

The Intersection of Work and Care: Exploring the Facilitators and Barriers of Maternal  
Employment in Canada

by

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1970s, many OECD countries have seen a significant increase in maternal employment rates. In cross-national comparison, Canada has high maternal employment rates, but lags behind some Nordic and East European countries. Within this context, this study explores how larger social, cultural and policy environments shape mothers' employment experiences, challenging the notion that women prefer to opt out of the labour force when they have children. To conduct this analysis, I drew on focus groups (n=19) and individual interviews (n=39) with 58 mothers in Canada with preschool children in the province of Alberta. The key finding from this study was that the majority of mothers, despite wanting to continue their careers alongside parenthood, experienced challenges integrating unpaid and paid work. To navigate these challenges, mothers employed various strategies, including seeking flexibility at work, reducing work hours, or opting out of employment. Yet, many remained ambivalent regarding their employment arrangements. I detail the ways in which paid parental leave and childcare policies acted as facilitators or barriers to mothers' labour force participation. Overall, the findings indicate that current policies are not sufficient to support mothers in the labour force. This study adds to a body of Canadian literature that examines how barriers such as pervasive gender norms in the workplace and households, and workplace inflexibility, create barriers to mothers' labour force participation and impact mothers' experiences in the labour market.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Haneen Abraham. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children,” No. Pro00089642, February 11, 2020.

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*Either we limit the structural constraints of gender so well that we deny women any agency or we portray women's agency so glowingly that the power of subordination evaporates*

*- Fraser, 1992, p.17*

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

Within the Western context, households have traditionally been guided by the breadwinner model, which involves a husband providing income through paid employment. At the same time, the mother assumes primary responsibility for unpaid household and childcare duties (Meisenbach, 2010). However, recent legal, economic, and cultural changes that have facilitated rising maternal employment rates offer hope that gendered beliefs may finally be eroding (Statistics Canada, 2022a; Barnett, 2004). Indeed, in the past fifty years, women's labour force participation has drastically increased across all high-income countries (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2013). While this is notable progress, the shifts in the labour force have introduced a modern set of challenges for women, particularly for mothers.

As women entered the labour force, they faced conflict managing their unpaid care responsibilities at home and paid work. A key reason for these challenges is that the sharp increases in women's labour force participation have occurred at a faster rate than men's contributions to unpaid work (Milkie et al., 2021), leading to a skewed and uneven imbalance in unpaid work that continues to disadvantage women. Unsurprisingly, the issue of reconciling work and family has gained attention in academic circles and has been well documented through several bodies of literature examining the nexus between paid and unpaid work (Beauregard and

Lup, 2020). Yet, even after decades of discussion, the benefits and drawbacks of women's employment remain a contested area in scholarly literature.

Some scholars have emphasized the benefits of employment for mothers, arguing that employment, particularly skilled work, offers economic security, higher levels of self-esteem, and better health outcomes (Frech and Damaske, 2012). Employment also offers access to social protection such as pensions, unemployment benefits, or leave benefits (UN Women, 2024b). In this light, employment is viewed as 'good for women' and presented as a catalyst for gender equality. Other perspectives, however, indicate that increases in women's employment have not served as a definitive solution to gendered inequalities. Indeed, while employment may particularly benefit some mothers, such as those who are well-educated, in professional employment, and well-positioned to opt out of the workforce by a high-earning spouse, the benefits of employment are not universal across all mothers (Landivar, 2017).

Some scholars have argued that a positive perception of employment may overlook the reality of low-income families, where women are more likely to experience lower wages, less employment flexibility, and a lack of employment benefits in the labour market (Landivar, 2017; Romero, 2000). In these circumstances, the benefits of employment may not surpass the psychological challenges of managing both paid work and providing care for their family in an environment with limited autonomy or options (Ciciolla et al., 2017; Bowman and Wickramasinghe, 2020).

The tension between paid and unpaid work is a complex and widespread global issue, and Canada is no exception. In Canada, mothers' paid labour has significantly increased in recent decades. For mothers with young children under six years of age, employment rates have more than doubled from 32% in 1976 to 72% in 2021 (Choi, 2023). Despite these changes, the rates of

mothers' employment continue to lag behind women without children, men with and without children (Statistics Canada, 2022a), and counterparts in other OECD countries (OECD, 2023a). Further, mothers still make up over three-quarters of the part-time labour pool in Canada (Moyser, 2017). Although there is some evidence that women's economic contributions have started to erode traditional gender roles, it is clear that gendered inequalities persist in the labour force (Moyser and Burlock, 2018). Indeed, despite calls from feminist scholars across disciplines dating from the 1970s to problematize the structural inequalities that continue to contribute to mothers' underemployment, these issues remain largely unaddressed in public policy (Jenson, 2015). Breitkreuz (2018) states, "If any other group had a nearly 40% underemployment rate, serious policy questions about systemic barriers would be raised" (p.1).

In response to these inequalities, Canada, alongside other OECD countries, has designed and implemented a variety of government policies that aim to facilitate mothers' labour force participation, achieve gender equality in pay, and support work-life balance (Reichel et al., 2023; Thévenon, 2013). While there is a broad range of family policies, paid parental leave and available, affordable, and high-quality childcare have been identified as key policies that increase mothers' labour force participation (Reichel et al., 2023; Thévenon, 2013; Gangl and Ziefle, 2015). However, despite the implementation of policies and their subsequent advancements, the statistics and experiences of mothers attempting to, or successfully participating in, paid work still indicate that current policies are insufficient to support equality for mothers in the labour force. Without larger structural or social changes surrounding unpaid work, women remain pulled between expectations of work and care but "without the necessary social infrastructure to enable them to do so" (Bowman and Wickramasinghe, 2020, p.5).

A possible reason why mothers' underemployment may remain unproblematic in policy and common discourse is because of what Hays (1996) identified as 'intensive mothering,' which is the ideology that has shaped the ideas surrounding motherhood in North America. Intensive motherhood is rooted in the idea that a *good* mother should spend "copious amounts of time, energy, and maternal resources" on their children (Hays, 1996, p.8). Because ideologies define our perception of reality, the idea that motherhood is a barrier to labour market participation remains present in society today (Johnston and Swanson, 2006). I argue, however, that maternal employment patterns and experiences need to be problematized as a critical issue that should be addressed in scholarly literature. This is because despite progress, all mothers, including those who are in privileged and underprivileged circumstances, still face gendered inequalities in the labour force that negatively impact their economic and psychological well-being.

Mothers who are trying to 'have it all' must simultaneously juggle paid work and unpaid work while trying to spend quality time with their families. These unrealistic expectations may lead to consequences related to poor mental health, including work dissatisfaction, increased stress, role overload, and high levels of guilt (Lamar et al., 2019). The Canadian Women's Foundation (2021) support of these findings, showing that 28% of mothers say they are struggling to manage work responsibilities, 50% of mothers report exhaustion trying to manage both employment and family responsibilities, and a quarter of mothers fear losing their job for taking time off work. Overall, among those who are participating in the labour force, cumulative factors, including mothers' increased burden of unpaid care work, fewer working hours per week, labour market segregation, persistent glass ceilings, and ingrained socio-cultural biases all contribute to lower labour force attachment and participation rates, and overall increased risk of

poverty among mothers (OECD, 2023b). Although mothers' increased labour market participation has increased their economic well-being overall, these circumstances highlight the need to support mothers' continued employment in the labour force throughout their lifespan.

Alternate to mothers who try to 'have it all,' mothers who opt out of the labour force to manage the conflict between paid and unpaid work become vulnerable to a spouse for their economic well-being (Fox and Moyser, 2018). This is particularly a concern in a context where there has been a rise in lone mothers and single-parent households (Giullari and Lewis, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2015a). Mothers who are living in poverty and may need to rely on state support are met with structural barriers to economic security, including inadequate benefits and a lack of affordable childcare (Caragata and Liegghio, 2013). These economic disparities are reflected in Canadian statistics that show lone mothers with a child aged 0-5 comprised the largest share (31.3%) of those living in poverty in 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Indeed, for those women who are separated, divorced, or leaving abusive relationships, economic instability or poverty has direct impacts on their "quality of life, safety, well-being, and access to basic human needs like food, housing, and healthcare" (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2022).

Recognizing the varied experiences of mothers in the labour force, this study aims to explore how larger social, cultural, and political environments shape the integration of unpaid and paid work. The purpose of this study is to explore mothers' experiences in the labour market. This study includes a range of experiences, including mothers who are employed full-time, part-time, and those who opt out of employment. By drawing on the experiences of 58 Canadian mothers with preschool-aged children, this research illuminates how parental leave and childcare policies may create facilitators or barriers to labour force participation. Additionally, policy recommendations are provided based on the experiences of mothers in this study. Overall, this

study adds to a small body of Canadian literature that examines how policy environments intersect with maternal employment experiences, ultimately guiding key stakeholders, such as policymakers, in developing effective policies to support mothers in the workplace. This study addresses the following research question and objectives:

### **Research Question:**

1. How do the experiences of mothers in Alberta highlight the facilitators and barriers of paid parental leave and childcare policies?

### **Objectives of the Study:**

1. To understand the experiences of mothers in Alberta within the context of paid parental leave and childcare policies.
2. To provide policy recommendations based on the experiences of mothers in the study.

### **Organization of Thesis**

This thesis will be organized as follows. Chapter two examines various bodies of literature, including the gendered division of paid and unpaid labour, traditional gender roles and ideologies, and key strategies for work-family integration to highlight the enabling and disabling influence of mothers social, economic, and political environment on their employment decisions. For clarity, the literature review is divided into three key sections. First, I contextualize mothers' experiences in the labour market, discussing their experiences integrating paid and unpaid work. Second, I provide an overview of Canada's policy context, including its role as a liberal welfare state and a federalist nation, providing a foundation for understanding key policies that influence

maternal employment. Third, I provide an overview of paid parental leave and childcare policies in Canada. Chapter three describes qualitative description, the methodological framework that guides this research study. I then outline the process of data collection and analysis.

In the latter half of the thesis, the stories of 58 mothers' experiences of employment are detailed. In chapter four, the challenges described by mothers integrating paid and unpaid work are brought forward, including unequal distributions of unpaid work, gender norms in the workplace, and workplace inflexibility. I then turn attention to the larger policy context, describing the ways in which paid parental leave and childcare policies may act as a barrier or facilitator to mother's labour force participation. In chapter five, I link mothers' shared experiences within the larger policy context in which they operate. It is this part of the thesis that highlights gaps between current policy and the reality of mothers' experiences in the labour market. Following this exploration, I make evidence-based recommendations for policy changes. In chapter six, the final chapter, I conclude this work by revisiting the critical role employment plays in mothers' economic security and gender equality, then provide a call to action to advocate for systemic change and policy reform.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

The rise of women's labour force participation has been shaped by a variety of factors, including changing gender roles, economic restructuring (Gornick et al., 1997), and increased educational attainment for women (Moyser, 2017; Henderson, 2016). Notably, these changes have also occurred alongside developing family policies that support parents with family responsibilities in the workplace in most industrialized countries (Reichel et al., 2023). Such family policies include paid parental leave and childcare policies to help parents, presumably mothers, to integrate their private and public roles (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2013).

There has been growing interest in family policy in Western policy agendas. However, family policies are often promoted for reasons other than improving women's labour force participation or economic independence. For example, family policies are often promoted to utilize women's human capital and alleviate labour shortages (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2013). Indeed, women's labour force participation has gained increased attention for its role in the economy, with recent reports showing that increasing women's contribution to the economy could add \$150 billion to Canada's economy by 2026 (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2022). Family policies have also been presented as a solution to a variety of societal problems, such as decreasing fertility rates, addressing child poverty, improving infant and maternal health, improving educational attainment for children, and managing the costs of a rapidly ageing population (Lewis, 2006; Hegewisch and Gornick, 2013).

Despite the various objectives behind family policies, they have indeed supported a shift in how women's roles as earners and carers are conceptualized (Misra et al., 2020). Whereas social, cultural, and political norms within the Western context had once supported single-earner

families, in which a male breadwinner's earnings can sustain a dependant woman who is responsible for unpaid work in a "traditional" household – there has since been a pivot to an "adult worker model," where all adults are assumed to enter the labour market, regardless of their gender or parental status (Giullari and Lewis, 2005).

While the new dual-earner norm has decreased the gender employment gap, other inequalities in the labour market have stalled (Henderson, 2016). Specifically, without the consideration of mothers' unique societal responsibilities at the forefront of policy changes, the push for mothers' transition to the labour market has occurred without the consideration of important demands for care, leaving a significant "care gap" unaddressed (Misra et al., 2020; Lewis, 2006). Without larger structural changes to redistribute unpaid care work, mothers now experience pressures as both earners and carers. The overlapping and conflicting roles experienced by mothers contribute to an assortment of consequences, such as role overload, increased prevalence of stress and guilt, and decreased self-efficacy, all while still facing inequalities in the workforce, including gender earnings gaps, and stalls in career progression (Henderson, 2016; Lamar et al., 2019). In this context, the overall aim of this literature review is to provide an analysis of the connections between mothers' experiences integrating paid and unpaid work within the broader policy and socio-cultural contexts that influence their lives.

### **Organization of Literature Review**

This literature review is divided into three key sections. In the first section, I provide an overview of mothers' experiences with paid work and unpaid work in the current Canadian context. Utilizing both a critical feminist (Lafrance and Wigginton, 2019) and a socioecological approach (Pocock et al., 2012), I review the diverse ways the social, political, and cultural

contexts can influence mothers' employment decisions. Next, I contextualize mothers' experiences balancing parenthood and paid work within Canada's policy environment. To do so, I highlight Esping-Andersen's (1990) three models of welfare regimes, highlighting Canada's role as a liberal welfare state. In addition, I discuss how Canada's federalist system influences variability in social policies across the country. Third, I provide an overview of paid parental leave policy and childcare policies in Canada.

### **Clarification of Terms**

There are a number of terms that are often used interchangeably in the context of maternal employment but carry significant and distinct implications. Given the importance of these terms, it is important to provide definitions. These terms are *preference* and *choice*. Fagan (2001) argues that careful consideration is needed when interpreting women's preferences in the labour market because preferences are “expressed from the vantage point of current circumstances, needs, and the range of perceived feasible alternatives” (p. 244). Specifically, instead of looking at preferences objectively, it is important to recognize that mothers' preferences are shaped by external circumstances, such as social norms, childcare costs, or financial constraints. This framework for interpreting preference cautions against the common implicit assumption that mothers are voluntarily opting out of the labour market, and instead brings forward the idea that under different circumstances, mothers' labour market preferences may look different.

Similar to preference, women's choice in the context of the labour market is “debatably an illusion” (Ciciolla et al., 2017, p.495). Stone (2007) provides a compelling argument for what they call a “choice gap” to describe the “disjuncture between the rhetoric of choice and the

reality of constraints” (p.14). Indeed, mothers face a variety of constraints in managing their dual carer and earner roles, including the lack of childcare, job restraints of partners (Ciciolla et al., 2017), social expectations, and inflexible workplaces (Stone, 2007). As a result, rather than a genuine choice, mothers must make a choice in an environment with an “absence of workable alternatives” (Ciciolla et al., 2017). In this context of constrained options, mothers are often pushed into normative expectations of reducing their careers under the guise of individual choice (Treas and Drobnič, 2010; Stone, 2007).

In light of such considerations, I have decided to use the term decision throughout this thesis to describe the outcome of the mother’s labour market participation. While any language may be somewhat problematic, the goal of using this specific language is a conscious choice to serve as a reminder that mothers' participation should be examined in their larger social, political, and cultural environments.

There are also several terms regarding employment categories that require clarification. Employment in Canada is often viewed as a dichotomy: employed or not employed. However, the type of employment arrangement organized by mothers has a significant impact on their ability to manage unpaid work responsibilities, their employment experiences, and their labour force outcomes (Breitkreuz, 2018). As such, there are a variety of terms describing employment categories that require explanation in relation to this study, which are defined below.

## **Employment Categories:**

### ***Employed***

Employed refers to “persons who are engaged in paid work, including 1) at a job or business in the context of employer-employee relationship, or self-employment; 2) unpaid family work contributing to the operation of a farm, business or professional practice owned and operated by a related member of the same household; and 3) had a job but could not work due to factors such as own illness or disability, personal or family responsibilities, vacation, labour dispute or other reasons” (Statistics Canada, 2015b).

### ***Full-time employment***

Part-time employment refers to when “employed persons who usually worked 30 hours or more per week, at their main or only job” (Statistics Canada, 2023a).

### ***Part-time employment***

Part-time employment refers to when “employed persons who usually worked less than 30 hours per week, at their main or only job” (Statistics Canada, 2023a).

### ***Unemployed***

Unemployed is defined as those persons “who were available for work and were either temporarily laid off, had looked for work in the previous four weeks, or had a job to start in the next four weeks” (Statistics Canada, 2023b).

### ***Underemployed***

Underemployed describes both 1) short-time workers, which describes “working short-time when short days or short weeks are adopted by employers because it is undesirable to maintain the business at its usual operating level. The reason for working short time may include slow business, shortage of material or energy, or plant maintenance and repairs,” and 2) involuntary part-time workers, which describes “respondents [that] work part-time because they could not find work with 30 or more hours or due to business conditions, whether or not they looked for full-time work” (Statistics Canada, 2023b).

### ***Not in the labour force***

Not employed refers to those who are neither employed nor unemployed; rather, they “were unwilling or unable to offer or supply labour services under conditions existing in their labour markets” (Statistics Canada, 2015b).

### ***Standard Employment***

Standard employment refers to work that is “full-time, permanent, and part of an employment relationship with one employer” (Government of Canada, 2022a).

### ***Non-Standard Employment***

Non-standard employment describes work that differs from standard employment, including those who are permanent part-time employees, temporary full-time employees, temporary agency employees, dependent contractors, and independent contractors (Government of Canada, 2022a).

### *Precarious Employment*

Since the mid-1970s, there has been a decline in the prevalence of “standard employment,” which is characterized by stable employment that offers a “family wage” along with benefits and pensions (Orstein, 2021). In this stage of the “golden age” of capitalism (Herod and Lambert, 2016), the distinction between standard and nonstandard work was often used as an indicator of precarious employment (Orstein, 2021). However, the changing context of the employment landscape has shifted away from the standard employment model. Indeed, modern employment or a so-called “gig economy” (Government of Canada, 2022a) now encompasses six groups of jobs—including permanent employment, contract work, seasonal employees, casual work, and self-employed workers (both with and without employees) (Orstein, 2021), leaving the boundaries of what constitutes precarious work unclear. Several scholars have tried to define precarious work. Notably, Vosko (2020) describes precarious employment as “forms of work for remuneration characterized by labour market insecurities such as degree of certainty of continuing employment, low income, lack of control over the labour process, and limited access to regulatory protection. Imbued with unequal power relations, it is shaped by the relationship between employment status (i.e., self- or paid employment), form of employment (i.e., temporary or permanent, part-time or full-time), social location (or the interaction between social relations, such as gender and race, and legal and political categories, such as citizenship), as well as social context (occupation, industry, and geography)” (p.15). While non-standard work is often considered more likely to be precarious (Government of Canada, 2022a), it is important to note that non-standard employment can have varying degrees of precarity, depending on the characteristics of the job (Vosko, 2003; Orstein, 2021). For example, Orstein (2021) argues

that there are both “standard, precarious jobs and non-standard, non-precarious jobs” (p.220).

Within the Canadian Context, Statistics Canada’s does not have a definition of precarious work (Statistics Canada, 2024a).

## **An Overview of Maternal Employment**

### **Maternal Employment in the OECD**

Maternal employment rates have seen significant growth across OECD countries. In 2021, 71% of mothers across OECD countries were employed (OECD, 2023a). However, the degree of labour force participation and attachment varies greatly across the globe, with further progress in some places than others. Leading countries, such as Slovenia, Portugal, Sweden, and the Netherlands, had the highest maternal employment rates, with more than 85% being involved in the labour market. In contrast, other countries, such as Mexico, Italy, and Chile still lag, with a maternal employment rate of under 65% (OECD, 2023a).

The distribution of full-time and part-time employment is an important consideration when discussing mothers' labour force participation. In countries such as Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, less than 10% of employed mothers are in part-time arrangements. Conversely, in countries such as Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands, more than 50% of employed mothers are in part-time employment. Despite differences in maternal employment rates and attachment across OECD countries, findings are consistent in that maternal employment rates increase with the age of the mother's youngest child, with rates being lowest at pre-school ages of 0-5 and highest at ages 6-14 (OECD, 2023a). The low rates of maternal employment when children are pre-school ages are often accounted for by the higher demand for care and housework responsibilities in early childhood ages (Breitkreuz, 2018; Patterson, 2018; Hotz et al., 2018).

In Canada, mothers' labour has steadily risen since the mid-1970s. For mothers with young children under six years of age, employment rates more than doubled from 32% in 1976 to 72% in 2021 (Choi, 2023). Despite these changes, the rates of mothers' employment continue to be disproportionately lower in comparison to other groups. For example, 72% of mothers with

young children under six years of age are employed, whereas the employment rate for women without children is 82.9%. Additionally, maternal employment lags behind that of men with children, who have a 92% employment rate, and men without children, who have an 88.6% employment rate (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Maternal employment in Canada, although greater than the OECD average, still lags behind Nordic countries and some Eastern European countries (OECD, 2023a).

Using data from the Labour Force Survey, Uppal (2015) illustrates the shifting employment patterns of Canadian families. From 1976 to 2014, the proportion of dual-earning families with at least one child under six has risen across the country, increasing from 36% in 1976 to 69% in 2014. However, even when women are employed, they are more likely to work part-time. Moyser (2017) used data from the Canadian Labour Force Survey to explore mothers' labour force employment patterns in comparison to men. Among those in core working ages of 25-54, 18.9% of women worked part-time, compared to 5.5% of men in the same age group. Overall, over three-quarters of the part-time labour pool in Canada is occupied by women (Moyser, 2017).

Using the same labour force survey, Patterson (2018) further examined the reasons why people choose part-time work. Hakim (2002) in her development of preference theory, argued that societal developments have finally given women a “genuine choice” to choose between work and family, suggesting that women may prefer part-time work (Hakim, 2002). However, this theory is not entirely supported by Statistics Canada data. Indeed, recent reports show that only 21% of women worked part-time due to personal preferences (Patterson, 2018). Instead, 27% of women aged 25-54 identified they worked part-time because they were caring for children, and for women aged 30-39, childcare was cited as the most common reason for part-

time work. Interestingly, when compared to men in the same age group, only 3.3% identified childcare and 2.4% identified personal preferences as a reason for part-time work (Moyser, 2017).

### **The “Ideal Worker” versus the “Good Mother”**

In Canada, mothers are no longer divided into carers or earners. Instead, the majority are both. Indeed, mothers' lives are said to be “fluid ” as they manage two different roles of childrearing and employment (Freiler et al., 2001), which remain guided by two distinct ideologies. The dominant work culture in North America values an ‘ideal worker’ who is continuously available to work and willing to prioritize their employment over other personal obligations, including their family or even their physical or mental health (Zanhour and Sumpter, 2022; Reid, 2015). Within the context of the ideal worker, employers often expect high levels of commitment from their employees, rewarding both long work hours and “face-time” at the office (Moyser and Burlock, 2018). This dominant work culture is based on the outdated gendered assumptions of the availability and capabilities of a typical ideal worker whose “life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and children” (Zanhour and Sumpter, 2022; Acker, 1990, p.149).

While women who are engaged in the paid labour force are expected to achieve the standards of the ideal worker norm, which values personal achievement and success in the competitive workplace, they often must also face conflicting expectations in their role as mothers, where success is based on intensive motherhood ideology (Walls et al., 2016). Intensive mothering ideology expects mothers to invest heavily in child-rearing and housework responsibilities (Hays, 1996; Johnston and Swanson, 2006; Lamar et al., 2019). This term was

coined by Hays (1996) to define the dominant ideology for mothers in North America, whereby nurturing mothers are responsible for a “child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, financially expensive” rearing of children (Hays, 1996, p.46; Johnston and Swanson, 2006). To meet such expectations, a mother is expected to de-prioritize all career and personal goals to take responsibility for a child’s emotional, social, cognitive, and physical well-being (Lamar et al., 2019). While not directly stated, this ideology implies to women that ‘good mothers’ do not leave room for full-time employment (Walls et al., 2016).

Although these expectations are not realistic for any gender in the modern world, the expectations of the ideal worker are emphasized for working mothers who are encumbered by unpaid responsibilities, such as unpaid care or household responsibilities (Breitkreuz et al., 2024; Zanhour and Sumpter, 2022; Reid, 2015). The clash between these two ideologies has become increasingly prevalent due to the growing emphasis on communication technology, such as email or laptop computers, that have made it possible to work at all times from anywhere, thereby extending the ideal worker standards into the private home sphere (Moyser and Burlock, 2018). The conflicting expectations faced by mothers make it difficult for mothers to fulfill both ‘ideal worker’ and ‘good mother’ norms, and as a result, mothers are penalized for navigating work and family identities in the labour force (Johnston and Swanson, 2006; Zanhour and Sumpter, 2022).

## **Gender and Unpaid Work**

The last five decades have seen significant changes to the long-standing traditional division of work and care in Canada. As women have entered the labour market, the rates of dual-earner families have increased from 36% to 69% across Canada. At the same time, families in which the husband is the sole earner have steadily decreased from 59% to 27%, and fathers

have increased their commitment to caregiving and household work (Doucet, 2015; Uppal, 2015). Although women's paid work and men's unpaid work are converging, scholars have argued that women's increases in the labour market have exceeded both men's contributions to unpaid work (Milkie et al., 2021), and the erosion of dominant ideologies that associate mothers as caregivers and men as earners (Henderson et al., 2016). Without changes to men's roles in society, women's progress in paid work plateaued, leading to what Hochschild (1989) coined the "stalled revolution" of gender equality.

Within the context of the stalled revolution, women are now considered responsible for paid work while continuing to do a larger share of the housework and childcare (Molina, 2021). The disproportionate responsibility for unpaid work is described by several terms in the literature, including "second shift" (Hochschild, 1989), which describes the issue faced by working women who have their "first shift" of paid labour, and their "second shift" of housework and childcare when they arrive home, leading mothers to overall experience less sleep and leisure time than their partners (Milkie et al., 2009; Dugan and Barnes-Farrell, 2020). Many scholars posit that the unequal distribution of unpaid work is a key reason for the persisting gender inequality in the labour force (Moyser and Burlock, 2018; Lamar et al., 2019; Houle et al., 2017).

Recent data helps to paint a picture of the distribution of care within Canada. When unpaid work is examined by both sex and activity, 66.5% of paid labour was completed by women when caring for children under 15 years of age, compared to 33.5% by men. Similarly, 58.7% of household chores or maintenance was completed by women, compared to 41.2% by men (Statistics Canada, 2022c). There are also gendered differences in the types of unpaid care performed. In general, women are more likely to complete routine, repetitive tasks related to

housework and childcare. In 2018, women aged 25-54, on average, spent 1.4 more hours on housework per day in comparison to men. For child-care-related tasks specifically, data shows that women performed an additional hour of child-care compared to their male counterparts (Moyser and Burlock, 2018). On the other hand, men are more likely to complete tasks such as “taking out the garbage, house and car repairs, mowing the lawn, and gardening,” which are considered to be less taxing and repeated on a less regular basis (Houle et al., 2017; Moyser and Burlock, 2018).

Although unpaid work is commonly used to describe visible work, such as cleaning dishes or completing laundry, there is a growing emphasis on the “mental load” (Dean et al., 2022). The mental load describes both cognitive labour and emotional labour that is required to support the smooth functioning of the family and is characterized by “anticipating, thinking and caring” (p. 15). Unlike visible unpaid work, the mental load is 1) invisible, 2) boundaryless, and can bleed into paid work, leisure time, and sleep, 3) enduring, meaning that it is never complete, with no clear start or stop time (Dean et al., 2022). Despite increased awareness of the impacts of the mental load, it remains absent from social surveys and national collection surveys. This leads to critical gaps in the data on family member’s time spent on the mental load, how the mental load is distributed across families and the potential labour force consequences that family members may face from carrying the mental load (Moyser and Burlock, 2018; Dean et al., 2022).

### **Gender and Paid Work**

The reduction of work hours is a key strategy used by mothers to mediate the competing demands of unpaid and paid work, increase flexibility, and reduce the strain caused by work-life conflicts (Buehler and O’Brien, 2011; Moyser and Burlock, 2018). Recent data supports these

findings, showing that, on average, employed women in Canada usually spend an average of 5.6 hours less per week in the labour force when compared men. Put differently, women employed full-time contribute 35.5 hours per week to their employment, while men contribute 41.1 hours per week to their employment (Moyser and Burlock, 2018). In contrast, some mothers decide to reduce their paid hours more significantly, opting for part-time employment (less than 30 hours per week) (Statistics Canada, 2023a). However, scholars have drawn an important distinction between voluntary and involuntary part-time employment.

Voluntary part-time employment is when an individual seeks part-time employment rather than full-time employment and may be used as a way to integrate employment with “studying, training or family care responsibilities; an adjustment enabling people with poor health to remain in employment; a partial retirement option enabling older people to prolong their working life; or, simply a working arrangement that frees up time for other activities” (Fagan et al., 2014, p.3). In contrast, involuntary part-time work refers to individuals who cannot find full-time positions. While part-time work for mothers is often explicitly or implicitly framed to be a voluntary *preference*, this decision is often shaped by external factors, such as gendered care responsibilities, workplace inflexibility, and inadequate childcare services. This suggests that for mothers, the decision to work part-time may not be voluntary but rather an involuntary adaptation to their unique position in the labour market (Fagan et al., 2014).

The reduction of work hours can have many consequences. These consequences, which include fewer career advancement opportunities and lower wages, are often described in the literature as the “motherhood penalty” (Lamar et al., 2019). In contrast to mothers, fathers are said to experience a “fatherhood bonus,” where fewer home and care responsibilities facilitate an increase in their work hours and the progression of their career development (Lamar et al., 2019;

Hodges and Budig, 2010). As stated by Moyser and Burlock (2018), “It is important to recognize that the unpaid work done disproportionately by women for their families facilitates men’s higher rate of labour force participation and longer work hours” (p.6).

### **Motherhood Penalty**

The motherhood penalty describes the disadvantages mothers face in the labour market. As care responsibilities largely fall to women, mothers often take a temporary or permanent leave from the workforce, reduce their work hours to part-time, choose fewer demanding positions, or seek new career options to manage their dual responsibilities at the onset of parenthood (Hill et al., 2004; Brown, 2010). Notably, in families where both parents are earners, mothers often scale back from careers to jobs. Becker and Moen (1999) describe the key difference between careers and jobs, stating careers are more linear, change less often, and are more rewarding, while jobs are more focused on having flexibility and earning income.

It is important to note that career progression may be particularly difficult for mothers who are already facing time constraints and, thus, cannot participate in additional training, education, or networking required to advance in their careers (Lamar et al., 2019). In addition, such time constraints have been shown to influence mothers’ choices in rejecting greater job responsibilities due to limited time availability in their dual roles (Brown, 2010). The motherhood penalty is largely based on the reduction of mothers' work hours, which causes them to be less visible at work and generally viewed as “less committed,” “less competent,” or “inadequate” when compared to men or women without children. As a result, mothers are less likely to be hired and, if hired, are paid lower wages and are less likely to be offered promotions to higher-level management positions (Lamar et al., 2019; Arora and Kumari, 2022).

## **Gender Wage Gap**

The motherhood penalty has significant implications for women's economic well-being. There are numerous terms used in the literature to measure the earning gap faced by mothers, including the "motherhood earnings gap," "child penalty," and the "family gap." Various factors contribute to the gender wage gap. First, women often work in lower-paid occupations (Moyser 2017). The gendered segregation of occupations may be in part due to the socialization of young women, who may choose occupations that allow paid work to be integrated with family care responsibilities (Lamar et al., 2019). This is supported by data from Statistics Canada (2023c) that shows women are still overrepresented in occupations such as health and education, or social community and government services, and underrepresented in management occupations, or trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations. Overall, female-dominated occupations often offer lower wages compared to male-dominated occupations in both the public and private spheres in Canada. A possible reason for lower wages in female-dominated occupations is that they largely resemble work that women have traditionally performed in the household, which remains undervalued in society today (Moyser 2017). Second, as discussed earlier, women often work fewer hours, even when employed full-time (Moyser and Burlock, 2018). Third, the loss of experience or tenure in the labour market due to childbirth may lead to career disruptions that impact career progression (Kunze, 2018), as described by the "motherhood penalty" (Lamar et al., 2019).

There are many estimates of the gender wage gap, with the size of the wage gap varying depending on how it is measured. For example, a recent Statistics Canada gender-based report shows that for full-time wages, female workers make \$0.74 for every dollar earned by a male

worker. However, when accounting for the fewer hours worked by women, women earned \$0.88 for every dollar a man earned (Moyser, 2017). Although the adjustment in calculations has explained some of the gap, nearly two-thirds of the gender pay gap remains unaccounted for (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2022).

Within the Canadian context, there are several factors to consider when analyzing the gender wage gap, including number of children, work experience, length of career gap(s), family structure, and education levels (Zhang, 2009). In addition, Canada is a diverse, multicultural country, thus, an intersectional lens is required to capture the gender wage gap and other social characteristics, such as immigrant status (Canadian-born or foreign-born), visibility minority status, and Aboriginal status (Drolet and Amini, 2023; Moyser, 2017).

When mothers' earnings were examined by the number of children, the earnings gap increased with every successive child: 9% for one child, 12% for mothers with two children, and 20% for mothers with three or more children (Zhang, 2009). It is hypothesized that this accumulative gap is a result of career interruptions and fewer years of work experience that result from giving birth to and rearing children (Zhang, 2009). Additionally, in Canada, both family structure and relationship status are also an important factor in women's well-being. In 2015, couple families with children had an average income of \$126,000, whereas women with and without children had an average income of \$53,800 and \$36,600, respectively (Fox and Moyser, 2018).

Higher levels of education are important for economic well-being, as education is a key protective factor against unemployment and a key enabling factor for entry into both professional jobs and occupations with higher pay rates (Drolet and Amini, 2023; Moyser, 2017). For Canadian-born women, those with higher educational attainment experience a reduced gender

wage gap. In 2022, Canadian-born women who had a bachelor's degree or above had an 11.5% wage gap, compared to a 15.1% wage gap for those women who had a high school degree or less.

Immigrant or Indigenous women in Canada experience worse labour market outcomes when compared to non-immigrant or non-Indigenous women in Canada (Drolet and Amini, 2023). While Canadian women with a bachelor's degree or above experience an 11.5% wage gap, immigrant women landing as children, immigrant women landing as adults, and Indigenous women experience a widening gap of 14.9%, 29.5%, and 15.7%, respectively. For immigrant women, this gap can be attributed to the limited recognition of their skills, education or experience, discrimination from employers, and the increased gendered division of labour in the family (Drolet and Amini, 2023). For Indigenous women, “the impact of colonization (such as discrimination, and negative stereotypes), intergenerational trauma, and subsequently lower levels of education and literacy” continue to pose barriers for secure attachment to the labour force (Drolet and Amini, 2023, p.6).

The gendered earnings gap may discourage mothers from entering or resuming their participation in the labour market, particularly if the mother’s earnings are not enough to support the additional costs of parenting, such as childcare (Zhang, 2009). As such, this gap is an important factor in reinforcing systematic and gender-based inequalities in the workplace and has a disproportionate effect on mothers facing additional inequalities, including racialized women, and Indigenous women (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2022).

## **Strategies for Work-Family Integration**

Work and family responsibilities are often seen as incompatible and overlapping roles, resulting in work-life conflict for parents (Griggs, 2022). This tension is particularly emphasized by mothers, as care of young children and home is typically seen as their primary responsibility (Martucci, 2023). Given the growing number of mothers in the workplace, and the increased recognition of the tension between paid and unpaid work, interest in work-family integration has developed in the scholarly literature (Kossek et al., 2023). Key strategies for work-family integration are part-time work and family-friendly policies.

### ***Part-time Work***

Several strategies have been proposed to help mothers integrate employment and family responsibilities, with the reduction of work hours or part-time work being highlighted as a key approach by policymakers, scholars, and the media (Breitkreuz et al., 2024). Indeed, some scholars have found part-time positions can be an effective way for mothers to fulfill caregiving responsibilities while retaining a connection to the labour market to maintain employment skills, earn an independent income, and sustain outside interests (Warren, 2004). For example, in their research with 1,364 partners mothers in the United States, Buhler and O'Brian (2011) examined the impact of part-time employment on mother's well-being and work-family balance, finding that those who worked part-time reported fewer depressive symptoms and less work-family conflict.

However, other scholars have pointed to the disadvantages for women. Breitkreuz et al. (2024) found that although part-time work promised flexibility, many of the participants who held part-time positions faced challenges similar to those in full-time jobs. Indeed, mothers

reported challenges accommodating work schedules with family responsibilities and continued to experience work-family conflict. In some cases, this led mothers to withdraw from the labour market entirely. Further, Baxter and Chesters (2011) found no significant differences in perceptions of work-family balance between those who worked full-time versus those in part-time work arrangements.

Part-time employment may also lead to negative consequences in the labour market (Webber & Williams, 2008). Indeed, part-time work is often concentrated in lower-paid and lower-grade occupations (Fagan et al., 2014) that often results in the loss of extensive statutory benefits, entitlements, and security (Booth and Van Ours, 2008; Ali et al., 2020; Vosko et al., 2003). The social protections lost through the reduction of work include pensions, unemployment benefits, and maternity benefits (UN Women, 2024b). Additionally, part-time is associated with limited opportunities for career advancement into professional and upper-level managerial positions (Fagan et al., 2014). Overall, while some research has indicated that part-time work offers a better alternative for women faced with full-time work or zero working hours, other scholars have concluded that part-time work is not the perfect solution to work-family conflict (Booth and Van Ours, 2013; Webber and Williams, 2008).

### ***Family-friendly Policies***

Another strategy to support work-family integration has been the introduction of family-friendly policies in the workplace (Kröll and Nüesch, 2019). Family-friendly policies enable employees' greater control over when, where, and for how long they work, typically through options such include telecommuting, remote work, flex time, shorter full-time hours options, or paid parental leave (Kröll and Nüesch, 2019; Lamar et al., 2019; Griggs, 2022). The flexibility offered by family-friendly policies aims to support dual-earner parents to enhance a work-life

balance, many of which struggle to manage paid and unpaid responsibilities (Lamar et al., 2019; Fang et al., 2019). However, in the last 40 years, research exploring the impact of these family-friendly policies on both the short- and long-term outcomes of mothers' participation in the labour market has offered limited, inconsistent results (Kossek et al., 2023).

There are contesting views on the effects of family-friendly benefits on maternal employment. One view is that the usage of family-friendly policies sustains employee commitment and job performance (Konrad and Yang, 2012). Indeed, some scholars have discussed the benefits of family-friendly policies in regard to a healthy work environment and positive outcomes for mother's labour force participation. For example, Fang et al. (2019), drawing on data from the Canadian Workplace and Employee Survey, examined the impact of work-life benefits, including flex time, teleworking, reduced work weeks, and compressed work weeks, on employee employment outcomes. Their findings suggest that family-friendly benefits are associated with greater earnings, career advancement, increased job satisfaction, productivity at work, and better job retention among women.

On the other hand, some scholars suggest that employers draw negative conclusions about the commitment or competence of employees upon the usage of family-friendly policies (Konrad and Yang, 2012). This is consistent with literature that has found family-friendly policies to have the potential to lead to a "flexibility stigma" that contributes to the motherhood penalty and reinforces gendered penalties in wage and career advancement (Fuller and Hirsh, 2019). One possible reason for this is that although family-friendly policies offer benefits to both parents in the workplace, they are often viewed as a mechanism to support mothers in accommodating family responsibilities (Feeney and Strinch, 2019). Fuller and Hirsh (2019) show through this flexibility stigma is more likely to negatively impact women with higher

education levels who substitute facetime at the office to work from home. In this scenario, mothers contradict the “ideal worker norm,” and employers may view mothers as being less committed, less productive, less competent, or less devoted to their careers.

While it is recognized that parental leave is a family-friendly policy that has a variety of positive impacts on a mother’s employment, the length of leave can have varying impacts on labour force attachment (Thévenon and Solaz, 2013; Gangl and Ziefle, 2015). Further, both leaves that are considered either too short or too long have negative impacts on labour force attachment, suggesting there is an optimal length of leave that is required to support mothers in the labour force (Heymann et al. 2017). Short parental leaves have been found to have a variety of negative outcomes, including the reduction of the probability of mothers returning to work or risking the well-being of both the mother and the child (Thevanon and Solaz, 2013). On the other hand, extended parental leaves are hypothesized to reaffirm mothers’ stereotypical roles as caregivers and have led to a decrease in mothers’ commitment to re-enter the labour force (Gangl and Ziefle, 2015). Scholars have theorized that the optimal amount of leave is between six months and 18 months to support mothers’ labour force attachment after leave (Thévenon and Solaz, 2013).

## Policy Environment

Three critical factors are required to support women's participation in the labour force: power, systems, and resources (UN Women, 2024a). In Canada's recent history, women have arguably made significant strides toward achieving power, including "agency, power, and autonomy" (UN Women, 2024a). For example, there has been rapid progress in women's education, with 40.7% of women in Canada aged 24-35 obtaining a bachelor's degree or higher (Deng, 2021), facilitating women's entrance into the labour force (Phan, 2013). Other areas of social progress, such as the introduction of contraception (UN Women, 2024a) and the legalization of divorce (Moyser, 2017), have given women a greater degree of autonomy over their bodies and life choices. Similarly, women have gained "access to, ownership, of and control over resources" (UN Women, 2024a), largely through legislative and legal changes. For example, although women have been working throughout Canada's history, it wasn't until 1964 that Canadian women were allowed to open a bank account without a husband's signature, marking a significant step in women achieving financial independence. Other legislative milestones, such as the Canadian Human Rights Act and the federal Employment Equity Act, were instrumental in enabling women to enter the labour force and giving them access to resources (Public Service Alliance of Canada, 2013). Despite these advancements in agency and resource access, challenges persist, in part because women's entry to the labour force has occurred without significant changes to policies, norms, and institutions necessary to create an enabling environment for women's labour force participation and economic security (UN Women, 2024a). As captured by Fraser (1992), women's agency is not sufficient to resist the persisting power of the structural constraints and gender norms that are working against them (Charrad, 2010).

## **The Welfare States**

To understand the policies supporting maternal employment in Canada, it is first important to situate them in the larger political context in which they operate. A foundational part of a country's political context is its welfare regime, which describes the extent to which individual welfare is supported by three key forces: the state, the market and the family (Myles, 1998; Buhr and Stoy, 2015). In 1990, Epsing-Anderson identified three welfare regimes that could be used to classify capitalist countries in the post-war era: liberal, social democratic, and conservative. Epsing-Anderson's classification system of welfare also provides an important foundation for understanding how women are positioned in the labour market. Indeed, each welfare state is characterized by similar social policies that correspond with distinct employment patterns for women (Richardson et al., 2023).

Among these models, Canada, in addition to the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, is identified as a liberal welfare state (Baker, 2000; Raphael and Bryant, 2004). In general, liberal welfare states emphasize individual responsibility for overall well-being (Baker, 2000). Across these states, it is assumed that individuals should be able to take care of their families, typically through reliance on the labour market (Rievajová and Poláčíková, 2011). However, the state provides a safety net by offering limited or ungenerous benefits to individuals or families classified as "in need" (Buhr and Stoy, 2015; Baker, 2000). The goal of such an approach is to decrease dependency on the state and encourage welfare recipients to take responsibility for their well-being through employment (Baker, 2000). For the majority of the population, economic security is expected to be found through reliance on a market-based economy, job-provided or private benefits, and personal savings (Prentice and

White, 2019). In short, liberal welfare states prefer “market solutions to welfare problems” (Myles, 1998, p.341).

Within liberal welfare states, women are offered a ‘choice’ between private and market-based childcare. A reason for this may be that within the liberal welfare state, the care of children is considered the responsibility of the family. In the absence of family support, the market, rather than the state, is expected to fulfill this role (White, 2012). However, when compared to other OECD countries, liberal welfare states such as Canada have historically underinvested in family policies (White, 2012; UNICEF, 2019). As such, feminist scholars argue that this ‘choice’ is constrained by overlapping gaps between the market and state, including limited childcare accessibility and availability that may influence women to withdraw from the labour force (Breitkreuz et al., 2019; Sakaluk et al., 2022).

This approach is in contrast to a social investment approach in social democratic welfare states, such as Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark, where universal labour force attachment for all, including mothers, is encouraged through policies that support continuous or long-term employment (Raphael and Bryant, 2004; Buhr and Stoy, 2015; White, 2012). Countries with a social democratic state offer extensive social rights that are based on citizenship rather than labour market attachment. The universal policies facilitate the redistribution of wealth across social democratic economies, leading to high levels of basic social security (Myles, 1998), low-income inequality, and low poverty rates across these states (Raphael and Bryant, 2004).

Women's labour market participation is encouraged by providing women with opportunities for high-quality employment as well as peripheral public sector support, such as formal, affordable, and accessible childcare, that enables women to engage in high levels of participation within the labour market (Myles, 1998; Buhr and Stoy, 2015). Further, within social democratic states, the

influence of the state, as well as the strong presence of unions, encourages the support of high-quality jobs (Buhr and Stoy, 2015). Overall, within social democratic states, the policies implemented to support women in the labour force have led to the highest rates of women's employment among welfare states (Neilson and Stanfors, 2014; Giuliani, 2022).

The third welfare regime, the conservative welfare state, is found in countries in Austria, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. Traditionally, conservative welfare states have been characterized by a strong emphasis on the male breadwinner family model, where families' economic security and entitlements to social benefits rely on a male earner's employment (Buhr and Stor, 2015). Within these states, women were historically viewed as responsible for the home and family and were generally discouraged from entering the labour market (Giuliani, 2022). As such, formal care services were underdeveloped (Buhr and Stor, 2015). However, this began to shift in the early 2000s, when the introduction of new social policies in conservative welfare states started to encourage women's labour force participation. Since then, mothers have entered the labour market but remain over-represented in part-time employment, atypical employment, and lower-wage work when compared to male counterparts (Shire, 2015).

### **Canada's Federalist Nation**

Canada has a federalist system of government that distributes power across various levels of government throughout the country (Government of Canada, 2021a). The federalist system includes a federal government and thirteen provincial and territorial governments (McKay et al., 2016). Within this system, the federal government provides select family and caregiving benefits. These benefits include the Canada child benefit, a direct cash transfer to families with children under 18, and maternity and parental leave provided through federal employment

insurance (Government of Canada, 2024a). Although the federal government provides the provinces and territories with substantial financial assistance in the form of federal transfers, a large share of the responsibility of providing support to families falls to provincial and territorial governments. The transfer model allows the provinces and territories increased autonomy, allowing these governments to create policies that better reflect the economic, linguistic, and cultural differences of the populations they represent (Government of Canada, 2021a).

There are four key federal-provincial transfers in Canada, which are the Canada Health Transfer, the Canada Social Transfer, Equalization, and Territorial Formula Financing (Government of Canada, 2024a). Particularly relevant to my study is the Canada Social Transfer. This transfer provides funding for social assistance and social services, including early childhood development and early learning and childcare, services which are critical for supporting maternal employment (Government of Canada, 2022b; Sakaluk et al., 2022). Although the transfer model allows the provinces and territories more autonomy in policymaking, it also results in a decentralized childcare system, resulting in dramatic variations in the cost, quality, and access of childcare across the country (Prentice and White, 2019). The uneven distribution of childcare services across the country is an important factor in mothers' employment choices. In addition, the decentralized system poses a challenge for coordinating policies and programs, which adds another layer of complexity when analyzing the policies available to mothers (Prentice and White, 2019). Quebec is the only province in Canada that does not participate in federal programs, and instead, has developed independent programs that are exclusive to their province, such as the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan and a universal childcare system (McKay et al., 2016).

## **Maternal Employment in Alberta**

Maternal employment characteristics exhibit nuances across Canada. Within Canada's federalist system, each province and territory operate under a unique social, cultural, and political context that influences maternal employment experiences. In this study, Alberta, a prairie province in Western Canada, is used as a case study to understand the larger structural factors that may be influencing mothers' labour force participation. Alberta is the fourth most populated province in Canada, with a population of 4.85 million and growing due to high levels of both international and interprovincial migration (Government of Alberta, 2024a). Following Ontario and British Columbia, Alberta is a major economic contributor, often described as an "economic engine of Canada" (Government of Alberta, 2024b). This 'economic engine' is driven by Alberta's large resource-based economy which includes oil and gas, advanced technologies, agri-foods, energy products, forest products, and industrial machinery in metal fabrication (Government of Alberta, 2013).

The province is made up of two major cities, Calgary and Edmonton, and numerous smaller cities and towns. As a province, Alberta has a polarized "urban-rural" political divide—whereby the left-wing Canada New Democratic Party (NDP) has gained significant support in Edmonton and some pieces of Calgary, while the rural surroundings largely continue to support the right-wing United Conservative Party (UCP) (Fawcett, 2023). Despite these variations, Alberta is viewed as politically and socially conservative within the Canadian context (Tough et al., 2013).

There are a few important characteristics of work and family that are important to consider within the Albertan context. For example, although there is an increasing proportion of

dual-earning families across Canada, Alberta reports lower maternal labour force participation. Uppal (2015) uses data from the Labour Force Survey from 1976 to 2014 to show that the proportion of dual-earner couples across Canada has increased from 36% in 1976 to 69% in 2014 among families with at least one child under 6. In comparison, Alberta had the lowest rate, with only 60% of families in Alberta being dual-earner households. This is in contrast to higher rates in other provinces, such as Quebec, at 74.3%, Saskatchewan at 74.2%, and the provinces of the Atlantic region (which includes Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick) at 70.6% (Choi, 2023).

In addition to having the lowest rate of dual-earner families, Alberta had the highest rate of single-earner families where only the father was employed, with 32.1%, compared to the national average of 23.6% (Choi, 2023). These statistics suggest that mothers in Alberta are more likely to ‘opt out’ of the labour force compared to other locations in Canada. Interestingly, employment patterns show that when there are no children at home, the rate of dual-earner couples in Alberta sits at 82.9%, which is comparable to the national average of 84.2%.

One possible explanation for the low rate of dual earners is Alberta’s large oil and gas sector, which employs over 6% of Alberta’s labour force, with 84,500 people employed directly in oil and gas and 50,500 employed in support activities in 2021. Alberta’s strong oil and gas sector contributes to a high employment rate, with 64.1% for those aged 15 and older, compared to the national average of 60.4% (Government of Alberta, 2024c). In addition, Albertan families had the highest after-tax median (\$72,000) compared to across Canada (\$61,400) (Statistics Canada, 2018). High employment and household earnings as an “Alberta Advantage” (Government of Alberta, 2024b), supporting families to live off one income.

Notably, 78% of employees in oil and gas are men of core working ages (25-54 years old) (Government of Canada, 2023a). Employment in this sector usually requires rotational shift work in rural, remote locations away from their families (Wright and Griep, 2019). Because core working ages usually overlap with parenting ages, the absence of fathers for employment may result in care and household responsibilities disproportionately falling on mothers, influencing their ability to participate in paid work. This is supported by examinations from Grecu and Bataille (2024), who found that sectors favouring men's employment, such as in the natural resource sector, lead to the perpetuation of gender employment and wage gaps.

These challenges are further emphasized by significant issues with childcare accessibility, affordability, and quality. It is well documented that access to childcare is a key factor in supporting parents, and particularly mothers, to be in the labour force (Government of Canada, 2024b). The next section will explore these childcare issues in detail and their implications for employment in Alberta.

### **Paid Parental Leave**

Since their introduction in 1971, maternity and parental leave policies have been recognized as a critical family policy for supporting mothers in the labour force (Doucet et al., 2020). These policies enable parents to take time off work to spend time with their infant children and provide several key benefits, including legal employment protection, financial security, the promotion of the health of infants and mothers, and the fostering of family relationships. Additionally, these policies work to reduce the gendered disparity of unpaid work and help to alleviate the work-family conflict that often arises at the onset of parenthood (Margolis et al., 2019; Gornick et al., 1997; Aitken, 2015). In Canada, there is a complex parental

leave system comprising of (a) a federal program offered through the Employment Insurance<sup>1</sup>; (b) an employer-sponsored supplemental unemployment leave benefit; (c) 13 provincial and 3 territorial employment standards to access leave benefits (UNICEF, 2022; Doucet et al., 2020).

### ***Federal Parental Leave***

The federal parental leave benefit program offers wage replacement benefits after the birth or adoption of a child for every province and territory except Quebec (McKay et al., 2016). The federal program offers two options: a standard and extended parental leave option. For both of the leave options, there is a 15-week maternity leave reserved for birth mothers at a 55% replacement rate, up to \$695 a week. Further, both biological or adoptive parents can claim either an additional 35 weeks of parental leave at a 55% replacement rate up to \$695 a week or 61 weeks of parental leave at a 33% replacement rate up to \$417 a week. Since 2019, parental leave benefits have also offered an additional five (standard) or eight (extended) weeks for a second parent, which is typically the father, to spend with their infant (Government of Canada, 2023c).

To qualify for the federal leave, parents must meet certain eligibility requirements. For example, a parent must have accumulated at least 600 insurable hours of employment, in which EI deductions contributed from employee-employer contributions in the 52 weeks before the start of the leave (Government of Canada, 2023c; Mayer and Le Bourdais, 2019). The barriers to access to parental leave have led to the coining of the terms “parental leave poor” and “parental leave rich,” which represents the division of families that have access to benefits from those who do not (McKay et al., 2016). Scholars have pointed to the parental leave eligibility requirements as a barrier for those who are not employed in non-standard work, such as seasonal, unregulated

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2006, Quebec provides maternity, parental, and paternity leave exclusively to Quebec residents through the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP). The QPIP offers more generous benefits through a higher earnings replacement rate and lower eligibility requirements.

jobs, or precarious jobs, and students, who may not have been able to accumulate enough insurable hours to be eligible (McKay et al., 2016). In addition, for those parents who have histories of non-standard work arrangements and have accumulated just enough hours to secure the leave, the relatively moderate replacement rate (33%-55%) may deter the usage of benefits. This is supported by data on parental leave uptake that finds that families in higher income ranges have higher rates of parental leave usage (Margolis et al., 2019d).

Since 2011, an exception to the 600-hour eligibility requirement has been made for parents who are self-employed (Mayer and Le Bourdais, 2019). Self-employed parents must meet other requirements, including the registration for EI a year before submitting their claim, experiencing a 40% reduction in their business activity due to the onset of childcare, and meeting a minimum net income, which was \$8492 in 2024 (Doucet et al., 2020; Government of Canada, 2024c). Despite these changes, parental leave uptake among self-employed mothers remains low (Robson, 2017). Other eligibility requirements for parental leave benefits also require uninterrupted employment under the same employer, with length of continuous employment varying from a duration of 90 days to the longest being thirteen weeks across the provinces (Mathieu et al., 2020)

Before receiving maternity and parental benefits, applicants must undergo a 1-week unpaid waiting period (Government of Canada, 2023c). Families that have a net income that does not exceed \$25,921 may be eligible for the EI family supplement, depending on family income and the number and ages of children in the family (Margolis et al., 2019). If a family is eligible for the EI supplement benefit, their wage replacement rate may be increased to up to 80% of average insurable earnings (Government of Canada, 2023c). As of January 1, 2024, the

maximum insurable earnings for federal leave was capped at \$63,200 annually (Government of Canada, 2024c).

### ***Supplemental Unemployment Leave Benefit***

In addition to the two government leave benefit programs, some parents have access to the Supplemental Unemployment Benefits program through their employer. This program allows employers to ‘top up’ employment insurance benefits, including maternity and parental leaves, to up to 95% of an employee's average weekly earnings (McKay et al., 2016; Government of Canada, 2020; Government of Canada, 2022c). In contrast to leave benefits, payments for SUB are collected through Service Canada and are not considered insurable earnings through federal employment insurance (Government of Canada, 2022c). Employer supplemental ‘top ups’ are not guaranteed, and employers who utilize this benefit are usually in large, public sector, or unionized workplaces. It is important to note that these workplaces generally offer wages and benefits that are higher than average, and fewer people have access to such benefits in our current economic climate (Prentice and White, 2019; Vosko, 2003). For mothers, access to such jobs is further strained by their non-linear and tenuous relationship with the labour market (Vosko, 2003).

### **Canadian Childcare Policy**

Governments invest in early education and care policies for many reasons, including closing the wage gap, poverty reduction, activating the labour market, motivating social cohesion, encouraging lifelong learning, encouraging healthy child development, and supporting parents in the labour force (Macdonald, 2018; Prentice and White, 2019). As maternal employment rates have increased, childcare availability, quality, and cost have been identified as

important factors in supporting the high labour force participation of mothers (Macdonald, 2018; Friendly, 2019). Specifically, childcare policies have been found to help mothers balance paid and unpaid work, increase work hours, and increase labour force attachment (Thévenon, 2013; Morrissey, 2017). Although no country has perfected accommodating both paid work and parenthood through public policy, Canada faces key challenges.

In contrast to parental leave, there is no universal childcare system in Canada (Breitkreuz et al., 2019; Sakaluk et al., 2022). Apart from the province of Quebec, which has its own universal, public childcare system, the federal government provides funding to provincial and territorial governments to provide childcare (Sakaluk et al., 2022). Canada's childcare is organized as a split system, with one set of policies being directed toward education and the other as part of social services (Prentice and White, 2019). In contrast to education, which has historically been highly regulated, publicly funded, and publicly provided, child care is a private, market-based system, which has been described as a “triple market failure,” (Dallaire and Anderson, 2009) characterized by low availability, low quality, and high costs (Breitkreuz et al., 2019; Prentice and White, 2019). In 2017, just over one in four children aged 0-5 had access to a regulated child-care space in Canada, despite nearly 70% of mothers with preschool-aged children being employed in the labour market (Breitkreuz et al., 2019). Due to the scarcity of child-care spaces, parents in Canada often rely on both formal and informal care arrangements (Colen and Breitkreuz, 2020).

In 2023, the non-parental care of children in Canada was divided between formal centre-based child care (34%) and informal areas such as care by a relative (12%), care by a non-relative (2%), home-based-care (9%), before- or after-school program (5%), or other child care arrangements (2%) (Government of Canada, 2023b). While a variety of informal care

arrangements fills the gap in child-care availability, it is not a perfect solution. A previous study in Alberta, where this study is placed, found that families using informal care arrangements often had to utilize multiple sources to fulfil their childcare needs, and mothers were primarily responsible for providing the flexibility to find, organize, and absorb any challenges of complex child-care arrangements (Breitkreuz et al., 2019). In this sense, the lack of regulated childcare may heighten the work-life conflict experienced by mothers, and contribute to limiting mothers' employment opportunities, advancement, and contribute to the wage gap through the contradiction of the ideal worker norm.

While some areas of care are regulated, others remain unregulated, raising concerns about the consistency of quality across childcare in Canada. Canada's fragmented childcare system is made up of both licensed (formal) and unlicensed (informal) care, where the former is compliant with provincial regulations (Macdonald and Klinger, 2015). In Alberta, these provincial regulations require all childcare centres with seven or more children to be licensed under the Alberta Child Care Licensing Act and monitoring centres to ensure they meet minimum standards with program operations, physical space, records, and staffing (Tough et al., 2013). Some studies have found that unlicensed care is generally lower in quality than when compared to licensed centres (Vandenbroeck et al., 2021; Prentice and White, 2019). However, because there is a large unregulated 'grey market' of unlicensed childcare centres, acquiring data on unlicensed centres poses challenges (Friendly, 2019; Macdonald and Klinger, 2015).

Licensed childcare includes both for-profit and not-for-profit companies (Macdonald and Klinger, 2015). Previous literature has shown that the for-profit sector is poorer when compared to not-for-profit care. This is because, in the context of limited public funding, centres are largely funded by parent fees. To make a profit or keep childcare rates affordable, staffing or education

credentials of staff are often reduced to the minimum (Friendly, 2019). This is concerning because, across all childcare programs, workplace characteristics of childhood educators, including educational qualifications, pay, and working conditions, are the most important indicators of childcare quality. Those parents who want to ensure high-quality care may have to pay higher fees. Overall, low staff wages, staff shortages, and limited recognition of unpaid care work are key factors contributing to childcare concerns in Canada (Halfon and Langford; Dallaire and Anderson; Friendly, 2019). Although childcare quality is less studied as compared to the availability or affordability of childcare, emerging research has confirmed that childcare quality is a key factor in supporting mothers' return to the labour force (Stahl and Schober, 2020).

Affordability is another key consideration in childcare uptake. Despite parents' concern about finding affordable care decreasing from 2019 to 2023, 41% of parents in Canada remain concerned about affordable childcare (Child Care Now, 2023). Previous literature has outlined the strong link between high childcare costs and mothers' decisions to withdraw from the labour force in Canada (Horne and Breitzkreuz, 2018). Despite the obvious and persisting challenges of childcare, the federal government is on the cusp of major changes in childcare with the recent introduction of the multilateral early learning and childcare system.

### **Looking Forward: Important Changes to Childcare in Canada**

Childcare has been a persistent issue in Canada but gained significant prominence in political discussions starting in 2017. The situation reached a 'breaking point' during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic when childhood centres were required to close, and some parents (the majority of which were mothers) were forced to reduce their hours significantly, leave their jobs,

or endure high amounts of stress managing both care for their children alongside work responsibilities (Government of Canada, 2021b). In the spring of 2021, the government of Canada responded to these issues by signing an Early Learning and Child Care Plan with nine provinces and one territory. The early learning and childcare plan aim to help Canadian families afford the cost of living, improve children's start to life and development, and help create new jobs and growth in the Canadian economy, largely through mothers' entrance into the labour force (Government of Canada, 2021c). As part of this agreement, the federal government has promised to invest 30 billion dollars over five years to provide parents with, on average, \$10 a daycare for children under 6 years old by 2026. Of this funding, \$2.5 billion is allocated to Indigenous learning and care to address the needs of Indigenous communities (Government of Canada, 2021c). In addition to decreasing costs for parents, federal funding also supports the growth of childcare availability across the country, allowing providers to expand before and after-school care to provide additional support for working parents. To implement this program, the federal government is working with provincial and territorial governments and Indigenous partners to build a Canada-wide framework. Because our data was collected prior to these developments in childcare (See Chapter Three: Data Collection), the focus of our study examines current childcare and parental leave while recognizing that significant changes to policy are planned for the coming years.

### **Gaps in Literature**

Through this literature review, I have identified two key gaps in the research and thinking about maternal employment experiences. First, contesting the belief that mothers collectively, as a subgroup, prefer to 'opt out' or spend less time in the labour force, several researchers have

recognized that mothers' employment decisions are influenced by the political context in which they live (Fagan, 2001; Collins, 2020). For example, Collins (2020) conducted a study on mothers' perceptions of work-family conflict in a cross-national comparison of Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the United States. Drawing on 109 in-depth qualitative interviews with middle-class women, the study revealed that work-family conflict is a by-product of larger public policies and attitudes that shape women's behaviours regarding work and family. For example, in countries that took an active role in ensuring that both men and women were equally responsible for paid and unpaid work, such as Sweden, mothers reported feeling supported in their dual roles and reduced work-life conflict. On the other hand, in the context of fragmented policies, such as in Italy, mothers reported heightened levels of work-family conflict.

Further, Fagan (2001) developed a framework for interpreting mothers' preference for employment, emphasizing the need for a distinct gender analysis that considers the context in which preferences are formed. Fagan's (2001) framework remains consistent with current research that shows mothers' preferences to participate in the labour part-time or opt out are made within constrained options such as social norms, childcare costs, and unpaid care responsibilities that play a key role in their employment decisions. Using this as a framework, this study adds to the literature by exploring how larger social, cultural, and political contexts intersect with mothers' experiences in the labour force to shape mothers' employment experiences in the Canadian context.

Second, previous research examining the role of policy on maternal employment has largely examined social policies independently (Vuri, 2016; Baker et al., 2008; Flynn, 2017; Prentice and White, 2019) or in comparison to other OECD countries (UNICEF, 2019; Jou et al., 2020; Bonoli and Reber, 2010). While such research has generated important foundational

knowledge for policy research, these studies have not yet examined policies in relation to each other to provide a contextualized understanding of how policies interact with each other and their collective impact on mothers' employment in Canada. By using a socio-ecological framework, this study highlights the ways in which mothers weigh various policies in their labour force decisions. This approach offers a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing maternal employment and aims to inform policy recommendations.

## Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

### Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, I employ a critical feminist (Lafrance and Wigginton 2019; Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019) and a socioecological approach (Pocock, Williams, Skinner, N. 2012) to explore mothers' experiences with parental leave and childcare policies. Stemming from commitments to feminist theory, I aim to conduct research for women (Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019) by beginning with women's experiences to understand the ruling relations that organize their lives (Smith, 2987). While critical feminist theory is a broad approach, I focus on two methodological considerations. First, I emphasize intersectionality, which Crenshaw (1991) described as how multiple identities categories, such as race, gender, and class may change experiences within groups. To embody this, I ask: "How do a variety of points of difference 'matter' to the issue at hand and how can this best be made visible in representations of the data?" (Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019, p.12).

Second, I commit to research for social change. I integrate key tenants of the socio-ecological model "...to make better sense of work, family and community relationships and to lead towards improved policies and action" (Pocock, Williams, Skinner, N. 2012, p.392). I pay particular attention to the macrosystem, which describes "the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p.15). In the context of this study, this theory opposes individualist approach to understanding work, home, and family (Pocock, Williams, Skinner, N. 2012), and instead focus on how larger institutional factors shape gendered expectations and mothers' experiences in the labour force. In other words, I consider the ways in which our research can

move beyond academia to shift how gendered expectations remain imbedded in social, cultural, and political norms to inform policy changes to improve the conditions of women's lives.

### **Qualitative Description**

Qualitative description, as described by Sandelowski (2000, 2010), is a unique methodology that is recognized for its straightforward approach to qualitative research. Unlike traditional methodologies, such as phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography-- which often require a highly complex and in-depth inquiry, qualitative description is characterized by providing a "rich, straightforward description of an experience or an event" (Hall and Liebenberg, 2024; Neergaard et al., 2009, p.2). Rather than conducting what Sandelowski (2000) has coined as "methodological acrobats," whereby researchers force their research into the theoretical and philosophical commitments of methodological approaches, qualitative description offers researchers an opportunity to offer a comprehensive description of everyday experiences in a way that best fits the data. This method's approach to data analysis is generally considered to be the least "theoretical" when compared to other qualitative approaches (Sandelowski, 2000) because researchers remain in "close proximity" to the data without veering into extensive theorization (Neergaard et al., 2010; Hall and Liebenberg, 2024, p.1).

Qualitative description builds on the principles of a naturalist inquiry, which is committed to studying something in its natural context, typically by using open-ended interviews, focus groups, observations, or the examination of documents and artifacts (Sandelowski, 2000, p.338). Qualitative description acknowledges the subjective nature of data interpretation, accepting that no researcher has an "immaculate perception" -- and rather, that each researcher is "seeking to describe an experience or event select what they will describe and, in the process of featuring certain aspects of it, begin to transform that experience or event"

(Sandelowski, 2000, p.335). Despite the differences in what parts of the data researchers may focus on, the low interference of qualitative description analysis means that researchers will more likely come to a consensus about the “facts” of the data Sandelowski (2000).

Sandelowski (2000) provides a helpful example to illustrate, stating that “even though one researcher may feature the feelings and a second researcher the events a woman reported in an interview, both researchers will likely agree that, for example, the woman stated several times that she was angry” (p.335). Ultimately, researchers should present their results in a way that most people, including researchers and participants observing the same event, would agree is accurate (Sandelowski, 2000; Chafe, 2017). There are a variety of ways to present data using qualitative description; however, the reporting of results should be described using participant experiences in a language similar to their own (Neergaard et al., 2009).

Because qualitative descriptions are low interference, it is often critiqued as being “too simple” or lacking “rigour” (Neergaard et al., 2009). However, these criticisms often stem from a misunderstanding of the methodology's goals and strengths. In fact, Sandelowski (2000) states that “no method is absolutely weak nor strong, but rather more or less useful or appropriate in relation to certain purposes' (p.335). Specifically, qualitative description should be used when only a description of an event or experience is required rather than an in-depth or theory-based analysis is needed (Neergaard et al., 2009). Qualitative description is appropriate for this study for several reasons, as described below.

First, qualitative description has been recognized to be a good fit for finding answers to questions within policy and decision-making settings similar to the one in this study. This is because the straightforward analysis offers findings that are readily accessible and understandable for practitioners, policymakers, or other stakeholders that encourage social

change (Sandelowski, 2000; Chafe, 2017). In the context of this study, qualitative description will be used to analyze the experiences of mothers managing unpaid and paid work to identify gaps in policy and provide key policy recommendations within the Canadian context. In addition, qualitative description offers an accessible entry point for understanding and applying qualitative research principles at the master's level. This is because traditional approaches such as phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography can require in-depth and complex analysis that can be overwhelming for beginners. Qualitative description, on the other hand, offers a practical and accessible framework for new researchers to interpret and analyze data (Hall and Lienbenberg, 2024).

### **Data Collection**

This study uses secondary data from a larger research study conducted at the University of Alberta called “Are Mothers Opting Out? Exploring Underemployment among Mothers with Preschool Children” (For the original study, see Breitzkreuz, 2018). This larger study was a qualitative mixed-method critical policy analysis that took place in Edmonton, Alberta, from 2019-2020. Using an institutional ethnographic methodological framework, the primary objective of this study was to explore the experiences and the contextual factors that influence mothers with preschool-aged children in the labour market. Further, this study examined how participant experiences intersect with the policies that shape mothers' employment decisions.

The objectives of this study were: 1) to describe mothers' decisions to work part-time/opt out and their current/previous experiences in integrating paid and unpaid work, looking at outcomes for subjective maternal wellbeing, economic security, and gender equality; and 2) to identify and map the linkages between individual experiences and policy contexts relevant for

mothers' economic participation, to explicate the policy organization of maternal employment. To capture these objectives, the following research questions were used:

1. What are the employment experiences of mothers, and what are the contextual factors that influence mother's decisions to reduce/opt out of paid work when they have preschool children?
2. What do mothers' experiences of employment and unpaid work reveal about the policy contexts that shape women's lives?

This study focused on part-time work, as previous research showed that part-time work was a common solution to integrate paid and unpaid work in OECD countries (Lewis, 2002; Breitzkreuz, 2018). While the focus of this study was on mothers' part-time work, the researchers chose to examine three categories of employment status, including mothers who were employed full-time, mothers who were employed part-time and mothers who “opted out” of the workforce. By including mothers who were not employed, the researchers aimed to shed light on previous research that suggests that opting out of employment may be a constrained choice within a context of unfavourable options.

### **Recruitment Strategies**

Participants were recruited through a variety of different channels. These channels included: 1) poster advertisements in multiple locations such as childcare centres, community halls, and family service centers; 2) Facebook advertisements; and 3) snowball sampling, where participants are asked to refer personal contacts in their network that may be interested in participating in the study that was also utilized (Ellis, 2021). To see the maternal employment study advertisement poster used to recruit participants, see Appendix G. Although this study

aimed to recruit mothers from low, middle, and high-income brackets, the participants' demographics indicate a predominance of higher-income participants. For a comprehensive review of participant demographics, see Table 2. Overall, 58 participants were recruited for this study. To collect data, a demographic survey (n=57), focus groups (n=19), and in-depth individual interviews (n=39) were conducted from 2019-2020.

### **Demographic Survey**

Upon email response from participants, a demographic survey was circulated to collect key information. The demographic survey asked for relevant information, including their age, occupation, number of children, parenting situation, level of education, current employment status, partner employment status, personal income, number of children in childcare, and hours in reproductive and paid work by participants and their spouses (if applicable). Using this information, focus groups were organized. All but one participant who completed a focus group or individual interview completed the demographic survey, whereas 25 participants completed the demographic survey who did not participate in the qualitative component of the data collection. Reasons for participant discontinuation from the qualitative component of the study included participant availability for focus groups and convenience of focus group locations, instability due to Co-vid 19 restrictions, and participants residing outside of Edmonton, Alberta, where the study was conducted. We did not include data in this analysis from the demographic surveys that were not followed by participation in focus groups or in-depth interviews. To see the demographic survey, see Appendix I.

## **Focus Groups**

Five focus groups were conducted with 19 mothers in Edmonton, Alberta in the summer and fall of 2019. The focus groups were organized according to employment status, which included full-time, part-time, and opt out. The goal of organizing focus groups based on employment status is to encourage feelings of understanding among participants while avoiding judgment or isolation of participants who made different employment decisions. Each focus group ranged from two- to five participants and lasted approximately one hour long. There was one full-time focus group, two part-time focus groups, and one opt-out focus group conducted. Due to participant availability, one final focus group was conducted with mothers who worked both part-time and full-time. To ensure locations were accessible to all participants, focus groups were held at public libraries throughout Edmonton, Alberta, a large city in Western Canada.

To collect data from focus groups, participants from each employment category (full-time, part-time, and opt-out) engaged in conversation guided by a facilitator using a semi-structured interview guide. The semi-structured interview guide was slightly adjusted for each employment category. Prior to focus groups, verbal consent was obtained from participants. To see the consent form used, see Appendix E. In every group, mothers were invited to share how their work life changed at the onset of motherhood. To understand this experience, mothers were asked to share their experience returning to work after their employment decision, including the advantages and disadvantages of their employment decision, the process of how their employment decision was made, as well as if they would make the same decision again retrospectively. To understand the impact of policy on mothers' experiences of employment and unpaid work, mothers were asked to describe what practices in their family/community/workplace supported their employment choices. In addition, mothers were

asked to describe their experiences integrating paid and unpaid work. Specifically, mothers were asked how they divided unpaid work with their partners, what their ideal paid/unpaid work combination would look like, how their current situation compares to their ideal, and how they manage the time demands for their “share” of unpaid and paid work. To conclude the focus group, mothers were given an opportunity to share any additional comments/information. To see the interview guide for focus groups, see Appendix A.

### **Individual Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted with thirty-nine participants. Similar to the focus groups, interviews were conducted using an interview guide specific to employment status (full-time, part-time, and opt-out). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent university social distancing orders starting in March, 2020, individual interviews were held on Zoom. Although data collection took place during the pandemic, participants were asked to describe “typical” work and house arrangements prior to the pandemic for the purpose of our study. Prior to recording interviews, verbal consent was obtained from participants. To see the consent form used, see Appendix E. In addition, a participation information form that provided an overview of consent, confidentiality and how any information will be used and stored, and an opportunity for participants to ask questions was provided. To see the participation information letter, see Appendix F.

Each interview was approximately one hour long. To collect data from individual interviews, similar to focus groups, mothers from each employment group were interviewed by a facilitator using a semi-structured interview guide. In contrast to the focus group interviews, the individual interviews asked a larger range of questions. To understand the factors that

influenced mother's employment decisions, mothers were asked how their work-life changed at the onset of motherhood. They were asked to elaborate on the factors that led them to make their employment decisions, including financial considerations, child needs, personal values, the presence or absence of support, personal fulfillment, etc. In addition, mothers were asked to recall how they decided on their employment decision-making process. To understand the larger contextual factors, mothers were asked about the employer and policy support that influenced their decision. Mothers were also asked about how integrating paid and unpaid work within the context of their employment decision impacted their finances, parenting, household responsibilities, and personal life. To close out the interview, mothers were allowed to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on paid and unpaid work. Both focus groups and individual interviews were recorded. For a comprehensive overview of the part-time/casual, full-time, and opt-out individual interview guide, see Appendix B, C, and D, respectively.

### **The Current Study**

Using this secondary data, the current research study asks the following research questions: 1) How do the experiences of mothers in Alberta highlight the facilitators and barriers of paid parental leave and childcare policies?

The objectives of the research study are 1) To understand the experiences of mothers in Alberta in the context of paid parental leave and childcare policies, and 2) To provide policy recommendations based on the experiences of mothers in the study.

## **Justification for Secondary Data Analysis**

This study employs secondary data analysis, a method whereby data collected by a researcher or set of researchers is analyzed by another who was not involved in the data collection. This approach may be used to explore new questions or implement different data analysis strategies than those used in the original study (Church, 2002; Ruggiano, 2017). In the context of this study, the original data is used to examine a new set of research questions. The secondary data used for this study was obtained through “formal data sharing,” where primary researchers share their data with other researchers. For this study, the data were shared by my graduate research supervisor from a previous SSHRC-funded study, adhering to all ethical and legal considerations for data sharing (Heaton, 2008). All required documents, including original transcripts, planning documents, survey results, coding schemes, key themes and recordings of interviews of focus groups, were provided. Although the process of data sharing and reuse of pre-existing data has become increasingly popular in qualitative research (Yoon, 2014), there are both advantages and disadvantages that should be considered (Ruggiano, 2017).

The use of secondary data in this study was an appropriate decision for several reasons. First, despite not being involved in the primary collection of data, I am familiar with the data set. In my role as a research assistant at the University of Alberta, I have reviewed the data thoroughly to identify key themes and illustrative quotes for the findings of a scholarly publication. Through this process, I had the opportunity to review all the planning documents, original transcripts, and data analysis and be in contact with the researchers who were involved with the research collection. This engagement with the data has provided me with all the necessary contextual information for thorough data analysis, which facilitates an understanding

of the epistemological stance of the researcher (Yoon, 2014). In the process of research, the research becomes a “research instrument” that interprets data based on their perception, knowledge, and experience. Further, the availability of the primary researchers helped verify questions regarding the context of the original study or key findings, contributing to the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data analysis (Heaton, 2008).

Second, data sets are considered to store “unmined” data. Further, those in support of secondary data analysis make the argument that primary researchers often collect a large amount of rich qualitative data and are not able to fully explore the data. By using secondary data, we can be respectful of participants who offered their stories and lived experiences to further research, as well as reduce the burden on new research participants and community partners who recruit participants by reducing the unnecessary duplication of data (Yoon, 2004; Ruggiano, 2017). Secondary data is also often available at no cost, which was the case in this study (Vartanian, 2010; Ruggiano, 2017). Due to the financial constraints of a graduate research project such as this one, the use of secondary data offers a practical choice while also meeting the research objectives.

Third, the use of secondary data is considered a time-effective method in research because the data collection is already complete. Although timely data analysis is beneficial within the context of an independent graduate study, it is also important because it offers early dissemination of research findings and policy recommendations. Timely data analysis is particularly important in policy research, where data is influenced by the social, cultural, and political environment in which it is collected (Ruggiano, 2017). If data is re-analyzed or reinterpreted in a different period, the data may be misinterpreted. In addition, policy-focused research benefits from existing data sets as they “have the potential to begin capturing policy

effects as soon as policy shifts” (Vartanian, 2010). Given that the data collection was relatively recent, we can examine the current Canadian policy environment. This is critical because significant changes to policy are coming to the Canadian landscape with the implementation of a Canada-wide early learning and childcare system (Choi, 2023). Thus, this initial analysis offers a time-sensitive opportunity to serve as an important indicator when future comparative research of new policies is conducted.

A key concern with using secondary data analysis is the lack of control of the questions asked to participants. As stated by Vartanian (2010), “the subtleties often matter a great deal in research” (2010). As such, although the secondary data may capture broader or related questions to the new research objectives, it will not align exactly with the new research question or objectives. In other words, critics of secondary data analysis have compared the reuse of data to “making a square fit into a circle” (Hunt, 2009). Other scholars, however, point out that both the flexible research design and semi-structured nature of the data collected in qualitative research make secondary data appropriate for reuse (Heaton, 2008). In this study, I determined the secondary data appropriate for key reasons. First, the similar methodological approach and the original data objectives were very rich and had both the “depth and breadth” to meet the new research objectives (Heaton, 2008). Specifically, the data was adequate because although the key objectives included more breadth than required for this study, it examined contextual factors, including the influence of policy on mothers' decisions, which was sufficient to meet the new study's objectives.

## **Data Analysis**

The primary data analysis was completed by two qualified research assistants and a principal investigator at the time of the study. The principal investigator is my current graduate supervisor. Data analysis utilized an in-depth, systematic review of the focus group and interview transcripts, which were transcribed as soon as possible after each meeting took place. Alongside transcripts, research assistants filed extensive field notes after each interview. Using NVivo software, the research assistants engaged in an iterative process of coding, recording, reviewing, organizing and thinking through the data (Morse et al., 2002). Because the objectives of the original study were different, the key themes in the data represented a broader scope of questions. The original data analysis led to 98 codes, 39 subthemes, and six key themes. Before the data analysis for this study, the original coding scheme, transcripts, and memos were reviewed to familiarize me with the data. Some codes, subthemes, and themes that fit into the context of this study were noted.

Many relevant codes were noted, including additional caregiver responsibilities, alternatives to intensive motherhood, benefits to childcare, community support, early return from leave, employer benefits, extended maternity leave, discontent with opting out, full-time as ideal, ideal worker norm, and lack of support past maternity leave. Subthemes included workplace stigma, prioritizing motherhood, prioritizing work, policy implementations, and a supportive workplace. Themes such as cost and accessibility of childcare, work-life integration challenge, job flexibility, and unequal distribution of unpaid labour/ traditional gender roles were particularly relevant for this study. Overall, the output through all levels of the data analysis (codes, subthemes, and themes) confirmed that the data set was a good fit. Following this overview of the data, coding for this study was conducted.

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clark (2006) was closely followed to analyze and report themes in the data. Similar to qualitative description, thematic analysis is a highly flexible method without clear agreement on implementation. Historically considered to be a poor method in qualitative research, it was often utilized without explicit acknowledgment from researchers (Braun and Clark, 2006). With this consideration, transparency and clarity on the assumptions and decisions that form the analysis are important to conduct theoretically and methodologically sound thematic analysis. The first step was to gain familiarity with the data. As stated, this process began during the earlier analysis of the data in my role as a research assistant and continued through the initial review of the data. However, in addition, prior to the onset of coding, all the transcripts of the interview guides and focus groups were re-reviewed using repeated reading techniques to immerse myself in the data. This time was also utilized to ‘memo’ or make initial notes about data.

Following this, all transcripts were uploaded into NVIVO software. The data transcription was completed by two previous graduate students and a contracted professional transcriber. Because the transcription was already complete, I reviewed the recorded tapes to ensure accuracy and capture important contextual details. This step is important because although the previous graduate students completed an accurate, thorough, and in-depth description, listening to transcripts provided important contextual details, such as subtle tone changes that are important for a comprehensive understanding of the participant’s perspective (Braun and Clark, 2006). Once I felt familiar with the data, I began my initial coding scheme. Gibbs (2007) defines codes as “how you define what the data you are analyzing are about” (p.2). Careful reading of the text was conducted, and initial codes were assigned. Detailed notes were kept for each code developed. The notes included the name of the code, the date the code was

assigned or changed, a definition of the code, and the thinking behind the code/ how it will apply to the other codes or the data.

A variety of strategies were used, including line-by-line coding, analysis of the word, phrase or sentence, and the constant comparison method. The constant comparison method utilizes a variety of strategies to compare the code to an extreme opposite in order to discover new insights in the data. As Gibbs (2007) explains, “All too often we are so familiar with things that we fail to notice what is significant” (p.16). Such strategies include the flip-flop method, which “flips” the findings to the extreme opposite, systematic comparison, which asks a series of “what ifs” to compare different phenomena that arise from the data, and far-out comparisons, where the data is compared to distant concepts that share different characteristics.

Once the initial codes were assigned, I started to look for themes in the data. To do so, relationships between the codes were examined for similarities and differences using mind maps and visual tables. Themes were identified deductively or in a ‘top-down’ approach. This approach provides “less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data” (Braun and Clark, 2006). This is particularly useful for this study as I am using secondary data and want to emphasize the data that fits my research objectives. Although themes are largely based on the judgement of the researcher, the themes were also discussed with my graduate supervisor as they developed—ensuring that the connections seemed logical and provided an accurate reflection of the data.

## Chapter 4. Findings

### Introduction

Although employment decisions are often framed as a personal and voluntary choice, such as in preference theory (Hakim, 2000), several scholars have outlined the ways mothers' employment 'preferences' or 'choices' may be shaped by both the options and constraints available in their contexts (Fagan, 2001, p.243; Stone, 2007; Ciciolla, 2017). Notably, Fagan (2001) states that preferences are shaped by an "evaluation of the options which [mothers] perceive to be open to them" (p.243). Similarly, Stone (2007) articulates how the language surrounding choice and privilege does not consider the reality of structural constraints faced by mothers managing their dual roles as both earners and carers. Using this as a launching point, the study presents qualitative findings to expand on the critique of preference and choice outlined in the literature by reporting the experiences of mothers navigating the conflicting demands of paid and unpaid work. The findings of this study demonstrate how larger social, cultural, and political influenced mother's employment decisions, with a particular focus on childcare and parental leave policies.

The findings of this study are divided into two key sections. In the first section, I describe the experiences of 58 mothers with preschool-age children in the context of childcare and paid parental leave policies in Alberta, Canada. To do so, I first outline what I call 'the components of choice,' where I show how various factors, including mothers' financial circumstances, investment into their education and career, and fulfillment from employment, are critical factors influencing their labour force decisions. Following this, I show that despite an overwhelming majority of participants who state their preference to participate in the labour market, mothers face key challenges in integrating paid and unpaid work. Specifically, I detail mothers'

experiences with unequal distributions of unpaid work in the home, pervasive gender norms, and workplace inflexibility.

In the second section, I turn attention to the larger policy context, describing how paid parental leave and childcare policies may act as either facilitators or barriers to mothers' labour force participation. First, I discuss parental leave policies. The findings of this study highlight both socio-economic and gendered disparities in the utilization of paid parental leave benefits. Further, the findings present benefits of fathers' parental leave uptake, including improved understanding and redistribution of unpaid work and an easier transition for mothers to return to work—in addition to challenges in parental leave uptake.

Following this, I discuss childcare policies. In addition to the importance of childcare availability, quality, and affordability to mother's employment, which is well established in the literature, this study extends the literature in one keyway. Specifically, I outline a frequently discussed challenge by providing care to children with short term illness (such as colds/flu) and whose needs cannot be accommodated by childcare centres. Overall, the findings of this study use mothers' experiences to illuminate gaps in the current policy context and suggest areas for policy reform within the Canadian context.

## **The Components of Choice: Key Factors Influencing Mothers' Employment Decisions**

*I think the thing that stayed the same was my desire to keep learning and keep participating in the world outside of who I was now defined as... despite wanting to continue to participate in my career, the ability to do so fizzled out...*

*-Fiona, a Full-time Instructor*

Of the 58 participants included in the study, 57 participants completed the demographic survey. As shown in Table 1, among these participants, 68% were aged between 30-39 years, and 25% were aged between 40-49 years. Data on the number of children of participants show that 39% had one child, 42% had two children, 14% had three children, and 7% had four or more children. Nearly all participants, except two, were co-parenting with their partner. One participant was a single parent, and another described their parenting situation as 'other.'

Participants of the study were generally highly educated; 55% had a graduate degree, 33% had a bachelor's degree, 5% had a college diploma, 3% had an apprenticeship or trades certificate, and 3% had a high school diploma. Participants also reported a wide range of occupations, including education, law and social, community and government services (37%), health (23%), natural and applied sciences (3%), management (5%), business, finance and administration (9%), trades, transport, equipment operation, and related occupations (2%), art, culture, recreation, and sport (10%), and sales and services (5%).

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

|                     |   | <i>n</i> = 57 |
|---------------------|---|---------------|
| Age of participants | 16-20   | 0             |
|                     | 21-29   | 3             |
|                     | 30-39   | 39            |
|                     | 40-49   | 14            |
|                     | 50 and above  | 0             |
|                     | Not reported  | 1             |
| Number of children  | 1   | 21            |
|                     | 2   | 24            |
|                     | 3   | 8             |
|                     | 4 or more   | 4             |
| Parenting situation | Co-parenting with husband/spouse/partner                        | 55            |
|                     | Co-parenting with ex-husband/ex-spouse/ex-partner               | 0             |
|                     | Single parenting  | 1             |
|                     | Other   | 1             |
| Level of education  | No certificate or diploma                                       | 0             |
|                     | Highschool diploma  | 2             |
|                     | Apprenticeship or trades certificate                            | 2             |
|                     | College Diploma   | 3             |
|                     | Bachelor's Degree   | 19            |
|                     | Graduate Degree   | 31            |
|                     | Other   | 0             |
| Occupation          | Education, law and social, community and government services    | 21            |
|                     | Health  | 13            |
|                     | Natural and applied sciences                                    | 2             |
|                     | Management  | 3             |
|                     | Business, finance and administration                            | 5             |
|                     | Trades, transport, equipment operation, and related occupations | 1             |
|                     | Art, culture, recreation, and sport                             | 6             |
|                     | Sales and services  | 3             |

**Note:** Data for this study was collected from 58 participants. However, only 57 participants completed the demographic surveys, resulting in missing data from one participant. As such, the participant demographic data only reflects responses from 57 participants.

### *The Financial Freedom to Choose*

Except for a very small number of participants who identified that, under ideal circumstances, they would prefer to opt out of the labour force, the overwhelming majority of participants preferred to remain attached to the labour market. Mothers pointed to varying factors that influenced their decision to return to the labour force. About half of the mothers in this study identified that their decision to participate in the labour force was driven by meeting their financial necessity rather than genuine choice. Grace, a full-time architect, illustrated:

...it would be very difficult, I would say, to live off of just my husband's income. So, I really do need both of us working to pay our housing costs... student loans and, car payments and all that kind of stuff, right?... even with the cost of daycare, it made sense for me to go back to work. (FT-INT)

Grace's experience represents a recurring pattern within the data: financial circumstances played an important role in mothers' labour market decisions. Grace highlights that despite the cost of daycare, additional income from her job was essential to cover her household expenses and ensure her family's financial stability. Many mothers expressed that a dual income was important to alleviate financial stress in the current economic climate. Kaitlynn, a part-time teacher, highlights this concern, illustrated, "If I don't take a full-time job or work full-time hours, will we be able to make our mortgage and will we, you know, have food on our table... kind of thing." (PT-INT)

The experiences of mothers in our study demonstrate how the decision to "opt-out" of full-time work may not be a realistic or available option to all mothers. Notably, financial considerations played a key role in mothers' decisions to return to employment, even among a relatively privileged and high-earning group. As shown in Table 2, over half of our participants

earned more than double Alberta's minimum wage of \$15 per hour. Specifically, 12 out of 57 participants earned \$31-\$40 per hour; 19 participants earned \$41-\$60 per hour; 3 participants earned \$61-\$80 an hour, and 2 participants earned over \$80 per hour. Despite these earnings, many mothers indicated that the ability to opt-out was conditional on the financial support of a high-earning partner.

For example, Bailey, a full-time psychologist, discussed how the sudden loss of her partner's income put her in a position during her maternity leave put her in a position where she had to return to work earlier than anticipated. She illustrates: "My most recent pregnancy, I told my boss that I was thinking more like six months... and two weeks later, my husband got laid off, and I'm like, hey! Remember that thing I said?" (FT-FG). Bailey explained how, although she initially wanted to return to work 6 months after childbirth, her husband's unexpected job loss made it necessary for her to return to employment earlier than anticipated. Bailey's experience shows how sudden or unexpected changes, such as a partner's job loss or separation, may dictate mother's employment decisions. Similarly, Faye, a full-time speech language pathologist, reflected on how divorce changed her work circumstances. She stated: "I ended up taking a different job, and part of why I did that was because it was paying me more money, and I was newly, surprisingly, getting a divorce" (FT-INT). Faye's experience illustrates how a sudden separation from her partner required a change of employment arrangements to ensure financial stability. This group of mothers' experiences highlight how a focus on 'preference' or 'choice' may overlook the reality for some women, where the decision to participate in employment is rooted in financial necessity rather than a genuine preference.

In our study, a few mothers recognized how their relatively high levels of education and earning power offered them a privileged position in the labour force. For example, Faye

recognized that, without the benefits of her education and a fulfilling career, returning to work after separating from her partner under difficult financial or emotional circumstances would have been significantly more challenging. She stated:

... it was hard enough for me coming from a place of fairly decent income. I feel so bad for people who, you know, didn't finish high school or have been home for ten years or fifteen years and then they get a divorce and have to manage having kids.... I had access to education, and I think things would be different if I was returning to a job that I hated and I felt like I didn't make any money and I didn't get to see my kids, you know? (INT-FT)

Faye contrasts her experience with those mothers returning who are in more precarious positions, showing how challenges returning to the labour market may compound for those trying to balance low-paying or inflexible jobs with family responsibilities. Similarly, Fiona, a full-time instructor, stated: "If I were to lose my husband, the implication is that I couldn't afford to go to work anymore. Because I wouldn't be able to afford childcare and a home and a vehicle... I would have to quit work to take care of my kids" (INT-FT). Although previous literature emphasizes how "opting out" of the labour force is concentrated among mothers with high levels of education and earning power, as they are more likely to couple with a high-earning partner to financially support their families (Stone, 2007), the findings of this study are consistent with research that shows that highly educated and high-earning mothers are more likely to continue employment and remain in the labour force (Kanji, 2011). In circumstances where separation, loss of a partner job, or in families with low family incomes, a choice regarding employment is constrained by financial considerations.

For the other half of mothers in this study, their partners individual income was enough to support their family's financial requirements. As such, they had 'room to work less' while meeting their basic financial needs. In circumstances such as these, mothers reported that the decision for employment was often motivated by the desire for extra financial support or flexibility, such as saving for children's education, children's activities, holidays, and retirement. Haley, a full-time sales coordinator, illustrated:

... it was better that I worked. Like, it's just... we like to go on holidays and things like that. So, one paycheque wouldn't have sufficed. And again, I wanted to make sure my kids could; we could save for their education and take them on vacation and let them, you know, go into dance and hockey and gymnastics and all that stuff. And one income just wouldn't have... been able to do that. (FT-INT)

Haley described how her employment provided the means to contribute to family goals and enhanced their quality of life. Mothers describe many reasons, such as providing additional opportunities for their children, buying 'bloody expensive strawberries,' taking family vacations, paying for a variety of after-school activities, or contributing to long-term retirement goals. Overall, participants' experiences in this study show how mothers in advantaged financial circumstances are provided with a greater ability to choose their employment arrangements, whereas those in more precarious circumstances face constraints that force them into the labour market out of necessity.

**Table 2: Employment and Income**

|                             |                                     | <i>n=57</i> |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| Current employment status   | Opting out/Not employed             | 7           |
|                             | Temporarily Laid-off due to COVID   | 3           |
|                             | Salaried Full-time                  | 20          |
|                             | Contract or Self-Employed Full-time | 4           |
|                             | Salaried Part-time                  | 15          |
|                             | Contract or Self-Employed Part-time | 4           |
|                             | Hourly Full-time                    | 1           |
|                             | Hourly Part-time                    | 1           |
|                             | Casual                              | 1           |
|                             | On Parental Leave                   | 5           |
|                             | Missing                             | 1           |
| Partner's employment status | Opting out/Not employed             | 3           |
|                             | Temporarily Laid-off due to COVID   | 1           |
|                             | Salaried Full-time                  | 42          |
|                             | Contract or Self-Employed Full-time | 2           |
|                             | Salaried Part-time                  | 4           |
|                             | Contract or Self-Employed Part-time | 3           |
|                             | Hourly Full-time                    | 0           |
|                             | Hourly Part-time                    | 0           |
|                             | Casual                              | 0           |
|                             | On Parental Leave                   | 0           |
|                             | Not Applicable                      | 1           |
|                             | Others                              | 1           |
| Personal income (hourly)    | Opting out                          | 10          |
|                             | Less than \$15 per hour             | 0           |
|                             | \$15 per hour                       | 1           |
|                             | \$16-\$20 per hour                  | 2           |
|                             | \$21-\$30 per hour                  | 4           |
|                             | \$31-\$40 per hour                  | 12          |
|                             | \$41-\$60 per hour                  | 19          |
|                             | \$61-\$80 per hour                  | 3           |
|                             | More than \$80 per hour             | 2           |

**Note:**

In this study, part-time work was defined as time worked between 1 and 30 hours per week. This is different from Statistics Canada, Canada's national statistical agency, which defines part-time work as less than 30 hours per week.

### ***Seeking a Return: Mothers' Investment in Education and Career***

Mothers in the study indicated that their investment in their education and career acted as a key driver in their decisions to return to the labour market after having children. Indeed, many mothers spoke about their career as an accomplishment integral to their identities, often expressing their desire not to be *'just'* a mother. Notably, the participants from the study were highly educated, with 50/57 participants holding a bachelor's degree or higher (19 participants holding a bachelor's degree and 31 participants holding a graduate degree), and often spoke about their significant investment of time and effort into their education and careers. Gloria, a full-time senior scientist, illustrated:

I don't think that there was a decision... I went to school for a long time, so I did an undergrad, a master's and a PhD so that I would work. So, there wasn't ever a question that I would be a stay-at-home mom and not return to work after having children. (FT-INT)

Gloria discussed how her investment in her education shaped her decision to return to work as inevitable rather than optional. For Gloria, the extensive effort, time, and resources dedicated to her education and career created a strong professional identity that suppressed the expectations of intensive motherhood ideology. Similar to Gloria, about a third of the participants in this study identified educational and career investments as an important factor in returning to work. For example, Darla, a part-time child specialist, stated, "I was like... that cannot be my life... I did not go to school to further my education and professionalism and everything just to be with my kids. And I love my kids, but I am a better mother for being out of the house." (PT-FG)

Overall, the participants in our study experience suggest that for mothers who have high educational attainment, their investment in their education played an integral role in their identity

as a career woman and was an influencing factor in returning to work at the onset of parenthood. Although some mothers in our study discussed the desire to return to their careers, this may not be true for all mothers. Faye, a full-time speech-language pathologist, discussed how her education contributed to her professional role and high levels of employment satisfaction. She illustrated: "... because I am in a professional role, it probably feels better for me than if I was working a minimum-wage job that I didn't want to do and didn't have a passion for, right?" (FT-INT). Faye's experience is consistent with previous research that has found mothers' education is an important factor in obtaining a preferred, fulfilling job, serving as a buffer against work-related challenges (Augustine, 2014). Perhaps for this reason, mothers in our study were more inclined to return to work, which may vary from those mothers working in more precarious, low-wage, and less flexible work arrangements.

### ***Personal Fulfillment***

Although mothers acknowledged the value of unpaid care and housework, mothers described their professional identities provided them with a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and enjoyment that was distinct from their roles as mothers. Kaitlynn, a part-time teacher, illustrated: "It goes beyond a paycheque. It's personal fulfillment as well... I think if I made a decision not to go back, I would have a worse perception of myself." (PT-INT). Kaitlyn viewed her professional role provided her with a sense of purpose that extends beyond financial security, fostering a positive self-perception. As discussed, the mothers in our study had invested in their education, demonstrating drive towards their role as professionals in the labour force. For Kaitlynn, she described leaving the workforce as "giving up... the one thing that I really, really love." (PT-INT)

Similarly, Georgia, a full-time team lead at an IT company, realized she was longing for something more during her maternity leave despite originally anticipating a desire to stay home with her children at the onset of parenthood. She stated:

I always thought that I wouldn't want to go back to work... But then yeah, while being on mat leave, it was just kind of a realization that I want... not necessarily more because staying home is a valid thing if that's what you want to do, but... it would be more fulfilling for me to still work. (FT-INT)

Georgia's experience shows how mothers, despite their professional role, may still internalize intensive mothering expectations and consider prioritizing caregiving for their children over professional aspirations. In Georgia's case, however, along with a few other mothers in our study, maternity leave served as an opportunity to recognize the fulfillment of paid work. Fiona, a full-time instructor, discussed the unfulfillment of unpaid work that some mothers may experience: "...now that I am outside of the house... I actually have something to talk about... rather than, you know, the baseboards that I washed really well that day" (FT-INT). These experiences point to challenges faced by many mothers in this study, where navigating a career in the context of 'intensive mothering ideology' fostered a sense of ambivalence. Indeed, mothers reported tension between their desire to participate in the labour force, utilize their skills, and pursue professional fulfillment and their desire to spend time with their families.

### **Household Manager- The Gendered Division of Household Labour**

The unequal distribution of unpaid work has been repeatedly recognized as a key factor in wide-ranging gendered inequalities. Jung and O'Brien (2019) summarize these impacts, stating that engagement in unpaid labour has profound effects on the "mental health, relational well-being, workplace achievement, and economic self-sufficiency of women" (p.187). While

there has been evidence of a converging gap in unpaid work between the genders, the results of this study show that an imbalance continues to create barriers to maternal employment. In this section, visible unpaid work, the invisible ‘mental load,’ and the impacts of maternal employment experiences are discussed.

### ***A Step Forward: Are Partner Contributions to Unpaid Labour Changing?***

Despite some inequalities of unpaid work outlined in our study, most mothers noted an increasing recognition and re-adjustment of the distribution of unpaid work within their families. They described ongoing reflections on the distribution of unpaid work with their partners to ensure they were shouldering an equal amount of the burden and resisting the traditional gender roles that often assign mothers to the ‘default parent’ role. Many mothers in our study reflected on how the distribution of unpaid labour had evolved in their households. Jessica, a part-time consultant, illustrated:

My husband and I have become more of a team. For some reason, after having kids, I took on more than my share, so to speak, just because I thought that’s what you do. But I’ve had to learn, for example, he’s just going to have to manage the dishes, lunch, and the kids because I have to work... and so, we’ve sort of become quite a well-oiled machine. (PT-INT)

Despite absorbing the initial gendered pressures to complete the “lion’s share” of work, Jessica recognized the need for a more equitable distribution between her and her partner. She later acknowledged that the distribution of labour is still not equal, stating: “I’d say probably 60/40... it took us a while to that point. Yeah. Many conversations and discussions about sharing duties and what he could do to take off my plate so I wouldn’t be completely overwhelmed.” (PT-INT)

Similar to Jessica, Blair, a full-time psychology consultant, points to the onset of parenthood as a turning point to an unmanageable increase in unpaid work. She described the iterative process of navigating the distribution of unpaid labour with her partner: "...after I had my first child and went back to work, it became too much. Like the mental load of organizing the doctor's appointments and dental appointments and the car appointments... and I'm like, I'm done!... so, then we had to regroup... what does 50/50 look like? Because this isn't 50/50. This feels like 80/20." (FT-FG)

While previous literature has consistently highlighted an unequal distribution of labour, Jessica and Blair's experience, along with other mothers in this study, suggests that although some mothers still experience the traditional imbalance of unpaid labour, there is a trend toward increased recognition and more equitable sharing of visible unpaid duties within households. Notably, about half of the mothers in this study described the distribution of visible unpaid work as generally balanced or equal between partners. Grace, a full-time architect, illustrated:

It's pretty equal, I would say... we try to split it as best as we can... yeah, and when we see the other struggle a little bit, or they're super tired, or they're not feeling well, we do try to kind of step of and fill those roles as well. (FT-INT)

This finding is consistent with recent data showing the division of household labour in Canada has converged between the genders, with about half of couples reporting sharing certain tasks equally, such as doing the dishes (51.1%), grocery shopping (48.9), or childcare tasks, such as supervising children (55.2%), performing bed-time routines (55.8%), or taking children to extracurricular activities (55.2%) (Frank and Frenette, 2021).

### *A Persistent Gap: The Unequal Distribution of Visible Unpaid Work*

Although most mothers acknowledged some contribution from their partners, the extent of this involvement varied across the study. For example, a few mothers experienced little to no support from their partners in the private home sphere, leaving the responsibilities of housework and childcare to them. Iris, a part-time therapist, illustrated:

I do most of the household things. I do all the cooking. I do all the lunch packing. I manage the kid's homework and school activities and planning. And like all their after-school activities. Their play dates. Like all that stuff.... (PT-INT)

Iris recognized her wife's demanding job hours, including evenings and weekends, as a key factor for the unequal distribution of unpaid work. Nonetheless, she shared her frustration regarding the overbearing burden of unpaid she shoulders for her family. Similarly, Kathleen, a part-time speech pathologist, shared how traditional gender roles have impacted the distribution of unpaid work in her household:

I did know from the start that it was going to be me making the sacrifices because asking him to sacrifice any part of his job was going to be a no... *I didn't have much of a choice* because he does have that traditional way of thinking where, you know, the housework and stuff is sort of falling on me and the raising of kids. (PT-INT, *italics added*)

Notably, Kathleen expresses she felt constrained in sacrificing her employment due to her husband's traditional viewpoints on unpaid housework and care work. When asked what her ideal distribution on housework would be, Kathleen responded: "I do wish that there was a little bit more of the shared responsibility. You know, if the kids are sick or if they are late, it's always my job that gets compromised...Whereas he can work late, and that's fine. So, I feel like my job has taken the hit." (PT-INT)

These experiences are consistent with what is commonly described in the literature as the ‘motherhood penalty’ whereby traditional gender norms persist in assigning a disproportionate amount of unpaid care and housework to mothers, thereby constraining their time available to participate in the labour market and negatively impacting their wages and career advancement (Jung and O’Brien, 2019). Overall, the experiences of mothers in this study demonstrate that there may finally be possible changes in the landscape of visible unpaid work. Indeed, only a few mothers in this study indicated little to no contributions to unpaid labour from their partners, and the overwhelming majority indicated some level of partner involvement, with many describing an equitable division of home responsibilities. While some families have seen shifts toward more equitable distributions of visible unpaid work, these changes are not reflected in the other types of invisible unpaid labour.

### ***The Mental Load***

Despite variations in the distribution of visible unpaid work, an overwhelming majority of mothers reported an unequal distribution of the mental load. The mental load is conceptualized as the invisible and boundaryless intersection of cognitive labour and emotional labour required to maintain the functioning of families (Dean et al., 2022). Cognitive labour describes the “thinking, planning, and organization” (Dean et al., 2022) involved in managing family functioning, while emotional labour describes supporting the family’s emotional or psychological well-being (Reich-Stiebert et al., 2023). This invisible form of unpaid labour, which is often completed by mothers, includes planning daily meals, writing grocery lists, scheduling or coordinating children’s care, such as extracurricular activities, scheduling doctors’ appointments, and keeping track of family members’ birthdays. The unequal distribution of the mental load is illustrated by Hope, a full-time psychologist:

I'm really lucky; my husband is supportive. Um, I would say when it comes down to the actual task, he's pretty fair... but where I do feel like there's a significant imbalance is just in the mental load. So, you know, I feel I am always carrying the burden of thinking about everything. Like, thinking "Okay, we need to take this car for an oil change," .... "it's this person's birthday, we have to get a gift," or thinking, "Okay, it—spring is coming, we have to make sure we have rain boots and splash pants at daycare" ... I'm the one who packs the bag before we go out like I'm the one to make sure that we enroll in swimming lessons by the deadline... So, the mental burden, I would say, is where the distribution is *deeply deeply unequal*. (FT-INT, italics added)

Hopes' experience suggests that even in relationships where there is a progressive distribution of visible unpaid labour, the invisible labour of managing a household still largely falls on women. Mothers described the mental load as an endless, exhausting, all-encompassing influx of thoughts that is difficult to articulate yet commonly understood by mothers. This became especially apparent in one particular focus group conducted for this study, where mothers found a sense of shared understanding regarding their experience with the mental load. In this group, Dawn, a part-time teacher, described the organizing and planning required to manage the mental load:

I sit down one evening a week. And I have to open up the calendar. And I'm like, okay what are you doing this week? And you've got this birthday party and you've got that. And I have to write down what everyone is doing... it takes an hour and a half every week. But if I do a good job... the week goes and that's like part-time... (PT-FG)

Similar to the other mothers in the group, Dawn recognized the challenges in managing the mental load with paid work responsibilities, despite working reduced part-time work hours.

Mothers' experiences in this study suggest that the additional time investment and management of the mental load, rather than visible unpaid work, is a barrier to labour force participation.

While mothers have a similar shared experience of the mental load, mothers point to several varying explanations for why the mental load may still fall on them. For example, Jane, a part-time chiropractor, linked the unequal distribution of the mental load to inherent differences between women and men, and suggested that women are more naturally attuned to their children's needs:

I think I talked about that a little bit earlier but it's kind of that mental burden that mothers just take on and it's—it's our nature, it's partially the way that we're wired and we're so in-tuned with our kids more so that we're always thinking of the next thing or what has to happen next or coordinating things and I think unfortunately, it's just women that are gonna take on that mental load a little bit more than the fathers will necessarily.

(PT-INT)

On the other hand, Gabriella, a full-time director pointed to personality differences as a key justification for the inequalities that existed in households.

I would say just the difference between us personalities wise... like I'm always scanning and looking for things that need to be done and he's sort of like more task-oriented and will do a task and get it done and won't think about the other stuff around it so much.

(FT-INT)

These findings are consistent with a recent study by Daminger (2020) that found that mothers in egalitarian contexts who continue to bear the mental load often reframe and “degender” the unequal distribution of invisible labour. A possible reason for this gendered lag is that, unlike visible unpaid work, the ‘mental load’ has only recently started to gain recognition as a form of

labour that requires re-distribution (Reich-Stiebert et al., 2023). In contrast to visible unpaid labour, such as doing dishes, folding laundry, or grocery shopping, the mental load is largely unnoticed as it is completed internally and is uninhibited by time, space, or place--- with no clear start or stop time. Daminger (2020) further illustrates the invisible yet omnipresent nature of the mental load by stating that cognitive labour is not tied to a location and can be “performed in parallel with other tasks” (p.810), such as paid work, commuting, or leisure time. With little recognition of this form of unpaid labour, it becomes difficult to outsource across the family (Dean et al., 2022). Holly, a full-time Health Care Corporate Director described the challenges of delegating the mental load with her partner:

... he'd just say “What do you want me to do? You know, “How can I help?” ... And you know...I could ask him to do more but...not that I don't trust him, but I kind of know all the pieces so it's hard to share some of those tasks.... I find, I find it easier to share some things like, “Here's the grocery list can you go get groceries? (FT-INT)

Holly pointed to a common experience shared by participants, where mothers are often described as the ‘household manager’ who must assign tasks to their “male helpers” (Daming, 2020., p.8), a dynamic that further perpetuates rather than alleviates the distinct and ongoing burden of carrying the mental load. Cally, a part-time nurse discussed her frustration with delegating work to her partner “I don't want to be having to take the initiative to tell you to do the job... I just want you to be the keeper of it” (PT- INT). Cally demonstrates that rather than delegating work, dividing responsibilities between her and her partner has been a more effective strategy to reduce the mental load.

Overall, participants of our study discussed the challenges in finding an equitable split of unpaid labour, often indicating that the mental load and household management an unspoken

expectations or assumptions that were primarily left to them. The findings reveal that the mental load, although often unacknowledged and unrecognized remains a source of stress that contributes to heightened work-life conflict and acts as a barrier to labour force participation (Reich-Stiebert et al., 2023).

### **Flexibility as a Strategy for Work-Family Integration**

A key challenge faced by mothers in integrating paid and unpaid work was workplace inflexibility. Indeed, almost all of the mothers in our study talked about the need for flexibility in the workplace as an important factor in enabling their labour force participation. The findings illustrate how flexibility in the workplace was used as a key strategy for work-family integration.

#### ***Flexibility as a Solution***

An overwhelming majority of mothers in this study identified flexibility as a key factor required to manage unforeseen but inevitable responsibilities related to family management, such as daycare drop-offs/pick-ups, sick children, or children's appointments with paid employment. Grace, a full-time architect, described how her need for flexibility surrounding hours of work shifted after becoming a mother. She illustrated:

I would say my need for scheduling and flexibility in my work hours changed...I work in a field that's fairly deadline and project based. So sometimes you just end up having to work a little bit outside your typical hours, you know, 9:00- 5:00 to get some things done. And... before being a mom, that was never really a problem. I could just stay late and kind of adjust my schedule as needed. But now there's my daughter in daycare. So, I have to pick her up by a certain time... And sometimes I've had to start work a little bit later in the morning too. Just to adjust, you know, she might have a doctor's appointment.

But I am lucky that I work for an employer that does offer flex time. So, it's been fairly easy to accommodate those needs. (FT-INT)

Grace's experience demonstrated how flexibility allowed her to manage family responsibilities, such as attending appointments and caring for her sick child without sacrificing full-time employment. Similarly, Hannah, a full-time service writer discusses the role of flexibility in a family-forward work environment. She illustrated:

My manager was very supportive if I needed to come in early to trade off for appointments... it was always taking care of your family and figure out the work after. ... there were a couple of times when just something happened, and I actually had to take my child to work with me... so there was a lot of support there that maybe I wouldn't have seen in another business" (FT-INT).

Similar to Grace and Hannah, mothers frequently viewed flexibility at work as a strategy to mitigate work-family conflict.

In circumstances where employment did not provide the flexibility required by mothers, they were often willing to shift their employment arrangements. For example, Gabriela, a full-time director, stated: "I would not have chosen work or I probably would have left a work environment that didn't allow for me to make the appropriate decisions both for work and family on a sort of day-to-day basis... that was critical for me" (FT-INT). Similarly, Farah, a full-time instructor discussed how an inflexible employment position contributed to changing employers. She stated:

... I led a team of emergency childcare providers that worked with families experiences any sort of domestic violence... and my team didn't always work when I worked. And with two children being kind of on-call all the time... it wasn't realistic anymore... And

now, I just work sessional... its great work and I like it but there's not benefits... But also, there's more flexibility in what I'm doing now. So, it works (FT-INT).

These experiences demonstrate the important role flexibility provides in supporting mothers to remain in the labour force.

Despite the advantages of workplace flexibility in supporting mothers' ability to work full-time without reducing work hours to meet family needs, some mothers also discussed the drawbacks of this arrangement. For example, Holly, a full-time corporate director, illustrated: "... even when I'm not working Fridays, I'm still monitoring my email... I'm gonna still handle emergencies and I'm not going to drop the ball. Um, so you know... that means there's a little bit of blurring between work and personal" (FT-INT). Holly's experience suggests that rather than reducing paid work, family-friendly policies may result in continued expectations to be available at work or the shifting of work responsibilities to a later time, a pattern experienced by a few in our study. For example, Hiriyana, a full-time research manager, illustrated: "... I might leave work early. But what that also means is that I come home and log into my computer and try to get that work done" (FT-INT). These experiences show how flexibility in work arrangements did not reduce her workload, but rather redistributed it, leading to a more ambiguous separation of work and family life.

Mothers' experiences are consistent with the often-contested nature of family-friendly policies, which, on the one hand, support mothers to integrate paid and unpaid work that may not otherwise be possible. However, these policies can also simultaneously reinforce traditional gender roles that expect mothers to be the primary caretakers of children in addition to contributing to the labour force (Collins, 2020). Managing the needs of a family is particularly difficult in the context of the 'adult worker model' (Giullari and Lewis, 2005), where both

parents are constrained by workplace expectations. This is challenging in a context where employees are held to an expectation of the “ideal worker model,” which remains organized around “typical male patterns of previous decades past... in which women handled household and familial responsibilities” (Wilk, 2016, p.39). As part of these expectations, employees are expected to prioritize work over other responsibilities and provide high levels of face time both in and out of the office (Wilk, 2016).

Notably, the need to be flexible often fell to women, even in situations where both parents are working full-time. In some cases, mothers’ jobs provided them with the flexibility they required. Hazel, a full-time Education Program Specialist, illustrated:

If there was one person who was at home and one person who was working, it would be a lot easier to say you know, the expectation is that the person at home would take care of the home things and the persons who’s working would take care of the working things... but with both of us working... it’s a lot harder, especially with those things that happen during the daytime. Like if you have to do doctors’ appointments. If you have to do dentist appointments. I’m the one with the more flexible schedule in that way. So that tends to fall on me because ... I can make things work a lot more easily. (FT-INT)

The findings suggest that while mothers are now participating in the labour force, gender norms or expectations of an ‘ideal worker’ have not evolved to meet family needs. Indeed, mothers who meet the expectations of an ‘ideal worker’ are often perceived as neglectful mothers, while mothers who prioritize their family responsibilities are perceived as uncommitted employees (Rowe et al., 2023). This leaves mothers in a ‘limbo’ where they are set up for failure in both home and work spheres. Jessica, a part-time consultant, illustrated the unrealistic expectations in the workplace with the current reality of mothers:

Well you know, in terms of what employers do for women..., I think there needs to be more flexibility... You know... your kid wakes up puking. What are you supposed to do? You can't ship them off to their daycare or school. You know, some employers aren't very understanding about that type of thing. (PT- INT)

Jessica illustrated a grey area between the home and work spheres which requires flexibility from mothers to integrate paid and unpaid work responsibilities. In general, managing dual roles as caregivers and employees became particularly challenging in circumstances where participant partners had inflexible work positions or in circumstances where that was limited family or community support, leaving the responsibility to be flexible primarily on mothers.

### ***Flexibility at a Cost***

While mothers often desired flexibility at work, for many it came with a cost in the workplace. Indeed, some mothers described the consequences of needing flexibility in their career progression or ability to continue participation in the labour force. For example, Hiriyana, a full-time manager, shared how she prioritized a flexible workplace over career progression to manage family responsibilities:

You do need an employer who's going to be understanding when your kids are sick... And I didn't want to risk that. Like where I currently work, they trust me. You know, they know the quality of my work. They know my work ethic. I didn't want to go somewhere else and start all over again.... as they got older, I think that's when I started thinking about and considering you know, what's next for me? (FT-INT)

Hiryanas experience is consistent with previous literature, which has coined the term 'mommy track' to reflect the less demanding career path taken by women with children to manage new family responsibilities. In Hiryanas case, she shared that she decided to delay career progression

and remain in a position where her employer's trust and understanding provided her with the flexibility she required. Indeed, research shows that mothers may reject job promotions or upper-level managerial positions due to the requirements of long hours, inflexible schedules, and limited job interruptions (Bertrand, 2018; Brown, 2010).

In contrast to Hiriyana, other mothers described feeling pushed out of the labour force by stigma or bias in the workplace. Molly, a full-time human resources business partner, shared the challenges experienced trying to manage childcare with paid work in an inflexible work environment:

... they were also in a day home. Um, which had very strict closing hours... you had to be there at 5:00, um, and so I would take the bus so I would take the bus so I'd have to leave at 4:00, it was very, I think I was seen as the one who was leaving work early, even though I was there by 7:00... I don't think they necessarily thought I was... I don't know.

Committed or, head in the game, whatever you want to call it. So, I was let go. (PT-INT)

Molly shared how her previous workplace held their employees to 'ideal worker' expectations, expecting them to prioritize their paid work over their family responsibilities. Molly further reflects on her experience, "... I don't want to work 24/7. I'm ambitious but I chose not to be a slave to the job because you know, I do enjoy spending time with my kids" (PT-INT). In another example, Jessica, a part-time consultant points to the systematic bias against mothers in some workplaces:

...I find it really disturbing that it's still such a gap in 20/20... I actually heard through the grapevine that after I left my job... they said they were either gonna hire either a guy or someone without kids" (PT-INT).

Jessica's experience shows how, despite the progression of women in the labour force, mothers may still be viewed as less competent or less committed in the workplace. Together, mothers' experiences show how mothers needing flexibility perpetuate biases that hinder their progression in the labour force.

In circumstances where mothers were not offered any flexibility and were left to manage family arrangements on their own, mothers were often cornered into reducing hours, choosing different work, or opting out entirely. For example, Eva, a process engineer, reflects on her inflexible shift work employment schedule as a driver in opting out of the labour force: "I felt like it just would have been too much... to... keep doing that in a work environment that's not really conducive to... you know, the flexibility that sometimes a family life... requires" (OO-FG).

Overall, the findings of this study show that mothers were much more likely to continue employment if they had some degree of flexibility to integrate their new role caregiving responsibilities at the onset of parenthood. Flexibility in start hours, work-from-home options, or reduced work hours, for example, provided needed accommodations that supported mothers to juggle work commitments with the demands of family life—ultimately supporting them to remain in the labour force.

## **Is the Grass Really Greener? Strategies to Reconcile Ambivalence Across Employment Groups**

A key finding from this study was that mothers experience a strong sense of ambivalence trying to reconcile wanting to spend time with children and the guilt they feel when they are not able to do so because of employment arrangements. Mothers employed a variety of strategies to deal with ambivalence while managing their dual roles as carers and earners. Key strategies included reducing work hours to part-time employment and opting out of employment entirely. The findings of this study show that even among those participants who reduced paid work, ambivalence towards their employment decisions often persisted as they navigated the labour market alongside parenthood. This section outlines the circumstances that influence mothers' decisions regarding their employment arrangements in part-time and opt-out employment groups and the drawbacks of those decisions.

### ***Opting Out as a Solution***

For a few mothers in our study, opting out of the labour force was used as a strategy to decrease the ambivalence they experienced. Out of 57 mothers in our study, seven had opted out of the labour force. Mothers described various factors influencing their decision to opt out. For example, Eva, a process engineer, illustrated:

I guess the main thing that left me to leave my job was just that I couldn't imagine working so many hours and not seeing my son... I couldn't go to work late anymore, and I couldn't go in early anymore and I just felt like now I have like an hour to see my son before bedtime. (OO-FG)

Eva described a desire for a slower life, where she could cook dinners, do household chores, and make time for her family. She stated that: "... thinking about us both working and trying to fit in all the chores and the grocery shopping and all the little things in the evening and on the weekends, we just felt would leave us with such a small amount of family time" (OO-FG).

Indeed, the wish to spend time with children emerged as a key factor considered in labour force participation across this study. Similar to Eva, Molly, who was employed as a Human Resource Manager, discussed the conflicting time demands when managing caregiving and employment: "... in the morning, you know, catching the bus at 6:45, I get up at 5:45, trying not to wake the kids, then you don't see them again till 5:00, five days a week it was just a lot." Since opting out, Molly shared that she can be more relaxed and present with her children and "be a good parent" (OO-INT).

Mothers' strong desire to spend time with children and families is exasperated by intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996), which is the idea that a mother is primarily responsible and should constantly be available for their children. These expectations are assumed even when mothers participate in the labour force, as they are expected to choose employment that allows simultaneous care for their children and family responsibilities. As such, previous literature has found that mothers experience heightened levels of guilt and role overload compared to their male counterparts (Lamar et al., 2019). Indeed, in contrast to mothers, who often experience a penalty in the labour force at the onset of motherhood, fathers are often rewarded. Hodges and Budig (2010) state that employers interpret fatherhood status as a signal of "valued, unobservable individual traits, such as loyalty or dependability," leading to advantages in "hiring, wage offers, evaluations of work commitment, and projections for future

promotability” (p.718). Importantly, this double standard leads to barriers in mothers’ labour force participation and career advancement (Lamar et al., 2019).

### *The Challenges of Opting Out*

Although the findings of this study show opting out did help to alleviate some of the conflicts between the conflicting demands of work and family experienced by mothers, mothers who opted out still faced key challenges. Notably, mothers described a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty when discussing the challenges of this work arrangement. For example, Nicole, a records coordinator, shares her experience: “... there are some days where I’m at home that I have a bit of resentment... but also being at work full-time and feeling guilty because somebody else is spending all that time with your kid” (OO-INT). As described by Nicole, the shift from paid work to unpaid was not always as fulfilling as paid work but alleviate some of the guilt coupled with spending time away from their children. Nicole, like others, found it difficult to value their contributions to unpaid work. Nicole stated: “I feel a bit of loss. I feel like something is gone... I feel a bit mad at myself that I’ve let that go” (OO-INT). Nicole spoke about how her positive experiences and memories in the workplace have heightened the challenges of staying at home. Similarly, Leah, a Respite Care Worker, illustrated:

I would say I struggle a bit with self-worth and whether or not I am contributing. And feeling like, am I really making an impact?... with the work I was doing before... there was a very visual and tangible result... (OO-INT)

Leah reflected on the value and accomplishment she felt in her previous position working with families and children. In contrast, the unpaid work she completed at home lacked the same visible and tangible outcomes. Instead, unpaid work may often be an invisible, unrecognized, and ongoing task, making it harder to see value in its contributions.

In other cases, mothers described how their unpaid work was undervalued by others or overlooked by societal ideas of what ‘work’ is valuable. For example, Alice, a Registered Psychologist discussed some of the messages she received from her social circle regarding opting out of the labour force. She illustrated:

...I’ve had conversations where they think maybe I’m throwing away the education I did... I’ve had comments about things like well don’t you want your daughter to see what her potential is and a working parent and all those kinds of things? (OO-INT)

Alice further explained her frustration with how the unpaid work she completes, such as meal prepping, doing housework, or working in her community, is often not valued or dismissed because there is no financial tie to it. Ann, who was a part-time nurse discussed the disconnect between the unpaid work she values and how those around her perceive it. She stated:

I don’t know that everyone gets it because I have friends who are like well so what are you going to do? And I’m like fuck you! I know what I’m doing, and it’s making tabbouleh and you know, like whatever it is... having coffee with a friend who has anxiety and depression (OO-FG).

In addition to finding it hard to value their work, mothers also expressed feelings of loneliness and a sense of missing community they experienced after opting out of employment. Specifically, mothers described a gap in social connection and support between maternity leave and children starting school. Ava, a process engineer, stated:

“...I found it hard to find. Especially past maternity leave. Like, there are all kinds of mom and baby things. And then you get past that point and everyone else goes back to work. And now you like okay, well I’m home now” (OO-FG).

Ava's experience showed that for mothers, particularly those who are surrounded by women who have invested in their education and career and are more likely to return to work, opting out can be an isolating experience.

Mothers also point to giving up their careers and loss of complete professional identity as a challenge of opting out. Notably, even among mothers who opted out of the labour force, some struggled to completely forego their careers. Alice, a registered psychologist who opted out of the labour force, discussed her hesitancy to relinquish registration with her college:

I love where I am ... but there's a nagging thing in the back of my head which says I continue to pay my registration dues to the college so that I can maintain those letters behind my name. Even though when I'm happier now than I was in my career... the idea of letting go of those letters behind my name is hard. It's really hard! (OO-FG)

Despite finding fulfillment outside of her career, Alice continued to pay her registration every year to maintain her professional identity. Later on, Alice pondered the idea of going back to school when her daughter is in school full-time. She states, "If I decided you know, she's in first grade and she's in school full-time, I could find a role. There is a piece of me that would like to stay involved somehow" (OO-FG). Mothers in our study who had opted out of employment commonly spoke about returning to work once their children entered school age, possibly due to the benefits of stable, quality, affordable care that comes with full-time schooling. These findings suggest that rather than preferring to 'opt out', there may be structural factors, such as lack of childcare or inflexible workplaces that 'push out' mothers from the labour force (Kossek et al., 2017).

### ***Part-time as a 'Best of Both Worlds' Solution***

For many mothers, part-time work was used as a strategy to seek flexibility and reduce the work-life conflict they experienced while still contributing to the labour force. Perhaps for this reason, an overwhelming majority identified part-time work as an ideal work arrangement. Mothers described part-time as a strategy to integrate unpaid and paid responsibilities. For example, Irene, a part-time health facilities analyst illustrated the ways part-time work 'checked all the boxes' for her:

it was the right balance... I didn't want to be dependent on my spouse financially. I get to have my own time, I get to learn new things and keep busy, but then I also got to spend time with my children, so it kinda checked all the boxes. (PT-INT)

Like Irene, many mothers in the study described part-time work as a way to continue their participation in the labour market and financial independence while also fulfilling other personal demands. This included spending time with their children, volunteering for field trips, going to appointments, completing housework, or visiting elderly grandparents. Kathleen, a part-time speech pathologist, illustrated how part-time work is used to find a middle group between her dual role as a mother and employee:

...it's important for me to have work in my life. I love being at home and I love my kids. But you know I feel like for my own well-being and my... you know, the perception that I am contributing to society I do need to work *at least* part-time... (PT-INT, *italics added*)

Kathleen, like other mothers in this study, frequently discussed the tension between their desire to spend time with their families and participate in the labour force. While these study's findings are consistent with the literature that part-time work is used as a strategy to integrate paid and

unpaid work responsibilities (Lyonette, 2015; Breitzkreuz et al., 2024<sup>2</sup>), Kathleen's experience suggests that mothers retain employment as a compromise to "weave" an identity that satisfies their divided roles as both an 'ideal worker' and 'good mother' (Johnston and Swanson, 2006).

### ***The Challenges of Part-time Work***

Despite part-time work being viewed as an ideal solution, part-time work presented its own unique challenges. Mothers described being torn between their dual roles as a mother and employees, where they could not fully commit to either. Gwen, a full-time instructor, illustrated: "Part-time was the worst of both worlds; I was a part-time mom and a part-time employee. And I couldn't wholeheartedly do either" (FT-INT). Like Gwen, mothers in the study often described part-time work as a 'limbo' where they still held to the same standards as those mothers who chose to work full-time or opt-out of the labour force-- creating challenges to meet the expectations of both an 'ideal worker' and 'good mother', which ironically, was the very challenge they were trying to mitigate in the first place.

Mothers who worked part-time contributed fewer hours in paid work, and thus, were expected to shoulder a disproportionate amount of unpaid labour and childcare responsibilities. Irene, a part-time health facilities analyst, discussed how the distribution of unpaid labour changed when she shifted to part-time employment: "I think that did kind of mean more of the household things fell on me, but I mean that also makes sense cause I'm home more" (PT-INT). Because part-time required fewer hours in paid work and thus, allowing for greater flexibility,

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<sup>2</sup> This article draws from the same data set used in this study.

mothers then became responsible for managing the invisible labour, such as planning meals, taking children to appointments, or managing after-school activities.

At the same time, some mothers reported challenges in part-time employment. For example, some describe not feeling valued as much by their employers. Kendall, a part-time physiotherapist, illustrated:

I was given a position with less responsibility... I remember feeling like that role... I felt a little bit less valued than had I been full-time just because you know, I miss a lot of the team meetings and I didn't hold responsibility for something on my own. But I didn't mind it because the purpose of it was to spend more time with my daughter. (PT-INT)

Kendall described how she was willing to forgo responsibilities in her employment to make time for her daughter. Indeed, while some mothers recognized the trade-off of part-time work, including a lower salary, slower career advancement or recognition in employment, and reduced benefits and pensions, they reconciled these sacrifices with their commitment to their unpaid responsibilities.

In other cases, mothers working part-time described being expected to complete the same amount of work in a shorter period. Gloria, a full-time senior scientist illustrated:

I've seen women working part-time and... they're expected to put out as much work as before ... and then have to do that in less time. (FT-INT)

Gloria described how in addition to completing the same workload, mothers must sacrifice their income, pay for childcare, and have a reduced pension. She indicated that the consequences of part-time work were “not worth the financial and emotional costs” (FT-INT). Similar to Gloria, Francine, a full-time nurse, described how part-time work does not reduce the workload, but rather the time spent in the workplace: “On the one hand, working full-time at my job makes my

job a little bit easier cause the workload is still there when I work part-time.... But being there full-time, there's definitely, you know, your work is spread out to more days." (FT-INT).

In sum, mothers' experiences show that while part-time work does provide mothers with additional time to manage family responsibilities, the workload is not reduced. Nonetheless, some mothers decide to participate to sacrifice their salary and career advancement in part-time employment to achieve the work-family balance they desire, even if it's just for a few years. While mothers often look at reducing their workload to part-time or opting out of the labour force, the results of this study show that such adjustments come with significant challenges that are not an ideal solution.

## **The Role of Parental Leave in Supporting Maternal Employment**

The participants in our study were predominately higher income, highly educated, and more attached to the labour market. As a result, participants largely overcame key systematic barriers of parental leave, such as meeting the 600-hour threshold of insurable hours, the 1-week waiting period, and the requirement for continuous employment. Indeed, as shown in Table 3, 50 out of 57 (88%) participants qualified for parental leave benefits. Among the 50 who qualified, 48 (96%) of participants accessed them. Perhaps because of this context, parental leave was generally perceived as an accessible and taken-for-granted benefit that was less often discussed in our study. Nonetheless, some mothers in our study did discuss their experience with parental leave benefits. This section first highlights socio-economic disparities in utilization of benefits, which is the key challenge of parental leave benefits experienced by mothers in our study. Following this, the partners uptake of parental leave, including the benefits of parental leave uptake and the challenges are outlined. Overall, this section uses mothers' experiences to evaluate Canada's current parental leave policies in supporting mothers' labour force participation.

**Table 3: Employer Support**

|  |   |    |
|--|---|----|
|  | <i>n</i> =57  |    |
| Participants who qualified (at least once) for parental leave benefits   | 50  |    |
| Participants who accessed (at least once) parental leave benefits        | 48  |    |
| Participants who have access to the following employer-provided benefits | Parental Leave  | 37 |
|  | Sick Leave  | 41 |
|  | Vacation Days   | 41 |
|  | Health Benefits   | 44 |
|  | Childcare Subsidy                                       | 3  |
|  | On-site Childcare                                       | 2  |
|  | Flex time Benefits                                      | 9  |
|  | Work-from-home Option                                   | 10 |
|  | Self-employed with purchased additional health coverage | 0  |
|  | Self-employed with no additional health coverage        | 4  |
| Not reported   | 5   |    |

As shown in Table 3, 50 out of 57 (88%) mothers qualified for parental leave benefits. Among the 50 who qualified, 48 (96%) of participants accessed them. Participants also had access to a range of other employer-provided benefits. Specifically, 37 participants had access to parental leave (64%); 41 participants had access to sick leave (71%); 41 participants had access to vacation days (71%); 44 participants had access to health benefits (77%); 3 participants had access to childcare subsidy (5%); 2 participants had access to on-site childcare (4%); 9 participants had access to flex time benefits (15%); 10 participants had access to a work-from-home option (17%); and 4 participants were self-employed with no additional health coverage (7%). For five mothers in our study, we do not have data for employer support.

### *Socio-Economic Disparities in Leave Benefits*

Despite the participants of this study being in ideal circumstances to access parental leave, mothers in our study still faced challenges. Specifically, mothers spoke about the socioeconomic disparities in the usage of parental leave benefits. For example, Kendall, a part-time physiotherapist, described how her high earning power served as a buffer for the moderate replacement rate offered by parental leave benefits. She stated:

You know, I top out my maternity leave ... I get the maximum amount because I make a good salary... it's designed for middle upper class. The whole system is. And I feel; I feel like I just don't know how anyone making minimum wage or... makes it work. (PT-INT)

Kendall described how her high income which allows her to receive the maximum parental leave benefit, was a key factor in feeling supported on parental leave. Maternity leave offers up to 15 weeks of earnings at a 55% replacement rate. In addition to maternity leave, parents can access parental leave which offers an earnings replacement rate of 55% for a standard leave (35 weeks) or 33% for an extended leave (61 weeks). As of January 1, 2025, the maximum weekly earnings are \$695 per week for standard benefits or up to \$417 per week for extended benefits (Government of Canada, 2025a). Kendall stated that paid parental leave is “designed for the middle class,” reflecting on the potential challenges that could arise for mothers who are making lower incomes and often do not have access to the same level of financial support. Indeed, for mothers with low incomes, a drop in income may require mothers to forego or make trade-offs of basic necessities (Bose et al., 2020). At the same time, mothers who are making much more than the maximum insurable earnings experience the largest drop in earnings. As such, it is possible that mothers may be deterred from utilizing paid parental leave benefits to their full extent (Haeck et al., 2019; Margolis et al., 2019). Haeck et al., (2019) suggest that when it comes to

paid parental leave, “leaner might be better,” with their study finding that a higher replacement rate of 70% in Quebec increased the uptake of parental leave in higher-earner mothers.

Perhaps for this reason, despite the relatively high income of our participants, some mothers discussed the relatively moderate earnings replacement rate adjustment as a challenge. Hope, a full-time psychologist and assistant director illustrated:

.... I think it would have been helpful to have more financial support to encourage moms to be with their babies. Um, because it just wasn't financially feasible to stay home any longer when I was done my leave, but I do think that my son and myself would've benefitted from that... (FT-INT)

Despite a high-income salary and access to a supplemental employment top-up, Hope reported challenges in sustaining her parental leave financially. Hope's experience indicates that even relatively privileged mothers face challenges with parental leave if they are not supported by a high-income partner or are not positioned well to set aside money in advance. Previous literature has pointed out that parents in Canada are divided into two categories: “parental leave rich”, which describes privileged families who have the household income to access certain policies, and “parental leave poor,” who are systematically excluded from policies due to low incomes and lower labour force attachment (McKay et al., 2016), only limited research explore the ways in which a significant loss of wages may impact high earnings mothers uptake of parental leave (Haeck et al., 2019)

### ***The Benefits of Paternity Leave Uptake***

Although much of previous research has largely focused on maternity leave and its role in supporting labour force participation, scholars have started to examine the impact of paternity leave on gender equality across paid and unpaid work (Elson, 2017; de Laat et al., 2023; Lütolf,

2024). Historically, the uptake of paternity leave by fathers has been substantially lower when compared to mothers; however, recent statistics indicate an increase in partners' uptake of parental benefits. Specifically, while parental leave uptake from partners only increased from 26% to 30% from 2007 to 2018, it leapt to 35% in 2019 and has steadily improved to 47% by 2024 (Statistics Canada, 2024d). This shift is likely facilitated by the introduction of the sharing benefits implemented by the federal government in 2019, which offers five to eight weeks of additional leave exclusively for the other parent (presumably, the father). This study collected data from 2019-2020, and largely captured parental leave experiences before the 2019 policy change or the early impacts of this change.

A key finding of this study is that mothers whose partners had taken paternity leave frequently discuss a range of benefits of this uptake. Indeed, about a quarter of mothers described how fathers' utilization of parental leave offered them an increased understanding of the challenges of unpaid labour and facilitated a redistribution of unpaid work across the household. Blair, a full-time psychology consultant, shares the contrast in her experience between her first child--when her partner could not access the benefit--versus the second when they could. She explained:

...for my second baby, my husband took the five weeks of parental leave [paternity leave] that just came into effect which was amazing. Like amazing not only for his experience and bonding but for my mental health. Like... it was *night and day* between the two. (FT-FG)

Blair indicated that the uptake of paternity leave by her partner fostered a sense of shared understanding and partnership in managing the challenges of unpaid work that are typically left to women. She shared how during the first few weeks of leave, her husband experienced the

demands of caregiving firsthand: “As soon as I went into labour, he was on parental leave [paternity leave]. So those first five weeks plus a week of vacation... And about week three, he turned to me and was like “It just never stops!” like... yeah! This is what it was like with the first one too!” (FT-FG).

Blair’s sentiments are echoed by many mothers whose partners had utilized parental leave. They described how leave uptake had a transformative impact on their husband’s contributions to unpaid work. Gloria, a full-time scientist, illustrated: “I actually advocate for men to take parental leave... I think a lot of guys see it as a little bit of a holiday... but when I went back to work, my husband had to figure it out. And he became a really good dad and a really good husband because he knew how much work it actually takes” (FT-INT). Gloria shared how her husband’s experience with paternity leave shifted his understanding of unpaid labour and the hidden by offering an opportunity for fathers to be the primary caregiver or ‘manager’ of the household.

Similar to Gloria, other mothers in this study often described paternity leave as a period of time where fathers learned to manage the ‘mental load’ or invisible labour required to anticipate and respond to the needs of the family and household. Kayla a part-time teacher, illustrated:

I think it’s good because it allowed him to see the little things that keep a household going like just the logistics of it. And you know, like laying out the kid’s clothes every day and you know, having planned out the lunches. And just those little; like did you remember to find these forms, you know? He didn’t really have an appreciation for it before. That I think was fairly illuminating for him. (PT-INT)

These experiences are consistent with previous literature that finds an unaccompanied paternity leave (taken without the mother being present) is an important factor in developing caregiving confidence and facilitating “a shift from a helper-manager dynamic to co-parenting” (Wray, 2020, p. 536). As Shafer et al. (2020) note, the opportunity for fathers to stay at home is important to develop a “needs exposure” to previously “muted” tasks of domestic work—thus increasing their share of childcare and housework, including invisible mental labour (Wray, 2020).

### ***Barriers to Paternity Leave***

Despite the benefits of paternity leave, there remain significant barriers that continue to limit father’s uptake of leave. This is reflected in our data, which show that only about a quarter of participants partners who had access to paternity leave took it. While we did not interview the fathers themselves, about 25% of mothers in this study indicated that their partner had utilized paternity leave and some shared that their partner experienced consequences in parental leave uptake. For example, Blair shared that judgment or stigma in the male-dominated oil and gas industry impacted her husband’s experience using paternity leave:

... he works in the oil and gas industry and... it seemed that it also put a target on his back because there are a lot of traditional old-school values in that industry. And so, there were a lot of comments made to him about like oh your one of those like new age guys... and he was the next one laid off, right? (FT-FG)

Blair’s experience suggests that while offering parental leave is a good first step, the social climate has not caught up to fathers utilizing leave. Several mothers in our study shared that fathers experienced an overlap with mothers’ experiences, including judgment, uncertainty, stigma, difficulty re-entering the labour market and, in some circumstances, job loss. Dawn, a

part-time teacher, illustrated: “It’s bad enough for women, it’s worse for men... a guy in my husband’s work took paternity leave and did not get a promotion for the next three years” (PT-FG).

In contradiction to the gender norms that affect mothers, which are usually discussed, mothers point to the gendered stereotypes experiences by fathers. Grace, a full-time architect, illustrated: “I feel like my husband has been discriminated against for being a parent more than I have” (FT-INT). Grace demonstrates that gender norms may impact fathers in similar ways to mothers’ experiences, however; because fathers are less likely to engage in caretaking, these consequences are less visible and not as frequently discussed. Interestingly, some fathers’ reluctance to take paternity leave persisted across occupations, showing the wide-sweeping impacts of gender norms. Bryn, full-time a senior advisor discussed her husband’s hesitancy regarding utilizing paternity leave, despite him working in a university setting. “...I know my husband was hesitant to even think about it. Like he would just rather take; scrape together a bunch of vacation time to take a big holiday than take leave.” (FT-FG)

Mothers in this study also pointed to how parental leave decisions are often influenced by financial considerations or employment arrangements, rather than what’s best for the family. Ella, a part-time medical laboratory assistant, illustrated:

... our parental leave benefits need to encompass various models... it makes things difficult for couples who want to share parental leave when one person in the partnership is not traditionally employed... and when it financially doesn’t make sense for male partners to take time off, it hurts the kids I think (PT-FG).

Ella shows how parental leave design systematically excludes parents who may work in non-standard work arrangements or earn a lower income. Because of the persistent wage gap in

Canada, with men still being more likely to be the financial earners, several mothers in our study indicated it made financial sense to take the leave over their partners. For example, Ingrid, a full-time photographer discussed how a low replacement rate can impact a father's ability to take paternity leave:

... if the father is the primary breadwinner, well, then, he can't afford to work at 55%.

The family can't afford to live off of 45-55% of their income. So, there need to be top-ups. Um, like those are simple changes I can think of but there are so many other things.

(FT-INT)

Ingrid proposes that cultural changes in the workplace are required to support father's uptake of paternity leave. Previous research supports this finding and has found that fathers are less likely to take paternity leave if the wage replacement rate is low (Mayer and Le Bourdais, 2019).

Gloria, a full-time senior scientist illustrated how a higher replacement rate, such as an employer top-up can support partner uptake or sharing of leave:

My husband is in the army, and so his employer provides a top-up from EI. So, he; during his parental leave, makes, I think its 95% of his salary. So, it makes more financial sense for us to do more sharing. I was home for six months... and my husband took the last six months of parental leave. (FT-INT)

Gloria's experience highlights that a higher replacement rate or an employer top-up can play a key role in making parental leave more accessible to fathers, particularly when the father is the breadwinner. While not everyone may be able to access a supplemental employment top-up, an increase in a wage-replacement rate could ensure families can be financially stable while both parents access paternity leave.

The experiences outlined by participants in this study indicate that although a non-transferable paternity leave is an important first step to increasing fathers' uptake of paternity leave—it is not yet sufficient, with the social climate surrounding fathers and caregiving not yet caught up with policies. In addition, a persisting wage gender gap and low replacement rates also work to discourage fathers from utilizing parental leave, despite its availability. Many mothers in the study discussed their frustration regarding the societal assumption that fathers will be uninvolved in childcare and home care—creating barriers for men who would like to be more involved and perpetuation gendered inequalities in unpaid care.

## **The Role of Childcare in Supporting Maternal Employment**

A key objective of this study was to understand maternal employment experiences in the context of childcare policies. While there has been a growing body of research that has emphasized the critical relationship between childcare and mother's labour force participation, this study aimed to explore connections that may have been left overlooked or still unexplored in the wider literature. Similar to previous literature, the findings of this study show an overwhelming number of mother's experience challenges with childcare accessibility, affordability, and quality as key issues and managing paid employment within the Canadian context (Breitkreuz et al., 2019; Prentice and White, 2019). Although the findings of this study largely echo previous literature, the study identified an important gap in childcare services that is not frequently discussed, thereby extending the literature in one keyway.

### ***A Gap in Childcare: Sick Children***

In addition to challenges with accessibility, affordability, and quality of care, many mothers expressed how navigating the care for their children who were ill was a key conflict with paid work. For example, Jessica, a part-time consultant, illustrated: "What are you supposed to do? You can't ship them off to their daycare or school... some employers aren't very understanding about that kind of thing" (PT-INT). Throughout discussions with mothers, they frequently discussed their employers' frustration and overall displeasure with them caring for their children when sick. Jennifer, a part-time music therapist, illustrated:

My manager was not happy for me to be taking time off to take care of my daughter when she was sick... I think the expectation of my manager is that someone else should look after her so you can come to your job... and we just didn't have that. (PT-INT)

With neither paid childcare nor daycare accommodating sick children, mothers scramble to arrange either childcare arrangements or flexibility from paid work, often causing feelings of tension in the workplace. For example, Kayla, a part-time teacher discussed the stress regarding paid work when her children are sick: “If your child is sick or injured, the work side of it shouldn’t be the most pressing issue. And currently for me, that is what would worry me the most” (PT-INT).

Mothers in the study described using a variety of strategies to manage care when their child is sick. In some cases, families had family support that helped them bridge the gap. For example, Gwen, a full-time sessional instructor, illustrated: “I can’t count the number of times where my child has a fever in the middle of the night... so were not going to be welcomed into childcare in the morning... And it’s a quick call to grandma, and so my mom is often the one who has fevered, vomiting children in her care” (FT-INT). Mothers who had family support were often much better positioned to navigate their sick children. However, when family support was not available, mothers used strategies, including using their sick days or using paid or unpaid vacation and personal days to fill gaps in care. This experience is consistent with a previous study in Alberta, Canada, that described the challenges mothers faced in facilitating the “planning, organizing and management” of multiple care arrangements to meet childcare needs (Breitkreuz et al., 2019).

Although not illustrated, the findings of this study are consistent with previous literature that has outlined the challenges with current childcare policies, showing the ways in which, they are insufficient to address issues with childcare availability, affordability, and quality to support mothers’ labour force participation. It is important to note that with the changing landscape of childcare policies in Canada, notably, the introduction of the Canada Wide Early Learning and

Child Care Framework in 2021, which aims to implement \$10 a daycare for children under 6 years old by 2026, some of these findings may not be representative of the experiences of mothers with childcare today.

In sum, the findings of this study show a ‘disconnect’ between the realities of mothers and modern families with the structural support provided by current policies. While many mothers report a desire to participate in the labour force, their decisions in the labour force are impacted by a variety of intersecting factors. While some factors, such as financial considerations, education and career investments, and personal fulfillment achieved by paid employment, encourage mothers to return to the labour force; structural constraints create barriers. Key barriers include unequal distribution of both visible and invisible labour, inflexibility in the workplace, and persisting gender roles that pressure mothers to reduce their work hours. Despite some mothers reducing their paid work hours to part-time or opting out of the labour force, the findings of this study indicate that these decisions come with key challenges and are not a sustainable solution for work-family integration. Instead, the findings show that current policies, including parental leave and childcare, while helpful, are not sufficient to support mothers’ labour force participation.

Although Canada offers a moderate parental leave when compared to other OECD countries, key issues persist. A key challenge that emerged from this study was socio-economic disparities in the utilization of parental leave benefits, showing the heightened challenges that may be experienced by mothers with both low and high earnings. This study also found many benefits for fathers’ uptake of parental leave, including an increased understanding and redistribution of both visible and invisible unpaid work, and improved familial relationships. Despite this, mothers described key barriers, such as traditional gender roles, stigma, and the

wage gap as key challenges in fathers' parental leave uptake. Beyond parental leave, the findings also highlight issues with childcare. While childcare accessibility, affordability, and quality of care are widely recognized barriers, this study extends the literature by identifying navigating children who are sick with paid employment as a key challenge. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that larger structural changes are needed in supporting mother's equal labour force experiences.

## Chapter 5. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to a small body of literature that examines the facilitators and barriers to maternal employment within the Canadian context. By examining the experiences of mothers with preschool children in a range of employment arrangements, including full-time, part-time, and opt-out, I sought to highlight gaps in the paid parental leave and childcare policies. Rather than assume mothers voluntarily opt out of the labour force, I used a socio-ecological, critical feminist approach to understand how mothers' decisions are influenced by the larger social, cultural, and political context in which they live. This study also aims to uncover gaps in mother's current policy environment, focusing on paid parental leave and childcare, to provide evidence-based policy recommendations.

The first objective of the study was to understand the experiences of mothers in Alberta in relation to these policies to highlight gaps in the current political environment. The key finding from this study was that an overwhelming number of mothers expressed their desire to participate in the labour force. Rather than assuming 'choice' or 'preference' regarding employment arrangements, the study aimed to explore the larger context surrounding these decisions. The results of this study show that mothers' decisions were influenced by weighting the perceived options and constraints of their environment.

A key finding is that participants' 'choice' regarding employment was largely intertwined with financial stability. Despite the relatively high household income of participants in this study, about half indicated that although they would prefer to reduce their full-time work hours, shift to part-time, or in a few cases, opt out of the labour force entirely, it was not a financially feasible option for them. Indeed, although mothers across employment groups described the tension between paid and unpaid work, only those mothers who were supported by a high-

income partner were able to reduce their work hours and forfeit the additional income, benefits, or retirement pensions that are tied with full-time employment. Statistics Canada supports this finding, noting “it takes two” -- showing that almost 70% of families in Canada now require a dual income to sustain the economic requirements of a family (2016). It is important to note nuance in these statistics, which indicate that the rate of dual-earner couple families will decrease with the addition of every child (Statistics Canada 2024c). One possible reason for this may be that the challenges of securing affordable and high-quality childcare may compound further with every child, reducing the benefits of mothers returning to the labour force. Unfortunately, for many mothers in this study, securing accessible, affordable, and high-quality childcare presented as a challenge.

Importantly, these findings are consistent with previous research that has critiqued the rhetoric surrounding mothers opting out as a personal or voluntary choice. Instead, scholars show that opting out is an option that is largely available to highly educated, professional women, and excludes the experiences of those lower-income mothers who do not have the flexibility of leaving employment. Instead, mothers with lower incomes are in a position where they must navigate the challenges of work-life conflict, even within circumstances of heightened barriers such as limited employment flexibility, overtime, absence of employment benefits, or requirement to work on employer premises (Landivar, 2017; Hennessy, 2009). Overall, the findings of this study show that in circumstances where mothers were supported by a high earning partner, they had greater choice and flexibility in selecting varying employment arrangements, whether that was full-time, part-time, or leaving the workforce entirely. On the other hand, when a mother’s income was required to meet the minimum financial needs of their household, the *choice* to opt-out was not perceived as an available option.

Another finding is that mothers commonly spoke about their investment into their education and career as a driver of labour force participation. Notably, the overwhelming majority of the participants had achieved higher levels of education, with 50 out of 57 (87%) participants holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Even in circumstances where mothers did not financially need to be employed, their investment into their professional careers was a driving factor influencing them to remain attached to the labour market, albeit to varying degrees. Indeed, for many participants in this study, their ambition for a career disrupted by the lopsided division of unpaid work responsibilities—often resulting in seeking part-time employment arrangements.

Previous research investigating highly educated mothers and career outcomes has not reached clear conclusions. On one hand, some research proposes that higher educational attainment provides mothers with greater professional standing, workplace flexibility and benefits, and thus, should increase their capacity to adjust their schedules and integrate private and public spheres (Herr and Wolfram, 2012). In addition, highly educated women face a higher 'opportunity cost' from participating in the labour force, as they are more likely to receive greater financial compensation and self-fulfillment than women with lower education. At the same time, consistent with the earlier discussion regarding opting out, highly educated mothers often have less pressure to remain in the labour force when met with work-life conflicts, as they are often partnered with high-income earners education (Hook and Paek, 2020). Although previous research often presents mothers' employment decisions as a dichotomy-- employed or opt-out—in this study, part-time work emerged in our findings as a strategic (yet flawed) compromise. For many mothers of our study, part-time employment offered both the flexibility

they required to meet what seemed like persistent conflicting family demands, without completely letting go of their investment into their education and professional credentials.

Another key finding was that mothers in our study frequently discussed personal fulfillment from paid employment as another important driver for their labour force participation. Although the literature has primarily focused on women's identity as mothers and the motherhood guilt experienced with paid work, we found that mothers in this study who had invested a lot into their education and career were also strongly influenced by their professional identity. Despite increased educational attainment across Canada, with 68% of women aged 24-64 earning a bachelor's degree (Statistics Canada, 2022d), little research has explored the linkage between highly educated mothers and their professional identity as a driver of labour force participation. Some research has hinted at the connection. In one example, Greenberg et al. (2016) find that women who "establish a strong vision of their future self as a working mother... may be more likely to stay engaged and committed to their professions" (p.4). In another case, Kutzer et al., 2013 state, "In the case of professional women, their association with a profession has, to some extent, shaped their identities. Through their education, work experiences and professional affiliations, they have established themselves within their working contexts" (p.15). Consistent with these findings, the results of our study show that mothers also often looked to paid work for a sense of fulfillment, purpose, and self-actualization that was not received from household or caregiving responsibilities. As expectations for mothers have shifted away from the traditional caregiver role of past decades and are instead encouraging women's education and labour force attachment, future research should be conducted to explore the linkage between shifts in societal expectations, mothers' sense of professional identity, and the ways in which this may impact mothers' decisions regarding labour force participation.

Despite these driving factors that support mothers' desire to continue participating in the labour force, mothers also discussed key barriers to full-time labour force participation. A key barrier to labour force participation that emerged from this study is the persisting gendered division of unpaid labour. This study examined both visible and invisible labour. In terms of visible labour, the findings of this study found that the gendered gap of unpaid work is shrinking, with the majority of mothers in our study indicating that their partner was contributing to visible labour such as doing dishes or laundry, making meals, or engaging in children's supervision or activities. Although some mothers described initially being the "default parent," at the onset of parenthood, mothers described redistributing unpaid work across the household more equally over time. This is consistent with recent literature, which shows the division of unpaid labour between women and men is converging, particularly across childcare tasks (Frank and Frenette, 2021). The shift towards a more equal distribution of unpaid labour may be explained by various factors, such as increasing awareness of visible unpaid labour as a social problem (Dean et al., 2022), and the subsequent shift of ideal expectations for fathers towards a new "involved father" (Williams et al., 2013), which has also been referred to as an "active parental role" (Naujoks, 2024), or "new involved parenthood" (Naujoks, 2024).

Interestingly, the results of this study present a different trend for invisible unpaid care or the "mental load," with the overwhelming majority of mothers describing an unequal distribution of unpaid invisible labour. The findings of this study provided further evidence of recent literature that has conceptualized the mental load. For example, Dean et al., (2019) define the mental load as internal cognitive and emotional behaviour required to maintain the smooth functioning of unpaid household labour and childcare responsibilities. Similarly, Daminger (2019) described cognitive labour as "anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them,

making decisions, and monitoring progress” (p.609). Based on experiences in the study, mothers described the mental load as a never-ending, exhausting, all-encompassing task that unwillingly fell to them, and trespassed into different areas of their lives, including leisure and paid work responsibilities.

Despite this, to date, very few studies have explored how the mental load may impact mothers’ involvement in the labour force. For example, Daminger (2019) notes that the lack of spatial or temporal boundaries is likely to interrupt or fragment paid work and may lead to lower job performance. Additionally, mothers may experience negative consequences related to their well-being, including stress, anxiety, role overload, and lower life dissatisfaction (Reich-Stiebert, 2023). Importantly, because the mental load is gendered, these experiences may disproportionately heighten experiences of work-family conflict for mothers, a key factor in reduced labour force participation (Dizaho, 2016; Haupt and Gelbgiserb, 2022). While research has started to conceptualize and bring visibility to the mental load, (Dean et al., 2019, Daminger, 2019; Robertson, 2019; Reich-Stiebert, 2023), several important and interesting avenues of research are required to understand further the consequences of the mental load on mothers’ labour force participation and their economic, mental, and physical well-being.

Finally, mothers also discussed inflexibility in the workplace as a key barrier to labour force participation. Many mothers in our study discussed requiring flexibility in paid work to manage unexpected yet inevitable household or family demands. Interestingly, requiring flexibility to meet unpaid care demands was a highly gendered responsibility, whereby mothers were primarily responsible for shifting paid work responsibilities to adjust to family responsibilities. While mothers stressed the importance of flexibility in enabling their labour force participation, particularly in maintaining full-time roles alongside caregiving

responsibilities, it presented as a catch-22 for mothers. Indeed, the findings of this study show that while flexibility in the workplace supports mothers' labour force attachment, it also reinforces pre-existing gendered inequalities in the labour force and obstructs mothers from advancing their careers at the same rate as women without children or their male counterparts.

Like other studies, mothers in our study indicated that the use of flexible policies led to reduced wages, slower career progression and a negative perception of mother's commitment to the workplace (Williams et al., 2013; Blair Loy and Wharton, 2004). In addition, flexible policies reinforced traditional gender roles by placing the burden of flexibility primarily on mothers, suggesting it is their responsibility to adjust shift schedules to accommodate family demands. The persistence of traditional gender roles in the workplace indicates that instead of the dissolution of gender roles, gendered expectations have been reshaped to fit into the context of women's increased labour market participation (Risman and Davis, 2013).

Importantly, scholars have also noted the varying ways in which flexible employment uptake and consequences may quickly become "murky" without consideration of intersectional factors such as educational level and class (Williams et al., 2013, p.12). For example, Williams et al. (2013) found those in a professional career may face consequences when reducing work hours or taking a career break, while those who are low-income workers with unstable employment hours are offered limited flexibility and instead much more likely to be terminated upon use. In another study, Fuller and Hirsh (2018) show how different flexibility policies have different impacts across employment. Indeed, while temporal flexibility (flexibility in work hours) may reduce motherhood penalties such as wage gaps or barriers to high-earning jobs, spacial flexibility (flexibility in work location) increase penalties for reduced face-time, which is a critical component of ideal worker standards.

Overall, the overarching finding from this study is a sense of ambivalence among mothers in all employment groups, whereby they felt a strong sense of uncertainty regardless of the labour force decisions they made. This finding is unsurprising, considering mothers in all employment arrangements described navigating a variety of trade-offs, whether in the paid or private sphere. Indeed, mothers who had committed to maintaining full-time employment reported high levels of guilt for not spending more time with their children and experienced significant time deficits. These time deficits often left them scrambling to meet competing expectations, frequently at the expense of their leisure or sleep to do so. At the same time, full-time employment also provided these mothers with a strong sense of purpose and self-fulfillment from maintaining their professional identity and advancing their career.

On the other hand, mothers who settled on part-time employment presented it as a strategic compromise whereby they made compromises in both paid and unpaid responsibilities to maintain their professional identity while being more involved in the care and nurturing of their children. Paid employment was often described as a break from unpaid work responsibilities, and thus alleviated the guilt associated with paid work. Despite being seen as the ‘best of both worlds’ solution, part-time work was almost always intertwined with certain challenges. While previous literature finds part-time work is associated with reduced work-life conflict (Buehler and O’Brien, 2011), the results of this study showed that mothers increased flexibility with part-time employment schedules shifted a disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibility onto these mothers. In other words, the benefits of reduced paid work were offset by increased responsibility in the private sphere. Despite the challenges, under the current circumstances, scholars argue that part-time employment provides mothers with a degree of

attachment and financial security for mothers who may otherwise be forced to choose between no employment and full-time work (Booth and Van Ours, 2013).

Finally, mothers who opted out described a great sense of relief about not having to manage what was described as relentless experiences of work-life conflict. Many described embracing a slower life, where they could prioritize spending time with their children, and family, and giving back to their community. At the same time, some mothers experienced a loss of their identity, and loneliness, and described challenges feeling value in their unpaid work contributions. This is consistent with Buehler and O'Brien (2011) who found that mothers who were not employed were more likely to experience social isolation, depressive symptoms, and child-related stress. A possible reason for these findings is that unpaid work is generally not recognized as societally valuable. Indeed, as stated by Daniels (1987) "any effort we make, even if it is arduous, skilled, and recognized as useful—perhaps essential—is still not recognized as work if it is not paid" (p. 403). Interestingly, the value (or lack thereof) of unpaid work even extends to the paid sphere, where care work may be viewed as an "extension of women's work in the home," and often remains underpaid with limited benefits, despite often being an emotionally and physically challenging occupation (Butler, 2009, p. 281). Despite the expectations for women to be carers, unpaid work is often invisible, unrecognized, and undervalued. Ironically, mothers are penalized if they reject gendered expectations, with those who prioritize their employment over family needs viewed as "cold, deceitful, bitter, selfish, devious, and personally disliked" (Benard and Correll, 2007, p.620) -- and yet, remain undervalued when they do fulfill gendered expectations of care. These findings contribute to the ongoing debate of whether women can truly *have it all*, fulfilling the expectations of both intensive motherhood ideology, and the ideal worker, all while avoiding conflict or overlap between their responsibilities.

Regrettably, the findings show that under current societal and policy conditions, this goal remains challenging and out of reach for many mothers.

The findings of this study show the current policy design has produced both socioeconomic and gendered disparities in the access and utilization of leave. Indeed, despite relatively high earnings, the mothers in this study described financial constraints in utilizing parental leave. This is consistent with evidence that indicates mothers on both ends of the income spectrum experience the greatest challenges with utilizing leave benefits (Haeck et al., 2019), suggesting that wage replacement rates, including ceilings and floors, require amendments. Specifically, mothers with high incomes faced the greatest economic losses when utilizing benefits. For example, mothers with high incomes earning over the maximum ceiling of \$65,700 annually (Government of Canada, 2023c) receive a 55% (standard) or 33% (extended) replacement rate of their maximum insurable earnings and incur a loss of all income beyond this limit.

These findings are supported by what may be viewed as a natural case study in the province of Quebec, where a higher replacement rate and earning ceiling have been shown to increase the uptake of parental leave among high-earning mothers (Statistics Canada, 2024d). The benefits extend beyond parental leave uptake, with research showing increased fertility across Quebec, particularly for those with higher education (Laplante, 2024). These findings indicate that a higher replacement rate and maximum earning ceiling of parental leave may better support mothers higher with earnings. While a higher replacement rate would give mothers across all socioeconomic groups additional financial support, an increase in an earning ceiling may also perpetuate socioeconomic disparities in leave. Indeed, such a policy change may disproportionately support those in higher-income brackets. At the same time, those with lower

incomes, who are less likely to afford the financial losses of parental leave, remain overlooked. Although this study looked at high-income mothers, further research in this area should explore the experiences of mothers with lower incomes to determine the potential of a higher earnings floor or guaranteed minimum parental leave benefit in better-supporting parents with lower incomes.

Another key issue with parental leave was the limited uptake of leave benefits by fathers. This is particularly concerning as the findings of this study show a range of benefits described by mothers whose partners had utilized parental leave, including a better distribution of visible and invisible unpaid work. Indeed, fathers' uptake of parental leave works to shift the widespread belief that women are better at childrearing while men are considered imperative in the workplace (Haas and Rostguard, 2011). In other words, mothers' disproportionate uptake of leave reinforces that mothers are primarily responsible for care, and as such, fathers' uptake of leave may shift cultural expectations of care (Eerola et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with research that has suggested that fathers who engaged in leave were able to gain familiarity, confidence, and hands-on experience with the necessary skills needed for the primary care of children, effectively working to shift the manager-helper dynamic to a co-parenting one (de Laat et al., 2023; Rehel, 2014; Lütolf, 2023). In addition to visible paid work, research has indicated that parental leave can increase a sense of responsibility over tasks and help to redistribute the mental load across families (Rehel, 2014; Shafer et al. 2020; Wray, 2020).

Rehel (2014) further emphasizes the importance of fathers' experience with childcare by pointing to the limited exposure to childcare for some men when compared to women who have been socialized for parenting through babysitting or care of relatives. This raises the question of why the same structural pathways are not provided for men and women when they are both

experiencing the same transition to parenthood. As stated by Rehel (2014), “When the transition to parenthood is structured for fathers in ways comparable to mothers, fathers come to think about and enact parenting in ways that are similar to mothers (p.11). This is further supported by Lütolf (2023) who points to the period directly after childbirth a “critical juncture” for couples to distribute unpaid care, where they can prevent traditional gender-specific roles that are often developed or intensified at the onset of parenthood.

The findings of this study, which were collected from 2019-2020, and as such, only captured very initial changes of the ‘use it or lose it’ benefit introduced in 2019, which introduced an additional non-transferable five or eight weeks of parental leave for standard or extended parental leave for an additional parent (often the father) to utilize the leave, respectively (Statistics Canada, 2024d). However, the findings of this study show that despite the introduction of the leave, fathers still experienced challenges and hesitations with uptake. While the introduction of paid parental leave is a promising step, there are certain caveats to consider in parental leave design for fathers’ uptake.

A key challenge was the gendered stigma of fathers taking leave. Despite the introduction of a reserved parental leave, the social norms surrounding the father’s role in unpaid care have not yet caught up. While previous research has outlined the consequences of parental leave of a mother’s career, the findings of this study show that the consequences of leave uptake also extend to fathers who have rejected the expectations of the “ideal worker” by allowing their responsibilities as a parent to disrupt their paid employment. While fathers have access to parental leave, which remains gender-neutral, a key suggestion is to increase the length of non-transferable leave for fathers. Another challenge was the replacement rate, where it made more financial sense for mothers to take the leave. As previously discussed, a possible solution is to

increase the replacement rate. Overall, providing fathers with a non-transferable leave with a high replacement rate is an important policy change required to support mothers' labour force participation, the re-distribution of unpaid work, and support shifts in gendered expectations surrounding care.

Finally, this study examined mothers' experience with childcare, looking for ways to extend the data. The findings of this study, however, were very consistent with previous studies conducted examining the current state of childcare in Canada—showing issues with availability, affordability, and quality as key barriers to mothers' employment (Breitkreuz et al., 2019). A key finding of this study was illustrating a key gap in childcare, which was finding care for children with a short-term illness such as the cold or flu. Indeed, mothers described a grey area of care, where caring for sick children was neither accommodated by childcare providers nor paid work. Instead, some mothers described impossible situations, where child care providers expected flexibility from parents' employment arrangements, fathers' workplaces pointed to "caretaker" mothers, and mothers' workplaces, in turn, looked to the father's employment, family support, or community support to care for children. In this context, mothers became responsible for shifting their paid work responsibilities to manage care (Breitkreuz et al., 2024), often at the expense of concerns about their productivity and commitment to work (Fuller and Hirsh, 2019).

The findings point to a novel idea that regardless of childcare, there will inevitably be situations that require parental support. There are many examples, including caring for sick children, managing appointments, extracurricular requirements (such as a piano recital), or holiday breaks from school. As such, it is important to offer family leave to support families in managing unexpected yet inevitable family responsibilities. This is a particularly good focus in the context of the Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care Framework in early 2021, which

aims to provide high-quality, accessible, affordable, flexible, and inclusive care across Canada (Government of Canada, 2017), hopefully mitigating challenges outlined by mothers in this study experienced prior to recent policy changes surrounding childcare. By providing a family or personal leave to employees, the expectations of an ‘ideal worker’ may shift through larger changes in employment practices or social expectations, allowing both fathers and mothers to support their families (de Laat et al., 2023).

### ***Policy Recommendations***

In alignment with the second objective of this study, I provide policy recommendations based on the experiences of mothers in the study. First, I suggest changes to the parental leave policy design, specifically suggesting an increase in wage replacement rates, including both ceilings and floors. Consistent with the findings of this study, an increase in wage replacement rates and the earning ceiling may better support higher-earning mothers to utilize parental leave uptake without incurring significant earning losses that deter usage. This has been shown in Quebec, where an increased wage replacement rate and earning ceiling have increased the uptake of parental leave benefits among high-income women (Statistics Canada, 2024d). In the context of a persistent gendered wage gap, an increase in the replacement rate may also encourage fathers’ uptake of parental leave. Indeed, the findings of study show that financial considerations often influence parental leave decisions, and as such, the lower earner (typically, the mother) is more likely to utilize the leave to maximize earnings during the period of leave. Although this study focused on higher-income mothers, it is important to note that an increase in earning replacement rates and earning ceilings may disproportionately support those in higher-income brackets and perpetuate the already apparent socioeconomic disparities in parental leave utilization. To address this, it is important to implement a minimum earning floor or guaranteed

income for parents who utilize parental leave benefits. By increasing both ceilings and floors, parental leave policy can become more inclusive, reduce systematic inequalities in access, and support a wide range of parents.

The findings of this study also indicated a gendered uptake in parental leave. In addition to increasing the replacement rate, as discussed above, it is important to increase the length of non-transferable parental leave for fathers. A non-transferable parental leave for fathers is an important tool to shift the deeply ingrained socio-cultural gendered expectations of care, particularly in the workplace, which contribute to the gendered stigma of fathers taking leave. At the same time, the re-distribution of parental leave utilization across parents may alleviate the labour force consequences mothers often experience when taking leave, such as reduced wages or slower career advancement. A longer guaranteed leave for fathers is also important to support the wide range of benefits associated with fathers' uptake of leave, including a more equitable division of unpaid visible and invisible care in the household.

The findings of this study also demonstrate a need for family or personal leave for employees. Indeed, in addition to well-documented issues with childcare availability, affordability, and quality, which are addressed by the Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care Framework, mothers in our study described inevitable circumstances that require parental support. For example, mothers in our study described challenges in finding care for sick children (who are not accepted into care centres), managing appointments, extracurricular requirements, or holiday breaks from school. In the absence of support, mothers are often required to find flexibility within their paid employment to manage these responsibilities, leading to heightened work-family conflict. Introducing a family or personal leave could assist parents in managing

family responsibilities alongside paid employment and work to reduce the current gendered consequences experienced by mothers in the labour market.

### ***Limitations***

There are several limitations to this study. First, the participants of this study were generally highly educated and had a relatively high family income. While this study extends our understanding of mothers' labour force experiences, it is important to consider the sample characteristics before generalizing the results to the mothers. As noted throughout the study, socioeconomic status can drastically shift mothers' experiences, whereby those with higher incomes experience a greater perception of *choice* in their employment arrangements due to the support of a high-income partner. Additionally, intersectional factors, such as immigration, race, and sexuality, though not explicitly addressed in this study, are important factors impacting mothers' experiences in the labour market and should be considered in generalizations of results. Future research should develop explore mothers' experiences across income groups, intersectional identities, and employment arrangements to develop comprehensive understanding of the policy supports that are required to support mothers.

A second key limitation of this study is that mothers' experiences of fathers' uptake of parental leave is used to make conclusions regarding parental leave. Although the findings of this study provide important and relevant insight regarding fathers' experience with parental leave, future research should explore fathers' direct experience in their larger social, cultural, and political environment to understand the shifts that are required to support the redistribution of gendered unpaid work. This could include completing focus groups and interviews with fathers to extend our knowledge of the barriers they experience utilizing leave benefits, managing childcare, and their experience of work-life conflict. Understanding the intersectional

experiences of mothers and fathers in managing paid and unpaid work is critical to guiding the development of inclusive and effective policy changes to support mothers' labour force participation, and fathers' contribution to unpaid work, and advance towards gender equality.

Another key limitation of this study was the focus on nuclear families, where "family units consisted of fathers, mothers, and their children (Sear, 2016). As such, we have not captured a wide range of the experiences of mothers in important family structures, such as extended families, blended families, single parents, and LGBTQ2S+ families. More research is required to capture the experiences of non-nuclear families and make linkages to the larger social, cultural and political environment to support policy changes that are inclusive of all family's lived experiences.

## Chapter 6. Conclusion

The findings of this study are bittersweet. Put simply, the experiences of the study have indicated that, the current social, cultural, and political environment continues to create hurdles for mothers' labour force participation. Notably, traditional gender roles which categorize mothers as carers and fathers as earners persist, and concerningly, have shifted to fit into modern-day employment standards, including the adult worker model and the ideal worker model. Without societal change or adequate public support, mothers of this generation experience a strong sense of ambivalence. Regardless of their employment arrangement, they are not able to meet the expectations of either the intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996) or the ideal worker standard (Acker, 1990). This study highlights the struggles they experience to reconcile their dual identity as both a mother and workers in an environment that systematically excludes them from achieving expectations in either realm. Gendered inequalities in paid and unpaid work cultivate significant consequences for the physical, emotional, and financial well-being of mothers. Indeed, despite the growing evidence of negative societal impacts stemming from gendered inequalities in the labour force, the negative implications for mothers remain overshadowed by the expectations of women to carry a disproportionate amount of unpaid care.

Although this paints a gloomy reality of the state of mother's employment, and perhaps gender equality as a whole, I would like to conclude with a hope for a changing future. Indeed, while gendered inequalities persist, social, cultural, and political shifts in the last five decades have brought undeniable and notable change. In the Canadian context, the introduction of maternity leave policies in 1971 has provided mothers with employment security through motherhood. Since then, these policies have expanded to include parental leave benefits for biological parents and adoptive parents in 1990, and same-sex couples in 2001. Later changes

included expanding paid parental leave benefits to self-employed parents in 2011 and increased flexibility in parental leave through the introduction of extended leave parental in 2017. Most recently, parental sharing benefits have been introduced, working to support greater gender equality in paid and private spheres (Statistics Canada, 2024d). Notably, the introduction of universal childcare across Canada is expected to have immense shifts in supporting mother's employment across Canada, providing high-quality, affordable, and accessible childcare across Canada (Government of Canada, 2024b). While policy is still catching up to the current circumstances of the mothers, it is clear that advocating for policy shifts is working and that we are making progress over time. As such, there is optimism that continued support in policy shifts will work to disassemble systematic barriers to fostering a society where mothers and fathers can be valued and contribute to both paid and unpaid spheres of work.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A. Focus Group Interview Guide (Part-time and Opt-out)<sup>3</sup>



DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN ECOLOGY  
GENDER, FAMILY, AND POLICY STUDIES

#### ARE MOTHERS OPTING OUT? EXPLORING UNDEREMPLOYMENT AMONG MOTHERS WITH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

##### Interview guides for participants

The **purpose** of the focus groups and individual interviews is:

- to inquire about mothers' employment decisions and experiences, including the possible experiences of returning to work part-time or opting out of the workforce
- to elicit experiences and perspectives from mothers of preschool children in integrating paid and unpaid work

#### Focus group interview guide

Focus group composition will be determined on two types of maternal employment experiences:

- A. Mothers who have reduced paid work
- B. Mothers who have opted out of paid work

Based on the composition of the group, question set A or B will be used for the first part of the focus group.

#### 0. Introductory comments

- Introduction of facilitator/s
- Introduction of participants
- Purpose and overview of focus group

#### 1. Employment experiences

- How did your work life change once you became a mother?

##### 1.A Mothers who have reduced paid work

- What was your experience of returning to part-time work after motherhood like? What was the best thing about your return to work? What was the worst thing?
- How did you make the decision to return to reduced hours after the birth of your child/ren? If you had to make this decision again, is there anything you would do differently?
- What practices in your family/community/workplace supported your return to part-time paid work?

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<sup>3</sup> An interview guide was also used for full-time participants, which is not included in this appendix.

**1.B Mothers who have opted out of paid work**

- What was your experience of not returning to paid work after motherhood like? What was the best thing about not returning to paid work? What was the worst thing?
- How did you make the decision to not return to paid work after the birth of your child/ren? If you had to make this decision again, is there anything you would do differently?
- What practices in your family/community support your unpaid work?

**2. Paid-unpaid work integration**

- Since becoming parents, how do you and your partner divide up family responsibilities (like household tasks, errands, and caregiving)?
- In an ideal world, what would your paid work/unpaid work combination look like? What would need to change in your household or workplace to achieve that ideal?
- How do you manage the time demands for your "share" of unpaid and paid work?

**3. Concluding comments**

- Is there anything related to your paid work/employment or unpaid work that you would like to talk about before we finish the focus group?

## Appendix B. Individual Interview Guide- Part Time

### Interview - Part Time/Casual

#### Maternal Employment Study Main Objective:

Contribute to a deeper understanding about outcomes for subjective maternal well-being, economic security, and gender equality.

- We are examining the employment experiences of mothers and the **contextual factors that influence their employment decisions** when they have preschool children.
- We are exploring the **impact of policy** on mothers' experiences of employment and unpaid work.
- We also want to inquire about mother's perspectives about, and experiences of, **integrating paid and unpaid work** (for example, childcare, eldercare, cleaning, groceries, errands, cooking, yardwork).

#### Key outcomes of study:

- **Scholarly contributions** to address gaps in knowledge about mothers' employment and the interplay of choice and constraints
- **Evidence-based policy recommendations** to enhance women's economic participation through employment

#### Pre-Interview tasks:

1. Explain consent, confidentiality and how any personal information will be used and stored
  - Obtain verbal consent for recording before starting the actual interview, and then go over the consent form to get verbal consent for each aspect
2. Questions & clarifications

## Begin Interview

### 1. Reasons/decisions/factors that influenced your employment decisions:

- How did your work life change after having children? What stayed the same?
- What factors led you to the decision to return to employment on a part-time or casual basis?
  - Financial (try not to dwell too much on this)
  - Needs of the child? Multiple children?
  - Personal values
  - Emotional/physical/mental considerations
  - Presence or absence of supports
  - Time demands
  - Demands of full-time employment
  - Need for employment health benefits
  - Career development/trajectory
  - Personal fulfillment
- How did you and your partner come to the decision?
  - What was your role in this process?
  - What was your partner's?
  - Were you and your partner in agreement about the decision?
  - If yes, why did you both feel this was the right decision?
  - If not, how did you differ? How did you come to decide on your current work situation given the disagreement?
  - Are you in agreement now or just accepting of the decision?
- Did you have a preference of whether you would return to employment or be with kids full time? Can you talk about that a bit?
- When deciding to work part time, did you take into account your future career trajectory or your retirement? If so, how?
  - How does your current employment status affect how you think about your future well-being in later life and retirement?
- Employer:
  - *Did your employer provide you with supportive options about returning to work?*
  - Did your employer provide options for flex-time?
  - Reaction of employer with your decision to work part-time
- What other supports (if any) were in place that enabled you to return to work part time? What supports were not there that would have made things easier for you?
  - Policy? (e.g. child care, parental leave, work-place)

- Childcare options?

## 2. Experiences / perspectives / impacts around integrating paid and unpaid work?

- Financial
  - What has changed financially for your day-to-day life?
  - Long term financial goals?
  - Retirement plans?
- Parental
  - How do you think that working part-time has impacted your children?
  - How has it affected your parenting?
  - Has it made you better in some ways? Are there drawbacks?
- Household
  - Has the way you manage your household changed?
  - What is the distribution of unpaid labour like?
  - Do you feel supported by your partner in your household responsibilities?
- Personal
  - How has the decision to return to work part-time impacted your relationships?
  - How has working part-time impacted your self-perception?
  - Would you describe yourself as more/less happy? Stressed? Fulfilled? Confident? Independent? Lonely/isolated?
  - Do you feel supported by family and friends with your decision? How has this impacted your relationships with family & friends?
- Change in Work Status
  - Do you think you will return to full-time work in the future?
    - If no, why not? If yes, why?
    - If so, do you have an estimated time you will pursue full time work?
  - Do you have a preference about staying home/working part time/working full time? Can you talk a bit about that?
    - Try to get at employment aspect, not just family
  - What would be your considerations for returning to work full time?
    - Financial
    - Social
    - Personal fulfillment
    - Power imbalance
    - Future/retirement
- In light of the current situation caused by COVID-19, how have your experiences around paid/unpaid work integration changed?

- Have you seen a change in your partner's participation in paid and unpaid work? If so, how has this impacted you?
  - In terms of paid work
  - Personally
  - Your family

### **3. Reflecting on your decision**

- Reflecting on the decisions that you have made, would you make any the same decisions or would you do things differently? Why or why not?
  - What could be in place to support you (long term leave of absence).
- In an ideal world, what would your decision look like?
  - How could that ideal scenario be achieved?
  - What would our society look like to best support your ideal decision?
    - Specifically policy, community, workplace, program changes?

### **4. Closing questions**

- What does it mean to you to be a good parent?
- What does it mean to you to be a good employee?
- What would it take for women to be able to successfully integrate parenting and paid work?
- What would it take for men to be able to successfully integrate parenting and paid work?
- What advice would you give to your own children about their decisions regarding work and family as adults?

**Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or anything that I didn't ask that you feel I should have?**

## Appendix C. Individual Interview Guide- Full Time

### Interview - Full Time

#### Maternal Employment Study Main Objective:

Contribute to a deeper understanding about outcomes for subjective maternal well-being, economic security, and gender equality.

- We are examining the employment experiences of mothers and the **contextual factors that influence their employment decisions** when they have preschool children.
- We are exploring the **impact of policy** on mothers' experiences of employment and unpaid work.
- We also want to inquire about mother's perspectives about, and experiences of, **integrating paid and unpaid work** (for example, childcare, eldercare, cleaning, groceries, errands, cooking, yardwork).

#### Key outcomes of study:

- **Scholarly contributions** to address gaps in knowledge about mothers' employment and the interplay of choice and constraints
- **Evidence-based policy recommendations** to enhance women's economic participation through employment

#### Pre-Interview tasks:

1. Explain consent, confidentiality and how any personal information will be used and stored
  - Obtain verbal consent for recording before starting the actual interview, and then go over the consent form to get verbal consent for each aspect
2. Questions & clarifications

## Begin Interview

### 1. Reasons/decisions/factors that influenced your employment decisions:

- How did your work-life change after having children? What stayed the same?
- What factors led you to the decision to return to employment on a full-time basis?
  - Financial (try not to dwell too much on this)
  - Personal values
  - Emotional/physical/mental considerations
  - Presence or absence of supports
  - Need for employment health benefits
  - Career development/trajectory
  - Personal fulfillment
- How did you and your partner come to the decision?
  - What was your role in this process?
  - What was your partner's?
  - Were you and your partner in agreement about the decision
  - If yes, why did you both feel this was the right decision?
  - If not, how did you differ? How did you come to decide on your current work situation given the disagreement?
  - Are you in agreement now or just accepting of the decision?
- Did you have a preference of whether you would return to employment or be with kids full time? Can you talk about that a bit?
  - Try to get them to talk about it in terms of employment (instead of just from a family perspective)
- When deciding to return to work full time, did you take into account your future career trajectory or your retirement? If so, how?
  - How does your current employment status affect how you think about your future well-being in later life and retirement?
- Employer:
  - *Did your employer provide you with supportive options about returning to work?*
  - Did your employer provide options for flex-time?
- What other supports (if any) were in place that enabled you to return to work full time? What supports were not there that would have made things easier for you?
  - Policy? (e.g. child care, parental leave, work-place)
  - Childcare options?

### 2. Experiences / perspectives / impacts around integrating paid and unpaid work?

- Financial
  - What (if anything) has changed financially for your day-to-day life?
  - Long term financial goals?
  - Retirement plans?
  
- Parental
  - How do you think that working full-time has impacted your children?
  - How has it affected your parenting?
  - Has it made you better in some ways? Are there drawbacks?
  
- Household
  - Has the way you manage your household changed?
  - What is the distribution of unpaid labour like?
  - Do you feel supported by your partner in your household responsibilities?
  
- Personal
  - How has the decision to return to work full-time impacted your relationships?
  - How has working full-time impacted your self-perception?
  - Have your friendships shifted?
  - Would you describe yourself as more/less happy? Stressed? Fulfilled? Confident? Independent? Lonely/isolated?
  - Do you feel supported by family and friends with your decision? How has this impacted your relationships with family & friends?
  
- Change in Work Status
  - Do you have a preference about staying home/working part time/working full time? Can you talk a bit about that?
    - Try to get at employment aspect, not just family
  
- In light of the current situation caused by COVID-19, how have your experiences around paid/unpaid work integration changed?
  - Have you seen a change in your partner's participation in paid and unpaid work? If so, how has this impacted you?
    - In terms of paid work
    - Personally
    - Your family

### **3. Reflecting on your decision**

- Reflecting on the decisions that you have made, would you make any the same decisions or would you do things differently? Why or why not?
  - What could be in place to support you (long term leave of absence).

- In an ideal world, what would your decision look like?
  - How could that ideal scenario be achieved?
  - What would our society look like to best support your ideal decision?
    - Specifically policy, community, workplace, program changes?

#### **4. Closing questions**

- What does it mean to you to be a good parent?
- What does it mean to you to be a good employee?
- What would it take for women to be able to successfully integrate parenting and paid work?
- What would it take for men to be able to successfully integrate parenting and paid work?
- What advice would you give to your own children about their decisions regarding work and family as adults?

**Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or anything that I didn't ask that you feel I should have?**

## Appendix D. Individual Interview Guide- Opt Out

### Interview - Opt Out

#### Maternal Employment Study Main Objectives:

Contribute to a deeper understanding about outcomes for subjective maternal well-being, economic security, and gender equality.

- We are examining the employment experiences of mothers and the **contextual factors that influence their employment decisions** when they have preschool children.
- We are exploring the **impact of policy** on mothers' experiences of employment and unpaid work.
- We also want to inquire about mother's perspectives about, and experiences of, **integrating paid and unpaid work** (for example, childcare, eldercare, cleaning, groceries, errands, cooking, yardwork).

#### Key outcomes of study:

- **Scholarly contributions** to address gaps in knowledge about mothers' employment and the interplay of choice and constraints
- **Evidence-based policy recommendations** to enhance women's economic participation through employment

#### Pre-Interview Tasks:

1. Explain consent, confidentiality and how any personal information will be used and stored
  - Obtain verbal consent for recording before starting the actual interview, and then go over the consent form to get verbal consent for each aspect
2. Questions & clarifications

## Begin Interview

### 1. Reasons/decisions/factors for leaving the work-force

- How did your work life change after having children?
- What led you to the decision to stop working after having a child? What were the main considerations?
  - Financial (try not to dwell too much on this)
  - Needs of the child? Multiple children?
  - Personal values
  - Emotional/physical/mental considerations
  - Presence or absence of supports
  - Time demands
  - Demands of employment
  - Personal fulfillment
- How did you and your partner come to the decision?
  - What was your role in this process?
  - What was your partner's?
  - Were you and your partner in agreement about the decision
  - If yes, why did you both feel this was the right decision?
  - If not, how did you differ? How did you come to decide on your current work situation given the disagreement?
  - Are you in agreement now or just accepting of the decision?
- Did you have a preference of whether you would return to employment or be with kids full time? Can you talk about that a bit?
  - Try to get them to talk about it in terms of employment (instead of just from a family perspective)
- When deciding to leave the workforce, did you take into account your future career trajectory or your retirement? If so, how?
  - How does your current employment status affect how you think about your future well-being in later life and retirement?
- Former Employer:
  - Reaction of employer with your decision to leave the job?
  - Did they give you an option for returning (flex time, part time etc.)?
  - Did you feel that you could have returned on a part-time basis?
  - Do you feel that if more workplace supports were available, you might have decided to go back to work?

- What other supports (if any) were in place that enabled you to leave the workforce? What other supports were not there that would have enabled you to continue to work?
  - Policy? (e.g. child care, parental leave, work-place)
  - Childcare options?

## 2. Experiences / perspectives / impacts around transitioning from full time employment to unpaid work

- Financial
  - What has changed financially for your day-to-day life?
  - Long term financial goals?
  - Retirement plans?
- Parental
  - How do you think that staying home has impacted your children?
  - How has this affected your parenting?
  - Has it made you better in some ways? Are there drawbacks (no breaks etc).
- Household
  - Has the way you manage your household changed?
  - What is the distribution of unpaid labour like?
  - Do you feel supported by your partner in your household responsibilities?
- Personal
  - How has the decision to stay home impacted your relationships?
  - How has leaving the workforce impacted your self-perception?
  - Have your friendships shifted?
  - Would you describe yourself as more/less happy? Stressed? Fulfilled? Confident? Independent? Lonely/isolated?
  - Do you feel supported by family and friends with your decision? How has this impacted your relationships with family & friends?
  - Do you feel that having children provided a welcome opportunity to leave your job or will you miss your work?
- Return to Work
  - Do you think you will return to work in the future?
    - If no, why not? If yes, why?
  - If so, do you have an estimated time you will return to work?
  - Do you have a preference about whether you would return or stay at home? Can you talk about that a bit?
    - Try to get them to talk about it in terms of employment (instead of just from a family perspective)

- What would be your considerations for returning to work?
  - Financial
  - Social
  - Personal fulfillment
  - Power Imbalance
  - Future/retirement
- What kind of scenarios run through your head while imagining returning to work?
  - What do you think returning to work would look like?
- In light of the current situation caused by COVID-19, how have your experiences around family work changed?
  - Have you seen a change in your partner's participation in paid and unpaid work? If so, how has this impacted you?
    - In terms of your workload
    - Personally
    - Your family

### **3. Reflecting on your decision**

- Reflecting on the decisions that you have made, would you have made the same decisions or would you do things differently? Why or why not?
  - What could be in place to support you in these changes (long term leave of absence).
- In an ideal world, what would your decision look like?
  - How could that ideal scenario be achieved?
  - What would our society look like to best support your ideal decision?
    - Specifically policy, community, workplace, program changes?

### **4. Closing questions**

- What does it mean to you to be a good parent?
- What does it mean to you to be a good employee?
- What would it take for women to be able to successfully integrate parenting and paid work?
- What would it take for men to be able to successfully integrate parenting and paid work?
- What advice would you give to your own children about their decisions regarding work and family as adults?

**Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or anything that I didn't ask that you feel I should have**

# Appendix E. Participant Consent Form



**Consent**

GENDER, FAMILY, AND POLICY STUDIES

**Title of Research Project:** Exploring Maternal Employment Among Mothers with Preschool Children

**Investigator:**

Rhonda Breitzkreuz, Associate Professor, Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta  
780-492-5997

Please answer the following questions by circling yes or no.

- |  |     |    |
|--|-----|----|
| Do you understand that the Investigators have asked you to be in a research study?       | YES | NO |
| Do you agree to be audio-taped?  | YES | NO |
| Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Letter?                    | YES | NO |
| Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study? | YES | NO |
| Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?                     | YES | NO |
| Do you understand that you can quit taking part in this study at any time?               | YES | NO |
| Have the Investigators explained confidentiality to you?                                 | YES | NO |
| Do you agree to keep what people say the focus group or individual interview private?    | YES | NO |
| Do you understand who will be able to see or hear what you said?                         | YES | NO |
| Do you know how the Investigators will use the information you say?                      | YES | NO |
| Do you give us permission to use your data for the purposes specified?                   | YES | NO |

This study was explained to me by: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to take part in this study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

I am confident that the participant who has signed this form understands what is involved in participating in this study and voluntarily agrees to take part.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

## Appendix F. Participant Information Letter



DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN ECOLOGY  
GENDER, FAMILY & POLICY RESEARCH INITIATIVE

### Information letter for Maternal Employment Study participants

#### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to understand the employment experiences of mothers with pre-school-aged children, how mothers balance paid and unpaid work, and how these experiences impact mothers' employment and well-being.

#### Who is doing this study

Dr. Rhonda Breitreuz, Professor in the Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta is leading this study. Jaira Dyckerhoff is the Project Manager for this study.

#### Methods

The information for this study will be collected through a confidential demographic survey, focus groups and individual interviews. Following the completion of focus groups, we will invite some mothers to participate in individual interviews. Both focus groups and interviews will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete; they will be audio recorded and typed out to ensure the accuracy of the data and assist with data analysis.

The data from the focus groups, interviews, and the demographic survey will be used to help us understand the employment experiences of mothers with pre-school children in Edmonton, documenting perspectives on mothers' employment, mothers' wellbeing, and work-family integration.

#### Consent

Participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You are free to leave the focus group or interview at any time. You may also choose not to answer particular questions; you may choose not to complete the demographic questionnaire. Once the focus group and/or interviews are transcribed, all identifying information (e.g., names) will be removed from the transcript. No one will be able to connect your data with any identifying information. Due to the nature of the recorded focus group data collected, where specific individuals' contributions are not distinguishable, it will not be feasible to remove your contribution.

**Information letter for Maternal Employment Study participants****Confidentiality**

The data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet/password protected digital file for five years following the completion of the study, after which time the data will be destroyed. We will not share the original interviews with anyone other than the researchers.

Members of the research team will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research. They will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure confidentiality.

**Benefits of participating in this study**

While participating in this study may not benefit you directly, the information we gather will help us to better understand the employment experiences of mothers in Edmonton. This knowledge may help other families and may be used to plan family policies. It is possible that there is no direct, personal benefit of participating in this study.

**Risks of participating in this study**

A risk of participating in this study is that you may feel upset about the information that you have shared. If this occurs, the focus group facilitator or interviewer will talk with you to help you to decide how to deal with your feelings. The focus group facilitator or interviewer can also provide information about services that you can go to for help.

There is also a risk that another focus group participant might share what you have said in the focus group with someone outside of the group. Before and after each focus group, all participants will be reminded that information shared in the group is confidential and shouldn't be shared outside of the focus group.

**Reimbursement of expenses**

To acknowledge your time, you will receive gift cards equivalent to \$20 for participating in the focus group interview.

**Ethics approval**

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

**Contact information**

If you have any questions or concerns, please email Jaira Dyckerhoff (Project Manager) [mothers@ualberta.ca](mailto:mothers@ualberta.ca) or Dr. Rhonda Breitkreuz [rhondab@ualberta.ca](mailto:rhondab@ualberta.ca)

## Appendix G. Maternal Employment Poster

# Maternal Employment Study



Exploring Maternal Employment among mothers  
with preschool children

GENDER, FAMILY & POLICY RESEARCH INITIATIVE  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN ECOLOGY



### BACKGROUND

Canadian mothers are a high-risk group of underemployed persons in Canada: they have lower labour-force attachment rates than women without children, fathers, and their counterparts in other OECD countries [1]; and they represent over three-quarters of the part-time labour pool in Canada [2].



### OBJECTIVES

This study will describe mothers' decisions to work part-time, or opt out, and their experiences integrating paid and unpaid work, looking at outcomes for subjective maternal well-being, economic security, and gender equality. We will map the intersections between individual experiences and relevant policy contexts.



### RESEARCH PLAN

We will examine the employment experiences of mothers and the contextual factors that influence their employment decisions when they have preschool children. We will explore the impact of policy contexts on mothers' experiences of employment and unpaid work.



### METHODS

In focus group and interview settings, we will speak with a diverse sample of coupled mothers. Guided by institutional ethnography methodology, we will complete a critical analysis of relevant policy initiatives and documents.



### KEY OUTCOMES

- **Scholarly contributions** to address gaps in knowledge about mothers' employment and the interplay of choice and constraints
- **Evidence-based policy recommendations** to enhance women's economic participation through employment



### INFORMATION

#### Principal Investigator

Dr. Rhonda Breitkreuz  
Professor  
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780.492.5997

#### Project Manager

Melanie Niemi-Bohun, PhD  
mniemi@ualberta.ca  
780.492.3824

[1] Moysen, M. (2017). *Women and paid work*. Statistics Canada; OECD. (2014). *Maternal employment rates*. OECD Social Policy Division of Employment, Labour, and Social Affairs; Statistics Canada. (2016). *Canadian megatrends: The rise of the dual-earner family with children*.  
[2] Status of Women. (2015). *Women in Canada: A gender-based statistical report*.

## **Appendix H. Stages of Data Coding**

### **Stage One**

**October 3, 2024-Oct 11, 2024**

**Initial codes and themes developed from preliminary reading of transcript**

1. Motivations to work
  - Financial Considerations
  - Personal fulfillment
  - Investment into education and career
  
2. Challenges in integration paid and unpaid work
  - Visible Unpaid Work
  - The Mental Load
  - Workplace Flexibility
  
3. Parental Leave
  - Maternity Leave
  - Parental Leave
  
4. Childcare
  - Cost
  - Quality
  - Availability

## Stage Two.

October 11, 2024- October 23, 2024

Codes- added/expanded/changed based on re-reading of transcripts (changes are indicated by *italics*)

1. Theme: The context shaping choice
  - **The Financial Freedom to Choose**
2. Theme: Ambivalence
  - **Ambivalence of roles**
    - **Educational and Career Investment**
    - **Fulfillment from employment**
    - *Mom guilt*
    - *Intensive mothering*
    - *Could not let job go*
    - *Want to be a role model for children*
3. Challenges of employment
  - **Full-time employment**
    - *Full-time ideal*
    - *Full-time challenges*
  - Part-time employment
    - *Part-time ideal*
    - *Part-time challenges*
  - **Opting out of the labour force**
    - *Opt-out ideal*
    - *Opt-out challenges*
4. Theme: Work-Life Integration
  - **Subtheme: Life Management**
    - Unpaid work
    - The Mental Load
  - **Subtheme: Employment Management**
    - *Mommy Track*
    - A Catch 22: Flexibility in the workplace
    - *Workplace Stigma*
5. Theme: Parental Leave
  - **Maternity Leave**
    - *Did not access Maternity Leave*
    - *Challenges of Maternity Leave*
  - **Subtheme: Paternity Leave**

- *Redistribution of Unpaid Labour*
- *Strengthening family bonds*
- *Challenges in taking leave*
- *An opportunity for reflection: the impacts of COVID-19 on father's unpaid labour*

6. Theme: Child Care

- **Subtheme: Availability**
  - *Operating hours*
  - *Part-time Care*
  - *Drop-in Care*
  - *A matching game: care and family needs*
  - *A gap in childcare: sick children*
- **Subtheme: Cost**
  - *Pushed out of work*
  - *Can't afford to expand family*
- **Subtheme: Quality**
- **Subtheme: School as a Solution**

### Stage Three.

October 23, 2024- October 28, 2024

**Codes- re-grouping of codes/codes added when re-reading transcripts (changes are indicated by *italics*)**

**Themes- reorganized**

Theme: *The Components of Choice: Key Factors Influencing Mothers' Employment Decisions*

Subtheme: The Financial Freedom to Choose, Seeking a Return: Mothers' Investment into Education and Career, Personal Fulfillment

Codes: Finances- pushed to work more, Finances- pushed to work less, Finances, room to work less, Investment into Education and Career, *Consequences of Opting-out Personal Fulfillment*, *did not want to be a stay-at home mom*, *Could not let job go*

Theme: *The Gendered Division of Household Labour*

Subtheme: A Step Forward: Are Partner Contributions to Unpaid Work Changing?, A Persistent Gap: Unequal Distribution of Visible Unpaid Work, The Mental Load

Codes: Unequal unpaid labour, *Contributing Partner*, Mental Load

Theme: Flexibility as a Strategy for Work- Family Integration

Subtheme: Flexibility as a Solution, Flexibility at a Cost

Codes: Part-time work ideal, Flexibility Important, *Workplace not flexible*, Mommy Track, School as a solution

Theme: Is the Grass Really Greener? Strategies to Reconcile Ambivalence Across Employment Groups

Subtheme: Opting Out as a Solution, Part-time as a 'Best of Both Worlds' Solution, The Challenges of Part-time Work

Codes: Opt-out ideal, Part-time ideal, Full-time ideal, Challenges of Opt-out, Challenges of Part-time, Challenges of Full-time, Ambivalence of roles

Theme: The Role of Parental Leave in Supporting Maternal Employment

Subtheme: Socio-Economic Disparities in Leave Benefits, The Benefits of Paternity Leave Uptake, Barriers of Parental Leave

Codes: Maternity Leave Uptake, Did not Access Maternity Leave, *Did not Access Maternity Leave-Breastfeeding Challenges*, *Men's Care needs to be valued*, Paternity Leave-Redistribution of Unpaid Labour, *Paternity Leave*, *Increased Understanding*, Paternity Leave- Strengthening Family Bonds, Paternity Leave- Hesitation and Challenges taking leave, An opportunity for reflection: the impacts of COVID-19 on father's unpaid labour

Theme: The Role of Childcare in Supporting Maternal Employment

Subtheme: A Gap in Childcare: Sick Children

Codes: Operating hours, Part-time care, Drop in-care, Matching care and family needs, A gap in childcare: sick children, Pushed out of work, *Childcare Patchwork*, Can't afford to expand family, Quality, *Benefits of childcare*

## Appendix I. Participant Demographic Survey



DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN ECOLOGY  
GENDER, FAMILY, AND POLICY STUDIES

### Demographic information for Maternal Employment Study

1. What is your age? (please circle)      16 – 20      21 – 29      30 – 39      40 – 49      Other
  
2. What is your highest level of education?
  - No certificate or diploma
  - High school diploma
  - Apprenticeship certificate
  - College diploma
  - Bachelor's degree or higherYear attained: \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Are you currently employed?
  - Yes
  - No. If no, go to question 7.
  
4. If you are employed, what kind of paid work do you do?
  
5. How many hours of paid work per week do you do?
  - 0-9
  - 10-19
  - 20-29
  
6. How would you describe your current employment status?
  - casual
  - part-time
  - other
  
7. Is there another earner in your household with whom you share financial responsibilities?
  - Yes
  - No. If no, go to question 10.

8. How many hours per week is the other household earner employed?

- 0-9
- 10-19
- 20-29
- 30-40
- 40+

9. How would you describe your partner's current employment status?

- casual
- part-time
- full-time
- other

10. What is your household income? (please circle)

|                 |                 |                   |                     |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| under \$20,000  | \$50,000-59,999 | \$90,000-99,999   | \$130,000-139,999   |
| \$20,000-29,999 | \$60,000-69,999 | \$100,000-109,999 | \$140,000-149,999   |
| \$30,000-39,999 | \$70,000-79,999 | \$110,000-199,999 | \$150,000 and above |
| \$40,000-49,999 | \$80,000-89,999 | \$120,000-129,999 |                     |

11. What is your personal (individual) income? (please circle)

|                 |                 |                   |                     |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| under \$20,000  | \$50,000-59,999 | \$90,000-99,999   | \$130,000-139,999   |
| \$20,000-29,999 | \$60,000-69,999 | \$100,000-109,999 | \$140,000-149,999   |
| \$30,000-39,999 | \$70,000-79,999 | \$110,000-199,999 | \$150,000 and above |
| \$40,000-49,999 | \$80,000-89,999 | \$120,000-129,999 |                     |

12. How many hours of unpaid work per day do you do?

|                        | Number of hours |
|------------------------|-----------------|
| Indoor housework tasks |                 |
| Household errands      |                 |
| Outdoor tasks          |                 |
| Caregiving             |                 |

13. Check the response that best describes your parenting situation:

- co-parent with your husband/spouse/partner  
 co-parent with ex-husband/ex-spouse/ex-partner  
 other:

 14. How many children do you have? (please circle)    **one   two   three   four   five**

 15. What are the ages of your children? 

16. Does your family use childcare?

- Yes  
 No

17. Thinking about a typical week, for each pre-school aged child (up to three children) indicate the type/s of childcare you use and how many hours per week your child is in this type of care.

| <b>Child 1</b>     |                               |                           |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
|                    | I use this type of child care | Number of hours/week used |
| Day care           | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Day home           | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Nanny              | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Babysitter         | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Neighbour/friends  | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Grandparents       | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Other relative     | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Parents take turns | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |

| <b>Child 2</b>     |                               |                           |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
|                    | I use this type of child care | Number of hours/week used |
| Day care           | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Day home           | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Nanny              | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Babysitter         | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Neighbour/friends  | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Grandparents       | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Other relative     | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Parents take turns | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |

| <b>Child 3</b> |                               |                           |
|----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
|                | I use this type of child care | Number of hours/week used |
| Day care       | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |
| Day home       | <input type="checkbox"/>      |                           |

|                    |                          |  |
|--------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Nanny              | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Babysitter         | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Neighbour/friends  | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Grandparents       | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Other relative     | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Parents take turns | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |

18. Did you qualify for and/or access paid parental leave after the birth of each child? If you accessed paid parental leave, indicate the length of time in months.

|         | Qualified | Accessed | Length (months) |
|---------|-----------|----------|-----------------|
| Child 1 | €         | €        |                 |
| Child 2 | €         | €        |                 |
| Child 3 | €         | €        |                 |
| Child 4 | €         | €        |                 |

19. Did your partner qualify for and/or access paid parental leave after the birth of each child? If your partner accessed paid parental leave, indicate the length of time in months.

|         | Qualified | Accessed | Length (months) |
|---------|-----------|----------|-----------------|
| Child 1 | €         | €        |                 |
| Child 2 | €         | €        |                 |
| Child 3 | €         | €        |                 |
| Child 4 | €         | €        |                 |

20. If you qualified for and accessed maternity leave for the births of your children, check all that apply for each child.

|                                      |   |  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Access to training while<br>on leave | Guaranteed<br>return-to-work conditions<br>(pay, number of hours) | Approached for input<br>on workplace<br>decision/initiatives |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|

|         |   |   |   |
|---------|---|---|---|
| Child 1 | € | € | € |
| Child 2 | € | € | € |
| Child 3 | € | € | € |
| Child 4 | € | € | € |

21. Since having your first child, have you accessed any government employment insurance or pensions?

- Yes  
 No

22. If you are currently employed, check all benefits that apply:

- Parental leave  
 Sick leave  
 Vacation days  
 Health insurance  
 Child care  
 Other (please specify):

23. If your partner is currently employed, check all benefits that apply:

- Parental leave  
 Sick leave  
 Vacation days  
 Health insurance  
 Child care  
 Other (please specify):

## Appendix J. Ethics Application

2/11/2020 Print: Pro0008964? - Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

Date: February 11, 2020 11:58:42 AM [Print Close](#)

### 1.1 Study Identification

All questions marked by a **red asterisk \*** are required fields. However, because the mandatory fields have been kept to a minimum, answering only the required fields may not be sufficient for the REB to review your application.

Please answer all relevant questions that will reasonably help to describe your study or proposed research.

**1.0 \* Short Study Title** (restricted to 250 characters):

Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

**2.0 \* Complete Study Title** (can be exactly the same as short title):

Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

**3.0 \* Select the appropriate Research Ethics Board** (Detailed descriptions are available at <https://www.ualberta.ca/research/support/ethics/office/Human-Research-Ethics/Research-Ethics-Boards.aspx>):

Research Ethics Board 2

**4.0 \* Is the proposed research:**

Funded (Grant, subgrant, contract, internal funds, donation or some other source of funding)

**5.01 \* Name of local Principal Investigator:**

Rhonda Breilkreuz

**6.0 \* Type of research/study:**

Faculty/Academic Staff

**7.0 Investigator's Supervisor**(required for applications from undergraduate students, graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and medical residents to REBs 1 & 2. HREB does not accept applications from student PIs):

**8.01 Study Coordinators or Research Assistants:** People listed here can edit this application and will receive all email notifications for the study:

**Name Employer**

Kerryn Colen [TEMP](#)

**9.01 Co-Investigators:** People listed here can edit this application and will receive email notifications (Co-investigators who do not wish to receive email, should be added to the study email list team below instead of here).

If your searched name does not come up when you type it in the box, the user does not have the Principal Investigator role in the online system. Click the following link for instructions on how to [Request an Additional Role](#).

**Name Employer**

There are no items to display

**10.01 Study Team:** *(co-investigators, supervising team, and other study team members) - People listed here cannot view or edit this application and do not receive email notifications.*

| Last Name                     | First        | of        | Responsibility | Phone | Email |
|-------------------------------|--------------|-----------|----------------|-------|-------|
| Name                          | Organization | Role/Area |                |       |       |
| There are no items to display |              |           |                |       |       |

### 1.3 Study Funding Information

**1.0 \* Type of Funding:**

Grant (external)  
Internal Funds (eg. Start-up funds, TLEF, Operational, etc)

**2.0 \* Indicate which office administers your award.** *(It is the PI's responsibility to provide ethics approval notification to any office other than the ones listed below)*  
University of Alberta - Research Services Office (RSO)

**3.0 \* Funding Source**

**3.1 Select all sources of funding from the list below:**  
SSHRC - Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council SSHRC

**3.2 If your source of funding is not available in the list above, click "Add" below and write the Sponsor/Agency name(s) in the free text box that pops up.** *(Note: You may reflect multiple sources of funding by continuing to click "Add" to add each additional source of funding).* University of Alberta

**4.0 \* Indicate if this research sponsored or monitored by any of the following:**  
Not applicable

*The researcher is responsible for ensuring that the study complies with the applicable US regulations. The REB must also comply with US Regulations.*

### 1.4 RSO Managed Funding

**1.0 \* To connect your ethics application with your funding: provide all identifying information about the study funding – multiple rows allowed. For Project ID, enter a Funding ID provided by**

<https://arise.nalheru.ca/ARISE/sa/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmartForms?Project=ism.webbridge.entity.Lnclty%5B011%5D061810310094141041B112...> 2/18  
 2/11/2020 Print: Proj0089612 - Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

**RSO/PeopleSoft Project ID (for example, RES0005638, G018903401, C19900137, etc). Enter the corresponding title for each Project ID.**

| Project ID                      | Project Title                   | Other Information  |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Speed Code                      |                                 |  |
| Are mothers opting out?         |                                 |  |
| <a href="#">View</a> RES0040026 | <b>1.5 Conflict of Interest</b> | Exploring underemployment among mothers of preschool children<br>ZK979 |

**1.0 \* Are any of the investigators or their immediate family receiving any personal remuneration (including investigator payments and recruitment incentives but excluding trainee remuneration or graduate student stipends) from the funding of this study that is not accounted for in the study budget?**

Yes **No**

**2.0 \* Do any of investigators or their immediate family have any proprietary interests in the product under study or the outcome of the research including patents, trademarks, copyrights, and licensing agreements?**

Yes **No**

**3.0 \* Is there any compensation for this study that is affected by the study outcome?**

Yes **No**

**4.0 \* Do any of the investigators or their immediate family have equity interest in the sponsoring company? (This does not include Mutual Funds)**

Yes **No**

**5.0 \* Do any of the investigators or their immediate family receive payments of other sorts, from this sponsor (i.e. grants, compensation in the form of equipment or supplies, retainers**

for ongoing consultation and honoraria)?

Yes  
No

**6.0 \*** Are any of the investigators or their immediate family, members of the sponsor's Board of Directors, Scientific Advisory Panel or comparable body?

Yes  
No

**7.0 \*** Do you have any other relationship, financial or non-financial, that, if not disclosed, could be construed as a conflict of interest?

Yes  
No

Please explain if the answer to any of the above questions is Yes:

### **Important**

If you answered YES to any of the questions above, you may be asked for

<https://a0isc.nalberta.ca/ARISE/sd/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmartForms?Project=com.webbridge.entity.Facility%5BQID%5B106181D5ED09E4104FR1B7...3/182/11/2020.Pmc:Pro0008964?> - Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

more information.

## **1.6 Research Locations and Other Approvals**

**1.0 \*** List the locations of the proposed research, including recruitment activities. Provide name of institution, facility or organization, town, or province as applicable

Recruitment will occur through posters posted physically in workplaces, childcare centres, and preschools in Edmonton and digitally on social media (for example, community Facebook pages).

Focus groups will occur on campus in Edmonton at the University of Alberta and/or a community centre. Interviews will occur on campus in Edmonton at the University of Alberta or in the interviewee's workplace.

**2.0 \*** Indicate if the study will use or access facilities, programmes, resources, staff, students, specimens, patients or their records, at any of the sites affiliated with the following (select all that apply):

Not applicable

List all health care research sites/locations:

### **3.0 Multi-Institution Review**

**\* 3.1** Has this study already received approval from another REB?

Yes  
No

**4.0** If this application is closely linked to research previously approved by one of the University of Alberta REBs or has already received ethics approval from an external ethics review board(s), provide the study number,

**REB name or other identifying information. Attach any external REB application and approval letter in the Documentation Section – Other Documents.**  
N/A

## **2.1 Study Objectives and Design**

### **1.0 \* Provide a lay summary of your proposed research which would be understandable to general public**

Canadian mothers are a high-risk group of underemployed persons in Canada: they have lower labour-force attachment rates than women without children, fathers, and their counterparts in other OECD countries; and they represent over three-quarters of the part-time labour pool in Canada (Beeston, 2016; Moysen, 2017; OECD, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2016). This study will describe mothers' decisions to work part-time, or opt out, and their experiences integrating paid and unpaid work, looking at outcomes for subjective maternal wellbeing, economic security, and gender equality. We will examine the employment experiences of mothers and the contextual factors that influence their employment decisions when they have preschool children. We will explore the impact of policy contexts on mothers' experiences of employment and unpaid work. In focus group and interview settings, we will speak with a diverse sample of coupled

[https://arise.ualberta.ca/ARIS/6a/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmart?crms?Project=cm.webridge.entity.Locality%3B%20ID%5B%20618%5D%20%209%241041%20182... 4/18](https://arise.ualberta.ca/ARIS/6a/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmart?crms?Project=cm.webridge.entity.Locality%3B%20ID%5B%20618%5D%20%209%241041%20182...)  
2/11/2020 Print: Pro00089642 - Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

mothers. Guided by institutional ethnography methodology, we will complete a critical analysis of relevant policy initiatives and documents. Outcomes of this study will include scholarly contributions to address gaps in knowledge about mothers' employment and the interplay of choice and constraints, and evidence-based policy recommendations to enhance women's economic participation through employment.

### **2.0 \* Provide a full description of your research proposal outlining the following:**

**Purpose**  
**Hypothesis**  
**Justification**  
**Objectives**  
**Research Method/Procedures**  
**Plan for Data Analysis**

Purpose, Objectives, and Research Questions

This study will examine the nuance of mothers' experiences of employment in Alberta, and reasons for truncated paid work hours. To launch this study, we will undertake a qualitative mixed-method critical policy analysis that examines the experiences of two categories of mothers with pre-school children in Edmonton, Alberta: 1) mothers who work part-time; and, 2) mothers who have "opted-out" of the workforce. Our study has two objectives: 1) To describe mothers' decisions to work part-time/opt-out and their current/previous experiences in integrating paid and unpaid work, looking at outcomes for subjective maternal wellbeing, economic security, and gender equality; and 2) To identify and map the linkages between individual experiences and policy contexts relevant for mothers' economic participation, to explicate the policy organization of maternal employment. To meet these objectives, we will ask the following research questions: 1) What are the employment

experiences of mothers, and what are the contextual factors that influence mothers' decisions to reduce/opt-out of paid work when they have pre-school children?; and, 2) What do mothers' experiences of employment and unpaid care work reveal about the policy contexts that shape women's lives?

#### Justification

There is a surprising and substantial gap in the scholarly literature on the employment realities of Canadian mothers. The nuanced experiences of employment, including level of labour-force attachment, job changes to accommodate unpaid work responsibilities, and experiences on the job are understudied. Status of Women Alberta (2017), Status of Women Canada (2017), the World Economic Forum (2017), and the International Monetary Fund (2017) have all highlighted women's economic participation as central to gender equality and good outcomes for women. Yet the underemployment of mothers in Canada remains a largely overlooked societal problem. Earned income is the key source of financial well-being for the vast majority of Canadian households, and mothers' marginalization in paid work may impede mothers' economic security, family income security, and national economic growth. In-depth examination of mothers' experiences of employment, the nexus of paid and unpaid work, and the accommodations that mothers make to address child care and other family responsibilities will provide important knowledge to address research gaps and support Canadian policy makers in creating policies to enhance maternal employment, improve mothers' economic outcomes, and create a more gender equitable society.

#### Research Methods and Data Analysis

In this study, we will use qualitative mixed methods to explore the experiences of truncated employment for coupled mothers with pre-school

<https://arise.ualberta.ca/ARIST/d/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmartForm.aspx?Project=asm.webbridge.entity.Entity%5B0ID%5B0D618DEED09-E4104FB1B2... 5/18 2/11/2020 Print: Proj0089642 - Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children>

children across diverse socio-economic contexts within Edmonton, Alberta. Mothers from low, middle and high income households will be recruited. Furthermore, we will seek to recruit both foreign-born and Canadian born women from a range of ethnic backgrounds. We will conduct focus groups (five-to-eight participants per group) and in-depth individual interviews, using the knowledge gained through this data collection to explicate the linkages between mothers' experiences of employment and current policy contexts.

Transcripts of focus groups and interviews will be indexed and analyzed according to flexible coding methodology (Deterding & Waters, 2018) to identify the main stories and recurring themes in the data. This iterative process is an effective way to make sense of rich, complex descriptions of participant experiences, leading to a nuanced understanding of maternal employment experiences, and their impact on maternal wellbeing, economic security, and gender equality.

We will also undertake a comprehensive literature review that outlines relevant earlier work on this topic and a critical policy analysis to understand the policy contexts that shape mothers' employment experiences and decisions.

**3.0 Describe procedures, treatment, or activities that are above or in addition to standard practices in this study area (eg. extra medical or health-related procedures, curriculum enhancements, extra follow-up, etc):**  
N/A

**4.0 If the proposed research is above minimal risk and is not funded via a competitive peer review grant or industry-sponsored clinical trial, the REB will require evidence of scientific review. Provide information about the review process and its results if appropriate.** N/A

**5.0 For clinical trials, describe any sub-studies associated with this Protocol.**  
N/A

## **2.2 Research Methods and Procedures**

*Some research methods prompt specific ethical issues. The methods listed below have additional questions associated with them in this application. If your research does not involve any of the methods listed below, ensure that your proposed research is adequately described in Section 2.1: Study Objectives and Design or attach documents in the Documentation Section if necessary.*

**1.0 \* This study will involve the following (select all that apply)**  
Interviews and/or Focus Groups  
Surveys and Questionnaires (including internet surveys)

*NOTE 1: Select this ONLY if your application SOLELY involves a review of paper charts/electronic health records/administrative health data to answer the research question. If you are enrolling people into a study and need to collect data from their health records in addition to other interventions, then you SHOULD NOT select this box.*

*NOTE 2: Select this option if this research ONLY involves analysis of blood/tissue/specimens originally collected for another purpose but now being used to answer your research question. If you are enrolling people*

<https://arise.alberta.ca/ARISE/sd/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmartForms?Project=com.webridge.entity.Entity%5B01D%5BD618DED094B4104FB1B3...6/182/11/3020Print:Pro00689642> Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

*into the study to prospectively collect specimens to analyze you SHOULD NOT select this box.*

## **2.5 Interview and/or Focus Groups**

**1.0 Will you conduct interviews, focus groups, or both? Provide detail. We will conduct five-eight focus groups in Edmonton with mothers of pre school children who are employed part-time or have opted-out of employment. Focus**



|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <input type="radio"/> |  |
| <input type="radio"/> | Participants might feel physical stress, e.g. cardiovascular stress tests                      |
| <input type="radio"/> | Participants might sustain injury, infection, and intervention side-effects or complications   |
| <input type="radio"/> | The physical risks will be greater than those encountered by the participants in everyday life |

**Possible Psychological, Emotional, Social and Other Risks and Discomforts**

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> | Participants might feel psychologically or emotionally stressed, demeaned, embarrassed, worried, anxious, scared or distressed, e.g. description of painful or traumatic events |
| <input type="radio"/> | Participants might feel psychological or mental fatigue, e.g. intense concentration required  |
| <input type="radio"/> | Participants might experience cultural or social risk, e.g. loss of privacy or status or damage to reputation   |
| <input type="radio"/> | Participants might be exposed to economic or legal risk, for instance non-anonymized workplace surveys  |
| <input type="radio"/> | The risks will be greater than those encountered by the participants in everyday life   |

**3.0 \* Provide details of all the risks and discomforts associated with the research for which you indicated YES or POSSIBLY above.** No negative effects are expected; however, it is possible that participants may experience emotional discomfort in relation to overdisclosure of personal information in the focus groups and interviews. In addition, loss of privacy may occur if focus group members share information revealed in the focus group, outside of the group.

**4.0 \* Describe how you will manage and minimize risks and discomforts, as well as mitigate harm:**

In relation to possible emotional discomfort, following each focus group and individual interview, a debriefing period will occur in which participants will have the opportunity to discuss emotional reactions to the focus group and interview discussions.

Focus group and interview participants will be provided with a list of resources at the end of focus groups and/or interviews; they can access these resources if they feel they require additional support

In relation to possible privacy issues, before each focus group, the focus group facilitator will discuss the privacy concerns associated with the possibility of participants sharing focus group information outside of the group. In addition, before and after each focus group, the focus group facilitator will request that all information revealed in the focus group not be shared outside of the group.

**5.0 Is there a possibility that your research procedures will lead to unexpected findings, adverse reactions, or similar results that may require follow-up (i.e. individuals disclose that they are upset or distressed during an interview/questionnaire, unanticipated findings on MRI, etc.)?**

Yes      No

**6.0 If you are using any tests in this study diagnostically, indicate the member(s) of the study team who will administer the measures/instruments:**

| Test Name | Administrator | Qualification |
|-----------|---------------|---------------|
|           |               |               |

There are no items to display

**7.0 If any research related procedures/tests could be interpreted diagnostically, will these be reported back to the participants and if so, how and by whom?**

N/A

### 3.2 Benefits Analysis

**1.0 \* Describe any potential benefits of the proposed research to the participants. If there are no benefits, state this explicitly:**

The participants will have the opportunity to share and reflect upon their employment experiences, which could be experienced as positive and affirming. It is possible that there may be no direct benefits to participants.

**2.0 \* Describe the scientific and/or scholarly benefits of the proposed research:**

To date, most research on maternal employment has centred on child impacts, with fewer studies examining maternal and family impacts. This project will fill a substantial knowledge gap in the Canadian literature on maternal employment, contributing new knowledge that will provide nuanced understanding of the employment realities of mothers in Alberta, with a particular focus on coupled mothers with pre-school children who are employed part-time, or who have opted out of employment. The knowledge created by this project will provide insight into the extent to which Canadian policy contexts promote or preclude gender equality in employment, and has the potential to contribute to better informed policies that can enhance mothers' employment outcomes.

This study will also make significant theoretical contributions through using a critical feminist framework to explore and problematize the notion of preference in maternal employment, particularly during the life course stage of mothering pre-school children. We will analyze the extent to which mothers' choices about employment are made within a context of constrained options.

**3.0 If this research involves risk to participants explain how the benefits outweigh the risks.**

Both the benefits and risks associated with participation in this

research project are minimal, and do not exceed those associated with everyday social life.

#### 4.1 Participant Information

[https://arise.alberta.ca/ARISE/sd/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmartForm.js?Project=com.webbridge\\_entity.Entity%5BOD%5BD618DEED09%5B4104FB1B1...9/18/2017/2020 Print: Proj0008964? - Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children](https://arise.alberta.ca/ARISE/sd/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmartForm.js?Project=com.webbridge_entity.Entity%5BOD%5BD618DEED09%5B4104FB1B1...9/18/2017/2020 Print: Proj0008964? - Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children)

**1.0 \* Will you be recruiting human participants (i.e. enrolling people into the study, sending people online surveys to complete)?**

Yes  
No

**1.1 Will participants be recruited or their data be collected from Alberta Health Services or Covenant Health or data custodian as defined in the Alberta Health Information Act?**

Yes  
No

#### 4.2 Additional Participant Information

**1.0 Describe the participants that will be included in this study. Outline ALL participants (i.e. if you are enrolling healthy controls as well):**

We are studying the employment experiences of two categories of coupled mothers with pre-school children in Edmonton, Alberta: 1) mothers who work part-time; and, 2) mothers who have "opted-out" of the workforce. We will recruit a diverse sample of mothers across diverse socio-economic contexts. We will seek foreign-born and Canadian-born mothers from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

**2.0 \* Describe and justify the inclusion criteria for participants (e.g. age range, health status, gender, etc.):**

We will include mothers who work part-time because previous literature suggests that this is the most common strategy used for mothers in most OECD countries to integrate employment and motherhood (Lewis, 2002; OECD, 2014). We will include mothers with an employment history who are not currently employed, because previous research suggests that opting-out of employment may be a constrained choice within the context of undesirable options (McDonald, Bradley & Guthrie, 2006). Further, we will include mothers of pre-school children for two reasons: 1) the life course stage of mothers with pre-school children is arguably the most time-crunched for women, therefore a time when considerations about how to negotiate paid and unpaid work will be most deeply considered by mothers; and, 2) our recent analysis of Canadian labour force survey data suggests that mothers' long-term employment patterns are established when their children are pre-school age (Breitkreuz & Stanton, under review). We will include coupled mothers because two-parent families are the most common family type in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016). Coupled mothers' employment decisions are understudied (as opposed to low income, lone mothers who are categorized as an at risk group and have been studied extensively in Canada and

elsewhere). Furthermore, it is often assumed that coupled mothers' decision to truncate employment is an unencumbered choice rather than a decision made within a context of limited options. Our study queries this assumption, using mothers' experience to provide insight about mothers' lower employment rates

All participants will be required to speak English.

### 3.0 Describe and justify the exclusion criteria for participants:

<https://arise.nalberta.ca/ARISE%20Resource%20Administration/Project/PrintSmartForms?Project=can.webbridge.entity.Entity%5B%5D%5BD618DED0%5C%4104FB1B...10/182/11/2020Print:Pr000089642> Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

We will only include mothers of preschool children (in contrast to parents of school-aged children, for example) for the reasons outlined in 2.0 above. Recent research (Craig & Churchill, 2018) confirms that the life course stage of mothers with pre-school children is a "crunch point" for time and financial resources, with implications for maternal employment and well-being.

Due to budgetary limitations which do not allow for translation costs, we will only include English speakers in these focus groups.

### 4.0 Participants

**4.1 How many participants do you hope to recruit (including controls, if applicable?)**

60

**4.2 Of these, how many are controls, if applicable?**

N/A

**4.3 If this is a multi-site study, how many participants do you anticipate will be enrolled in the entire study?**

### 5.0 Justification for sample size:

In the proposed study, we will conduct 5-8 focus groups with 6-8 participants per group. This sample size (n=30 (min) - 64 (max)) is a robust sample size for the qualitative methods being employed. This sample size was chosen because we anticipate that we will need to conduct a number of focus groups with a diverse group mothers with different experiences of employment (e.g., mothers who work part-time, mothers who have opted out). From the focus group participants, 20-30 mothers will be invited to participate in in-depth, individual interviews. This sub-sample (n = 20 (min) - 30 (min)) will allow key themes from the focus groups to be validated and explored in greater detail.

### 4.4 Recruitment of Participants (non-Health)

#### 1.0 Recruitment

**1.1 How will you identify potential participants? Outline all of the means you will use to identify who may be eligible to be in the study (i.e. response to advertising such as flyers, posters, ads in newspapers, websites, email, list serves, community organization referrals, etc.)** Participants will be identified by their response to physical

or digital posters. Physical posters will be displayed in workplaces, childcare centres, and preschools in Edmonton. Digital posters will be published on social media (for example, community or preschool Facebook pages). Participants may also hear about the study through word of mouth.

Parent participants will be identified through asking the following questions:

1. What is the age of your youngest child?
2. Are you currently employed?
- 3a. (If yes to question 3) Are you currently employed full-time or part time?
- 3b. (If no to question 2) Were you employed prior to the birth of your first child?

**1.2 Once you have identified a list of potentially eligible participants, indicate how the potential participants' names will be passed on to the researchers AND how will the potential participants be**

<https://arise.ualberta.ca/ARTST/ad/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmartForms?Project=com.webridge.entity.Entity%5B0ID%5BD618DCE094F4104FB1B2...> 11/18  
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**approached about the research.**

The researchers are undertaking the recruiting directly; names of participants are passed directly to them at the time of recruitment. Participants are approached by recruitment posters and/or word of mouth that they then respond to either via email or the research telephone. Should participants be contacted by a third party, the third party can give the study information to the potential participant/s, and the individual/s can decide whether or not to contact the researchers.

## 2.0 Pre-Existing Relationships

**2.1 Will potential participants be recruited through pre-existing relationships with researchers (e.g. Will an instructor recruit students from his classes, or a physician recruit patients from her practice? Other examples may be employees, acquaintances, own children or family members, etc.)?**

Yes      No

**3.0 Will your study involve any of the following? (select all that apply)**  
Payment or incentives, e.g. honorarium or gifts for participating in this study

## 4.5 Informed Consent Determination

**1.0 Describe who will provide informed consent for this study (i.e. the participant, parent of child participant, substitute decision maker, no one will give consent – requesting a waiver)**  
Participants will provide informed consent.

### 1.1 Waiver of Consent Requested

**If you are asking for a waiver of participant consent, please justify the waiver or alteration and explain how the study meets all of the criteria for the waiver. Refer to Article 3.7 of TCPS2 and provide justification for requesting a Waiver of Consent for ALL criteria (a-e)**  
N/A

**1.2 Waiver of Consent in Individual Medical Emergency**

If you are asking for a waiver or alteration of participant consent in individual medical emergencies, please justify the waiver or alteration and explain how the study meets ALL of the criteria outlined in Article 3.8 of TCPS2 (a-f).

N/A

**2.0 How will consent be obtained/documented? Select all that apply**

Signed consent form

If you are not using a signed consent form, explain how the study information will be provided to the participant and how consent will be obtained/documented. Provide details for EACH of the options selected above:

N/A

<https://arise.nathena.ca/ARISE5a/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmartForms?Project=om.webridge.entity.Entity%5B80DD%5BD618D%ED09%5D104E81B...> 12/18  
2/11/2020 Print: Proj0089612 - Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

**3.0 Will every participant have the capacity to give fully informed consent on his/her own behalf?**

Yes No

**4.0 What assistance will be provided to participants or those consenting on their behalf, who may require additional assistance? (e.g. non English speakers, visually impaired, etc.)**

Only English-speaking participants will be included in the study sample for focus groups and interviews. If there are visually-impaired participants, the focus group facilitator or interviewer will read to them the consent letter and verbally affirm consent.

**5.0 \* If at any time a PARTICIPANT wishes to withdraw from the study or from certain parts of the study, describe when and how this can be done.**

Following each focus group and interview, participants will be reminded that consent for participation in the study is voluntary, and that participants can withdraw from the study at any time. Should a participant choose to withdraw at any point from the focus group interview onwards, any data they may have opted to provide through the demographic questionnaire will also be withdrawn.

**6.0 Describe the circumstances and limitations of DATA withdrawal from the study, including the last point at which participant DATA can be withdrawn (i.e. 2 weeks after transcription of interview notes)**

Participants can withdraw from the study at any time. Due to the nature of the recorded focus group data collected, where specific individuals' contributions are not distinguishable, it will not be feasible to remove a participant's contribution. Should a participant choose to withdraw at any point from the focus group interview onwards, any data they may have opted to provide through the demographic questionnaire will also be withdrawn.

**7.0 Will this study involve any group(s) where non-participants are present? For example, classroom research might involve groups which**

include participants and non-participants.

Yes

No

#### 4.6 Expense Reimbursements and Incentives

##### 1.0 Expense Reimbursements:

**1.1 Describe in detail the expenses for which participants will be reimbursed, the value of the reimbursements per item as well as the total maximum reimbursement and the reimbursement process (e.g. participants will receive a cash reimbursement for parking at the rate of \$12.00 per visit for up to three visits for a total value of \$36.00)**  
N/A

**1.2 IF you will be collecting personal information to reimburse or pay participants, describe the information to be collected and how privacy will be maintained.**  
N/A

##### 2.0 Incentives:

<https://oasis.ualberta.ca/ARISFsd/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmartForms?Project=com.webbridge.city.Facility%5B0117%5B061810ED092B4104FB1B...> 1/31/2020 Print: Proj00089642 - Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

**2.1 Will participants receive any incentives for participating in this research (i.e. gift card, cash payment, prize draw)? If yes, provide details of the value, including the likelihood (odds) of winning for prize draws and lotteries.**

<https://www.ualberta.ca/research/support/ethics-office/human-research-ethics/use-of-incentives-in-research>

Gift card incentives appropriate in type and amount will be offered to focus group and interview participants. A gift card to the value of \$20.00 will be offered from vendors such as grocery stores (e.g., Safeway, Superstore) or other retailers (e.g., Home Depot, Chapters).

**2.2 What is the maximum value of the incentives offered to an individual throughout the research?**

A mother who participates in both a focus group and an individual could receive a maximum value of \$40.00 in gift cards.

**2.3 IF incentives are offered to participants, they should not be so large or attractive as to constitute coercion. Justify the value of the incentives you are offering relative to your study population.**

The modest amount of the gift card (\$20.00) provides a token of appreciation and acknowledgement of the participant's time.

#### 5.1 Data Collection

**1.0 \* Will the researcher or study team be able to identify any of the participants at any stage of the study?**



**how will this be done?**

Any identifying information will be deleted from focus group and interview transcripts and transcribers will replace identifying information in transcripts with codes (e.g., replace the name of a person with code assigned to study participant) or descriptors (e.g., name of child will be replaced with "participant's daughter"). Transcribers will not have access to consent forms or complete code lists and will be required to sign confidentiality agreements before gaining access to focus group recordings.

**5.0 \* Specify what identifiable information will be RETAINED once data collection is complete, and explain why retention is necessary. Include the retention of master lists that link participant identifiers with de-identified data:**

The participants' names and addresses will be maintained upon the completion of data collection, in order to be able to go back to participants to either verify something in the data (i.e. member checking) and/or to send participants a final report of the study findings. Identifiers will not be connected to survey data, except in the confidential master document that will be available to research team members only.

**6.0 If applicable, describe your plans to link the data in this study with data associated with other studies (e.g within a data repository) or with data belonging to another organization:**

N/A

### **5.3 Data Confidentiality and Privacy**

**1.0 \* How will confidentiality of the data be maintained? Describe how the identity of participants will be protected both during and after research.**

<https://arise.ualberta.ca/ARIST64/Resource/Administration/Project/PrintSmartForms?Project=conn.webridge.entity.Entity%5B0ID%5B0D618D6D09-E4104FB1B...> 15/18  
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The usual research procedures for respecting privacy and protecting confidential data will be used. These include use of code numbers to identify recorded interviews and transcripts. All information will be held confidential, except when professional codes of ethics or legislation requires reporting.

When information and findings are presented or published, no information that might identify participants will be included.

Only members of the study team (investigators and research staff) will have access to confidential data. The project coordinator, research assistants and principal and co-investigators will have access to the data from the interviews. A transcriptionist will listen to the recorded interviews and review field notes in order to transcribe them. Each research assistant and the transcriptionist will sign a confidentiality agreement indicating that he/she will not share the information on the recordings or in the field notes with anyone outside of the research team.

**2.0 How will the principal investigator ensure that all study personnel are aware of their responsibilities concerning participants' privacy and the confidentiality of their information?**

All team members will receive privacy education/training from the research investigators.

#### **3.0 External Data Access**

**\* 3.1 Will identifiable data be transferred or made available to**

persons or agencies outside the research team?

Yes  
No

## 5.4 Data Storage, Retention, and Disposal

**1.0 \*** Describe how research data will be stored, e.g. digital files, hard copies, audio recordings, other. Specify the physical location and how it will be secured to protect confidentiality and privacy. (For example, study documents must be kept in a locked filing cabinet and computer files are encrypted, etc. Write N/A if not applicable to your research)

Recorded interviews, transcripts and field notes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet/ password protected digital file in the principal investigator's research office for five years following completion of the study. Consent forms and coding lists will be kept in a separate locked cabinet in the principal investigator's research office for at least five years after completion of the research.

**2.0 \*** University policy requires that you keep your data for a minimum of 5 years following completion of the study but there is no limit on data retention. Specify any plans for future use of the data. If the data will become part of a data repository or if this study involves the creation of a research database or registry for future research use, please provide details. (Write N/A if not applicable to your research)  
At this time, there are no plans for future use of the data once this study is complete.

<https://arise.nalberta.ca/ARISE3d/ResourceAdministration/ProjectPrintSmartForm.js?Project=com.webbridge.entity.Entity%5B01D%5BD6181DE1D09E-B4104FB1B...> 16/18  
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**3.0** If you plan to destroy your data, describe when and how this will be done? Indicate your plans for the destruction of the identifiers at the earliest opportunity consistent with the conduct of the research and/or clinical needs:

Identifiers will be removed from the transcripts of the focus groups and interviews by the transcribers at the time of transcription.

Recorded

interviews, transcripts and field notes will be destroyed five years following completion of the study by permanently deleting (digital files) and shredding (hardcopy documents).

## Documentation

Add documents in this section according to the headers. Use Item 11.0 "Other Documents" for any material not specifically mentioned below.

Sample templates are available by clicking [HERE](#).

**1.0 Recruitment Materials:**

**Document Name Version Date Description**

[Recruitment poster](#) 0.02 4/30/2019 10:49 AM

**2.0 Letter of Initial Contact:**

**Document Name Version Date Description**

[Information letter](#) 0.03 5/7/2019 3:36 PM

**3.0 Informed Consent / Information Document(s):**

**3.1 What is the reading level of the Informed Consent Form(s):**  
Grade 10

**3.2 Informed Consent Form(s)/Information Document(s):**

**Document Name Version Date Description**

[Participant consent](#) 0.03 5/7/2019 10:38 AM

**4.0 Assent Forms:**

**Document Name Version Date Description**

There are no items to display

**5.0 Questionnaires, Cover Letters, Surveys, Tests, Interview Scripts, etc.:**

**Document Name Version Date Description**

[questionnaire](#) 0.02 4/30/2019  
[Participant demographic](#) 10:50 AM

[group](#) 0.02 4/30/2019  
[Interview guide - Focus](#) 10:50 AM

[interview](#) 0.01 4/30/2019  
[Interview guide - Individual](#) 10:50 AM

<https://arise.alberta.ca/ARISE/sd/Resource/Administrative/Project/PrintSmartForms?Project=com.wbridge.cmty.Entity%5B01D%5BD618DEED09%5B4104FB1B...> 17/18  
2/11/2020 Print: Proj00089042 - Are mothers opting out? Exploring underemployment among mothers with preschool children

**6.0 Protocol/Research Proposal:**

**Document Name Version Date Description** There are no items to display

**7.0 Investigator Brochures/Product Monographs:**

**Document Name Version Date Description** There are no items to display

**8.0 Health Canada No Objection Letter (NOL):**

**Document Name Version Date Description** There are no items to display

**9.0 Confidentiality Agreement:**

**Document Name Version Date Description** [agreement](#)

0.02 4/30/2019 10:51

[Confidentiality](#)  
AM

**10.0 Conflict of Interest:**

**Document Name Version Date Description** There are no items to display

**11.0 Other Documents:**

*For example, Study Budget, Course Outline, or other documents not mentioned above*

**Document Name Version Date Description** There are no items to display

**Final Page**

You have completed your ethics application! Click "Continue" to go to your study workspace.

**This action will NOT SUBMIT the application for review.**

**Only the Study Investigator** can submit an application to the REB by selecting the "SUBMIT STUDY" button in My Activities for this Study ID:Pro00089642.

<https://arise.alberta.ca/ARISE/sd/ResourceAdministration/Project/PrintSmartForm.js?Project=com.webbridge.cndty.Entity%5B01D%5BD6181DE10%5B4104FB1B..> 18/18