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Juggling between two full-time jobs:

Work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the United States

Elona Gashi

A thesis research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science in Education

Adult Education/Human Resource Development

May 2023

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

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Dedication

To my *wonderful* parents

Thank You for the endless love, care, sacrifice, patience, courage, support, and prayers...

Nothing makes me happier than your happiness!

Ju dua pafund e ju paqa në përjetësi!

Lulushja a Mamit dhe Gonxhja e Babit

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Thank you to my amazing parents for teaching me how great the small things in life are! There was not a single night in which they fell asleep without sending me their love, prayers, and support! Your phone calls and your messages were the strongest encouragement for me to keep reading, learning, and writing. I am proud to be your daughter!

Thank you to my funny brothers for always taking care of my smile and laughter during this research journey!

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All praise to Almighty God,

by whose blessing all good deeds are completed!

- Shazia Khan -

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study sought to explore the working mothers' work life balance experiences in Kosovo and the United States. Specifically, it aimed to explore within the life, work, and sociocultural contexts of these experiences. There were six working mothers interviewed in total, three from Kosovo and three from the U.S. The findings of this study showed that each of the contexts consisted of two major themes. Self-care and child-care themes emerged as essential to participants' life context experiences. The nature of the work and workplace support themes emerged as crucial to participants' work context experiences. And lastly, gender norms and support systems themes emerged as influential to participants' sociocultural context experiences. This research study has implications for the HRD literature and practices.

Key words: Work-life balance, working mothers, life context, work context, sociocultural context, and Human Resource Development.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The challenge of the work-life balance is rising to the top of many employers' and employees' consciousness. Managing these work and life roles and finding a balance between them is vital, particularly as it relates to working mothers. One of the key challenges facing working mothers is the "double burden" of balancing work and family responsibilities, given the gendered norms and expectations. Studies have found that working mothers often experience high levels of stress and burnout due to the competing demands of their work and home lives (Frone, 2003). They also often struggle with guilt and feelings of inadequacy as they try to meet their families' and employers' expectations (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Consequently, this leads to a lack of engagement in work and family responsibilities, which decreases job satisfaction and negatively impacts the overall well-being (Osei Boakye et al., 2021).

Although women have made great strides in gaining management and professional positions over the past decade (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), their careers after becoming mothers tend to stagnate and they are more likely to leave their organizations (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Stone, 2007). However, it is not just women's careers that incur costs, their organizations also pay if they do not effectively support these women (Gatrell, 2011; O'Kelly, 2013). When a talented working mother leaves the organization, it will cost the organization firm between \$80,000 and 120,000 in lost productivity and recruitment expenses (Nayyar, 2006). Therefore, for organizations to retain working mothers and support their professional career advancement amidst

motherhood, it is crucial to understand their motherhood and work-life balance experiences, which the current research attempts to do.

Regarding this issue, Human Resource Development functions work together to design interventions with the purpose of enhancing working mothers' career development and their overall well-being, while helping them decrease the amount of conflict between work and life roles. Human resource development (HRD) is a process of developing and unleashing human expertise for the purpose of improving performance (Swanson, 1995). Designing and implementing the needed HRD interventions could help to combat employee burnout by keeping them actively engaged in their work (Eversole & Crowder, 2020) and consequently creating an overall feeling of being valued which simultaneously increases retention (Gillet et al., 2015).

Overall, it is imperative for employers and organizations to recognize the importance of work-life balance for working mothers and take steps to support them in balancing their work and family responsibilities. This will not only benefit the overall well-being of working mothers, but also will improve the productivity, increase job satisfaction, and increase retention rates.

Statement of the Problem

Working mothers perform numerous roles within their work and life worlds, which complicates their chances to successfully experiencing work-life balance. The commitment, efforts, and long hours that institutions expect from the "ideal worker", inevitably leak into the personal and family life, which make this balance among roles hardly achievable. As Voydanoff (2004) stated: "participation in one role is more

difficult because of participation in the other role” (p. 399). Having considered these overlapping roles and responsibilities, women’s careers after becoming mothers tend to stagnate, and they are more likely to leave their organizations and quit their careers (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Stone, 2007).

Nevertheless, it is not just women’s careers that incur costs. Their organizations also pay tremendous money if they do not efficaciously support these women (Gatrell, 2011; O’Kelly, 2013). Therefore, HRD practitioners must know more about these women’ experiences in order to design the needed interventions to sustain the physical and mental well-being of working mothers, help meet performance expectations, and reduce work-life conflict. Employees are the key strength of any organization, and that is why HRD practitioners continuously must look for ways to retain talented employees.

In this regard, the problem and the need stand upon the fact that there is a lack of understanding the working mothers’ work-life balance experiences. Specifically, there is a lack of understanding the interconnectedness between the life, work, and sociocultural contexts and their influence in working mothers’ work life balance. Most trainings and interventions in organizations are related to the work context and they leave the life and sociocultural context out of the picture. Hence, my purpose is to take a proactive approach and explore within these experiences and analyze how the different contexts intersect and influence these experiences. By doing so, I aim to provide HRD practitioners with a glance of first-hand information, which can be taken into consideration when designing and implementing interventions to meet working mothers’ needs and ease their challenges.

Purpose of the Study

The core purpose of this study is to explore the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the U.S. More concisely, it seeks to explore and understand in-depth how the interconnection of different contexts impacts the work-life balance of working mothers, based on their lived experiences. When saying different contexts, I mean how the life context, work context, and sociocultural context intersect and as such affect the struggles of reaching a balance. Therefore, by exploring these experiences, and the influence that these contexts have in these experiences, my purpose as the researcher was to make my participants' stories, challenges, and needs be heard. By doing so, I aimed to provide HRD practitioners with a glance of first-hand information, which can be taken into consideration when designing and implementing interventions to meet working mothers' needs and ease their challenges.

Research Questions

In order to further understand the working mothers' work-life balance experiences, in Kosovo and the U.S., this research study was guided by a leading question and its following sub-questions that directed and structured the whole research. While this study investigates working mothers' lived experiences and their efforts to reach a balance, the leading research question of this study is as follows:

The Leading Research Question:

- *What are the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the United States?*

Moreover, I aimed to further examine these experiences, by delving deeper into the struggles of the life, work, and the sociocultural contexts' components of the work-life balance. This study's sub-questions are as follows:

Sub-questions:

- 1. How does the life context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?*
- 2. How does the work context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?*
- 3. How does the sociocultural context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?*

Research Significance

First and foremost, the significance of this research stands upon the very premise of gaining an elaborated understanding regarding the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the United States. Although in a limited sample size, this research study offers up to date perspectives on what influences contribute to a healthy balance and unhealthy imbalance based on the life, work, and sociocultural contexts. In specific, it seeks to explore what family roles and obligations as well as work force roles and responsibilities influence these women's work-life balance.

In addition to life and work influences, which are the primary contexts of the work-life balance, the current research offers some insights on how the sociocultural domain in these situated contexts impacts the work-life balance of the participants. Although, the small number of participants does not allow us to make generalized truth claims (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), the comparative cross-cultural approach between

Kosovo and the U.S. offers insights regarding similarities and differences between the two countries in the respective topic. According to Van de Vijver and Leung (2001), cross-cultural studies enhance and expand the knowledge beyond the confinements of one's surrounding context. In the current research study, both countries were chosen because of the researcher's familiarity with work, life, and culture in these respective countries.

Lastly, the view of the work-life balance offered in this study has implications for Human Resource Development and management practitioners (Polach, 2010). Therefore, my hope as the researcher is that this study will offer a solid contribution within the HRD literature & international HRD literature. Moreover, HRD practitioners can utilize the current findings to better understand the work-life balance of working mothers and apply the learning to their workplaces' policy and practice.

Key Terms and Definitions

The following table consists of different key words that are used throughout this research study. Alongside the key terms of the study, there are their corresponding operational definitions found in the literature.

Term	Author/s	Definition
Work-Life balance	(Kalliath & Brough 2008, p. 326)	“Work-life balance is the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote

	(Leslie et al., 2019)	<p>growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities".</p> <p>"A dynamic phenomenon and a continuum in which the individual oscillates between the two extremes of work and life, at a particular point in time"</p>
Work Context	(BenitoOsorio et al., 2014; Kalliath & Brough, 2008)	The formal paid employment in the organizational setting.
Life Context	(BenitoOsorio et al., 2014; Kalliath & Brough, 2008)	The non-work domain includes family, education, health, travel, self-care, and the like.
Sociocultural Context	(Strayer, 2015) (Spradley, 1980, p. 22)	How "a group of people who live in a definable community shares a culture", Culture is defined as "the acquired

		knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior”.
Cross Cultural Study	(Van de Vijver, 2001)	“Cross-cultural studies are research designs that compare human behavior and experiences across two or more cultures.”
Working Mother	(Jayita & Murali, 2009)	A woman with the ability to combine a career with the added responsibility of raising a child.
Human Resource Development (HRD)	(Swanson, 1995).	A process of developing and unleashing human expertise for the purpose of improving performance.

Table 1. Key terms and definitions

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

For this research study, I chose to interview working mothers in Kosovo and the United States. In each of these countries, three working mothers were interviewed. In this regard, the first limitation consists of a small sample, which means that the findings cannot be general truth claims. As stated by Creswell (2015) “The qualitative research method does not enable us to generalize from a small group of people to a large population” (p.15). Yet, the strength of qualitative inquiry stands in its ability to offer in-depth explanations and analyze the patterns of human behavior and experiences that can be difficult to quantify (Creswell, 2015). The nuanced experiences of working mothers are the focus of this qualitative study.

Furthermore, there was an assumption that these recruited working mothers will feel comfortable sharing their experiences openly and honestly. In line with this assumption, there are two potential limitations. First, a limitation is seen in the fact that some of the answers provided might be too general, and do not emphasize the individual lived experiences. Second, another limitation is seen in the fact that participants might have not been able to recall the exact situations and feelings in particular interview questions.

Lastly, the data collected from participants in Kosovo were translated from Albanian to English. Although the data were translated by a professional and experienced translator, there is still a risk that some of the words in Albanian might have lost their originality when translated into English. Nevertheless, the fact that I speak both languages has helped to mitigate this potential limitation.

Chapter summary

In closing, the first chapter of this paper presented the purpose of the study, research questions, research significance, key terms definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. To continue, the second chapter will present and discuss the plethora of the existing literature on the topic of working mothers' work-life balance considering the life, work, and sociocultural contexts. The third chapter will present the methodology utilized for this research project. The fourth chapter will meticulously convey the findings of the study, based on the collected data from the participants in the research process. Lastly, the fifth and final chapter of this paper will discuss the findings alongside with the supporting literature, the implications to the field of HRD, and suggest recommendations for further research. The following section presents the literature review of the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review of the "Juggling between two full-time jobs: Work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the United States" research study begins with presenting the used databases, key terms combinations, and the conceptual and theoretical framework. While reviewing the existing literature, I utilized multiple databases and journals, including Google Scholar, JMU Libraries, Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, Human Resource Development International, Advances in Human Resource Development, American Psychological Association, ResearchDesign, and other peer-reviewed research. During the research process, several different keywords were

used to form combinations of the terms such as: “work-life balance”, “working mothers”, “work and life responsibilities”, “childcare”, “support systems”, “society and culture”, “cross-cultural studies”, “the world of work”, “career development”, “HRD and work-life balance”, “HRD and career development”, and “HRD and working mothers.” The literature was reviewed as thoroughly as possible, yet clearly, some pertinent literature may not be represented. The following section will discuss the conceptual and theoretical framework of the current study.

Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1. shows the relationship between work-life balance and three main contexts - the life context, the work context, and the sociocultural context. The latter is included because of the comparative piece of the study between Kosovo and the United States. Each of these contexts is further discussed in this literature review.

All three contexts that are visually presented in the conceptual framework, influence the work-life balance of working mothers. Not only do they impact the work-life balance, but these contexts are also inevitably interconnected among themselves, and bleed into one another. If one context is out of balance, the other will be affected, just as the Ecological Systems Theory claims (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In their research study Haddon et al. (2009) explored how personal, work, and environmental characteristics collectively contribute to the dynamics of the work-life balance, considering the Ecological Systems Theory. Having considered this research study, I chose to utilize the Ecological Systems Theory to inform my study, because I aimed to investigate and understand how various given contexts of human experience overlap, and as such

indicate the level of both conflict and balance between roles. The conceptual and theoretical framework are presented visually below in the Figure 1.

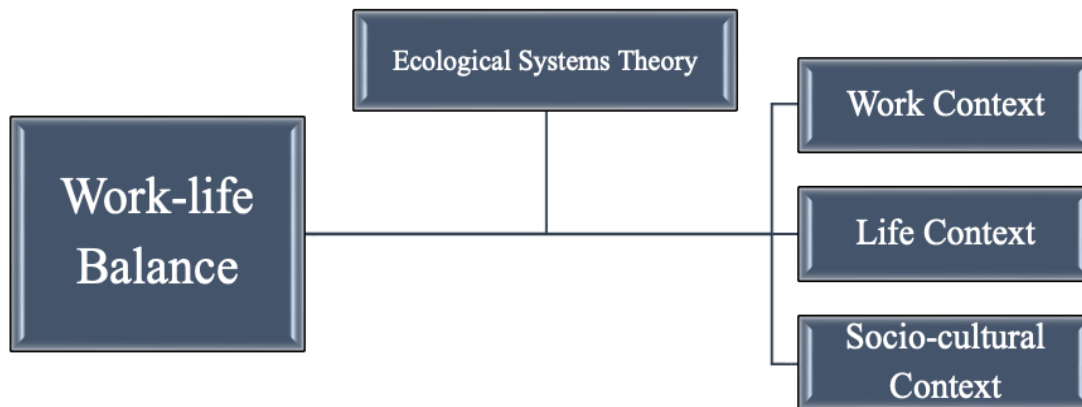


Figure 1. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Work-life balance

The construct of work-life balance has received considerable attention over the past few decades (Barber et al., 2019; De Cieri et al., 2005). However, it seems that this concept's meaning and definition is still debatable for researchers. According to Kalliath and Brough (2008) the lack of a direct, well-developed measure of the concept, combined with the elusiveness of a formal definition, limits our ability to fully investigate the phenomenon. It appears that numerous other researchers have come to the same conclusion. Lewis et al. (2003) have claimed that one of the biggest obstacles preventing more effective ways to integrate paid work with other aspects of life is the limitations of the vocabulary and terminology used to define the issues in the literature. The concepts of

"work-family" and "family-friendly" have been replaced with "work-life" and "work-life balance," respectively. Nevertheless, the term 'work-life balance' remains debatable (Lewis et al., 2003). Despite the widespread academic and applied interest, the construct is inconsistently defined, creating confusion in the literature (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007; Voydanoff, 2005). Additionally, sometimes the term is used as a noun (when one is encouraged to achieve balance), other times it is used as a verb (to balance work and family demands) or as an adjective (as in a balanced life) (Greenhaus, 2003). There is also the implication that work is not part of life, or that work, and the rest of life are mutually exclusive (Lewis et al., 2003).

The term "balance" has also generated controversy because it implies an equal investment in both the work and non-work worlds, and the idea that giving something to work (such as time and energy) is perceived as taking away from the non-work world and vice versa. More current ideas frame the issue in terms of "work-personal life integration" as a "working terminology to capture the synergies and connections between the different parts of life and the ways in which they feed into each other" (Lewis et al., 2003, p. 829). However, this idea has been considered such a "red flag" from researchers. They recommended using the words "harmony" and "harmonization" rather than "integration" to denote the intention of positively or harmoniously linking professional and personal life sectors (Poelmans et al., 2008). Nevertheless, it appears that the 'work-life balance' terminology continues to be the most recognized and utilized within the literature. The following section will present and analyze the literature about the life context of working mothers' work-life balance components.

Life context

In the last few decades there has been an increased participation of women, and mothers among them, in the labor market (Jaumotte, 2004; Janus, 2012). Yet, women still are much more involved in childcare than men (Winefield et al., 2011). Therefore, childcare arrangements are key to women's ability to juggle motherhood and work outside the home (Arpino et al., 2014).

The use of different combinations of paid or unpaid external childcare is influenced by several factors including parents' needs, socioeconomic status, children's age, availability of relatives and friends, and the family policies system (Brady & Perales, 2016; Williams, 2010). In this regard, formal childcare services may be preferred by some families as they guarantee consistency and higher quality compared to other childcare arrangements. However, according to Brillì et al. (2016), when childcare services are limited, the matching between parents' working schedules and the flexibility of the service becomes crucial to guarantee a satisfactory work-life balance. This issue is particularly relevant for parents working nonstandard hours, a common situation among young couples and low-income families (Baxter & Hand, 2016). They might have difficulties finding childcare centers sufficiently close to their home or workplace, or they have fewer economic resources for additional forms of paid childcare such as employing a babysitter (Brillì et al., 2016). Thus, difficulties related to cost, time, and location of external childcare can reduce the positive returns of work-life balance for working mothers (Arpino & Luppi, 2020).

Given these limitations related to the paid childcare services, it may become crucial to substitute childcare centers with other types of childcare. Alternatively,

relatives and friends represent a possible source of support, reducing the care burden of parents, the economic burden, and relieves the time constrain linked to the opening hours of childcare centers (Bordone et al., 2017; Wheelock & Jones, 2002). In addition, cultural factors can lead working mothers to prefer grandparents' help instead of paid childcare services. For instance, individuals with more traditional values consider grandparents as more trustworthy than childcare centers (Arpino et al., 2014). However, despite its flexibility and being free, relying only on unpaid childcare provided by grandparents, other relatives, or friends might raise problems of discontinuity and difficulties to obtain long hours. Therefore, the possibility to combine different sources of paid and unpaid childcare mitigates the difficulties associated with relying on just one of these sources. Accordingly, Arpino and Luppi (2020) found that the possibility to combine different sources of childcare results in higher satisfaction with work-life balance.

When discussing the life context, the additional concern of personal time is often lost sight of (Williams, 2000). Williams (2000) argues that work-life balance represents a reconciliation of three spheres: personal time and space, caregiving time, and work time and space, rather than just work and family. However, evidence from the research indicates how work-life balance was mostly viewed as resolving demands between the two spheres of work and family, which was often stressful and tiring, and therefore, left no room for personal time and leisure. Correspondingly, Wattis et al. (2012) found that women's personal time and leisure time away from both work and family was a marginal concern that most did not even consider. In the same study, several professional women felt the need to compensate for working long hours during the week by spending all their available free time with their children.

In closing, this section presented the existing literature on the components that the life context of working mothers' work-life balance included. As shown, two of the most significant struggles that literature covers regarding the working mothers' life context are the struggle of childcare and the lack of personal time. The following section presents the existing literature on the work context of working mothers' work-life balance.

Work context

The evidence on the importance of the work-life balance to employee well-being and the organizational outcome is ubiquitous (Barber et al., 2019; Bobat et al., 2012). However, the continuous interest in this concept indicates that employees still sacrifice work over life or life over work, and struggle to find the balance. Women are particularly predisposed to experience role conflict because, in addition to their maternal roles, they play several other roles within and outside their workplace (Murthy & Shastri, 2015).

A major challenge facing working mothers is the lack of flexible work arrangements. Many mothers struggle to find employers who offer flexible schedules or the ability to work from home, which can make it difficult for them to fulfill their responsibilities (Galinsky et al., 2001). This lack of flexibility can lead to a lack of autonomy and control over one's work schedule, which can lead to increased stress and burnout. In a recent study, the differences in working arrangements and their impact on work-life balance satisfaction were investigated (Sharkey & Caska, 2019). The study showed that respondents whose working arrangements involved a combination of working from the office and home emerged as being more satisfied with their job and life than their counterparts who worked only from their offices. This implies that flexible

work schedules and flexible work location remain substantial strategies that can be harnessed to improve the work-life balance outcomes.

Boakye et al. (2021) conducted qualitative research with six married mothers. Based on the ecological systems theory, they explored the lived experiences of women who study in addition to their work to understand how they achieve work-life balance. They revealed that work flexibility, co-worker support, supportive supervisor, supportive family, and programmed work and life are the main themes that explain how working mothers maintain a sense of well-being. When analyzing these themes, it turns out that most of them are related to the work context of the work-life balance concept. In other words, working mothers' well-being is strongly connected to the work context components. While all forms of support are critical for working mothers, the support from one's workplace is arguably the most essential in enabling them to adjust and manage their roles in the best way possible (Kossek et al., 2010). In line with these findings, a study by Hill et al. (2008) found that women who perceived high levels of workplace support reported lower levels of work-life conflict and higher levels of job satisfaction.

Additionally, working mothers face various forms of bias and discrimination in the workplace. Research has shown that working mothers are often perceived as less committed, less competent, and less passionate about work than their childless counterparts, and they are more likely to be passed over for promotions and important assignments (Correll et al., 2007). Moreover, working mothers are more likely to be subjected to negative performance evaluations and are penalized for taking time off for family responsibilities (Heilman, 2012). This bias against working mothers is often

rooted in traditional gender roles and stereotypes. These stereotypes portray women as caregivers and men as financial figures, leading to the perception that women cannot be successful both as mothers and as professionals (Heilman et al., 2004). Nevertheless, some studies have found that workplace policies and culture can mitigate bias against working mothers. For example, organizations that provide family-friendly policies such as flexible work arrangements and paid parental leave are more likely to attract and retain working mothers and promote their career advancement (Hill et al., 2010).

In summary, this section presented the existing literature on the components that the work context of working mothers' work-life balance included. As shown in the literature, the most significant struggles that working mothers face regarding the work context are workplace support, flexibility, and workplace bias and discrimination. The following section presents the existing literature on the sociocultural context of working mothers' work-life balance.

Sociocultural context

While the influence of work and life contexts in work-life balance is well established by the literature in the sections above, considering the cross-cultural nature of the study, it is imperative to also analyze the sociocultural influences as well. In the following sections, Kosovo and the U.S. contexts will be deliberated, with an emphasis on the gender roles and norms in these two situated contexts.

The Kosovo Context

Kosovo is a new developing country, which became independent in February 2008. It lies at the center of Balkans, in the Southeast Europe. Albanians form the

majority in Kosovo, with over 93% of the total population. Significant minorities include Bosnians (1.6%), Serbs (1.5%) and others. A 2015 estimate put Kosovo's population at 1,870,981. According to Pew Research Center (2015), Kosovo had 93.8% Muslims, 6.1% Christians, and all other religious groups and the unaffiliated each had less than 1%.

As per the gender roles and women empowerment, women in Kosovo have experienced some improvements in their status, but further efforts are necessary to achieve gender equality. Kosovo has also enacted the necessary laws to ensure gender equality, but there are still issues with the full implementation of these laws, and the quality of related services leaves much to be desired. When discussing the sociocultural context of women's work-life balance, the research shows that the traditional gender roles and the lack of partner's support continue to be the biggest struggles that women in Kosovo face.

The research evidence shows that one of the most significant challenges to women's empowerment remain traditional gender roles, which continue to consider women as primarily responsible for domestic roles and childcare (Goldscheider et al., 2015). These roles are sustained by family, media and society, and self-salience (Rosenfield et al., 2000). Consequently, in their battle for work-life balance, women experience psychological distress (Riviera & Paredez, 2014) and increased rates of stress (Matud, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial to understand what can be done to support their overall mental health and enhance their professional development.

The Kosovo context can be described as a conventional society, where gender roles are strictly defined. This means that conformity and obedience to these roles is

highly expected because any deviation is associated with social rejection. Kelmendi and Jemini-Gashi (2022) conducted a cross-sectional research study with 656 women in Kosovo. Their findings showed that the changing nature of gender roles among societies was associated with women's increased level of education and participation in employment in Kosovo. However, these changes were not accompanied either by a reduction in women's role in domestic chores and childcare responsibilities or by their partners' increased engagement in these duties and roles (Goldscheider et al., 2015). In this regard, Kosovo is still considered to be in the first phases of gender role transformation.

Interestingly, the research scholars consider that the redefinition of men's role within the family is crucial for empowering the role of women as economic providers (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Goldscheider et al., 2015). In line with this perspective, researchers also argue that the transformation of male gender roles toward more communal roles would benefit women, children, men, and society (Croft et al., 2015). Correspondingly, women who experience support from their partners in everyday chores and in pursuing their agentic career goals report higher satisfaction and higher professional development (Meisenbach, 2010). In contrast, research shows that women who experience a lack of support from their partners are less satisfied and tend to be depressed (Frisco & Williams, 2003).

In summary, the issue of traditional gender roles and the lack of partners' support seem to still prevail for women in Kosovo. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, there are efforts underway to promote gender equality and empower women in Kosovo. The following section elaborates on the U.S. sociocultural context.

The U.S. context

Social scientists have documented a dramatic change in gender inequality sometimes called as “gender revolution” in the last half-century in the U.S. Women’s employment increased and became the norm, even for mothers of young children (Cotter et al., 2019). The proportion of women receiving baccalaureate or doctoral degrees increased dramatically (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Moreover, women are getting degrees in fields of study that have traditionally been dominated by men, such as management, accounting, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields (England, 2010).

It’s becoming increasingly common for households in the U.S. to have more than one income earner. From 2010 to 2019 (the latest available federal data), the percentage of dual-income households rose from 51.9% to 53.3% (U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, 2020). Comparably, Pessin (2007) in her study “*Changing Gender Norms and Marriage Dynamics in the United States*” explored how gender norms were associated with women's marriage dynamics between 1968 and 2012. She utilized the data from the General Social Surveys and marital histories from the Panel Study of Income. Findings suggested that a higher prevalence of egalitarian gender norms predicted a decline in marriage formation for women without a college degree. Whereas, for college-educated women, the association between gender norms and marriage formation became positive when gender egalitarianism prevailed. The results of this study also showed that gender norms and divorce have an inverted U-shaped relationship. When gender norms tended to be more traditional, divorce rates initially rose. However, this was not the case with the

educated women (Pessin, 2017). This study indirectly reflects on the barriers that a non-educated women is facing in a society that is embracing gender equality.

In closing, based on the presented literature, there is a difference noticed on the issue of family gender norms between Kosovo and the U.S. In fact, in both countries there are still families that follow the traditional gender roles. Nonetheless, women in Kosovo even after getting their degrees report having no additional support from their partners. In comparison, college educated women in the U.S. report to share responsibilities with their partners and embrace gender equality.

Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter presented, analyzed, and compared different research articles on the existing literature regarding working mothers' work-life balance. Moreover, this literature review spotted the challenges within the life, work, and sociocultural contexts. The latter focused on the Kosovo and the U.S. sociocultural contexts, considering that the current study recruited participants from both these countries. The following chapter will elaborate and explain in detail the methodology that the current study utilized.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to explore the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the U.S. In specific, it sought to explore and understand in-depth how the different contexts (presented in the conceptual

framework) impact the work-life balance of working mothers, based on their lived experiences. This exploratory research study was not intended to be generalizable yet was intended to gain insight into the experiences of a small group of working mothers in their respective cultural contexts. Therefore, the study followed a qualitative research method approach along with the narrative inquiry. This chapter will thoroughly elaborate the research design of the study, sample rationale, participants description, researcher's positionality, data collection and procedures, data analysis, and protection of human subjects.

Research Questions

The leading question that this study sought to answer is: "What are the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the United States?" In specific, this study investigates these three following research sub-questions:

1. How does the life context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?
2. How does the work context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?
3. How does the sociocultural context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?

Research Design

This research study used a qualitative approach to explore the work-life balance experiences among working mothers in Kosovo and the U.S. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning

individuals or groups ascribe to a social human problem (p. 4). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to study the topic in greater depth because they “permit one to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Among five traditional forms of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007), narrative inquiry was chosen as a form of qualitative research, in which the stories themselves become the raw data (Bleakly, 2005). Narrative inquiry involves exploring and analyzing the stories that individuals share about their experiences and the meanings that they attach to those experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The data collection method used in the current study is the *semi-structured interview*. In this case, the researcher created a set of 15 structured questions, based on the life, work, and sociocultural contexts of the work-life balance. Interviews were a great data collection method to be utilized in the current research study because they allowed me as the researcher to collect detailed information from my participants. According to Flick (2018), interviews are particularly useful for exploring the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals, as well as for generating rich and contextualized data. The interviews were open to follow-up questions which enabled me to have a clearer understanding of participants’ individual experiences and reduced the chances for confusion and ambiguity. According to Patton (2015), follow-up questions can be used to clarify and expand upon participants' initial responses, explore their perspectives in greater depth, and uncover new information that may not have been elicited by the initial question. Follow-up questions can take many forms including asking for examples, seeking clarification, asking for elaboration, and asking for further explanation (Patton,

2015). Prior to the interviews, I practiced these techniques by meeting with my master's thesis chair. I interviewed him with the created interview questions. This practice interview was a great help for me to practice follow up questions and reminded me to be conscious and not exceed the time limit. Lastly, I had my own research journal where I took notes of my thoughts, reflections, and observed behaviors. For example, one of the participants from Kosovo became quite emotional when she started talking about how her financial circumstances forced her to return to work and leave her 8 weeks old daughter home. In this case, I wrote down -financial situation- and put a little star close to it, which during the data analysis process would remind me of the high importance of this component in this working mother's life. The two following sections will discuss the sample rationale and participants description.

Sample rationale

Considering the qualitative nature of the current research, the sample was quite small. This helped me as the researcher to understand the experiences of specific individuals in specific contexts and not make generalized truth claims. Accordingly, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated "A single case or a small, nonrandom, purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in-depth, not to find out what is generally true of many" (p. 16). The sample consisted of six working mothers, from which three were from Kosovo and three from the United States. This small sample size was appropriate for this research as it allowed me to gain an expanded understanding of my participants' individual/authentic experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Description of participants

In total, there were six interviews conducted. Three interviews were conducted with working mothers in Kosovo, and three others with working mothers in the United States. On the one hand, the inclusion criteria for participation comprised being a full-time working mother from Kosovo or from the United States, and their children should be 15 years of age or younger. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria stated that the working mother should not be from countries other than Kosovo or the United States, should not be working part-time, and their children should not be older than 15 years of age. Brief descriptions of each participant are provided below.

Participants from Kosovo

The first participant coded as 01 KS, is a working mother in Kosovo. She has two daughters, 12 and 6 years of age. By profession, she is a psychologist. She has worked in many different full-time jobs. Currently, she is working in a very rigid workplace, which is impacting her work-life balance tremendously. To be able to achieve a more satisfactory balance, she just quit her full-time job and is planning to start working part-time as a psychologist of children with extraordinary intelligence. She made this decision because she wants to have more time available for her family and her doctorate studies.

The second participant coded as 02 KS, is a working mother in Kosovo. She has two children, a son who is 10 years of age, and a daughter who is 15 years of age. 02 KS is the director of an NGO, that has a focus on the movie and documentary festivals in Kosovo. She also shared previous work experiences, which affected her work-life balance mostly in a negative way.

The third participant coded as 03 KS, is a working mother in Kosovo. She has three children, two sons and a daughter. By profession, 03 KS is a doctor specializing in nephrology. She became a mother after gaining some work experience and after having had her career path all figured out. This has been quite helpful for her in terms of successfully managing the family roles, without experiencing any decrease in work performance.

Participants from the United States

The first participant coded as 01 U.S., is a working mother in the U.S. She is a mother of two boys, 12 and 15 years of age. 01 U.S. is working remotely in the field of Training and Development. In addition to her full-time job, she is pursuing her master's as well.

The second participant coded as 02 U.S., is a working mother in the U.S. She is a mother of a 4-year-old daughter. 02 U.S. has just finished her graduate studies and currently is working remotely.

The third participant coded as 03 U.S., is a working mother in the U.S. She is a mother of a 2-year-old daughter. 03 U.S. is also working remotely and has just finished her master's degree.

Researcher's positionality

I, Elona Gashi, am an Albanian from Kosovo. I have a bachelor's degree in Psychology, and now I am pursuing my Master's in the Program of Adult Education and Human Resource Development at James Madison University. Being born and raised in Kosovo, and now pursuing my Master's in the United States, was my motive to do this

research and include participants from both these countries. I am not a mother, but I always admired how brave, ambitious, humble, and what a great manager my working mother was and continues to be. However, I know that it is not easy. Hence, I wanted to dive deeper and explore working mothers' experiences and see how they are managing their work and life responsibilities in today's world.

I have been raised by two wonderful working parents. While growing up, I always saw how my father helped my mother with household chores and childcare. Nonetheless, this was not the case with many of my friends' parents. So, I started to know more about gender roles, and at some point, I understood that the majority of men work and provide financially, while women stay home and take care of the children. So, based on my experiences in Kosovo, I somehow expected that working mothers in Kosovo will address some concerns related to their partner's support. In comparison, based on my experiences in the U.S., I expected that my participants from the U.S. will claim that they share responsibilities with their partner's and how helpful it has been for them as working mothers. Therefore, I acknowledge the fact that my biases and expectations that were created overtime with experience have influenced the research to some extent.

The rationale for the cross-cultural study

Comparative analysis offers a view of similarities and differences across countries and cultures. Thus, the researcher sought to add nuance and understanding to the work-life balance experiences of women from a comparative and international perspective. Moreover, expanding the understanding on the sociocultural contexts is helpful in efforts to support women and embrace inclusive cultures in the workplace. These two countries,

Kosovo and the United States, were chosen because of the researcher's familiarity with both countries.

Data Collection and Procedures

The participants of this research were from Kosovo and the United States. Data were collected from December 2022 to January 2023. For the participants from Kosovo, the overall participation process was conducted in the Albanian language (Kosovo's native language). Recruitment emails, consent forms, and the interview questions were all translated in Albanian. The researcher is originally from Kosovo and Albanian is her native language. Therefore, there were no language burdens in this regard. For the participants from the United States, the overall process was conducted in English.

All six respondents were contacted with recruitment emails to ask for their willingness to participate. Afterward, the ones that reached back to the researcher with their confirmation were sent the consent forms for signature. The interviewing process was built based on the participants' preferred date, time, and place. Two of the interviews with participants from Kosovo took place in-person, in Kosovo, and the third one was conducted virtually via Zoom. The same occurred with the U.S. participants where two of the interviews took place in-person, in the U.S., and the third one was conducted virtually via Zoom. The virtual interviews were the participants' choice because they were not able to schedule an in-person interview due to winter holidays. This was slightly more challenging for the researcher because of the technical issues and the internet connection. The in-person interviews took place in the Yunus Emre Institute (in Kosovo) and in the campus of James Madison University (in the U.S.). The face-to-face interviews were the researcher's favorite because she felt more relaxed without having to worry about the

internet connection, technical issues, or the quality of the audio recordings. She was able to better analyze the participants' shared experiences, had clearer thoughts on follow up questions, and observed body language and emotional reactions.

With participants' approval, both face-to-face and virtual interviews were audio-recorded using the Voice Memos app, on the researcher's iPhone 11. No videos or photographs were taken. Auto-save iCloud options were disabled and all recorded data were de-identified, encrypted, and stored on the researcher's MacBook Pro laptop, that is password protected and only accessible by her. After the collected data was stored in the laptop, they were deleted from iPhone's recorder.

Throughout the interviews, the researcher also took notes of observed body language, behavior, and emotional reactions of the participants. After having all the interviews conducted, to show my appreciation as the researcher, a "Thank You" email was sent to all the participants to value their time, experiences shared, and the overall contribution to this research study.

After possessing all audio-recorded data, the transcription phase started. The ones in Albanian were translated into English by a licensed translator from a reputable language school in Kosovo. Lastly, during the data analysis process (which will be further discussed in the next section), participants were send an email for member checking, which is vital for checking the trustworthiness of the results. Below find the visualized steps of data collection procedures:

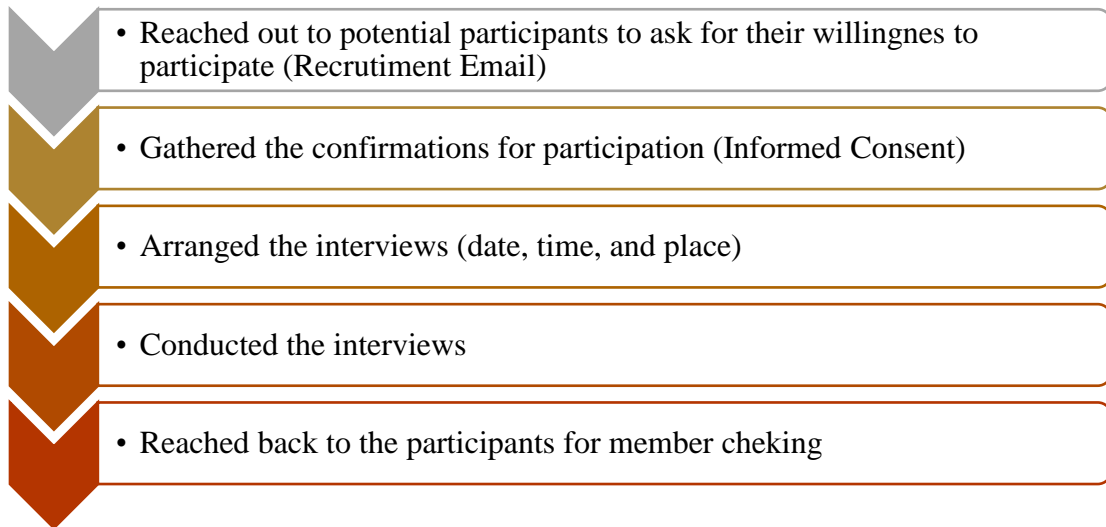


Figure 2. Visualized steps of data collection procedures.

Data Analysis

Organizing the data

Creswell (2013) recommended that the collected data should be organized prior to beginning the analysis. The researcher organized the data for each participant in the following order: the interview transcriptions, field notes from the observation, and the final approvals from the member checking.

Reading and memo-ing

Creswell (2013) recommends “writing notes or memos in the margins of field notes or transcripts or under photographs helps in this initial process of organizing a database” (p.183). In the current research study, after getting the transcriptions and translations done, the researcher went through the audio-recordings and the written transcriptions to make sure nothing is missing. She then read through the transcriptions with more of an analytic lens. Based on which transcription she was reading she consulted the particular field notes taken for each participant. After having read and re-

read each participant's data set individually (the interview transcriptions and notes), the researcher started looking for preliminary codes and themes within each participant's data.

Describing, classifying, and interpreting data into codes and themes

This step represents “the heart of qualitative data analysis” (Creswell, 2013, p. 184). Having into consideration Creswell's recommendations, while using the transcripts in the Word documents, I started open coding. The open coding involves breaking down the data into small segments and analyzing each segment independently to identify key concepts and themes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 51). After the open coding that I made through commenting on the transcripts, I slowly started axial coding. The axial coding involves making connections between the categories and subcategories identified during the open coding (Charmaz, 2006, p. 79), which leads to the determination of the study's themes and sub-themes. This process helps to create a more organized and cohesive understanding of the data by creating relationships and identifying any gaps in the data. While axial coding, I started having a clearer view of the themes and the corresponding sub-themes of the findings. Simultaneously, I was as well highlighting particular quotes from the participants' transcripts, which would further support the findings on Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness is an essential component in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Different strategies that the researcher utilized to establish trustworthiness are as follows:

- The researcher was enrolled in a research methods course, and regularly consulted the faculty advisors who had significant qualitative research experience.

- The created interview questions were firstly consulted with the literature, then with the committee chair, and lastly with the committee members. This is a practice of making sure that the questions are all clear and understood the same by everyone, and that there are no patterns of ambiguity.
- A practice interview was conducted with the committee chair to allow the researcher to get familiar with the interviewing process, to improve interviewing skills, and validate the effectiveness of the interview questions.
- While analyzing the data and having the preliminary themes, I reached back to all the six participants for member checking to ensure credibility (Mertler, 2017). In this case, I emailed my participants and I included the preliminary themes and sub-themes in the email. I required from them to kindly respond to that email offering more elaborated insights or confirming the accuracy of the findings. Finally, four out of six participants responded, and they all confirmed the accuracy of the findings and had nothing to add.

Ethical Considerations and the Protection of Human Subjects

This research project is IRB approved #23-3824. Specifically, it fell under the IRB Expedited Review and it posed no more than minimal risks to the participants. As suggested by Welman et al. (2005), the researcher paid close attention to three ethical considerations which include informed consent, right of privacy, and protection from harm.

To begin with, the participants were verbally informed in detail regarding the purpose of the study, procedures, their rights, and confidentiality. Then, they were given the consent forms which comprised all the needed information in written. This allowed

them to take their time and analyze the details once more and provide me with their consent to participate. Furthermore, to establish trust and ensure that the participants will feel comfortable to openly talk about their experiences, the interview questions were shared with them prior to the interview. By doing so, I was seeking to receive a stronger confirmation for participation and make sure that those questions will not trigger any traumatic or emotional reaction during the interviews. Further on, during the interviews, the participants were told once more that their participation in this study is completely voluntary and that they may withdraw from it at any point, upon request.

To ensure confidentiality, the participants were completely de-identified and given a code to their data (for example: 01 KS; 01 U.S.). They are only identifiable by the researcher herself. A master list with consent forms, related codes, interview transcripts, and observation field notes were kept in the researcher's office, in a lock drawer. All audio recordings were encrypted and stored on a password protected laptop that was only accessible by the researcher.

Chapter summary

In summary, this chapter presented and thoroughly explained the utilized methodology for the current research study. The subtitles of this chapter were: design of the study, sample rationale, participants description, researcher's positionality, data collection and procedures, data analysis, and protection of human subjects. The following chapter will present a meticulous and thorough analysis of the findings, based on the collected data.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This research began because of the researcher's interest in the importance of supporting working mothers in their work-life balance experiences. Exploring their experiences, seemed to be a good starting point for gaining a more elaborated understanding of their struggles and what can their workplaces do to better help them. In particular, the researcher was keen to better understand how the life, work, and sociocultural contexts influence working mothers' everyday life experiences in their efforts of trying to reach a balance between responsibilities.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the themes that were constructed from the data gathered by interviewing working mothers in Kosovo and the United States. The findings address the leading research question that guided this qualitative narrative study. The leading question of this research study is:

- *What are the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the United States?*

This leading research question was followed by three sub-questions, which directed the focus of the research and the way how the findings were drawn. The sub-questions are as follows:

1. *How does the life context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?*
2. *How does the work context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?*

3. How does the sociocultural context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?

Thus, the study explored the life context, work context, and sociocultural context and how these overlapping contexts influenced the working mothers' work-life balance experiences.

The data were collected from the conducted interviews with working mothers in Kosovo and the United States. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, and I also took notes regarding preliminary themes, the participants' body language or emotional reactions to particular questions, and the overall flow of the interview. The following section delves deeper into the data analysis process that I followed.

Data analysis

The transcripts from the interviews served as the primary source of research data. The analysis phase started with open coding. During the open coding phase, I broke my data into discrete parts and created codes to label those parts (Charmaz, 2006). I coded manually alongside the respective data in the transcriptions on Word documents. Additionally, I also open coded the de-identified data snippets in collaboration with my thesis chair, which ensured that the coding procedures are accurately being followed. After finishing open coding, I continued with axial coding. During this process I made connections between the categories and subcategories identified during open coding (Charmaz, 2006), which led to the determination of the themes and sub-themes. All these processes are discussed in depth in the Chapter 3 of this thesis research project.

In order to convey the findings, this chapter presents six major themes that were drawn from the data and provide a deeper understanding of the working mothers' experiences on work-life balance. Most of the themes have sub-themes. The sub-themes represent the layers of descriptive interpretation of the data. Layers of descriptive interpretation are also referred to as "levels of analysis" in the literature (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). For the purpose of this study, the first layer of interpretation consists of six major themes, and the second layer consists of sub-themes. Below, I elaborated and visually presented all the themes and the corresponding sub-themes for each of the three investigated contexts. To begin with, the life context components will be examined and described.

Life context

Based on my data, the life context of the work-life balance experiences of working mothers, in Kosovo and the U.S., comprises two major themes: *self-care and childcare*. On the one hand, self-care consists of three sub-themes: mom-guilt and acknowledging that you cannot do it all, setting healthy boundaries, and planning and time-management skills. On the other hand, childcare consists of four sub-themes: the partner's help, support, and understanding, the family's help, support, and understanding, the lack of trust and safety issues in the daycare services or schools, and family's financial circumstances. These are all visually presented in Table 2.

LIFE CONTEXT	
The themes	Sub-themes
Self-care	1) mom-guilt and acknowledging that you cannot do it all
	2) setting healthy boundaries
	3) planning and time-management skills
The themes	Sub-themes
Childcare	1) partner's help, support and understanding
	2) family's help, support and understanding
	3) the lack of trust and safety issues in the daycare services or schools
	4) family's financial circumstances

Table 2. The themes and the sub-themes drawn by data analysis for the life context.

Self-care

Self-care was the very first theme spotted in the life context. Within the self-care theme, three sub-themes were found: mom-guilt and acknowledging that you cannot do it all, setting healthy boundaries, and planning and time-management skills.

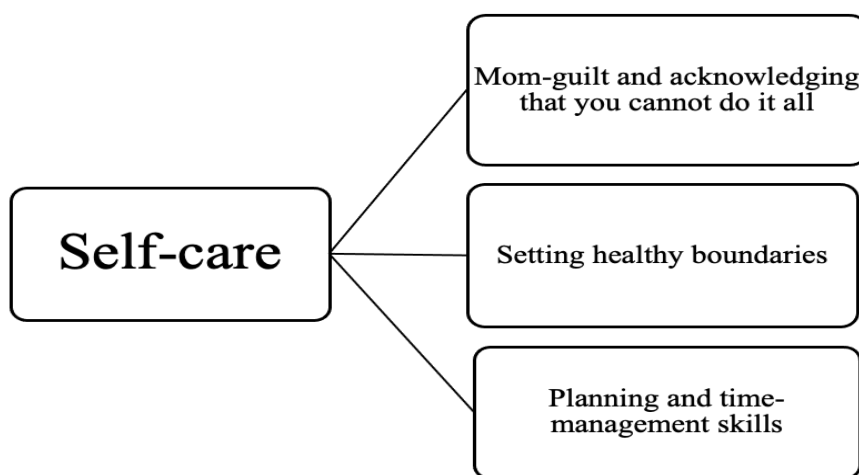


Figure 2. Self-care theme and its corresponding sub-themes

Mom-guilt and acknowledging that you cannot do it all. The most common word used by the interviewed working mothers was mom-guilt. All six out of six participants said that despite all their sacrifices and efforts in trying to balance their roles and responsibilities, they still feel guilty for not being able to spend more time and be more present in their children's life. When I asked one of the working mothers in Kosovo about what a typical day of her life looks like, she said:

Once I'm home, both of my daughters are full of energy and have the tendency to require the same level of energy and enthusiasm from me. They start telling me

about how their day was, and I feel that my brain is still in the work mode and then I start thinking about what to cook, do they have homework, I need to do laundry... just, just rushing all my thoughts, and I notice that my thoughts fade away and I can't get focused on what my daughters say. And then boom, I blame myself because I feel like I am not being a good mom, a present mom... (01 KS, 2022, p.3).

Despite the fact that they all felt guilty about certain situations in their life, they continuously are trying to accept and normalize the fact that a working mother, just as everyone else, has some days in which she can be productive and do it all, but in some others it's okay to not be able to have everything in place.

I am a good mother even if I don't clean today and I don't make lunch tomorrow; I am a good mom even if I could not be together with my children tonight and help them with their homework; I am a good worker, even if I haven't finished all the items on the to-do list the other day... The idea of being able to do everything in a perfect way has brought me to a stage where I started to doubt myself, to be dissatisfied, to experience anger issues, to be not comfortable with anything and anyone...! Changing the perspective, enabled me to feel more balanced... (02 KS, 2022, p.3).

Along with what participant 02 KS said, participant 03 KS told me how a mother's perspective matters. She said that she was in an ongoing process of working with herself to become the mother that her child needs.

A child does not need a perfect mom, a child needs a calm mom... That is why I'm always working with myself, to become the mother that my child needs... It's all about self-care, and it's all a matter of perspectives... (03 KS, 2022, p.7).

Even among the interviewed working mothers in the U.S., the researcher found completely similar beliefs and experiences.

"I often feel 'mom-guilt' for having to send my daughter to daycare, because I just want to spend all my time with her and my husband..." (03 U.S., 2023, p.2).

Additionally, they also emphasized the fact that everything has its own place, and everyone has their own time, just as working mothers need their space and time for themselves.

I love my husband, my two beautiful sons, my work, the environment around me... But, sometimes, I just need ME time. ME time is the best therapy for a working mother, it's a time of reflection, recharging yourself, and calming... I understood the power of ME time only after becoming a mother... There should be a lower bar than perfection to be considered successful and balanced as a mother, and sometimes that simply means that today I don't have 100% to give in everything, and that's okay... (01 U.S., 2023, p.5).

Setting healthy boundaries. The next sub-theme within the self-care theme is setting healthy boundaries. Four out of six working mothers reported that re-evaluating their priorities and re-prioritizing their responsibilities was a huge step for them to reaching a balance. When one of the interviewees from Kosovo was asked about an experience where she had to prioritize work over family, she said:

Ohhh... There are so many... But it is good that I have been able to reflect, to tell myself that this is not good, and I should change it! That is why I resigned from my current job, simply because I came to a certain point where I felt the need to re-prioritize things. Now, I want to work on my dissertation, and I'll be starting a part-time job with children of extraordinary intelligence soon. All this will enable me to do something I enjoy, as well as prioritize my family, and have more quality time with them. (01 KS, 2022, p. 6)

Even though all participants reported that they love to work: *“I didn't thrive as a stay-at-home mom, I need human interaction” (02 U.S., 2023, p.9)*, and that *“to work or not to work is not part of the discussion” (01 KS, 2022, p.3)*, still, one of the U.S. participants reported:

In order for me to be less stressed and feel more comfortable with achieving what my different roles require, I have decided to be less ambitious at work, which means that I have made it clear that I cannot stay after work hours, I can't work on weekends, and I can't take projects that require a lot of energy and continuous effort.... I know I can put much more effort into it and take more responsibility, but I choose not to, for my own well-being, and for prioritizing my family... (03 U.S., 2023, p.5).

The same individual also said:

Sometimes, setting healthy boundaries means learning to say no... After becoming a mother, and moreover, being a working mother, people don't make an effort to understand what you are going through... They call you and invite you to places, and when I can't go, they make a big deal out of it... And I realized that it is not

worth the try. If you can't go, or can't take more responsibility, you simply say NO without overthinking it... (03 U.S., 2023, p.6).

Planning and time management skills. The final sub-theme of the self-care theme is planning and time management skills. Time management skills and the work-life balance are significantly correlated (Beyramijam et al., 2020). Five out of six interviewed working mothers in Kosovo and the U.S. reported that each day they need to come up with a plan and have a timeline for themselves and their children. One of the participants from Kosovo shared:

I must point out that I always devote a lot of time to planning my children's day and routine, along with an organized timeline. I pay special attention to the details of the daily planning, and wherever we take the children, either to our parents' house or to daycare centers, I make sure everything is clean and safe. I would rather be committed in terms of a detailed planning and strict timeline, than get bothered all day long at work from the thoughts and concerns for not having managed to take care of our children properly, and consequently have our work performance decrease... (03 KS, 2022, p. 8).

Along with this perspective, one of the U.S. participants stated:

While we're talking about reaching a balance, time management, and planning skills are a huge asset to have, especially as a working mother. With a decent plan and a timeline, you can almost do it all... During the days I have a plan and a timeline, and I stick with it, I actually feel that I did it all... I feel that I filled all the gaps within all my roles and responsibilities, and most importantly, found time for some ME time... (03 U.S., 2023, p. 1).

Thus, the interviewed working mothers in Kosovo and the U.S., seem to share quite similar experiences when discussing their own work-life balance among the life context components. Mom-guilt and acknowledging that you cannot do it all, setting healthy boundaries, and planning and time-management skills were the three sub-themes, which all fell under the concept of self-care. Further on, childcare as the second major theme of the life context will be thoroughly elaborated into four different pieces of sub-themes.

Childcare

The second theme found within the life context inquiry is childcare. The childcare theme consists of four sub-themes: the partner's help, support, and understanding, the family's help, support, and understanding, the lack of trust and safety issues in the daycare services or schools, and the family's financial circumstances.

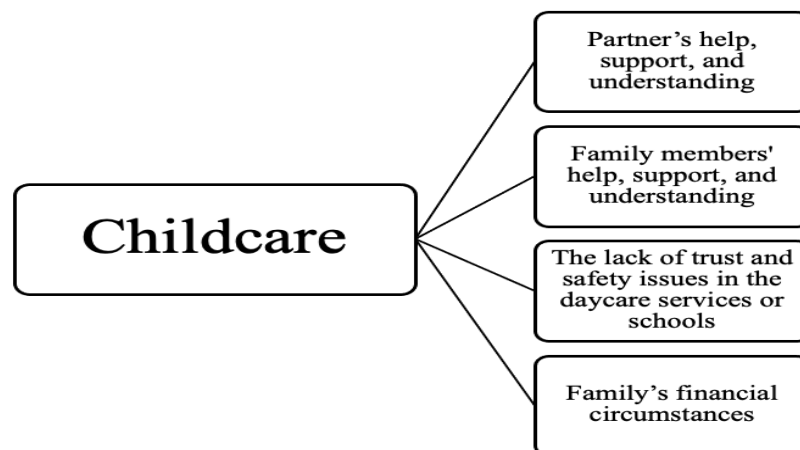


Figure 3. Childcare theme and its corresponding sub-themes

The partner's help, support, and understanding. Partner's help, support, and understanding is the first sub-theme found under the childcare theme of the life context. For a working mother, the partner's support is much needed. When discussing partners' help, the experiences of the interviewed working mothers in Kosovo and the U.S. started to differ. Two out of three participants from Kosovo were deeply disappointed with their husband's lack of support and empathy.

I would have been so happy if my husband would offer me help sometimes... If I am to be fully honest, I often feel like a single mother... My husband isn't really a partner, he's just a figure that provides financially, and, yeah, that's all... I am the default parent, and I deal with everything when it comes to our house and family, and he's just the default person for finances... (02 KS, 2022, p. 4).

This was not the case with the third working mother from Kosovo. She expressed herself to be very happy with her husband's support, and she tended to talk in the plural when it came to taking care of their children.

Before we leave our house, in the morning, we spend a good amount of time planning our children's day, you know, what they will eat, where they will be staying, what stuff they will need for the day... My husband and I, we make a good team... We share responsibilities and that is such a great help for me... (03 KS, 2022, p. 2)

On the other hand, regarding the participants from the U.S., three out of three working mothers reported that they have their partner's support and empathy and do not quite follow the traditionally gendered norms (which will be further discussed in the sociocultural context).

So, I am the one who takes care of our family finances. My husband in the past felt guilty because you know finances traditionally are a “man thing”, but I’m like, it’s okay love, that is not the advantage you bring to our family, let’s see, let’s discuss what advantage you bring... So, being willing to communicate the things that we can take responsibility for, helps you and makes you feel that you’re not alone... (02 U.S., 2023, p. 10).

Furthermore, all three interviewed working mothers in the U.S. reported that, when it came to raising their children and taking care of them, they combined and organized their work shifts with their partners. This way both the mother and the father would be taking care of their children at different points of the day.

We had a period of time when we were having a hard time finding childcare options, we just couldn't find somebody we liked or afford. So, my husband and I arranged our schedules. He was actually a business owner at that time. We arranged our schedules so that I would go to work from 6 am to 2 pm. Then I would come home, and then he would go to work from 3 in the afternoon till 11 pm. We never saw each other... (02 U.S., 2023, p. 4).

Clearly, communication and combining work schedules are paramount in shared childcare responsibilities in the lived experiences of these participants.

The family members’ help, support, and understanding. Family’s help, support, and understanding is the second sub-theme under the Childcare theme of the life context. Among participants from Kosovo there was an unanimity noticed when discussing the family’s help and support. They all shared situations in which their

families, either their own family members or their husband's family members, have been a huge help in taking care of their children.

“Having our family’s support has helped us in managing our roles and responsibilities better. If we would live somewhere far from our families, I am sure that we would be sacrificing a lot more...” (03 KS, 2022, p.13).

She also went on to say that:

“Along with my partner’s help, family members’ support, understanding, and the physical help with the childcare has enabled me to have ME time and quality time with my husband.”

Among participants from the U.S., I noticed that one of the participants was able to work and pursue her Master’s simultaneously, with the support of her family members and her husband’s family members.

My mother and mother-in-law came to look after my daughter during the weekdays, and in the evenings, when I had classes, my husband would watch her. On the weekends, I would do my assignments while being able to spend time with my daughter and my husband. So, with their help and sincere support, I felt that I was able to spend the right amount of time in every role that I had... (03 U.S., 2023, p.6).

Moreover, 02 U.S. declared that having or not having family support impacts working mothers’ future family plans regarding the number of children they want to have.

“Me and my husband, we literally are asking ourselves -do we want more kids?!... Because, like, it is hard to raise another child when you don’t have other family members to help with childcare...” (02 U.S., 2023, p. 13).

The lack of trust and safety issues in the daycare services or schools. The third sub-theme within the childcare theme is the lack of trust and safety issues in daycare services or schools. Participants from Kosovo expressed their concerns with the quality of the daycare institutions in Kosovo, and the fact that they have no decent monitoring from the competent governmental institutions. When 01 KS was asked to share some of the struggles that she experiences as a working mother, she replied:

Childcare institutions are a big concern for me... Daycares and schools in Kosovo aren't well-monitored as they should be by the competent state organs... My daughters can be bullied, or not offered a qualitative education and no one will ever know if my daughters won't share stuff with me. So, even when I've found an option for a daycare or a school for my daughters, the concern was and honestly, it's still there with me... (01, KS, 2022, p. 3).

Whereas two out of three participants from the U.S. stated that public safety is their concern when it comes to sending their children to daycares or schools. Moreover, they also mention the possibility of homeschooling their children.

It's really hard to put my trust in someone else when it comes to taking care of my daughter... And now the political tensions and the gun violence, oh my God, that is a huge stressor for me... I never really thought of homeschooling before having my daughter, but now, I don't ignore it as an option, even though it will crash my balance completely... (02 U.S., 2023, p. 12).

The family's financial circumstances. The fourth and the last sub-theme found under the childcare theme is the family's financial circumstances. The participants from Kosovo, discussed the financial circumstances in two different matters. First, the family's

financial situation determined how much the mother can stay with her child after giving birth.

When we had our first daughter, we were in big debts and had to pay the credit \$1000 per month. At that time, me and my husband were working 2 jobs, and I had to leave my daughter when she was only 8 weeks old... That was the hardest thing that I ever had to do in my entire life, and I've never felt more imbalanced... (01 KS, 2022, p. 8).

Second, the family's financial circumstances determined the quality of education that the children will be getting.

Now that we made it and are pretty stable financially, we had the opportunity to pay for the best quality schools for our daughters. We might be paying more, but we feel much more relieved than we were before, knowing that our daughters are being provided a high-quality education, in a high-safety environment... (01 KS, 2022, p. 9).

Whereas the U.S. working mothers' concerns were more general. They mentioned the overall expensive life in the U.S. and the fact that they have to start saving even before becoming parents, in order to cover their child's school expenses.

"Life in the U.S. is expensive, and kids are expensive... I'll pay around \$10.000 for my daughter's daycare this year..." (02 U.S., 2023, p. 6)

As elaborated within the four pieces of the presented sub-themes, childcare is an important part that affects these working mothers' work-life balance in many ways. In this regard, there were some differences noted between working mothers in Kosovo and those in the U.S. These data clearly showed that the interviewed working mothers in

Kosovo have more help provided by their families than their husbands. As opposed to the interviewed working mothers in the U.S., which declared having more help provided by their husbands than their families. Otherwise, regarding the lack of trust/safety issues in daycares and schools, and the financial circumstances, both working mothers in Kosovo and the U.S. shared similar points of view. To continue, the work context components of the interviewed working mothers' work-life balance experiences will be examined.

Work context

Based on the data that my participants provided, the work context of the work-life balance comprises two major themes: *nature of the work* and *workplace support*.

The theme of the nature of the work does not consist of any sub-themes. Whereas the theme of workplace support consists of four sub-themes: employer's empathy, flexibility, and support, coworkers' approach, empathy, and support, promoting and respecting healthy boundaries, and maternal leave regulations. Find them visually presented below.

WORK CONTEXT	
The themes	Sub-themes
Nature of the work	

The themes	Sub-themes
Workplace Support	1) employer's empathy, flexibility, and support
	2) coworkers' approach, empathy, and support
	3) promoting and respecting healthy boundaries
	4) maternity leave regulations

Table 3. The themes and the sub-themes drawn by data analysis for the work context.

Nature of the work

The nature of the work theme was the very first theme spotted in the work context of working mothers' work-life balance experiences, and there were no sub-themes found under this theme. All six out of six interviewed working mothers in Kosovo and the U.S. agreed with the fact that the nature of work is tremendously important and that some careers/jobs will dissuade a working mother to manage a successful balance of responsibilities. One of the Kosovo participants said:

While I've been working in the private sector, in a bank in Kosovo, I had the worst time ever in my work life... I felt completely out of balance... I felt like I don't have a life and I could not find neither the time nor the energy to be a good mom, a good wife, or take good care of myself... (01 KS, 2022, p. 5).

While some careers and jobs inhibit working mothers to reach a balance, some others enable them to manage a successful and satisfactory balance of responsibilities. As a U.S. working mother stated:

Currently, I work in the training and development field, and I work remotely. Although remote work has its own challenges, I've never felt more balanced and more relieved when it comes to reaching my goals in my work and life roles... I have a lot more flexibility than a mother who works as a server or a housekeeper... Unfortunately, there is a huge number of working mothers who cannot take a day off even when they're sick or their children are sick... (01 U.S., 2023, p. 10).

So, both participants from Kosovo and the U.S. agree with the fact that some careers/jobs are more challenging than others for working mothers. Further on, the second theme of the work context will be examined through four different sub-themes.

Workplace support

The second theme found amongst the work context components is workplace support. The theme of workplace support consists of four sub-themes: employer's empathy, flexibility, and support, coworkers' approach, empathy, and support, promoting and respecting healthy boundaries, and maternal leave regulations.

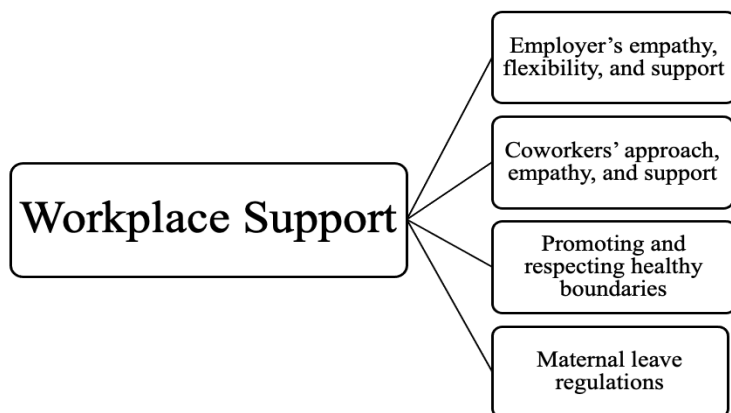


Figure 3. Workplace support theme and its corresponding sub-themes

Employer's empathy, flexibility, and support. The first sub-theme found under the workplace support theme is the employer's empathy, flexibility, and support. Two out of three interviewed working mothers from Kosovo, shared that they have changed many jobs just because they could not find an employer whose approach was empathetic and supportive. 01 KS shared that, now that she is stable financially and has already paid her debts, she does not want to continue working in a toxic working environment, with a high micromanaging culture.

In my current job, from which I just quit, we have to check in and check out every time we get in or get out of the building... And when you are late, they take it out of your salary... And one time, one of my daughters was feeling sick in the morning, and I, of course, ran late for work, until I found someone to stay and take care of her. And, when I finally made it to work, all stressed and worried for my daughter, my employer not only didn't appreciate me showing up while my daughter was sick, but he said to me -next time when you run late, you send me an email... With a very arrogant tone... It was sad to see how non-empathetic an employer can be... I don't even want to start on the cases when my daughters had their music concerts, which I missed almost all, because I simply didn't have either the needed understanding or the flexibility from my employer... (01 KS, 2022, p. 10).

However, 03 KS, was quite happy with her employer's approach and support. She said that each day, she feels more motivated to do her best, because of the support she has.

When I see my manager applauding me for not giving up, and for still coming to work even after staying up all night with my child, that gives me so much strength

and motivation to continue... During my working hours, I go home at least three times, and breastfeed my youngest son... I don't think that many mothers have this flexibility... But I do... And I could not feel more grateful about it... (03 KS, 2022, p. 8).

Similarly, the U.S. participants shared that employers' support and flexibility are huge facilitators in helping them manage their work-life balance. Two out of three interviewed U.S. working mothers have declared that they work remotely because they chose to, and they had their employer's full support in this regard. *"I am so grateful that my employer approved my request to work full-time from home"* (03 U.S., 2023, p. 6).

Nonetheless, 02 U.S., shared that she did not work during the first year when she gave birth to her daughter. And her struggle was that many employers questioned her about the one-year gap in her resume.

It was so sad that I wasn't encouraged to tell employers during the interviews that I actually was mothering full-time during that year. But, when I did tell them that, I could clearly see their faces judging me... Because for the employers, a working mother means that they cannot fully count on her and that they need to invest in her when it comes to health insurance and childcare benefits... (02 U.S., 2023, p. 13).

Below, you will see two different tables which present the points that my participants made when they were asked about what their employer can do to better help them manage their roles and responsibilities in work and life. See Table 4 for the responses of participants from Kosovo, and Table 5 for the responses of participants from the U.S.

Q: What can your employer do to better help you reach a balance?		
01 KS	02 KS	03 KS
“For once, I would love to see policymakers actually ask the working mothers what their needs and requests are, before making any final decision about the regulations and policies. I don’t like it when non-competent people determine my fate...”	“Flexibility, flexibility, flexibility... I cannot stress that enough...”	“Better maternal regulations regarding the finances part... And just being empathetic and offering sincere support because it is vital, human, and professional...”

Table 4. The responses of participants from Kosovo when they were asked about what can their employer do to better help them with their work-life balance struggles.

Q: What can your employer do to better help you reach a balance?		
01 U.S.	02 U.S.	03 U.S.
“The best thing that my employer can do for me is to recognize that work is not my whole life and give me space to do my work and live my life...”	“Do not assume what we need; listen to our requests; do not make us re-invent the wheel; respect healthy boundaries -don’t make me work on the weekends or holidays, I need that time for my family...”	“I definitely need more opportunities for professional development...”

Table 5. The responses of participants from the U.S. when they were asked about what can their employer do to better help them with their work-life balance struggles.

Even though this information cannot be generalized, it can be beneficial for policymakers and HRD practitioners, in their efforts to try and make workplaces better places for working mothers.

Coworkers' approach, empathy, and support. The second sub-theme found under the workplace support theme is coworkers' approach, empathy, and support. Both participants from Kosovo and the United States shared extremely disappointing experiences when it came to their relationships with their coworkers. In addition, they both emphasized the importance of having supportive coworkers. 02 KS, shared:

When I was working in the bank, I had many, many days in which I could barely stand because I had stayed up all night with my son... And every day we had to stay after hours, to balance the finances of the day. That was something that anyone could do... And I could hear myself praying inside my mind for my coworkers to say -hey you go home we can manage this, go rest, or you know, something like this... But they never really did, even though they knew how poorly I was feeling... And now that I am an employer myself, I have made it mandatory for my employees to inform me if they see a colleague not feeling well or going through a tough period of time... (02 KS, 2022, p. 12).

Similarly, 02 U.S. shared an experience where her colleagues were being mean and dramatic about her pumping within the workplace. That experience with her coworkers led her to quit that job because it had a terrible impact on her work-life balance, and her mental well-being.

So, even before I accepted their offer, I told my employer that I will need to pump throughout the day, and I need a room or a place where I could pump in

privacy... And they were fine, they found me this room which did not have any curtains, so I simply put one... And just because I put a curtain there, two of my coworkers had started complaining, making up stories, and causing departmental drama about why I should need a curtain... This got bigger and bigger, and I just could not take that nonsense anymore, therefore, I quit... (02 U.S., 2023, p.11).

Promoting and respecting healthy boundaries. The third sub-theme found under the workplace support theme is promoting and respecting healthy boundaries. The importance of setting healthy boundaries within the world of work and respecting those boundaries was a strongly emphasized point by each of the participants in Kosovo and the U.S. Two out of three participants from Kosovo shared particular experiences in which their workplace had set healthy boundaries, but never really respected them.

When I first started working there, we were in a meeting, me and my boss, and I remember telling him that I will be able to work 9-5, as the contract required, and I said that sometimes I can be at work 30 minutes more, but then I need to be home because I have to take my daughters from school and then take care of them, their homework and stuff... And you know what he said to me...? He said: Well, I hope you won't have to work more than that... That was such a red flag... I had just proposed to work 30 minutes more than I was supposed to, and he told me that... And to tell you the truth, I had to stay after hours the majority of the time in that workplace... (01 KS, 2022, p. 7).

As per the U.S. participants, 02 U.S. explained:

I am aware that my employer is trying to make things better, but like yesterday was a state holiday, and I had to submit stuff on a state holiday... This happened

on some weekends, winter breaks, and in other state holidays also, it wasn't the first time... So, as much as you try to respect the boundaries you set for yourself as a mother, when the employer, and the workplace in general, do not respect those boundaries, it is really hard to reach a balance... (02 U.S., 2023, p. 8).

Maternal leave regulations. The fourth and last sub-theme found under the workplace support theme is the maternal leave regulations. This issue was only addressed by the participants from Kosovo. Two out of three working mothers in Kosovo had experienced issues with the maternal leave regulations in their workplace, especially while working in the private sector. While getting quite emotional, 01 KS explained how she had to go to work and leave her 8 weeks old daughter, because her workplace was not going to pay her after 8 weeks of leave.

Whenever I have to remember that experience, I feel ashamed that I had to do that and did not see the first steps of my daughter. But I was being paid three times more than my husband, and we needed that income for our debts, our daughter, and we were also taking care of my husband's family... So, I left my 8 weeks old daughter, and went back to work, just because they had an 8-week paid leave, and afterward, they would save my spot, but provide no financial help... (01 KS, 2022, p. 7).

However, she also emphasized that this happened around twelve years ago, and right now the situation with the maternal leave regulations in Kosovo is getting better. However, some companies in the private sector still have unfair regulations and do not follow the state laws.

“My biggest concern is working in a private sector company, because not only that it won’t pay you for more than two months, but your job position can be easily replaced...” (01 KS, 2022, p. 7).

And the latter actually happened to the 02 KS, which shared:

“I had to leave my 2 and a half months old son and go back to work because there was an actual risk of me losing my job...” (02 KS, 2022, p. 6).

Among U.S. working mothers, there were no particular experiences addressed when it came to the maternal leave regulations. Nevertheless, they mentioned the fact that some jobs have different maternal regulations than others:

“I cannot imagine myself being a working mother who works in restaurants or housekeeping jobs that have the worst maternal leave regulations” (02 U.S., 2023, p. 8).

To sum up, in this theme and its sub-themes, I noticed similar experiences and perspectives from participants of both countries involved. They both shared experiences that emphasized the importance of having empathetic and supportive employers as well as coworkers, in fulfilling their work and life roles at their best. Furthermore, the data indicated that respecting healthy boundaries is a must when it comes to their work-life balance and the impact that the work context has in it. Lastly, participants from Kosovo shared experiences that indicated a big difference in maternal leave regulations within the private and public sectors. Nonetheless, one of the participants from the U.S. slightly mentioned that as well. In the following section, the sociocultural context of working mothers’ work-life balance experiences will be presented and analyzed.

Sociocultural context

Based on my data, the sociocultural context of the work-life balance experiences of working mothers, in Kosovo and the U.S., comprises two major themes which are: *gender norms and support systems*. These major themes consist of sub-themes. The gender norms theme consists of two sub-themes which are: generational conflict on gender norms and societal expectations on how a mother should be. The support systems theme, on the other hand, also consists of two sub-themes which are: main support systems and support systems can add stress to working mothers' work-life balance. Find them visually presented in Table 6.

SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT	
The themes	Sub-themes
Gender norms	1) generational conflict on gender norms
	2) societal expectations on how a mother should be
Support systems	1) main support systems
	2) support systems can add stress to working mothers' work-life balance

Table 6. The themes and sub-themes drawn by data analysis for the sociocultural context.

Gender norms

The first major theme found in the sociocultural context components is gender norms. The theme of gender norms consists of two main sub-themes: generational conflict on gender norms and societal expectations on how a mother should be.

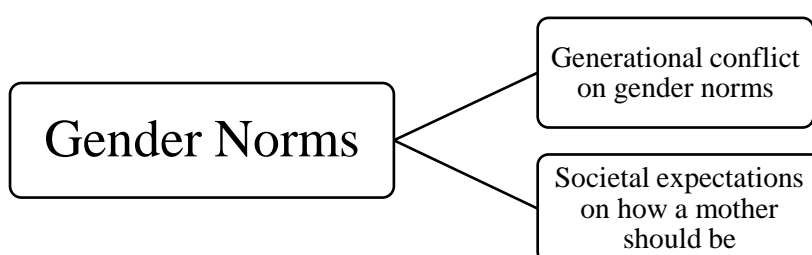


Figure 4. Gender norms and its corresponding sub-themes

Generational conflict on gender norms. The first sub-theme found under the gender norms theme is generational conflict on gender norms. All six working mothers described how their families, particularly their mothers/mothers-in-law have been imposing their beliefs on gender roles to them. They shared how they have been told how to act, what responsibilities to carry, and what to expect from the husband. Based on what my participants from Kosovo shared, it seems that in Kosovo, this issue continues to prevail. The mother's parents or her in-laws still try to make her follow the traditional gender norms, where the mother stays home, does the household chores, and raises the children. Whereas the father only provides financially. Many families in Kosovo still live

in extended families, therefore, there is a bigger predisposition for generational conflict to occur.

When we all used to live together, me, my husband, his parents, and his 5 sisters, my life has been quite difficult and impacted by them in many, many ways... At that time, I was doing my master's and working. And this fact was disturbing my husband's parents a lot... All they wanted me to do is stay home, be the bride of the house, take care of the households, serve them breakfast/lunch/dinner, and raise my daughter... (01 KS, 2022, p. 14).

Similarly, 01 U.S. described how her mother taught her to not require help from her husband because the husband only provides financially. Nevertheless, she did not follow her mindset, and she requires help from her husband.

My mom always taught me to not ask my husband for help because they work all day to provide financially, and that's their only job, and I should take care of the rest... But this is just unreasonable, partners are partners for a reason - to help each other achieve their goals and fulfill their responsibilities, and not have completely divided goals and responsibilities... (01 U.S., 2023, p. 10).

Societal expectations on how a mother should be. The second and last sub-theme spotted under the gender norms theme is societal expectations on how a mother should be. Both participants from Kosovo and the U.S. shared some interesting experiences when they were asked to share how society and culture around them impact them as working mothers. A participant from Kosovo described:

Well, sometimes people in Kosovo just don't mind their own business and they have the tendency to talk a lot about you, your 'mothering' style, and try to teach

you how to be a perfect mother, whatever that means... The society here sees mothers as someone who should be isolated in the house, raise the children, and do the household chores... (01, KS, 2022, p. 11)

However, she strongly disagreed with this mindset, and continued to say that:

Mothers should no longer be seen as someone who can only take care of the house and the children, because mothers can do those both and also work and contribute to the society... And giving birth and raising a child are just a couple out of many contributions that women make to society... This is the law of nature, and children are the future of the country... (01 KS, 2022, p. 11).

In line with the participants from Kosovo, the participants from the U.S. also declared having societal influences that try to impose the way how a mother should be. In this regard, 02 U.S. shared an interesting point:

As much as I don't want to care about what society and culture says, it still affects me in many ways... You know they become voices in your head... Especially the comparison between the mom circles kills me, you know, how are you raising your child, why are you working, how much time are you spending with your daughter, don't you feel blame... etc... etc... (02 U.S., 2023, p. 16).

And she goes on to say that:

"Being raised in conservative Christian circles, everyone expects from me to send my daughter to a private school. It's so much pressure, you have no idea... How am I supposed to afford a private school...?" (02 U.S., 2023, p. 15).

Clearly, she is concerned about deciding whether to send her daughter to a private school or a public one. Sending her daughter to a private school is not affordable for her and

sending her to a public one is something that is “against the norms” in the society in which she was raised. Thus, both participants from Kosovo and the U.S. shared similar experiences in which they have had generational conflicts and particular societal expectations that disturbed their work-life balance. Next, the second theme of sociocultural context will be presented and elaborated thoroughly.

Support systems

The second major theme under the sociocultural context components is support systems. This theme consists of two sub-themes which are: main support systems and support systems can add stress to working mothers’ work-life balance.

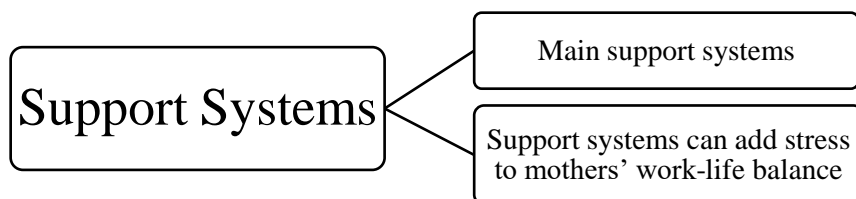


Figure 5. Support Systems and its corresponding sub-themes

Main support systems. In this sub-theme the main support systems of my participants are presented. To better understand who the support systems of my participants are, the tables below show them listed.

Participants from Kosovo	Support systems
01 KS	Mother
02 KS	Mother & sister
03 KS	Husband, parents, parents-in-law

Table 7. Support systems of participants from Kosovo

Participants from the U.S.	Support systems
01 U.S.	Husband
02 U.S.	Husband
03 U.S.	Husband, mother, mother-in-law; sister-in-law, babysitter, church small group

Table 8. Support systems of participants from the U.S.

On the one hand, two out of three participants from Kosovo do not list their husbands as a support system.

“I had to send my children to my mother’s house, even when my husband was home...” (02 KS, 2022, p. 7).

Whereas all U.S. participants list their husbands as their first support system.

Even though in the conservative cycles in which I was born and raised, gender norms are clear cut, me and my husband, we don’t have that rhythm going on in our family, we share responsibilities, and do the things we’re best at in order to contribute to our family... (02 U.S., 2023, p. 15).

On the other side, all three interviewed working mothers in Kosovo listed their family members as their strongest support system.

“My strongest support system is my mother, her door is always open for me and my children...” (02 KS, 2022, p. 9).

However, two out of three working mothers in the U.S. did not list their family members as a support system. They declared that they either do not have other family members or they live far away and cannot provide support in any way.

My family lives in Northern Virginia, and it’s impossible for them to support me. We also have my husband's family that live closer, and they’ve been a great help, but recently his mom was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, so we can’t really ask for their help anymore... So, we really feel the lack of family support in helping us raise our daughter... (02 U.S., 2023, p. 13).

There is a clear distinction seen when discussing the support systems of the interviewed working mothers in Kosovo and those in the U.S. I must say that for these working mothers in Kosovo, there are still some indicators of the traditional gender norms, which are affecting the support that these mothers have. Meanwhile, working mothers from the U.S. do not seem to follow the traditional gender norms and share responsibilities.

Therefore, these mothers list their husbands as their first and strongest support system.

Support systems can add stress to mothers’ work-life balance. The second sub-theme found under the support systems theme is support systems can add stress to mothers’ work-life balance. Even though the support systems are a network of people who provide practical or emotional support, my participants shared experiences that bring to light another side of the support systems. In line with this perspective, one of the participants from Kosovo shared:

My strongest support system is my mother... However, I must emphasize that my mother, as a support system, has its own struggles that in a way disturb my balance... You know, I try to be a gentle parent, but in the meantime, I want to have disciplined children, not spoiled ones. And every time I go get my children from my mother's house, they're just something else... Spoiled, lazy, very demanding, and dependent on me even on the little things that they're capable of doing... And that happens because my mother spoils them a lot... (02 KS, 2022, p. 13).

This is an experience that represents the fact that a support system can be a concern of its own. Alongside this experience of 02 KS, a working mother in the U.S. shared something similar when discussing support systems. She stressed the importance of communicating the kind of support you need from your support systems, in order to not end up feeling that they are imposing their beliefs and practices on you.

Well, for me, I communicate with my support systems. I tell them what kind of support I need, and I don't like for them to impose their beliefs on me, because then I won't feel either supported or balanced, and that would add worry to my daily life... (03 U.S., 2023, p. 10).

Thus, as the findings show, support systems not always are only supportive. They can also add stress to these working mothers' daily life because in a way or the other they will impose their beliefs to them or their children.

Chapter Summary

This chapter thoroughly analyzed and presented the data of this research project. During the data analysis process, I took my time to analyze and present my data in a way

in which the voice of my participants would be heard. According to the data, there were six major themes found, two in each of the work-life balance contexts. Within the life context of the working mothers' work-life balance, self-care and childcare were considered the two major themes. Then, within the work context of the working mothers' work-life balance experiences, the nature of the work and workplace support were the two major themes found. Lastly, within the sociocultural context of the working mothers' work-life balance, gender norms and supports systems were the two corresponding major themes. After meticulously analyzing and presenting my data, I can state that the participants of both countries seem to have more similarities than differences in common. These similarities and differences will be further discussed in the following chapter. Thus, the following chapter will discuss these findings, connect them to the existing literature, and propose a few recommendations for further studies.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This exploratory qualitative research study sought to explore the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the United States. By delving deeper into these continuous efforts of managing work and life roles and responsibilities, I aimed to provide first-hand information on what these experiences look like. By doing so, I hoped to provide information regarding what workplaces and HRD practitioners can do to ease the struggle of being between two full-time jobs. Therefore, in order to explore these experiences, there were six full-time working mothers interviewed, three from Kosovo and three from the U.S.

This study was guided by the following leading research question: *What are the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the United States?*

In addition, this leading research question was followed by three sub-questions, which directed the focus of the research and the way the findings were drawn. The sub-questions are as follows:

- 1. How does the life context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?*
- 2. How does the work context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?*
- 3. How does the sociocultural context impact the work-life balance of a working mother in Kosovo and the United States?*

Thus, this study's structure was built around the life context, work context, and sociocultural context of working mothers' work-life balance.

During the data analysis process, there were six major themes found. Two themes emerged in each of the work-life balance contexts. Within the life context, self-care and childcare were considered the two major themes. Then, within the work context, the nature of the work and workplace support were the two major themes. Lastly, within the sociocultural context, the gender norms and support systems were the corresponding major themes.

Interpretation of the data with the supporting literature

The findings of this research study were organized based on the life, work, and sociocultural context of the working mothers' work-life balance. The findings regarding these contexts were drawn by the experiences of the interviewed working mothers in

Kosovo and the U.S. In this section, I will discuss these findings and support them with the existing literature.

Life context

About the life context, the literature mainly covers the paid and unpaid childcare issues and the factors contributing to each of them (Brady & Perales, 2016; Williams, 2010). Formal childcare services may be preferred by some families as they are more convenient and guarantee consistency and higher quality compared to other childcare arrangements. However, according to Brill et al. (2016), when childcare services are limited, the matching between parents' working schedules and the flexibility of the services becomes crucial to guarantee a satisfactory work-life balance. This goes along with what one of the participants from the U.S. stated:

We had a period when we were having a hard time finding childcare options, we just couldn't find somebody we liked or afford. So, my husband and I arranged our schedules. I would go to work from 6 am to 2 pm. Then I would come home, and then he would go to work from 3 in the afternoon till 11 pm. We never saw each other... (02 U.S., 2023, p. 4).

Further on, the literature also states the benefit of combining different childcare arrangements. Accordingly, Arpino and Luppi (2020) found that the possibility to combine different sources of childcare results in higher satisfaction with work-life balance. This goes along with what 03 KS stated:

I am so grateful for all the support that my husband, his family, and my family provided in childcare... I cannot forget to mention the help of the babysitter who took care of my older daughter and son, so I could take care of the little one, and

finish my specialization. I couldn't have done it without their help... (03 KS, 2022, p.8).

Furthermore, research evidence also shows that the socioeconomic status of the family can disturb the balance of work and life responsibilities. Families with lower economic resources have fewer options for paid childcare such as employing a babysitter (Brilli et al., 2016). In line with this statement, the current findings show that the financial circumstances play a crucial part in these working mothers' work-life balance. As 01 KS shared: *"Now that we made it and are pretty stable financially, we had the opportunity to pay for the best quality schools for our daughters, but this wasn't the case a few years ago"*. Hence, having a stable financial situation not only helps working mothers with having more childcare options, but it also affects the quality of the childcare arrangement.

The research on the life context also highlights the issue that working mothers are not making up time for themselves (Williams, 2000). Correspondingly, Wattis et al. (2012) found that women's personal time and leisure time away from both work and family was a marginal concern that most did not even consider. In the same study, several professional women felt the need to compensate for working long hours during the week by spending all of their available free time with their children (p. 8). Similarly, most of my participants reported that they spend their free time with their children and use it as a bonding time:

All of my free time is spent with my children, but I never regret it because it serves us as bonding time and we really enjoy it. It also makes me feel less guilty for the hours that I'm at work and not with them... (01 KS, 2022, p. 7).

Lastly, the research evidence on the life context also investigates the time management skill and its impact on the work-life balance. In their study, Beyramijam et al. (2020), examined the responses of 271 participants from Iran regarding their time management skills and the level of their work-life conflict. The findings showed that there is a significant inverse correlation between time management skills and work-life conflict, meaning that when one has high time management skills, the conflict will be at its lowest and vice versa. Correspondingly, the participants of the current research shared that they spend a lot of time planning and managing their own time and their children's time, so they can feel more balance and less conflict throughout the day. Just as O3 KS stated: *"I spend all my mornings planning and creating timelines for every member of the family, so we can all work it out and feel no pressure afterward"* (O3 KS, 2022, p. 8).

In summary, the findings of this research regarding the life context of working mothers' work-life balance are quite supported by the existing literature. Indeed, the family's support, financial circumstances, trust and safety issues with daycares and schools, and time management skills are crucial to a satisfactory work-life balance for working mothers. The following section will compare the current findings with the existing literature on the work context of work-life balance.

Work context

About the work context, the existing literature covers mainly the workplace support and flexibility, and not much about how the different jobs and careers affect working mothers' work-life balance, as the findings of this research study show. In this case, research evidence shows that many mothers still struggle to find employers who offer flexible schedules or the ability to work from home, which can make it difficult for

them to meet their work and life responsibilities (Galinsky et al., 2018). Sharkey and Caska (2019) investigated the differences in working arrangements and their impact on work-life balance satisfaction. The study showed that respondents whose working arrangements involved a combination of working from the office and home emerged as being more satisfied with their job and life than their counterparts who worked only from their offices (Sharkey & Caska, 2019). This implies that flexible work schedules and telecommuting from home remain substantial strategies that can be harnessed to improve the work-life balance outcomes of employees. Comparably, my participants reported that employers' and coworkers' approach, support, empathy, and workplace flexibility are key factors that indicate the balance and motive that a working mother has while juggling between roles and responsibilities.

When I see my manager and colleagues applauding me for not giving up, and for still coming to work even after staying up all night with my child, that gives me so much strength and motivation to continue... Moreover, during my working hours, I go home at least three times, and breastfeed my youngest son. I don't think that many mothers have this flexibility... But I do... And, I could not feel more grateful about it, and that's what keeps me strong and keeps me going... (03 KS, 2022, p. 8).

In closing, the findings of this research regarding the work context of working mothers' work-life balance are quite supported by the existing literature. Indeed, the employers' support, empathy, and flexibility as well as coworkers' support and understanding are crucial to a satisfactory work-life balance for working mothers. The

following section will compare the current findings with the existing literature on the sociocultural context of work-life balance.

Sociocultural context

About the sociocultural context, the existing literature covers mainly the issue of traditional family gender roles and how these imposed roles add a lot of weight to working mothers' shoulders. As expected, the biggest difference noticed in the experiences of the participants from both countries were mainly within the sociocultural context. The social expectations seemed to be quite the same among these participants' experiences. Nevertheless, when discussing the help of the support systems, participants from Kosovo shared that they have more support from their own family members, parents, and siblings, than from their husbands. Whereas the ones from the U.S. shared that even if they feel that they are always the "default parent" (02 U.S., 2023), their biggest support are their husbands. This difference stands upon respecting or not the traditional and non-traditional family gender roles. Because the extended families still exist in Kosovo, there is high generational conflict and intrusions on how mothers are expected to "act like a mom" and stay home to raise their children. Accordingly, this is what 01 KS shared:

When we all used to live together, me, my husband, his parents, and his 5 sisters, my life has been quite difficult and impacted by them in many, many ways... At that time, I was doing my master's and working. And this fact was disturbing my husband's parents a lot... All they wanted me to do is stay home, be the bride of the house, take care of the households, serve them breakfast/lunch/dinner, and raise my daughter... (01 KS, 2022, p. 14).

In line with the current findings, Kelmendi and Jemini-Gashi (2022) conducted a cross-sectional research study with 656 women in Kosovo. Their findings showed that the changing nature of gender roles among societies was associated with women's increased level of education and participation in employment in Kosovo. However, these changes were not accompanied either by a reduction in women's role in domestic chores and childcare responsibilities or by their partners' increased engagement in these duties and roles (Kelmendi & Jemini-Gashi, 2022; Goldscheider et al., 2015).

On the other side, Pessin (2007) explored how gender norms were associated with women's marriage dynamics in the U.S. between 1968 and 2012. Her findings suggested that a higher prevalence of egalitarian gender norms predicted a decline in marriage formation for women without a college degree. Whereas, for college-educated women, the association between gender norms and marriage formation became positive when gender egalitarianism prevailed. The results of this study also showed that when gender norms tended to be more traditional, divorce rates initially rose. However, this was not the case with the college educated women (Pessin, 2017).

Based on my findings and the supporting literature, there is a difference noticed on the issue of family gender norms between Kosovo and the U.S. In fact, in both countries, there are still families that follow traditional gender roles. Nonetheless, women in Kosovo, even after getting their degrees, report having no additional or increased support from their partners (Kelmendi & Gashi-Jemini, 2022). Whereas, college-educated women in the U.S. report embracing gender equality and sharing responsibilities with their partners (Pessin, 2017). The following section will present the implications that these findings have for the HRD literature and practices.

Implications

The need to respond to the working mothers' work-life balance challenges, fosters HRD practitioners to know more about their experiences and design the needed interventions. "An intervention is the implementation of an action to create change" (McLean, 2005, p. 428). It is suggested that HRD professionals re-think the traditional interventions and consider non-traditional interventions that could offer a solution to the conflict between the work and life roles. Traditional HRD interventions (e.g., training, coaching, mentoring, etc.) are generally designed to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to successfully perform their work (Rowold, 2017), and do not relate much with either life or sociocultural circumstances. Non-traditional HRD interventions on the other side, include revising/designing employee leave policies (Kehoe & Wright, 2013), providing workplace social support (Gersick et al., 2000), managing work-life boundaries (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012), encouraging wellness behavior (Biron et al., 2012), and offering training to supervisors who are responsible for maintaining supportive systems (Hammer et al., 2013). All these non-traditional HRD practices, or better say non-work-related practices, seem to correspond with the findings of the current research.

Hence, it is my hope that this research study is a modest contribution to the HRD literature and that its findings can enhance these non-traditional HRD practices, with the purpose of mitigating the struggles of working mothers' work-life balance. Lastly, I hope that this research study has put an emphasis on the importance of taking into consideration all the three contexts when designing interventions. The following section will present the recommendations for further research.

Recommendations

During this research, I identified areas of future study that would contribute to the overall HRD literature and practices. The proposed recommendations are presented below:

- First and foremost, conduct a study of the same nature, with a representative sample among working mothers.
- Second, conduct a study that would evaluate the effects of conducting needs analysis on working mothers' work-life balance satisfaction. Most of my participants reported that they have never been asked what their needs are, but their needs were always assumed and generalized. Therefore, it is HRD's responsibility to further evaluate if conducting needs analysis, prior to policy making or designing interventions, will correlate with higher satisfaction of working mothers on work-life balance experiences.
- Third, conduct a research study which aims to determine the advantages and disadvantages of both remote and in-person work for working mothers. Some of the participants shared that working from home is a huge help and a very much appreciated opportunity. Whereas other participants shared that working from home has added stress to their efforts in trying to find a balance, and that it has been more difficult to separate work and life roles, which has led to increased conflict among roles. Therefore, I recommend this further research in order for it to serve as evidence for working mothers and organizations for when they are making decisions in this regard.

- Fourth, conduct a research study that focuses and delves deeper especially within the socio-cultural context of working mothers' work-life balance experiences in Kosovo and the United States.
- Lastly, conduct a study in which the maternal leave regulations are compared between countries. My participants shared that the maternal leave regulations have impacted their work-life balance in many ways, mostly negatively. Therefore, having the maternal leave policies and practices compared among different countries, might be good empirical evidence on the regulations that resulted to be beneficial for both working mothers and organizations. In line with this recommendation, I would also suggest conducting a study with the purpose of comparing the maternal leave regulations and the flexibility provided between the private and the public sector. My participants shared very poor experiences while they were working on the private sector. Therefore, a study in this regard would expose the struggle of being a working mother in a private sector and perhaps serve as evidence that things must change.

Conclusions

With this research study, I sought to explore the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the U.S. More concisely, I aimed to explore and understand in-depth how the interconnection of different contexts impacts the work-life balance of working mothers, based on their lived experiences. When saying different contexts, I aimed to analyze how the life context, work context, and sociocultural context intersect and affect the struggles of reaching a balance. Therefore, by exploring these

experiences and the influence that these contexts have in these experiences, my purpose as the researcher was to make my participants' stories, challenges, and needs be heard.

Even though, the life, work, and sociocultural contexts were studied separately, the findings showed that they all intersect and influence working mothers' work-life balance as such. The current study utilized the Ecological Systems Theory to inform these findings and this interconnectedness among contexts. The findings showed that there were six major themes found, two in each of the work-life balance contexts. Within the life context, self-care and childcare were considered the two major themes. Then, within the work context, the nature of the work and workplace support were the two major themes. Lastly, within the sociocultural context, gender norms and supports systems were the corresponding major themes.

After meticulously analyzing and presenting my data, I can state that the participants of both countries, Kosovo and the U.S., seem to have more similarities than differences. The only big difference spotted was within the family gender roles and norms. Participants in Kosovo seemed to still follow the traditional gender norms, mainly because of the impact that the extended families continue to have on these mothers. In contrast, this was not the case with the U.S. working mothers, which seemed to not conform to their parents' perspectives on family gender roles and share the household chores and childcare responsibilities with their partners on daily basis.

In conclusion, while conducting this research, I was keen to make a modest contribution to the HRD literature and provide its practitioners with firsthand experiences from the working mothers themselves. During the interviews, I saw my participants' frustration specially when we were discussing about how they have never been asked

about what their needs are, because their needs were always assumed and compared to the majority. Therefore, all the interviewed mothers had quit previous jobs just because of this reason. Despite the fact that the current findings cannot be generalized, it is my hope that these findings can serve as a starting point for further research with representative samples. Moreover, it is my hope that this study and its findings highlighted the need for needs assessment plans for working mothers. Because while conducting the needs assessments, HRD practitioners will have a clearer and more accurate understanding on what interventions to design and what career development support do these working mothers need. And finally, by doing so, talented working mothers will feel appreciated and heard, and therefore, they will not give up easily because they will have the needed support in their efforts to find the balance between their roles and responsibilities.

Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Script

Hello!

My name is Elona Gashi. I am a graduate student at JMU in the M.S.Ed. Adult Education and Human Resource Development Program. I am conducting research for my master's thesis. The purpose of my research is to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the United States. If you are a full-time working mother, and your children(s) are no older than 15 years old, then you are eligible to participate in this study.

If you meet the criteria and have further questions or wish to participate in this research, please reach out back to me at gashi3ex@dukes.jmu.edu.

Your prompt response is greatly appreciated!

Thank you very much!

Kind regards,

Elona Gashi

Appendix B

Consent to Participate in Research Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Elona Gashi from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to explore the work-life balance experiences of working mothers in Kosovo and the United States. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her master's thesis.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of a semi-structured interview, which will last from 45 to 60 minutes. If you are a participant from Kosovo, the interview will take place in *Yunus Emre* Institute in Prizren, Kosovo. If you are a participant from the U.S., the interview will take place in *Memorial Hall*, on JMU's campus. Nevertheless, if you find Zoom more convenient, I will give this as an option too.

You will be interviewed about your work-life balance experiences as a working mother. The interview will be audio recorded even if it will be conducted in-person or in Zoom. If you do not want to be audio recorded, I will take notes using pen and paper instead.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require approximately 1 hour of your time. The interview will take no longer than 45 to 60 minutes.

Risks

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

Benefits

Potential benefits from participation in this study include helping to inform the field of human resource development regarding working mothers' work-life balance experiences in Kosovo and the United States. There are no direct benefits to the participant, however, the interviews might be an opportunity to reflect on your work-life balance experiences.

Incentives

You will not receive any compensation for participation in this study.

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be presented to the researcher's research committee and may be published in academic journals and presented in conferences. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers including audio recordings will be destroyed. Final aggregate results will be made available to participants upon request.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Researcher's name: Elona Gashi

Department: Learning, Technology and Leadership
Education

James Madison University

Email address: gashi3ex@dukes.jmu.edu

Phone number: 347-543-5201

Advisor's name: Dr. Edward Brantmeier
Department: Learning, Technology and Leadership
 Education
James Madison University
Email address: brantmej@jmu.edu
Phone number: 540-568-4846

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject

Dr. Lindsey Harvell-Bowman
 Chair, Institutional Review Board
 James Madison University
 (540) 568-2611
harve2la@jmu.edu

Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be interviewed. _____ (initials)

I give consent to be audio recorded during my interview. _____ (initials)

I give consent for the researcher to take notes during my interview.
 _____ (initials)

 Name of Participant (Printed)

 Name of Participant (Signed)

 Date

 Name of Researcher (Signed)

 Date

Appendix C

The Interview Questions

Work-Life Balance:

1. Can you please tell me how a typical day of yours as a working mother looks like?
2. How do you define work-life balance, or better said, what does work-life balance mean to you?
3. Can you share some challenges that you face when it comes to reaching a work-life balance?
4. What are some ways that help you reach a work-life balance?

Personal Context:

5. How does your personality and your nature as a human being affect your work-life balance? Can you tell me about a particular experience?
6. Can you share an experience where you felt that your work-life balance was balanced (successfully achieved)? What helped it?
7. Can you share an experience where you felt that your work-life balance was not balanced (not successfully achieved)?
-What initiated it? How did it make you feel? How did you manage it/got through it?
8. Can you share an experience where you had to choose between work and family/life?
Better said, when you had to prioritize one over the other?

Work Context:

9. In what ways/How did becoming a mother impacted your professional career? Can you share your personal insights and reflections in this regard?
10. Can you share an experience where you felt that being a mother affected your work performance?
11. Do you feel that your workplace is helping you reach a balance or is it the opposite? Do you feel that they care, or just want the work done? Can you share an experience?
12. How can your organization better support you?

Socio-Cultural Context:

13. What are your support systems? Your partner, immediate family, relatives, friends?
14. If a support system is mentioned:
 - Can you share an experience where this support serves you as an opportunity and/or a barrier to reaching the work-life balance?
15. Can you share an experience when the culture in which you were raised and the social expectations/norms have had an impact on your work-life balance?
16. In closing, on the topic of work-life balance, what else would you like to share that you have not yet? Maybe something you thought about during your answers or maybe something that was not asked?

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