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# **Working Mothers Navigate Identity & Authenticity During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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## Abstract

Interviews with working mothers juggling professional and personal overlap during the COVID 19 pandemic show that the existing social and institutional challenges and the gendered burdens that working mothers bore before the pandemic, have intensified during the work-from-home environment. Women interviewed shared stories about working policies, organizational trust, burdens of childcare and housework and their wish for a more authentic merging of their work and mothering identities.

### **Working Mothers Navigate Identity & Authenticity During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In May of 2020, three months into the pandemic lock down, I posted a set of two photos on Instagram with the caption: “what my colleagues see → what my family sees”. In the first photo, my face filled up the majority of the frame, my collared shirt visible from the ribs up and a neutral piece of artwork hung on a blank wall behind me. When you swipe to the second photo, the frame is zoomed out. I am sitting at a child sized desk, with my knees up to my elbows in the middle of a room full of toys, laundry and what seems to be the aftermath of a violent fort. The feeling of this photo summed up so much of my pandemic experience to that point: desperately framing my professional self while my reality (working full time at home with four kids ranging in age from 3 to 14) was utter chaos.

The purpose of this study is to gather stories like mine, the stories of working women who are juggling (sometimes literally) the expectations of professional jobs with the upended realities of home life during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on research about intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and negotiations between good worker and good mother (Turner & Norwood, 2013; Johnston & Swanson, 2006), I interviewed 17 women who were in the midst of a whole new level of negotiation between home life and work life and asked questions about identity, authenticity and ambition. The stories gathered from these interviews describe a chaotic, exhausting new reality where working mothers are navigating organizational policies and attitudes that often ignore the experience of working parents; where working mothers are unavoidably merging their mothering identity into work and shouldering the

gendered burden of housework and childcare; and where working mothers are seeing an opportunity for more authenticity in the future.

While very little research has yet been published on the experience of working mothers during the pandemic, popular media has published numerous articles lamenting the very difficult plight of working mothers during the pandemic. In the summer of 2020, as the pandemic finished its fifth month, the New York Times, NPR and the Washington Post all published pieces saying some equivalent of “moms are not okay” telling the story of numerous mothers who were juggling the new challenges of working from home without in-person school or daycare options. The New York Times published a series of pieces examining the effect of the pandemic on working mothers called “The Primal Scream” named for a group of New Jersey moms who met in a park to scream out their anxiety and frustration. In part of this series called “America’s mothers are in crisis: Is anyone listening to them?”, writer Jessica Grose highlights the increasing number of mothers who are leaving the workforce because of the unbearable burden of caring for children while trying to make work *work*. A large exodus coincided with announcements from schools that the Fall 2020 school year would start virtually.

Another NYT article from March 2021 titled “Three American Mothers, On the Brink” follows three women from around the country, over eleven months, showing the story of chaos, resentment and at some points, hope. Women in these interviews note the burnout and exhaustion of working from home while managing kids’ virtual school schedules and childcare for young children who have yet to return to in-person daycare. This article specifically calls out the long-held refrain that moms should keep their lives “hidden from view – lest they be viewed as uncommitted to the work or somehow less fit for the job.” Now “there is no hiding anymore”.

So much in these articles references the gender imbalance that already existed in domestic chores and child related planning for heterosexual couples. Now the cliché about moms never getting a day off is a literal reality. The hope is that this could be a moment for change, a “galvanizing moment for

mothers. A point of common rage.” But as the NYT story of the three moms points out, no one has time or energy to be enraged. Working moms are busy living in states of chaos, resignation, drowning, exhaustion. and resentment.

In another NYT article in the scream series published in February 2021 titled “Working Moms are struggling. Here’s What Would Help” the author acknowledges that all parents and caregivers are hit hard right now but mothers are shouldering the biggest load. The article quotes Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner of MomsRising saying “instead of a structural solution and policies, we’ve relied on unpaid labor of women, who are at a breaking point.” The social pressures and gendered expectations on women affected the experience of working mothers before the pandemic. Since the pandemic, it has all come to a head. This study is intended to explore both what that tension feels like for working mothers and also to ask what could change to relieve the tension and lead to a more authentic experience for working mothers post-pandemic.

### **Literature Review**

Very little literature exists about the experience of working mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Very likely, a lot of interesting research will come out of this time of pandemic-caused working and living environments. There is, however, literature about the experience of working mothers more generally. This literature, which sets the stage for the research in this study, focuses on four themes: the impossible standards for working mothers, how working mothers are navigating identities of *good worker* and *good mother*, how organizational structures and institutional norms create hurdles for working mothers, and the gendered landscape of working mothers at home.

#### **Working mothers are held to impossible standards of parenting and working**

Much of the research about working mothers is presented with the backdrop that so much has changed over the last few decades. Women have exceeded men in college graduation rates; more and more women are working outside of the home and more mothers are choosing to return to work with

young children at home. These changes that lead to dual-earner marriages, to nontraditional parenting roles, and to women's roles in workplaces are still relatively recent developments. But as women's access to jobs has opened up over the last decades, the demands on working professionals in general are increasing at the same time. Simultaneously, the cultural expectations for mothers are not decreasing as they take on more paid work outside the home. In fact, expectations for mothers require that an increasing amount of time and energy be spent on their kids. Many women find the dual increase of expectations for professionalism and motherhood irreconcilable. (Damaske, 2011) There just aren't enough hours in the day.

In addition to the impossible amounts of time and energy required of mothers, the dominant ideals of intensive motherhood (child-centeredness and omnipresence) are incompatible with the ideals of the workplace, which include profit, and personal achievement (Hays, 1996). Hays' term "intensive mothering" defined as "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, financially expensive" (p. 8) ideology has become salient because women who try to enter the workforce cannot fulfill both the expectations of motherhood and the workplace. This impossible expectation is explained by Michel Foucault's theory of cultural hegemony, that subordination of women is "perpetuated by setting up for failure those who attempt to counter hegemonic forces." (Johnston & Swanson, 2006 p. 510)

Career oriented women are stuck between a rock and a hard place, or as Blair-Loy calls it, the work devotion schema and the family devotion schema, neither of which can be fulfilled fully by working mothers. (Blair-Loy, 2003) Working mothers who have at home, primary caregiver male partners would seem to have the best-case scenario. But Brescoll (2005) found that nontraditional parents (working mother, at-home father) are liked less than traditional parents (working father, at-home mother) and at-home fathers are not regarded highly by others. These kinds of gendered social expectations make any working situation for mothers a losing battle.

It is important to note that many factors of American culture and institutional norms create particularly acute pain for working mothers. The “lockstep life course” of continuous dedication and paid employment that is ingrained in the American ideals of hard work and achievement are difficult to set aside for working women who are also juggling primary responsibility for home and children. (Moen, 2005) American values of individualism also exacerbate issues of work-family balance by treating this negotiation as private and personal and not something that the cultural or institutional structures should address. (Blair-Loy, 2003)

### **Working mothers navigate Identities of “good mother” and “good worker”**

If women cannot fulfill the expectations of good mother or good worker, how do they navigate their overlapping identities as working mothers? Research by Johnston and Swanson (2006) proposes the following options for working mothers: selection, segmentation, cyclic alternation, neutralizing, or reframing. Selecting requires a mother choose an identity and abandon the other. Segmenting requires a mother to compartmentalize her identities; Cycling involves a rotation between identities during different times of life; Neutralization means both identities get short changed. The last and potentially most appealing option is to reframe, a process to “weave an identity that reflects their commitment to employment with their commitment to intensive mothering” by reframing one or both parts of this identity. This is accomplished by broadening definitions of both caregiving and working. (Johnston & Swanson, 2006)

Much of the research about working mother identity centers around this expectation that women manage (or reframe) the tension between the identities of *good mother* and *good worker*. (Turner & Norwood, 2013) Some women succeed at changing the definitions of *good mother* and *good worker* into *good working mother*, which includes reframed expectations around quality child care, partnerships and feeling pleasure in working motherhood. This negotiation also encourages a move from an either/or polarity to a more nuanced identity. (Buzannell et al, 2006)

Karen Christopher (2012) showed how working mothers construct the “extensive mothering” role where they delegate much of child care to others and see good mothering as being “in-charge” of their children’s well-being but not necessarily involved in all of the day-to-day caregiving. This study also shows how working mothers see work as a benefit to their own well-being, in addition to their children’s, though the women interviewed rejected certain aspects of the ideal worker model to be able to reconcile both roles. (Christopher, 2012)

This reframing of the definitions of *good mother*, *good worker* and *good working mother* seem to provide some hope for working mothers. However, Buzannell and her colleagues (2006) point out that the danger in this view of the negotiation of a *good working mother* image is that it is a fragile construction and can be easily shattered or derailed by both internal and external factors.

### **Institutions create hurdles for working mothers**

The gendered social expectations about good mothers and good workers are only one part of the picture of the landscape for working mothers. Many structural and institutional factors create hurdles for working women, even if they have successfully negotiated balanced work/family expectations. Even as the number of women in the workforce increases, the gender wage gap still favors men. In 1960 full-time working women earned 60% of median full-time working men. In 2009, that number was still only 77% and while that is going in a better direction, some research shows that progress has stalled. Even if you carry this rate from 1960-2009 forward, the gender wage gap would not close until 2056. Some have suggested that this wage gap can be tied to a skills gap where men had more skills or education than women. In many ways, any difference in the skills of men over women no longer exists. In the case of college graduates, women now outnumber men. (Misra & Murray-Close, 2014)

Gendered organizational practices and structures also lead to discrimination against women that affect wages, hiring and promotion (Misra & Murray-Close, 2014). Structural and cultural factors



maintain more gender traditional attitudes toward work and family that reinforce the gendered roles of fathers as breadwinners and the mothers as caretakers that lead to benefits and opportunities for men in organizations over women. (Chesley, 2017)

Gendered workplace norms affect the ability of working parents to create gender equality at home as well. Even when individuals have gender-egalitarian ideals, their choices and behaviors are constrained by the workplace policies and norms. The institutions' norms are influencing work-family preferences instead of the other way around. (Pedulla & Thebaud, 2015) Motherhood, even more than the gender gap, affects women. Childless people and fathers are employed at much higher rates than mothers with evidence that institutional and cultural constructs like paid leave, child care and support for working moms predict the involvement of mothers in the workforce. (Boeckmann, 2015)

An Italian study from 2020 shows that the pandemic has magnified some of the structural barriers for working mothers citing the 'crisis of care' that is subordinating women, relegating them to the domestic sphere even as they are working at the same time. This study calls attention to the pandemic's role in highlighting institutions that have subordinated women and need gender-egalitarian reorganization, especially when it relates to caring for children. (Manzo, 2020)

### **The Gendered landscape for working mothers (additional burden of childcare and household)**

In addition to the social expectations and the structural and institutional hurdles that women face as mothers in the workplace, it cannot be ignored that women must also navigate a complicated and entrenched minefield of gendered expectations in the home.

Equality in family roles and household labor is more elusive than equal pay in the workplace. Women must still "specialize in family work" while men "specialize in market work" and these men benefit from access to family work (the support of a female primary caregiver at home), which few mothers can access. The marginalization of women from market work has eroded but women are still

marginalized in household roles that require the majority of domestic and childcare related work fall to women. (Williams, 2000)

While participation in labor force and college completion rates are pushing more married couples toward a dual earner model and away from the traditional breadwinner/caretaker division in families (Crompton, 1999; Lewis, 2001) heterosexual partnerships are still reproducing prevalent gendered work/family models that come from interactions with others through a process called doing gender (Chesley, 2011). When women do not do gender, i.e. perform in ways that are seen as non-normative, it can lead to conflict in social interactions and cultural contexts, which can perpetuate the subordination of women. Gendered expectations around housework and childcare are found throughout societal and cultural norms. Working women's personal and social identities are gendered and co-constructed not only by their partners but also by broader societal discourses about independence, career progress, control and leadership (Meisenbach, 2009). So, working women are punished through institutional norms in organizations and they are punished (or called selfish) through societal and cultural norms around childcare and housework.

Parenthood in particular reinforces the adoption of gender-traditional work and family roles. The parent who is most available or earns more does not predict the division of unpaid domestic labor. And while paid work is fairly equal across partners, mothers are doing much more unpaid work than fathers including housework and childcare. Time spent with children has increased regardless of the wage the mother is making. (Chesley, 2017) There can also be power dynamics in heterosexual marriages related to working, breadwinning, and caretaking that cause women to do more of the domestic labor, despite earned income and time available. Even in partnerships where the woman is making significantly more income, the women are still doing more than half of the domestic labor in their households (Tichenor, 1999)

The pandemic has intensified this existing gendered environment. Women surveyed in Italy since the COVID-19 lockdown talk about: the need to reorganize their home space for work, working off hours around children's schedules, finding new communities of care, household duties, and childcare challenges. All of these challenges were seen to be primarily the burden of the mother, with their male partners bearing much less of the burden of the increased challenges of childcare and domestic responsibilities during the pandemic. (Manzo, 2020)

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: Are women negotiating identity differently during the pandemic? How has the merging of home-life and work-life into the same physical space changed the way mothers negotiate their identity as a good mother and good worker?

RQ2: In what ways has the reframing of work through the zoom lens helped/hindered working mothers within organizations?

RQ3: How might organizations emerge from/learn from the pandemic with a more inclusive strategy for working mothers?

### **Method**

The participants in the study are working mothers who fulfill the following criteria: working in professional positions; have children under 10 years old; have been working from home during the 2020-21 pandemic; and had worked in person before the pandemic.

Participants were recruited through my direct professional and personal connections and then via a snowball sampling of additional participants recommended by the interviewees. The qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured, conversational interviews conducted via Zoom virtual meetings, the most convenient and commonly used platform for many of us during the pandemic. The interviews were structured to guide the participants through prescribed questions but were open to allow follow-up comments and questions and allow more or less time to be spent on topics of interest, depending on

the participant's experience. I started the interviews by outlining the main purpose and goals of the study and outlining the general agenda for the interview. As a working mother myself, I talked with the women at the start of the interview to provide a shared experience. The interview questions focused on their experience in their organizations both before and during the pandemic, their sense of identity and best self, their support networks, and their ideas for a better organization in the future.

All participants were given the informed consent form, in which the participants were informed of her options to answer, not answer the questions and to stop the interview at any point if she did not want to proceed. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed through Zoom, or through a Microsoft Word transcribing tool. Participants in the study are referred to by pseudonyms in all interview documentation and in the final research paper. The Zoom recording files were saved with pseudonym information only and kept in a password protected drive folder, accessible only by the researcher.

The study represented minimal risk to the participants. While the participants were asked to reflect on aspects of their working and family life that pose challenges and frustrations, these reflections did not cause any more stress or anxiety than the experience of these challenges and frustrations already cause in their everyday lives. If anything, reflecting on these experiences may have alleviated some of the stress of the situation.

All transcripts were uploaded to the computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti for open and advanced coding purposes. Using Tracy's (2020) data analysis coding approach, the data were grouped into a set of 45 codes with more than 700 quotations in the data immersion phase of primary cycle coding. After the first round of coding was complete, some codes were combined and grouped in the secondary-cycle coding that exposed some general themes. These groups were gathered under hierarchical codes to form the themes in the findings. Drawing from advanced data analysis methods, exemplars were identified, the "significant and multi-faceted examples" that encapsulated the data in the research or summed up a particular theme that resonated. (Tracy, 2020)

## Findings

The goal of this study was to gather the stories of women who are working from home with young children during the COVID 19 pandemic and understand the ways that this reframing of work affected their working and mothering identities within their organizations. The stories shared by the women in the study focused on five challenges created by the pandemic work environment: (1) negotiating the organizational structures (policies, work hours, job performance); (2) navigating the organizational culture (support, communication, trust); (3) displaying their mothering identity at work; (4) juggling work and home; and (5) bearing increased gendered burdens around childcare and housework. These challenges highlighted a common goal for many of the women interviewed – a wish for authentic, whole-self identities where mothering and working identities are merged and make us better at both.

### Mothers Navigating Organizational Structure

Many of the women interviewed talked about their organization's policies before the pandemic and then the way the policies evolved during the pandemic. The women described their employer's attempt to put parameters around work-from-home arrangements including technology and access, work hours, geographic location of work, and requirements for job performance and productivity. Some of these structural boundaries created very difficult environments for working mothers, while other policies created improvements in the work/life balance of mothers.

Polly, a working mother with three children who is the executive director of a nonprofit shared how the structures pre-pandemic created an impossible and unnecessary burden for her:

*And, you know, you can leave a child at daycare screaming because he wants to nurse but you don't have time so you're going to race to your office getting the seated at the right time but you're probably crying or you feel horrible and it's really taking you a minute to center yourself to get your mind focus to work because you're feeling horrible you left your child screaming at*

*daycare because they all they want is to the comfort of nursing before you leave, or you make the choice to nurse them. And you're completely stressed out because you know you're going to be late. And you kind of try and slink in as if you've always been there but you know you haven't because you do still have your coat and your purse but you're trying to make it seem like you're not late. Even though you know that that extra 15 minutes really doesn't matter you could have been in the bathroom, you could have been getting coffee could have been talking to somebody like you see people do all the time. Right, the person, but it's perception and it's it's pressure and it's stress and it's unnecessary.*

The stress of fitting into a strict definition of work: either by number of billable hours or by physical presence in a seat was a strain on working mothers before the pandemic because exceptions to the normal day constantly arise with young children. With the closing of daycares and schools during the pandemic, many women interviewed had a full overlap of work and childcare and the strict definitions of work hours and job performance became even more stifling.

Lena, a lawyer with two elementary aged kids had no childcare during the pandemic and did most of her work in the middle of the night. One of her kids struggles with mental health issues and requires additional support. Her working situation during the pandemic was already a strain but during the pandemic, it became impossible and she ended up quitting her job to be available for her kids.

*I gave notice in June of 2020 And I had several other experiences like that where I was like you're not thinking about what this is like for working parents, like how hard this is. Like poor communication and stuff.*

One of the last straws for Lena was a work-from-home agreement issued by her employer that ignored the needs of working parents and then a denial of a request to purchase an internet booster that would allow her to work from a more private location:

*I was just getting approval to use my visa for the Internet booster And I was told no. They would not pay \$100. They had not paid a dime to help me Manage the situation. They knew it was a difficult situation in my instance and they declined my request for a \$99 Internet booster. And that's the moment I decided that I was done.*

Mindy, an administrative assistant for a university with 3 children under the age of 5, had no childcare options for the majority of the pandemic. Her organization had very strict work hours before the pandemic that were incompatible with her daycare schedule requiring a two-hour commute twice a day to her sister's house to accommodate her work hours. She was able to rearrange her hours during the pandemic to work around kids' sleep schedules but she worries that nothing will change when they return to the office.

*Because it's hard, it's hard when you're like such a such a strict schedule. It's either like either adapt or compromise, to whatever your schedule is or you have to look for something else so it's like there's no in between, there's no negotiating. It's either you do things our way or you have to find something else that works for you.*

During the pandemic, many companies and organizations had lay-offs, furloughs and pay freezes. While some of this was a critical need for organizations to stay economically afloat, these structural impacts of the pandemic sent a message to employees about their value. Katie, an industry liaison for a university with 2 children, weathered this storm of changes and it made her question the worth of working and her value to the university:

*They announced last summer that they were going to lay off between two and three hundred people. And then they took away our 401k match. And there was like a pause on all merit increases or salary increases. And when life is already hard because of a pandemic or just, you know, you're already kind of on the fringes of, you know, like loving life. You know, very strict, in terms of just making things happen and meet expectations. When there is a lack of appreciation like in general is like in this not*

*great financial state right but I think showing a lack of dedication to your people who need to make things happen, makes it really hard to say why would I stay, like why would I stay when there's no extra benefit. You know that our benefits are taken away. So what I always say is my job better be really good for me to be away from the people who I love and care about the most and brought into this world.*

Sandra, working on a sales team for a tech company with a one-year-old daughter, shared a way that she leveraged the pandemic work schedule to accommodate her childcare needs, leaning into job performance instead of the typical indicators of productivity: working hours and availability:

*my plan is to be the highest performer two quarters in a row and then tell him what I've been doing, which is that I haven't been working on Tuesdays and Fridays. And now we want this officially recognized right because my bet is that if I say that now and he's like just getting to know the team he's gonna be like, 'what the literal f' right?. But if I just get in so deep as the highest performer and I'm like showing up and I'm like giving him advice and I'm telling him ways that he can manage the team and that those are turning out to be true so those are all things that I'm doing. And I was the highest performer q1, I'm probably going to be q2 and then I'm going to address it.*

Every one of the women interviewed sited challenges with the organizational structure of their employers that makes their work difficult. Many of these challenges involve expectations of hours worked during specific core times, the appearance of productivity in traditional ways; the maintaining of professionalism during the pandemic, work-from-home policies that ignore the realities of working parents, cuts to benefits and pay; and lack of support around technology and physical workspace. Some of the women talked about opportunities that are created by new policies and structures during the pandemic, either because physical presence in the office allows for a redefinition of productivity or because their organizations have adapted to a more nuanced definition for job performance.



### **Mothers Negotiating Organizational Culture; Trust of Org**

In addition to the more objective structural parameters set by organizations in the pandemic, working mothers in the study also talked about the challenges of navigating the organization's culture. They told stories of their employers being tone-deaf, not valuing employees, and showing a lack of trust and empathy for their employees

Lena gave an example of how her organization was tone-deaf about the experiences of their employees. Her organization rolled out an entirely new billing system during the pandemic, making everyone watch training videos and convert their entire process to a new system. Decision-makers at her firm had more time available than usual during the pandemic (they do not have kids or their kids are grown) and they rolled out this change without thinking about the impact on people who are juggling more:

*Today I have to watch a like one hour video to figure out how to keep track of my time like it was just it. This tone-deaf stuff like do you know that? Like you obviously don't know what that means to me. Means everything 'cause like getting up and getting going this morning took a lot and now I can't because. You people are just. I don't know on your pelotons all day. And then sipping martinis at night and Just think this isn't a big deal like this is just not a big deal for people. They'll just find a way to do it and it like every tiny thing like that was such a big deal.*

Charise, a clinical social worker with two kids sited another example of her organization, a large medical conglomerate, being obtuse with policies that alienated working mothers:

*We have another colleague who just came back from maternity leave, and I was talking with her about it – her first baby. She was pregnant during the pandemic. You know I'm just like, That's hard. And they are just not working with her, I'm like you guys we're going to lose this amazing clinician. Yeah, yeah, and it makes no sense to me management wise, like honestly to them the cost of like recruiting and hiring somebody. I don't even know how they think that it makes*

*financial sense, except that they, they put the work back on the rest of us. Does that make sense? So like it gets redistributed.*

Working mothers are also navigating the trust (or lack of trust) of their organizations during the work-from-home environment of the pandemic. Without the physical proof that an employee is physically sitting at a desk, organizations struggle to set clear expectations and then trust people to get their work done. The old perception that the person who is the first one in/last one out is the employee who gets the most done is more difficult in a remote environment and is incompatible with the way working mothers in the study see productivity. Instead, they need trust. Many of the women interviewed said they do not want micromanaging or a constant reporting of the minutia of your day. There are so many things that are busy work that we do to “look busy” but the physical presence at a desk does not equate to productivity. Lesley, a director at a university with two children talks about the bureaucratic minutia that has defined so many roles in her organization and how the pandemic has highlighted how pointless many of these processes are:

*There's a lot of people there who You know they get their power through enforcing the paper process and minutiae of detail, dear Lord. And not being there in person, I think kind of brings to light some of the pettiness of some of the work.*

Sandra talks about another way that her organization sends a message of distrust. Everyone at her tech company will notify their team when they leave their desk, to walk their dog or run an errand or go to an appointment. Sandra hates this and sees it as distrust, another version of busy work and playing into the traditional metrics of productivity that don't work for working moms:

*So I think there's also things that like you could have leadership role modeling like if you need to take your dog for a walk, please do not post in slack like nobody cares and also like. Not only does nobody care but I want you to know. It's a really good thing We don't care. We trust you, like, there's no need, like, anytime I see a post like that it tells me you think someone's going to*

*like what be mad at you were like, you're not meeting expectations you don't reply like that's not how we operate.*

Women in the study also talked about the lack of empathy they have felt from their employers during this time, understanding that there is a fine line between special treatment for working mothers and understanding the unique challenges that working mothers face during the pandemic. Many of the women talked about how different the experience of the pandemic has been for men (both their partners and their male colleagues), how different it has been for people without kids or grown kids and the clear lack of feeling they have felt from their organizations. Katie, the university industry liaison says:

*I would say that empathy is missing in general from our society. And what needs to change is there needs to be a general a bigger, bigger level of empathy for everybody. So my circumstances don't have to be the same measures for me to recognize that you need something different than what I do, I don't have to live in your shoes in order to know that it's okay that you need something different. And so I'd hoped that there'd be a change of empathy and an increase in trust and respect that things will get done, maybe not in the exact same time as normal, but by the deadline. By the time things need to be done things would be done.*

Jessica, a single mom who has twin 3-year-olds and works as in-house counsel for a publicly traded company talks about the experience of being a woman with mostly male colleagues who do not understand what it's like to have to juggle priorities:

*The recurring meetings getting set at eight o'clock am in the office with all of the male managers or executives, which is really difficult to do when you can't drop your kids off until eight o'clock. It's impossible or just the commute alone. It's just, yeah, I don't know, that's my number one example, I guess, other than just the overall overarching feeling. Yeah, the 8am meetings, and your colleagues, or 730, or 7am should add that baseline expectation that your*

*work is the number one priority for your schedule and your time and you'll, everything else will kind of be behind that.*

Working mothers navigate a complex set of cultural expectations in their organizations and come out feeling that their employers are tone-deaf, that they don't trust them and that they lack empathy for their situation.

### **Mothers Presenting Mothering Identity at Work**

The pandemic has provided an opportunity for working mothers to bring their mothering identity to work in more noticeable ways. Some of this has a negative impact but some has been a welcome move towards authenticity. Women in the study noted ways that the pandemic put their mothering identity on display; they talked about the unique skills that make mothers assets to their organizations; and they see their working mother identity as an example to their kids.

For many of the working mothers in the study, their mother identity has become much more prevalent in their workplace interactions during the pandemic. Some of this is in obvious, tangible ways like kids in the background of meetings but colleagues and clients are also noticing and reacting to the mothering identity more directly.

Lisa, an architect with two kids owns her own business and has always prioritized her kids. But since the pandemic, she feels like more people are commenting on her dual role than they did before. It's now a popular topic of conversation to bring up the remote learning or work-from-home challenges:

*So, and then there's more conversations I think people are more aware of the impact of kids.*

*Now, you know, with the homeschool or distance learning. Clients seem to ask questions about it more, whether they want to talk about it really like an easy topic of conversation if they know you have kids, right, like the thing we all talk about as an icebreaker kind of it.*

Sherry, a mom of 2 kids who works in fundraising for a university had some unavoidable childcare issues that impacted her job during the pandemic. Because of that interruption in her work, her colleagues

treated her differently and didn't communicate with her. She felt her mothering identity affected her working relationships during the pandemic:

*it's like just being able to figure out like priorities. I think it's really hard like I think some people don't ask me to do things as much because they're like I don't even know what's going on with her. Like, is she working right now. And there was a period of time when we lost her childcare overnight and I was out for like a week and a half and literally people just stopped emailing me like act like we figured it out like yes I was not gone. It actually is harder to do my job if people don't tell me what's going on.*

Many of the moms in the study reflected on how their identity as a mother actually made them better at their jobs. They cited the confidence that comes from motherhood, the multi-tasking and organization required, as qualities that were also assets to their employers. Jae, a user experience designer with a one-year old daughter specifically saw the process of child-birth as a moment of her empowerment that gives her confidence in her work. The virtual environment of the pandemic has also given her confidence, providing a less intimidating context where her new-mother confidence can flourish:

*I also think it's like I've noticed that a bit of a change after becoming a mom as well. Like I I do think it sort of. It gave me a very different perspective on things. After having my daughter, And yeah, and I think that also contributed to being more kind of comfortable with myself and just being more outspoken. And yeah, so I think that was part of partially come after having my daughter and also. Getting more comfortable because of this virtual situation that we are going through.*

*Yeah, and like empowerment, kind of in that. Yeah in a way in a way like also like I can't believe I did that but also like Just the fact that, oh, you know, those people have not gone through the pain and the you know, the the courage that that you have to kind of go through of giving birth.*

*I think that alone sort of gives me a confidence. You know, I'm this person who went through this experience and now we have a beautiful daughter. Yeah, I think it's sort of that kind of unspoken confidence.*

Jae also commented on her new-found skills of organization and time-management that have come with motherhood that makes her better at getting her work done efficiently:

*you know as a working mom you feel as if you have kind of a very limited time that you can get things done and so you tend to be more focused in your work, more organized in your work. You're better at. Resolving conflicts and and I think that's all you know, very true.*

Jessica, the lawyer with twins talked about the mind-expanding that happens when you have kids. She used the example that talking to twins is like talking about nuclear fission and blueberry muffins at the same time; you have to be able to do two very different things at once. She sees this broadening that happens with motherhood as being an obvious benefit to your work as well:

*I think, I don't know how to explain it but it's like your mind just expands in so many ways i mean you know you're a mom four times over. Like your mind expands to the universe will become a mom, you get by on so much less sleep and you do so many more things, and you just have this low level vibration of things that you're constantly thinking about, and you just get so much stuff done.*

Some of the women specifically noted that their role as a working mother felt like an important opportunity to set an example for their children and to blaze trails for young women who are coming up in their organizations behind them. This responsibility to create more examples of working mothers in leadership positions drove some of the women in the study to be ambitious where they might otherwise pursue less demanding opportunities.

Lesley, the university director, specifically includes her kids in her meetings, both to push the envelope with her male colleagues but also to show her kids what it looks like to run a meeting, teach them valuable skills by having them with her while she models professionalism.

*You know, so that that was an interesting one. Just working with an older generation, a different gender that coming through I feel like my children gain because they get to hear me have meetings and they get to see the professional side of me and that's how I learned how to have meetings. I was surprised when I graduated college and so few people knew how to conduct a meeting. You know or how to negotiate or how to? There's just the little things that I mean people pick up on it fast when they need to, but shocking that you can go through education that many years and not know those skills. Having my bored children rolling across the lawn while I'm having an outdoor meeting with masks. You know 'cause I know that they're kind of picking it up.*

Jae, the user experience designer wants to set an example for her daughter and for other Asian children to see leaders who look like them. Jae saw a professional development talk given by an Asian women about the rates of promotion by Asians into senior leadership roles. She saw that she had a role to play:

*Well, I think in my 20s I was very, very driven to kind of climb up the ladder and like get up there. Now I'm kind of more, you know, my focus has shifted to having more balance between my work and life. And really. Focusing more on kind of the team and the organization that I work with. Uhm, that I enjoy doing what I do daily. But after that talk it was it was kind of interesting in that yes, like my daughter is Asian and so I want her to have visibility into Other Asian females kind of going and seeing them and understanding that she there's really no limitation to her future and. In that sense, I think that sort of drives me to kind of aim higher in a way then I was thinking in the past couple of years. So. Yeah, so who knows, but I feel as though you know for I I need to*

*kind of keep pushing myself to be, uhm, not just, you know, in Italy in a leadership role but push myself to new positions and new challenges for the sake. Young Asian girls and boys*

### **Mothers Juggling both Work and Home**

Every woman interviewed in this study shared an example of how they are juggling their responsibilities of work and home during the pandemic, regardless of their childcare situation. One of the most vivid examples was shared by Tanya, a manager for a shoe manufacturing company with two young children. Tanya had a meeting with a senior executive and at the last minute, her nanny was in the other room and her baby son was screaming under the table where she was taking the meeting:

*Okay, I had one day like last week, it was so bad Kate. I had, it was a very important person, it was a senior director and I hadn't met with them, virtually since COVID. So it's like important to put on, you know, a good show and whatnot. And then, like, so I yelled at her [the nanny] to come get the baby and. And then my husband started talking really loudly. And so the person that was the main key person in the meeting was like, I'm sorry, to stop. I've got feedback, there's some and I'm like, No, that's my husband and I had practice my husband before like because we tell each other when we have really important meetings like you cannot you have to be quiet during this time. No, he's, and then I should not excuse my language. Five minutes later. The landscaper outside the window with the blower It was literally outside. Oh my god. So I actually had to send a message to the person afterwards I'm like I'm so sorry.*

Tanya's example is one of many that show the ways that working mothers are dealing with children, partners and other household distractions while working full time from home.

### **Mothers Bearing Other Gendered Burdens**

The last common challenge shared by all of the women in the study is the disproportionate amount of work associated with childcare, housework and logistics that working women shoulder, especially during the pandemic. Lisa, the architect with two kids talked about the perception her



husband had about the ratio of work they each are doing during the pandemic. Her husband was shocked when she said she totally identified with the women in the NYT Primal Scream series. He thought he was doing so much more work during the pandemic, using paid leave to care for kids after school, helping with dinners. She pointed out that the ratio has stayed the same (with more burden on her) but the work load overall during the pandemic has increased.

*Well, I mean, you know he has taken on a little more responsibility because of this because he has the flexibility in his work but I don't think that's made it more aware of what I've been doing this whole time. Because in his mind. You know things are very equal. But they're not really. Any kind of like all the all the coordination between, you know, finding the nanny finding the you know the things for the kids to do after school activity any of that like kid management stuff, you know, has always been on my plate. And, and it still is, you know, even though he's taken you know he'll take some time off during the week to do the child care but, um, Yeah, I don't know, it's, it's just like not that stuff is just not on his radar.*

*I think, I mean, I think he thinks that he's, you know, he's taken on like 50% of the responsibility of parenting responsibility. And he has taken on more than he had before, but it's still not 50%.*

As the literature supports, women are continuing to bear more of the burden for childcare and housework than their male partners, regardless of the amount of paid work they are performing and the availability of time. Women in the study talked about the burden of coordinating kids' activities, a role they have often always taken but which in the pandemic is even more difficult. Celebrating birthdays or going on vacations, doing sports or activities became a complicated minefield during the pandemic when none of the typical options existed. Women also noted their role in identifying and securing new kinds of childcare or schooling for their kids during the pandemic, and in managing meal planning and food-related tasks as well as other household chores that increased during the pandemic without a coinciding increase in support from their partners.

### **Mothers Finding Authenticity and their Best Self**

One of the questions that each of the participants in the study was asked is, “which version of yourself is your best self, your working self or your mothering self?” with a clarifying question added, “which role are you more authentic?” This set of questions had an unexpected charge to them. First because many women feel social pressure to perform in gender normative ways and so feel like they should be most fulfilled, most authentic in mothering roles. This tension was apparent in the responses of some women. Secondly, the women more often than not answered this question not as an either/or but as a both. Many of the women said that the best version of themselves is a weaving of both their mothering selves and their working selves.

Sandra says this:

*I mean, I really do feel like those times where I'm like both honestly and I feel comfortable, is when I'm at my best like I just literally want to deal with this big hospital because the woman who bought from me, is a bomb, and I sent her a picture of [Sandra's daughter] on her birthday. You know, so like that won me business because, but it's because we had in common and I felt comfortable, and I could be my real self, and she knows I get stuff done and she really sees me fully.*

Lena, the lawyer who quit her job during the pandemic answered the question similarly:

*I think the best version of myself is the flexible one who is willing to like make a sacrifice. Or what makes the most sense and what is healthiest for my family rather than being an either or person like either career or family? And demanding that. Having the courage to demand from my professional peers that they accept that and honor that. And that You know that the most important thing is the health of me and my family and not like Their convenience, or, you know, the health of their business,*

In some cases, the pandemic has created opportunities for these overlaps of working and mothering identities to happen in meaningful ways. Jessica, the in-house counsel with twins was asked to speak at an affinity group for working mothers during the pandemic. She took the opportunity to be very up-front about her situation as a single mom, which she had been more guarded about it in the past. She felt like the pandemic crystallized her priorities and put her situation more on display. She said, "Gone are the days that I have to pretend now, because I don't. And everyone knows, and it just makes me feel a lot more like my authentic self and I honestly think that I do a lot better job and I feel a lot more respected."

Sandra also saw glimmers of what this authenticity could look like during the pandemic but notes there is still so much gendered assumptions that get in the way, "I get these rare glimpses of what it feels like to be relaxed and be myself, and, you know, still be seen as professional and, and there's very few people that I trust to support that."

### **Discussion**

The COVID 19 pandemic radically changed the experiences of working mothers in both specific, objective ways and more abstract, cultural ways. The pandemic collapsed the structural systems that provided childcare, reoriented the definitions of productivity and professionalism and relocated the work arena. The literature on working mothers lays the scene and the interviews from this study add pandemic-specific context to the stage.

Each of the women in this study noted the struggle to navigate the organizational structures and culture that made it challenging to be a working mom before the pandemic and nearly impossible during the pandemic. This builds on the existing literature about institutional hurdles for working women. Many of the women shared stories of presenting their mother identity at work and the difficulty of juggling the responsibilities of parenting and working. These experiences are directly connected to the literature about impossible standards for working and mothering and the negotiation of good mother

and good worker identities. The gendered expectations that fall more fully on mothers during the pandemic echoes extensive data about the burden of childcare and housework on women.

All of the women interviewed said that flexibility and trust are critical values where organizations need to commit if they are serious about keeping valuable working mothers as employees. And each of the women saw how the overlap of work and home gave them a glimpse of their best selves, the authentic merging of their working, mothering identities, which puts the pandemic lens on Buzzanel's research (2006) about reframing the good working mother identity.

The problem with that ideal merged identity is that it requires organizations change as they emerge from the pandemic. Women in the study feel the tension between the pull to be authentic, whole-self versions of themselves (with the belief that this genuinely makes them a better employee) and the structural limitations of organizations that prioritize productivity, professionalism, and profit. This focus of many companies rewards those who have 24/7 availability, 100% commitment to work and 0 distractions. A groggy mom in a greasy pony-tail, with a pile of laundry, a barking dog and a shrieking toddler in her background gets judged as distracted, unproductive and unprofessional. So how does one bring authenticity to an organization that is biased against your whole self?

Sandra, a participant with a one-year old daughter who works in sales, embodies this tension that exists between authenticity and the realities of organizational trust. On one hand, she talks about the regular posts that her colleagues pepper the Slack channel with, things *like I'm walking my dog, be back in 10 or Running to an appointment*. She sees these kinds of disclosures as proof that employees assume the organization does not trust them and they need to account for every minute of their work day. On the other hand, Sandra thinks the best organizations allow us to bring our whole, full selves to our jobs and be authentic. She realizes this is a contradiction – to say “Don't tell me about yourself” while also saying “we should be able to bring our true self to our jobs” but she addresses this contradiction and the trade-off required:

*I started this women's group, we have it's called a book club. The first rule of it is you can't have any books, no assignments. Right. And so I just see the look on everyone's faces and the tone of voice and the way it feels when people are being themselves and that is not what 90% of my work is right and I know that you can be yourself and have really good results but I'm not comfortable with our leadership's ability to, you know, support that and understand it.*

*I feel like the lesson I've learned is that there is so much, for better or worse like sexism and assumptions and like you don't get opportunities that you deserve when there's kind of these perceptions that I just like feel like it's my responsibility to make sure my income and my family's not impacted by that. So that's the decision I've made. And that comes at like great personal happiness sacrifice.*

Another participant, Alissa who is a physician with 4 children, struggles with this tension between authenticity and productivity and proposes that coming out of the pandemic, organizations should embrace the tradeoff of productivity for authenticity:

*Something that is necessary for our working culture to be honest that I would love to retain, which is that you know, being authentic and having you know sort of trusting relationships takes time and Is you know at least what I've noticed is that managers are realizing that they also need to take time with their people to have these conversations about what's going on in the background of their lives. So there's a loss again, there's a gain in relationship when that happens, but I think that organizations will perceive that there's a loss through productivity, both from the manager standpoint as well as from that individual contributor standpoint. So I think what I would want organizations to understand is that that that tradeoff is good and we should make that at every point that we can because people who are, you know, living and authentically you know integrated life? Some are gonna be more sustained in their work, you're*

*going to have less burnout, more retention kind of in a long run it's it's sort of a lot of that long view perspective.*

Lena, a lawyer and mother of two, envisions an organization where the merging of work and personal life elicits a different kind of response, not a policy or a compartmentalization, but a sharing of the burden.

*I think when in a situation where work and personal life necessarily merge, like if somebody has an illness or family emergency or some unique life experience. You can't bifurcate the person from the job and you have to necessarily like consider some of these personal circumstances and what you will expect of them. And ask them how you can shoulder that burden and responsibility along with them, I really felt like There was this expectation that workers would shoulder all of it.*

This overlap of authenticity and organizational trust represents a lovely but abstract opportunity. It is very difficult to translate subjective traits like authenticity and trust into practical policies. So, what could be the concrete ways that organizations could prioritize the kind of valuable authenticity that working mothers have in spades? What would it look like to genuinely value relationship over productivity, seeing authenticity as an investment toward engagement, retention and community; how could organizations help shoulder their employee's burdens?

Many of the women interviewed provided some simple solutions: First, acknowledge how hard it is for working moms and don't make life harder. Don't schedule meetings outside of normal core hours; don't schedule meetings last minute; instead of inviting moms out for happy hour (another thing she'll have to arrange childcare for), have dinner delivered to her door. It doesn't have to be special treatment to know each other as human and value different needs.

Second, change what it means to get the job done. Allow employees to have flexible working hours around their family's needs and their own personality and redefine what productivity looks like. Instead of winning for being first in/last out, affirm the people who deliver important goals across finish

lines (in whatever way they get there). Some people are night owls or have kids in bed by 7pm and will get tons done by the time you are checking your morning email. Make projects about deliverables and deadlines and not about hours with a butt in a visible seat.

Finally, acknowledge that it is easier to be ourselves when we have others around us who are in the same boat. Women interviewed in this study who had a teammate with kids or had a close connection with colleagues with kids felt supported in their organization. Many organizations are forming affinity groups to provide this kind of community for a variety of groups. There could also be intentional mentoring for working moms, partnering moms within the organization for networking and professional growth. Creating organizational space to find community and build relationships (during paid working hours!) will allow for authenticity to grow and will do more for retention, job satisfaction and productivity than any benefits package could offer.

At this point, there is very little research to say how organizations are responding to the pandemic, how they might emerge from the pandemic with lessons learned and new appreciation for working mothers. Likely, there will be a lot of research that studies how the pandemic has overhauled modern working culture. Additional research on the specific experience of working mothers in broader geographic areas, from a more diverse demographic sampling and including the working experience of mothers who are essential workers and navigated the pandemic with in-person work would paint a fuller picture of this study. But either way, the pandemic is exposing a window of possibility for organizations to evolve. It remains to be seen if organizations will push open the window and move toward authenticity or shut the window and revert to the way it was before.

### **Conclusion**

Many of the media articles published in the last 12 months prophesy an imminent breaking point and are calling for systemic changes, policies that would relieve the burden of working mothers during and after the pandemic. Benefits like sabbaticals, nanny reimbursements, paid leave and other

organizational and government benefits would offer options to the working mothers who are trapped between a rock (needing income) and a hard place (caring for their families). So far, none of these policies is getting widespread, government-level support. The most recent 2021 \$618 billion stimulus package is meant to help relieve the financial burden on working parents. The package included expanded unemployment insurance, extending paid leave and continuing the stay on evictions. It also included stimulus payments, increase in minimum wage, plans for reopening schools and pumps billions into child care. The Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University says these measures could cut child poverty in half. And certainly, all of these efforts provide an added cushion, a closing gender pay gap and hope for child-care solutions. But so far, these measures are only dulling the pain of specific financial burdens, not addressing broader societal and institutional hurdles for working women.

In the NYT article “Working Moms are Struggling. Here’s What Would Help” the author looks to employers, government, and communities to provide help to working moms. During the pandemic, many employers had to allow for flexible hours. But as the pandemic continued, these snatched hours here and there mean a woman “managed to keep her job but is about to lose her mind.” Instead, the employer solutions proposed are: offering part-time schedules, unpaid leaves, paying for child care, not penalizing caregiving and not returning to normal office schedules and structures. The article offers many areas for the US government to step up as well: offer paid family leave, subsidize child care, send money to parents, offer tax credits to businesses that retain and rehire mothers, open schools, give social security credits for caregivers and most importantly, **THAT THESE SOLUTIONS BE PERMANENT**. As the third leg of the stool in the solution, the NYT article points out that individuals have a lot of power to solve this problem, pointing out that men still carry about the same portion of the child care burden. Friends and communities can also help relieve the pressure for working moms. And moms (as impossible as it seems) have to make time to care for themselves.



In addition to these specific policy solutions that could address many of the challenges for working mothers, there is also this cultural question: have organizations learned to value the unique skills that working mothers have to offer? If you ask the women interviewed in this study, it will take more than subsidized childcare and paid leave (though these things will certainly help). It will take a broader shift in the definitions of productivity and professionalism to include the authentic, merged identities of a new breed of employees who have lived through the overlap and want to bring some souvenirs along to their future employers. The kind of employers who might value a resume that includes: ability to deliver outcomes amidst chaos; strong organizational skills despite changing goals; and adaptability and resilience in extreme challenges.

The interviews in this study represent the stories of 17 women who were either directly or loosely connected to my social network, people who likely saw my Instagram post. While they represent various industries and sectors, various levels of organizations and have access to various support networks, they are certainly not a representative sample of the diverse experiences of working women outside of the pacific northwest, in other working settings (especially essential workers), and in broader demographic and socioeconomic categories. It is easy to imagine that the pandemic, with all of its challenges and upending, will be ripe ground for research about organizations, gendered burdens, working parents and so much more. Hopefully this future research will show how organizations embraced the opportunity that the pandemic provided, to pivot, to grow, and to encourage the merge of our working and personal identities into one authentic self.

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