Effects of the Pandemic on Working Mothers: Exploring Perspectives from the United States and South Africa

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on working mothers from the United States and South Africa. This study sought to highlight both cross-cultural similarities and differences. American and South African working mothers took part in online interviews. Each participant met individually with the researcher and answered a series of open-ended questions regarding their experiences of being a working mother during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers analyzed interviews using thematic analysis. Common themes emerged in the interviews with both American and South African working mothers. Mothers in the United States and South Africa both noted the need for flexible work schedules as well as expressed difficulty balancing roles as mothers and professionals during the pandemic. Increased motivation and resiliency as well as lack of representation of women leaders were themes specific to South African mothers in this study. Conversely, feelings of decreased interest in pursuing leadership opportunities was a theme specific to American mothers in this study. The current study adds to the growing body of literature documenting the effect of the pandemic on working mothers, and builds on this research by including a qualitative component to gain knowledge from working mothers themselves. The narratives collected in the current study highlight commonalities as well as differences in the experiences of working mothers in the United States and South Africa, which holds important implications for how workplaces and the broader community can best attend to the unique needs of working mothers.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected the lives of working individuals globally, as governments instilled social distancing and isolation measures (Haleem et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020). This, paired with other gendered vulnerabilities such as expectations surrounding caregiving responsibilities, have important implications (Connor et al., 2020; O’Reilly & Green, 2021; Raile et al., 2020). As working groups adjusted to work-from-home measures following workplace and school shutdowns, the need for parental in-home care rapidly increased. As a result, many parents experienced significant shifts in their daily routines as they sought out ways to balance newfound responsibilities and roles. Given gendered norms and workplace rigidity, this responsibility fell largely on working mothers (Pavlov & Timbers, 2022; Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Thus, considerations for how working women experienced and remain impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic warrants further investigation. However, to understand the cultural shift propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, we must first understand cultural realities for working women generally, and how those realities may differ across South African and American groups. In an effort to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has made an ongoing impact on working mothers, the current study’s sample, which consists of both American and South African working mothers, served as an opportunity to deepen the understanding of how these two societies uniquely responded to the global pandemic. The current study additionally works to highlight the shared experience of how working mothers may have been disproportionately impacted throughout the course of the pandemic.

Conceptualizing Motherhood Cross-Culturally
Ideologies concerning motherhood are salient to the historical and cultural values promulgated by society and inform understandings and expectations of mothering roles (Lockwood et al., 2019). While there are certainly shared commonalities within mothering responsibilities, individuals from differing cultural groups experience varying dominant narratives concerning mothering, and thus conceptualize the roles of motherhood differently (Lockwood et al., 2019). In Western society, current understandings of motherhood predominantly follow Hays’ (1996) model of intensive motherhood, which positions mothers as solely responsible for the emotional and physical care needs of their children (Lockwood et al., 2019). Following this theoretical model, societal expectations require that mothers prioritize their children’s needs over their own (Hays, 1996). In turn, mothers in the US often experience feelings of apprehension due to the paradoxical social requirements of being an ideal mother and an ideal worker (Borelli et al., 2017). However, the ambivalent expectations for working mothers in Western cultures may not be as salient to cultures that practice collective mothering, in which communities share parental responsibilities (Robinson, 2014). Collins (1994) posited that the practice of collective mothering is a result of economic and racial oppression and often salient to Afrocentric ideologies regarding motherhood. Additionally, Spjeldnæs (2021) suggested that South African mothers’ use of collective mothering provides families with a source of resilience to combat the requirements of employment and mothering responsibilities. Hence, these alternative cultural norms regarding motherhood have implications for mothers’ attitudes towards employment and mothering cross-culturally. It is additionally notable that culturally normative parenting practices were significantly altered in the face of COVID-19. Thus, the following paper attempts to both expand on the contextual experience of South African and American working mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic and explore the potential effects of COVID-19 on working mothers’ parenting and employment attitudes and roles.

Working Mothers in the South African Context

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced various moments of hardship as emerging variants and ever-changing protocols impacted personal and professional routines for individuals across the world. Despite the introduction of efficacious vaccines, omicron subvariants, such as the BA.4 and BA.5, which originated in South Africa, as well as the BA.2.12.1, which was first found in New York, caused an upheaval of positive COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and protective protocols to mitigate further spread of the variants to the general public (World Health Organization, 2022; Schnirring, 2022). Across Africa, mandated stay at home orders and national lockdowns affected all 22 African countries, with South African being one of the first African countries to declare a state of emergency (Verani et al., 2020). South Africa remained in a state of emergency and lifted all mandated stay at home orders and restrictions more than two years later. Thus, in response to COVID-19, families in South Africa noted large changes in their daily routines, heightened feelings of isolation and social disconnection, and increased experiences of financial distress (October et al., 2021).

To better understand how working mothers may be disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to unpack the cultural context and apparent gender differences that South African women typically face. Historically, South African women, and particularly households that have a
woman serving as the primary income earner, are more likely to experience poverty or lower income than their gender counterparts (Parry & Gordon, 2020). Given federal lockdown regulations in South Africa during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, working women typically bore tremendous strain as they managed their responsibilities as caregiver and professional, as well as heightened levels of emotional distress, violence, and unpaid labor (Parry & Gordon, 2020).

Unfortunately, unpaid work is relatively common for working women in South Africa (Parry & Gordon, 2020; Ramparsad, 2021). Though South African women have long faced the burden of gender inequality and differences within the workforce, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic increased rates of unpaid labor within South Africa (Khwela-Mdluli & Beharry-Ramraj, 2020; Ramparsad, 2021). In turn, marginalized communities have been disproportionately impacted, and the poverty gap has broadened (Ramparsad, 2021). Hence, those who remain most impacted are South African women, who are already most vulnerable to experiencing structural discrimination, gender inequity, and lack of compensation for work (Khwela-Mdluli & Beharry-Ramraj, 2020; Mathur-Helm, 2005; Ramparsad, 2021; Sinden, 2017).

For years, South African women are notably refused positions of power, are underrepresented in leadership roles, and are subjected to remain in roles of lower occupational status (Mathur-Helm, 2005; Sinden, 2017). Although there has been public outcry for gender equality in the South African workforce, as well as the effect of various legislative policies, such as the Employment Equity Act of 1998[^1] and the Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill[^2], gender inequality continues to exist within the South African workforce (Sinden, 2017). The hindering advancement of professional women in South Africa falls on the psychosocial barriers in place, such as limited accessibility to resources, professional development, or training for women as well as gender based discrimination, gendered stereotypes, gender norms, and racism (Khwela-Mdluli & Beharry-Ramraj, 2020; Sinden, 2017). In turn, the collective and systemic forces at play have historically impacted South African women at a disproportionate rate; however, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these gender based inequalities.

**Working Mothers in the American Context**

Women's participation in the United States economy has substantially increased in the last several decades (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). However, women continue to be primarily responsible for domestic and household labor (Power, 2020). Data have consistently indicated that women engage in more home and family work, regardless of the number of hours they spend performing paid labor (Pavlov & Timbers, 2022). This is particularly salient for working mothers, who hold an abundance of responsibilities in and out of the home. In particular, working mothers navigate dual societal expectations including the need to excel in the workplace and to excel as a caregiver. In part, these expectations are propagated by US culture, which imparts intensive mothering and individualistic ideologies, insinuating that outsourcing for communal caregiving support is aberrant (Hays, 1996; Lerner & Galambos, 2021). As a result, maintenance of home and work responsibilities may be burdensome for working mothers (Dugan & Barnes-Farrel, 2018; Lerner & Galambos, 2021). Hence, these expectations promulgate
unrealistic standards that often affect working mothers’ psychological well-being (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005). Dugan and Barnes-Farrel (2018) posited that navigating paid and unpaid labor leads to the depletion of time resources amongst working mothers, which is then associated with increased feelings of stress. Further, Borelli et al. (2017) stated that working mothers experience greater feelings of parental guilt and dissatisfaction in the workplace when work interferes with family life. Thus, these findings portend important implications for working mothers who experience heightened work-family distress related to disruptions in their work and home routines.

Undoubtedly then, the protective measures taken in response to slow the spread of COVID-19 impacted working mothers and their abilities to balance work and home responsibilities. The COVID-19 pandemic brought the US economy to a halt, and as a result, parents’ employment has suffered (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Additionally, the closure of schools and childcare facilities due to social distancing requirements means that the time demands associated with in-home childcare has drastically increased (Moscardino et al., 2021). Given that women already contribute more to household labor, working mothers may have continued to do so in the face of this shift. Existing data indicated that between 45-90% of working mothers were the primary caregivers for their children at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst additionally working full-time from home (Pavlov & Timbers, 2022; Zamarro & Prados, 2021). It is likely then, that the increase of responsibilities for working American mothers may have additionally impacted their overall functioning, including their general well-being. Zamarro and Prados (2021) noted that in the early months of the pandemic, working mothers of young children reported an increase in psychological distress. Similarly, working mothers are also at higher risk of workplace burnout due to a reduction of psychological resources that occurs through multiple caretaking responsibilities (Luthar, 2015). Thus, it remains important to consider how working mothers continue to be affected by COVID-19, and how such experiences may affect their familial functioning and career trajectories.

Current Study

Data were collected from October 2021 through March 2022. The timeline of data collection coincided with the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 variants, more specifically, the Omicron BA.1 variant, which was first reported in South Africa in November 2021 (Madhi et al., 2022). Over the course of data collection and as COVID-19 infection yet again rose due to viral mutations and variants (Thakur et al., 2021), the ways South African and American mothers were uniquely impacted by the waves of the SARS-CoV-2 variants and the pandemic began to be revealed. Given the influx of COVID-related illness and increased isolation protocols, it was critical for researchers to further explore the perspective of working mothers between the two countries while considering the global consequences on transmissibility, fatality, and sociocultural implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taken together, the purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on working mothers from the United States and South Africa and to consider cross-cultural similarities and differences given the cultural differences salient to mothering ideologies seen among American and
South African women. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to many difficulties that have disproportionately impacted working mothers across the world, given their cumulative labor roles in and out of the home. Additionally, the effects of COVID-19 may have been especially difficult for BIPOC mothers and mothers with intersecting marginalized identities. Hence, it is imperative that workplaces better understand the challenges that have affected working mothers in their employee populations. In an effort to amplify the voices of working mothers, especially in the crisis of a pandemic, this study aimed to synthesize the specific needs of working mothers and identify the ways in which workplaces can adapt to these needs.

The current study analyzed the effects of the pandemic on South African and American working mothers’ perceptions surrounding leadership ambition, vocational motivation, career trajectory, and aspects of work and family life. The current study has the potential to yield important implications for identifying the barriers working mothers face and addressing ways employers and vocational spaces can empower their employees who are mothers to pursue leadership roles and promote their professional development. Finally, it is notable that motivational shifts among working mothers may impact women’s desires to pursue leadership roles. Thus, we further sought to explore the effect of COVID-19 on leadership pursuits amongst working women, as these understandings may allow workplaces insight to the unique challenges salient to career mothers. Although this study is largely exploratory, we predict that the COVID-19 pandemic will have negatively affected working mothers from both cultural groups. The analyses of the interviews sought to reveal the scope of the impact of the pandemic and the specific needs that have arisen for working women because of the pandemic.

**Methods**

**Sample**

The current sample consisted of 18 working mothers who were recruited via Prolific, a platform used to recruit and compensate individuals. Participation in the study required participants to meet criteria: (1) participants were expected to be above 18 years old and (2) participants were expected to be mothers to a child younger than 18 years old. Of the 18 participants, 15 participants identified their current residence, while the remaining three participants did not complete the demographic questionnaire. Though some participants did not complete the optional demographic questionnaire, some information about the participants (geographic location and job) was collected through voluntary reports made during interviews. Among those who reported their demographic information, 40% of the participants (N = 6) resided in South Africa, while 60% (N = 9) of the participants lived in the United States. When referencing information provided by the remaining three participants during the interview process, two of these participants reported living in South Africa and one participant reported living in the US. Thus, when accounting for information gathered via demographic questionnaire and the interview process, 55.56% (N = 10) identified as American mothers, while 44.44% (N = 8) of the sample identified as South African mothers. Participants were asked to report their gender identity, race and ethnicity, age, state of residence, relational status, educational level, and age and genders of their children. The age range of the remaining
15 participants was between 21 years old and 54 years old ($M = 36.6$, $SD = 8.35$). Among the sample who completed the demographic questionnaire, 53.33% ($N = 8$) identified as White, 33.33% ($N = 5$) identified as African, 6.67% ($N = 1$) identified as African-American/Black, and 6.67% ($N = 1$) identified as multiracial or multiethnic. Among those who completed the demographic questionnaire, 60% of the sample ($N = 9$) were married, 26.67% ($N = 4$) reported never being married, 6.67% ($N = 1$) reported being separated, and 6.67% ($N = 1$) identified as engaged. 33.33% ($N = 5$) reported completing a graduate degree, 26.67% ($N = 4$) reported completing some college (referring to participants who completed less than four years at a university), 20% ($N = 3$) reported obtaining a four year university degree, and 20% ($N = 3$) reported completing high school (referring to participants who have received a high school diploma or GED). All participants indicated that they were mothers to at least one child (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Demographic Information of Participants’ Children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>N Participants</th>
<th>Mean Age</th>
<th>SD Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.125</td>
<td>6.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.29</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited through Prolific, a system where enrolled individuals are able to participate in studies for which they meet the eligibility criteria. In the current study, participants were awarded $20 compensation through Prolific. Interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes, and were conducted via Zoom. Interviews were recorded to allow for transcription.

Each participant met individually with the researcher. During the scheduled interview time, participants were asked to complete a brief demographic survey and answer a series of standardized, open-ended interview questions regarding their experiences of being a working mother during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 2 for examples). Interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) steps for thematic analysis.

**Table 2.** Interview Questions.
1. How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted your career and leadership trajectory?
2. Were you able to work from home during the pandemic, and if so, how has this impacted your performance, professional development, and/or leadership skills/ambitions?
3. What unforeseen obstacles has the pandemic brought as it relates to your roles as a mother, employee, and a leader?
4. Does your workplace support you being a mother while advancing as a leader in your field? Please describe how your workplace was supportive or unsupportive.
5. How have you felt supported or unsupported during the pandemic by your supervisors, managers, or leaders at work, career trajectories, or leadership pursuits?
6. With the current status of COVID-19 today, do you think the pandemic still affects your career and leadership trajectory or have you been able to recover? What factors have led to continued stress at work or recovery at work?

Thematic Analysis

To analyze the data collected via interviews, the researchers utilized Braun and Clarke’s (2006) steps for thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the phases of thematic analysis are: (1) become acquainted with the data; (2) construct codes when assessing the data; (3) explore notable themes; (4) review proposed themes; (5) identify and operationalize themes; (6) report findings. Researchers cross-evaluated interviews for themes, and also noted themes that were present in South African and American mothers to evaluate cross-culture similarities and differences. In accordance with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) steps for thematic analysis, researchers transcribed and reviewed video recordings of interviews. During the initial phase of thematic analysis, researchers documented notable themes that emerged within each recorded interview. To establish inter-rater reliability and to ensure salient themes were appropriately captured, two coders were involved in the initial documentation of notable coded themes. Initial review of the data revealed the following preliminary themes: working from home, parental stress, workplace support, gender representation, and motivation. Later thematic analysis involved assessing the frequency of coded themes.

To assess cultural differences, researchers reviewed frequency of themes among the two cultural groups. The process of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis is considered to be a nonlinear process. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), “there are no hard and fast rules about what makes a theme” (Maguire & Delahun, 2017, p. 3356); therefore, there is not a formal definition or set of standards involved in constituting a theme. Thus, to determine prominent patterns, the researchers explored themes that were consistent among multiple participants’ reports. Given the low sample sizes of each cultural group, the researchers determined prominent themes as ones which were consistent among at least 25% of the given cultural sample size.
Results

The lived experiences of both American and South African mothers were collected in the current study. Given possible cultural differences and the varied response to the COVID-19 pandemic between the two countries, the researchers found it important to explore the shared and differing experiences of South African and American working mothers (see Fig. 1).

Notable Differences Specific to South African and American Mothers

The results of the thematic analysis suggest noteworthy themes specific to both South African and American working mothers. For South African participants, there was a collective experience of increased motivation and resiliency experienced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another important theme that arose is that South African mothers reported limited representation of women leaders within the South African workforce, generally. Alternatively, the most salient themes shared amongst American mothers was a shared decrease in motivation to pursue leadership opportunities.

Increased Motivation and Resiliency among South-African Mothers

Across various interviews, 75% (N = 6) of the study’s South African participants described a new-found sense of empowerment and resilience upon reflecting on the difficulties they faced as working mothers during the pandemic. Several South African participants (N = 6) noted persisting through obstacles that may have unexpectedly arisen from the pandemic, which left them feeling an increased sense of self-motivation and improved self-efficacy.

“It kind of boosted my confidence, knowing that I can be able to do certain things...things that I never thought of before...it just give[s] me a different perspective and show[ed] me that I can do more than I think I can.” – 36 year old, African mother of two residing in South Africa who works in logistics and deliveries.

“I had to accept that my company's closing down. It was quite hard to tell people to stay at home. I have nothing for them...Basically, let me say, it has actually [let me] plan for a lot of things. I think that is the most biggest highlight for me, and [I] appreciate [the] people around me. I think that's the biggest thing in my life. I'm grateful for my life now...it has actually made me aware that if I'm capable to do this, then I can assist other people.” – 40 year old Black mother of three residing in South Africa who is a self-employed business owner and coal miner.

Importantly, thematic findings suggest that despite the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on working mothers, South African mothers expressed a greater sense of resiliency, and increased confidence in their self-efficacy.
Lack of Representation of Women Leaders with South-African Mothers

Through discussions with South African and American working mothers, cultural and societal norms regarding women in leadership emerged. Among the eight (N = 8) South African participants, 25% (N = 2) reported the difficulty women faced at a societal level when aspiring for leadership positions.

“I don’t think that is something [leadership] that is possible for me...but as a leader, especially for women, [mining is] not a company that you would...they don’t really consider women”. – 40 year old Black mother of three residing in South Africa who is a self-employed business owner and coal miner.

Importantly, this theme was seemingly salient beyond the constraints of COVID-19, and rather dependent on the culture of South Africa. Additionally, some participants noted the obstacles that working women may face when attempting to break the glass ceiling. Some participants reported that seeking advancement in their careers may not seem entirely possible or may appear to be infeasible, while other women specifically highlighted how undervalued women may be within workplaces:

“Normally, when you are a female, especially in a male dominated industry, for you to get ahead, you have to act strong as if you are not a female. So my advice is that we are strong as females, we don’t have to act out like men, we have our strong capabilities, we just have to use our strengths [to] make sure that we occupy the spaces in our workplaces as efficiently as possible.” – South African mother in male dominated field; did not complete optional demographic questionnaire.

Despite the pandemic's role in heightening feelings of resilience and empowerment, many South African women also made note of the societal obstacles that contribute to their inability to advance within their careers. This theme may suggest that while leadership is desirable for some working women, the systemic barriers, racial oppression, lack of representation, and negative perception of women as professionals promulgated by South African culture may serve to further inhibit working mothers ability to pursue leadership opportunities. Thus, these results suggest the presence of these systemic barriers persisted during the development of the pandemic, and were arguably exacerbated when working mothers were faced with unexpected obstacles associated with the global impact of COVID-19 on workplaces.

Loss of Motivation to Pursue Leadership among American Mothers

Another notable theme that emerged solely amongst American mothers within the study was the reported loss of motivation for pursuing leadership roles and responsibilities.

“I would say, in that sense, like it’s [the pandemic] made me even less likely to want to […] be in charge because it’s a lot of responsibility. And the anxiety from all of this going on and trying to manage everything is a lot, and so I’m definitely more happy [in] a non-managerial role. I still, you know, want to
advance, but not be in a head leadership role by any means. It's a lot of stress especially in times like this." – 28 year old, White, married, American mother of one who works at a non-profit.

Among the ten (N = 10) American participants, 50% (N = 5) indicated that they did not want to experience the additional stress and responsibility they saw their supervisors and managers bear while working through the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, witnessing employers endure heightened pressure or work-related stress appeared to be a strong deterrent for many working women who were previously interested in pursuing leadership roles.

"I think that it has made me maybe second guess my desire to be a leader. Prior to COVID-19, I was very gung-ho towards leadership, and then watching the decision that leaders have to make and watching the challenges that they have to face...I felt prior to the pandemic, I felt really prepared to tackle what I had seen and then watching the way people reacted to leaders... in leadership, there was no right answer at that point... I sort of took a step back and sort of maybe slowed my trajectory down, I guess, and maybe realized like yeah we'll just take it one day at a time." – 39 year old White mother of three from Texas who works as a public school teacher

Themes specific to working mothers in America seemingly highlight the burnout salient to intensive mothering ideologies, which posit that working mothers must individually bear the burden of child and home labor alongside their career responsibilities. Taken together, comparison between the two cultural groups revealed that South African mothers reported increased motivation and excitement regarding work related tasks and obstacles, whereas American mothers alternatively noted decreased feelings of motivation and less interest in pursuing leadership opportunities in the workplace.

**Notable Similarities between South African and American Mothers**

Although there were important themes that were unique to either South African or American working mothers, common themes amongst both groups additionally emerged. Specifically, both South African and American working mothers indicated their desire for flexibility regarding work schedules, as well as a shared difficulty in balancing their roles as both a mother and a professional.

**Importance of Flexible Work Schedule**

A notable theme that was apparent for both the study's American and South African participants was the acknowledgment of how a flexible work schedule was beneficial to their lived experiences as a working mother. 27.78% of the participants (N = 5) identified schedule flexibility as a key component of feeling supported as a mother and employee by their employer. Of the five who identified a flexible work schedule as either desirable or beneficial to their professional and personal goals, three (N = 3) were American working mothers and two (N = 2) were South African working mothers.

“They're very supportive. They always let me take off if I need [to] take her [child] to the doctor's appointments or... as far as homeschooling, you know, they're very flexible with my schedule. As long as I
get my job done and my hours in, I can work in the middle of the night or in between appointments, whatever days of the week I need, and they also are really encouraging about moving forward." – 28 year old, White, married, American mother of one who works at a non-profit.

“But I mean you’ve got the flexibility as long as you’re either back or connecting from home once you’ve got at home….so they’ve been very supportive in allowing [me] to just juggle what [I] need to juggle. I think I’m grateful for that…I don’t know why as a society, we haven’t gotten to a place where we understand that people have personal lives outside of work and sometimes they sort of overlap and it should be okay.” – South African mother; did not complete optional demographic questionnaire.

Hence, working South African and American women value workplace flexibility, as it allows mothers the opportunity to better navigate time constraints related to the responsibilities salient to their families and careers. This theme underscores the benefits of workplaces implementing greater flexibility and compassion towards employees with children. The capacity for employers to see their employees, and in this case, working mothers, through a human first perspective appears to be not only desired but also necessary for working parents.

**Shared Difficulty Balancing Roles as Mother and Professional**

Many mothers working from home had difficulty maintaining their attention on work and parenting responsibilities. In particular, 44.44% (N = 8) of South African and American participants reported struggling to balance the roles of being a mother and an employee, experiencing parental distress as a result of attending to their visible and invisible responsibilities, and experiencing difficulties splitting their attention between work related and familial related tasks. Of those who endorsed these feelings, four (N = 4) were American mothers and four (N = 4) were South African mothers.

“It’s not always possible to 100% give my attention to my work the way I would if... I had the reassurance of knowing my children are at school during these times and I’m at the office... so split focus is happening, absolutely.” – 54 year old married multiracial mother of two from Mississippi; undisclosed career.

Additionally, mothers with younger children specifically noted their heightened distress when forced to attend to their work related responsibilities while caring for an infant or toddler.

“You’re at the office and so all your attention is there, and you know you get to do a job in peace and particularly because I had a baby during the pandemic and I also have a 10 year old. It’s, you know, it’s very hard to stay afloat with everyone in the house. Because you need to make sure that everyone is taken care of...you need to be there to help the child with all their schoolwork while you are also doing your own professional work. By also taking care of a baby - that has been like a big challenge [in] our life.” – 29 year old Black mother of two residing in South Africa; undisclosed occupation.
“I was able to work from home for a couple of months, and it was really difficult because of the age of my child. He’s a toddler … so it was really hard to balance the two. Because I’m also a single parent, I didn’t have anybody else to kind of hand them off to. So it was really hard, but we did get into a rhythm, which was really nice…It just took a while to get there.” – US mom, healthcare industry; did not complete optional demographic questionnaire.

“As a mom I think...we put a lot of pressure on ourselves. We want to be super moms. We want our kids to think that we can do everything...so advice to other moms will be: let's not put pressure on ourselves. Let's do our best, but not put pressure on ourselves and over promise...and hide the fact that we [are] also humans” – South African mother in male dominated field; did not complete optional demographic questionnaire.

Working mothers further reported difficulties with dividing their attention from work roles and personal roles while working from home, which exacerbated feelings of stress related to balancing work and home responsibilities.

“Working from home impacted my performance because my attention was so divided... I think ultimately it helped me to become a better multitasker and definitely have more patience.” – US mom, healthcare industry; did not complete optional demographic questionnaire.

Overall, it is apparent that there are notable differences explaining the unique experiences of South African and American working mothers. However, the difficulties related to navigating one's role as both a parent and professional are shared across both cultural groups.

**Discussion**

The purpose of the current study was primarily to capture the unique experiences of working mothers. Beyond this, the current study aimed to explore similarities and differences experienced by working mothers in both the United States and South Africa during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 18 participants in the study, eight participants resided in South Africa, while the remaining ten were mothers in the United States. During interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their experience, obstacles, and desired professional development opportunities or training that participants believed would best support them and their various roles.

Through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), researchers identified several themes that are both shared and unique to South African and American mothers. Specific to South African mothers, the following themes emerged among this sample: (1) increased motivation and resiliency; and (2) lack of representation of women leaders. These thematic findings align with previous research that highlight higher rates of resiliency among South African girls and women, who have been susceptible to experiencing gender based inequality and hardships spanning from South Africa's apartheid history to the systemic barriers that inform the gender differences that plague South African women (Amaechi et al., 2021; Collins, 1994; Jefferis & Theron, 2018; Spjeldnæs, 2021). Among working mothers in the United
States, the most salient theme was found to be the loss of motivation to pursue leadership. The contrasting effects of the pandemic on motivation in both cultural groups appear to allude to the prominent gender discrimination commonplace within the South African workforce culture (Mathur-Helm, 2005; Ramparsad, 2021; Sinden, 2017), as well as may be attributed to the nuances and mothering ideologies of each cultural group. Among mothers in the United States and South Africa, (1) flexible work schedules and (2) difficulty balancing roles as mothers and professionals were salient shared experiences between both cultural groups. These thematic findings are in line with other research, which has indicated that the amalgamation of work and home domains exacerbates feelings of being overwhelmed for working mothers due to the compound responsibilities of balancing employment changes and novel child-care tasks (October et al., 2021; O’Reilly & Green, 2021; Pavlov & Timbers, 2022; Power, 2020; Woine et al., 2022; Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Taken together, the results of this study suggest the need for workplaces to acknowledge the difficulties that working mothers typically face and to attend to the unique needs of their employees with children.

The thematic analysis of the current study’s interviews with working mothers in the United States and South Africa proposed many implications that relate to the lived experiences of working women, especially working mothers with ambitions to advance their careers. Notably, the results of this study portend the importance of workplace flexibility, and give rise to how workplaces may better support working parents, and specifically working mothers. Given that an emerging and shared theme among both American and South African mothers was the imperative need for workplace flexibility, the current study calls for workplaces to implement adjustable work schedules that attend to the unique needs of their employees with children. Additionally, participants who noted greater workplace flexibility or who had employers that integrated a human first approach felt more supported in their work environment. In turn, these participants were likely to feel valued and viewed their workplace more positively. Thus, the current study additionally suggests that workplaces offer supportive accommodations for working mothers that lend attention to the needs stemming from their dual responsibilities experienced in and out of the workplace.

Further, South African participants highlighted experiencing feelings of resiliency, empowerment, and motivation, despite the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research has suggested that some individuals may experience an increase in resiliency development as a result of enduring the disastrous life events (Jefferis & Theron, 2018), such as those salient to the COVID-19 crisis. For example, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Stanko et al. (2015) observed an elevated sense of resiliency following the 2005 natural disaster, such as increased helping behavior, greater feelings of preparedness in the event of a future natural disaster, and heightened positive perception of their current cities. Given the lived experiences of South African women, which often include long withstanding experiences of gender inequity, poverty, and unpaid labor (October et al., 2021), it may be the case that they were better equipped to recover from the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, given that collective mothering practices provide South African mothers with a source of resilience (Spjeldnæs, 2021), and that many households are comprised of diverse family structures in South Africa (October et al., 2021), it is possible that mothering ideologies salient to working women in South Africa mitigate the
adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic due to the ability to lean on other family and community members for caregiving support. It is also important to note that while participants did not mention the impact of racial oppression, privilege, or social class as it relates to their access to childcare or their ability to achieve occupational goals, the results of the current study indicate that South African participants of color reported higher rates of motivation to pursue career goals, despite the scarce representation of women leaders. This salient theme aligns with current research on Black mothers, as Black mothers often exhibit heightened levels of resiliency and mental strength despite how disproportionately susceptible Black mothers are to experiencing racial trauma, reproductive injustices, and institutional violence (Aniefuna et al., 2020). However, further research should continue to consider the differing motivational and well-being experiences of women across various cultural groups.

On the contrary, working mothers in the United States noted feeling decreased interest in pursuing leadership opportunities. Many American mothers attributed COVID-19 to explain the redirection of their focus from occupational goals to their families. Some of the factors that contributed to this redirection were witnessing the stress their supervisors and managers endured, as well as a newfound desire to connect with their family rather than expending additional energy and resources on their careers. Given that the intensive mothering ideologies salient to US culture foster unrealistic standards requiring women to excel as both caregivers and employees, American working mothers may experience increased feelings of stress and burnout when unable to meet such requirements (Borelli et al., 2017; Dugan and Barnes-Farrell, 2018; Lerner & Galambos, 2021; Lockwood et al., 2019). Thus, it is likely that the motivational shifts experienced by working mothers may be due to feelings of role overload exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in line with Carlson et al. (2011), who posited that working mothers may be more prone to exiting the workforce after enduring a shock that threatens their work-family balance. Therefore, these results suggest the need for workplaces to adapt to the responsibilities of their working mothers by providing resources for their varied roles, offering flexibility, and acknowledging working mothers’ needs in workplace decisions, even if working mothers have decreased motivation to be in leadership positions. Additionally, working mothers’ motivational shifts may have profound implications for workplace equity and the US economy, at large. Overwhelming data have indicated that women in executive and leadership positions have a positive impact on a company's fiscal performance and overall morale (Sandberg, 2019). Thus, this study further suggests that workplaces implement viable opportunities that promote both flexibility and career advancement for working mothers. These results highlighted the distinct needs of mothers in each cultural group, and offer actionable recommendations for employers of working mothers.

Taken together, the findings of the present study offer important understandings of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on working mothers from the United States and South Africa. Specifically, this study provided thematic findings that highlight cross-cultural similarities and differences in working mothers’ perception of leadership ambition, vocational motivation, career trajectory, and aspects of work and family life. Given the importance of women in the workforce, these findings offer valuable insight to better understanding how culturally propagated mothering ideologies and expectations may implicate working women’s career ambitions in the face of a global health crisis. Additionally, given the prominent
history of racial and gender based oppression in the United States and South Africa, the findings of the current study provide a broader understanding of how women in both countries have continued to experience heightened levels of stress due the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as shed more light on the structural systems in place that inherently inhibit the career development for working mothers. Thus, the present study identified many of the structural systems that exacerbate working mothers’ stress and perpetuate the cycle of hindering the professional development of working mothers: lack of workplace support, difficulties related to division of labor and balancing parental and professional roles, rigid work schedules and standards, and limited to no forms of mentorship or representation of women in leadership.

Limitations

Although the results of this study have produced a number of implications for working women, mothers, and parents, there are also notable limitations. Given the low sample size of the current study, it may be difficult to generalize these results to the broader population within the United States or South African regions. Though the current sample has a low sample size, similar studies investigating the effects of the pandemic through qualitative interviews have similar sample sizes (Augsjerson et al., 2021; Denford et al., 2021). Further, the researchers developed the interview questions. Given the dynamic nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the questions may not fully assess working mothers’ experiences. In particular, the questions used to assess professional development and leadership pursuits may not completely capture the wide array of hardships and experiences that working women endured during the height of the pandemic. Furthermore, interviews were conducted between October 2021 through March 2022. Considering the emergence of efficacious vaccines and the ever-changing nature of COVID-19 restrictions, it is possible that these results may not encompass the experience for working mothers during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the current study consisted of mainly cisgender women. Although researchers hoped to recruit participants who identified outside of the gender binary, the study’s current sample did not include representation of those who are gender non-binary or gender non-conforming, transgender women, or individuals who may not identify as a cisgender woman. Therefore, future research may benefit from examining the prominent experiences of those with diverse gender identities.

Though the current study is centered around exploring the experiences of South African and American mothers, the researchers did not explicitly inquire how the participants’ cultural identities (e.g., race, household income, home division of labor, and relationship status) directly correlate to their experiences related to balancing the various professional and parental roles that they assume. Future studies would benefit from including interview questions geared towards understanding the participants’ self-report of how these diversity factors not only impact the way they exist and move through the world, but additionally explore how systemic racism and gender oppression contribute to career oriented obstacles, as well as how their intersecting identities inherently influences their experience as a parent and employee. Lastly, participation in the current study required access to internet and digital technologies, and thus, the reflections offered in the current study may not be generalizable to mothers without digital
access and/or digital acuity. As such, future studies should attempt to gain a more robust understanding of how working mothers of other educational levels and socio-economic backgrounds experienced the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Future Directions**

While the current study offers important understandings of the cross-cultural similarities and differences salient to working mothers in the United States and South African, continued research is necessary. Notably, many parts of the Global South are comprised of rural women, who often have longer working hours, experience higher rates of employment, and have less access to childcare (Smith, 2007; Waterhouse et al., 2022). Thus, future research would benefit from exploring how urban and rural working mothers in South Africa were similarly and differentially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Future researchers may also benefit from further exploring the differences in experiences between working mothers globally. It may be particularly useful to assess the effectiveness of professional development training for working parents and explore whether access to additional personal development has any mediating or moderating effects on motivation to pursue leadership or advancement in their career.

Furthermore, in order to remain inclusive of gender identities and to explore the experiences of individuals who do not identify within the gender binary, it is important that future research includes participants of diverse gender identities. Additionally, given this study was conducted during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, future researchers may benefit from exploring if the themes found in this current study are lasting effects that are apparent for working mothers in the aftermath of the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as health protocols have relaxed since the emergence of vaccines. Additionally, since the COVID-19 virus may not be completely eradicated, it is also possible that school closures and mandated restrictions may continue as a measure to contain future transmission rates (Leonhardt, 2022). For this reason, it may be imperative that future researchers continue to investigate how continued school closures may have potential lasting impacts for mothers across the world. Lastly, future research may benefit from collecting data from a larger sample of working mothers in the hopes that this may increase the generalizability of the themes found. As there is more to unpack as it relates to how the global pandemic has impacted the everyday lives of working professionals and parents, it is imperative that future research continues to investigate both the immediate and long term effects of the pandemic to ensure workplaces, academia, school settings, and the broader community attend to the unique needs of working parents and mothers.

**Declarations**

**Data Availability Statement**: Interview transcripts are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards Statement**: This research was conducted in full accordance with the ethical principles outlined by the American Psychological Association and was approved by the [name}
Participants provided informed consent prior to participating in the study.
The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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**Footnotes**

1. The employment Equity Act of 1998 statues that no person may discriminate against an employee on the grounds of race, gender, pregnancy, marital status, family responsibility, ethnic or social origin, sexual orientation, age, disability status, religion, HIV status, conscience, belief, political opinion, culture, language, and/or place of birth (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

2. The Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill attempted to promote equality amongst men and women, by prohibiting discrimination based on sex and gender, and by mandating that public and private bodies implement measures to achieve fifty percent representation of women in decision-making roles (Republic of South Africa, 2013).

**Figures**
Figure 1

Joint display Venn diagram displaying overlapping and differing qualitative themes between South African and American working mothers.