይም በህዝባዊ ፖሊሲ ውስጥ ምን አይነት ለውጦች ቢደረግ መልካም ነው ብለው ያስባሉ??
13. በአዲስ አበባ ውስጥ እንደ ሰራተኛ እናት ያሉትን ልምድ ማካፈል የሚፈልጉት ተጨማሪ ሃሳብ አለ?