

Lived Experiences of Working Mothers Raising Children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder While Balancing Work Responsibilities

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of working mothers raising children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) while balancing employment and caregiving responsibilities in the Philippines. Guided by Role Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological design and Colaizzi's phenomenological method. Eight working mothers were purposively selected based on established inclusion criteria, including primary caregiving responsibility for a child with a documented clinical diagnosis of ADHD and concurrent employment. Data were generated through researcher-developed, semi-structured, in-depth virtual interviews and analyzed through systematic identification of significant statements, formulated meanings, theme clustering, and synthesis of the essence of the experience. Trustworthiness was supported through bracketing, reflexive journaling, verbatim transcription, an audit trail, and member checking. Five themes emerged: (1) navigating the dual burden of motherhood and employment; (2) emotional, physical, psychological, and financial strain of caregiving; (3) developing adaptive coping strategies and resilience; (4) the crucial role of support systems; and (5) transformation of maternal and professional identity. Participants described continuous negotiation among caregiving, employment, household, and personal responsibilities. They also described resilience through acceptance, spirituality, positive reframing, structured routines, self-care, and advocacy. Family members, workplaces, schools, and professionals served as important sources of support, although access to support differed across participants. The findings indicate that sustainable support for working mothers of children with ADHD requires attention not only to individual coping but also to family, educational, workplace, healthcare, community, and policy contexts. The study proposes an integrated support framework to guide family-centered, school-responsive, and workplace-supportive practices.

Keywords: Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, working mothers, lived experiences, phenomenology, caregiving, resilience, support systems, maternal identity, Philippines

1. INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

Balancing employment and parenting responsibilities is a significant concern for mothers who raise children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition associated with difficulties involving attention, hyperactivity, impulsivity, executive functioning, and everyday regulation. For families, these characteristics may create demands that extend

beyond routine parenting and may require sustained supervision, behavioral guidance, educational support, service coordination, and emotional availability. Research has consistently associated ADHD caregiving with increased parental stress and challenges in family functioning (Theule et al., 2013; Haneda et al., 2025; Jongrakthanakij et al., 2026).

Caregiving demands may also interact with mothers' employment responsibilities. Work and family roles draw on limited time, energy, and emotional resources, creating conditions in which responsibilities in one domain can interfere with responsibilities in another. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) described work-family conflict as arising when role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible. For mothers of children with ADHD, the need to respond to school concerns, behavioral needs, appointments, developmental needs, and household responsibilities may make employment continuity difficult, particularly when workplace arrangements are inflexible or support is limited.

Recent research has documented poorer quality of life, elevated stress, and the importance of social support and resilience among caregivers of children with ADHD. A scoping review of mothers of children with ADHD identified physical, psychological, social, and environmental dimensions of quality of life as important areas of concern (Quatrosi et al., 2025). Other studies have emphasized the roles of family functioning, parental characteristics, coping, and contextual support in shaping caregiver well-being (Bar et al., 2024; George et al., 2024; Jongrakthanakij et al., 2026). Qualitative work has further shown that parents' experiences include complex challenges and culturally meaningful coping processes, including spirituality and acceptance (Mesfin & Habtamu, 2024; Vithana & Asurakkody, 2025).

Despite this evidence, much of the available literature emphasizes stress, quality-of-life measures, or broader populations of parents of children with neurodevelopmental conditions. Less attention is given to the subjective experiences of employed mothers who simultaneously manage caregiving, employment, household responsibilities, and changing maternal and professional identities. The Philippine context is particularly important because family support, cultural expectations, workplace conditions, and access to services can shape how caregiving responsibilities are negotiated.

The present study therefore focused on the lived experiences of working mothers raising children with ADHD while balancing work responsibilities. A phenomenological approach was selected to understand the meaning participants attributed to their everyday experiences rather than to quantify relationships among variables. The study was guided by Role Theory (Biddle, 1986), which helps explain competing expectations associated with motherhood and employment, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which emphasizes the influence of interacting family, school, workplace, community, and broader social environments.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

- How do working mothers experience the integration of caregiving and professional roles in daily life?
- How do working mothers cope with the emotional, psychological, and physical demands of managing both roles?
- How do these experiences shape their sense of identity as mothers and professionals?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of working mothers raising children with ADHD while fulfilling employment responsibilities, with particular attention to role

integration, caregiving strain, coping and resilience, support systems, and maternal and professional identity.

2. METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenology was appropriate because the purpose was to understand participants' subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations of balancing employment and caregiving. Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method. The approach allowed the researcher to identify significant statements and formulate themes representing the shared essence of participants' experiences.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

The researcher recognized that qualitative interpretation is influenced by the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. The researcher's background in education provided familiarity with parenting, educational settings, and child development, while also creating a need for deliberate attention to assumptions and possible interpretive bias. Bracketing was used to identify and set aside preconceptions as much as possible. A reflexive journal documented methodological decisions, reflections, emotional responses, emerging insights, and potential sources of bias. Standardized interview procedures, verbatim transcription, member checking, and an audit trail further supported credibility and confirmability.

Participants and Sampling

The target population consisted of working mothers raising children with clinically documented ADHD while maintaining employment. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who could provide rich and relevant accounts of the phenomenon. The inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old, to be a biological, adoptive, or legal guardian and primary caregiver of a child with a documented ADHD diagnosis from a qualified healthcare professional, to be engaged in formal or structured employment, to have approximately 30–40 hours of work per week or more, and to have at least six months of employment and caregiving experience. Participants also provided written informed consent and agreed to an audio-recorded virtual interview.

Eight participants were included in the final sample. Data saturation was considered achieved after the eighth interview because the major patterns relating to caregiving, work-family integration, coping, support systems, and identity transformation were consistently represented and no substantially new themes were emerging.

Participant Profile

Participant	Broad occupational context	Family context	Support context
P1	Teacher / school coordinator	Married; two children	Husband and mother; supportive workplace
P2	Full-time employee	Single mother; one child	Limited assistance; primarily manages caregiving alone
P3	Home-based online business	Married; mother of twins	Flexible work arrangement;

			coordinates with professionals
P4	Airline scheduler / work from home	Married	Also supports mother with cancer treatment; limited external support
P5	Part-time on-call cleaner	Single mother; three children	Financial and caregiving constraints; limited resources
P6	Full-time nurse	Married; five children	Family coordination and spousal support
P7	School administrator	Married	Family, faith community, and trusted colleagues
P8	Full-time supervisor	Solo parent	Extended family provides major caregiving support

Research Setting and Data Generation

The study was conducted in the Philippines using online and virtual platforms. Participants were recruited through ADHD support groups, parent organizations, schools, special education centers, workplace networks, and social media communities. Interviews were conducted through platforms selected according to participants' preferences and availability, including Google Meet, Zoom, and Messenger Video Call. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission.

A researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide was used. The guide covered three broad areas: managing children with ADHD; integrating caregiving and professional roles; and coping strategies, support systems, and sense of identity. The guide was reviewed by three experts in educational psychology, special education, and qualitative research for clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. A pilot test with two working mothers outside the study sample was used to refine wording and flow.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked against the recordings. Personal identifiers were removed or replaced with participant codes. Colaizzi's phenomenological method was used to analyze the data through repeated reading of transcripts, identification of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of meanings into themes, and synthesis of the overall essence of the phenomenon. Member checking was conducted with all eight participants. Participants reviewed summarized thematic interpretations and confirmed that the themes reflected their experiences; minor clarifications were incorporated where appropriate. An audit trail documented coding and analytical decisions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was secured before data collection, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to decline questions, pause interviews, reschedule, or withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected through participant codes and secure, password-protected data storage. The study also addressed the possibility of emotional distress because participants discussed personal experiences involving caregiving, employment, and family challenges. Interviews could be paused and participants

could skip questions or withdraw. Debriefing was conducted after interviews, and participants experiencing continuing distress were encouraged to seek appropriate professional support. The study reported compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

3. RESULTS

Theme 1. Navigating the Dual Burden of Motherhood and Employment

The first theme captured the continuous negotiation required to fulfill maternal and professional responsibilities at the same time. Participants described motherhood and employment not as separate domains but as interconnected responsibilities requiring constant adjustment, prioritization, and time management. The demands of ADHD caregiving included supervision, educational assistance, therapy or service coordination, behavioral support, and responding to concerns arising from school or other settings.

Participants differed in the way role conflict appeared. One teacher and school coordinator described the need for significant effort, patience, and dedication to move between professional duties and caregiving after work. Another participant reported that caregiving needs influenced career decisions. A participant operating a home-based online business experienced flexibility but also difficulty separating work from caregiving because both occurred in the same environment. Another participant managed employment as an airline scheduler while also caring for a child with ADHD and supporting a mother undergoing cancer treatment. A nurse described the experience as a “constant balancing act” involving parenting, employment, and caregiving responsibilities.

These accounts indicate that work-family conflict was influenced not simply by whether a mother was employed, but by the interaction among job demands, caregiving intensity, flexibility, and support. Participants with more understanding supervisors, flexible arrangements, and family assistance described greater capacity to maintain both roles. Participants with fewer resources reported greater pressure to modify work arrangements, prioritize immediate caregiving needs, or accept limits on professional opportunities.

Theme 2. Emotional, Physical, Psychological, and Financial Strain of Caregiving

The second theme described caregiving as multidimensional. Participants reported emotional concern for their children’s development and future, physical fatigue, psychological pressure, and financial demands associated with services and family needs. One participant described feeling “physically tired and emotionally drained” while combining teaching, household responsibilities, therapy appointments, and academic support for her child.

Emotional strain was connected to uncertainty, responsibility, guilt, frustration, and concern about children’s independence, social adjustment, academic progress, and future opportunities. Physical strain was intensified when employment schedules were demanding or unpredictable. Financial concerns were particularly salient for participants with limited resources and for single or solo parents who had fewer alternatives for sharing caregiving responsibilities.

The experiences also showed that caregiver burden was contextual. A participant managing the needs of both a child with ADHD and a parent with cancer experienced overlapping caregiving responsibilities. Participants with single-parent or solo-parent responsibilities described greater dependence on personal coping and extended family. These differences demonstrate that ADHD-related caregiving cannot be understood independently of family structure, employment, financial capacity, and available services.

Theme 3. Developing Adaptive Coping Strategies and Resilience

The third theme focused on how participants adapted to continuing demands rather than eliminating them. Mothers described positive reframing, acceptance, spirituality, structured routines, organization, self-care, family teamwork, learning about ADHD, and attention to children's progress as ways of sustaining themselves.

One participant used gardening, exercise, time with family, and attention to small developmental improvements as sources of strength. Another relied on prayer, faith, and continuing education about ADHD. A school administrator used routines, organization, and celebration of developmental milestones. Other participants emphasized family cooperation, teaching children life skills, focusing on one day at a time, leisure activities, and conversations with trusted people.

Resilience therefore appeared as a dynamic and contextual process. Internal resources such as patience, acceptance, spirituality, optimism, and emotional regulation interacted with external resources such as family assistance, workplace understanding, and professional guidance. Participants with fewer resources still demonstrated persistence and adaptation, but their strategies were more strongly oriented toward meeting immediate needs and maintaining essential responsibilities.

Theme 4. The Crucial Role of Support Systems

Participants consistently described support as an important condition for sustaining caregiving and employment. Support came from spouses, parents, siblings, older children, colleagues, supervisors, educators, professionals, and faith communities. Family support reduced the practical burden of childcare, transportation, appointments, household responsibilities, and unexpected caregiving needs.

Workplace support was also important. Participants with understanding supervisors, flexible schedules, or accommodating colleagues were better able to respond to children's needs while remaining employed. School and professional collaboration helped mothers understand children's needs and coordinate strategies. These experiences demonstrate the ecological nature of caregiving: mothers' well-being was influenced by the quality and accessibility of relationships and systems surrounding them.

Support was not equally available. One participant described limited practical assistance while carrying multiple caregiving responsibilities. Participants who were single or solo parents also had fewer caregiving alternatives. Where support was limited, mothers relied more heavily on personal resilience and immediate problem-solving. Thus, support systems were not simply additional resources; they shaped the conditions under which mothers experienced and managed caregiving.

Theme 5. Transformation of Maternal and Professional Identity

The fifth theme reflected changes in how participants understood motherhood, work, disability, inclusion, and themselves. The caregiving journey was described not only as a source of difficulty but also as a process that developed patience, empathy, acceptance, resilience, and advocacy.

Participants working in education described professional changes resulting from their experiences as mothers. One teacher reported greater understanding of learners with special needs, while a school administrator described stronger commitment to inclusive education and supportive learning environments. A nurse reported increased empathy for families facing developmental and health-related challenges. Other participants emphasized personal transformation, including greater patience, emotional control, acceptance of individual differences, and prioritization of children's well-being.

Across the narratives, success was sometimes redefined. Rather than focusing only on career advancement or conventional achievement, participants described valuing presence, acceptance, child development, emotional security, and family well-being. Increased knowledge about ADHD also

contributed to advocacy, with mothers becoming more willing to communicate children's needs to schools, workplaces, and communities.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings show that the experience of working mothers raising children with ADHD is shaped by an ongoing interaction between personal responsibilities and environmental conditions. The five themes are consistent with Role Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Role Theory explains the tension created when expectations associated with motherhood and employment compete for time and energy (Biddle, 1986; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Bronfenbrenner's framework further explains why mothers' experiences differed according to family relationships, workplace practices, school relationships, community resources, and broader cultural expectations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The dual burden identified in the first theme is consistent with evidence that caregivers of children with neurodevelopmental conditions experience work-family challenges and increased stress. The present study adds qualitative detail by showing how mothers experience these pressures in everyday routines and employment decisions. Participants did not describe balance as a stable condition. Instead, balance was an ongoing process of adjustment that depended on the child's needs, job demands, family resources, and the availability of flexible arrangements.

The second theme is consistent with research documenting reduced quality of life and elevated caregiver stress among mothers of children with ADHD. Quatrosi et al. (2025) identified physical, psychological, social, and environmental dimensions of quality of life, while Bar et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of caregiver well-being. The present findings show how these dimensions become interconnected in daily life: emotional concern can affect concentration at work, physical fatigue can reduce recovery time, and financial demands can influence employment choices.

The third theme suggests that resilience should not be treated solely as an individual trait. George et al. (2024) emphasized stress, coping, and resilience among mothers of children with ADHD, while Vithana and Asurakkody (2025) documented the role of spiritual practices as a coping resource. The participants in the present study similarly used spirituality, positive reframing, structured routines, self-care, and social support. At the same time, participants' experiences show that resilience develops within circumstances that can either enable or constrain coping.

The fourth theme reinforces the importance of social and ecological support. Research on ADHD caregiving has identified family functioning and social support as important contextual factors (Jongrakthanakij et al., 2026; Pardo-Salamanca et al., 2024). In the present study, reliable support reduced the practical and emotional burden of caregiving, whereas limited support increased dependence on individual coping. Workplace and school relationships were particularly important because they influenced mothers' ability to remain employed while responding to children's needs.

The fifth theme extends the discussion beyond burden by highlighting transformation. Participants described increased empathy, patience, acceptance, and advocacy. These changes affected both maternal and professional identities. For participants working in education and healthcare, personal caregiving experiences influenced professional understanding and strengthened commitment to supportive and inclusive practices. This suggests that caregiving experiences may contribute to professional meaning-making as well as personal development.

Taken together, the findings suggest that interventions should not place the responsibility for successful work-family integration solely on mothers. Individual coping support is important, but sustainable

support requires coordinated systems. Families can distribute caregiving responsibilities; schools can strengthen communication and individualized support; workplaces can consider flexibility and supervisor understanding; healthcare and community services can improve access to information and interventions; and broader policies can recognize the realities of employed caregivers.

5. IMPLICATIONS

For Families

Family-centered approaches should recognize caregiving as a shared responsibility. Practical distribution of childcare, household tasks, appointments, and educational support may reduce pressure on mothers and create opportunities for rest and employment continuity.

For Schools and Special Education Practice

Schools and special education professionals can strengthen communication with families, provide clear information about children's needs, and collaborate with parents on realistic support strategies. Understanding the mother's employment and caregiving context may improve the practicality of school-family interventions.

For Workplaces

Workplaces may consider flexible scheduling, supportive supervisory practices, and reasonable mechanisms for responding to family needs. Such measures can help employed caregivers remain engaged in work while managing responsibilities associated with children who require additional support.

For Healthcare and Community Services

Families may benefit from accessible information, coordinated referrals, parent education, and community-based support. Services should recognize caregiver needs as part of the broader context of child and family well-being.

Integrated Support Framework

Based on the findings, the study developed an Integrated Support Framework and Action Plan for Working Mothers Raising Children with ADHD. The framework adopts a multi-level approach involving individual empowerment, family participation, school-family collaboration, workplace responsiveness, community support, and policy development. Its central premise is that maternal resilience is strengthened when personal coping resources are matched with supportive environments.

6. CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study explored how eight working mothers in the Philippines experienced the simultaneous demands of employment and raising children with ADHD. The findings showed that their experiences involved continuous role negotiation, multidimensional caregiving strain, adaptive coping and resilience, dependence on support systems, and transformation of maternal and professional identity. The mothers' experiences demonstrate that caregiving challenges are not determined solely by ADHD-related needs. Family structure, employment conditions, financial resources, workplace flexibility, school relationships, and access to support all influence how caregiving and employment are negotiated. At the same time, participants demonstrated substantial capacity for adaptation through acceptance, spirituality, organization, self-care, positive reframing, family cooperation, and advocacy.

The study therefore concludes that meaningful support for working mothers of children with ADHD requires an ecological and collaborative response. Supporting mothers as individuals remains important,

but sustainable outcomes also depend on families, schools, workplaces, healthcare providers, communities, and policy environments sharing responsibility for caregiver support.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study involved eight purposively selected working mothers and was designed for depth rather than statistical generalization. Participants also differed in age, occupation, family structure, work arrangement, available support, and the developmental circumstances of their children. These differences enriched the phenomenological accounts but also mean that the findings should be interpreted as contextual rather than representative of all working mothers of children with ADHD. Future studies may include larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, fathers and other caregivers, comparative occupational groups, and studies examining specific workplace or school-based interventions.

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