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[Badrea Al Oraini](#) *

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Article

Motherhood, Disability, and Employment: Understanding the Workplace Experiences of Mothers of Children with Intellectual Disabilities

Badrea Al Oraini

Department of Business Administration, College of Business and Economics, Qassim University,
Buraydah 52571, Saudi Arabia; barieny@qu.edu.sa

Abstract: This study investigates the workplace experiences of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities. These mothers may face challenges in balancing motherhood, disability, and employment. Therefore, it is important to understand the challenges they are facing and the mechanisms they use to cope with caregiving and work responsibilities in managing the stress that develops throughout this ongoing experience. The purpose of this research was to investigate the workplace experiences of single mothers of children with intellectual disabilities. A review of the literature was conducted. For this research, a qualitative methodology was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of the mothers' experiences. A narrative method was used for data collection. Thematic analysis was utilized to obtain a clear understanding. The findings suggest that mothers of children with intellectual disabilities face difficulties in balancing between caregiving for their child with a disability and their job responsibilities, in addition to showing that there is a lack of flexibility in the workplace, less awareness from colleagues and bosses of the challenges these mothers face, and a lack of organizational legislation that supports these mothers. According to our findings, workplaces should provide assistance to mothers of children with intellectual disabilities in order to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in their employment.

Keywords: organization and management; life-work-conflict theory; mental health; female; human resources; qualitative; child

1. Introduction

"Mothers of disabled children make their way within a society that devalues their children and in which their motherhood has 'failed' to follow the culturally appropriate trajectory" [1], p. 10). Balancing employment and motherhood is a challenging experience for mothers of typical children [2]. Things become more challenging when a single mother needs to cope with raising a disabled person along with fulfilling her job responsibilities, considering that motherhood, intellectual disabilities, and employment all intersect in complex and challenging ways [3–5]. Though there's a growing focus on promoting social inclusion, tangible support, community consciousness, and equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities, the life quality and experiences of women who are mothers to these individuals often remain overlooked or even neglected.[6], p. 3). The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [7] defines intellectual disability as a long-term condition that impairs a person's ability to learn, communicate, and adapt to their surroundings. It is estimated that 200 million people worldwide had an intellectual disability, with a prevalence rate of 1-3% (World Health Organization [8]. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2.9% of its residents have severe disabilities. [9]. The prevalence of Intellectual Developmental Disability was found to be 8.9 per 1000 children, a rate similar to that reported in other countries. Moderate or severe intellectual developmental disorder was found in 70.9% of these children [10]. This raises the importance of providing them with the necessary support. The available statistics, although outdated, still give an indication that the number of disabilities is growing within communities and of the importance of

providing sufficient intervention and support for the disabled and their families. It should be stressed that the effects of disability in general and intellectual disabilities in particular affect not only the person with the disability but also their communities and families, especially their mothers, the ones who take on caregiving responsibilities in most cases [11].

Despite the statistics indicating an increase in the number of individuals with intellectual disabilities in Saudi society, the number of published research studies related to the experiences of mothers caring for individuals with disabilities in the workplace is limited. This is due to the focus on the experience of mothers in general, assuming that the challenges faced by mothers of children with disabilities are similar to those faced by any mother. In one study [12], it is argued that, while new ideas about motherhood have evolved and mothers from varied backgrounds and perspectives demand “space and subjectivity regarding their experiences in motherhood” (p. 39), “very little is known about mothers raising disabled children” (p. 40). The difficulties that mothers of children with intellectual disabilities face in the workplace have received little attention in academic research within developing countries [3,13–15]. Families in developing countries contend with the lack of government financial resources and the provision of appropriate education for their children, along with the shortage in healthcare support and community welfare for the disabled and their families [15–17]. Working mothers of children with disabilities often face particular challenges such as a lack of understanding from colleagues and employers, discrimination, and a lack of flexibility. They usually have access to fewer job opportunities and lower earnings [18].

The purpose of this research was to better understand the workplace experiences of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities, in addition to how these experiences overlap with their caregiving obligations and disability status. It investigated the particular experiences of mothers with children with intellectual disabilities in the workplace, taking into account their dual roles as caregivers and employees. How mothers’ caring responsibilities and their children’s disability statuses intersect with their employment experiences, including any barriers and support they may face, is also examined. This study investigates the difficulties mothers face in obtaining and maintaining jobs, the discrimination in terms of their career opportunities, and the support they need to stay in jobs. The aim was to contribute to the development of policies and practices that support those children with intellectual disabilities and their families to afford them access to different job possibilities and improve their socioeconomic well-being by fostering comprehension of their life experiences. The findings fill a gap in the literature regarding single women’s work experiences, particularly the experiences of mothers of children with disabilities. This research has the potential to inform policy and practice to address the needs of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities.

In this study, qualitative research methods were utilized to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon and allow mothers of children with intellectual disabilities to express their feelings and concerns related to their workplace experiences. Based on the work–life fit model, this study aimed to explain how personal experiences lead to stress-inducing circumstances for working mothers of people with intellectual disabilities, also attempting to shed light on the challenges that these women struggle with in the workplace. It also concentrates on navigating the support provided for single mothers in particular and its impact on their allegiance and satisfaction. In this study, the experiences of nine women who were caregiving for one or more children with intellectual disabilities in the context of the workplace environment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were investigated. This research involved collecting, recording, and analyzing the narratives of these women in seeking to understand the experiences of life, work, and caregiving for one or more children with intellectual disabilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Motherhood and the Responsibility of Caregiving of Children with Intellectual Disabilities

Intellectual disability is a developmental disease that manifests throughout the formative years as substantial limitations in cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [7]). Individuals with intellectual disabilities often face challenges with communication, social skills, and daily living skills in addition to having difficulties with learning, thinking, and problem-solving skills (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [19]). Intellectual disability is a complex disorder with various degrees of severity and underlying causes. Genetic abnormalities, brain injury, and metabolic disorders are the most common causes of

intellectual disability [20]. Autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and epilepsy are all conditions associated with intellectual disability [19]. Individuals with intellectual disabilities are affected throughout their lives, and this can have a significant impact on their education, career, and social participation.

Motherhood is an important part of many women's lives, including through their variety of responsibilities such as providing emotional and physical care, nurturing, and guiding their children [13,15,21]. Mothers who are caregivers of children with disabilities may have more complex and numerous caregiving responsibilities, such as providing specialized care, advocating for their children's needs, and coordinating multiple services and lines of support [22]. Mothers of disabled children frequently shoulder a disproportionate number of caregiving tasks and may experience substantial difficulty in balancing these responsibilities with their own needs and other life demands, such as work [11]. Therefore, caregivers' physical and mental health, social relationships, and overall well-being can all suffer as a result of the responsibilities of caregiving [23]. The impact of caregiving on mothers of disabled children can potentially affect their employment opportunities and outcomes [24]. Mothers may experience job difficulties due to the need to provide care, a lack of access to flexible work arrangements, and workplace prejudice or stigma [18]. These obstacles can lead to decreased employment rates, lower incomes, and financial insecurity [25]. Despite these obstacles, many mothers of disabled children continue to work, either out of necessity or by choice. They may, however, require additional assistance and accommodation in order to reconcile their caregiving responsibilities with their employment responsibilities. Flexible work arrangements, access to leave, and workplace policies that encourage inclusivity and understanding are examples of such assistance [11,26].

Mothers of children with intellectual disabilities are more likely to face workplace harassment and stigma, and they are frequently excluded from job prospects and professional advancement [21,27]. They also encounter challenges in obtaining flexible work arrangements, paid leave, and inexpensive childcare, which can influence their work-life balance and general well-being [4,28]. On the other hand, several studies have found that mothers of children with intellectual disabilities are extremely motivated to work and resilient in overcoming career restrictions [29,30]. It should be noted that mothers of children with intellectual disabilities reported higher levels of job satisfaction when they had access to flexible work arrangements, supportive supervisors, and inclusive workplace environments [31]. Another study indicated that mothers who engaged in peer support groups had higher work satisfaction and better mental health [32]. Previous studies have highlighted the demand for broader policies and strategies to support mothers who look after their children with intellectual disabilities in finding work. For example, [29] indicated that mothers who had access to cheap daycare were more successful in managing their caregiving and job duties. For mothers with disabled children, their work experience isn't always clearly recognized, as evidenced [6]. [3] focused on the experiences of women who had children with intellectual disabilities. The author used interpretive phenomenological analysis in a qualitative study to investigate the experiences of these mothers. The study allowed in-depth assessment of mothers' experiences, and the results show that the mothers experienced a variety of feelings, including love, joy, and fulfillment, as well as stress, guilt, and anxiety. The author also discovered that these mothers faced several problems, such as navigating complex care systems, dealing with societal stigma, and balancing the demands of their children and family.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, a handful of studies have been conducted on this topic. For example, [33] interviewed 84 parents of autistic children to assess their quality of life. They found that this was lower for those families of children with autism than those of neurotypical children or children with other disabilities. In addition, [15] studied the effect of having a disabled child on the quality of life of Saudi women. The findings revealed that having a disabled child had a detrimental impact on the mothers' quality of life. The study suggested that greater support services be provided to mothers of disabled children in Saudi Arabia in order to improve their quality of life. Many mothers who care for individuals with disabilities have indicated that they face extreme fatigue and burnout to the extent that working outside the home becomes nearly impossible. They also pointed out that the healthcare services their children need often require them to attend appointments that are typically scheduled during regular work hours [34] (p. 165). As a result, many mothers of children with disabilities either leave their jobs, seek positions below their actual qualifications, decline

promotions due to additional responsibilities conflicting with their caregiving duties for their disabled children, or opt to transition from full-time to part-time positions to achieve a balance between caregiving and providing financial support [34]. Research has indicated that several factors influence how mothers of children with disabilities navigate the work environment and whether they are capable of engaging in paid employment. These factors include the level of care required by the child's disability, the type of disability, the mother's health, the support she receives from extended family, and the availability and quality of childcare services [34]. Despite the challenges they face, some mothers choose to continue working, for various reasons, and succeed in their endeavors. However, others struggle to strike a balance between the demands of their job and fitting into the work environment. This, in turn, leads to feelings of isolation, self-esteem issues, and a sense of reduced accomplishment, especially for those with higher educational qualifications [35]. Moreover, those who engage in paid employment highly value their positions and report that their working life affords them the opportunity to shape their sense of self, distinct from that associated with their roles as mothers [35]. Some working mothers of children with disabilities perceive that employment provides them with a temporary respite from family worries and caregiving responsibilities. It also offers a sense of independence and an opportunity for engagement and conversation with others in addition to utilizing their skills and abilities to a greater extent [36]. Despite these advantages that employment brings to working mothers, some may feel guilty due to the perception that engaging in paid work is a self-indulgent act [36]. Consequently, some may face pressure to leave their jobs due to societal constraints that confine mothers to the primary caregiving role for their child, or they may struggle to balance the demands of work and the demands of caregiving for their child with a disability [6]. This balance is often not fair, especially in the absence of adequate support and the fragility of the systems that protect mothers of children with disabilities in developing societies [11].

Through reviewing the published research on the experiences of mothers of children with disabilities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it is observed that some of these studies relied on surveys to gather their experiences. This approach deprives the mothers of the opportunity to express their experiences more clearly and overlooks the psychological reality and human experience of these mothers. Furthermore, the qualitative study undertaken centered on the mother's experience of caring for the child, with an emphasis on the services provided for the disability, while neglecting the personal challenges, social obstacles, and psychological barriers that these mothers faced. Additionally, there was little attention given to the challenges of the work environment that these mothers encountered.

2.2. Work-Life Balance

According to [37], work-life balance (WLB) refers to the fact that having rewarding experiences in some aspects of life influences a range of resources, such as energy, time, and dedication, and that these resources are scattered throughout all areas. WLB research began in the 1960s, with a number of studies concentrating on working mothers and families with multiple incomes due to day-to-day engagement. A growing number of women are entering the labor force [38]. Different theories of WLB have been proposed at the theoretical level, including segmentation theory, overflow theory, compensation theory, enrichment theory, facilitation theory, and work-life conflict theory [39]. Ref. [40] developed the conflict theory, suggesting that elements of work and life are inherently distinct, and both vie for an individual's focus because of the time and effort required. And that the two struggle for an individual's attention due to the effort and time needed. Many human resource practitioners began to see work-life balance as a "business issue" in the late 1980s, and firms at all levels realized that spending resources on WLB is in the greater interest of the corporation and its workers [41]. Although work-life balance was originally considered a minor issue, it has grown in importance in recent years because it influences everyone, whether positively or negatively. Both work and family life are crucial aspects of living.[42]. WLB is now acknowledged as a critical management problem for both businesses and employees. Many WLB issues (including stress, absenteeism, employee retention, bad health, and morale) can be attributed to unsuitable WLB management [43]. A range of complementing variables, including equality, job security, labor market flexibility, and affordability, have been added to the present policy mix in the field of work-life balance [44]. Concerning practices, like in many Arab nations, there are signs that Saudi Arabia's

Work-Life Balance (WLB) practices to aid parents of disabled children in the workplace are inadequate. [45,46].

2.3. Work–Family Fit in the Context of Disability

The challenges faced by parents of children with disabilities in balancing work and family responsibilities have garnered significant attention in the literature, such as the paper by [47]. They argued that, while many organizations have introduced family-friendly policies, these policies often do not meet the needs of parents of disabled children. Moreover, [48] refer to the challenges and opportunities faced by families that have one or more children with autism spectrum disorder in the workplace that have not been investigated in depth. Their qualitative study provides evidence of how the family domain can greatly impact experiences and decisions made in the work domain for families with special needs. Therefore, organizations need to provide flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting and flextime, as well as on-site childcare and respite care. It is also necessary to provide training for managers and colleagues on how to support parents of children with ASD. Ref. [49] also examine the work–family fit for parents of children with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). They conducted focus groups with 41 employed parents of children with EBD to gain insights into the challenges they face in balancing work and family responsibilities. The authors argue that these challenges can have a significant impact on the parents' mental and physical health as well as their work performance. They also argue that these challenges can lead to financial strain, as parents may have to take on additional childcare expenses or reduce their work hours. In addition, [28] assert that parents of individuals with disabilities encounter similar challenges.

Other work-related issues may accrue through daily interaction with work colleagues, and feelings of workplace stigma and shame may present [27], which refer to the workplace stigma the parents face when they choose to disclose their family member's special needs and care demands to obtain support. Moreover, [5] discuss the challenges that parents face in maintaining employment while caring for a child with a chronic illness. Also presented in the findings were the negative impact of these parents' caring responsibilities on their work life and the increased stress they experience trying to maintain full-time employment. In addition, [50] examines the impact of family care responsibilities on employment. The author concludes that family care responsibilities can have a significant impact on employment. Additionally, [51] investigated the impact of child disability on parental employment and labor income in Norway, with the results showing that caring for children with disabilities has a negative effect on mothers' labor market participation, working hours, and labor income. The employment effect is more pronounced among mothers of children with more severe disabilities. Although their labor income is lower, the employment probabilities and working hours of fathers of children with more severe disabilities remain consistent in the after-birth period. The authors deduce that providing care for children with disabilities significantly affects parental employment and labor income. This effect is more noticeable for mothers compared to fathers. Ref. [13] investigated the experiences of mothers caring for children with disabilities in Canada. The author found that the challenges they face significantly impact their mental and physical health, as well as their work performance. This can lead to financial strain, as they may have to meet additional childcare expenses or reduce their work hours. The author also stated that these mothers are normally invisible in society, which means their struggles and experiences are overlooked and not taken seriously. As part of the shifting of gender roles, in masculine cultures such as most Arab cultures, the responsibilities of caregiving for children in general, and the disabled in particular, fall more on the mothers' shoulders [1,52]. This causes mothers to be more influenced by the disability than fathers. Ref. [53] examines the role of gender in caring for a child with a disability. Their results show that caring for a child with a disability is a complex position that has at least three meanings: (1) Caring for, which refers to the caregiving work that is involved in raising a child with a disability. This work can be physically and emotionally stressful, and it can take up a great amount of time. (2) Caring about, which refers to the love and care that mothers feel for their children with disabilities. This love is often unconditional, and it can be a source of great strength for mothers. (3) The extended caring role, which refers to the ways in which mothers of children with disabilities extend their caring to broader societal fear and anxiety. This can include advocacy work, fundraising, or even raising awareness about disability issues. In the families [53] studied, mothers were the primary caregivers for their children with disabilities. Fathers, on the other hand, were more likely to be involved in

financial and emotional support. These conventional gender expectations concerning the division of duties between parents might adversely affect mothers of children with disabilities. This caregiving role can lead to feelings of isolation, stress, and burnout, which can also make it difficult for mothers to access the support they need. The findings of [53] are important because they challenge the traditional assumption that mothers are the only ones who can care for children with disabilities.

Moreover, [25] examine the negative impact of work–family conflict on working mothers' career development. They review a number of studies that found that work–family conflict can lead to a number of negative outcomes for working mothers. Therefore, they argue that work–family conflict is a complex issue that is caused by a number of factors, including the increasing number of women in the workforce, the traditional gender roles that still exist in many societies, the lack of workplace flexibility, and support for working parents. In Saudi Arabia, [16] investigated Saudi mothers living with a child with cerebral palsy (CP) and their perceptions of disability. The study concluded that the mothers' perceptions of disability were influenced by different factors, including their cultural beliefs, their religious beliefs, and their personal experiences. They also concluded that the mothers' perceptions of disability had a significant impact on their lives. Their study findings facilitate understanding of the influence of the cultural context in which a person lives and how it impacts perceptions of disability. The study highlights the need for policymakers and service providers to be sensitive to the cultural context when developing policies and services for people with disabilities. In addition, [15] provide a comprehensive overview of the quality of life, needs, and fears of mothers of children with disabilities in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 lockdown. Their findings show that mothers of children with disabilities experienced a significant decline in quality of life during the COVID-19 lockdown.

3. Research Design and Methods

Social constructionism sheds light on the construction of social reality and phenomena, as [54] explains, "Social constructionism and phenomenology share a commitment to examining the lived experience of individuals, and, in doing so, focus on the meaning of the discourse/text/narrative under investigation" (2000, p. 257). The social constructionist approach in research is based on the premise that individuals' reality is not necessarily made up of distinguishable facts, but that individuals construct their perception of reality ([55] & Luckmann, 1967). The important questions of the social constructionist approach include: "How have people constructed reality in this context? What are their perceptions, 'truths,' explanations, beliefs, and worldview? What are the effects of their constructions on their behavior and on those who interact with them?" [56] (p. 255). Ref. [57] argues that humans interpret the world through common sense constructs of daily life, enabling them to orient themselves and navigate their social and cultural environments. From the perspective of social constructionism, meaning is understood as negotiable and created through language and interaction. Therefore, the research process, which includes interviews for instance, contributes to the active production of knowledge and experience. "While we view individuals as active agents in their own lives and as such constructors of their social worlds, we do not see that activity as isolated and subjective. Rather, we locate individual experience in society and history, embedded within a set of social relations which produce both the possibilities and limitations of that experience" ([58] (p. 425).

3.1. Data Collection Procedure

Before conducting interviews with the women, a questionnaire was sent to them. The goal of the questionnaire was to collect demographic information. The questionnaire included several questions such as the age of the participant, marital status, number of children, age of the child with a disability, nature of the disability, employment status, and type of work. It is worth noting that an option to prefer not to answer was provided for each question in the questionnaire. The questions for the semi-structured interview were prepared based on the research question and previous research reviews. The questions were organized around various topics, including support networks, economic needs, employment, motherhood, and disability. Examples of the questions asked included: "In what ways has been a mother of a child with a disability affected your career path?"; "What type of impact has caring for a child with a disability had on your social relationships?"; "Did governmental support influence your adaptation to your child's disability circumstances?"; and "How did you manage to balance work requirements and your child's needs?". The interviews aimed to achieve the research

objectives, with the researcher actively generating rather than merely collecting data. The interaction between the researcher and the mothers played a significant role in creating new meanings. Additionally, the flexible interview design contributed to achieving adaptability and the researcher’s responsiveness to unexpected insights from the participants. The flexible design of the interviews provided the opportunity to modify the interview questions based on the participants’ responses during the interview. This flexibility allowed for a deeper understanding of how participants gave meaning and organized their lives, and how this meaning influenced their actions [59] (p. 9). The duration of the interviews ranged from 1 h to 1 h and 30 min. All the interviews were recorded after obtaining written consent from the mothers, and they were transcribed immediately after completion. This allowed us to gain a deeper insight into the directions of the interviews. The participants chose the location and date of the interview according to their convenience. All the interviews were conducted at the participants’ homes. The researcher had to travel to different regions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to conduct the interviews. A convenience sample of nine mothers living in major cities in Saudi Arabia was recruited. A summary of the participants’ sociodemographic characteristics is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants’ characteristics.

Mother	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Mother’s age	26	30	56	42	32	40	52	34	46
Marital status	Divorced	widow	Divorced	Divorced	Divorced	Divorced	Divorced	Divorced	Divorced
City of living	Riyadh	Jaddah	Riyadh	Qassim	Yanbu	Damam	Qassim	Riyadh	Khobar
Number of children	5	3	6	1	4	3	2	5	6
Age of child with disability	10	5	22	6	12	9	14	12	7
Child’s gender	Female	Female	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Type of job	Teacher	Teacher	Retired Teacher	Teacher	Nurse	Physician	Teacher	Teacher	Administrative job

Interviewees were informed that they could withdraw from the interview process at any time. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary. Consent forms were given to all participants prior to the start of the interview, which they were asked to sign. The form indicated that participants’ direct quotes might be published as well as their sociodemographic characteristics. All interviewees were assured that their confidentiality would be protected and their personal information would be modified to ensure anonymity.

3.2. Data Analysis and Validity

The transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis [60] to “give voice” to the participants’ key life views [61]. Through a careful assessment of their personal perceptions and lived experiences, an in-depth inductive qualitative analysis was conducted to identify the mothers’ special experiences in raising a child with intellectual disabilities. The author classified and analyzed transcripts using a step-by-step transcript analysis technique based on the IPA method [61,62], which included organizing, coding, integrating, and interpreting the data [63]. During the text evaluation, the focus was on the participants’ subjective points of view rather than hard facts. First, the researcher read and reread each participant’s transcript independently to become informed about the data. This procedure was repeated for all transcripts, allowing the researcher to gain a clear understanding of the participants’ ideas and feelings via their experiences. Furthermore, at this stage, the researcher documented their findings and comments [62]. The author then coded each interview transcript line by line in the next step. Important descriptive, grammatical, and

conceptual themes were developed for each transcript by concentrating on links between themes inside each tale and then across narratives.

4. Results

The analysis revealed themes concerning the maternal burden of raising a child with a mental disability. These themes provide insight into the complex experiences of the mothers, particularly in the context of managing work, caregiving, and advocating for a child with disabilities. By elaborating on these themes, we gain a deeper understanding of the mothers' experiences, emotions, and challenges. These themes collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between work, caregiving, and personal growth, emphasizing the need for supportive and inclusive workplaces.

4.1. Dual Roles and Responsibilities

When they were asked about the overall impact of raising a child with a mental disability, all participants referred to the challenges they normally face in balancing contradicting responsibilities. During interviews, almost all the mothers were full of sad emotions when describing their feelings and reported overwhelming emotions describing their daily struggles related to the child's caregiving and thinking about the child's future. They discussed the challenges of balancing caregiving with work responsibilities. The struggle to find suitable schools and daycare centers for the child was emphasized, as well as the impact of caregiving duties on the mothers' job performance. This theme sheds light on the conflict between personal responsibilities and professional obligations. As one of the mothers stated regarding her struggle in balancing conflicting responsibilities:

"...Assigning me tasks that require me to be in multiple places and not taking into consideration that I should not change my location due to my commitment to picking up my son from the center early."

Through interviews, mothers frequently highlighted the demanding dual roles they had to play as both a dedicated employee and a caregiver to a child with a disability. This inequality greatly intensifies work-life conflict, as the roles are sometimes incompatible, making it difficult to effectively fulfill the responsibilities in each domain.

"I continued to work for 32 years, struggling and exhausted, carrying the burden of caring for my son... performing my full role for my other children and as a wife... as well as working outside the home full-time."

These various responsibilities create a need for critical balance that is hard to maintain. The work-life conflict theory posits that, when roles in personal and professional domains interfere, stress results [64]. The continuous challenge of juggling these roles can intensify feelings of being overwhelmed, leading to burnout and dissatisfaction in both domains [65]. The mothers suggest that the common understanding of dual roles, of being an employee and a family member, might be oversimplified. Instead, for individuals with unique caregiving responsibilities, these roles become multidimensional, including caregiving, advocacy, coordination, and more. The mothers underscored the immensity of the dual roles, emphasizing the sclerotic need for resilience. The burden is not just about employment; it extends to fulfilling responsibilities toward other children and being a partner. This hints at the widespread nature of role-based conflicts and how they penetrate every aspect of life.

4.2. Discrimination and Inequity at Work

The mothers discussed unequal treatment within the workplace, where a colleague is favored over them. The colleague is assigned favorable tasks due to their relationship with the department head, while the mothers of children with mental disabilities are normally denied the same opportunities. The need for a fair work system that protects employees' rights is emphasized. This inequality raises concerns about a lack of fairness and transparency in task distribution between employees. The need for a balanced work system that safeguards employees' rights becomes important.

"It's not reasonable for my colleague to be assigned online teaching or other work just because they have a good relationship with their department head."

"Our lack in these environments of systems and laws that support us and uphold our rights... without having to rely on sympathy and pity."

The working mothers of children with disabilities expressed feelings of frustration and dread at the workplace's lack of consideration for their struggles. The workplace appears to be oblivious to the pressure and challenges the mothers are facing. This disregard creates a sense of being ignored, which can have negative effects on the mothers' morale and work performance [66]. The lack of genuine concern and appreciation from the workplace exacerbates the emotional impact. As referred to by one of the mothers:

"I feel frustrated and dismayed due to my workplace's disregard for my struggles."

Another mother expressed her feelings of negligence by the workplace as well as her feeling of pressure because of the disrespect for her situation:

"It seems they are unaware of the pressure I'm under, as if they don't express genuine concern about what I'm going through."

Some of the mothers described instances where the individual felt overlooked for job promotions and faced inspection over her leave, suggestive of a workplace environment that was not equitable. Discrimination or perceived discrimination can heighten feelings of work-life conflict, as the individual feels undervalued and unsupported [67].

"I often faced, with the manager, discrimination where some were favored over me for certain positions managing departments that I deserved."

Bias and discrimination add another layer to work-life conflict. When personal challenges become a basis for workplace discrimination, this not only increases stress but also creates a hostile work environment. The mothers shed light on a troubling aspect of workplace dynamics where personal challenges become a ground for professional discrimination. This emphasizes the need for workplaces to be educated and sensitized about employees' unique challenges to ensure fairness.

4.3. Lack of Institutional Support

Mothers' repeated references to the absence of accommodations, unsupportive managers, and a lack of understanding from colleagues underline the scarcity of institutional support. This increases work-life conflict, as the individual does not have the necessary resources or flexibility at work to manage her unique situation.

"There is no cooperation at all because some of the approved facilities classified by decision-makers have not been allocated to us."

Work environments that lack flexibility and understanding toward employees with personal challenges only increase work-life conflict. The absence of supportive facilities or mechanisms implies a systemic indifference to employees' unique challenges. Institutions play a crucial role in either reducing or increasing life-work conflict. Therefore, the mothers highlighted a clear gap where decision-makers have failed to extend requisite support, underscoring the need for policy revisions and inclusive workplace strategies. Traditional work-life conflict theory often focuses on individual strategies for mitigating conflict [68], but the mothers underline the pivotal role of institutional mechanisms. This suggests that institutional support is not simply a contextual factor but is central to the experience and management of work-life conflict.

4.4. Financial Constraints

Most of the interviewed mothers mentioned the high costs associated with special care treatments and therapies as well as the financial need to maintain full-time employment. This financial constraint amplifies the work-life conflict, as the individual cannot prioritize care over work even if they want to.

"...this type of supportive service for his development is exorbitantly priced... I can't afford it without working because his father's income is insufficient."

Economic factors often compound work-life conflict. The necessity to work is not just a professional obligation but becomes a lifeline for accessing crucial services [69]. The intersectionality of financial constraints with caregiving responsibilities adds another layer of stress. Financial

constraints, as depicted by the mothers, are not just about making ends meet. They directly influence the quality of care for the child, driving home the point that economic challenges in work–life conflict are not just personal, but they have far-reaching consequences. While financial considerations have always been acknowledged in work–life conflict theory, the narrative positions it as a core determinant. It challenges the established theory, prompting the recognition of financial stress not just as a background factor but as a direct and primary contributor to conflict, especially in specific socioeconomic contexts.

4.5. Physical and Mental Health Impact

The chronic strain resulting from juggling work and caregiving responsibilities has evidently affected the health of some mothers, forcing them into early retirement. This theme resonates with work–life conflict, where the stress from one role negatively affects performance in another role.

“...this led to my physical exhaustion and diseases that prevented me for a period from taking care of my son.”

Chronic work–life conflict inevitably takes a toll on one’s physical and mental well-being. This, in turn, affects one’s ability to function effectively in both roles. The mothers bring to light the tangible health repercussions of sustained stress, which is not just about managing roles but also about the physical and psychological cost that comes with it. It serves as a testament to the multidimensional impact of work–life conflict.

4.6. Ideal Work Environment

Despite the challenges, there is a representation of what an ideal work environment looks like, indicating a desire for understanding managers, supportive colleagues, and institutional systems that acknowledge and accommodate this unique situation.

“The ideal environment... an environment that includes a manager, a leader who knows how to deal with this category of employees... who give their best.”

An understanding, supportive work environment can play a vital role in decreasing work–life conflict. Empathetic leadership and cooperative colleagues can provide the much-needed respite and flexibility. The portrayal of the optimal environment for mothers demonstrates what many facing work–life conflict are looking for: empathy, understanding, and flexibility. It represents the instrumental role workplaces can play in easing strain from the role of caregiving work. The mothers’ descriptions of an ideal work environment move beyond only work flexibility and delve into empathy, understanding, and collaborative support. This acts as a catalyst for the work–life conflict theory to be redefined “supportive work environments” not just in terms of policies but also in terms of culture and interpersonal dynamics.

4.7. Early Retirement with Full Benefits

The emphasis on the proposal for early retirement with full benefits reflects the need for policy-level changes. It also captures the essence of work–life conflict where individuals may withdraw from the workforce due to an inability to harmoniously integrate both life and work roles.

“The greatest and most significant suggestion is... early retirement with a full salary for mothers with mental disabilities.”

Allowing early retirement with full benefits can provide relief to those struggling with intense work–life conflict, especially when personal challenges become overwhelming. Within this theme, the mother’s emphasis on this suggestion points to a systemic solution that addresses the root of the conflict. This suggests a profound acknowledgment of personal challenges and offers a way to prioritize personal well-being without economic compromise. Mothers are looking for systemic solutions, and emphasis on solutions such as early retirement with full benefits would push policy makers to consider more systemic, long-term solutions rather than short-term individual or organizational strategies.

5. Discussion:

This research adds to the growing body of literature on the challenges faced by mothers of disabled children and how their experiences are shaped by the wider social and economic context.

The findings indicate that the beliefs and presuppositions about the care for disabled children here are transformed into social duties and constraints in the lives of these women. Accordingly, as the mothers of disabled children, they have to navigate these entrenched beliefs about their identities (which are often contradictory) whilst trying to lead their everyday lives. These projects have far-reaching effects, showing the struggle that these women experience attempting to undo and abide by the expectations of “motherhood”. Placing their experiences within the framework of maternity leave, work–life balance, gender roles, and social identity, this study represents an original theoretical/conceptual contribution that enhances our knowledge of work–family interfaces, specifically how mothers in Saudi society cope with motherhood. Finally, knowing the trials faced by mother–carers of disabled persons would feed further into our knowledge base on the general quality of motherhood as well as motherhood amongst carers of disabled offspring. The life–work conflict theory suggests that there may be inconsistencies or contradictory demands between an individual’s personal and professional roles leading to tension, stressors, and disappointment within both domains (Bahudhailah, 2019). Mothers have stood as a representation of this struggle, exacerbated by what one participant described as “the additional layer” of parenting a child with a disability. The absence of institutional frameworks and economic need drive even more tension, with consequences in terms of health and forcing women to make the final decision about early retirement. The mothers highlight the need to understand, allow adjustments, and adopt helpful regulations in balancing work and family life, especially for those who provide care in special situations. The mothers represented this tension magnified by the specificity of being a special needs mother. These conditions are exacerbated, again, by the institutional inequalities and the economic compulsion to keep working, which bring about adverse physical consequences resulting in the irreversible decision to permanently leave the workplace. The mothers recommend that understanding their circumstances, providing modifications, and adopting flexible guidelines can reduce the strain between work and familial duties, especially for those facing unique caregiving challenges. The mothers provided an informed narrative on work–family conflict; their accounts highlight the complexities of balancing multiple roles. This points out the necessity of structural, organizational, and societal change to establish spaces that recognize, validate, and support just those challenges. Put more generally, the interviewee mothers’ voices offer an important extension and deepening of the work–life conflict theory. This highlights the importance of the theoretical model to be more pluralistic, accurate in terms of levels of disagreement, and responsive to diverse personal difficulties, to make it more all-encompassing and suitable for different situations.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to understanding the challenges faced by mothers of children with disabilities and the impact of the social and economic context on shaping their experiences. This research indicates that beliefs and anticipations associated with caring for children with disabilities in this setting become social obligations and limitations in the lives of these women. Consequently, mothers of children with disabilities must skillfully navigate these prevailing assumptions about their roles, which can be complex and conflicting at times, while managing their lives. The outcomes of these efforts are far-reaching, revealing the ongoing struggles these women face as they strive to challenge and adhere to traditional notions of motherhood. By situating the experiences of these women in the context of discussions related to balancing motherhood, work, and personal relationships, this research represents an original contribution to knowledge in the field of work–life balance and toward enhancing the understanding of the motherhood experience in Saudi society. Additionally, understanding the challenges faced by working mothers who care for disabled individuals will contribute to advancing knowledge in the broader challenges of quality of life for working mothers in general, particularly for mothers of children with disabilities. The work–life conflict theory suggests that the roles and responsibilities of one’s personal and professional life can be in disagreement, leading to strain, stress, and dissatisfaction in both domains [70]. The mothers are symbolic of this conflict, intensified by the special circumstances of being a parent to a child with disabilities. The lack of institutional support and the financial necessity to work further increase this conflict, leading to health implications and the definitive choice of early retirement. The mothers emphasize the importance of understanding, accommodations, and supportive policies in mitigating work–life conflict, especially for individuals in unique caregiving situations. In this study, the

mothers offered an influential account of the work–life work conflict, emphasizing the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals who shoulder significant personal responsibilities. This emphasizes the need for systemic, institutional, and societal changes to create environments that acknowledge, understand, and support those facing such challenges. In essence, the interviewed mothers' insights can allow for significant extension and refining of the work–life conflict theory. This emphasizes the need for the theoretical framework to be more inclusive, accurate in degrees of difference, and sensitive to diverse personal challenges, thereby making it more comprehensive and applicable in varied contexts.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of organizations adapting their work policies to better support mothers who care for children with disabilities. One significant change that should be considered is implementing work hours that allow employees to adjust their schedules based on their caregiving responsibilities. Another beneficial step would be offering work options providing mothers with the flexibility they need to care for their children with disabilities. Financial assistance is also crucial and can greatly improve the lives of these caregivers. Organizations may want to explore subsidies or financial assistance programs in relation to health insurance coverage. Additionally, raising awareness and providing training is essential. Conducting sensitivity training sessions can help employees and managers gain an understanding of the challenges faced by caregivers fostering an empathetic work environment. Encouraging the formation of support groups where employees facing caregiving responsibilities can share experiences, offer advice, and provide support is another important aspect. Lastly, it is vital for organizations to ensure that caregiving responsibilities do not influence decisions regarding recruitment, promotions, or job assignments. At this level, it is crucial to establish a number of specialized care centers that operate for extended hours to cater to the requirements of these mothers. Governments should consider investing in facilities that provide affordable rates for therapy and care sessions used by people with disabilities, and allowing early retirement with full benefits for caregivers with substantial responsibilities. In order to address the physical and emotional toll of juggling work and caregiving, organizations should also be encouraged to reinforce well-being programs, counseling, or health checks for employees. These practical measures, when implemented, can help reduce life–work conflict, especially for caregivers, making workplaces more inclusive, empathetic, and supportive.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research Areas

It is important to note that the experiences shared in this study may be influenced by societal and regional factors. Therefore, the findings might be specific to regions or countries and may not necessarily apply universally. One aspect that could enhance our understanding is whether the mothers provided insights into how these experiences and challenges evolve over time. This would help us better grasp the long-term effects and changing dynamics of life–work conflict. Recognizing these limitations is crucial, as they allow us to put the findings into context and determine their applicability in guiding research endeavors in this field. For instance, it would be valuable to explore the experiences among a group of working caregivers to identify commonalities and differences. Additionally, gathering insights not from caregivers but, rather, from coworkers, supervisors, human resources departments, and other relevant stakeholders would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the workplace environment and its dynamics. It would also be worth investigating how different organizational cultures impact working caregivers and whether certain organizational practices are more supportive than others. To expand our knowledge further, quantitative methods could be utilized to measure the prevalence of these described experiences among a group of individuals. In this way, we can identify the challenges faced by working caregivers. Moreover, exploring how technology can assist these individuals in managing their responsibilities is an area worth examining. Are there any solutions that can effectively reduce conflict between life and work obligations? By exploring these areas of research, academics can begin to grasp the difficulties encountered by individuals who are balancing work responsibilities with caregiving duties.

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