National College of Ireland

STRESS MANAGEMENT IN WORKING MOTHERS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR WORKING MOTHERS IN HIGH-PRESSURE CORPORATE ENVIRONMENTS IN IRELAND PRE, DURING AND POST-COVID.

Pragya Dadhich
22171673

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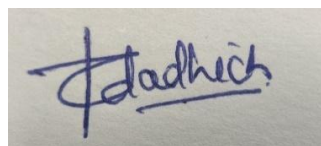
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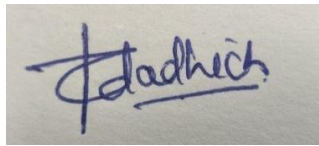
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ABSTRACT

This research looks at how working moms in high-stress corporate workplaces in Ireland handle their stress, focusing on the relationship between personal guilt, societal constraints, and job obligations. Using a qualitative technique, the study conducts in-depth interviews with working mothers to learn about their strategies for managing stress before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. A thorough literature analysis highlights how social expectations lead to guilt sentiments and negatively impact mental health by placing their experiences within larger organizational and societal frameworks.

Semi structured interviews with 15 participants were conducted to gain a better understanding about research questions and the data obtained was analysed using thematic analysis. The results show a considerable disconnect between the effective use of supporting workplace policies like flexible work schedules and childcare assistance and the rules themselves. Mothers who experience this difference frequently lack the support they need, which increases stress levels. Conditions have essentially stabilized, leading to an increasing dependence on digital tools and remote labor. In order to really help working mothers, the report recommends a comprehensive reevaluation of corporate cultures and structures. Enhancing flexible work arrangements, boosting mental health services, and developing a positive work environment are among the recommendations. The goal of this research is to encourage support for working mothers for a more fair and inclusive workplace environment by providing workable solutions to help them.

Keywords: Stress Management, Working Mothers, Corporate Culture, Ireland, Flexible Work Arrangements, COVID-19

Acknowledgement

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1.   Introduction

1.1 Overview:

This research explores the intricacy of stress management strategies for working mothers in high-pressure corporate environments within Ireland. Utilising a comparative approach across pre-COVID, during COVID, and post-COVID periods, this study aims to understand how the pandemic's disruptions exacerbated existing pressures for working mothers by amplifying the struggles to balance their professional duties with family responsibilities, ultimately influencing their stress management strategies.

This study seeks to understand how working mothers adapted their coping mechanisms in response to all the unique challenges that were presented by the pandemic. By examining the interplay between work demands, societal pressures, guilt, and the COVID-19 pandemic, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of stress management for working mothers in these demanding environments through qualitative interviews. Insights gathered can help address an under-researched issue with implications for supporting women's wellbeing in organisations.

1.2 Background:

Over the past few decades, there has been a significant rise in female labour force participation across the globe. In Ireland specifically, women's participation in the workforce increased from 34% in the early 1990s to over 60% in 2023 (CSO, 2023). This dramatic socio-economic shift has altered the traditional family structure with many women now balancing both career and caregiving responsibilities. Working mothers now account for a considerable fraction of the labour force in Ireland, especially in high- pressure corporate professions that demands steady dedication.

While increased workforce participation has been economically and socially empowering for many women, it has also introduced new stressors and challenges related to balancing competing demands of work and family. Extensive research highlights the elevated stress levels experienced by working mothers as they juggle professional obligations with childcare, household duties, and societal expectations regarding gender roles (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020 ; Tripathi et al., 2016). Additionally, there can be psychological and physical consequences of chronic stress if it's left unaddressed.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated existing challenges beginning in early 2020 through lockdown, remote working, and disrupted routines (Calarco et al., 2020). Qualitative research is needed to explore how ongoing changes are shaping stress coping strategies employed by Irish working mothers over the last few transitional years. A deep understanding of their experiences could guide evidence-based initiatives to support workforce wellbeing

and productivity as well personal satisfaction for working mothers.

1.3 Research Problem:

Working parents, particularly working mothers, have historically struggled to balance their professional and personal lives. Traditional gender roles often place the primary responsibility of childcare on mothers, which creates a conflict with their professional aspirations (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021) and also marital lives. This can lead to significant levels of stress, impacting their mental and physical health. Stress in working mothers generally arise from work demands, societal pressures and guilt, and most of the new mothers feel lost in the midst of motherhood. High pressure corporate environments further complicate this issue by demanding long hours, intense workloads and relentless pressure to perform.

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the challenges faced by working mothers, amplifying the struggle to balance professional duties with family responsibilities amidst unprecedented disruptions. The blurring of boundaries between work and home environments, coupled with no childcare options and remote working intensified stress levels for many working mothers during that time. This research addresses these challenges and the strategies adopted by working mothers to deal with them, further providing insights about the impact workplace practices hold on the wellbeing of working mothers managing stress.

1.4 Research Purpose:

The primary objective of this research is to provide a deeper understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on the stress management strategies employed by working mothers in high-pressure corporate offices in Ireland. By examining how they adapted their approaches in the unique timeframe of pre-COVID, during initial pandemic lockdowns, and the gradual return to normalcy in subsequent years, it seeks to identify both areas of resilience and potential gaps in existing research. It aims to equip working mothers with the knowledge that will support new mothers to create a balance between their professional and personal lives and help with ways to cope up with stressful challenges that could possibly come in their way. Analysing different approaches to deal with stress and finding the best practices that have proven to cope up with difficult phases of motherhood in work environment. However, it is essential to note that this research does not attempt to devalue the regulations of Irish workplaces but it could still help the organisations to support new mothers in a better way by providing ideas.

1.5 Aims and Objectives:
- Examining the Interplay of Work Demands, Societal Pressures, and Guilt in the Stress Experienced by Working Mothers in High-Pressure Corporate Environments in Ireland.

- Understanding the Stress management strategies that are used by working mothers in relation to childcare responsibilities and career advancement within these 3 timelines.

- Analysing the Impact of workplace policies, specially practices on the wellbeing of working mothers managing stress.

1.6 Research Questions:
To achieve these research objectives, this dissertation seeks to answer the following questions:

1. **Stress Management Strategies for Working Mothers (Pre-Pandemic):**
- **Question:** How did working mothers in high-pressure corporate environments in Ireland manage the stress associated with balancing childcare responsibilities and career advancement before the COVID-19 pandemic?

- **Focus:** This question delves into coping mechanisms for stress management in working mothers, identifying established strategies and potential areas of vulnerability.

2. Societal Pressures and Guilt:
- **Question:** How do societal pressures surrounding motherhood interact with the feelings of guilt experienced by working mothers in high-pressure corporate environments?

- **Focus:** This question explores the interplay between societal expectations and self-perceptions of working mothers, particularly regarding guilt management.

3. Impact of the Pandemic on Stress Management:
- **Question:** How did the COVID-19 pandemic, including school closures, remote work arrangements, and heightened anxieties, influence the stress management strategies employed by working mothers in your study?

- **Focus:** This question explores how the pandemic disrupted existing strategies and potentially necessitated adaptations.

4. Workplace Policies and Stress Management:
- **Question:** To what extent do existing workplace policies and practices in high-pressure corporate environments in Ireland support or hinder the stress management efforts of working mothers?

- **Focus:** This question analyses the role of workplace policies (e.g., flexible work arrangements, childcare support) in promoting well-being and reducing stress for working mothers.

5. Post-Pandemic Adaptations and Recommendations:
- **Question:** In the post-pandemic context, what lasting changes or adaptations have working mothers made to their stress management strategies, and how can these insights inform recommendations for better supporting working mothers in high-pressure corporate environments?

- **Focus:** This question explores long-term impacts of the pandemic on stress management and seeks to identify potential improvements in support systems based on the lived experiences of the studied mothers.

1.7 Outline of the Study

There are six chapters in this research study, and each one contributes to the thesis' objective. An outline of the research's components is provided in the first chapter, which serves as the introduction. The second chapter, the literature review, looks at the most pertinent literature to help readers understand the importance of this study. The research strategy and procedures are described and justified in the third chapter, Methodology. The findings and key discoveries are analysed in the next chapter, which is followed by a discussion section in chapter five. Finally, chapter six provides an overview of the primary findings and suggestions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction:

The growing presence of women in the workforce has cast a spotlight on the unique challenges faced by working mothers, particularly those employed in demanding corporate settings. According to Arunachalam and Venugopal (2023), working mothers experience major pressure and stress as they strive to balance childcare duties and domestic responsibilities with a demanding career. Stress, as defined by Piotrowski and Hollar (2023), is a psychophysiological response to environmental pressures that, if prolonged, can disrupt hormonal balance, impair immune system function, and increase susceptibility to serious health issues, including mental health disorders. In a recent poll, it was demonstrated that 42% of working mothers surveyed were diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression in 2022 (Payton, 2023). Stress management encompasses a range of methods and approaches employed to effectively cope with stress. Stress management can be defined as the process of reducing the adverse effects of stress and enhancing an individual's physical and mental state of health. It is essential to comprehend efficient stress management techniques for employed mothers in order to promote their own well-being and foster a more equitable work environment.

2.1.1 Scope of the literature review:

This study examines the existing literature on the stress experienced by employed mothers in high-pressure corporate settings. The text explores many stressors, such as job demands, childcare obligations, cultural pressures, and household chores. The review subsequently examines the influence of stress on the physical and mental well-being of working mothers, their professional achievements, and their ability to maintain a harmonious equilibrium between work and personal life. Subsequently, it delves into a range of stress management techniques utilized by employed mothers, with a specific emphasis on coping mechanisms and avenues of assistance. Following this, the analysis delves into the particular difficulties associated with achieving work-life balance for employed mothers and how the COVID-19 epidemic has intensified these difficulties. The study concludes by pointing out limitations in current research and emphasizing the necessity for studies that take into account the specific circumstances in Ireland, track long-term patterns, and acknowledge the swiftly evolving societal environment.

2.2 Sources of Stress for Working Mothers

Mothers working in high-level corporate settings prime themselves for the conflicts of criteria that come along with the pressure of work, which often leads to high levels of stress. Work demands can also be a powerful source of stress. The main stressors are tight deadlines,

heavy workloads, long working hours, and unwavering performance expectations (Jain, P. and Batra, A., 2015). Modern-day working mothers frequently go through a constant state of mental stress that comes with the pressure to excel and maintain career progression within a competitive corporate environment. According to a study conducted by Poroski et al. (2024), a significant majority of working mothers report feeling unable to achieve success simultaneously in their familial duties and professional careers.

It is impossible to overlook the additional strain and complexity of childcare arrangements. When there are other professional obligations involved. It is difficult to strike a healthy balance between demanding work schedules and making sure the kids get the care they need. When working women feel they are not succeeding in their parenting or professional obligations, they may experience feelings of guilt or inadequacy. As also concluded in a research study by Gadzail et al. (2023), significant emotional and psychological stress might arise from feeling guilty about not living up to one's duties.

A study by Vijai (2023) depicts that, in addition to the duties of a baby and work, a large amount of other household chores are usually taken on by women. Taking part in household chores, cooking, and other activities increase their burden overall, which exacerbates their stress levels. Mothers who are working often shoulder further responsibility due to feelings of frustration and inadequacy that result from not having enough time or energy to properly manage household responsibilities.

In the long run, women who are raising children and working face a great deal of stress due to cultural expectations and conventions around parenting. As per Payton's study (Payton, 2023), gender stereotypes dictate that mothers are typically tasked with many childcare and domestic responsibilities (Payton, 2023). Even with society's attitudes gradually changing, feelings of guilt and inadequacy arise when these expectations are not met. Because they have to handle the pressures of a demanding profession and adhere to social expectations, working mothers undergo a significant amount of stress.

2.2.1 Effects of Stress on Working Mothers:

Based on a study by Mclean (2013), females who are employed can be severely affected by chronic stress in a number of ways. Anxiety, depression, irregular sleep patterns, and even cardiovascular diseases are examples of physical and mental health conditions that can physiologically result from stress (Mclean, 2013). These physical health issues can create a detrimental loop of stress and illness and make it more difficult to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Beyond that, as established by the research conducted by Launders (2024), prolonged stress may contribute to burnout, a condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and

diminished effectiveness. Burnout has an enormous effect on working mothers' happiness and accomplishments at work, as well as their mental and physical health. Burnout can cause moms to become less productive, have trouble focusing, and lose their uniqueness, which can hinder their ability to develop in their careers and generally affect their general well-being.

Stress has an impact on working mothers' professional results that extends beyond burnout. Stress can make people less motivated, have trouble coping with setbacks, and find it harder to strike a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives. Working mothers may experience a decrease in job satisfaction as a result of these barriers to advancement in their careers (Frech and Damaske, 2012). Working mothers who experience ongoing stress in a cutthroat corporate environment may find it challenging to keep up with their less stressed colleagues, which could potentially impede their ability to advance in their careers.

2.3 Strategies for Working Mothers to Manage Stress:

Working mothers in difficult professional settings employ a range of strategies to manage the multiple stressors they face. Coping strategies center on personal approaches to managing stress in the given circumstances. Working women need to learn effective time management techniques in order to juggle their work obligations with childcare and housework. According to the findings of a study conducted by Allen (2001), effective time management comprises allocating tasks according to their significance, utilizing tools for planning, and setting realistic deadlines. Working mothers can develop a sense of independence and lessen the feeling of overload by carefully managing their time.

Based on research conducted by Arunachalam and Venugopal (2023), cognitive reframing techniques can be an effective strategy for stress management in addition to time management. Reevaluating difficult situations from a more optimistic perspective is known as cognitive reframing. Working mothers can reduce the emotional toll of stress by confronting negative thought patterns and viewing demanding circumstances in a more positive manner. (Morin, 2023). For example, reinterpreting a tight deadline as a chance to demonstrate one's abilities rather than as an insurmountable obstacle can greatly lessen tension and anxiety. In addition, practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques like yoga, meditation, or deep breathing exercises can help control the stress response and enhance mental health. These relaxation methods provide working mothers with the resources they need to handle stress in the moment and build resilience over time.

2.3.1 Resources for Supporting Working Mothers:

 According to the research study (Abendroth, 2012), many forms of support are essential in helping working mothers reduce stress in addition to their own personal coping mechanisms. Social networks and family can offer priceless practical and emotional support. In addition to helping with childcare duties and lending a sympathetic ear, a supportive spouse, partner, or close friends can foster a feeling of belonging and community. Robust social networks can

mitigate the adverse effects of stress by cultivating a shared sense of problems and providing emotional support.

Progressive company practices and culture can also greatly aid working mothers in managing their stress. According to Bhende et al. (2020), companies that provide flexible work arrangements, such as reduced workweeks or remote work choices, can give working mothers more control over their schedules and improve work-life balance. Working mothers can also experience less stress and fewer childcare burdens thanks to employer-sponsored childcare subsidies or on-site childcare facilities. In conclusion, creating a work-life balance culture in the workplace where extended work hours, which are not customary, will greatly lessen the overall stress levels of working mothers and enhance their overall health.

As to the findings of a study conducted by Fink (2022), working women can also benefit greatly from community resources, including mental health services, after-school activities, and reasonably priced daycare centers. Having access to these tools, particularly reasonably priced daycare, can help working women manage their stress more effectively, relieve some of their practical burdens, and stop marginalizing them. In conclusion, in order to handle the intricacies of their responsibilities and lessen the harmful effects of stress, working mothers rely on a combination of personal coping mechanisms, social network support, and progressive workplace regulations.

2.4 Maintaining a Work-Life Balance for Working Mothers:

Blithe (2023) talked about how working mothers still face substantial challenges in striking a sustainable work-life balance while juggling social and economic demands. There are several reasons behind this continuous conflict. Workplace cultures that prioritize long work hours sometimes leave working women with little time for personal and family obligations, despite the notion that a "good mother" should be there for her children round-the-clock. Extended hours at work might result from the expectation of showing unshakable dedication and constant availability, which further intrudes on personal time and perpetuates a sense of unease. As (Fink, 2022) concluded, this imbalance might eventually result in shame, dissatisfaction, and exhaustion, which can also lead to women considering leaving their job.

Another significant hurdle to working women's ability to manage their personal and professional lives are childcare obligations (Redmond et al., 2006). It is always a logistical and emotional tightrope walk to meet work expectations and make sure the kids are getting proper care. This problem is made worse by the lack of readily available, reasonably priced, and trustworthy daycare providers. Working mothers may worry about the standard of care their kids receive, especially if they must rely on their extended family or make do with subpar daycare arrangements. This ongoing state of anxiety increases the load of stress overall and makes striking a work-life balance much more challenging.

Furthermore, the difficulties working mothers face in maintaining a work-life balance are

mostly due to cultural expectations and deeply ingrained gender norms. Traditional gender norms often place the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic duties on mothers. In contrast to fathers, who are not required to prioritize their children's needs, mothers are expected by society to prioritize these responsibilities, even if it means sacrificing their professions (Aarntzen, 2023). Working women who don't live up to these standards could experience insecurity, guilt from society, and internal conflict, which makes it harder for them to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Additionally, the difficulties working mothers face in maintaining a work-life balance are mostly due to cultural expectations and deeply ingrained gender norms. Ultimately, working mothers find it extremely difficult to strike a balance between work and life because many corporate environments provide little in the way of organizational support and flexibility.

Lack of employer-sponsored childcare choices, restricted access to parental leave policies, and rigid work schedules all add to the stress and challenge of striking a healthy balance. According to the study by Crompton and Lyonette (2006), organizations that do not adopt supportive policies and acknowledge the special needs of working mothers unintentionally foster an environment that disadvantages mothers at work and makes it more difficult for them to succeed in both their personal and professional lives.

2.5 Effects of COVID-19 on the Stress and Coping Strategies of Working Mothers:

Referring to a recent report (Rosen et al., 2024), working mothers' stress levels escalated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's profound changes to the dynamics of work and family life. Their stress levels were significantly influenced by the pandemic's unique range of difficulties, which caused them to alter their methods for dealing with it.

Fontenelle established in his research (2021) that one of the main causes of stress for working women during the pandemic, the increasing duties associated with looking after others as well as homeschooling their children. Due to restrictions on staying at home, and school closures, homeschooling duties had to be quickly added to the already demanding job load. As a result, working mothers were successfully managing two full-time jobs, with little to no distinction between their responsibilities for taking care of their children. For working women's stress was further increased by the necessity of fulfilling their professional obligations and guarantee their children's education.

A study by Zahrotun (2023) discovered that while the transition to remote work offered some benefits for work-life balance, but it also brought with it unexpected challenges. Working mothers found themselves perpetually "on" due to the blurring of work and personal life boundaries, making it difficult to genuinely switch off and disconnect from work. This ongoing presence at work may worsen depressive and burnout symptoms, specifically for mothers who find it hard to keep up with the demands of distant work with parental responsibilities.

For working women, this epidemic also severely affected the boundaries between work and life. It became more challenging to maintain an acceptable boundary between these two domains as childcare and work increasingly took place within the home. Lack of boundaries may cause work to spill over into personal time, making it more difficult for already stressed mothers to unwind and heal. The research investigation carried out by Van et al. (2023) yielded the afore-mentioned conclusion. Furthermore, having work-related distractions around the house all the time might worsen feelings of overload while decreasing productivity.

Following that, the pandemic's effects on isolation and uncertainty added to the stress that working mothers were already under. Social isolation has been linked to major mental health problems. problems, according to a study by Jenkins (2023), and policies like social distancing and lockdown hinders reduced options for social connection and support relationships, leaving people feeling alone and disconnected. The worldwide ambiguity surrounding the global pandemic and its long-term implications, according to the study by Bavolar (2023), increase anxiety and stress levels even further.

Working mothers' mental health suffered greatly during the pandemic as a consequence of these mental health issues as well as the extra responsibilities of childcare and job opportunities. As it sums up, the COVID-19 pandemic caused an enormous amount of disruption to working mothers in demanding business requirements. Stress levels were elevated due to elevated caregiving responsibilities, the shift to remote work, a blurring of work-life boundaries, and the adverse impacts of isolation and unpredictability on mental health. The

2.6 Persistent Guilt Grip: A Concern for Mothers Who Work:

Many working mothers endured a sense of guilt, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, which caused all of the disruptions. It results from the intricate interactions that exist between one's personal objectives, societal standards, and the day-to-day challenges of juggling a demanding work and home life. Additional investigation of the intricate dynamics of guilt and how it impacts working mothers is provided in this section.

2.6.1 Sources of guilt:

1. Household vs. Work: In relation to studies performed by Aarntzeh (Aarntzeh et al., 2023) and Maclean (Maclean et al., 2021), female workers often have trouble with guilt related to pushing off their parental or professional duties. Overworking or failing to meet deadlines can make one feel as though it's disappointing your peers or leader and focusing on work can make one feel blameworthy about missing taking care of the kids.

2. Standards and Expectations: Based on Aarntzen's research (2023), idealized images of the "perfect" mother who prioritizes childcare and domestic tasks primary are often portrayed

among social expectations surrounding motherhood. Working women who break from this tradition by pursuing employment opportunities or occasionally putting work first may feel guilty for failing to live up to these accepted standards.

3. Imperfections and Shortcomings: Depending on a study by Zhou (2020), feeling insufficient and guilty over perceived shortcomings may originate from constant pressure to perform efficiently in both his professional life and parenting duties. Working women may feel guilty about missing out on school functions, not finishing home tasks, or not having sufficient downtime for one-on-one time with the children.

2.6.2 Consequences of Guilt:

 The well-being of working mothers could be severely endangered by constant feelings of guilt. It could result in anxious, depressive, or inadequate self-worth emotions. As shown in According to Myrzabekova's (2024) study, feeling guilty can also make it more difficult for a mother to make decisions and enjoy her time with her family and at work. Guilt can sometimes make it harder to be productive at work. Guilt-ridden women may exhibit absence from work, a state in which they are physically present at work but mentally diverted by their kids or chores at home, which reduces engagement and productivity.

2.6.3 Coping up with Guilt:

There are a variety of techniques that working mothers can use to manage and mitigate the overwhelming effects of guilt. The authors of the investigation (LaGraff and Stolz, 2023), putting one's own opinions and priorities first and criticizing and changing inappropriate expectations from society can be a significant beginning. Feelings of inadequacy can also be eased by developing self-compassion while acknowledging that perfection is an unrealistic target.

Another research by (Balykal, 2023) establishes that it's also essential to seek help from family and partners in a transparent and open manner. In order to achieve a more manageable balance, working mothers might gain from setting realistic standards for both themselves and those around them. They may also benefit from negotiating for flexible work schedules or childcare support. Mothers who use scheduling and prioritization tactics can also reduce feelings of overlooking critical responsibilities by focusing on the most vital activities. For working mothers, guilt governance is ultimately a continual practice. Working mothers may minimize the adverse effects of guilt on their health and feel more confident as well as accepting of themselves as they manage the demands of their roles by using these strategies and recognizing that guilt is a typical emotion.

2.7 The Irish Context: Stress, Policies, and Working Mothers:

Analyzing the viewpoints of working mothers in challenging corporate environments is made feasible by the particular setting that Ireland offers. Their access to support communications networks and stress levels are greatly impacted by a variety of elements, such as business

practices, societal attitudes, and economic realities.

Shifting Tides: Gender Roles and Working Mothers: Although Ireland has made progress in In recent years, despite achieving gender equality, conventional cultural views about motherhood have still exist (source: Global Family Survey 2019). Working mothers who also aspire to excel in their chosen fields might encounter internal struggle and guilt due to the expectation that women prioritize childcare and domestic duties. Their already stressful lives are considerably more stressful by the added social pressure.

High-Pressure Corporate Environments: The Competitive Irish Corporate Landscape encourages a culture of long working hours, heavy workloads, and performance-driven stress, corresponding to other reports (CSO Ireland, 2023; Motherly, 2024). A recent survey discovered that 60% of working mothers want to work part-time or flexibly. This environment of perpetual stress may increase working mothers; already stressful commitments more intense. Finding a good work-life balance is made more difficult by the lack of flexible employment possibilities

Policies and Economic Needs: Regulations established by the government have an important role in supporting working mothers. Ireland supplies some support, which includes childcare. subsidies and parental leave schemes. However, the Barnardos report from 2023 illustrates that having access to and the cost of childcare continue to be significant barriers, particularly in developing towns. Mothers who face high levels of stress and few support systems may feel obligated to continue working due to the financial necessity for several households to have two earnings. It is important to understand the contextual attributes present in the Irish environment in order to evaluate the distinctive challenges that working moms endure in high-pressure workplaces.

2.8 Existing Literature Gaps

Despite an abundance of studies on stress management and working moms, there still exist several significant gaps that prohibit us from fully understanding their experiences in the Irish context, especially in the midst of the COVID-19

1. Confined Longitudinal Studies: The majority of research that has been done so far adopts a cross-sectional approach that gathers experiences at a single instance in time. In order to comprehend how mothers adapt to changing circumstances, how approaches to managing stress change over time, and the long-term consequences of stressors like the pandemic, longitudinal studies that follow working mothers over time are required.

2. Emphasis on Irish Working mothers: While a lot of study has been carried out on working mothers, only a fraction of it has been done expressly with an Irish viewpoint. To build specialized support networks and advance the well-being of Irish working mothers, it is essential to look at the particular obstacles they encounter in the context of the country's

specific socioeconomic, cultural, and policy surroundings.

3. Impact of Quickly Changing Context: Working women's job and family circumstances were significantly altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature that is now published might not sufficiently explain how mothers adjusted ways of coping for dealing with homeschooling, remote jobs, and higher anxiety levels. To fully understand the long-term effects of these modifications on stress and mental health, more research needs to be done.

4. The post-pandemic recovery phase provides a distinctive chance to investigate how working mothers are adapting to the "new normal" It is essential to carry out research to investigate how regulations at work are evolving, how societal views are changing, and how moms cope with the pandemic's consequences, including as childcare complications and constant stress. Filling in these gaps in the literature will be vital for gathering an extensive knowledge of the intricate interactions between guilt, societal pressures, and work demands that contribute to working mothers' stress experiences in high-pressure corporate environments, in particular the Irish context. In order to boost working mother's well-being and create a more equitable balance between work and life for this important group of workers, further study can help develop supportive networks and workplace policies. Moreover, the purpose of this research is to provide working women with the knowledge that will enable new mothers to establish a balance between their personal and professional lives while offering solutions for addressing any stressful obstacles that may emerge.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Introduction

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research approach will be used, which will include the participation of mothers who are working in high-pressure corporate environment using the method of structured interviews. In the domain of qualitative research, the research methodology section is an essential foundation that provides a structured framework for data collecting and analysis (Saunders et al., 2016). This chapter takes the reader on a tour through the rich tapestry of the research technique used in our qualitative study, explaining its relevance and goal. Adopting a meticulous research methodology helps us to improve the overall quality of our research endeavour while also guaranteeing the validity, trustworthiness, and integrity of our findings. The purpose is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the influence that COVID-19 Pandemic has had on stress management strategies employed by working mothers. As part of this study, particular research issues will be addressed via the collection of qualitative data. The interview questions will be intended to gather qualitative insights from a diverse sample of working mothers in the corporate sector.
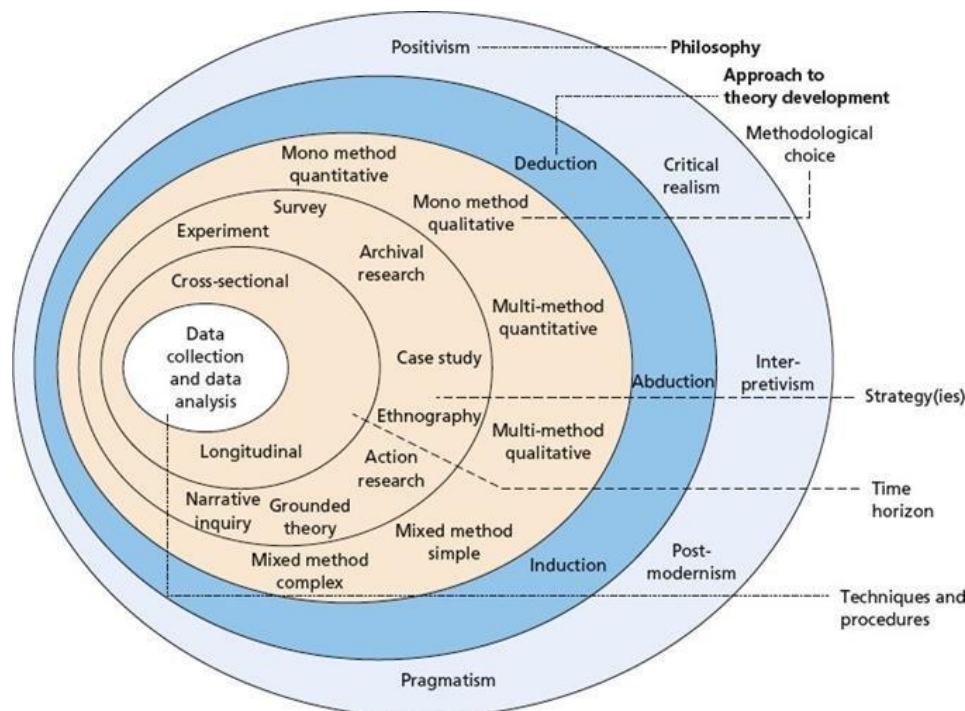
3.2 Research Design:

Figure 1: **Research Onion** (Saunders *et al., 2016)*

Bryman and Bell (2011) emphasized the importance of study design, emphasizing its function in methodically gathering, analysing, and interpreting data. It functions as a framework for researchers, aiding them in formulating research questions, choosing the appropriate methodology, and selecting the most suitable data gathering procedures. This study adopts a comprehensive strategy, referred to as the 'onion model,' to illustrate the complexities of research design. In this work, the research onion model proposed by Saunders et al. (2016) has been utilized. According to this model, every research project comprises five important levels, namely, research philosophy, approach, strategy, choice, time horizon, and techniques.

Once the philosophy, approach and method is established, the discussion transitions to the specific techniques and procedures implemented for gathering and analysing data. Details are provided on how the research sample was selected, the development of the data collection tool, and the analytical techniques employed. The chapter concludes by considering the ethical issues encountered during the research and acknowledging its limitations.

3.3 Research Philosophy

The field of qualitative research is a complex tapestry woven with philosophical foundations that shape the approach used. We will be exploring the philosophical underpinnings of our research technique in this chapter, beginning with an examination of the "onion model" proposed by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016). This research is founded on the idea that women confront extra problems or stress to the ones that males do, both at work and at home and it intends to explore the best strategies to deal with these issues. The researcher argues that these obstacles are created by social interactions, and they continually alter. Therefore, the philosophy of this research is interpretivism. The choosing of this philosophy may be interpreted using the following assumptions:

This paradigm explores four basic levels: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. It is similar to peeling back the layers of an onion. Each layer, while separate, intertwines harmoniously to influence the trajectory of our study, offering it a solid structure and a subtle essence.

Ontology: Ontological viewpoint respects the subjective aspect of working mothers' experiences of stress in corporate settings, notably under various contexts connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. We realize that each individual's reality is moulded by personal and societal influences, leading to distinct experiences of stress and coping techniques. This viewpoint allows us to study the many ways in which working mothers perceive and manage their stress across different time frames, reflecting the complex, constructed character of their professional and personal life.

Epistemology: From an epistemological stance, this study employs an interpretivist method, ideal for comprehending the nuanced, subjective experiences of our participants. Qualitative technique will explore into how working moms understand their stress levels and uncover the

solutions they utilize in managing such stress. Through semi-structured interviews, we strive to elicit nuanced perspectives that represent the personal meanings and contextual intricacies connected with their experiences. (Creswell, 2014)

Axiology: The moral and ethical issues raised by researching human beings are heavily weighted in this research. The researcher pays close attention to how interactions with study participants may represent and honour their innate experiences and values. Furthermore, by exposing the requirements and difficulties experienced by working moms, this study aims to advocate for changes in workplace regulations in addition to analysing them. This axiological position emphasizes the dedication to social relevance and ethical integrity in research. (Creswell, 2014)

Methodology: This investigation, which makes use of qualitative research methodologies, aims to collect comprehensive, contextualized data using themes analysis and semi-structured interviews. With this method, researcher can evaluate how well different stress-reduction techniques work in three different stages: before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the pandemic. We have particularly selected our technique based on its adaptability and flexibility, which enables us to investigate the dynamic relationships between personal experiences and more general social and organizational frameworks. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018)

3.4 Research Approach

Emerging interest in pressures faced by working mothers served as an inspiration for my thesis, which focused on a comparative analysis for stress management techniques used by working mothers in high-pressure corporate environments in Ireland, specifically during the pre-, during-, and post-COVID phases. Through semi-structured interviews, this study uses an inductive technique to uncover patterns and thoroughly examine how these pressures change throughout these different time periods. This approach makes it possible for insights from working mothers' individual experiences to surface, giving researchers a better grasp of the coping strategies they use and the changing obstacles they encounter as the epidemic progresses.

3.5 Method Choice

The purpose is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the influence that COVID-19 Pandemic has had on stress management strategies employed by working mothers. As part of this study, particular research issues will be addressed via the collection of qualitative data. The interview questions will be intended to gather qualitative insights from a diverse sample of working mothers in the corporate sector.
This will allow for an in-depth assessment of their perspectives regarding how the pandemic affected their own wellbeing practices, how it influenced workplace policies in response to

remote work and increased workload, how heightened anxiety levels and constant fear of pandemic contributed in their stress management and dealing with the guilt as well as societal pressure regarding the childcare responsibilities. It becomes essential to explore the philosophical foundations and methods that give qualitative research life in order to fully comprehend the significant relevance of research technique in the setting of qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research opens its canvas to comprehend and interpret the tapestry of social phenomena from the perspective of the participants themselves, capturing the depth, complexity, and nuance inherent in human experiences, in contrast to the world of quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analyses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

3.6 Research Contributions:

This study is of the greatest importance since it has the potential to make significant contributions to both the policy makers and working mothers in Ireland. In the first place, the purpose of this research is to help improve the work-life balance and reducing the stress levels in the lives of working mothers through suggestions and findings gathered by a deep understanding of emotional values and professional duties that demand equal attention from working mothers. These insights, have the potential to play a crucial role in influencing the mindset of working mothers, both new and established. Underscoring effective stress management strategies can mitigate the feelings of inadequacy often associated with the social pressure to "do it all". This can foster a sense of community and shared experience among working mothers. It can also influence the creation and implementation of workplace policies that are suited to the specific problems of motherhood and possibilities of a better work life balance in this population group. Organizations that are active in the corporate sector have the ability to improve their competitive position and reduce the operational risks that are related with workforce management if they start promoting workplace wellbeing as much as they promote productivity.

This research presents a unique opportunity to bridge the existing gap between academic inquiry and practical application. The findings can inform policymakers, support organizations, and corporations in creating more supportive systems for working mothers, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and balanced work environment for this vital segment of the workforce. By fostering a deeper understanding of the specific challenges faced by working mothers, the research can empower policymakers and organizations to develop more targeted and effective support systems. The study's exploration of how workplace policies and practices impact the well-being of working mothers can be a valuable resource for corporations seeking to create a more supportive work environment. By identifying areas where existing policies may fall short, the research can guide corporations in developing strategies to mitigate stress and promote work-life balance for working mothers. This can ultimately contribute to a more engaged and productive workforce. This research has an additional potential to contribute to raising awareness about the unique challenges faced by working mothers. By shedding light on the complex intertwinement

among work demands, societal pressures, and guilt, the study can encourage a broader societal discussion about the need for a shift in expectations surrounding motherhood and work-life balance. These insights can pave the way for a more constructive environment for working mothers within families, communities, and workplace.

3.7 Techniques and procedures

3.7.1 Sample Selection

The target population for this research is all working mothers employed in high-pressure corporate environments in Ireland, who have been managing work and kids since last 5 or more years. This target population was sampled using a non-probabilistic approach. Using this method, the sample is not chosen at random but rather by the researcher using their subjective assessment (Berndt, 2020). More precisely, homogenous purposive sampling was the sample strategy employed as this study is focused on a specific subgroup that satisfies the following requirements:

- They are mothers working in high pressure corporate environments in Ireland.

- They have one or more kids.

- They have a working experience of more than 5 years.

- Age group 30-55 years old.

To understand the backgrounds of the respondents, a brief overview of their profiles is provided. While much of this information was gleaned from the interviews, additional details were also sourced through background research on the interviewees. A sample of 15 working mothers was obtained from the population of all mothers working in high-pressure corporate environments in Ireland. Multiple working mothers from Ireland were contacted to participate in the research.
Table 1 shows in more detail the demographic of the interviewees.

Table 1 Participants' Characteristics:

Respondents Code	Age	Kids	Work Experience	Work Setting
E1	30	1	6 years	Remote
E2	35+	2	15 years	On-site
E3	30s+	1	10 years	Hybrid
E4	35+	2	12 years	Hybrid
E5	50+	3	30+ years	Hybrid
E6	40+	1	16 years	On-site

E7	35+	2	8 years	On-site
E8	35+	1	6 years	Hybrid
E9	50	2	24 years	Hybrid
E10	35+	2	11 years	Hybrid
E11	30+	1	7 years	Hybrid
E12	35+	2	12 years	Hybrid
E13	40+	3	15 years	On-site
E14	40+	1	12 years	Hybrid
E15	45+	2	15 years	Hybrid

The researcher reached out participants through emails. The email used to contact participants can be found in Appendix 2. All the participants hail from corporate sector, possess varied educational backgrounds. Most have around 10 years of work experience with some even exceeding 20 and 30 years. All of these mothers have an experience of 5 or more years balancing work and childcare duties together and all are married. Most participants fall under young demographic, though some are near to their fifties and one is more that fifty years old. These participants collectively share their stories shedding light on various Stress Management Strategies that worked out for them. The varied exposure of participants to their work settings, number of kids and work experience enhances the depth of insights for the study. By collecting the perspectives and advices from distinct participants, the study can achieve a commendable understanding of the intricacies and implications COVID-19 introduced in already stressed mothers.

3.7.2 The instrument for data

Since this is a qualitative study, individual interviews with the participants were used to get the information required. The interview guide was designed in such a way that it enabled the participants to begin recollecting earlier events. They must recall their prior actions and emotions as part of this research, which aims to comprehend their perspective. In addition to adhering to Kallio et al. (2016)'s framework for creating a semi-structured interview guide, Kriukow (2022) offers three essential points that will aid participants in recalling prior events and eliciting more detailed responses. Using the brain to your advantage, or utilizing cognitive psychology, is the first step. Because it is kept in long-term memory, memory may retain and recall information, even knowledge that individuals do not consider to be known. The relationship between a person's body, brain, and surroundings is known as cognition (Zlotnik and Vansintjan, 2019). Because of this, employing keywords facilitates interviewees' retrieval of data from their subconscious. It is vital to begin with broad inquiries in order to do this, then progressively limit them down to focal questions. If you ask most individuals right away, they seldom recall how they felt at that precise time. However, if you ask them a broad question beforehand, when you ask them a focus question, they may utilize cognitive mnemonic devices to make the connection between the wide and focus questions.

In order to let the participants feel at ease and acquaint themselves with the topic, the

interview guide's questions were intentionally worded extremely broadly at the outset (McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl, 2019). The following were the opening questions:

- When did you first start working? What were the feelings associated with your first job?
- What motivated you to rejoin at work after your first child? How did you feel after joining back?

To investigate the issue from a different perspective, same question was asked with a different view point and more in depth to provide with a more thorough response. An example of this would be the questions that were included in the interview guide for this study:

- How did you typically manage work and child together? Was there any stress related to childcare responsibility and demanding career? If yes what were the sources of stress for you?
- Can you describe any specific strategies or routines you found particularly effective in managing stress during that time as a new mother before COVID-19?

Using hypothetical questions is the last approach. Asking questions like these relieves some of the participants' pressure and encourages them to provide information that they would not have felt comfortable discussing. This is the hypothetical query that was included in the study's interview guide.

- Thinking back to when you started back at work as a new mother, what information would have you liked to know that could have helped you in managing stressful situations and dealing with guilt, if any?

Breaking down the questions this way provided a good quality interview guide in which the participants were able to tell their stories. These interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour long long and were carried out in person or via Google meet because it was the most convenient for participants and a safe platform to use. An example of the interview questions utilized can be tracked down in Appendix 1.

All the interview questions were arranged in sections to obtain the necessary information to achieve the research goals. Below is the information provided on how the interview questions relate to objectives.

How interview questions relate to objectives:

Questions	Related to objectives	Objectives
1	1	• Examining the Interplay of Work Demands, Societal Pressures, and Guilt in the Stress Experienced by Working Mothers in High-Pressure Corporate Environments in Ireland.
2	2	
3	2	
4	1	
5	1	
6	1	• Understanding the Stress management strategies that are used by working mothers in relation to childcare responsibilities and career advancement within these 3 timelines.
7	1 & 2	
8	2	
9	2	
10	2	
11	3 & 2	• Analysing the Impact of workplace policies and practices on the wellbeing of working mothers managing stress.
12	3	
13	3 & 2	
14	1 & 2	
15	2	
16	1	

3.7.3 Pilot test

Since the researcher wrote the interview guide, it was necessary to do a pilot test before utilizing it to collect data. The purpose of the pilot study was to evaluate the suitability of the questions and offer the researchers some preliminary recommendations on the feasibility of the investigation. (Abd Gani et al., 2020). Additionally, it helped the researcher establish

rapport with the informants and gain experience conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Pilot study helped the researcher acquire interviewing techniques and conversational flow. One working mother participated in pilot test and shared her insights, interview questions were edited again for the actual interviews.

3.7.4 Data analysis:

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed by researcher, This aided in data organization following the interview. The researcher sought the participants for their agreement after informing them that they were being videotaped. The participants' identities are anonymous, and in order to ensure anonymity, their names were coded during the transcription process. Thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyse the data. This analysis approach was selected because it allows for the flexibility in data interpretation that is necessary for this study, as its goal is to examine stress management strategies for working mothers and how COVID-19 exacerbated the problem.
This approach is highly intuitive and simple to use, making it a great choice for novice researchers analysing qualitative data. It's crucial to recognize that it helps in obtaining a detailed description of the data and identifies patterns within it (Braun and Clarke, 2006). There are seven processes in this analysis: transcription, familiarization with the data, coding to extract central themes, theme searching, theme evaluation, theme definition, and reporting of findings. In order to protect the confidentiality of the interview subjects, the transcripts were arranged and examined. After the transcripts were complete, Microsoft Word was used for both the coding and transcription process. A separate Word document was utilized to complete the coding and identify the themes. Following the organization of themes and subthemes, Chapter 5 (Findings and Analysis) presented the findings.

3.7.5 Ethical Considerations and Accessibility

Formal ethical permission is granted by the University and its academic members prior to any research endeavours. The researcher stays steadfast to fundamental ethical precepts such as protecting human dignity, guaranteeing beneficence, and enacting justice throughout the whole study process. Pseudonyms or coded identifiers were used in place of real names in order to protect participant privacy. As noted by Creswell, this measure guaranteed the highest level of secrecy (2007). In order to enhance the participants' anonymity even more, all data transcripts were cleaned up by removing any identifying identifiers and replacing them with randomly issued pseudonyms.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The findings of 15 semi-structured interviews with mothers who are working in high pressure corporate environments are presented and analysed in this chapter. The researcher used thematic analysis to interpret the data and identified distinct themes which correlate with the research objectives and address the primary research questions.

Theme 1. Stress Management Strategies & Sources of Support

- FINDINGS

Working mothers employ various strategies to manage stress, with varying degrees of success. These strategies include planning and time management, mindfulness, seeking professional help, and relying on a support network of family and friends.

"I try to plan my week every Sunday night. It helps to have a clear idea of what's ahead, though unexpected things often throw the plan off." (E1)

"I used to worry a lot but since the time I started managing my time effectively, It has been easier and less stressful" (E6)

"I started seeing a therapist last year to help manage my stress. It has made a significant difference in how I cope with daily pressures." "Therapy doesn't give us the direct solution but the strength to deal with problems" (E3)

"My family is my backbone. My parents and in-laws visit every year for a couple of months to help in proper upbringing of my kids, and my husband shares household chores. Without their support, I couldn't manage." (E1)

- ANALYSIS

The findings reveal that employed mothers use many stress management techniques, such as detailed planning, mindfulness techniques, professional counselling sessions, and family support network. These tactics play a central role in proper juggling of work-related progress and kids caring duties.

Theme 2. Work-Life Balance Challenges

- FINDINGS

Achieving a work-life balance is particularly challenging for working mothers, with many reporting that they often sacrifice personal time to meet work and family obligations. Some participants feel these sacrifices are a part life and help in better managing dual

responsibilities whereas some participants think they don't have enough time for themselves or even family and it leads to unhappiness, they feel so unproductive.

"There's really no balance, to be honest. It's more like a compromise where I end up giving more time to work to meet career goals and less to my family, which I regret deeply." (E2)

"I try to leave work at work, but with remote working, the lines are blurred. My home has turned into an office, and it's tough to switch off." (E13)

"Weekends are supposed to be for family, but I often find myself catching up on work or running household errands. It feels like I'm always on duty. I don't get any time for myself. I became a sad and boring person" (E11)

"I try spending more time doing things for my family and that makes me happy. I have accepted this quality of life and if I feel guilty and selfish for taking out time for myself and forgetting the responsibilities as eventually they are not disappearing anywhere, so better I focus on giving my kids a life they deserve, If they are happy around me, I find my own happiness there" (E15)

- ANALYSIS

The theme pinpoints the hardship of striking a healthy work-life balance, where working mothers frequently end up making heavy personal sacrifices for the sake of their work. The efforts of separating roles in work and in home can sometimes be complex in the case of blended environments especially with remote work due to demands that are always on call leading to dissatisfaction and overall wellness.

Theme 3. Impact of COVID-19 on Stress Management Strategies

- FINDINGS

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted stress management strategies. The shift to remote work, while initially seen as a relief, eventually added to the stress due to the increased difficulty in separating work and family life. Seven out of 15 participants stated that they are working more at home as compared to working at office. Most of the participants found it difficult to adapt to new remote work and remote school setting, a few participants with grown up kids found it easier to manage work at home.

"When we first started working from home, I thought it would be easier to manage everything. But soon, the boundaries disappeared, and it felt like I was working all the time." (E1)

"The pandemic made it impossible to stick to my usual stress relief activities like yoga classes or going out with friends. I had to find new ways to cope, mostly indoors." (E2)

"Handling homeschooling on top of my full-time job was a nightmare. It multiplied my stress levels to a point where I felt completely overwhelmed every day." (E11)

"We were all dividing the household chores and nobody felt burdened" "My kids were helping me out with remote work as I was not used to it, my elder son was setting up my screens every morning" (E6)

"Remote work made situations easier for me as I got to work at my own pace" (E7)

"I never thought I will celebrate my dad's birthday on a video call" (E12)

"I signed up for online yoga classes because I wasn't able to find motivation doing it alone" (E9)

- ANALYSIS

The COVID-19 pandemic inevitably reformed mothers' stress management approach, as remote work broke the classical boundaries between work and home life. However, the pros of flexible workspaces, for many, were in contradiction with the downsides of having the personal and the professional spaces in the same space for others. Adaptations brought in digital solutions such as online exercise classes; however, the strong demand for sustainable learnings to erase the gaps formed by the varied effectiveness of these new approaches is present as well.

Theme 4. Mother Guilt and Societal Expectations

- FINDINGS

The theme of mother guilt is deeply intertwined with societal expectations, which dictate that mothers should be able to balance their careers and family life seamlessly. 12 out of 15 participants experienced feelings of guilt once in there motherhood when they perceived themselves as falling short of these expectations emerging from both the society and their own children. Some participants stated that they don't feel guilty but responsible and empowered.

"I constantly feel guilty when I'm working late because it means less time with my children. Society expects you to manage everything perfectly, but it's just not possible." (E12)

"I don't listen to what society says behind my back, until and unless I am raising my children well society doesn't matter. I am earning so that I can afford a better lifestyle for myself and my kids"(E3)

"The worst is when you hear comments from other parents at school about how you're always the last to pick up your child. It's a constant reminder that I'm not there enough." (E2)

"Sometimes when my child is sick, she makes me feel guilty for going to work. Sometime I have important meetings I can't cancel and I feel like if my kid is not happy who am I earning all this money for?" (E14)

" I had to once miss my kid's birthday for a work trip and he still mentions it most of the time" (E9)

"Even my own family sometimes makes me feel guilty for prioritising my career at times. It's a no-win situation; you're judged no matter what choices you make." (E4)

- ANALYSIS

The theme "Mother Guilt and Societal Pressure" delineates the huge emotional pressure working mothers face as they struggle to keep up with the expectations created by society and family that they ought to be executing in a career and a caring role without fault. On one hand, some people become proud and glad, whom on the other hand, others can experience too much criticism and self-judgment which may result in their health problems and their decision process on work-life balance.

Theme 5. How Workplace Policies and Practices Affect Work-Life Balance and if Workplace Policies are Actually Practiced

- FINDINGS

Despite well-intentioned workplace policies aimed at supporting work-life balance, there is often a gap between policy and practice, which affects their effectiveness. But 40% of participants stated that their managers and colleagues are very supportive and policies at their workplace are followed properly without making them feel like they're not performing good at work.

"Our company has a flex-time policy, but no one uses it because there's an unspoken rule that it reflects poorly on your work ethic." (E2)

"I have a full-time remote work on my contract with or without pandemic but now my manager is indirectly forcing or asking me if I can come to office at least once a week" (E1)

"We have policies for remote work, but the expectation to be available beyond regular hours has actually increased. It's like we're always on call."(E13)

"The policies look great on paper and in theory should help, but the management doesn't always support them in practice, so you end up not taking advantage, I vocalised this to my manager and now things are fine." (E5)

"People sometimes don't understand the importance of maternity leaves, My colleague once asked me "How was your vacation?" and I was deeply hurt" (E11)

"I work flexible hours and if I start working early, I log out early as well, I work as many hours on my contract not more and that's what it should be" (E7)

"My manager is extremely supportive and even if I want leaves on a short notice, most of the time I get it" "If I complete my work on time, they don't care if I am online or offline" (E3)

- ANALYSIS

The theme goes through a gap between these work life balance policies and their implementation. The policies are beautiful in the paper but, in reality, the cultural norms and management practices are always against these policies, and the women activists even have more problems and stress than before. Even though the report states that 40% of workers have a supportive workplace, a large number of employees face barriers that inhibit them to fully utilize the given opportunities. Maternity discrimination, if present can hinder any attempts of proper implementation of favorable policies and it will be a source of unnecessary stress and regret to working mothers. In that case, they have to make a tough decision between career advancement or caring for the family. At the same time, they are confronted with disapproval from office colleagues and supervisors. Thus, the only solution to the unconscious bias is a strict policy enforcement and a cultural change in organizations that would facilitate real diversity and inclusion to create a fair workplace for everyone, including the working mothers.

Theme 6. How Workplace Support Can Be Enhanced

- FINDINGS

The need for enhanced workplace support is clear, with suggestions for improvements that could make a significant difference in the lives of working mothers.

"I think having on-site childcare would make a huge difference. It would alleviate so much stress knowing my child is close by and in good hands." (E4)

"More genuine support from management for using flexible work options would help. It shouldn't be just a policy but part of the company culture." (E1)

"Regular check-ins by HR to ensure that the policies are being followed and to gather feedback on what else could help would be beneficial. We need a voice in this." (E8)

- ANALYSIS

The stress is laid on the necessity of the team by employer who will be skilled enough to allow working mom to perform her work in the best possible manner.

Theme 7. Comparative Analysis: Pre-Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Strategies

- FINDINGS

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the stress management strategies of working mothers. Before the pandemic, these strategies mainly centered around time management, support networks, and work-life balance. In the post-pandemic context, these strategies have evolved to address new challenges.

"Pre-pandemic, I relied on after-school programs and sometimes my parents to help with childcare. But during-pandemic, I had to adapt to homeschooling and handling everything myself." "Things are back to normal now" (E8)

"Working from home during the pandemic blurred the lines between work and home life. My strategy shifted to setting strict boundaries, but it's still a struggle." (E13)

"I started valuing life more" (E10)

"Before the pandemic, I managed stress by taking breaks to visit the gym. During lockdown I did online workouts at home, but it was harder to find time and space with everyone around." (E12)

"Before pandemic I used to panic very often but now I learnt how to deal with difficult situations calmly" (E10)

- ANALYSIS

The comparative analysis of pre-pandemic and post-pandemic stress management strategies for working mothers highlights significant adaptations and a gradual return to normalcy.

Theme 8. Strategies for Enhancing Support

- FINDINGS

The need for better support systems for working mothers is clear. This theme explores strategies for enhancing support from employers, communities, and families.

"Employers need to promote a culture that genuinely supports flexible work arrangements, making it clear that using them won't negatively impact our careers." (E6)

"It is very difficult for me to pick my kid from creche as it is far away from my office, I think flexible time schedules are necessary" (E2)

"Community support groups for working mothers can offer emotional support and practical advice, helping to create a network that reduces stress." (E9)

"Families need to share responsibilities more equitably. My partner taking on more of the household chores has made a world of difference for my stress levels." (E5)

- ANALYSIS

These recommendations emphasize important areas for improving help. Working moms may greatly reduce their stress levels by implementing these methods, which include building community networks, promoting a fair division of household duties, and encouraging a supportive workplace culture.

Theme 9. Finding Best Approaches to Manage Stress Better as a Working Mother

- FINDINGS

Based on the findings, several approaches emerge as particularly effective for managing stress as a working mother:

"Setting clear boundaries between work and personal life is crucial. I've learned to log off at a set time each day, even if it means unfinished tasks." (E5)

"It's okay to feel sad and overwhelmed, feel what you're feeling and then think what can help you"(E3)

"ASK FOR HELP, if you feel like things are out of control, speak up." (E1)

"Regular self-care practices, like meditation or exercise, help me manage stress levels and maintain my mental well-being."(E13)

"Having a strong support network of family and friends has been vital. They help share responsibilities and offer emotional support when needed."(E4)

- ANALYSIS

This theme consolidates various strategies, highlighting the importance of boundaries, self-care, Seeking support, effective time management and support networks. By integrating these approaches, working mothers can effectively manage stress and achieve a more balanced lifestyle.

5.   Discussion

This study covers the complex issues of stress management for working mothers in Ireland's high-stress workplaces, focusing on the interaction between expectations at work, social norms, and guilt experiences. Three broad timelines—pre-pandemic, pandemic, and developing post-pandemic—were identified by the literature analysis and all the major ways that mothers employ to balance childcare obligations and career progress. The influence of workplace practices on these working mothers' well-being is being further examined by the research and was not discussed in literature review. Through the examination of data gathered from in-depth interviews, the conversation aims to bring the experiences of working mothers into line with the body of research, shedding light on the strengths and weaknesses of the support networks that are currently in place in corporate environments. The results are arranged to methodically address every research goal and to answer all five questions emerged from research objectives, offering a thorough understanding of dynamics at play and suggesting avenues for enhanced support and policy reforms.

5.1 Discussion on Question 1

Working mothers in high-pressure corporate environments in Ireland employed a range of coping strategies before the COVID-19 pandemic to manage the stress associated with juggling childcare and career advancement. Strategic planning and effective time management allowed them to schedule their weekly tasks and anticipate unexpected challenges, supporting the literature review. Also, emotional and practical help was supplied by robust support systems of family and friends. Nevertheless, these techniques also exposed important weaknesses; working mothers were frequently more vulnerable to stress in the absence of strong institutional support networks at their places of employment, particularly when those networks were undermined or absent. This scenario demonstrated the necessity of more extensive workplace regulations in order to provide working moms with the support they need. (Based on insights from E6, E8, E11 and E5)

5.2 Discussion on Question 2

This part looks into how cultural expectations affect the guilt that working mothers frequently experience while working in high-stress work environments. The results show that mothers are usually expected by society standards to maintain an ideal balance between taking care of their children and their employment, which is seldom achieved in practice and causes a great degree of guilt. As discussed in the literature review, when these mothers put work before family, they are often judged, which makes them feel even more guilty. Strong peer and family pressure to do well in all positions is a common source of stress and guilt, which gets worse by remarks that highlight these unattainable standards. The report emphasizes how critical it is for society to embrace more realistic and understanding perspectives on the difficulties faced by working mothers. Understanding the actual struggles these women face might significantly lessen the shame they feel for not living up to these high social norms. (Based on insights from E12, E4, E9, E2)

5.3 Discussion on Question 3

Working mothers' approaches to stress management were dramatically changed by the COVID-19 epidemic. The transition to working from home and the closing of schools forced working mothers to quickly adjust, causing the lines between their personal and professional lives to blur. This study discovered that mothers who continued working from home had to learn new coping strategies, such establishing clear boundaries between work and home and looking for online assistance to reduce stress. Although at first, these adjustments frequently resulted in increased adaptability and independence in stress management for some mothers. Primary research confirmed that there were heightened anxieties due to the pandemic and fear of uncertainty. The necessity for continuous support and adaptability as the pandemic circumstances evolve is shown by the fact that these new techniques' efficiency varied from mother to mother. (Based on insights from E8, E12, E10)

5.4 Discussion on Question 4

According to the primary research, a substantial gap between the implementation of workplace policies is felt by majority of working mothers, which are intended to reduce stress and improve the well-being of working mothers in high-pressure corporate environments in Ireland, and how they are actually carried out. Examples of these policies include flexible work arrangements and childcare support. Due to a corporate culture that does not fully accept or implement these regulations, working moms are left to handle significant stress without the help that was meant to close this gap. Therefore, even in cases where there are policies designed to support working mothers, their effectiveness is significantly hindered by the absence of practical implementation by some colleagues or managers, making it challenging for working mothers to take use of the measures intended to support them. (Based on insights from E2, E13, E5, E11)

5.5 Discussion on Question 5

Working women changed their stress management practices dramatically in reaction to the epidemic, emphasizing the long-term benefits of remote work and a greater dependence on digital health resources like online exercise courses and mindfulness applications. These modifications highlight how important it is for companies to adapt and improve their support networks in order to better accommodate working moms' new normal. Now that hybrid work arrangements are introduced and situation is getting back to normal, some doable recommendations for enhancements include standardizing on flexible work schedules, enhancing mental health resource accessibility, and revising organizational rules to better support the blurred lines between work and personal life. These tactics can help companies better assist working mothers' well-being in stressful work contexts.
(Based on insights from E6, E1, E10, E13)

5.6 Limitations of the Study
As this research and findings are extracted from a small sample, more impactful information could have been obtained by a bigger sample size, due to time constraints researcher could only get insights from 15 participants. These findings are based on what participants really felt when it comes to Stress Management and Motherhood combined with Working in stressful settings.

6.   Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the complex challenges and strategies related to stress management among working mothers in high-pressure corporate settings in Ireland. It became clear that the combination of workplace demands, societal expectations, and personal guilt significantly influences the stress these women face. Mothers handled their obligations before the epidemic with careful planning, networks of support, and socialising more. But these plans had to be quickly altered due to the COVID-19 epidemic, highlighting the fragility and resiliency of working moms in these unheard-of circumstances.

The research found that despite the existence of policies aimed at supporting work-life balance, such as flexible working hours and childcare assistance, there is a significant disconnect between these policies and their actual application. This gap frequently leaves mothers without the needed support, intensifying their stress. Furthermore, the trend toward remote work and the rise in the usage of digital solutions for stress relief following the pandemic point to a tendency toward more independent approaches to work-life balance management for some working mothers.

In conclusion, this thesis highlights the crucial need for a reevaluation of corporate cultures and structures to truly support working mothers. Strengthening the implementation of flexible work policies, improving access to mental health resources, and fostering a workplace culture that authentically supports work-life balance are essential. Such changes will not only aid the well-being of working mothers but also lead to healthier, more productive workplace environments. Not only workplace but also at home, there is a need to understand the dual roles played by working mothers and constant support should be provided by family members. This will lead to a healthier environment at home.

6.1 Recommendation for future research
Numerous areas for additional investigation were discovered as this study moved along. While this study yielded valuable insights into the stress management strategies employed by working moms in Ireland, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods can yield larger insights. Because of the limited scope of this study, the researcher discovered additional themes but could not focus on them, such as the influence of societal expectations on the sentiments of women experiencing postpartum depression during COVID-19. In summary, more study in this area may be conducted.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions

Demographic questions:

1. How old are you?

2. How many children do you have, and what are their ages?

3. Are you employed full-time or part time?

4. Do you currently work in a remote, hybrid or on-site setting?

5. What is your educational background?

6. When did you first start working? What were the feelings associated with your first job?

Research questions:

1. Pre-Pandemic Strategies for Stress Management (Theme 1)

1. What motivated you to rejoin at work after your first child?

2. How did you typically manage work and child together? Was there any stress related to childcare responsibility and demanding career? If yes what were the sources of stress for you?

3. Can you describe any specific strategies or routines you found particularly effective in managing stress during that time as a new mother before COVID-19?

2. Societal Pressures and Guilt (Theme 2)

4. How do societal expectations surrounding motherhood impact your feelings when balancing work and childcare responsibilities?

5. Can you share any instance where you had to choose work over your child/children? How did you feel?

6. Can you describe any instances where societal pressures or norms influenced your decisions or behaviours related to work-life balance?

7. Thinking back to when you started back at work as a new mother, what information would have you liked to know that could have helped you in managing stressful situations and dealing with guilt, if any?

3. Impact of the Pandemic on Stress Management (Theme 3)

8. How did the COVID-19 pandemic, including factors like school closures and remote work arrangements, affect your stress levels? What were the main reasons for this change?

9. Did you have to adapt or change your previous coping mechanisms in response to the pandemic? If so, how?

10. What additional stressors or anxieties emerged for you as a working mother during that time?

4. Workplace Policies and Stress Management (Theme 4)

11. To what extent do you feel that existing workplace policies and practices support your efforts to manage stress as a working mother?

12. Can you provide examples of specific policies or practices that have either helped or hindered your ability to balance work and family responsibilities?

13. How do you believe workplace support could be improved to better address the stressors faced by working mothers in high-pressure corporate environments?

5. Post-Pandemic Adaptations and Recommendations (Theme 5)

14. In the post-pandemic context, what changes or adaptations have you made to your stress management strategies as a working mother?

15. Are there any lessons or insights from your experiences during the pandemic that you believe could inform recommendations for better supporting working mothers in high-pressure corporate environments?

16. What advice would you give to new working mothers?

Appendix 2. Email used to contact participants formally and providing them with enough information about the research. (after a verbal confirmation)

Hello,

I would like to invite you to take part in a qualitative research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please feel free to contact the researcher- Pragya Dadhich (pragyadadhich646@gmail.com) to clarify any doubts or if you would like to get more information related to the interview. Take your time to decide whether to take part in this research or not.

About the researcher:

My name is Pragya Dadhich and I am a student of National College of Ireland. I am currently in the final semester of a M.Sc in Management. Through this interview, I am attempting to understand the Stress Management Strategies for Working Mothers, employed in high pressure corporate environments in Ireland.

I will be highly thankful to you if you spare a few moments out of your precious time to help me in my primary research. By undertaking this interview, I aim to gain a greater understanding about the STRESS working mothers face, it's sources and different strategies to deal with it. I am also curious to compare how these strategies evolved throughout Covid pandemic. Participation in this research involves one in-depth / semi structured interview, which will approximately take 45-60 minutes, consisting a maximum of 20 questions. This interview will not ask for any identifying information such as your name, email address or professional information.

If at any point during the interview, you wish to stop you can simply deny. Participation in this research is completely voluntary and there are no negative consequences of taking part in it.

The data collected here will be kept confidential and anonymous. All responses or transcripts will be stored in a password protected folder, the password for which will only be known to the researcher. The results of the study will be used for academic purposes only. Please note, as this research will not collect any identifying information, it will not be possible to retract your answers once you have completed the interview. In line with National College of Ireland's Data Retention Policy, data will be securely stored for a period of 6 months after my research submission following which it will be destroyed completely.

If you decide to be a part of my research, please tell me your availability for the interview sometime this week or next week?

Best Regards,
Pragya Dadhich.

**Appendix 3. STRESS MANAGEMENT GUIDE FOR NEW WORKING MOTHERS.
"PRO TIPS BY EXPERIENCED MOTHERS"**

- A template designed by researcher as an additional conclusion based on Stress
  Management for New Working Mothers, based on all the advices interviewees had for
  them to manage stress better.

STRESS MANAGEMENT GUIDE
for New Working Mothers

PRO TIPS BY
"EXPERIENCED MOTHERS"

PRIORITISE SELF-CARE: "SELF-CARE ISN'T SELFISH, IT'S ESSENTIAL FOR BALANCING MOTHERHOOD AND WORK"	**SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS:** "PERFECTION ISN'T THE GOAL; DOING YOUR BEST IS."
DELEGATE AND ASK FOR HELP: "DON'T HESITATE TO REACH OUT; YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW MANY ARE WILLING TO LEND A HAND IF YOU SIMPLY ASK."	**ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES:** "WORK-LIFE BALANCE STARTS WITH CLEAR BOUNDARIES."
STAY ORGANIZED: "A LITTLE PLANNING GOES A LONG WAY IN MANAGING STRESS."	**CONNECT WITH OTHER MOMS:** "FINDING SOLIDARITY IN MOTHERHOOD MAKES THE JOURNEY EASIER."