

Bettering and Balancing: Experiences of Maternal Self-Employment in Urban and Rural Nova
Scotia

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Abstract

Advancing the “push-pull debate” (Hughes, 2003), this research draws on Budig’s (2006) disadvantaged worker and class-mobility hypotheses to identify the push and pull-factors that inform mothers’ decisions to self-employ in Nova Scotia. A review of literature examining maternal self-employment revealed three key limitations: (1) a frequent reliance on quantitative, national survey data, (2) a focus on macro-level geographic context, and (3) a lack of comparative analysis of two or more geographic contexts. To address these gaps, this research employed a qualitative approach to examining the influence of meso-level geographic context. The following questions were addressed: (1) What push and pull-factors do mothers identify in their experiences with self-employment? (2) How does urban versus rural residence shape mothers’ experiences of self-employment in Nova Scotia? Qualitative data was collected through six semi-structured interviews with urban and rural self-employed mothers and analyzed using thematic content analysis. While unique rural constraints and resources were discussed, the primary push-and pull-factors into self-employment were identified by urban and rural participants, alike. Participants more strongly emphasized pull-factors toward self-employment, including the ability to reduce work-family conflict and increase control. Within self-employment, identified constraints included a loss of income and increase in workload and responsibilities, while resources included community support and social networks. Participants suggested that mothers’ experiences in both wage-employment and self-employment could be improved through the expansion of government programs and increased advocacy for scheduling flexibility and work-family balance in the workplace. Findings reveal that mothers navigate and weigh multiple push and pull-factors when deciding to self-employ, indicating that further qualitative research is needed to fully capture mothers’ unique experiences.

May 2, 2022

Introduction

Over the past half-century, Canadian women's workforce participation has increased substantially. Since the late 1970s, the gap between women's and men's workforce representation has decreased from 30% to 9% (Petersson et al., 2019; Status of Women in Canada, 2012). Despite increased workplace participation, scholars document persistent normative expectations regarding women's domestic obligations, resulting in competing work and family demands (Simon, 1995; Collins, 2020). These competing demands generate tension and conflict for women, particularly mothers seeking to balance work and family obligations. Likewise, a large body of literature identifies mothers' unique and disproportionate exposure to work-family conflict (WFC), workplace discrimination, and associated high levels of distress (Cornwell, 2013; Correll et al., 2007; Mallon and Cohen, 2002; Simon, 1995).

In examining how mothers navigate competing work and family demands, self-employment is identified as a popular work alternative (Cai et al., 2019; Carr, 1996; Szalamek, 1996; Craig et al., 2012; Lim, 2019). Research highlights several push and pull-factors that influence mothers' self-employment, including WFC, exposure to workplace discrimination, lack of access to childcare, the opportunity for scheduling flexibility, and potential income and career growth (Budig, 2006; Besamusca, 2018; Hughes, 2003). Additionally, scholars have identified geographic context as a key factor shaping maternal self-employment patterns. Local employment policies, normative expectations, and material resources stand out as significant factors underlying mothers' self-employment (Carr, 1996; Collins, 2020; Joonas, 2017; Lim, 2019; Menon & Rogers, 2011; Zhang & Pan, 2012).

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Previous research is limited in three key respects: (1) it is largely quantitative and reliant on national survey data, (2) it has primarily focused on macro-level geographic contexts, and (3) it has rarely offered a comparative analysis of two or more geographic contexts. Quantitative research has been vital to producing an overview of self-employment patterns; however, the use of qualitative interviews can reveal important details of mothers' perceptions of the push and pull-factors that inform their employment (Collins, 2020). Additionally, focus on meso-level geographic context is valuable in Canada, as culture, resources, constraints, and government policies can vary considerably from one region to another. Through a series of in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with mothers from urban and rural Nova Scotia, my research seeks to capture mothers' detailed accounts of their experiences and how they feel their urban or rural residence may impact their self-employment.

The findings and limitations of previous literature led to the development of two research questions: (1) What push and pull-factors do mothers identify in their experiences with self-employment? (2) How does urban versus rural residence shape mothers' experiences of self-employment in Nova Scotia? Disadvantaged worker hypothesis and class-mobility hypotheses are adopted to analyse and frame findings (Budig, 2006). Using deductive reasoning, findings will be compared against both hypotheses to identify how, when, and why they explain rural or urban self-employment patterns.

Literature Review

Gender Role Expectations and Work-Family Conflict

A large body of research has identified women's unique and disproportionate exposure to work-family conflict (WFC; Collins, 2020; Correll et al., 2007; Glavin et al., 2011; Greenhouse,

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1985; Simon, 1995). Despite women's overall increased participation in the workforce over the past half-century (Petersson et al., 2017, Status of Women in Canada, 2012), normative expectations of women's domestic obligations are persistent. Simon (1995) finds that, in the United States, women are more likely to perceive their work and family roles as "independent" and in tension with one another, while men are more likely to perceive their work and family roles as "interdependent" and harmonious (p. 183). While women understand their work roles as additional and potentially threatening to their domestic obligations, men understand their wage-employment as an acceptable and inherent part of their breadwinning obligations (Simon, 1995). For men, feeling like a "good" husband and father is contingent on working and contributing financially to the home while, for women, feeling like a "good" wife or mother is contingent on ensuring that adequate time and attention is given to domestic obligations (Simon, 1995). As women "continue to shoulder most responsibility for managing domestic life" (Collins, 2020, p. 849), participation in the workforce is accompanied by tensions between competing work and family demands (Craig et al., 2012; Simon, 1995).

Navigating work and family obligations has a considerable impact on women's levels of distress (Simon, 1995; Collins, 2020; Cornwell, 2013; Glavin et al., 2011). For example, Simon (1995) finds that, of the women he interviewed, "85%... felt guilty about combining work and family because they perceive that a consequence of having a job is that they sometimes slight their children and neglect their husband" (p. 186). In response to experiences of WFC, women's self-perception as a "good" wife or mother may be undermined, resulting in feelings of inadequacy, failure, or guilt (Simon, 1995; Collins, 2020). Nearly 25 years after Simon's (1995) research was published, Collins (2020) research with American women produces strikingly

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similar findings, with the majority of women participants expressing feelings of guilt and personal responsibility in response to WFC.

Motherhood and WFC

Further research on women's competing work and family demands reveals motherhood as a key predictor of WFC and associated distress (Cornwell, 2013; Correll et al., 2007; Mallon and Cohen, 2002; Simon, 1995). The additional domestic obligations associated with motherhood exacerbate women's already disproportionate exposure to WFC. For example, Cornwell (2013) finds that working mothers report having to "switch" between various social roles more frequently than both women without children and fathers. This increased exposure to role switching is associated with higher levels of distress due to the chronic pressure of navigating different social expectations (Cornwell, 2013, p. 115). Additionally, Simon (1995) and Collins (2020) find that mothers' additional experiences of distress in balancing work and family demands inform their self-perception as "good" mothers.

Women's and mothers' experiences of WFC are not limited to internal beliefs and distress but extend to material consequences in both the home and workplace. Previous research finds that mothers are subject to increased scrutiny, harsher penalties, and lower pay in the workplace when compared to childless workers of other genders and fathers (Besamuca, 2020; Correll et al., 2007; Craig et al., 2012). This "motherhood penalty" stems from employers' skepticism of mothers' ability to balance work and family demands, due to the normative assumption that mothers should and will prioritize their domestic obligations over employment (Correll et al., 2007). Correll (2007) finds that, when potential employers were asked to rate job applicants whom they believed to be mothers, competence ratings decreased by approximately 10% and commitment ratings by 15%. This was despite being presented with resumes identical

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in merit to those of both childless applicants and fathers, neither of whom were penalized in the same way as mothers. Mallon and Cohen (2002) find that persistent tension between work and family roles results in many women “com[ing] to the realization that for them, organizational life [is] fundamentally incompatible with their family roles and responsibilities” (p. 223). As such, past studies have identified women as more likely than men to adapt or altogether leave their jobs to mitigate WFC (Bari et. al, 2021; Correll et al., 2007; Greenhause & Beutell, 1985).

Push and Pull-Factors Toward Maternal Self-Employment

In response to research identifying mothers’ disproportionate exposure to WFC and workplace discrimination, a growing body of literature is concerned with how mothers navigate and mitigate the conflicts they experience. Amidst this literature, self-employment stands out as an attractive and flexible work alternative for women, particularly mothers, seeking to balance their work and family roles (Cai et al., 2019; Carr, 1996; Szala-Meneok, 1996; Craig et al., 2012; Lim, 2019). While research on maternal self-employment patterns often identifies WFC and workplace discrimination as push-factors into self-employment, other authors point to potential pull-factors (Budig, 2006; Hughes, 2003).

The ability to integrate income-generating and childcare activities has been identified as a significant pull-factor in mothers’ pursuit of self-employment over wage-employment (Cai et al., 2019; Carr, 1996; Lim, 2019). Researchers have found that self-employed women typically spend less time on paid work and more time on family than their wage-employed peers, suggesting that the ability to spend more time on family is an important feature of maternal self-employment (Craig et al., 2012; Dinh et al., 2021; Bari et al. 2021; Budig, 2006). In reviewing survey data from over 12000 survey respondents in the United States, Budig (2006) finds that “each additional child increases women’s likelihood of self-employment by 11 percent,”

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although children do not affect men's likelihood of self-employment (p. 2234). Literature similarly highlights the unique impacts of "scheduling flexibility" for working mothers, although little of this research examines its potential relationship to maternal self-employment patterns (Blair-Loy, 2009; Jacobs & Padavic, 2015).

Scholars have identified additional pull-factors within maternal self-employment. For example, Joona (2017) suggests that Swedish mothers typically enjoy more equitable, family-friendly work policies (e.g., longer parental leave for both parents) and access to universal childcare, which may alleviate WFC. Consequently, Swedish women may self-employ to continue market work despite the expectation to take maternal leave (Joona, 2017). Budig (2006) finds that professionally self-employed women (e.g., small business managers) are likely to experience an increase in earnings compared to previous wage employment. However, those who are unprofessionally self-employed (e.g., childcare-provider, hairdresser, sales worker) are likely to experience a decrease in earnings (Budig, 2006). While the opportunity to increase earnings may be a pull-factor for women's self-employment, Budig (2006) finds that "each additional child increases women's likelihood of self-employment in non-professional occupations by 10-percent" (p. 729). Because the majority of previous research is quantitative, it is limited in its ability to highlight the complex ways that both push and pull-factors may interact to influence maternal self-employment patterns. To address this gap, this research employs a qualitative approach to explore mothers' experiences with self-employment in greater detail.

Geographic Context

Previous research has highlighted how geographic context shapes mothers' engagement with self-employment. Several authors have focused on macro-level contexts, particularly how national policies regarding parental leave, childcare, and small business supports affect mothers'

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exposure to WFC (Carr, 1996; Collins, 2020; Joona, 2017; Lim, 2019; Menon & Rogers, 2011; Zhang & Pan, 2012). As discussed above, studies examining national survey data from countries including the United States, Canada, Ireland, and Australia have pointed to mothers' disproportionate exposure to WFC as a push-factor into maternal self-employment (Bari et. al., 2021; Besamuca, 2020; Craig et al., 2012; Hughes, 2003). Conversely, in the Swedish context, Joona (2017) finds that equitable, family-friendly work policies and access to childcare have decreased mothers' exposure to WFC and associated push-factors (Joona, 2017). In urban China, Zhang and Pan (2012) find that both mothers' desire to balance work and family life and their experiences of state-sector layoffs in the early 1980s contributed to maternal self-employment patterns. Taking a comparative approach, Collins (2020) identifies cross-national variation in the level and extent of mothers' exposure to WFC in Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the United States. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that geographic context is relevant in shaping maternal pathways to self-employment. However, few authors offer a comparative analysis of maternal self-employment in different geographic contexts.

A more limited body of research has focused on the influence of meso-level contexts on maternal self-employment patterns (Keller, 2014; Kley & Drobnič, 2019; Menon & Rogers, 2011; Szala-Meneok & McIntosh, 1996; Wells, 2002; Zhang & Pan, 2012). While national work and family policies have a significant impact on maternal self-employment patterns (Joona, 2017; Collins, 2020), maternal employment patterns can differ considerably between communities within the same country, state, or province (Menon & Rogers, 2011; Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000; Zhang & Pan, 2012). Particularly, scholars have identified considerable differences in the normative expectations, accessibility of resources, and associated employment patterns between rural and urban communities (Keller, 2014; Kley & Drobnič, 2019; Menon &

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Rogers, 2011; Szala-Meneok & McIntosh, 1996; Wells, 2002; Zhang & Pan, 2012). For example, Kley and Drobnič (2019) find that, in rural communities, normative constraints regarding women's roles as primarily domestic are exacerbated by structural constraints including limited local job markets and longer commuting distances. Together, these constraints "hamper [rural] women's labour market participation more than men's" (Kley and Drobnič, 2019, p. 150). Despite these findings, literature regarding how rural or urban dwelling informs maternal self-employment is limited. Additionally, much like national-level research, few community-level studies have offered a comparative analysis of how geographic context informs maternal self-employment patterns. Focusing on Nova Scotia, this research will address this gap by comparatively examining maternal self-employment in both urban and rural contexts. By speaking with both urban and rural mothers, this research seeks to explore how community-level factors inform mothers' pursuit of self-employment.

Problem Statement

Scholars have detailed both the complex push and pull-factors within maternal self-employment and how these factors are informed by geographic context. However, previous research is limited in two key respects: First, a significant portion of previous literature has relied on survey data to identify motivating factors in mothers' self-employment. In-depth, qualitative accounts of maternal self-employment are lacking, despite the insight a qualitative approach would provide to understanding the push and pull-factors of maternal self-employment. Second, previous research has rarely employed a comparative approach to examining the effects of geographic context on maternal self-employment, particularly on a community-to-community level. Comparative analyses of maternal self-employment patterns in two or more geographic contexts will provide valuable insight into the impact that local social and economic landscapes

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have on self-employment patterns. This understanding is particularly useful in identifying what resources mitigate WFC and where they are lacking. My research proposes to address these gaps by (1) taking a qualitative approach to examining mothers' first-hand accounts of their motivations and experiences surrounding self-employment and (2) interviewing a sample of both rural and urban self-employed mothers in Nova Scotia to compare experiences in different geographic contexts.

Research Questions

In reviewing the findings and limitations of previous literature, this thesis seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What push and pull-factors do mothers identify in their experiences with self-employment?
2. How does urban versus rural residence shape mothers' experiences of self-employment in Nova Scotia?

Theoretical Framework

As stated, this research seeks to identify the push and pull-factors that shape mothers' experiences with self-employment. This “push-pull’ debate” (Hughes, 2003) has been examined by authors from a variety of perspectives, with some authors focusing on push-factors (Cai et al., 2009; Lim, 2019; Mallon & Cohen, 2002; Menon & Rogers, 2011; Smith, 2005; Zhang & Pan, 2012) and others on pull-factors (Joona, 2017; Keller, 2014; Taniguchi, 2002). Michelle Budig (2006) distinguishes these push and pull perspectives into two theoretical categories: the “disadvantaged worker hypothesis” and the “class-mobility hypothesis” (p. 2224). The disadvantaged worker hypothesis focuses on the push-factors associated with self-employment,

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suggesting that people self-employ primarily as a response to barriers in wage-employment (Budig, 2006; Besamusca, 2018). This perspective emphasises that certain social groups, including mothers, are disproportionately exposed to discrimination, conflict, and exclusion in the workplace, which pushes them to seek alternatives to wage-employment (Budig, 2006; Besamusca, 2018; Correll et al., 2007). Conversely, the class-mobility hypothesis focuses on the pull-factors associated with self-employment, particularly how it can be used to advance their career or income (Budig, 2006; Besamusca, 2018).

While many scholars have adopted either a disadvantaged worker or class-mobility framework in analyses of self-employment, others argue that both theoretical perspectives can explain maternal self-employment patterns in different contexts (Budig, 2006; Besamusca, 2018; Hughes, 2003). For example, research has shown that unemployed and underemployed women, those in low-paying jobs, or those experiencing workplace discrimination are more likely to feel pushed into self-employment as a way to generate income despite barriers in wage-employment (Cai et al., 2009; Lim, 2019; Mallon & Cohen, 2002; Menon & Rogers, 2011; Smith, 2005; Zhang & Pan, 2012). Conversely, those previously employed in well-paying and accommodating jobs may feel pulled into self-employment by the opportunity to self-manage and expand one's career (Joon, 2017; Keller, 2014; Taniguchi, 2002). The mere existence of a large body of research documenting both push and pull-factors indicates their coexistence and the merit of combining both theoretical perspectives.

Because my research seeks to highlight mothers' perceptions of their experiences with self-employment, I do not approach my analyses from a strictly disadvantaged worker or class-mobility framework. Rather, both of these perspectives are used to analyze and frame findings (similarly to Budig [2006]). Taking a deductive approach, I examine how mothers' experiences

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reflect and support one or both theories. Additionally, this study seeks to identify how urban and rural mothers' experiences with self-employment overlap or differ; therefore, consideration is given as to whether one theoretical framework appears more relevant to findings from a particular geographic context.

Methodology

Qualitative Approach

In seeking to highlight the complexities of mothers' lived experiences, this research benefits from the detailed personal recollections that emerge from qualitative interviews (Collins, 2020). Past scholarship has identified numerous push and pull-factors that inform maternal self-employment patterns (Budig, 2006; Besamusca, 2018; Cai et al., 2009; Hughes, 2003; Joon, 2017; Lim, 2019; Menon & Rogers, 2011; Smith, 2005; Taniguchi, 2002; Zhang & Pan, 2012). However, much of this research has been quantitative and reliant on national survey data (Budig, 2006; Besamusca, 2018; Cai et al., 2009; Joon, 2017; Keller, 2014; Lim, 2019; Mallon & Cohen, 2002; Menon & Rogers, 2011; Smith, 2005; Taniguchi, 2002; Zhang & Pan, 2012). Such quantitative research has been essential to producing general conclusions regarding self-employment patterns (e.g., what percentage of the population is self-employed, what demographics are most represented in self-employment, and associated income levels). Nonetheless, quantitative methods are limited in their ability to capture people's complex experiences with push and pull-factors. For example, Hughes (2003) finds that, due to limited response categories, survey data can underestimate the impact of push-factors motivating women's self-employment. He argues that qualitative methods can ensure that push-factors are identified, emphasizing that they are "findings that have important implications for [women's] economic security and success and for the contours of the 'push-pull' debate (Hughes, 2003, p.

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435). Likewise, by utilising a qualitative approach, this study allows participants to provide greater detail regarding their understanding of the push and pull-factors that inform their employment status (Collins, 2020).

Data collection for this research consisted of six semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative interviews with self-employed mothers residing in urban and rural Nova Scotian communities. Participants were recruited via posters distributed on social media (e.g., posted in community Facebook groups), and selected using convenience sampling. Of the six participants, three were mothers residing in urban Nova Scotia, and three were rural residents. Interviews ranged from 30-minutes to one hour long and were conducted via Zoom out of consideration for Covid-19 safety precautions. Interviews were structured around ten questions that facilitated further conversation: Participants were asked to speak about what they do for self-employment, their employment status before becoming self-employed, their motivations in pursuing self-employment, what they liked and found challenging about being self-employed, any resources and barriers that they encountered, and any perceived supports or lack thereof in their home communities. Following the interviews, transcripts were created and coded using Dedoose. Findings were then analyzed using thematic content analysis, wherein data was organized based on emergent themes.

Geographic Focus and Comparison

Previous research has been limited in its assessment of geographic context in two key respects: (1) The majority of studies have focused on macro/national-level contexts, while meso-level contexts have been less thoroughly examined, and (2) few studies have employed a comparative approach to examining different geographic contexts. My research seeks to fill these gaps by comparing two distinct, meso-level settings within Nova Scotia.

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Within Canada, a focus on meso-level geographic contexts is useful to highlight the impacts of local cultural expectations, material constraints, and resources on mothers' decisions to self-employ. Culture and resources can vary considerably from one Canadian province or territory to the next, and national-level research risks neglecting the experiences of many women across the country. Additionally, in Canada, many policy decisions that may impact mothers' employment experiences, including the required minimum wage and childcare subsidies, fall under provincial jurisdiction (Nova Scotia n.d.; 2021). Therefore, this research is focused within Nova Scotia, both to accommodate the scope of the research, and to examine the particular push and pull-factors within the province.

To identify what cultural expectations, material constraints, and resources shape maternal self-employment in Nova Scotia, this study offers a comparative analysis of two geographic settings within the province: urban and rural. It has been widely documented that differences in urban and rural communities impact local employment patterns (Keller, 2014; Kley & Drobnič, 2019; Menon & Rogers, 2011; Szala-Meneok & McIntosh, 1996; Wells, 2002; Zhang & Pan, 2012). By focusing on urban and rural communities within Nova Scotia, this research seeks to identify if and how push and pull-factors differ on the meso-level, even under the same federal and provincial policies.

Within Nova Scotia, participants were drawn primarily from urban and rural Halifax Regional Municipality and Colchester County. Strict boundaries regarding which communities are considered urban, suburban, or rural were not established. As John Parkins and Maureen Reed (2013) explain, rural and urban definitions and boundaries are contested and entail understandings beyond quantitative measures of population density or economic features. Local perceptions and self-understanding are important aspects of what defines urban, suburban, and

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rural communities (Parkins & Reed, 2013). Thus, rather than create quantitative criteria to identify urban and rural participants, potential participants were encouraged to self-identify based on their own understanding of their community.

Ethical Considerations

This research involved human participants and, as such, required research ethics approval prior to commencing. Research Ethics approval was obtained in mid-March before any recruitment or data collection began. All participants are referred to by pseudonym and home communities are identified only as rural or urban, not by name. This was especially important for rural participants, as smaller communities lend themselves to easier identification (e.g., owning a coffee shop in a region where only one or two coffee shops are present). Any additional information that was determined to be potentially revealing of a participant's identity or place of residence was omitted from the transcripts.

Findings

Push and Pull-Factors Toward Maternal Self-Employment

Work-Family Conflict

Throughout interviews, participants unanimously highlighted WFC as a push-factor in their pursuit of self-employment. They expressed that wage-employment typically did not afford them the flexibility needed to balance competing work and family demands, motivating them to seek out self-employment in the hopes of attaining more control over their hours and schedule. One participant, Jessica, expressed that “the whole reason why you want to be working for yourself is so that there is a balance.” Participants also identified the unique and disproportionate impact of WFC on working mothers. Jessica explained that:

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Women- we've all been told, 'oh yeah, you can do both, you can do both, you can be a mom and you can have a career.' You can't. That's a lie. You cannot do it. It's impossible. There always has to be- something has to fall away. So if you're with your kids, you're not doing your career properly, at the expectation this society wants you to. Or, if you're doing your career, you absolutely are not paying attention to your children, and you have to not be at everything your children do. So there is not a balance. There's a zero-sum game. You give more to one, one absolutely takes the fall. And that is something that nobody ever talks about, and the guilt associated with that is debilitating as a mom.

While Jessica stated that her experiences of WFC did not completely resolve when she became self-employed, greater control over her schedule and workload allowed her more flexibility when navigating competing work and family obligations.

Reducing WFC emerged as a significant factor in participants' pursuits of self-employment, both as a push-factor and a pull-factor. While some participants identified specific experiences of WFC that pushed them to seek self-employment, others pursued self-employment in anticipation of reducing WFC as they planned to start a family. Angela, who was self-employed as a massage therapist for four years prior to the birth of her son, explained, "even going into massage therapy, way back when, you know, I was like, this is a great career for flexibility down the road, because you can make your own hours and stuff like that. If you work for it, yeah." Although she recounted facing continued challenges with balancing work and family after her son was born, she explains that she was able to transition her business from a rental space to working from home until her son was eight years old, so as to spend more time with him.

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All participants maintained that their transition to self-employment had an overall positive impact on reducing WFC. Participants tended to describe this reduction as a pull-factor, rather than focusing on WFC as a push-factor. The most beneficial characteristic of self-employment identified by participants in reducing WFC was the ability for scheduling flexibility. When asked what she liked most about being self-employed, Jessica responded, “flexibility, one hundred percent. It’s knowing that, if your baby is sick from school that day, you can stay at home.” Similarly, Cindy responded, “ I really like the flexibility. Um, with scheduling, with choices surrounding the business and the effects it may have.” Angela also stated, “being self-employed and going part-time gives that flexibility of just being around for the family, you know?” Many participants explained that their families were supportive and understanding of their work commitments and did not pressure them to prioritize family time. Nonetheless, being able to rearrange work obligations to accommodate family time was emphasised by all participants as an important benefit of being self-employed.

While participants indicated that their transition to self-employment reduced WFC and associated distress as they had more control over how they balanced their time, they also shared persistent feelings of personal responsibility for getting this balance right. Jessica described this as “a balancing act that creates so much guilt in your own soul.” While participants identified more opportunities for family time when self-employed, they also expressed that this level of control meant that any perceived failures to balance work and family fell squarely on their shoulders, rather than on those of an unempathetic boss or unaccommodating workplace. In other words, self-employment alleviated feelings of distress when WFC decreased but potentially led to greater feelings of personal shortcoming if WFC persisted. Jessica explained:

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... it's hard to not want to work a lot because it's attached to how much money you earn. So when you work for somebody, it's all- there's an expectation regardless of if it's forty hours a week or fifty hours a week or whatever it happens to be, you know what the expectation is so that you can just kind of hit it. But when you work for yourself, you know that the more you work the more you earn. And then it's hard to keep a balance for your family.

Similarly, Brianna recounted:

Being a mom puts a bit more pressure on making sure something succeeds, 'cause if you're taking time from your life, if you're walking away from your children and putting your time into something else, it has to work. It has to be successful or else what was it for, you know? Now I've lost time with my kids and my business is failing. So there has to be a pay-off. There has to be- so there is that level of pressure.

Others seemed to accept that perfect balance was not a possibility and that either work or family would always take priority over the other. Angela identified as a "full-time mom, part-time massage therapist" to explain how she balanced her priorities. Reflecting on occasions when she closed her shop to attend to family emergencies, Cindy similarly explained: "My number one is I'm a parent. My number two is I'm a small business owner."

Although none of the participants explicitly expressed feeling more pressure than their partners to do so, many seemed to assume disproportionate responsibility for reducing WFC. Speaking about her experiences after having her son, Angela explained:

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I haven't made the same amount of money since before I had him. And it's fine, and the- you know, a married couple, we are doing really well income-wise. But as a woman and your career, like, I mean obviously you have- I had to sacrifice, right?

As Angela's comment highlights, many participants recounted making sacrifices and compromises between work and family obligations that they perceived to be necessary. Brianna similarly explains, "I've built my life around my children's schedules. I've built my life around my husband's shift work." However, participants did not express negative feelings towards making these compromises; rather, they emphasized the ability to make them as a pull-factor into self-employment.

"Being One's Own Boss"

Greater control and the ability to "be one's own boss" was an additional, significant pull-factor discussed by participants. The benefits of being one's own boss extended beyond scheduling flexibility and were identified by participants as an important aspect of their self-employment. Jessica stated, "I love the control. I love being able to choose who my clients are, and I love being able to work when I want to work." Brianna similarly recounted, "I love being in control. Like, I like being the boss, you know? If there's a decision to be made, I'm making the decision. I'm weighing things out." Several participants recounted negative wage-employment experiences in which their lack of control as an employee led to abuse, exploitation, or overwork. Brianna reflected on her negative experiences in previous wage-employment positions, which she said disproportionately impacted women employees:

I found it very frustrating to see ... when you go to question that behaviour, or when you would bring these concerns to someone's attention, how quickly and consistently it was turned around to be your problem. Um, because, you know, you're hysterical, you're

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ridiculous, you're overdramatic, you're- and I just have too much fight in me to put up with it.

Other participants similarly recounted a variety of negative workplace experiences, including gender-based discrimination. Despite identifying these conditions as push-factors out of wage-employment, the majority of participants more strongly emphasized the ability to increase one's level of control and independence by "being one's own boss" as a pull-factor into self-employment.

Constraints and Resources Within Maternal Self-Employment

Constraints

While participants more strongly emphasised the benefits they associated with their self-employment, they also acknowledged several common constraints. One such constraint was a decrease in income, identified by all but one participant. For example, Jessica explained, "when you work for yourself, you have to be pretty cool with not being paid as much as you would normally." Many who experienced a loss of income expressed acceptance of this outcome, identifying it as an acceptable trade-off for greater scheduling flexibility and selectivity in their work. Angela, Jessica, and Jennifer explained that they could increase their income to a level similar to that of their previous wage-employment by working more hours or taking on more clients, but that this would decrease the benefits that they appreciated in self-employment. In addition to lost income, participants unanimously highlighted significant expenses associated with the transition to self-employment, including purchasing one's own equipment and materials, marketing, and renting a workspace. Angela, Brianna, and Jessica indicated that their partner's income was an important factor in their ability to transition into self-employment and overcome the associated costs and loss of income.

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Additionally, the majority of participants expressed that running their own business increased their workload and responsibilities compared to wage-employment. As previously discussed, participants expressed feeling greater responsibility for navigating WFC when acting as their own boss. However, this sense of responsibility extended to a host of tasks associated with running one's own business. Cindy explained:

So, as well as all the flexibility, also comes all of the responsibility. So, there's a lot to remember. A lot to remember. Your registration every year, your liability insurance, your finances. It's all you. Whereas before it was sort of somebody else's problem. Not that it's a problem, maybe I shouldn't use that word, um, but I find the responsibility that comes with owning a business a lot.

Similarly, Jennifer stated: "No one is there to rescue you. There's no safety net, no one is doing the work when you're on vacation, there's no one up the chain that you can blame. Nope, it's all on you." Participants recounted the significant stress associated with this sense of responsibility. For example, Brianna detailed:

It's something that could break a person, those high-stress moments. Um, and there are times, I won't lie, there've been times where I'm like, 'I can't do this today.' And I have gone to bed, and I have had a cry. And I'm like, 'what have I done with my life? Why didn't I just get a real job?' And then I tell myself to get over it, like, 'remember when you had a real job and how awful that was?'

Despite associating additional work and responsibility with their self-employment, participants unanimously identified this as a worthwhile trade-off for the identified benefits. While Cindy explained that navigating multiple obligations was "not an easy balance," she enjoyed being able

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to schedule more work at some points so as to afford more time off at others. Angela, Jessica, and Jennifer stated that they enjoyed having more control over workload and clients than they did when working for someone else in the past, even when being the boss came with its own challenges.

Resources

Participants identified community support and social networks as particularly valuable resources within their self-employment. This was mentioned by the majority of participants, but was more strongly emphasized by rural participants who recounted facing unique barriers in their communities, including unreliable internet access, lack of public transport, few local self-employment programs, and smaller local markets. Having local community support and a social network was identified as important to all participants, but rural participants especially highlighted the value of social networks in finding solutions, building partnerships, and feeling at home in their community. For example, Cindy expressed how much local community support means to her in her business:

Look, I have ladies that bring me homemade pickles. Or they tried a new bread recipe and they'll bring me a few rolls. Or, just different things they make like cookies, or sometimes they just stop in to say hi. Like, I love the community. I, you know, that was one of my goals, to become a part of the community. They're very welcoming.

Participants also identified support from a community of other self-employed people, especially other women and mothers, as an important resource. Cindy emphasized the importance of connecting with others “going through the same things,” and detailed the informal network that businesses in her rural community have fostered to share advice, customers, and products.

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Brianna similarly identified the unique value of social networks among rural, self-employed women:

For women, networking is so important, and we really are focused on everybody's success. 'Cause if your business next to me closes down, less people are coming to this area, which means less people are coming into my business. So I need you to be successful so I can be successful. And we're really good at bolstering each other for those things.

Thus, while all but one participant (who resided in an urban community) highlighted social networks and community supports as a valuable resource within their self-employment, social networks appear to be particularly valuable in mitigating unique rural constraints.

Suggestions

Several participants offered suggestions for decreasing constraints and improving resources associated with self-employment. Many participants argued for updates and expansions within government self-employment grants and programs. Both Cindy and Julie recalled having difficulty finding any grants specifically designed to support women entrepreneurs and small business owners. Reflecting on the value of social networks, Cindy and Jessica felt that self-employment programs (e.g., Community Business Development Corporation [CBDC] program, by the federal government) should better facilitate and teach social networking skills, rather than focusing on classroom curriculum. They suggested that providing more opportunity for new small business owners to network with one another would provide a long-lasting resource. Additionally, Cindy suggested that every local community should have a more formal "small business owner group that, if you were looking to start your business you could reach out and say, 'okay guys, I need some of the basics on just how to get started.'"

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Regarding government policies, Angela explained how the current federal maternity and parental benefits program often excludes self-employed mothers, who may not be paying into Employment Insurance (EI) long enough to qualify for benefits. She explained that one needs to pay into the program for a year to access benefits, a timeframe that many women miss because they do not realize they are pregnant in time. In her own experience, she was unable to access maternity benefits for this reason, resulting in a total loss of income for a period following the birth of her son. While Angela explains that she was able to afford this, not every mother would be able to, undermining mothers' pursuit of self-employment as a way to integrate income-generating and childcare activities. Jennifer also highlighted issues with dental, pharmaceutical and other healthcare being excluded from Nova Scotia's Medical Services Insurance Programs (MSI). She explains that, for many people, this additional medical coverage is accessed through their workplace insurance, which they may lose when they become self-employed.

Lastly, several participants stated that both wage-employment and self-employment conditions could be improved through increased advocacy for scheduling flexibility and work-life boundaries within society, as a whole. Jessica expressed that the benefits typically associated with self-employment can also be found in certain wage-employment jobs where employee wellbeing is considered, a positive work environment is fostered, and where scheduling flexibility is allowed. However, because these characteristics are not typical in Canadian work culture, people are forced to forge these conditions themselves through self-employment. Brianna also argued that "the best businesses, and the ones that thrive the best, and the ones that have the happiest employees are the ones that accommodate families and children and help each other in that aspect. And that's something that more businesses need to wrap their brains around." Brianna, Jessica, and Jennifer all expressed that people should be more vocal in

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asserting and normalizing work-life and work-family boundaries, arguing that this would improve experiences within both wage-employment and self-employment, particularly for women.

Emphasising the Positive

Overall, participants expressed positive feelings towards their self-employment, despite the challenges they encountered. Additionally, they highlighted the unique, positive impact it had in reducing the WFC that accompanies being a working mother. From this positive perspective, participants tended to emphasize pull-factors and benefits over push-factors and detriments. Angela explained that she considers herself “blessed” to be self-employed and to work part-time hours despite her reduced income, stating, “some of my friends and people, like, they have to, you know, hold two full-time jobs. Like, I don’t know how they do it. Clean their house and- I don’t know how they do it.” Although Jessica discussed her persistent struggles with WFC while self-employed, she likewise expressed gratitude for her work arrangement. Speaking about the experiences of working mothers during Covid-19 lockdowns, she explained, “my job is super flexible. All I could think about was the women, specifically, that their job wasn’t flexible, and how much stress it would have been causing them.” While WFC was identified as a push-factor from wage-employment, the majority of participants more heavily emphasized the pull-factors of self-employment, including reduced WFC and increased scheduling flexibility and control.

Discussion

The Push-Pull Debate

The findings of this research highlight the many considerations that mothers weigh and navigate throughout their experiences with self-employment. The first research question this

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study sought to answer was: What push and pull-factors do mothers identify in their experiences with self-employment? In response to this question, participants identified the reduction of WFC as an important pull-factor into self-employment, mediated by an increased capacity for scheduling flexibility. While previous research has examined the impacts of scheduling flexibility on employee wellbeing (Blair-Loy, 2009; Jacobs & Padavic, 2015), participant responses indicate the need for further research into its role in maternal self-employment patterns. Although participants identified WFC as a push-factor out of wage-employment, overall positive perceptions of self-employment led to an emphasis on pull-factors and benefits. Additionally, increased control, and the ability to “be one’s own boss” was identified as a significant pull-factor into self-employment, despite also being associated with an increase in workload and responsibilities.

In considering the “push-pull debate” identified by Hughes (2003), findings suggest that, rather than feeling exclusively pushed or pulled into self-employment, mothers are constantly weighing and navigating the pros and cons of different employment options. All participants recounted experiencing push-factors out of wage-employment and into self-employment, particularly WFC, lack of scheduling flexibility and control, workplace conflict, and the unique, negative impacts they have on working mothers. However, those interviewed tended to frame their transition to self-employment as primarily guided by pull-factors, including the ability to reduce WFC through scheduling flexibility and to have greater control over one’s work and career. Considering both the disadvantaged worker and class-mobility hypothesis (Budig, 2006), participants’ responses illustrate that mothers experience and consider both types of motivations, simultaneously seeking to escape barriers encountered in their wage-employment and hoping to gain more autonomy and growth their career. In terms of outcomes of these decisions, mothers

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explained that, after becoming self-employed, WFC was often persistent, and it was not unusual to experience a decline in one's career or income. Additionally, they expressed the unique challenges encountered when seeking to balance competing work and family demands, regardless of their type of employment. Taken together, these findings offer support for Budig's (2006) suggestion that both disadvantaged worker and class-mobility perspectives can offer insight into mothers' unique and gendered motivations for pursuing self-employment.

Geographic Context

The second research question this study addressed was: How does urban versus rural residence shape mothers' experiences of self-employment in Nova Scotia? Participant responses did not illustrate a drastic difference between urban and rural experiences. Cindy explained that a smaller rural market meant a smaller customer base but also fewer similar businesses to compete with, resulting in an overall balance in supply and demand. Similarly, Angela explained that running her own business in urban HRM meant competing with more businesses, but also a larger customer base, leading to a similar, balanced situation. Rural participants more strongly emphasised several local constraints, including a lack of walkability and access to public transport, unreliable internet, and lack of formal self-employment programs in their communities, contributing to unique challenges in building their business. Consequently, rural participants placed particular emphasis on the value of using social networks to share resources, knowledge, customers, and products with one another, to help overcome these constraints.

While meso-level differences were identified between urban and rural contexts, the central push and pull-factors recounted by participants stemmed from macro-level influences. Criticisms of government (and government-funded) programs and policies, such as the CBDC, MSI, and EI maternity benefits, were directed primarily toward provincial and federal-level

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programs rather than those at the community level. Furthermore, normative gender expectations regarding women's competing work and family demands were persistent across urban and rural communities and did not appear to be more salient in one community or another. Therefore, the factors identified by participants as impacting mothers' experiences with self-employment in Nova Scotia stem primarily from macro-level influences, rather than meso-level, lending support to previous, macro-level findings (Carr, 1996; Collins, 2020; Joon, 2017; Lim, 2019; Menon & Rogers, 2011; Zhang & Pan, 2012). Given these findings, neither the disadvantaged worker or class-mobility hypothesis appears more applicable within one community context or another; rather, they seem to coexist in informing all participants' decisions to self-employ.

Conclusion

This research seeks to identify the push and pull-factors that shape maternal self-employment in urban and rural Nova Scotian communities. Likewise, the two main research questions addressed in this thesis are: (1) What push and pull-factors do mothers identify in their experiences with self-employment? (2) How does urban versus rural residence shape mothers' experiences of self-employment in Nova Scotia? Through interviews with six, self-employed mothers residing in urban and rural Nova Scotia, several key themes regarding push-factors, pull-factors, resources, and constraints emerged. Participants shared overall positive feelings toward their self-employment; therefore, they primarily emphasized pull-factors and benefits over push-factors and detriments. While WFC was identified as a push-factor out of wage employment, participants more strongly emphasized the ability to reduce work-family conflict and increase scheduling flexibility and control as an important pull-factors into self-employment. Participants in this study identified several resources and constraints within their self-employment, with rural residents highlighting more local constraints (e.g., lack of public

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transport, reliable internet, and formal self-employment programs) and placing greater value on social networks as a resource. However, overall, participants did not emphasize meso-level influences as informing their decisions to self-employ. Rather, macro-level influences, such as normative gender expectations and provincial and federal programs and policies were identified as influential across communities. Participants suggested that mothers' experiences in both wage-employment and self-employment could be improved through greater consideration of mothers' unique needs within government programs and policies and increased advocacy for scheduling flexibility and work-family balance within the workplace. This research contributes to the push-pull debate, arguing that mothers navigate and weigh multiple push-factors, pull-factors, resources, and constraints when pursuing self-employment. These findings suggest that further, macro-level qualitative research is needed to better capture the multitude of factors that influence maternal self-employment.

Limitations and Future Research

Due to time and resource constraints, this study included only a small sample of self-employed mothers in Nova Scotia. While valuable insights can be garnered from these interviews, participants' experiences are not representative of every community, income-level, or racial identity within Nova Scotia, all of which are factors identified by previous literature as having important impacts on maternal self-employment. As such, future research would benefit from a larger sample size to better capture mothers' diverse experiences. Additionally, the most influential push and pull-factors shaping maternal self-employment were associated with macro-level influences; however, the majority of previous macro-level research is quantitative. Qualitative, comparative research with participants from multiple provinces or countries would

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be useful in shedding further light on the different resources and constraints that shape mothers' experiences.

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