

COMPARISON OF THE EFFECTS ON MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN AMONG WORKING AND HOUSEHOLD WOMEN

Original Research

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ABSTRACT

Background: Maternal influence plays a foundational role in shaping the mental and emotional well-being of children, especially during early and middle childhood. Mothers, whether employed or homemakers, impact their children's psychological development through daily interactions, emotional availability, and guidance. Understanding how maternal occupational status affects children's mental health has become increasingly important in public health, particularly in socio-cultural contexts where family dynamics differ based on employment status. This study explores these differences among school-aged children in Faisalabad.

Objective: To assess and compare the mental health status of children aged 6–12 years born to working and non-working (household) mothers.

Methods: A descriptive comparative study was conducted over four months involving 200 mothers of children aged 6 to 12 years from Faisalabad. A non-probability convenience sampling method was used. Sample size was calculated using standard statistical formula with a 95% confidence interval. Data were collected via structured questionnaires incorporating the DASS-21 scale to assess depression, anxiety, and stress levels in children, reported by their mothers. Children below 6 or above 12 years were excluded. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 23.

Results: Among children of working mothers, 61% were found to have normal levels of depression, 19% mild, 19% moderate, and 1% severe. In contrast, 32% of children of household mothers had normal depression levels, 10% mild, 5% moderate, 2.5% severe, and 0.5% extremely severe. Anxiety prevalence in children of working mothers was 31% normal, 17% mild, 40% moderate, 4% severe, and 8% extremely severe. Children of household mothers showed 10.5% normal, 9.5% mild, 22% moderate, 4.5% severe, and 3.5% extremely severe anxiety. Stress levels were also higher among children of working mothers, with 76% normal, 14% mild, 8% moderate, and 2% severe stress reported, compared to 34.5% normal, 9% mild, 3% moderate, and 3% severe among household mothers' children.

Conclusion: Children of working mothers generally demonstrated stronger emotional regulation and resilience, with higher normal scores across mental health domains. However, mild to moderate stress was also more prevalent. These findings emphasize the nuanced effects of maternal employment on child mental health and the importance of balanced family support systems.

Keywords: Anxiety, Child Behavior, Depression, Mental Health, Mothers, Stress, Working Women.

INTRODUCTION

Childhood represents a foundational period in the trajectory of human development, especially in terms of acquiring cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills. During these early years, the architecture of the brain is shaped by a complex interplay between biological predispositions and environmental influences (1). Central to this process is the role of early experiences, which profoundly influence a child's ability to build more complex skills over time. At the heart of these early interactions stands the mother, whose influence has been widely recognized as vital to the psychological and emotional well-being of children (2). The quality of maternal relationships is consistently identified as a strong predictor of a child's future developmental outcomes (3). In many societies, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, the mother's involvement in a child's upbringing remains a key determinant of mental health development. While women's employment undeniably enhances financial independence, improves family income, and offers a sense of empowerment, it also introduces challenges (4). Increased occupational responsibilities often lead to reduced time and emotional availability for children, potentially heightening stress within the family unit (5). In contrast, non-working or household women, by virtue of spending more time with their children, often facilitate open communication, reduce psychological stress, and nurture emotional security. This sustained interaction fosters trust and strengthens the parent-child bond, serving as a buffer against external stressors (6).

The mental growth of a child is one of the most critical public health concerns globally, especially in resource-limited settings. It encompasses a wide range of regulatory factors including nutritional status, parenting practices, cultural norms, environmental conditions, and socio-demographic parameters (7). Optimal mental development in children is strongly associated with better cognitive abilities, improved academic performance, reduced rates of illness and mortality, and greater economic productivity in adulthood (8). Moreover, child development spans multiple domains—motor, cognitive, and socio-emotional—which are all influenced by the nuanced and often underexplored dimensions of parenting behaviors and beliefs. While certain developmental areas are frequently prioritized in public discourse, others, including the reflective capacity of parents to understand their own and their child's mental states, are equally crucial for fostering healthy psychological growth (9). For many working mothers, particularly single parents or those with insufficient household income, employment is not a choice but a necessity (10). However, this economic imperative may impose competing demands on time, often undermining the capacity to engage in meaningful childcare or educational support. While gainful employment can promote maternal self-efficacy and long-term investments in children, it may simultaneously result in stress, fatigue, and diminished parent-child interaction quality, particularly when caregiving and professional responsibilities intersect without adequate support systems (11).

On the other hand, housewives, despite often lacking formal recognition for their contributions, also face significant psychosocial stressors. The demands of caregiving, household responsibilities, and attending to family members with health issues can mirror the mental strain seen in high-intensity professions, contributing to stress and burnout. These stressors, in turn, can affect parenting quality and ultimately impact the psychological well-being of their children (12). Therefore, understanding how maternal roles—both within and outside the workforce—affect child mental health is not only a social concern but a public health priority. Given the multidimensional nature of parenting and its influence on child development, this study aims to explore the association between maternal occupational roles and the mental well-being of children. The objective is to assess how working versus non-working maternal statuses affect children's mental health, and to identify the mediating factors that contribute to these outcomes in the context of contemporary socio-economic challenges.

METHODS

This descriptive comparative study was conducted to examine the association between maternal occupational status—working versus non-working—and the mental well-being of their children aged 6 to 12 years. The research was carried out in Faisalabad over a duration of four months. Participants were selected using a non-probability convenience sampling technique, targeting mothers of children within the specified age range. The inclusion criteria comprised children aged between 6 and 12 years whose mothers either worked outside the home or were full-time homemakers. Children below 6 years and those older than 12 years were excluded to maintain developmental consistency in cognitive and emotional assessments. A total sample of 200 participants was determined using the formula $n = I +$

2C(SD/d) ². Data collection was executed through structured questionnaires administered to mothers, which focused on evaluating their children's mental health, cognitive functioning, and growth monitoring. To assess the emotional well-being and behavioral patterns of the children, the DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale) was incorporated into the questionnaire. All responses were gathered directly from the mothers, who were informed about the study's purpose and voluntarily provided informed consent. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB). Data were entered and analyzed using SPSS software, version 23. Descriptive statistics were utilized to summarize demographic data and clinical characteristics. Comparative analyses were conducted to evaluate psychological outcomes—specifically depression, anxiety, and stress levels—between children of working and non-working mothers.

RESULTS

The findings demonstrated significant differences in the mental health status of children based on their mothers’ occupational roles. Regarding depression levels, 61% of children with working mothers exhibited normal scores, while 19% showed mild depression, another 19% moderate depression, and 1% severe depression. In comparison, 32% of children with non-working mothers had normal scores, whereas 10% exhibited mild, 5% moderate, 2.5% severe, and 0.5% extremely severe levels of depression. For anxiety, 31% of children with working mothers had normal scores, while 17% exhibited mild anxiety, 40% moderate anxiety, 4% severe, and 8% extremely severe anxiety. Children of non-working mothers showed 10.5% normal anxiety levels, 9.5% mild, 22% moderate, 4.5% severe, and 3.5% extremely severe scores. These results indicated that children of working mothers were more likely to fall within the moderate to extremely severe range of anxiety. In terms of stress, children of working mothers showed 76% normal levels, 14% mild, 8% moderate, and 2% severe levels of stress. In contrast, children of household mothers had 34.5% normal scores, with 9% mild, 3% moderate, and 3% severe stress levels. The data suggested that while children of working mothers were more likely to experience mild to moderate stress, children of household mothers were more prone to reduced normal stress levels overall.

Table 1: Depression Levels

Depression Level	Children of Working Mothers (%)	Children of Household Mothers (%)
Normal	61	32
Mild	19	10
Moderate	19	5
Severe	1	2.5
Extremely Severe	0	0.5

Table 2: Anxiety Levels

Anxiety Level	Children of Working Mothers (%)	Children of Household Mothers (%)
Normal	31	10.5
Mild	17	9.5
Moderate	40	22
Severe	4	4.5
Extremely Severe	8	3.5

Table 3: Stress Levels

Stress Level	Children of Working Mothers (%)	Children of Household Mothers (%)
Normal	76	34.5
Mild	14	9
Moderate	8	3
Severe	2	3

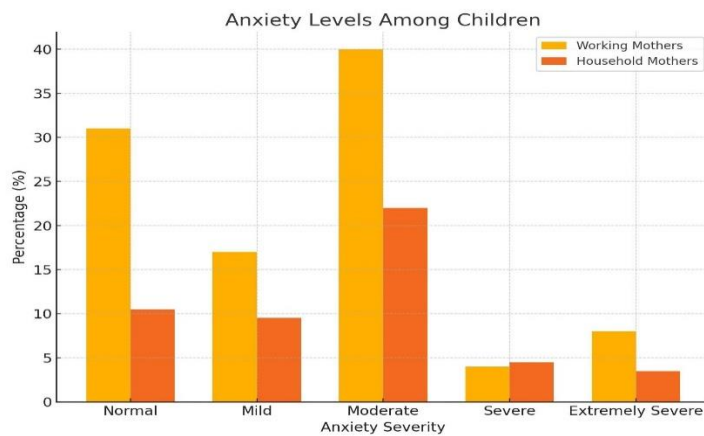


Figure 1 Anxiety Levels Among Children

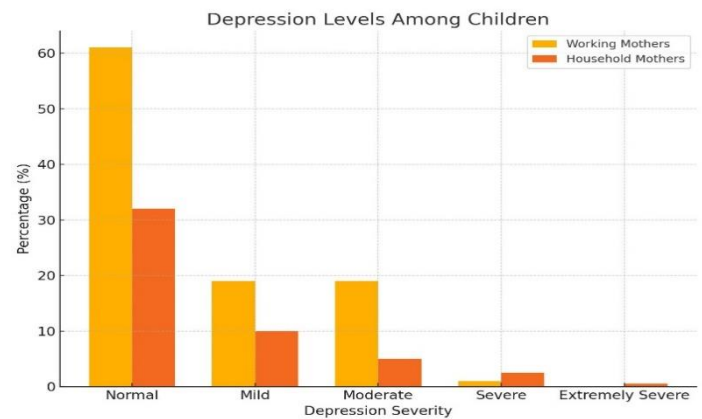
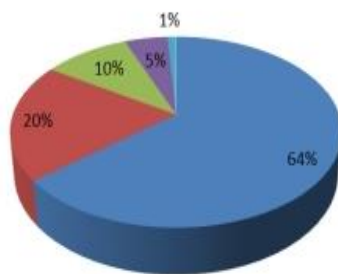


Figure 2 Depression Levels Among Children

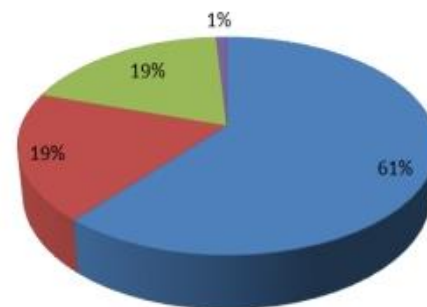
Prevalence of Depression (household) Frequency (n)

■ normal ■ mild ■ moderate ■ severe ■ Extremely severe



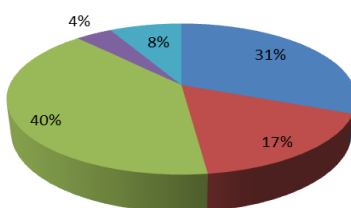
Prevalence of Depression (working)

■ normal ■ mild ■ moderate ■ severe



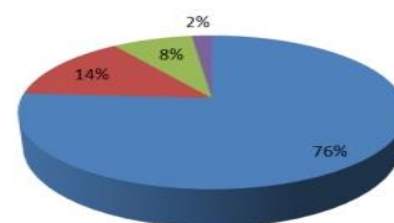
Prevalence of Anxiety (working) Frequency (n)

■ normal ■ mild ■ moderate ■ severe ■ extremely severe



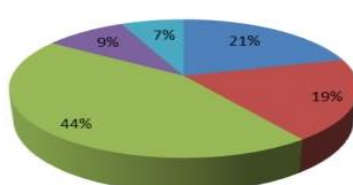
Prevalence of Stress (working) Frequency (n)

■ normal ■ mild ■ moderate ■ severe



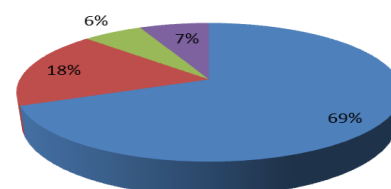
Prevalence of Anxiety (household) Frequency (n)

■ normal ■ mild ■ moderate ■ severe ■ extremely severe



Prevalence of Stress (household) Frequency

■ normal ■ mild ■ moderate ■ severe



DISCUSSION

The present study highlighted a significant difference in the mental health status of children based on their mothers' occupational roles. Findings revealed that children of working mothers showed higher prevalence of normal levels across depression, anxiety, and stress domains when compared to children of household mothers. These results suggest that children of working mothers tend to be more emotionally expressive, socially adaptive, and independent, traits that are often nurtured in environments where autonomy and structured routines are emphasized. Such children were perceived as warmhearted, outgoing, and cooperative, whereas children of household mothers were more often described as reserved, skeptical, and emotionally withdrawn (13,14). These personality and behavioral tendencies may reflect variations in parenting styles, exposure to diverse social contexts, and the psychosocial dynamics within the home environment. In the domain of depression, over half of the children of working mothers experienced positive emotional states, significantly higher than their counterparts with household mothers (15). These results align with prior researches indicating that children exposed to more structured, socially interactive, and cognitively stimulating environments tend to exhibit more positive affect and lower emotional disturbances (16,17). Similarly, in the assessment of anxiety, children of working mothers demonstrated greater self-awareness of daily routines, with 71% showing moderate to high awareness compared to only 36% among children of household mothers. This level of awareness is often associated with enhanced self-regulation, executive functioning, and resilience, attributes that contribute to adaptive functioning in various settings such as school, peer interactions, and family life (18).

Contrary to some traditional assumptions that maternal employment may impair child-rearing quality, the present findings revealed that children of working mothers scored higher in normal ranges across psychological well-being indicators, challenging the notion that maternal absence from home leads to emotional neglect (19). Nonetheless, children of working mothers also showed slightly elevated percentages in mild to moderate stress categories, suggesting that while they benefit from certain emotional and cognitive strengths, they may simultaneously experience environmental stressors associated with their mothers' work-related responsibilities. These findings mirror observations from earlier studies that noted both positive and adverse effects of maternal employment on child development, depending on contextual factors such as parental support systems, work schedules, and family dynamics (20). While these findings present valuable insights, the study is not without limitations. The use of a convenience sampling method and confinement to a single geographical location limits the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the reliance on maternal self-report through DASS-21, although informative, may introduce subjective bias and may not fully capture the nuanced psychological states of children, especially those aged 6–12. The scale's primary validation for adult populations necessitates caution in its application to pediatric mental health assessments via parental reporting. Additionally, the study did not account for potentially confounding factors such as maternal education, socio-economic status, paternal involvement, and the quality of childcare support, all of which may mediate or moderate child mental health outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the study holds strength in its focus on a critical public health issue, offering comparative data on emotional well-being among children in a region where such research remains sparse. The findings provide foundational evidence to inform policies and programs aimed at supporting maternal employment without compromising child mental health. Future studies should adopt a longitudinal design, include objective assessments of cognitive and emotional development, and control for socio-demographic covariates to strengthen the evidence base. Expanding research in diverse socio-cultural settings will also enhance understanding of how maternal roles interact with child mental health across varying contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the occupational role of mothers significantly influences the psychological and behavioral development of their children. Children of working mothers were observed to be more confident, independent, and self-reliant, often demonstrating initiative and a strong sense of personal responsibility. In contrast, children of household mothers tended to be more dependent, receptive to guidance, and influenced by maternal instructions, reflecting a more submissive behavioral pattern. These findings underscore the importance of understanding how maternal roles shape child development and highlight the need for supportive environments—regardless of a mother's employment status—that foster emotional well-being, autonomy, and resilience in children.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author	Contribution
Sadia Manzoor*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Saba Shoukat	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Nadia Manzoor	Substantial Contribution to acquisition and interpretation of Data Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Syed Muhammad Abbas	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Omer Ghani	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Sabir Ali	Substantial Contribution to study design and Data Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Muhammad Sabir	Contributed to study concept and Data collection Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

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