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A Phenomenological Study on the Lives of Low-Income Working Mothers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experience of low-income (B40) working mothers in Klang Valley during the COVID-19 pandemic. It sheds light on their mental health struggles and unexpected silver linings. Eight participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. A seven-day diary-writing exercise followed by individual interviews was conducted. Data analysis is based on descriptive phenomenology, allowing in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Multitasking is too taxing, highlighting the intensified role conflict faced by some mothers; (2) Struggling to regulate emotions, revealing the guilt and emotional challenges these mothers experienced as they juggled multiple roles; and (3) The upside of COVID-19, demonstrating how some participants found unexpected benefits in increased family bonding during lockdowns. In sum, low-income working mothers faced significant mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated by their unique circumstances. The findings underscore the importance of recognising their struggles and the need for interventions that promote their mental well-being. Additionally, providing training in emotional resilience and self-regulation could prove beneficial. This study contributes to the understanding of the nuanced experiences of low-income working mothers and calls for continued attention to their mental health needs, particularly in times of crisis.

Keywords: *Low-income working mothers, psychological health, descriptive phenomenology, work-family conflict, coping*

INTRODUCTION

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has not only posed significant health risks and triggered multifaceted socioeconomic and psychological challenges (Carroll et al., 2020). The closure of schools and childcare facilities and the sudden shift to remote work blurred the boundaries between work and family life (Vitória et al., 2022). Among the vulnerable society, low-income working mothers stand out as a significant group that deals with complex stressors (Whitaker et al., 2021). These stressors arise from the interplay between their socioeconomic circumstances and the conflicting demands of work and familial responsibilities - more specifically, they were vulnerable to employment insecurity, economic uncertainty and limited access to childcare (Hermann et al., 2021). The pandemic compounded their challenges, leading to a surge in stressors. Consequently, these mothers navigate a landscape that can significantly impact their mental health and overall well-being (Hermann et al., 2021; Whitaker et al., 2021).

The heightened stressors experienced by these mothers can exacerbate existing mental health issues or lead to the emergence of new ones (Wandschneider et al., 2022). Factors such as financial

instability, increased caregiving responsibilities and the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic can contribute to elevated levels of anxiety and depression (Haskett et al., 2022). Constantly juggling work and family obligations without adequate support may result in burnout, compromising mental well-being (Gambin et al., 2020).

In examining family stress during COVID-19, there is also a crucial need to unveil the potential silver linings mothers exhibit amidst this pervasive health and financial crisis. It is imperative to gain insight into parents' experiences, particularly mothers who lack economic security, as they have borne a disproportionate impact from the pandemic (Calarco et al., 2020). In alignment with Greenhaus and Powell's (2006) assertion, the concept of work-family enrichment (WFE) posits that engaging and performing in one role (e.g., family) has the potential to enhance the quality of life in other roles (e.g., work).

Furthermore, there is a noticeable dearth of research on WFE in comparison to work-family conflict (WFC), a gap that persists as a generally underexplored area, particularly so during the COVID-19 pandemic (Busia et al., 2023). Additionally, there is a marked scarcity of investigations into WFE among working mothers amidst the COVID-19 crisis. Notably, Haskett et al. Field's (2022) study serves as a rare example of WFE, delving into low-income American mothers' challenges and positive experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. A comprehensive understanding of the mothers' challenges and opportunities is essential for designing effective interventions and support systems that address the unique needs of this vulnerable population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Working mother's mental health

This preliminary study explores the mental health of low-income working mothers. World Health Organisation (2022) defined mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well and contribute to their community [...] Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders. It exists on a complex continuum, experienced differently from one person to the next, with varying degrees of difficulty and distress and potentially very different social and clinical outcomes”. Before the pandemic, existing research has indicated that regardless of background, working mothers were already grappling with stress, feelings of guilt, and exhaustion as they navigate through the multiple roles of a mother and a worker (Chen et al., 2018). The tension is further exacerbated by the societal expectation for working mothers to strive to be an ideal mother or put in intensive mothering (unpaid) work while achieving the ideal worker status in the professional setting (Oomens et al., 2007). Consequently, working mothers often arrive at conflicting expectations from trying to meet multiple demands in the home and work spheres (Oomens et al., 2007). The ideal mother and ideal worker ideologies somehow create an illusion of an attainable ideal for the mothers to achieve using work-life balance. However, pursuing the realistically speaking, unattainable ideal often comes at the expense of their mental health (Kim et al., 2023).

Low-income and mental health

Before COVID-19, multiple factors have been associated with mental health difficulties among parents (Hermann et al., 2021). Financial insecurity and low income in terms of susceptibility to job loss and financial circumstances were related to heightened stress and exacerbated anxiety and depression (Fisher et al., 2012). Working mothers with dependent children and low income are

vulnerable to mental health problems (Allen and Finkelstein, 2014; Nomaguchi and Fetto, 2019). Professional and middle-class women are more likely to opt for childcare services as they are more financially sound, which helps them balance family obligations and work simultaneously (Hennessy, 2015). In contrast, women from low-income families are more likely to dwell on the demands of family and work (Hennessy, 2015). The situation is even more debilitating to their mental health as life stressors associated with low income are likely to put them at risk of suffering from mental disorders (Bizu et al., 2012; Umi Adzlin et al., 2011).

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, working mothers dealt with heightened work-home role strains at unprecedented levels (Whitaker et al., 2021). Studies in mental health and remote work in the lockdowns found that as the pandemic forced companies to adopt remote work policies, working mothers found themselves attempting to balance professional responsibilities while simultaneously meeting the increased demands of managing a household and caring for children (Brym et al., 2022; Collins et al., 2021; Elgendi et al., 2022; Wandschneider et al., 2022). As a result, the need for clear boundaries between work and home life became particularly challenging, with the home now serving as the workplace, the school, and the childcare centre. This blurred division between work and family life led to heightened stress, exhaustion, and feelings of being constantly overwhelmed (Benassi et al., 2020). This may have been especially true for low-income (B40) mothers who had to maintain their roles as the economic providers for their families while juggling home-schooling and caretaking responsibilities.

Researchers have emphasised the increased number of working women exiting the professional setting to cater for the home role in the pandemic (Arntz et al., 2020). The discourse on that matter was somewhat intense as it highlights the pervasive traditional gendered role imposed on women to cater for the homes, which will hamper their career progression (Arntz et al., 2020; Hermann et al., 2021). Unfortunately for the low-income working mothers, whether married or of single status, they are not privileged to choose between home or work life because they are the primary income provider and being off work will paralyse their families' income. In other words, low-income working mothers are the breadwinners of their families. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the factors that facilitate or hamper their mental health. Understanding these stressors is essential for crafting targeted interventions and support systems that address their needs and promote their mental well-being.

While research on the pandemic's impact is growing, there still needs to be a gap in comprehensively understanding the lived experiences of low-income working mothers during this crisis. This study seeks to address this gap by employing a descriptive phenomenology to explore the intricate relationships between their socioeconomic background, work-family dynamics and mental health. By providing a detailed examination of their unique experiences, this preliminary study aims to contribute to scholarly discussions and practical interventions supporting the well-being of B40 working mothers.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive phenomenology, rooted in Husserlian philosophy (Dowling, 2007), provides an apt approach to delve into the subjective experiences of urban low-income working mothers during the pandemic. This research method encourages researchers to suspend assumptions and immerse themselves in the participants' perspectives, facilitating an in-depth exploration of the essence of their encounters (Dowling, 2007). By adopting this approach, I, as the researcher, can uncover how the

pandemic has shaped working mothers' mental health, work arrangements, and parenting responsibilities.

This research follows a descriptive phenomenology design. The phenomenon is explained using phenomenological themes. The foundational ideas of Husserl play a crucial role in the field of descriptive phenomenology (Dowling, 2007). According to Husserl, phenomenology aims to deeply understand human consciousness by describing things every day in everyone's experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). Descriptive phenomenology is the best approach when exploring universal aspects of a phenomenon that haven't been studied before (Wojnar and Swanson, 2007). Juggling roles during the pandemic for working mothers was a new phenomenon with its complexities and intricacies of mothers' emotional responses to the unparalleled crisis.

Central to descriptive phenomenology is bracketing, where preconceived beliefs and opinions about the phenomenon being studied are temporarily set aside (Dowling, 2007). This allows the true essence of the phenomenon to emerge from the perspective of those experiencing it. In this study, bracketing was achieved through reflective journaling. The methodology of descriptive phenomenology provides the tools to avoid making judgments and instead focus on describing the actual lived experience rather than interpreting it. The researcher's reflective notes were reviewed before each interview and each case analysis to ensure that assumptions imposed by the researcher did not take precedence over the participants' reported experiences.

Eight participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball samplings. Purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting informants who can expound upon a predetermined theme, concept, or phenomenon (Robinson, 2014). Subsequently, snowball sampling enables the expansion of the sample by soliciting participants to provide information regarding individuals who could be interviewed (Groenewald, 2017). Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested a number between 3 and 15 participants suitable for conducting a phenomenology study.

This study uses a homogenous sample of working women with the following criteria: 1) combined household income <RM3999; 2) involved in full-time paid employment (fixed hours job, private sector); 3) have dependent child and/or adults with disabilities under their care; 4) live in greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley; and 5) able to read and write, either or both in Bahasa Melayu and English, as they are required to write a diary.

Data was collected using seven days of consecutive diary writing followed by an interview from June to December 2021. This data collection method was deemed the best tool to dive deeper into the phenomenological accounts of each participant. The utilisation of diary entries in this study is characterised by their everyday nature, which is significant in facilitating the collection of contemporaneous data (Andy Alaszewski, 2006; Lauri Hyers, 2018). In addition, using diaries helps minimise recall bias, as thoughts and emotions are recorded close in time to the events (Andy Alaszewski, 2006). Consequently, this reduces the potential loss of information, which can be highly valuable.

Conversely, relying solely on interviews may challenge participants in recalling significant daily events (Andy Alaszewski, 2006). Thus, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to extract additional information from the diary entries. While written diaries may need to capture specific perspectives in sufficient detail or length, interviews provide an opportunity to expand on these aspects. Semi-structured interviews elicit comprehensive and detailed responses using open-ended questions and language that participants are comfortable with. Furthermore, they offer the advantage of allowing

the researcher to explore unforeseen areas of interest during the conversation, leading to the acquisition of more extensive data (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Therefore, using both methods is seen as complementary, where they could provide richer insights into the phenomenological aspect of the participant's life.

Seven participants chose an online diary (email, Word, Whatsapp, etc.), and one wrote on a paper notebook. Interviews were conducted via the online Zoom platform. All participants were given pseudonyms in keeping with the ethical research confidentiality agreement. A set of open-ended questions for the daily diary was given as prompts for the participants. Interviews data were transcribed verbatim. Participants were using a mix of both languages. The data was selected to match the objectives of the study. The data analysis took place using Sundler et al.'s (2019) thematic analysis based on descriptive phenomenology. The three core analytical steps are: 1) achieve familiarity with the data through open-minded reading; 2) search for meanings and themes; 3) organise themes into a meaningful wholeness (Sundler et al., 2019, p. 736).

Data were gathered through diary accounts, interview sessions and the researcher's fieldnotes for triangulation. This combination of methodological approaches allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences, encompassing positive and negative facets of living during the pandemic. Indeed, field notes have been recognised as an added data layer to develop thick and rich study descriptions (Phillippi and Lauderdale, 2018).

For this study, the researcher's field notes played a vital role in the triangulation of data from diaries and interviews by highlighting crucial details, such as keywords, phrases and noteworthy expressions utilised by the participants and contrasting them. Additionally, it is of utmost significance to consider observations such as interruptions by family members during the interviews as they demonstrate the constant demand for the mother's presence at home, which signifies their limited opportunities for personal communication.

The interview setting, such as conducting the session openly in the dining room with the husband and other family members present, raised questions about the participants' motivations. The researcher's notes also encompass critical reflections on the researcher's performance, biases and emotions, which were recorded immediately after the interview and sometimes developed over time when important insights unexpectedly emerged. Thus, close notetaking was undertaken during the interviews and diary narratives were cross-checked to eliminate ambiguity in the data between the participants' diaries and interviews. Triangulation involved the interpretation of each data analysis and the comparison of all recorded sources.

In addition, this study employed a peer-review procedure executed by two proficient users in qualitative research. This evaluation aimed to ensure the study's reliability, accuracy, credibility, and robustness. The peers validated the identification of the themes arising from the data analysis. The endorsement of themes by these experts is of significant importance in ensuring that the themes genuinely capture the research inquiries and objectives.

Theoretical framework

The principles of role theory have influenced the majority of investigations concerning the intersection of work and family field (Kahn et al., 1964; Katz and Kahn, 1978). Scholars within the area of role theory have delineated the connection between work and family about the number of roles an individual embraces (Kahn et al., 1964; Katz and Kahn, 1978). Role theory can be viewed from the

negative perspective, which is role conflict, or the positive perspective, which is role accumulation. Role conflict directs its attention towards deleterious impacts and the constraints on the energy (Kahn et al., 1964), whereas role accumulation underscores the advantageous consequences and satisfactions that arise from involvement in various roles (Sieber, 1974). Both perspectives of role conflict and role accumulation serve as foundational principles for most work-family dynamics literature (Michel et al., 2009).

Role conflict

Role conflict theory asserts that individuals have a finite amount of time and energy; thus, adopting multiple roles can be excessively challenging (Kahn et al., 1964). This viewpoint is rooted in the scarcity hypothesis proposed by Field (Goode, 1960), which posits that the performance of multiple roles is likely to result in conflict and strain. Kahn et al. (1964) define role conflict as the "simultaneous occurrence of two (or more) sets of pressures such that compliance with one would make more difficult compliance with the other." That circumstance will subsequently lead to interrole conflict, which arises when the requirements of one role are inconsistent with the requirements of another. Building from that concept, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) assert that interrole conflict occurs when the obligations of work and family roles are mutually incompatible in some ways. The portrayal of work and family as conflicting elements underscores the importance of examining the flow of conflict from work to family and from family to work. Hence, it is now widely acknowledged that a mutual, two-way relationship exists between work and family, in which work can impede family life and family can impede the work sphere (Williams et al., 2016).

Role accumulation theory

The opposite of role conflict theory is role accumulation theory. The theory of role accumulation suggests that engaging in various roles leads to overall benefits that outweigh potential challenges (Sieber, 1974). Similar to the scarcity hypothesis, the expansion hypothesis also directs attention towards the number of roles an individual assumes. Expansion theorists do not contest that assuming multiple roles can engender conflict and stress (Mullen et al., 2008). Expanding upon this established theoretical framework, various scholars have additionally emphasised the advantageous mutual relationships between occupational and familial responsibilities, illustrating how these dual roles mutually support one another to yield overall individual advantages (Grzywacz, 2002). Researchers like Greenhaus and Beutell (2006) proposed a concept of work-family enrichment, which refers to the experiences where one role can positively impact the quality of life in the other role. Indeed, the conceptual foundations of enrichment experience are rooted in a role expansionist theory, which posits that engaging in multiple roles will benefit individuals (Grzywacz, 2002; Sidle, 2007).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Eight participants were recruited for this study. The sample comprised five married and three single mothers aged 28-45. All mothers worked in the private sector. They have a range of one to five kids aged from 6 months to 19 years old. The research has identified three themes from the analysis of diaries and interviews: (1) Multitasking is too taxing; (2) Struggling to regulate emotions; (3) The upside of COVID-19. Please note that the use of [...] within participants' quotes indicates editorial omission, typically comprising exclamations made by the interviewer.

Theme 1: Multitasking is too taxing

This theme illustrates the intensity of juggling between the roles of being a mother and/or a wife and at the same time working to make ends meet for their families. Some working mothers explicitly voiced out the intense juggling work that has become a struggle in their daily lives due to the conflicting roles. Married mothers with small children like Seroja, Dara and Melor portrayed more intense inter-role conflict during the COVID-19 lockdowns. This finding is consistent with existing studies that found mothers, particularly those with children in elementary school or younger, experience more frequent disruptions from their children while working at home than fathers during the pandemic (Collins et al., 2021; Zamarro and Prados, 2021).

Furthermore, Nomaguchi and Fetto (2019) researched childrearing stages and work-family conflict. They found that working mothers of younger children, specifically of infants and toddlers, reported heightened family-to-work strife as opposed to when their children in the third or fifth grade, which corroborates Dara's situation. When children are younger, there are high physical care demands involving discrete activities such as diapering, feeding, and supervision to enhance their cognitive and emotional development (Perry-Jenkins and Gerstel, 2020).

In this theme, the working mothers reported, to a certain degree, a higher negative spillover from family to work than the negative spillover from work to family domain. This situation can be explained by the fact that data collection was conducted throughout the intermittent enforcement of Movement Control Order (MCO) or lockdown during the pandemic times when these mothers were working from home, whether on a full-time daily basis or alternate days. Consequently, they experienced more intensified juggling roles than before the pandemic. Reimann et al. Field (2022) found that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, work-family conflicts, in general, were showing an increased trend across all married working groups, with family-to-work conflict (FWC) direction surpassing the work-to-family conflict (WFC). The increase was notably high in the parents' group (Reimann et al., 2022).

On top of that, the participants also reported elevated stress and emotional exhaustion when working from home. Kida et al. (2023) attributed the situation to the blurred home-work boundary. They discovered that juggling multiple roles was positively associated with burnout. In the context of the pandemic, working mothers with children exhibited more severe mental health symptoms during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Not only that, a study by Wandschneider et al. Field (2022), during the pandemic, found that mothers who indicated insufficient emotional or childcare support presented with elevated levels of psychological distress. There is no doubt that the availability of spousal support at home, specifically in carrying out the domestic load and providing emotional comfort, can help to alleviate a mother's psychological health and vice versa (Allen and Finkelstein, 2014; Elgendi et al., 2022; Kida et al., 2023).

The negative spillover from family to work was evident in Dara's case. The demands from their family counterpart as a breastfeeding mother to a baby, a toddler and a pre-schooler put her under immense stress as she had to fulfil these roles on top of working as a live chat agent. Dara described her mental state at the time of the interview as "I don't know..it's.. (pause)..it's really bad!" (Dara, interview/line 428). Dara gave a sneak peek into her daily work days during the interview without little to no help from her husband.

The kids woke up at 10 am. I was rushing to make breakfast. I would hold on to this tab (her work tablet) whilst frying up anything, such as chicken nuggets. Coco Crunch (cereals) and feed the baby with milk [...] It gets even more complex when the husband isn't helping. He

woke up and just did his stuff, and he went out. Maybe to work, maybe not. (Dara, interview/line 307)

Likewise, another young mother, Seroja, reported a similar agonising juggling act when her husband neglected his domestic responsibilities. The intense problem was not a one-off or rare occurrence in her household. During the interview, Seroja expressed her anguish about her husband's preference to hang out with his friends to release his pandemic stress and avoid his responsibilities at home.

I don't mind if he wants to hang out with his friends, but not almost every day...[...] He hangs out with his friends about 2-3 times per week. Did I ever do that? No! I'm a mother.. ight after work.after I clock out, I instantly switch to mommy mode. I had to manage the kid and then sleep with the kid. (Seroja, interview/line 429)

These working mothers were at their wit's end from receiving little to no help around childcaring and domestic duties from their husbands, which further exacerbated their stress. As for Melor, she was struggling with the absence of work-home duties segregation, where she felt challenged by the multiple simultaneous tasks of work and caring for her tiny baby. It reached the point where she looked forward to returning to working in the office due to the exhaustion of the multiple roles package.

I feel wrong for wanting to return to work in the physical office. Hmm..It's not that my baby suffocates me..but.. hm..I can't focus, and then..I get overtired because I need to focus on both. (Melor, interview/line 449)

Findings from this theme shed light on the intensified role conflict experienced by some working mothers due to minimal to no husbands' involvement in domestic duties and childcaring responsibilities. Nonetheless, according to Powell (2020), the issue of work and family conflict is not limited solely to times of the COVID-19 pandemic. This conflict existed before the pandemic and was magnified rapidly due to worldwide socio-economic shifts.

Indeed, when the mental health and well-being of working mothers deteriorate, it will impact their ability and quality to parent their children. The next theme will expound on the guilt these working mothers faced when they lost their temper around their children.

Theme 2: Struggling to regulate emotions

This theme illuminates the ways these low-income working mothers felt when their children were neglected because of work or at times when their work-family exhaustion took over, resulting in them mistreating their children. As much as work provides financial subsistence for their family, these mothers also face the negative emotional repercussions of juggling multiple roles. Almost all mothers explicitly expressed having guilt towards their children over their unintentional inability to self-regulate. Being the sole breadwinner and head of the family who was constantly deprived of domestic help, Orked wrote about her failed attempt to regulate emotions, which unfortunately took a toll on her kids.

When my husband burdened me with all the responsibilities he should be shouldering, I was disgruntled. There are so many things that I am unhappy about (him)..one way for me to let out the stress is with the kids. I get short-fused, easily upset...[...] I'm not proud of that (Orked, interview/line 998)

Likewise, Embun echoes Orked's struggles to manage her emotions whenever her work gets the best of her and takes it out on her six-year-old Anis. She would be engulfed by guilt when that happened. In a somewhat sombre tone, Embun said:

I do worry about her mental health... about what she feels. Sometimes, when I get home from work, I'm already tired. Then she's acting up. I can't help it. I'll scold her. Admittedly, I did that..I scolded her. I often feel guilty afterwards..that I could not control my emotions. (Embun, interview/line 559)

Anom, a mother of two elementary school children, wrote about her resentment towards homeschooling her kids while keeping up with her paid work. She was struggling to juggle between roles and the demanding task of monitoring and teaching her kids' school syllabus, which was very stressful for her. As a result, she scolded her kids because they could not follow her teachings. She wrote in her diary about her reflection on what the kids might have felt.

I think if they (the kids) were given choices, I'm sure they'd rather go to school than stay at home because their mothers are nagging and scolding them every day. Please be patient, my kids.. I also don't know what else to do. Scolding means love, but I can see through their faces that they are dissatisfied and tired. (Anom, diary day 6/line 42)

These quotes from the working mothers shed light on the interplay between the overwhelming responsibilities of caring and childcaring, paid work, mental health and parenting quality – that when the mother has sound mental health, she can parent her kids better Field (Clark et al., 2021; Market(Clark et al., 2021; Mark et al., 2003). These mothers were describing their guilt from the failed attempts or inability to regulate their emotions as a result of multiple role strains. These guilt expressions also translate into the diminished perceived role quality or role satisfaction of being a mother, which is often regarded as the most rewarding job in the world (Billotte Verhoff et al., 2023). Looking beyond the obvious, this finding somehow highlights the effects of pervasive guilt and shame associated with the experience of mom guilt or having mom rage (Kim et al., 2023). Indeed, parenting guilt emerged as the most significant predictor of a mother's subjective well-being and exhibited a greater capacity for depression when contrasted against relationships with spouses and friends as factors (Luthar and Ciciolla, 2015).

Being a working mother, either outside or inside the pandemic, has shown to be detrimental to their mental health. However, we also found that some working mothers experienced favourable times when working from home. The next theme will provide a detailed explication of the unexpected silver linings.

Theme 3: The upside of COVID-19

Being a full-time teacher, a hands-on mother of three, and a partially unemployed husband, Orked has been the main thrust of the family. She was the leading provider, carer, driver, housekeeper, and other role that got the family functioning. Hence, she described her lockdown experience as a blessing in disguise. Being at home means she was remarkably spared from the consuming task and time of getting ready to work and the kids ready for school. Orked expressed her relief of being forced to stay indoors as a pleasurable experience and that she gets to invest in many self-care routines, especially to recharge her spiritual and religious batteries by reconnecting with Allah s.w.t. The lockdown helped her take a 'forced rest', unexpectedly beneficial for her physical and emotional wellbeing.

I never did Zikr before. I admit. I didn't know how..oh no. I know, but I didn't care. I took it lightly. And then selawat.. [...] I didn't do that. So now, when I spend more time at home, I have plenty of time. I tried to practise that bit by bit. (Orked, interview/line 454)

Suri, a mother of five kids aged from 8-19, also reported the same positive experience as how Orked portrayed her lockdown but in a different light. She enjoyed herself being in the same space with all her five kids. Suri mentioned that it was an opportunity for her and her kids to rebuild their bond again since her teenage kids have been in boarding schools and were only home during a short school holiday or semester break. She also had to be working at the office. Hence, she could perform work roles whilst spending more time with her children than before.

Working at the office is fun when there is plenty of work to finish – I'll get to focus. But working at home whilst surrounded by the kids is also fun..because our bonding with these kids seems stronger after the lockdowns. Because they've all grown up. They do most of the housework..they are my maids! (laugh). (Suri, interview/line 1035)

Whilst mothers with small children like Seroja, Dara and Melor struggle with work-family conflict to cater to their minor children and husbands, Suri can depend on her teenage children as part of her support system. This finding is consistent with Busia et al. Field (2023) found that working mothers benefited greatly from the presence of the eldest children during the lockdown, as they could assist with taking care of younger siblings and managing domestic tasks. This means that instead of being the ultimate carer for the kids, which is highly taxing for their energy and time, Suri's teenage kids can take care of themselves and their mothers, resulting in a positive and pleasant lockdown experience. Indeed, a harmonious family environment has been regarded as a protective factor for positive mental health (Wu et al., 2020).

The experiences on the positive side of the COVID-19 pandemic to the working mothers' mental health suggests that participants also unexpectedly discovered benefits when their work and home life merged. Although the quarantine and lockdown practices involved more social isolation from external connections such as extended family members, colleagues, neighbours, and friends, the more significant contact with family members inside the home provided a rare opportunity for the family to bond. Literature along the lines of family functioning during the pandemic found that such "silver linings" could potentially act as a buffer, shielding family dynamics from the more detrimental effects of the pandemic (Busia et al., 2023; Çetin et al., 2022; Levkovich and Shinan-Altman, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The mental health of low-income working mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic is an area of critical concern. Their unique challenges, ranging from juggling multiple responsibilities to the strain of financial instability, have profound implications for their psychological well-being. Insights from this preliminary study underscore the importance of acknowledging their struggles and implementing interventions that enhance their mental health support. Single mothers with teenage children were showing a better lockdown experience, whilst married mothers with small children were experiencing intensified role conflicts due to the lack of home-work boundaries and lack of domestic help from their spouses. There is a need to provide free training on emotional resilience and self-regulation for working mothers. Unlike their non-B40 counterparts, low-income mothers cannot quit their jobs, have little opportunity to switch to a better job due to childcare constraints and even job options, and are deprived of time and financial options to seek psychological help. The ongoing stress is costing their mental health and affecting the mother-child relationship. It's a non-ending vicious cycle to the working

mother's mental health and well-being if psychological resilience training is to continue being put on the bottom list of interventions.

The present study has its limitations. Descriptive phenomenological studies only capture participants' experiences at a specific time. These experiences might evolve or change over time, and this study might not capture those evolving changes in future. The qualitative study focuses on small research participants. Unlike surveys, it does not aim to generalise the findings to other populations.

This study is part of a PhD thesis by NB. NB designed the study and performed data collection. All authors were actively engaged in the manuscript writing process. NB led the drafting of the manuscript. RH and AT also assisted in data analysis and were the peer reviewers involved in triangulating the data. RH also ensured the coherence of the final document and incorporated feedback. Each author has critically reviewed and approved the content of this paper.

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