

Article

Working Mothers' Career Aspirations and Priorities Following the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The pandemic resulted in a proliferation of job-related and family stressors for many working mothers. The purpose of the current study is to explore working mothers' career aspirations and priorities in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current sample consisted of 168 working mothers in the United States who responded to open-ended questions developed to understand how they perceived that the COVID-19 pandemic affected their career progression, career aspirations, and priorities. Thematic analysis of these open-ended questions revealed a change in career aspirations for many working mothers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, thematic analysis also indicated that some working mothers shifted their priorities away from their career trajectory and towards family, health, and stability. Three subthemes emerged from working mothers' descriptions of placing greater priority on family following the pandemic: shifting priorities away from work concerns to family needs, increased focus on time spent with family, and recognition that family should not be taken for granted. The findings of the present study attempt to gain a more nuanced understanding of the pandemic's effect on working mothers' attitudes towards their career trajectories, priorities, and families in a post-pandemic worker landscape.

Keywords: working mothers; career aspirations; pandemic; COVID-19; family

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound financial and psychosocial effects on mothers and their families. The pandemic appeared to largely impact the employment decisions of working mothers who either reduced their working hours or exited the workforce completely at higher rates than any other demographic group (Yavorsky et al., 2022). Some data have suggested that working mothers' resignation trends were due to child-care responsibilities or needs to attend to high-risk family members (e.g., older adults; Hite & McDonald, 2020; Schudde et al., 2022; Yavorsky et al., 2022). As working mothers faced increased caregiving demands, many reported challenges with balancing work and family (Chu et al., 2021; O'Reilly & Green, 2021; Rosen et al., 2024). Together, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic had a gendered impact and in turn, disproportionately affected working mothers' vocational and familial decisions.

Scholars have called for work to examine longer-term impacts of the pandemic on families (Andrade et al., 2022; Elhinnawy et al., 2025). To build on previous findings, it may be helpful to explore the reconsideration process working mothers underwent in the months following the COVID-19 pandemic and how their priorities and career



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aspirations shifted. To examine these processes and working mothers' experiences, the current study assessed participants' accounts of perceived changes in priorities and career aspirations using retrospective written responses. Although this study is exploratory in nature, findings may suggest ways to support working mothers and their families given the association between employment and maternal psychological and economic well-being (Gonçalves et al., 2021; Hite & McDonald, 2020).

1.1. COVID-19 and Family

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered family life. Established family routines were sent into a state of flux with work and school closures as well as reduced access to activities and sources of social support outside of the home (O'Reilly & Green, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2025; Rosen et al., 2024). Working mothers were especially affected as they tried to balance job and childcare demands (O'Reilly & Green, 2021). Both career and family are integral to working mothers' identity, and many felt that the pandemic affected them in ways that made it challenging to thrive in both roles (Turner et al., 2022). Mothers reported experiencing role overload as they felt they lacked the time, energy, and resources to meet the demands associated with their jobs as well as their caregiving responsibilities (Chu et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 2024; Turner et al., 2022). Mothers also reported feelings of guilt accompanied this sense of role overload (Rosen et al., 2024; Turner et al., 2022). Past research has highlighted that experiencing role overload and guilt are associated with maternal distress (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). Attending to how mothers responded to the stress of the pandemic and post-pandemic life is critical for family functioning, especially given the potential impacts on their children's well-being (Chu et al., 2021). Researchers have long noted that work-related stress can spill over to home and have negative impacts on family; such spillover may be increasingly likely as the pandemic brought an increase in remote work that blurs the boundaries between work and home (Sahay & Wei, 2023; Tsukerman et al., 2020). For many mothers, remote work continued after the peak of the pandemic, and thus mothers may continue to face stress from blurred boundaries.

Importantly, some families may have adapted to the multiple stressors brought about by the pandemic and ensuing remote work responsibilities (Walsh, 2020). Meaning-making may have helped families navigate stress from the pandemic as they recognized key ways the pandemic affected their lives (Walsh, 2020). Moreover, some parents may have reenvisioned their futures in a post-pandemic world, recognizing new possibilities (Walsh, 2020). Walsh (2020) noted that the pandemic highlighted the fragility of life, which may have encouraged reflection and placed emphasis on the value of relationships, as well as not taking opportunities for granted. The stressors from the pandemic, some of which were financial in nature, and the ways in which families responded to these had the potential to affect work, as discussed below.

1.2. COVID-19 and Work

The economic disruption induced by the COVID-19 crisis resulted in mass layoffs and unprecedented turnover rates. Many grappled with job ambiguity alongside anomalous work changes without adequate resources to adapt and plan for the future (Osborn et al., 2022). Akkermans et al. (2020) have described the impact of COVID-19 on work as a career shock, which refers to a disruptive and unprecedented change in one's work environment that requires workers to reconceptualize their vocational trajectories and aspirations. Indeed, the worker landscape significantly shifted in the aftermath of COVID-19, as employees reconsidered their priorities and personal needs (Hite & McDonald, 2020). When considering quitting patterns, women accounted for 63% of the resignations during COVID, thus suggesting a potential gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis

(Wenham et al., 2020). Findings also suggest that COVID-19 disproportionately impacted occupational sectors dominated by women (Yavorsky et al., 2022). Hence, consideration for possible motivators for women's occupational changes ought to be given.

As noted above, the caretaking responsibilities required by the COVID-19 pandemic also disproportionately impacted women and thus impacted women's work (Yavorsky et al., 2022). In the wake of school and daycare closures, women with children subsumed most childcare responsibilities, exacerbating their in-home labor demands and responsibilities (Hite & McDonald, 2020). Collins et al. (2021) found that these labor demands required working mothers, but not working fathers, to dramatically reduce their paid working hours to ensure time for caretaking responsibilities.

These findings posit that employed mothers' worker roles were affected by COVID-19 in two ways, both by exacerbating the childcare responsibilities and by disproportionately impacting women-dominated occupational fields. In turn, working mothers appeared to be most overwhelmed by the changes of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they reported higher rates of psychological distress, including feeling overwhelmed by health concerns, guilt, unequal divisions of labor, family, and work responsibilities (Clark et al., 2021). Kirwin and Ettinger (2022) explored the mental health and vocational outcomes of 728 working mothers during the years of the pandemic. Their findings posited that nearly 75% of working mothers met criteria for moderate mental illness; however, distress symptoms appeared to be buffered by childcare and job-related benefits such as flexibility in working hours and paid leave. Similarly, many working mothers endorsed feelings of familial and career burnout amidst the COVID-19 pandemic due to the amalgamation of their career and home spheres (Rosen et al., 2023). These findings highlight that the psychological distress propagated by the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted working mothers' parenting and vocational decisions, leading many working mothers to reduce or modify their educational and occupational advancement pursuits in response to newfound work and caregiving responsibilities (Schudde et al., 2022).

Exploring mothers' dispositions towards work continues to hold relevance given the gendered impact of COVID-19 and potential lasting implications. Data collected at the height of the pandemic (e.g., 2020–2021) suggested an intermittent effect on women's psychological wellness, personal values, and career growth, resulting in sharp declines in employment for women, especially mothers (Collins et al., 2021; Yavorsky et al., 2022). It is notable that maternal employment has mostly returned to pre-pandemic rates (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023), and yet, working mothers continue to be impacted by social and economic factors such as a lack of childcare and reduced pay attributable to the COVID-19 crisis (Li & Laughlin, 2024). Conceptualized as the childcare crisis, the supply of quality and attainable childcare remains low in the United States in the aftermath of the pandemic, which is evidenced by a slower return to work rate for mothers when compared to fathers or women without children (Qian et al., 2023). Moreover, women who exited the labor market during the pandemic encountered a wage penalty when re-entering the workforce (Qian et al., 2023). Given that financial challenges and childcare demands exacerbated career burnout in previous studies (Rosen et al., 2023) and that such barriers continue to persist, it is crucial to explore the lasting impacts of COVID-19 on working mothers' career trajectories.

It is noteworthy that while women absorbed the additional childcare responsibilities required by the pandemic, women's disproportionate participation in household and childcare labor when compared to men is a long-standing reality (Yavorsky et al., 2015). Gender norms within the United States have historically sanctioned women into caretaking roles regardless of their worker status (Yavorsky et al., 2015). In turn, working mothers have historically encountered barriers to career advancement, sometimes referred to as the

motherhood penalty in the workplace (Torres et al., 2024). The motherhood penalty is a term used to highlight the ways in which mothers are sometimes denied promotions or leadership positions due to being perceived as unfit for leadership roles, less competent, or less devoted to careers. In addition to workplace biases, working mothers may also face internalized barriers that impede their career progression (Torres et al., 2024). Working mothers are left in a position where they must decide between prioritizing their family or their career. For example, mothers may choose to decline promotion offers because of the burden of increased leadership responsibilities, which interfere with their caregiving or family responsibilities (Bowyer et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2024).

Beyond poor access to childcare, the challenges of balancing work and caregiving responsibilities are also related to lower job retention, which may lead mothers to switch positions more often than their male counterparts (Hardoy et al., 2017). Working mothers who opt to prioritize their caregiving responsibilities over career advancement often consider these personal choices, rather than choices made in light of systemic or structural influences, such as the societal expectation that mothers should prioritize their family's needs over their own or that mothers should shoulder the majority of the caregiving responsibilities (Torres et al., 2024). Thus, it may be important to explore how working mothers' priorities shifted when faced with a health and economic crisis that threatened familial stability.

1.3. Current Study

The current study builds on prior research performed by Rosen et al. (2023) exploring the impact of COVID-19 on working mothers' career concerns during the peak of the pandemic. While Rosen et al.'s (2023) study intended to explore career strains promulgated by COVID-19, qualitative data collected from late 2021 and early 2022 revealed the impossibility of career and home separation for working mothers. Findings suggested that working mothers struggled to balance their work and familial responsibilities in part due to the loss of childcare, work from home policies required by the pandemic, and financial challenges influenced by COVID-19 furloughs and layoffs. Difficulties navigating home life and work life resulted in feelings of career burnout, psychological distress, loss of connection with co-workers and employers, and overall reductions in motivation (Rosen et al., 2023). Thus, we sought to explore the perceived long-term impacts of burnout and COVID-induced career strain on working mothers' career aspirations. While Rosen et al. (2023) found that the majority of working mothers experienced negative impacts in response to the pandemic, it is also noteworthy that some mothers reported positive impacts or neutral impacts at the height of the pandemic. Examples of these positive impacts included opportunities to adapt and gain new career skills or shift towards alternative career trajectories. Neutral impacts referred to working mothers who experienced no change or working mothers who were motivated to reevaluate their values in the face of the pandemic (Rosen et al., 2023). Hence, we also sought to explore how working mothers' career priorities may have shifted when reconsidering their personal values to examine their perceptions of the longer impacts of the pandemic.

Given existing research coupled with the impact of COVID-19 on working mothers' time boundaries and working capacities (Yavorsky et al., 2022), the current study sought to explore the diversity of working mothers' experiences focusing on their articulation of career aspirations and priorities following the COVID-19 pandemic. Working mothers, and women largely, are integral to the health of the United States economy and labor market (Devillard et al., 2018; Turesky & Warner, 2020) as well as the wellbeing of their families, and thus, understanding reasons for working mothers' vocational changes post-COVID may offer insight to potential workplace protections for women with children.

The current study drew on social cognitive career theory (SCCT) as a sensitizing framework to guide the research. According to SCCT, there are three primary facets that contribute to work aspirations and perceived agency in the workplace: efficacy (beliefs about one's personal ability to produce acceptable outcomes in the workplace), adaptability (ability to seek out and identify physical and psychosocial resources needed to cope with changes to one's career role), and work volition (autonomous choice in one's vocational role despite constraints) (Brown & Lent, 2016; Dik et al., 2019). Through the lens of SCCT, which suggests that threats to work aspirations include a loss of work volition, reductions in career self-efficacy, and barriers to career-adaptability (Brown & Lent, 2016; Dik et al., 2019), researchers anticipated that many, but not all, women's work aspirations would be impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Career self-efficacy is largely informed by social messaging and thus, it is likely that women's caregiving decisions were partly informed by a sense of responsibility to assume childcare and household labor tasks and in turn, reduce their commitment to their career role (Bowyer et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2024). COVID-19 may have also reduced worker volition for working women due to an inability to balance both career and caregiving responsibilities (Rosen et al., 2023). Lastly, COVID-19 introduced threats to worker adaptability by presenting employees with an unprecedented set of circumstances without adequate resources, especially for working mothers who experienced alterations in their child(ren)'s care routines alongside changes in their career (Akkermans et al., 2020). Taken together, the authors expected that many working mothers' priorities may have shifted away from career pursuits and towards family and home labor as they grappled with the compounded care responsibilities required in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift toward family would also be consistent with a reevaluation of priorities that may have been spurred by the pandemic, highlighting the fragility of life (Walsh, 2020). Importantly, the pandemic did not affect all working mothers uniformly (Rosen et al., 2023). Employees differ in their capacity to adapt to change, and some organizations are better able to support their workers through dynamic situations, such that they experienced less role overload, guilt, and distress (Cullen et al., 2014). As such, it was expected that some mothers would report no changes or even positive changes in their career aspirations following the pandemic.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Researchers administered an online survey that included open-ended questions inquiring about participants' career aspirations and priorities following the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection spanned from November 2022 to March 2023. Participation was restricted to individuals living in the United States, given the differences in government policies enacted during the COVID-19 crisis across various countries. Criterion inclusion for the current study also required that (1) participants were over the age of 18, (2) participants were employed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) participants were mothers to a child under the age of 18. The final sample included 168 participants.

The majority of participants identified as White (86%), while the remainder of participants identified as Black/African American (6.5%), Hispanic/Latinx (3.1%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1.6%), multiracial (1.6%), and Native American (1.1%). All participants identified as mothers to one or more children. The average number of children for the current sample was 1.66. The average level of education among participants was 15.76 years. Most of the participants reported that they were married (72%). However, 13.4% of participants indicated that they were never married, 5.4% reported they were divorced, 4.8% reported they were in a long-term partnership, 3.2% of participants indicated they were separated from their partner, and the remaining 1.1% reported they were widowed.

In terms of job, nearly half of the sample of participants also indicated that they held supervisory positions (43.5%). The average household income of participants was \$103,084. With regard to the impact of COVID-19 on occupational roles, 12.4% of participants voluntarily left their job in seeking alternative employment, 8.1% of participants temporarily lost their job due to COVID-19-induced furloughs, and 3.8% of participants permanently lost their jobs due to COVID-19 disruptions.

2.2. Procedure

Following university Institutional Review Board approval, participants were recruited using Prolific, a secure online research system that allows individuals to identify studies in which they meet eligibility criteria. Participation involved a larger survey exploring the impact of COVID-19 on working mothers through a series of questionnaires and open-ended questions. Of relevance to the current study were demographic questions and open-ended questions asking about career aspirations and priorities. Upon completion of the study, participants were thanked and compensated \$20 for their participation via Prolific.

2.3. Qualitative Questions

To further explore the impact of COVID-19 on working mothers' career aspirations, open-ended questions were included. Open-ended questions were developed after reviewing existing literature implicating the alterations in career goals and trajectories experienced by women following the COVID-19 crisis (Rosen et al., 2023; Torres et al., 2024; Wenham et al., 2020). Questions align with previous work by Rosen et al. (2023). The questions were (1) Have your priorities changed since the onset of COVID-19? If so, how? and (2) How have the events of the last few years affected your career progression and aspirations?

3. Results

3.1. Qualitative Results

The researchers conducted an inductive thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2022) methodology to better understand how working mothers were impacted by the role changes precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In accordance with the suggestions of Braun and Clarke (2022), thematic analysis occurred via a five-phase process: data familiarization, initial coding, generating themes, reviewing and consolidating themes, and finalizing themes. Researchers compiled all qualitative responses from participants into a single dataset and immersed themselves in the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of and familiarity with the data set.

Two researchers independently engaged in an initial coding process using an inductive analysis approach, allowing codes to emerge from the data rather than adding a predetermined coding framework. During the initial coding phase, researchers sought to answer two primary questions: (a) how participants' priorities regarding family and other key areas had changed since the onset of the pandemic and (b) how the pandemic affected working mothers' career progression and aspirations. Initial codes were generated line-by-line and organized into a preliminary codebook consisting of code labels, operational definitions, and representative participant excerpts. Participant responses were permitted to receive multiple codes when responses reflected more than one relevant concept or experience. Once initial themes were generated, researchers conducted a systematic review of the thematic structure, consolidating some themes and further differentiating others into more specific sub-themes during the reviewing and consolidating themes phase.

Following independent coding, researchers compared coding decisions, discussed discrepancies, and refined code definitions. Disagreements were resolved through discussion

until a unanimous agreement was reached regarding code assignment and interpretation. During this phase, codes reflecting similar meanings were grouped into broader themes and sub-themes. Finally, themes and sub-themes were finalized through iterative review and consensus among the research team to ensure that each theme accurately reflected patterns present across the dataset.

Priority shifts among participants were first distinguished into two categories of change and no change. Three major themes contributing to priority shifts were identified: family, health, and stability (see Table 1). Given the diversity of reasons contributing to aspiration changes, sub-themes were identified. Definitions for each theme and sub-theme are detailed below. Regarding impact on career aspirations, participant responses were coded into three primary groups: Increase in aspirations, reduction in aspirations, and no effect on aspirations. Participants' coding into an increase in aspirations clearly communicated an increase in their career motivations in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Alternatively, participants coded into the reductions in aspirations theme provided clear indications of a loss of motivation or interest in advancing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants coded into the no effect on aspirations theme either reported no effect or did not provide a clear indication of an increase or decrease in aspirations.

Table 1. Operational definitions used for codes.

Theme	Operational Definition
Family	Participant descriptions of shifts in priorities toward family relationships and responsibilities, including spouses/partners, parents, and children.
Health	Participant descriptions of shifts in priorities toward physical or psychological well-being, including physical health concerns, mental health, work–life balance, meaning-making, and increased focus on overall quality of life or sense of purpose. This theme also included references to illness or health concerns related to COVID-19.
Stability	Participant descriptions of shifts in priorities toward financial security, employment stability, income maintenance, and access to work-related benefits. This theme also captured efforts to maintain a sense of control or predictability during the uncertainty of the pandemic.

3.2. Priorities

Researchers explored how participants' priorities had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and while 61 participants (36.3%) reported no change in their priorities, among the participants who did endorse priority changes ($n = 107$; 63.7%), three major themes were identified: family, health, and stability. As multiple codes could be assigned to one participant (e.g., categories could be overlapping), percentages exceed 100%.

3.2.1. Family

A large proportion of the sample ($n = 70$; 41.7%) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had shifted their priorities toward family needs. Many working mothers reported becoming more family-oriented following the pandemic.

"I feel like my family has become more of my priority."

"It [the pandemic] has put a firm emphasis on family for me."

In reviewing working mothers' descriptions of placing greater priority on family following the pandemic, three subthemes emerged: shifting priorities away from work concerns to family needs, increased focus on time spent with family, and recognition that family should not be taken for granted (see Table 2 for representative quotes for each subtheme).

Table 2. Subthemes and representative quotes.

Subtheme	Representative Quotes
Shifting priorities away from work concerns to family needs	- I think that I am more focused on my family and less worried about being the best employee. - My child needed me, so I quit my job. - I've prioritized family/family activities over 'climbing mountains,' to achieve higher social status.
Increased focus on time spent with family	- I'm ok to say no to social events, I treasure time at home more. - I've found it more important to spend time with family and do more things with my children. I feel the children suffered the most during all of this, and I feel it's up to us to fix their social and activity deprivations. - I value family time and am less likely to overschedule my kids in too many activities. We enjoyed the quiet pace and togetherness of Spring 2020 very much.
Recognition that family should not be taken for granted	- I am much more concerned about family. . . I learned to not take my family for granted. - I think my priorities are focused more on family and our kids. A job is just a job, and I would be replaced very quickly. Family can't be replaced. - I care less about work and what other people think and even more about my family and enjoying the time we have together because there are no guarantees that we couldn't die tomorrow.

Interestingly, the role of partners was not identified as a subtheme from participants' discussion of family. Exploratory analyses were conducted in which the researchers electronically searched for the terms: partner, husband, wife, and spouse. There were only five mentions of partners. Of these, four participants described their partner in ways that were consistent with the subtheme of increased focus on time spent with family. For instance, one mother noted, "I intentionally spend more time with my kids and family. I enjoy and cherish time with my kids and husband." The other mention of partner was in terms of effects of ill health on maternal career; "I had to give up an opportunity to move down south and advance in the company because my husband was hospitalized for two months from COVID complications." Thus, findings suggest that partners have the potential to impact working mothers in important ways.

3.2.2. Health

A total of 27 participants (16.1%) stated that their primary concern since the pandemic was their physical health and psychological wellness. Some mothers noted that this shift towards wellness required them to seek job opportunities that allowed for a sense of meaning and purpose.

"I think I looked towards having a more fulfilling career option and more meaning in my work."

"I am not willing to work a mundane job that make[s] me miserable."

However, other participants stated that the newly realized importance of health led them to turn their focus away from work completely and identify alternative sources of meaning in their personal lives.

"I prioritize my mental health and my family's mental health more. I prioritize spending time with family and relaxing more."

"A close friend of mine died due to COVID. I think my priorities changed in that I became more concerned about being healthy and my son being healthy. . . Spending more quality

time with friends and family has become so important. I think less about work and focus more on the important things."

Hence, with health and wellness considerations propelled by COVID-19-related illness and loss, some participants reported that their job seemed less important or less of a priority.

3.2.3. Stability

A small percentage of participants ($n = 18$; 10.7%) reported that the pandemic reinvigorated their focus on job stability, primarily in fiscal domains. Some working mothers noted that they had few opportunities to realize their priorities beyond getting through the routine needs of themselves and their children.

"Feel like I've given up on a lot of things. Don't have many priorities other than getting through the day, keeping my son out of trouble, and making enough money to pay bills."

However, other participants indicated that their needs for stability inspired them to take on or remain in secure jobs to ensure financial and health security.

"Yes, now that I am the sole earner in my family my priority is maintaining my income, our health insurance, and other benefits through my job. My priorities are much more about job stability and schedule flexibility than anything else."

"My priorities have shifted more heavily towards financial security being my priority."

While definitions for stability appeared to manifest differently among some participants, an overarching feeling of stability was sought out among mothers following the COVID-19 crisis.

3.3. Career Aspirations

The majority of participant responses were coded as increase in aspirations, reduction in aspirations, and no effect on aspirations. The 12 participants not accounted for either did not provide responses at all (i.e., data was missing) or responses were not codable.

3.3.1. Increase in Aspirations

A total of 32 participants (19%) described shifts towards career advancement in the months following the COVID-19 pandemic. Many working mothers noted that their increased career aspirations were a result of fears associated with stagnation or being without work.

"If anything [the COVID-19 pandemic] pressed me to move up in my career and not stay stagnant."

"I have become more assertive in attaining my career goals because now I realize I have no back up plan."

Many participants also cited the opportunity to work from home and dictate their own schedules as an opportunity to advance within their career.

"I have actually advanced because I can work as frequently as I need to with working from home."

"I have been able to advance more quickly with a new team due to remote work."

Another commonly noted factor associated with an increase in career aspirations among participants included an ability and willingness to adapt. Namely, working mothers stated that the COVID-19 pandemic challenged them to take on job tasks they were unfamiliar with or had not previously considered.

"I have made an effort to make myself more versatile and pick up skills in other departments."

"A lot of people, including myself, have had to rely on working remotely. I've had to learn to train and oversee my team remotely and though it was a challenge, it was one I overcame and enjoy thoroughly."

3.3.2. Reduction in Aspirations

While some working mothers reported an increase in aspirations, a larger proportion of the sample ($n = 61$; 36.3%) shared that the COVID-19 pandemic impeded their ability and desires to advance within the workplace. Participants reported that they experienced a shift in values, felt discouraged and disillusioned by their work role, and endorsed a preference for spending time with their family and loved ones.

"I have realized that family is more important, and I have no desire to want to move up and be a manager. It's too much time away from family. I'm content with my current position."

"I think that it has stalled my career progressions and tempered my aspirations to some extent. I am just not as focused on work as I used to be. It just doesn't seem as important as it used to be."

Many participants also stated that their career aspirations took a backseat whilst they navigated realizations concerning the importance of their health and psychological wellness amidst the COVID-19 crisis.

"I have completely altered my outlook on my career. If I could afford to quit today, I would. To focus on my physical and mental health and caring for my household and spending more time with my child."

"I now realize how fragile life is and how valuable time is. I am putting my family first. I realize that career goals are not that important in the bigger scheme of things."

Other mothers stated that the job loss and reduced advancement opportunities within the workplace fostered feelings of being stuck and ultimately altered their vocational trajectory. Specifically, mothers reported feeling hindered by the stagnation of the labor market during the peak of the pandemic.

"COVID definitely threw a wrench into some of my career plans and altered my career path. Because of COVID I gave up a position that I really enjoyed but I have grown to enjoy my flexible schedule and being able to spend more time with my daughter more. Once my daughter is older, I will likely pursue greater aspirations, but I am content with the arrangement I have while she is still pretty young now."

"It seemed to put a hold on progression, mainly in part because many companies were putting off any hiring or growth during this time."

"I feel like the past few years have been a major setback and I don't know how to rebound from it."

3.3.3. No Effect on Aspirations

The largest segment of participants ($n = 63$; 37.5%) indicated that the pandemic had not affected their career progression or aspirations. While many participants provided short responses (e.g., "No change." or "No effect."), some elaborated that the COVID-19 pandemic did not stifle their career goals.

"To be honest, not much has changed, I still have the same goals as I did before and after the pandemic. I still want to improve as a worker, advance in my career, and be a great mother to my children."

Others reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has not changed their career aspirations as there was little room for advancement in their role to begin with. For these mothers, career aspirations were shaped by the nature of their job, not the pandemic.

"My career progressions and aspirations have not changed. As a public school teacher, there is little room for advancement, so I am continuing to put in my years of service towards retirement."

“There really is no room for advancement in my career or department, but that is ok with me.”

Lastly, some working mothers indicated that they did not have firm career aspirations prior to the pandemic.

“It really hasn’t affected me in any way. I basically just go to work each day and don’t really have any career goals at this point.”

“They haven’t been impacted. I don’t want a leadership position. I’m happy in the role I’m in now.”

4. Discussion

The qualitative findings from the current analysis, though exploratory in nature, are some of the first to examine the years following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study employed retrospective written responses to two open-ended survey questions and should be interpreted as participants’ accounts of perceived changes rather than definitive evidence of lasting effects. In these accounts, some working mothers reported alternations in their career aspirations. Many mothers noted increased prioritization of family, which aligns with research suggesting a reenvisioning of the future following loss or perceived loss resulting from the pandemic (Walsh, 2020). Indeed, some participants noted that their increased focus on family stemmed from reevaluation after the pandemic, with one mother noting she came to recognize “how fragile life is” and another noting her outlook changed as she realized there are “no guarantees that we couldn’t die tomorrow.” These findings also build on existing research, which indicates the care responsibilities necessitated by COVID-19 have disadvantaged working mothers’ vocational trajectories (Collins et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 2023; Wenham et al., 2020; Yavorsky et al., 2022) by providing additional insight to the decisions working mothers grappled with as they navigated experiences of role overload and reimaged their vocations and personal priorities.

The current findings further suggest that about one-third of working mothers reported experiencing an overall reduction in their career aspirations following the COVID-19 pandemic. When describing reasons for their shifts in aspirations, working mothers primarily cited a higher regard for health and family or discouragement from general career stagnation due to labor fallout during the pandemic. In terms of priority shifts, findings were similar in that individuals who described a shift away from work indicated that family, health, or stability now remained focal. These themes align with existing research stating that the COVID-19 pandemic upended the work-family interface by exacerbating conflict among the two domains, suggesting that early impacts of the pandemic on working mothers remain (Rosen et al., 2023; Vaziri et al., 2020). Specifically, working mothers may have navigated newfound conflicts concerning their attentional capacities for family matters or their abilities to navigate proliferated caretaking hours (Collins et al., 2021). The shift in career aspirations or priorities may reflect participants’ attempts to align their career path with their values (e.g., quality time with family, a focus on health) spurred by the pandemic. Furthermore, social messaging related to childcare during the pandemic may be another explanation for this shift.

Additionally, the current study highlights that some mothers increased their attention to upward movement within their career sphere. These findings are also consistent with previous data indicating that some mothers reported that opportunities for career adaptability were positive markers of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rosen et al., 2023). Adapting to changes in their work environment and role was key for many of these mothers, including the ability to transition to remote work or take on additional responsibilities. SCCT highlights the importance of adaptability, and it is possible that adaptability may have strengthened participants’ commitment to their careers. Other mothers reported that

their increase in career aspirations stemmed from a need for stability for themselves and their families. Specifically, it appears that the threats of job insecurity propagated by the COVID-19 pandemic led some mothers to adapt to ensure job security, perhaps in part to protect their families in the face of future crises. Future research may consider what specific factors contribute to the differences in working mothers' responses when faced with job instability or threats to work volition and the subsequent effects on their families.

It is noteworthy that the findings of the current study also suggest that approximately one-third of mothers report experiencing no changes in their career aspirations nor priorities. These findings deviate slightly from research collected at the height of the pandemic, in which a much smaller percentage of mothers reported neutral or no impacts (Rosen et al., 2023). It is likely that some working mothers were differentially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Alternatively, working mothers holding jobs minorly impacted by COVID-19 may have experienced few changes in their work priorities. Moreover, some mothers may have prioritized other aspects of their life (e.g., family, personal well-being) over work aspirations, thus resulting in fewer vocational impacts. Some working mothers may additionally be underestimating the extent of the impact of the pandemic on their career due to a greater amount of time and distance from the COVID event. Alternatively, the immediate effects of COVID-19 may not have been perceived as long-lasting by all mothers. To highlight the differences among working mothers' aspirations, future research may explore various attitudinal, personality, or demographic factors that protect working mothers from vocational alterations in the face of crisis.

Lastly, it is of note that the findings from the current study work to offer an extension of previous research describing the impact of COVID-19 on working mothers' career experiences (Rosen et al., 2023). Previous work indicated that more than 20% of mothers found the separation between work and family indistinguishable resulting in greater stress and career disruptions at the height of the pandemic. These past findings also indicated that a few mothers had begun to reevaluate their values during the pandemic. However, mid-way through the COVID-19 crisis, most working mothers remained motivated for career advancement and reported desires for leadership and industry-related training despite their experiences with economic stagnation (Rosen et al., 2023). In turn, the current findings offer insight into working mothers' career outlooks in the aftermath of such reevaluations. Specifically, the results of the current study suggest that working mothers navigated COVID-induced career stagnation in two ways: they pivoted towards family, health, and stability rather than career growth or they sought out advancement opportunities to ensure career stability. Future research may take the body of these findings and explore what personal and environmental factors differentiate working mothers who turn away from versus towards career advancement in the face of crisis.

4.1. Implications

The findings of the current study indicate that many mothers perceived lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their career aspirations and priorities. Namely, these findings suggest that despite economic and social claims of return to normalcy, most working mothers continue to perceive pandemic attributable repercussions in their career priorities and outlooks, which has the potential to affect family well-being. Many of the mothers who reported changes in their priorities described their career as less focal or reported reduced career aspirations. These findings indicate that assumptions for a return to normalcy without workplace changes are not enough according to mothers' accounts. Instead, employers should enact efforts to support working mothers balance work and home, such as increased flexibility or resources to assist working mothers as they navigate their career and family demands. Enacting family-supportive policies has the potential

to reduce role overload and maternal distress. In addition to policies at work, findings suggest that support both from within and outside of the workplace may attenuate the effects of role overload, guilt, and maternal distress (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015).

4.2. Limitations and Future Research

While the current study provides new insights surrounding working mothers' priorities and aspirations in a post-COVID economic climate, the study is not without limitations. Importantly, results should be interpreted with caution as the sample was predominantly White, mostly married, and relatively highly educated. Considering this limitation, it is important not to overgeneralize findings to all working women. Most of the sample included married women, whose experiences with work and motherhood may have significantly differed from working mothers without a partner living at home. The pandemic may have also disproportionately impacted mothers with fewer resources; however, it is important to examine how the pandemic affects all mothers. Luthar and Ciciolla (2015) have highlighted the importance of studying college-educated mothers who have increasingly become focused on childrearing and activities.

Another limitation is that the current study did not directly assess partners' roles in shaping maternal career aspirations, which is an important area for future research. The role of partners could also be further examined by comparing post-COVID motivations among single and married working mothers. Moreover, the age(s) of participants' children was not collected and therefore the current study is unable to decipher whether differences between working mothers with younger children and working mothers with older children exist. Given that children's age has been found to impact mothers' career progression (McIntosh et al., 2012), future research should explore the differential impacts of COVID-19 on working mothers with children of varying age groups.

Additionally, the design of the current study did not allow for full consideration of participants' labor-market position. Wikström et al. (2024) note that "many working-age people face persistent difficulties finding sustainable employment. This may be due to a migrant background, low-level education or skills, short work history, chronic health problems, disabilities, prolonged unemployment, living in a rural area, or being young or old. These people are in a weak labour market position . . ." (p. 2). As participation in the current study was limited to mothers who were employed at the start of the pandemic and many indicators of labor-market position were not assessed, the current study is unable to examine the effects of participants' labor-market position. Future research is needed to better understand disparities in how COVID-19 affected mothers in a weak labor-market position.

The current research also used an open-ended, online survey to collect participant responses. Data were collected online, asynchronously, to allow for ease in response and reach a broader sample of participants; however, it is possible that potential nuance may have been overlooked through the use of online surveys. Future research may benefit from the use of interviews or focus groups to better understand working mothers in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Conclusions

The current study attempted to build on existing literature to better understand working mothers' changes in career aspirations and priorities in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. The current study suggested that while the majority of mothers reported experiencing motivational changes regarding work, some mothers reported experiencing no change in their aspirations and priorities in the face of the pandemic. Mothers who documented reduced motivational changes noted shifts towards health, family, and stability.

SCCT draws attention to the role of vocational choice, adaptability, and efficacy in career motivation, and these factors likely came into play as mothers navigated the changes of the pandemic and post-pandemic landscape. In addition, findings can be viewed in light of work on family resilience, suggesting that the pandemic spurred a reconsideration process for many parents. These findings also extend existing research by highlighting the gendered impact of COVID-19 and calling attention to the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on working mothers and their families.

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