

Understanding Working Mothers' Perspectives on parenting and Early Childhood Development in Semi-Urban Areas

By

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A thesis submitted to Brac Institute of Educational Development in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Early Childhood Development

Brac Institute of Educational Development
Brac University
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that,

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Ethics Statement

Title of Thesis Topic: Understanding Working Mothers' Perspectives on parenting and Early Childhood Development in Semi-Urban Area

Student name: Sayada Afrin Madhobe

1. Source of population: The participants were selected from my hometown Madaripur and my current living area Gazipur.
2. Does the study involve (yes, or no)
 - a) Physical risk to the subjects (no)
 - b) Social risk (no)
 - c) Psychological risk to subjects (no)
 - d) discomfort to subjects (no)
 - e) Invasion of privacy (no)
3. Will subjects be clearly informed about (yes or no)
 - a) Nature and purpose of the study (yes)
 - b) Procedures to be followed (yes)
 - c) Physical risk (yes)
 - d) Sensitive questions (yes)
 - e) Benefits to be derived (yes)
 - f) Right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study (yes)
 - g) Confidential handling of data (yes)
 - h) Compensation and/or treatment where there are risks or privacy is involved (yes)
4. Will Signed verbal consent for be required (yes or no)
 - a) from study participants (yes)
 - b) from parents or guardian (no)
 - c) Will precautions be taken to protect anonymity of subjects? (yes)
5. Check documents being submitted herewith to Committee:
 - a) Proposal
 - b) Consent Form
 - c) Questionnaire or interview schedule

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the perspectives of working mothers regarding parenting and early childhood development (ECD) in semi-urban areas of Bangladesh. With increasing female participation in the workforce, mothers face the dual responsibility of employment and caregiving during their children's critical developmental years. Using a phenomenological approach, data were collected through six in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions conducted in Gazipur and Madaripur. The findings reveal that mothers perceive themselves as the primary caregivers and first teachers of their children. Although participants demonstrated general awareness of holistic child development, they experienced significant challenges, including time constraints, emotional guilt and limited workplace support. Grandparents emerged as the primary childcare providers, while access to formal daycare services remained limited and costly. Despite challenges, employment contributed positively to mothers' financial independence, confidence and decision-making power. The study highlights the need for family-friendly workplace policies and community-based childcare services in semi-urban Bangladesh. The findings contribute to strengthening ECD practices, gender-responsive policies and support systems for working mothers.

Keywords: working mothers; early childhood development; parenting practices; semi-urban Bangladesh; work–life balance; childcare support

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my beloved parents, whose endless love, sacrifices and unwavering support have shaped who I am today. Their prayers, encouragement and belief in my dreams have been my greatest strength throughout this journey. I am deeply grateful to my dear brother for his constant understanding and emotional support during both the challenging and joyful moments. Finally, I dedicate this work to my loving husband, whose love, encouragement and unwavering belief in me inspire me to dream big and to always remain positive in life. This accomplishment belongs to all of them.

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List of Acronyms:

ECD – Early Childhood Development

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

IDI – In-Depth Interview

ILO – International Labour Organization

NICHD – National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

WHO – World Health Organization

Chapter I: Introduction & Background

Introduction:

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a crucial stage that shapes children's cognitive, socio-emotional and physical growth. Parents, particularly mothers play a vital role in ensuring that children receive the care, stimulation and emotional support necessary for holistic development (Landry et al., 2003). In Bangladesh, more women are now working outside the home than ever before, particularly in semi-urban and industrialized areas. They are active in every sector and this change has brought economic benefits to families and helped to empower women. At the same time, it has created challenges for mothers who have to balance their jobs with parenting young children. Childcare availability is an important factor shaping how mothers manage this balance. For example, a study in Dhaka found that the presence or absence of reliable childcare center facilities has a significant impact on working mothers' ability to maintain work productivity and reduce stress. Mothers who can depend upon childcare services are more likely to report better work-life balance and less conflict between workplace and family obligations (Shaulin, 2024). Cultural expectations play a big role too. In many Bangladeshi families, even if both parents work, the mother is still expected to be the main caregiver. This cultural pressure affects how mothers view their parenting roles and the choices they make for their children (Nahar, 2024).

Semi-urban areas represent a unique transitional context because they are in transition. These areas are not fully urban, not fully rural. Mothers in these areas face mixed cultural expectations and limited childcare facilities. At the same time, they are increasingly exposed to new ideas about early childhood education, women's empowerment and modern parenting practices (Sultana & Ahmed, 2023). As a result,

working mothers often experience emotional stress, social expectations and practical challenges as they try to balance work and parenting. Their perspectives offer important insights into how families adapt within changing social and economic conditions (Hossain & Kusakabe, 2022).

Despite the importance of this issue, there is limited research in Bangladesh that explores how working mothers in semi-urban communities perceive parenting and early childhood development. Most studies have focused either on urban professionals or rural women, which is leaving a gap in understanding the experiences of mothers in the middle, those living in semi-urban transitional spaces. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the experiences, beliefs and challenges of working mothers in two semi-urban districts: Gazipur and Madaripur.

Understanding these views can help identify gaps in childcare services, workplace support and community resources. It also highlights what working mothers need to ensure for the healthy development for their young children (UNICEF, 2019). Moreover, examining mothers' experiences can inform policymakers, employers and community organizations about practical interventions that support both child development and women's participation in the workforce. By capturing these perspectives, the study contributes to building more inclusive and effective strategies for early childhood care and family support.

Statement of the Problem:

Women's participation in the workforce in Bangladesh has increased over the past decades. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Survey, the female labour force participation rate increased from 36.3% in 2017 to about 42.7% in 2022. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics also includes that in total numbers,

Bangladesh had around 24 million women in the workforce in 2023, indicating a growing contribution of women to the country's economy. Especially in semi-urban areas experiencing rapid industrial growth and shifting livelihood patterns. This change has expanded opportunities for women but has also increased the complexity of parenting young children during the crucial early years of development. Mothers remain the primary caregivers in most households, even when they work full-time or long hours (Nahar, 2024). As a result, many working mothers struggle to balance job demands with the emotional, physical and developmental needs of their young children. This pressure often leads to stress, guilt and concerns about whether they are providing adequate time and stimulation (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Semi-urban areas face unique challenges because they are neither fully urban nor fully rural. These areas undergo fast social and economic changes yet still lack structured childcare facilities and supportive workplace systems (Hossain & Kusakabe, 2022). Many workplaces in these settings do not offer flexible schedules, breastfeeding support or childcare services (ILO, 2018). Consequently, mothers depend on informal childcare arrangements such as relatives or neighbors, which may be unreliable. When childcare is inconsistent, mothers struggle to maintain stable employment and young children may experience disruptions in care that affect their safety, nutrition and early learning (Black et al., 2017; Win et al., 2022).

At the same time, strong cultural expectations continue to place full caregiving responsibilities on mothers, regardless of their work status (Nahar, 2024). These expectations influence how mothers perceive their parenting roles and influence their confidence and daily decisions. Women in Bangladesh continue to carry a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities, performing

three to four times more household work than men, which can restrict their participation in paid employment (Daily Sun Report, 2025).

Despite these realities, limited research focuses directly on working mothers' experiences in semi-urban Bangladesh. Existing studies largely represent urban centers or rural areas (UNICEF, 2019). Semi-urban regions such as Gazipur and Madaripur are transitioning from rural areas to more urban and developed communities and face distinct challenges that are not well understood. There is a significant research gap concerning how working mothers in these areas perceive parenting, early childhood development and the competing responsibilities of work and home. Without this understanding, policies and programs may fail to support the needs of mothers and young children.

Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is the lack of detailed knowledge about how working mothers in semi-urban Bangladesh manage parenting and the development of their child while balancing employment responsibilities. By capturing their lived experiences, this study aims to fill an important gap and contribute evidence to help strengthen childcare policies, family-friendly workplaces and community support systems.

Moreover, there is insufficient documentation of how working mothers emotionally experience the dual burden of employment and caregiving in semi-urban Bangladesh. Their daily coping strategies, compromises and decision-making processes remain largely invisible in existing literature. Because of this, existing policies and programs may not fully understand or address their real needs. Without proper research based on mothers' lived experiences, support systems may remain weak or incomplete. Therefore, it is important to explore their experiences more

deeply to develop practical and effective solutions for working mothers and their young children.

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the perspectives of working mothers on early childhood development in semi-urban areas of Bangladesh. It aims to examine how working mothers perceive their parenting roles and responsibilities while managing their jobs. The study will investigate their beliefs, knowledge and practices regarding early childhood development as well as how they balance the dual demands of work and parenting in transitional communities. By focusing on mothers in semi-urban communities, where life is changing from rural to more urban lifestyles, the study hopes to capture the complex realities of motherhood in Bangladesh.

In addition, this study aims to identify the factors that shape and influence mothers' parenting practices, including workplace policies, childcare availability and family or community support systems. Understanding these dynamics will help to reveal both the challenges and opportunities that working mothers encounter in fostering their children's growth and well-being. The findings will help to suggest better ways to support working mothers to promote positive child development outcomes in semi-urban Bangladesh.

Significance of the study:

This study is significant because it focuses on working mothers in semi-urban Bangladesh whose experiences are underrepresented in research and policy discussions. The early years of life are the most critical for cognitive, emotional and social development, and the quality of care that children receive during this period

strongly influences future outcomes (Landry et al., 2003; Black et al., 2017). Since mothers in Bangladesh typically serve as the primary caregivers, understanding their beliefs and practices is essential for promoting children's early learning and emotional well-being.

As Bangladesh continues to urbanize, semi-urban areas are expanding rapidly and undergoing social and economic transitions. These areas often lack reliable childcare centers, structured ECD services and workplace support systems (Shaulin, 2024). Mothers in these environments face different pressures compared to those in rural or fully urban settings. However, most existing research focuses on Dhaka or rural communities, leaving semi-urban contexts largely unexplored (Hossain & Kusakabe, 2022). This study addresses this gap by examining two semi-urban districts Gazipur and Madaripur, offering insights into how mothers in transitional communities manage work, parenting and childcare.

The study is also important for informing policy and practical interventions. International research highlights that supportive workplace policies such as maternity leave, flexible hours and childcare services help reduce work-family conflict and benefit both mothers and children (ILO, 2018; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In Bangladesh, many workplaces lack these supports, especially in semi-urban or informal sectors. By examining how workplace conditions influence parenting, the study can help shape family-friendly policies that support women's employment and children's development.

Furthermore, childcare availability is a major factor influencing mothers' ability to balance work and caregiving. When mothers have access to reliable childcare facilities, they experience reduced stress and improved work performance

(Shaulin, 2024; Win et al., 2022). The study's findings can guide the design of community-based childcare models tailored to semi-urban settings.

Finally, this research values the voices of working mothers and uses their lived experiences to inform policy and practice. Listening directly to mothers ensures that interventions whether ECD programs, workplace policies or community supports are culturally relevant, realistic and effective. Therefore, the study contributes meaningfully to early childhood development research, gender studies and social policy in Bangladesh.

Research Questions:

This study focuses on understanding the perspectives of working mothers regarding parenting and early childhood development in semi-urban areas of Bangladesh. As more women participate in the workforce, mothers are required to balance employment responsibilities with caregiving roles during their children's crucial early years.

Semi-urban communities, which are undergoing social and economic transitions, present unique challenges and opportunities for working mothers. This research aims to explore how mothers understand early childhood development, how they practice parenting while working and what support systems influence their experiences in semi-urban areas.

Based on this focus, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the beliefs, knowledge and practices of working mothers regarding parenting in early childhood development?

2. What challenges and opportunities do they face in balancing parenting during the early childhood development of their children?

Operational Definition:

Working Mothers: In this study, working mothers refer to women engaged in paid employment, either in the formal or informal sector, who have at least one child aged 3–5 years and are residing in semi-urban areas of Bangladesh. This includes mothers working in teaching, garment factories, offices, small businesses, or other income-generating activities.

Early Childhood Development (ECD): Early Childhood Development refers to the cognitive, socio-emotional, physical and language development of children during the early years of life, particularly between ages 3–5 in this study. It includes children's learning, behavior, emotional well-being, health and social skills as perceived and described by their mothers.

Parenting Practices: Parenting practices refer to the daily caregiving behaviors, interactions, discipline methods, emotional support and learning activities that mothers provide to support their child's development.

Beliefs and Knowledge about ECD: This refers to mothers' understanding, ideas, values and perceptions regarding child development, learning, discipline, emotional care and healthy growth during early childhood.

Work–Life Balance: Work–life balance in this study means how working mothers manage and adjust their time, energy and responsibilities between employment and caregiving roles.

Semi-Urban Areas: Semi-urban areas refer to transitional communities that are neither fully urban nor fully rural, characterized by growing industrialization, mixed livelihoods and changing social structures. In this study, Gazipur and Madaripur represent semi-urban area.

Support Systems: Support systems include family members, spouses, relatives, neighbors, childcare services and workplace policies that assist mothers in managing childcare and employment responsibilities.

Workplace Support: Workplace support refers to employer-provided policies and practices that help working mothers balance professional and family responsibilities. This may include maternity leave, flexible working hours, breastfeeding breaks, reduced workload, or workplace-based childcare services.

Chapter II: Literature Review:

Introduction to Early Childhood Development (ECD): Early Childhood Development (ECD) is widely recognized as one of the most critical phases of human development. The first five years of life are characterized by rapid brain growth and the formation of neural connections that shape cognitive, emotional, social, and physical capacities (Black et al., 2017). During this stage, children develop foundational skills in language, emotional regulation, problem-solving and social interaction, which influence later academic achievement and life outcomes.

Research consistently highlights the importance of warm, responsive, and consistent caregiving in promoting healthy development. Landry et al. (2003) found that responsive parenting behaviors, such as sensitivity to children's cues and positive

engagement, significantly contribute to children's cognitive and social competence. Similarly, Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) argue that early relationships form the foundation for brain architecture and long-term well-being.

In the context of Bangladesh, mothers are traditionally viewed as the primary caregivers, and their daily practices significantly influence children's early learning and emotional security. Cultural expectations often position mothers as the main source of nurturing, guidance, and discipline. Therefore, understanding maternal roles in the early years is essential for examining children's developmental outcomes.

Theoretical Perspectives on Parenting and Maternal Employment: Several theoretical frameworks guide research on parenting and maternal employment. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains child development as influenced by multiple environmental systems, including family, workplace, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When mothers engage in paid employment, the interaction between the microsystem (family) and exosystem (workplace) becomes particularly important.

Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby (1969), emphasizes the significance of secure emotional bonds between caregivers and children. Secure attachment forms when caregivers are consistently responsive and emotionally available. Researchers have debated whether maternal employment affects attachment security. However, most studies indicate that employment alone does not harm attachment if children receive high-quality, stable care (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005).

Work-Family Conflict Theory, introduced by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), describes the tension arising when work and family responsibilities compete for time

and energy. This conflict can reduce parental well-being and influence parenting behaviors.

These theoretical perspectives help explain how employment conditions, caregiving arrangements, and family support systems collectively shape the parenting experiences of working mothers.

Working Mothers and Parenting Roles in Bangladesh: As more Bangladeshi women join the workforce, the daily lives of mothers are changing. Many mothers now carry two major responsibilities at the same time. They are being an active worker as well as the primary caregiver at home. This often creates pressure because society still expects mothers to give most of their time and attention to childcare, no matter how demanding their job is. Studies show that working mothers commonly experience feelings of stress, guilt, and worry about whether they are giving enough time to their children (Nahar, 2024). These emotional challenges can influence how confident they feel as parents and may also affect their interactions with their children.

This struggle is not unique to Bangladesh. International studies also show that balancing work and family is difficult for many mothers. When work demands and family responsibilities clash, it can lead to “work-family conflict,” a common issue described by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985). In Bangladesh, especially in semi-urban and industrial areas, many workplaces still lack supportive policies such as flexible working hours or childcare facilities. As a result, mothers often feel torn between meeting work expectations and taking care of their young children.

Therefore, working mothers often manage caregiving responsibilities without institutional support, increasing their emotional and physical burden.

Childcare Access and Support Systems: Access to proper childcare is one of the biggest factors that influence how mothers manage work and parenting. Research from Dhaka found that having dependable childcare options greatly improves mothers' work-life balance and reduces their stress levels (Shaulin, 2024). When mothers feel confident that their children are safe and cared for, they can perform better at work and feel more emotionally available at home.

However, many mothers especially in semi-urban areas do not have access to good childcare services. Some rely on relatives, neighbors or older siblings, while others have no support at all. Studies show that when childcare is unreliable or unavailable, mothers may be forced to reduce their working hours or quit their jobs (Win et al., 2022). For children, inconsistent or poor-quality caregiving can negatively affect nutrition, safety, and learning during the early years (Black et al., 2017). Family support remains an important safety net in many Bangladeshi communities. Uddin (2024) found that strong family support improves mothers' well-being and helps them engage more positively with their children.

Positive Effects of Maternal Employment: Although maternal employment presents challenges, research also highlights its benefits. Increased household income can improve access to nutritious food, healthcare, and educational materials. Studies in developing contexts show that maternal income often contributes directly to children's welfare (Huebener, 2019).

Maternal employment is also linked to women's empowerment and decision-making authority within households. Employed mothers may have greater confidence in managing children's education and health choices. A report published by the

International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2018 notes that economic participation strengthens women's social status and autonomy.

However, positive outcomes are strongly dependent on supportive conditions.

Workplace Policies and Global Insights: Workplace policies make a major difference in supporting working mothers. Maternity leave, flexible working hours, breastfeeding breaks and childcare support at workplaces are some of the key measures that help mothers balance work and family responsibilities. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) emphasizes that such policies can improve both maternal well-being and child development outcomes.

Unfortunately, in Bangladesh many workplaces especially in semi-urban or informal sectors do not offer these benefits. While some institutions provide maternity leave, many others lack clear policies or do not follow them properly. Research indicates that insufficient workplace support contributes to higher stress and reduced parenting satisfaction among mothers (Nahar, 2024). The absence of institutional childcare support in semi-urban employment settings creates additional caregiving challenges, particularly for mothers of young children aged 0–5 years.

Parenting Beliefs and Cultural Expectations in Semi-Urban Bangladesh: Parenting beliefs in Bangladesh are strongly influenced by cultural norms, family traditions and social expectations. Even when mothers take on paid work, many communities still expect them to serve as the main caregiver, managing both household responsibilities and children's emotional and developmental needs. In semi-urban areas where communities are shifting from rural lifestyles to more urbanized living, these expectations become even more complex. Mothers often face mixed messages they are

encouraged to contribute financially yet still expected to meet traditional caregiving standards without receiving additional support (Nahar, 2024).

Research suggests that parental beliefs shape daily interactions, including communication styles, discipline strategies, and play-based learning opportunities (Bornstein, 2012). For example, some Bangladeshi families emphasize obedience, discipline and physical safety, while others value communication, early learning and stimulation through play. In semi-urban settings, where families often have partial access to information and services, parenting beliefs may vary widely.

Understanding these beliefs is important because they guide how mothers balance work demands with nurturing and teaching their young children.

The Role of Fathers and Changing Family Dynamics: The involvement of fathers in childcare is another important factor influencing children's early development. Traditionally, Bangladeshi fathers are seen primarily as financial providers with limited engagement in daily caregiving tasks. However, as families in semi-urban areas experience changes due to migration, job diversification and exposure to urban lifestyles, fathers' roles are gradually shifting. Some fathers are beginning to participate more in activities such as feeding, bathing, supervising play or supporting school readiness especially when mothers work long hours or when extended family support is limited (Verani, Somad, & Warmansyah, 2022).

Research shows that active father involvement benefits both children and mothers. Children who have warm and responsive interactions with their fathers show better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007). For mothers, supportive fathers help reduce stress, improve emotional well-being, and contribute to healthier family relationships.

Exploring fathers' changing roles is important for understanding how families collectively adapt to economic and social transformations in semi-urban Bangladesh.

Maternal Mental Health and Its Influence on Early Childhood Development:

Maternal mental health is a critical but often overlooked factor in early childhood development. Research shows that mothers who experience chronic stress, anxiety, or depression may face difficulties in maintaining consistent, responsive, and emotionally supportive interactions with their children (Goodman et al., 2011). Since early childhood development depends heavily on caregiver responsiveness, maternal psychological well-being directly influences children's cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes.

In low- and middle-income countries, including Bangladesh, working mothers may be particularly vulnerable to stress due to financial pressures, work demands, and limited childcare support (WHO, 2020). When work-family conflict is high and institutional support is low, maternal stress levels increase, which can affect parenting quality. Studies indicate that maternal depression is associated with reduced stimulation, less verbal interaction, and lower emotional sensitivity toward young children (Goodman et al., 2011).

Moreover, evidence suggests that community-based and family support systems can act as protective factors, reducing psychological strain and improving maternal caregiving behaviors. Access to social support, flexible work policies, and reliable childcare services can buffer stress and enhance maternal mental health (WHO, 2020).

Therefore, examining maternal mental well-being is essential for understanding how employment conditions and caregiving environments shape early childhood development outcomes in semi-urban Bangladesh.

Identified Gaps in Research: Although considerable research exists on maternal employment, childcare access and parenting in Bangladesh, limited studies focus specifically on semi-urban contexts. These areas are neither fully rural nor fully urban; they represent transitional environments with distinct socio-economic characteristics.

Existing research largely concentrates on urban centers like Dhaka or on rural poverty. There is insufficient evidence about how working mothers in semi-urban districts experience parenting, access childcare, and interpret early childhood development within shifting cultural expectations.

Furthermore, few studies integrate perspectives on maternal beliefs, workplace policies, and father involvement simultaneously. This gap highlights the need for context-specific research that captures the lived experiences of working mothers in semi-urban districts such as Gazipur and Madaripur.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that early childhood development is strongly influenced by caregiving quality, maternal well-being, workplace support, and cultural norms. While maternal employment can bring financial and empowerment benefits, challenges such as work-family conflict and limited childcare access remain significant.

Theoretical frameworks including Ecological Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, and Work-Family Conflict Theory provide valuable lenses for understanding these dynamics. However, there remains a notable gap in research focusing on semi-urban Bangladesh.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how working mothers in Gazipur and Madaripur understand parenting and early childhood development while balancing employment responsibilities, contributing culturally grounded insights to the existing body of literature.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research Approach and Design:

This study is a qualitative research design to gain a deep understanding of working mothers' experiences and perceptions regarding parenting and early childhood development in semi-urban area in Bangladesh. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to explore personal meanings, beliefs, emotions and lived experiences rather than measure numerical outcomes.

The study specifically used a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is suitable because it seeks to explore and describe working mothers' lived experiences and how they make sense of those experiences. In this research, the phenomenological approach helped to uncover how working mothers experience balancing employment and caregiving responsibilities, how they perceived early childhood development and how social, cultural and workplace factors shape their parenting practices.

To collect comprehensive data, the study used a combination of In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). IDIs allowed participants to share their personal experiences, emotions and challenges in a confidential setting. On the other hand, FGDs provided opportunities to explore shared experiences, community norms and collective perspectives among working mothers. Using both methods helped to strengthen the depth of the findings and provided a more complete understanding of the research topic.

Research Site:

This research was conducted in two semi-urban areas of Bangladesh, Gazipur and Madaripur. These areas were selected because they were experiencing social and economic changes. Semi-urban areas were neither fully urban nor fully rural. They reflected a mix of traditional lifestyles and modern development, which made them important for understanding the experiences of working mothers. These two places provide different but connected settings to understand how working mothers manage their parenting, balance work and family life and care for their young children's development.

Gazipur is a growing industrial area where many mothers work in garment factories, offices, schools, and small businesses. Because of rapid industrial growth and population increase, the area is becoming more urban. This creates job opportunities for women but also brings challenges in balancing work and childcare. On the other hand, Madaripur is slowly changing from rural-based work to more mixed types of jobs, such as small businesses and service work. Although it is less industrial than Gazipur, it is also experiencing social change. Studying these two areas helped to understand how working mothers manage parenting and early childhood development in different semi-urban settings.

Research Participants:

The study involved 6 working mothers for In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and 12 working mothers who participated in two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). All participants had at least one child aged 3–5 years. The age of the participating mothers ranged from 25 to 40 years. The mothers were involved in different types of occupations,

including school teaching, garment factory work, private office employment, small business ownership, doctor and government job.

In terms of educational background, the participants had varied levels of education, ranging from Secondary School Certificate (SSC) to Master's degree. The participants also represented different socio-economic backgrounds, which allowed the study to capture diverse experiences, beliefs and challenges faced by working mothers in semi-urban areas. Including mothers with different ages, occupations, and educational qualifications helped provide a broader and more balanced understanding of their parenting experiences and perspectives on early childhood development.

Sampling Procedure/Participants Selection Procedure:

This study used purposive sampling to select participants who were most relevant to the research objectives. In total, 6 working mothers who had at least one child aged 3–5 years and were living in semi-urban areas were selected for In-Depth Interviews (IDIs). Among them, 3 participants were from Madaripur and 3 were from Gazipur. This distribution helped to ensure representation from both research sites and allowed comparison of experiences across the two contexts.

In addition, 2 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, 1 in Madaripur and 1 in Gazipur. Total 12 participants were selected for Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Among them, 6 participants were from Madaripur and 6 were from Gazipur.

Participants were identified through workplaces, community contacts and personal recommendations. This approach ensured that all selected mothers met the study criteria and were willing to participate voluntarily.

Data Collection Tool:

A semi-structured In-Depth Interview (IDI) guideline and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guideline were used as the main data collection tools for this study. The semi-structured format allowed participants to share their experiences, perceptions and challenges related to parenting, early childhood development and work–life balance in their own words. The FGD guideline was designed to explore shared experiences, social norms and support systems among working mothers. Both data collection tools were developed based on the research objectives and research questions of the study. The interview and focus group discussion checklists were initially prepared in Bangla to ensure that the participants could easily understand the questions and express their views comfortably during data collection. Later, the tools were translated into English for documentation and reporting purposes. In addition, the tools were pilot-tested prior to the actual data collection to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness of the questions.

Data Collection Method and Procedure:

A semi-structured In-Depth Interview (IDI) guideline was developed to collect primary data for the study. The guideline included open-ended questions to explore mothers' parenting practices, work–life balance and childcare arrangements. These questions allowed participants to freely share their personal experiences and opinions in detail. In addition, two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with working mothers to gather shared experiences, collective perceptions and different viewpoints related to parenting and early childhood development. The FGDs also encouraged interaction among participants, which helped generate deeper discussion and reflection on common challenges and support systems.

Both the IDI and FGD guidelines were pilot-tested before the main data collection to ensure clarity, relevance and cultural appropriateness. All IDIs were conducted face-to-face and one FGD was also conducted face-to-face, while the other FGD was conducted online. All interviews and discussions were conducted in Bangla to ensure participants felt comfortable and could express their thoughts clearly.

Each in-depth interview lasted approximately 40-50 minutes and each FGD lasted around 1-1.5 hours. With participants' permission, audio recordings were taken to ensure accurate documentation of their responses. Field notes were also maintained to capture important observations and contextual details. Before starting each session, the purpose of the study was clearly explained and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Management and Analysis:

After completing the In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), the interview was conducted in Bangla and was audio recorded. Later the transcription was translated in English language. The transcripts were reviewed several times to ensure accuracy and completeness. All data were organized systematically using separate files for each participant and pseudonyms were used instead of real names to maintain confidentiality. The digital files, including audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and only the researcher had access to them.

For data analysis, a qualitative thematic analysis approach was used. The transcripts were read repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Important statements and meaningful segments were identified and assigned initial codes. Similar codes were grouped together to develop broader themes and sub-themes based

on common ideas and patterns. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they clearly reflected the participants' experiences and answered the research questions. Throughout the analysis process, care was taken to preserve the original meaning of participants' responses and ensure accurate interpretation of the findings.

Validity & Reliability:

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research tools, the interview and FGD guidelines were carefully developed and reviewed by me with the support of my research supervisor to ensure clarity, relevance, and content validity. The tools were also pilot-tested before the main data collection to identify any unclear or inappropriate questions and make necessary revisions. The same interview procedures, guidelines, and core questions were followed for all participants to maintain consistency and reduce bias. Conducting the interviews in Bangla helped ensure accurate understanding of the questions. In addition, audio recordings and detailed field notes were used to accurately capture participants' responses, which supported dependable data analysis and strengthened the overall credibility of the study.

Ethical Issues:

Ethical approval was obtained from BRAC University's Ethics Committee before starting the study. All participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the research that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any problem. Written informed consent was taken from each participant. Only mothers who willingly agreed to participate were included and no incentives or pressure were used. Participants were also given the chance to ask questions or seek clarification before and during the study.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by using pseudonyms instead of real names. All data were stored securely and used only for academic purposes. The interview questions were simple and non-sensitive and cultural values were respected throughout the process. After completing the data analysis, audio recordings and identifiable information were deleted to prevent misuse. All data were handled and reported following proper ethical research standards.

Limitations of the Study:

This study faced several practical limitations during data collection. Getting time from working mothers was challenging, as they had busy work schedules along with household responsibilities and childcare duties. In some cases, mothers had to leave the interview early to attend to their children or other urgent tasks. Because of this, a few interviews were shorter than planned, and some discussions could not go into deeper detail.

Similarly, organizing the FGDs was difficult, as not all participants were able to manage time from their work and family responsibilities. Some mothers joined late or had to leave before the discussion ended. In one FGD, all working mothers could not attend so they joined online. Managing both face-to-face and online participants at the same time was slightly challenging, and interaction was sometimes less smooth compared to a fully face-to-face discussion. Despite these limitations, efforts were made to create a comfortable environment and collect meaningful information from all participants.

Chapter IV: Results/Findings & Discussion

RES FINDINGS:

This section presents the findings of the study based on six In-Depth Interviews (IDI #1–#6) and two Focus Group Discussions (FGD #1 and FGD #2) conducted with working mothers of young children. The interviews and focus group discussions explored mothers' understanding of early childhood development (ECD), their daily parenting practices, work and family balance, challenges and support systems.

After transcribing and reviewing the data multiple times, thematic analysis was conducted. Codes were generated from repeated patterns in the narratives and then grouped into broader themes and sub-themes. The findings are presented below under major themes and supporting sub-themes aligned with the research questions.

The findings indicate that mothers perceive themselves as the primary caregivers in their children's lives. Most participants demonstrated a general understanding of early childhood development, particularly emphasizing the importance of proper nutrition, a supportive environment, and active parental involvement for children's growth and wellbeing. However, working mothers often experience several challenges, including time constraints, physical fatigue, and feelings of emotional guilt due to balancing work and childcare responsibilities. In many cases, grandparents play a significant role in caregiving and provide essential support in raising young children. Despite these family supports, workplace support for working mothers remains limited and inconsistent. At the same time, financial independence gained through employment provides working mothers with a sense of confidence, empowerment, and personal satisfaction.

Themes and Sub-Themes:

Theme 1: Perception of Motherhood as Primary Responsibility: This theme captures how participants conceptualize their role as mothers. Across all interviews and focus groups, motherhood was described as the central and primary responsibility in a child's life.

Sub-theme 1.1: Mother as the Main Caregiver

Across all IDIs and FGDs, participants described motherhood as a central and full-time responsibility. Mothers consistently stated that they are responsible for their child's overall well-being. One participant shared: "*Being a mother means taking full responsibility for my child's care and future.*" (Focus Group #1: 22.01.26) Another mother explained: "*A mother is the first teacher and the closest person in a child's life.*" (Focus Group #2: 23.01.26). Similarly, Surma (pseudonym) stated: "*All responsibilities of my child are mine. It is my moral duty.*" (In-depth Interview #3: 14.01.26). Participants described managing feeding, bathing, schooling, emotional care and supervision. Even in joint families, mothers felt ultimate accountability for the child.

Sub-theme 1.2: Mother as First Teacher

Many participants described themselves as the first teachers in their children's lives. Mothers explained that they support their children's learning through daily interactions such as teaching manners, helping with homework, telling stories and answering their questions. One mother explained, "*When they repeatedly ask questions, I answer them. In this way, their development takes place.*" (In-depth Interview #4: 18.01.26). This suggests that mothers see their role not only as

caregivers but also as key contributors to their children's early learning and development.

Theme 2: Daily Parenting Practices Supporting Development: This theme presents the everyday caregiving and learning activities mothers engage in to support their children's growth. Participants described structured routines and intentional interactions that contribute to development.

Sub-theme 2.1: Structured Daily Routine

Participants described maintaining structured daily routines to support their children's development. These routines included waking children in the morning, preparing breakfast, getting them ready for school, supervising homework and spending time with them in the evening. Mothers explained that managing these daily activities helps maintain stability in their children's lives. One participant said, "*From waking him up in the morning to putting him to sleep at night, almost everything is done by me.*" (Focus Group #1: 22.01.26). Many mothers also mentioned that they wake up early to complete household tasks before going to work, showing their efforts to balance work and family responsibilities.

Sub-theme 2.2: Learning Through Play and Interaction

Participants described supporting their children's development through play and daily interaction. Mothers mentioned activities such as storytelling, drawing, puzzles, outdoor walks, and educational games that help children learn new things. These activities were seen as opportunities for children to explore their surroundings and develop different skills. One mother explained, "*When I take him outside, he learns different things from the environment.*" (In-depth Interview #3: 14.01.26). Another participant shared, "*We play together and talk about what he sees.*" (In-depth

Interview #5: 18.01.26). These responses show that mothers try to encourage learning through simple everyday activities and interactions with their children.

Sub-theme 2.3: Addressing Emotional Needs

Participants reported trying to support their children's emotional needs through affection, communication, and spending time together. Mothers mentioned talking with their children, hugging them, bringing small gifts, and making efforts to understand their feelings. These actions were seen as important for maintaining a close relationship and supporting children's emotional wellbeing. One participant shared, "When I return home, I try to bring something he likes." (In-depth Interview #4: 18.01.26). Another mother said, "I try to understand why he is upset and solve it." (Focus Group #1: 22.01.26). These responses show that mothers try to maintain emotional connection with their children despite their work responsibilities.

Theme 3: Understanding of Early Childhood Development (ECD): This theme explores participants' knowledge and perceptions of early childhood development. Mothers described ECD as a critical stage involving holistic growth and environmental influence.

Sub-theme 3.1: ECD as Holistic Growth

Most participants defined early childhood development as physical, mental, emotional and social growth from birth to five years. One participant said: "*Early childhood is when a child grows physically, mentally, socially and emotionally.*" (Focus Group #2: 23.01.26). Another mother explained: "*Early childhood development refers to the stage when a child is around two years old, starts to speak, understand and learn to do small tasks independently. I consider this period to be the most important phase of child*

development. This stage builds the foundation for future success.” (Focus Group #1: 22.01.26).

Sub-theme 3.2: Role of Family and Surrounding Environment in Child

Development

Participants believed that children’s development is strongly influenced by the people and environment around them. Mothers explained that children often learn by observing adults and their surroundings. One mother shared, *“They copy our words and actions and learn from the environment.”* (Focus Group #1: 22.01.26).

Participants also mentioned that mobile phones, television, neighbors, friends and other family members can influence children’s behavior and learning. Some mothers expressed concern about children’s growing dependence on mobile phones. One participant stated, *“Even if we want to spend time, the child prefers mobile games.”* (Focus Group #2: 23.01.26).

Sub-theme 3.3: Importance of Nutrition, Sleep and Environment

Participants identified several essential factors for healthy development: Proper nutrition, adequate sleep, peaceful home environment, father’s involvement. One mother stated: *“Balanced nutrition and proper sleep are most important.”* (Focus Group #1: 22.01.26). Another participant emphasized: *“There should not be conflict between parents or other family members in front of children.”* (In-depth Interview #5: 18.01.26).

THEME 4: Work–Family Balance and Time Constraints: This theme highlights the experiences of managing employment alongside parenting responsibilities. Participants discussed time pressure, fatigue, emotional strain, and adjustments in parenting practices.

Sub-theme 4.1: Time Pressure and Exhaustion

Participants described that managing both work and parenting responsibilities often creates significant time pressure and physical exhaustion. Many mothers reported struggling to balance office duties with household work and childcare, which leaves them feeling tired and stressed. One participant explained, “*Children do not sleep at night and in the morning I feel tired.*” (In-depth Interview #3: 14.01.26). Another mother stated, “*Time management is very difficult. I sacrifice my rest.*” (Focus Group #2: 23.01.26). These responses show that working mothers frequently experience fatigue as they try to fulfill both professional and family responsibilities.

Sub-theme 4.2: Emotional Guilt

Many participants expressed feelings of emotional guilt because they could not spend enough time with their children due to work responsibilities. Mothers reported that balancing job demands and childcare often created emotional stress. One participant said, “*I feel guilty for not spending enough time.*” (Focus Group #1: 22.01.26). Another mother shared, “*Sometimes I think of leaving my job.*” (Focus Group #1: 22.01.26). These responses suggest that although mothers value their employment, they also experience emotional pressure related to societal expectations of motherhood and caregiving. Some participants also mentioned becoming stricter with their children due to stress and time limitations.

Sub-theme 4.3: Shift Toward ‘Quality Time’

Some participants explained that after starting work, they tried to focus more on the quality of time they spend with their children rather than the amount of time. Due to work schedules and limited availability during the day, mothers reported making a conscious effort to engage more actively with their children when they return home.

One participant said, “*Now I try to give more quality time when I am at home.*”

(Focus Group #2: 23.01.26). These responses indicate that working mothers adapt their parenting practices by prioritizing meaningful interaction and attention during the time they are able to spend with their children.

Theme 5: Support Systems and Childcare Arrangements: This theme focuses on the formal and informal support systems available to working mothers. Participants described reliance on grandparents, daycare services and varying levels of workplace support.

Sub-theme 5.1: Grandparent’s Support

Many participants reported that grandparents play an important role in caring for their children while they are at work. In most cases, grandparents were the primary caregivers during working hours and helped with daily childcare responsibilities. One participant stated, “*My mother looks after my child while I am at work.*” (Focus Group #2: 23.01.26). Mothers explained that support from grandparents makes it easier for them to continue working and manage their family responsibilities. However, some participants also mentioned that although joint family support is helpful, it is not always sufficient to meet all childcare needs.

Sub-theme 5.2: Daycare Services

Some participants reported using daycare centers as an alternative childcare arrangement while they are at work. Mothers who used daycare mentioned checking the facilities carefully before enrolling their children. One participant shared, “*I checked everything carefully and felt satisfied.*” (In-depth Interview #3: 14.01.26). However, other mothers expressed concerns about the high cost and quality of private daycare services. One participant said, “*Private daycare is expensive.*” (Focus Group

#2: 23.01.26). Another mother mentioned that the nearest daycare center was far from her home, which made it difficult to use regularly “*The nearest center is far from our home.*” (In-depth Interview #6: 20.01.26). These responses indicate that while daycare services can support working mothers, access and affordability remain challenges.

Sub-theme 5.3: Workplace Support

Some mothers mentioned receiving maternity leave after childbirth, which helped them care for their newborns during the early months. One participant stated, “*When my baby was born, I received leave.*” (In-depth Interview #3: 14.01.26). However, many participants noted that flexible working hours were limited and not always available. One mother explained, “*Sometimes yes, sometimes no.*” (Focus Group #1: 22.01.26). Few participants reported having access to childcare facilities at their workplace. These responses suggest that workplace support remains inconsistent and often insufficient to fully support working mothers in balancing their professional and family responsibilities.

Theme 6: Financial Independence and Identity: This theme reflects mothers’ perceptions of employment beyond caregiving. Participants emphasized economic contribution, personal confidence and the sense of independence gained through work.

Sub-theme 6.1: Economic Contribution

Participants described their employment as an important way to contribute financially to their families. Many mothers expressed pride in earning their own income and supporting household expenses. One participant shared, “*When I receive my salary, I feel happy.*” (In-depth Interview #4: 18.01.26). Mothers explained that their income

helps improve family wellbeing and provides additional financial security. One participant shared, *“I can buy whatever I want for my child”*. These responses show that employment is not only a necessity but also a meaningful contribution to the family’s economic stability.

Sub-theme 6.2: Confidence and Self-Identity

Several participants reported that working outside the home increased their confidence and sense of independence. Mothers mentioned that earning their own income allows them to make decisions and reduces financial dependence on others. One participant stated, *“I do not have to depend on anyone financially.”* (In-depth Interview #5: 18.01.26). Some mothers also encouraged other women to continue working despite challenges. As one participant said, *“Do not stop working. One day your child will be proud.”* (Focus Group #1: 22.01.26). These responses indicate that employment contributes to mothers’ self-confidence and personal identity beyond their caregiving roles.

Discussion:

This section discusses the findings presented in the Results chapter and explains what they suggest about working mothers’ experiences in supporting early childhood development (ECD). The purpose of this discussion is to interpret the patterns that emerged from the data and connect them to the broader educational and social context. The findings reveal complex realities in which working mothers negotiate caregiving responsibilities, employment demands, emotional experiences and support systems while attempting to ensure their children’s healthy development.

The discussion is organized according to the major themes identified in the results.

Motherhood as the Primary Responsibility: One of the strongest findings of this study is that working mothers overwhelmingly perceive themselves as the primary caregivers and central decision-makers in their children's lives. Regardless of employment status or family structure (nuclear or joint), participants internalized caregiving as their core responsibility. This suggests that employment has not reduced the traditional expectation that mothers are mainly responsible for child-rearing. Instead, mothers appear to carry a “dual burden,” maintaining paid work while continuing to shoulder primary caregiving duties (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

This finding is consistent with previous research in South Asian and global contexts, where motherhood is culturally positioned as the primary nurturing role. Studies on gender roles and caregiving have shown that even when women participate in the labor force, domestic and childcare responsibilities largely remain theirs (Craig & Mullan, 2011). The findings of this study confirm that this pattern continues.

The significance of this result lies in its implication for early childhood development. When caregiving responsibility is concentrated on one individual, stress and exhaustion may increase, potentially affecting parenting quality. This highlights the importance of shared parental responsibility and structural support systems (Cawley & Liu, 2012).

Daily Parenting Practices and Support for Development: The findings show that working mothers actively engage in structured routines and developmental activities such as storytelling, helping with homework, answering questions and facilitating outdoor interaction (IDI-1, IDI-3, FGD-1). Despite time constraints, mothers attempt to provide intentional support for cognitive and emotional growth.

This suggests that employment does not reduce mothers' commitment to supporting development, rather many mothers adapt their strategies by organizing routines and maximizing limited time. This aligns with research indicating that the quality of parent-child interaction is more influential than the quantity of time spent (Hsin & Felfe, 2014). Activities such as conversation, responsiveness and engagement reflect principles of positive parenting and child-centered learning (Britto et al., 2017).

However, the data also indicate that structured daily routines are often maintained at the cost of mothers' personal rest (IDI-2, FGD-2). While such routines benefit children, their sustainability may depend on the availability of support systems. This reflects findings by Bianchi (2000), who noted that working mothers often compensate for time constraints by intensifying caregiving efforts.

These findings emphasize the need for parenting support programs that help working mothers balance developmental engagement with self-care and stress management.

Understanding of Early Childhood Development (ECD): Most participants demonstrated a general awareness that early childhood is a foundational stage involving physical, mental, emotional, and social development (IDI-1, IDI-4, FGD-1). Mothers recognized the importance of nutrition, sleep, environment, and parental involvement.

This suggests that community-level awareness of ECD exists, even if it is not framed in technical language. Mothers' understanding appears experiential rather than theoretical, which aligns with findings from Aboud (2007), who found that caregiving knowledge in low- and middle-income contexts is often shaped by lived experience rather than formal education.

However, one participant (IDI-6) was unable to clearly define ECD, indicating variability in awareness levels. This suggests that ECD knowledge is not uniformly distributed across participants. An important observation is the concern about mobile phone dependency (FGD-2, FGD-3). Several mothers reported that children prefer mobile games over direct interaction. This reflects contemporary challenges in parenting within a digital environment. Research shows that excessive screen exposure in early childhood can negatively affect language development, attention, and social interaction (WHO, 2019).

The findings confirm that while working mothers are aware of the risks of digital media, they may struggle to regulate usage due to time constraints. This underscores the need for community-based awareness programs on healthy media use in early childhood.

Work–Family Balance and Emotional Experiences: Time pressure, exhaustion and emotional guilt emerged as central experiences among working mothers (IDI-2, IDI-5, FGD-1). Many participants described waking early, sleeping late and sacrificing personal rest to manage both work and caregiving responsibilities.

This supports the concept of work-family conflict, where competing demands create stress and role strain (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The emotional dimension of guilt particularly related to limited time with children was strongly expressed (IDI-3, FGD-2).

This finding aligns with research suggesting that working mothers often experience psychological tension between professional responsibilities and caregiving expectations (Craig & Mullan, 2011).

Interestingly, mothers responded to this challenge by emphasizing “quality time” over quantity time (IDI-1, IDI-4). This adaptation reflects resilience and coping strategies rather than withdrawal from employment. Contrary to the assumption that maternal employment negatively impacts child development, participants did not report reduced commitment. Instead, they described intentional efforts to compensate for time limitations. This supports the argument that maternal employment does not inherently harm child development when supportive caregiving practices are maintained (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2010).

Thus, the relationship between maternal employment and child development appears complex and context-dependent.

Support Systems and Structural Limitations: Grandparents emerged as the most significant support system (IDI-2, IDI-5, FGD-1). Informal family networks compensate for the lack of formal childcare services.

This finding reflects the continued importance of extended family structures in childcare arrangements. However, reliance on grandparents may not always be sustainable, particularly as urbanization increases and family structures change.

Participants reported that daycare services are limited, expensive or inconsistent in quality (FGD-2, FGD-3). Workplace support was described as irregular and dependent on employer goodwill rather than formal policy (IDI-3, IDI-6).

These findings highlight structural gaps in childcare infrastructure. The absence of workplace daycare and flexible working arrangements increases pressure on working mothers. Research in Bangladesh similarly shows that lack of institutional

childcare support creates barriers for women's workforce participation (NIPORT et al., 2020).

From an educational perspective, stable and high-quality caregiving environments are essential for optimal early childhood development (Black et al., 2017). Therefore, improving access to affordable and regulated childcare services is critical.

Financial Independence and Maternal Identity: An important finding is the positive perception of employment among mothers (IDI-1, IDI-4, FGD-1). Participants expressed pride in earning income and contributing financially to their families.

This challenges the assumption that employment is primarily experienced as a burden. Instead, employment functions as a source of empowerment, confidence, and identity. This finding aligns with Kabeer (2012), who argues that women's economic participation enhances agency, autonomy, and decision-making power within households. In this study, mothers associated income with dignity and independence (FGD-2).

This suggests that policies aimed at improving childcare support should not frame maternal employment as a problem, but rather as a social reality that requires supportive systems.

Unexpected Findings: One unexpected finding was that mothers did not express strong regret about working (IDI-3, FGD-1). Despite challenges, they encouraged other women to continue employment.

This indicates that employment is not perceived as conflicting with motherhood but rather as part of modern maternal identity.

Another notable finding was the emphasis on peaceful home environments (IDI-2, FGD-3). Mothers linked family harmony with children's emotional and social development. This aligns with research suggesting that a positive home environment significantly influences children's socio-emotional well-being (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Implications for Educational and Policy Improvement: The findings suggest several important implications for educational and policy improvement. Parenting education programs should place greater emphasis on practical knowledge of early childhood development (ECD) and effective management of children's digital media use, as many mothers reported limited awareness in these areas (IDI-2, FGD-1) (WHO, 2019).

In addition, participants highlighted the challenges of balancing work and childcare, indicating the need for workplace policies that incorporate flexible scheduling and the provision of childcare facilities (IDI-1, FGD-2). The discussions also revealed a strong demand for government-supported community daycare centers to ensure equitable access to quality childcare services (FGD-1, FGD-2).

Another important finding was the limited involvement of fathers in childcare, which increased the caregiving burden on mothers (IDI-5, FGD-2). This suggests that promoting father involvement programs could help reduce this burden and support more balanced caregiving roles (Lamb, 2010). Improving these areas may enhance early childhood developmental outcomes while also supporting maternal well-being.

Limitations and Future Research: This study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a specific geographic and socio-economic group. The findings may not represent all working mothers.

- Future research could explore fathers' perspectives on caregiving

- Examine children's developmental outcomes directly
- Investigate long-term impacts of mobile device exposure
- Compare urban and rural childcare support systems
- Further research could also examine policy-level barriers in implementing workplace childcare facilities.

The discussion reveals that working mothers demonstrate commitment, adaptability and resilience in supporting early childhood development. While they face time constraints, emotional stress and structural limitations, they continue to prioritize their children's growth.

The findings suggest that the challenge is not maternal employment itself, but the lack of supportive systems that enable balanced caregiving and professional participation.

Conclusion:

This study explored the perspectives of working mothers regarding parenting and early childhood development in semi-urban areas of Bangladesh. By using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the research captured mothers' lived experiences, beliefs and daily practices. The findings show that working mothers strongly perceive themselves as the primary caregivers and first teachers of their children. Although they demonstrate awareness of holistic child development, they face significant challenges such as time constraints, emotional guilt, fatigue and limited workplace support. Informal support systems, especially grandparents, play a crucial role in childcare arrangements, while formal childcare services remain limited or costly in semi-urban contexts.

The study successfully achieved its purpose of understanding how working mothers balance employment and parenting responsibilities during the critical early childhood years. It identified key influencing factors, including cultural expectations, workplace conditions and childcare availability. The research also highlighted the dual reality of maternal employment: while it creates stress and work–family conflict, it also provides financial independence, confidence and a sense of identity for mothers. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex realities faced by working mothers in transitional semi-urban communities.

Reflecting on the entire research process, this study has deepened my understanding of the everyday struggles, strengths and resilience of working mothers. Listening to their personal stories revealed how deeply committed they are to their children’s development despite limited structural support. The research journey strengthened my appreciation for qualitative inquiry, particularly the importance of giving voice to participants’ lived experiences. Overall, this study reinforces the need for more supportive systems that value both women’s employment and young children’s developmental needs.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Parenting Education Programs:** Government and NGOs should provide parenting education on early stimulation, responsive caregiving, and emotional support. Many mothers lack access to accurate ECD information. Such programs can improve caregiving practices and promote child development. They also empower mothers to make informed parenting decisions.

- 2. Encourage Father Involvement:** Initiatives should promote shared caregiving between mothers and fathers. This can reduce the burden on mothers and create a more balanced family environment. Increased father involvement supports children's cognitive and emotional development. It also strengthens overall family well-being.
- 3. Strengthen Workplace Policies:** Employers should introduce flexible working hours, paid maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, and childcare support. These policies help reduce work–family conflict and improve maternal well-being. Supportive workplaces enable mothers to remain productive and engaged. They also contribute to better outcomes for both mothers and children.
- 4. Policy-Level Intervention:** Government policies should prioritize childcare services in semi-urban areas. These regions often lack adequate infrastructure and support systems. Strengthening policy focus can ensure more equitable access to services. Collaboration between sectors can improve implementation and sustainability.
- 5. Establish Community-Based Childcare Centers:** Affordable and quality childcare centers should be developed in semi-urban areas to support working mothers. Many currently depend on informal and unreliable care arrangements. Structured childcare can ensure children's safety, nutrition, and early learning. It also reduces maternal stress and supports mothers' work participation.
- 6. Future Research:** Further research should include fathers' perspectives and informal work settings. Current studies focus mainly on mothers, limiting a

full understanding of family dynamics. Longitudinal research is also needed to assess long-term child outcomes. This will help develop more effective and inclusive policies.

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Appendices:

Appendix A: In-Depth Interview Questionnaire

Title: In-depth Interview and Focus Group Discussion Guideline for Working Mothers

Purpose: This interview guideline is prepared to collect information from working mothers about their experiences, parenting practices and challenges in managing both work and childcare in semi-urban areas.

Section 1: Basic Information

1. Mother's name:
2. Age of mother:
3. Educational Qualification:
4. Number and age of children:
5. Occupation:
6. Type of family (nuclear or joint):
7. Interview/FGD date:
8. Interview/FGD starting time:
9. Interview/FGD ending time:

Section 2: Introductory Questions:

1. How are you?
2. How is everyone at home?

Section 3: Parenting and Daily Life

1. How do you describe your role as a mother?
2. What are your daily responsibilities for your child?
3. How do you manage your time between work and home?
4. Has your parenting style changed since you started working? If yes, how?

Section 4: Understanding of Early Childhood Development

1. What does early childhood development mean to you?

2. What kinds of activities do you do to support your child's learning and growth?
3. How do you take care of your child's emotional needs?
4. What do you think are the most important things for a child's healthy development?

Section 5: Challenges and Support

1. What difficulties do you face in parenting your child during early childhood?
2. Who helps you take care of your child while you are at work?
3. Are there any childcare centers or services in your area? What is your experience with them?
4. Does your workplace support you as a mother (for example, leave or flexible time)?
5. What kind of support would help you most in supporting your child's early development?

Section 6: Reflections

1. What do you enjoy most about being a working mother?
2. What advice would you give to other working mothers of young children?
3. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences?

Note for FGDs: The same thematic areas were explored during Focus Group Discussions.

Closing Note: Thank you for sharing your time and experiences. Your opinions will help to better understand the lives and needs of working mothers in semi-urban areas. All information will be kept confidential and used only for academic purposes.

Appendix B: Consent Form

Title of the Study: Understanding Working Mothers' Perspectives on parenting and Early Childhood Development in Semi-Urban Areas

Researcher: Sayada Afrin Madhobe

Supervisor: Mohammad Safayet Khan

Purpose of the Study: This study aims to explore the experiences, beliefs, and challenges of working mothers in managing parenting and early childhood development while balancing work responsibilities in semi-urban areas of Bangladesh.

Participation: Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

Confidentiality: All information provided will remain confidential. Your name or identity will not be revealed in any reports or publications. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your privacy.

Procedure: If you agree to participate, you will take part in an interview lasting approximately 30–40 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate data collection.

Consent Statement: I have read and understood the information above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study and understand that I may withdraw at any time.

Participant Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____