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The Cost of "Having It All": A Narrative Synthesis of Systematic Causes Of Burnout in Working Mothers

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Abstract: Modern society has promoted gender equality and created more opportunities for women with children to participate in the labour market. Working mothers, who participate in the workforce while actively managing family responsibilities, however, often face the challenging "double shift" between professional careers and family care. If burnout, in the traditional sense, is conceptualised as physical and mental fatigue within the scope of work, then working mothers face double the pressure. This narrative review synthesises recent studies to evaluate the specific aetiology, distinct structural dimensions, and systemic drivers of burnout in working mothers. It will contribute to a holistic understanding of the struggles they face and suggest preventative measures and interventions.
Driving from the Conservation of Resources (CoR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001), our review includes publications focusing on the topic of burnout syndrome in working mothers and containing information on its causes, severity, and extent, risk factors, symptoms, and intervention strategies.
This review categorises the causes of maternal burnout across four systemic levels: macro-systemic (societal and cultural pressures), meso-systemic (organisational and workplace environment), micro-systemic (domestic and relational dynamics), and individual. Burnout in working mothers is not merely an individual pathology or a lack of personal resilience, but a predictable systemic consequence of the mismatch between socio-cultural requirements and institutional resources. To mitigate this public health crisis, structural interventions are needed, including equitable redistribution of domestic labour, organisational flexibility, and robust social policy support.

Introduction

With the demands of modern society, the number of working mothers in the labour market is steadily increasing. According to the OECD Family Database 2023, the average of 71% of mothers were employed, which is a very significant number. While working, socialising, and financially supporting their families is incredibly beneficial and admirable for mothers, they also face immense physical and mental challenges stemming from both family and work responsibilities, which can easily lead to burnout over time.

Burnout

According to the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), burnout is an occupational phenomenon caused by chronic, unmanaged workplace stress–distinguishing it from short-term stress (ICD-11; Khammissa *et al*., 2022). Aligned with Maslach *et al*. (2001), it is characterised by three dimensions: exhaustion (emotional depletion), cynicism (irritability and detachment), and inefficacy (low productivity and morale). Although defined as a non-medical condition, severe burnout is associated with profound physical consequences, including cortisol imbalance (Lennartsson *et al*., 2015), autonomic overactivity (Oliveira *et al*., 2023), cardiovascular disease (John *et al*., 2024), metabolic changes (Tsvetkova *et al*., 2025), and immunosuppression (Balcerowska & Kwaśnik, 2025).

Burnout in Working Mothers

Empirical studies confirm that working women experience higher rates of burnout than men (Allwood *et al*., 2022; Huang *et al*., 2019), but isolating family structure reveals that working mothers suffer significantly worse chronic stress than working fathers or childless women (Leineweber *et al*., 2018; van Hedel *et al*., 2025). As maternal labour participation rises (ABS, 2011), balancing professional demands with intensive childcare leaves this group uniquely vulnerable. While working fathers retain personal relaxation time, mothers expend their remaining energy on the domestic "second shift" (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). This imbalance is stark: only 26% of working men regularly contribute to housework and 19% to childcare, compared to 63% and 66% of working women (Bernard, 2017), systematically depriving mothers of critical recovery.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

Stevan E. Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory posits that stress is an objective consequence of external challenges, driven by a fundamental motivation to acquire, protect, and develop valuable resources. In the Conservation of Resources Evaluation (COR-E), Hobfoll and Lilly (1993) categorised resources hierarchically: primary (survival-related, like health and housing), secondary (social support and employment), and tertiary (culturally shaped status or financial credit providing access to primary and secondary assets). Structurally, COR further divides these into four functional types: object (e.g. housing), conditional (e.g. job stability, marriage), personal (e.g. resilience, self-esteem), and energy resources (e.g. time, money, physical energy).

The theoretical framework operates on two primary principles and four corollaries (Hobfoll, 1998). Principle 1 states that resource loss is disproportionately more psychologically salient than resource gain. Principle 2 dictates that individuals must invest resources to protect against loss, recover from depletion, or secure new gains; for example, workers trying to gain conditional resources like promotions must often sacrifice substantial energy resources like time (Salanova *et al.*, 2010). Finally, COR outlines four corollaries: those lacking resources are highly vulnerable to further loss, those possessing resources are better positioned to acquire more, resources do not exist in isolation but travel in synergistic "clusters", and—severely depleted individuals inevitably shift into a defensive survival mode.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model posits that employee well-being and productivity depend on the balance between job demands (aspects requiring sustained effort) and job resources (elements that help achieve goals and reduce demands) (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). While excessive demands deplete energy and trigger burnout, robust resources foster motivation, engagement, and resilience (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker *et al.*, 2023). The updated JD-R Theory 2.0 explicitly defines two distinct pathways driven by this balance: the health impairment process, where chronic exposure to high demands without recovery causes exhaustion and burnout, and the motivational process, where job resources fulfil basic human needs to drive long-term engagement and high performance (Bakker *et al.*, 2023).

By utilising those theoretical frameworks, our narrative review synthesises recent studies to comprehensively and systematically investigate and explain the causes of burnout in working mothers. It is also expected to contribute to a comprehensive, scientifically sound understanding of the difficulties they face, and to suggest preventive and intervention measures.

Methods

This narrative review systematically reviews and evaluates recent empirical literature around the aetiology, dimensions, and systemic drivers of burnout among working mothers. Based on the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and the Risks and Resources Theory, this study systematically reviews empirical literature from Google Scholar and PubMed on maternal burnout causes, severity, and solutions. The search strategy focuses on peer-

reviewed publications and longitudinal designs to categorise the causes of burnout in working mothers across macro (socio-cultural), meso (organisational/domestic), micro (individual), and cumulative cross-domain spillover levels, thereby assessing the structural problems between work-family demands and limited institutional resources.

The ideology of Intensive Mothering

Society has established cultural norms, ideologies, and expectations that shape an "intensive mother" and an "ideal worker" that working mothers are expected to conform to.

Coined by sociologist Sharon Hays (1996), the ideology of "Intensive Mothering" (IM) posits that child-rearing is a woman's ultimate moral and societal duty, framing the child as the absolute centre of a mother's life. This cultural script mandates that mothers wholeheartedly sacrifice their own time, health, social relationships, and careers to prioritise their children's needs, while casting fathers in a purely secondary role. Empirically, the adoption of IM ideology–rather than the act of raising children itself–directly impacts a mother's health. The pressure to conform to these unrealistic standards causes chronic stress, fear of failure, maternal monopoly on household management, and overall exhaustion (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). Furthermore, mothers with young children who endorse these views often experience significantly higher levels of depression, increased stress, and lower life satisfaction (Rizzo *et al*., 2013). Logistically, modern intensive parenting methods overwhelm mothers with conflicting, "expert-guided" instructions on nutrition, sleep, and emotional regulation. Viewed through the lens of the Resource Conservation Theory (COR), the pursuits of the ideal mother are seen as desirable resources, but they demand a constant and severe drain on energy and time. This unsustainable trade-off transforms daily caregiving into a heavy administrative burden, ultimately leading to cognitive overload and chronic hypervigilance (Reich-Stiebert *et al*., 2023).

The "Ideal Worker" norm

Joan C. Williams (2000) argues that the modern workplace is structured around the "Ideal Worker" model—an employee who works full-time, continuously, and is available for overtime. This standard systemically disadvantages working mothers who must simultaneously navigate the "intensive mothering" archetype at home. Due to subconscious biases, employers routinely assume mothers are less dedicated, flexible, and competent. Consequently, mothers face severe penalties in employer treatment, wage negotiations, and career advancement (Correll *et al*., 2007; Lucifora *et al*., 2021).

Laboratory experiments confirm that mothers face lower evaluation scores and depressed starting salaries, whereas fathers encounter no such disadvantages and often experience a career benefit (Correll *et al.*, 2007). This economic disparity is compounded as mothers frequently reduce hours, take extended leave (Lükemann, 2021), or exit the workforce entirely to manage postpartum and domestic demands (Schneider *et al.*, 2021). Ultimately, the friction between rigid workplace expectations and domestic pressures inflicts intense psychological strain, making it extraordinarily difficult for mothers to maintain well-being (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018; Dugan & Barnes-Farrell, 2020).

The Loss of the "Village"

Modern urbanisation, individualism, geographical migration, and the isolated nuclear family structure have left parents lacking the traditional support systems from the wider community and extended family, which is also a significant cause of burnout in working mothers. Research has confirmed that individualism plays a larger role in parental burnout than economic inequality between countries or any other characteristics (Roskam *et al.*, 2021). Individualism is defined as a type of culture in which people prefer to think of themselves rather than others and prioritise personal gain over the common good (Kim, 2014). In countries that emphasise individualism, parents often perceive a clear discrepancy between the societal image of parenting and their own self-image. Consequently, parents who perceive this discrepancy are at a higher risk of burnout. A low level of shared parenting responsibility, high societal expectations for autonomy, and significant differences between parents and children are also predictors of a higher risk of parental burnout (Roskam *et al.*, 2024).

The stigma surrounding mental health

A survey revealed that 40% of women experiencing postpartum depression symptoms do not seek help due to shame, guilt, stigma, and a misunderstanding of treatment options, leaving their conditions undiagnosed (Gavin *et al.*, 2005; Kozhimannil *et al.*, 2011; Manso-Córdoba *et al.*, 2020). When considering intervention, mothers fear being treated disrespectfully, deemed unfit, or losing custody of their children (Anderson *et al.*, 2006). This hesitation is worsened by the guilt over body image and self-comparison to idealised media depictions of mothering, which makes women reluctant to confide in others for fear of judgment (Jackson *et al.*, 2024). Ultimately, social pressure to project a flawless image of "having it all" creates a powerful barrier that prevents mothers from seeking early support due to the fear of being perceived as incompetent.

The Meso-Level Causes: Domestic and Workplace Contexts

At the meso-level, the work-family conflict driving maternal burnout manifests across the three dimensions of Greenhaus and Beutell's (1985) framework: *time-based conflict*, where professional demands physically restrict the hours needed for the domestic "second shift," causing sleep deprivation; *strain-based conflict*, a psychological spillover process where workplace anxiety and fatigue bleed into the home; and *behaviour-based conflict*, which forces a rapid cognitive shift between the analytical posture of corporate success and the nurturing disposition required for parenting. Simultaneously navigating these structural conflicts accelerates emotional burnout and systematically undermines a mother's sense of personal accomplishment in both domains.

Partner support is a critical meso-level determinant of maternal burnout, a dynamic explained by Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. In dual-income households, unequal physical and mental labour directly accelerates emotional exhaustion. This relationship is bidirectional and prone to cognitive bias: advanced burnout can cause a mother to misinterpret genuine parental assistance as implicit criticism of her competence. This cognitive mismatch triggers a maladaptive "stress spiral" where domestic conflict replaces recovery, undermining marital harmony and ultimately destroying the mother's personal identity and sense of achievement across both professional and maternal roles.

Beyond work and marital pressures, specific child characteristics determine the burden of caregiving that leads to maternal burnout. Unlike occupational stress, maternal burnout is proportional to the number, age, and developmental needs of children in the household (Alouane, 2025). While infants are physically demanding and disrupt sleep, adolescents shift the burden to emotional regulation. This caregiving pressure peaks in demanding contexts, such as raising children with neurodevelopmental differences or special needs, which essentially turns family life into a second job that is emotionally stressful (Ahmad, 2026). Over time, these ever-increasing developmental needs fragment a mother's finite energy, hindering opportunities for recovery and increasing feelings of emotional burnout and diminished personal achievement.

"Motherhood penalty" causes burnout among mothers through severe economic and occupational discrimination. Research has quantified salary reductions of 9% to 18% per child in the UK, US, and Germany (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009), and an unexplained penalty of 4% to 8% per child in Switzerland, where employers set lower starting salaries for mothers (Oesch *et al.*, 2017). Beyond financial losses, this systemic punishment devalues mothers by attributing to them the stereotypes of being less competent and less committed to the organisation than non-mothers. Institutional bias forces working mothers to invest

disproportionate effort in proving their competence within prejudiced systems. Because this constant effort is rarely adequately rewarded, the capacity for a quick response is depleted. Consequently, the "motherhood penalty" becomes a serious occupational stressor, directly accelerating emotional burnout and diminishing personal achievement by limiting career advancement.

According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti *et al*., 2001), burnout among mothers at a moderate level is primarily due to a structural mismatch between high workplace expectations and available organisational support. During periods of occupational crisis, the burden of care and mental health falls on working mothers (Mucharraz and Cano *et al*., 2024). More importantly, informal support from partners or family is often insufficient to protect women from occupational burnout; instead, systemic protection relies on formal institutional resources, such as flexible work arrangements, stable schedules, and clear work-life boundaries (Mucharraz and Cano *et al*., 2024). Workplaces lacking these structural safeguards force mothers to adapt to a rigid environment unsuitable for the realities of childcare. As the gap between demanding job requirements and scarce institutional resources widens, emotional fatigue erodes mothers' sense of competence and professional achievement, leading to severe burnout.

The Micro-level: Domestic and Relational Dynamics

Micro-level causes of burnout in working mothers include individual psychological and cognitive traits, interpersonal and domestic dynamics, and behavioural patterns that affect how professional and maternal expectations are managed.

According to the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), in the resource loss cycle, burnout occurs when highly valued resources, such as energy, time, sleep, or self-esteem, are depleted after a major investment (Balogun & Afolabi, 2020). Working mothers constantly use their resources to deal with professional and maternal demands without opportunities for replenishment. This process triggers a spiral toward debilitation. Working mothers who have lower levels of resilience and self-esteem are more vulnerable to burnout.

When mothers are in this exhausted state, even daily work-family disruptions are appraised as existential threats to their identity as a mother and an employee. After evaluating their coping resources, if they conclude that these resources (control, spousal help etc) are insufficient to defeat this threat, the psychological stress response accelerates into burnout (Lebert-Charron *et al*., 2018).

At this micro level, maternal burnout primarily stems from the internal pressure to meet an ideal parenting standard. The fear of failing to be a "perfect mother" leads to a state of heightened vigilance, focused on avoiding mistakes, which often triggers controlling behaviours in mothers, preventing their partners from sharing child-rearing responsibilities (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). While this controlling behaviour temporarily alleviates anxiety about maintaining perfection, it ultimately prevents the replenishment of essential resources by eliminating support from their partners. Consequently, mothers end up bearing the invisible burden of fatigue–such as managing housework, family schedules, and doctors' appointments–entirely alone (Basu, 2024).

According to Lazarus and Folkman's Cognitive Appraisal Theory, burnout occurs when working mothers assess role conflict as a threat to their dual identity (primary assessment) and believe their coping resources are insufficient (secondary assessment). This cognitive pressure exacerbates role overload and negatively impacts occupational and parental identity, with subjective work-family conflict causing severe psychological exhaustion (Gardazi *et al*., 2016). Finally, post-pandemic challenges have significantly exacerbated stress, anxiety, and depression in mothers, confirming that marital dynamics remain a significant factor in maternal psychological distress (Bhowmik, 2024).

The Cumulative Effect: How the Dimensions Manifest

The progressive development of maternal burnout is fuelled by cross-domain contamination, characterised by the spillover and crossover effects identified by Demerouti *et al*. (2005). Within this framework, emotional and psychological exhaustion generated in the workplace bleeds into family life, while domestic pressures impair occupational functioning. This bidirectional stress transfer shapes symptom progression: chronic professional demands deplete emotional energy, prompting a protective emotional withdrawal that eventually hardens into depersonalisation and cynicism across both spheres. Ultimately, this self-perpetuating cycle reduces professional competence and parental sensitivity, causing a severe erosion of personal accomplishment. Thus, work-family pressures are not merely cumulative but mutually reinforcing, locking mothers into a continuous loop of psychological depletion (Demerouti *et al*., 2005).

While cross-domain spillover explains immediate stress transfer, its long-term progression is best understood through Hobfoll's resource loss caravans, where work-family conflict continuously erodes a mother's psychological resources over time (Grandey *et al*., 2007). When high demands lack environmental support–like organisational supervisor

assistance–initial resource investments fail to yield recovery, triggering a self-reinforcing downward cycle of depletion (Grandey *et al.*, 2007). According to the caravan framework, this early drain on time and energy increases vulnerability to further losses, driving the progressive emergence of burnout stages. It begins as a persistent emotional exhaustion, advances to an energy-conserving depersonalisation, and ultimately culminates in a severely weakened sense of personal accomplishment as psychological defences are overwhelmed by dual-domain pressures (Grandey *et al.*, 2007).

Although psychological theories explain internal resource depletion, maternal burnout is ultimately rooted in the material conditions of the structural "double burden" or "second shift" . Time-use research by Suzanne M. Bianchi and colleagues (2012) demonstrates that despite the rising workforce participation, domestic labour remains unevenly distributed along gender lines, leaving working mothers with a persistent shortage of time and labour capacity. Even with equal hourly pay, women still coordinate and manage daily household chores (Bianchi *et al.*, 2012). This immediate transition from paid work to unpaid family care creates a significant barrier to recovery; without opportunities for real rest, continuous strain transforms temporary stress into chronic emotional exhaustion and energy-conserving emotional withdrawal. Ultimately, this structural imbalance prevents mothers from meeting conflicting domain expectations, leading to a severe decline in personal achievement and satisfaction (Bianchi *et al.*, 2012).

Discussion

This narrative review aims to examine the causes, structural characteristics, and systemic determinants of burnout among working mothers. Through the integration of the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, the findings suggest that maternal burnout should not be interpreted as an individual weakness or a lack of resilience. Rather, it emerges as a systemic outcome produced by the interaction of restrictive socio-cultural norms, inflexible workplace structures, and unequal domestic responsibilities.

Theoretical Integration and Systemic Determinants

Integrating the JD-R frameworks and the CoR highlights that working mothers face severe resource deficits within dual high-demand environments. Professionally, they face the "Ideal Worker" standard and the "Motherhood Penalty," which economically

penalises them based on the assumed low commitment (Correll *et al.*, 2007), while domestically, "Intensive Mothering" ideologies shift primary childcare onto them (Hays, 1996). This structural imbalance triggers a resource loss spiral (Hobfoll, 1989) where an unpaid domestic "second shift" blocks recovery (Bianchi *et al.*, 2012). To manage this pressure, mothers often exhibit maternal gatekeeping (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018), which temporarily relieves anxiety but worsens burnout by blocking partner help and increasing invisible mental labour. Finally, widespread mental health stigma acts as a final barrier, preventing exhausted mothers from seeking professional help due to shame and fear of social judgment (Gavin *et al.*, 2005).

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the expanding research, maternal burnout literature remains limited by an overreliance on WEIRD populations, cross-sectional self-reports prone to social desirability bias, and a narrow focus on heterosexual, nuclear families that overlooks single-parent and LGBTQ+ realities. To resolve these gaps, future research must adopt multicultural frameworks encompassing diverse family structures. Additionally, transitioning to longitudinal designs with objective physiological markers–such as cortisol dysregulation and heart rate variability (HRV)–is critical to accurately assess the physical toll of a mother's double burden.

Policy and Practical Implications

Addressing maternal burnout requires shifting from individual coping to structural, multi-level interventions. At the macro-level, governments must enact family-oriented policies like universal childcare subsidies and dual-parent paid leave to challenge the "intensive mothering" ideology. At the meso-level, organisations must dismantle the "Ideal Worker" model through flexible scheduling and "right to disconnect" regulations, while family counselling should promote an equitable domestic split of physical and cognitive labour. Finally, at the micro-level, clinicians can utilise cognitive-behavioural strategies to help mothers deconstruct perfectionist expectations, manage role-conflict guilt, and reduce maternal gatekeeping to foster psychological recovery and resource restoration.

Conclusion

This review shows that burnout in working mothers is not an individual pathology, but a foreseeable systemic consequence between socio-cultural requirements and inadequate institutional resources. Based on the CoR and JD-R frameworks, the "second shift" of unpaid domestic labour causes severe resource loss spirals and cross-domain stress depletion. Solving this public health crisis requires moving beyond individual coping to structural interventions, including equal domestic labour redistribution, organisational flexibility with a "right to disconnect," and strong social policies like universal childcare.

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