Exploring Demands and Resources for Mothers in Leadership Roles

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ABSTRACT

Objective: this study investigates how mothers in leadership positions manage their motherhood and work responsibilities. The job demands-resources (JD-R) model served as the theoretical lens for the analysis. **Method:** a qualitative and exploratory study was conducted with 18 women employed in large organizations in Brazil. The data were analyzed through content analysis. **Results:** findings support key aspects of the JD-R model while also revealing additional resources and demands. Self-imposed maternal standards emerged as a personal demand, whereas workplace prejudice and discrimination and the lack of organizational support upon returning to work were identified as job demands. In contrast, remote work and flexible scheduling were essential job resources, while managerial skills and support networks were found to be important personal resources. The results also showed that the challenges of balancing motherhood and work responsibilities led some participants to forgo higher-level positions in their organizations. **Conclusions:** the study contributes to the literature by introducing new job and personal demands and resources within the context of motherhood. From a practical standpoint, the findings underscore the need for organizational policies to support working mothers, which may foster their representation in leadership roles and help mitigate workplace inequalities.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is a multifaceted phenomenon that has been reshaped by socio-cultural transformations in recent decades. The desire to participate in the labor market and the pursuit of financial independence — as well as advances in contraception — have all significantly influenced women's decisions about whether and when to become mothers (Niemistö et al., 2021; Rocha-Coutinho, 2004, 2008; Scavone, 2001).

For those who choose to be mothers, balancing their professional and maternal roles requires addressing the demands at work and at home. Within the family context, women continue to bear the main responsibility for household tasks and childcare (Craig & Mullan, 2011; Rocha-Coutinho, 2008). According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, women dedicate an average of 21.3 hours per week to caregiving and domestic chores, compared to 11.3 hours for men (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2023). In the workplace, holding a management position poses additional challenges (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Schultheiss, 2021). Therefore, reconciling these multiple roles is often fraught with difficulties (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014), requiring women to mobilize resources from both work and personal spheres.

The job demands-resources (JD-R) model provides a suitable framework for understanding the interplay between the demands and resources individuals encounter in both professional and personal contexts (Bakker et al., 2011; Chen, 2024). Originally developed to analyze workplace dynamics, the model emphasizes the dual processes of strain and engagement: job demands, or elements that require sustained physical, cognitive, or emotional effort, can lead to strain, while job resources, or factors that help mitigate demands or foster motivation, enhance engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

Recognizing that many women seek to develop their professional careers while fulfilling their roles as mothers, this study explores the demands faced by mothers who hold management positions, as well as the resources that help them balance their career and motherhood responsibilities. Specifically, we sought to understand: (1) how these women experience work and family demands; (2) what job and personal resources are mobilized to balance career and motherhood; and (3) the influence of these aspects on their career trajectories. Therefore, we conducted a qualitative and exploratory study with the participation of 18 women who are mothers of children up to 15 years old and hold leadership positions in large organizations in Brazil.

The issue of balancing motherhood and career is relevant because motherhood remains an essential element of women's identity, while a successful career may bring them personal and professional fulfillment, as well as financial independence. According to Arena et al. (2023), a significant percentage of working women have children, which also points to the importance of research on their careers. Moreover, women who are mothers and managers tend to face significantly more challenges than men and women without children (Schultheiss, 2021).

While prior research has examined the challenges faced by working mothers (Arena et al., 2023; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020), fewer studies have explored these experiences through the lens of the JD-R model, particularly among women in leadership positions. Most existing research tends to focus on general work–family conflict or on the motherhood penalty, without systematically identifying the job and personal demands and resources for mothers in managerial roles. Furthermore, although the JD-R model has been applied to the work–home interface (e.g., Bakker et al., 2011; Chen, 2024), its use in understanding the dual challenges of career progression and caregiving for this group remains limited. This study addresses this gap by integrating both job and personal dimensions within the JD-R framework to examine the lived experiences of mothers in leadership positions in Brazil.

From a practical standpoint, the findings can guide the development of organizational policies to support these professionals, which may, in turn, foster their representation in leadership roles and help mitigate workplace inequalities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework is structured into three sections. The first examines the intersection of motherhood and career, including the literature on work–family conflict. The second section focuses on the JD-R model, which serves as the theoretical lens for this research (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). The third section explores the role of leadership within the JD-R model.

The intersection of motherhood and career

Throughout the 20th century, various transformations contributed to a change in the sexual division of labor, with women occupying more public spaces (Hirata,

2

BAR, Braz. Adm. Rev., 22(4), e250021, 2025.

2015). In this new reality, women gained professional visibility but continued to carry the weight of traditional values. According to Negreiros and Féres-Carneiro (2004), there is a disparity, as women assumed new roles in the public domain while men did not effectively incorporate their roles in the private realm. Moreover, the perception that women should bear the main responsibility for childcare persists, leading to a double burden for them (Hirata, 2015; Niemistö et al., 2021; Rocha-Coutinho, 2004; Scavone, 2001). A study with Brazilian female executives showed that, even in prominent leadership positions, they remained primarily responsible for managing the home and caring for children (Carvalho et al., 2010). Similarly, research by Loureiro et al. (2012)indicates that executive women value their career trajectories but face various obstacles in balancing their roles as mothers and professionals.

Such difficulties include the experience of conflict between these two domains. According to the seminal study by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), work–family conflict occurs when roles performed in the family and work domains are mutually incompatible. Recuero and Segovia (2021) show that work–family conflict contributes to emotional exhaustion, especially among women, and highlight the importance of a gender perspective in studies on the topic. Motherhood brings new demands that intensify this conflict, both due to self-imposed standards and the lack of support in caring for their children (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010; Recuero & Segovia, 2021).

There is also evidence that, upon becoming mothers, women face prejudice and discrimination in the workplace, creating further challenges and, eventually, leading them to seek professional alternatives that harm their careers (Arena et al., 2023; Crowley, 2013; Hennekam et al., 2019; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). For example, some women leave the workforce after giving birth (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019) or move to jobs with reduced hours and lower pay that are more suitable for someone with childcare responsibilities (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020).

The expression motherhood penalty is used to describe this scenario in which mothers receive lower wages compared to men and women without children or have their careers negatively impacted (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019). In Brazil, according to Guiginski and Wajnman, (2019, p. 1), "the presence of children, especially preschool-aged children, significantly affects women's participation in the labor market, de-creasing the probability of participation and increasing the likelihood of precarious work, part-time jobs, and self-employment."

To reduce the burden of household and childcare demands, women often rely on personal support networks, consisting of close relatives and household or childcare professional services, such as nannies, maids, daycare centers, and schools (Rocha-Coutinho, 2004). The father or partner is another important ally for women, as shown by studies conducted in Germany (Bröckel, 2018) and Brazil (Martins et al., 2019).

Regarding the role of organizations in balancing motherhood and career, evidence suggests that the support of immediate supervisors is important, as well as flexible work schedules, family-friendly policies, and a more inclusive organizational culture (Anderson et al., 2002; Byron, 2005; Ladge et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2010; Michaelides et al., 2023; Premeaux et al., 2007). In the job demands-resources model, which is discussed next, such initiatives can be interpreted as job resources.

The job demands-resources model

The job demands-resources (JD-R) model was proposed by Demerouti et al. (2001) to identify potential antecedents of burnout. According to the authors, working conditions can be categorized as either job demands or job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands are defined as "the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical, cognitive, and/or emotional effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs." Job resources, on the other hand, are "the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that have motivating potential, that are functional in achieving work goals, that regulate the impact of job demands, and that stimulate learning and personal growth" (Bakker et al., 2023, p. 32).

The seminal research by Demerouti et al. (2001) included five job demands: physical workload, time pressure, service recipient contact, shift work, and the physical environment. In contrast, the six resources they proposed were constructive performance feedback, rewards, job control, participation in decision making, job security, and supervisor support.

Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) developed an expansion of the JD-R model, arguing that the original model disregarded the role of individual agency. Therefore, the authors proposed the addition of personal resources, associated with the individual's perception of their ability to control and influence their

environment. As such, personal resources provide the energy and motivation that enable individuals to navigate work-related challenges and responsibilities. In their study, three personal resources were considered: self-efficacy, optimism, and organization-based self-esteem (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

Following this original research, other personal resources have been proposed, including resilience (Bakker et al., 2023), proactivity/proactive behavior, reflexivity/reflective behavior (Contreras et al., 2020; Mastenbroek et al., 2014), assertiveness (Contreras et al., 2020), locus of control, and self-esteem (Limmer & Schütz, 2021). Specifically regarding mothers in leadership roles, research has shown that psychological capital — comprising hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism — functions as a personal resource that helps them cope more effectively with work–family

conflict and maintain engagement in their careers (Machín-Rincón et al., 2020).

Another addition to the JD-R model refers to personal demands, defined as "requirements that individuals establish for their own performance and behavior that force them to invest effort in their work and are, therefore, associated with physical and psychological costs" (Barbier et al., 2013, p. 751). In other words, besides environmental pressures, workers can also be affected by self-imposed standards. Performance expectations, workaholism, and perfectionism are personal demands proposed in the literature (Barbier et al., 2013; Guglielmi et al., 2012; Prieto et al., 2008). Table 1 summarizes important components of the JD-R model, including both foundational elements and subsequent additions relevant to this study.

Table 1. Dimensions and constructs of the JD-R model.

Dimension	Constructs	References
Job demands	Physical workload; time pressure; recipient contact; physical environment; shift work.	Demerouti et al. (2001) (seminal article)
	Work overload; emotional demands; cognitive demands.	Bakker et al. (2011)
	Customer interaction; physical work demands.	Chen (2024)
Job resources	Feedback; rewards; job control; participation; job security; supervisor support.	Demerouti et al. (2001) (seminal article)
	Job autonomy; opportunity to learn and to develop; performance feedback; supervisory coaching; participation in decision-making.	Bakker et al. (2011)
	Positive work atmosphere, work support.	Chen (2024)
Personal resources	Self-efficacy; optimism; organizational-based self-esteem.	Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) (seminal article)
	Self-efficacy; optimism; self-esteem; resilience.	Bakker and Demerouti (2008)
	Self-efficacy; proactive behavior; reflective behavior.	Mastenbroek et al. (2014)
	Self-efficacy; proactive behavior; reflective behavior; optimism; assertiveness.	Contreras et al. (2020)
	Locus of control; self-esteem.	Limmer and Schütz (2021)
Personal demands	Perfectionism.	Prieto et al. (2008)
	Workaholism.	Guglielmi et al. (2012)
	Performance expectations.	Barbier et al. (2013)

Note. Elaborated by the authors.

The JD-R model has been employed in studies exploring the work–family dynamic (Bakker et al., 2011; Chen, 2024) and, in a similar vein, served as the theoretical framework for this research, which aims to enhance our understanding of the interplay between job and personal demands and resources faced by women who are mothers and leaders. Building on this framework, it is also important to examine how leadership itself is positioned within the JD-R model, both in terms of how leaders influence their followers and

how occupying a leadership role may entail specific demands.

Leadership within the JD-R model

In the JD-R model, leadership is mostly conceptualized as an important element of the work environment that can either be a job resource or a job demand, playing a crucial role in subordinates' work engagement and burnout (Pletzer et al., 2024; Tummers & Bakker, 2021). In their seminal article, Demerouti et al. (2001) found that supervisor support functioned as a job resource.

4

BAR, Braz. Adm. Rev., 22(4), e250021, 2025.

Since then, supportive leadership behaviors — such as transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership — have typically been classified as job resources, as they foster employee motivation, engagement, and well-being. Conversely, destructive or abusive leadership is understood as a job demand, contributing to strain, emotional exhaustion, and other negative outcomes (Byrne et al., 2014; Pletzer et al., 2024; Schaufeli, 2015; Tummers & Bakker, 2021).

In their review of the literature, Tummers and Bakker (2021) show that leadership operates within the JD-R framework in two ways: by directly shaping job demands and resources, and by moderating the impact of these factors on employee well-being. From this standpoint, leadership is positioned primarily as an external condition, that is, as something experienced by employees rather than a characteristic of the leadership role itself. Such a perspective, however, seems to overlook the psychological costs and pressures associated with being a leader.

In this regard, evidence suggests that individuals in leadership roles face significant challenges, such as high performance expectations or pressure to perform, conflicting demands, people management challenges, and complex decision-making tasks (Lundqvist et al., 2012). In addition, managers are often required to engage in emotional labor, displaying confidence, composure, and motivation regardless of their internal state (Humphrey, 2012). These responsibilities require sustained cognitive and emotional effort and may therefore be conceptualized as job demands within the JD-R framework — an approach adopted in the present study.

METHOD

A qualitative and exploratory approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' perceptions and experiences (Goldenberg, 2011). In line with the study's objectives, we defined the participant profile as women with children under 15 years of age who hold leadership positions in large organizations in Brazil. The age range for the children was chosen because it represents a period of significant dependency and, consequently, the greatest demands on mothers. Additionally, we focused on women in leadership roles, recognizing that these positions often entail greater demands.

Lastly, large companies were selected not only due to their greater likelihood of providing formal resources to employees but also because they typically place more complex and intensive demands on those in managerial roles (Anderson et al., 2002; Byrne et al., 2014; Gold & Thorpe, 2010), thereby enriching our analysis.

Data collection

The call for interviews was shared through the authors' LinkedIn profiles and personal networks. A LinkedIn post introduced one of the authors — who later conducted the interviews — and outlined the research topic, accompanied by a form for prospective participants to complete. The same form was also shared within the authors' personal networks. It gathered demographic information (name, contact number, number and ages of children) and organizational information (company size, measured by number of employees). Respondents were informed that all data would be treated confidentially and that both their identities and the names of their organizations would remain undisclosed to ensure anonymity. After receiving the completed forms, initial contact was made to confirm whether the individual fit the defined profile. In such cases, interview appointments were scheduled. Participants were also asked to suggest other women who met the desired profile, a technique known as snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted remotely. All sessions were recorded with the participants' permission and fully transcribed. They had an average duration of 50 minutes, ranging from 28 to 90 minutes. The interview protocol was organized into two main sections. The first section explored participants' professional trajectories and their experiences with motherhood, with particular attention to how maternity intersected with their careers. The second section addressed the challenges these women face in reconciling maternity and career, as well as the strategies and resources mobilized to navigate and integrate these dual roles as mothers and professionals. The research received approval from the ethics committee of the authors' institution under protocol number 225/2022.

The study included 18 managers aged 36 to 49 years, employed in large private, public, and mixed-economy companies across various sectors, including aviation, consulting, education, energy, manufacturing, logistics, oil and gas, insurance, technology, telecommunications, and retail. Table 2 presents an overview of the participants' profiles. To ensure confidentiality, participants are identified by sequential numbers, which are referenced throughout the results section.

Table 2. Participants' profile.

No.	Age	Type of company	Industry / Sector	Position / Area of activity	Number of children	Children's age (years)	Has a partner?	Tenure as manager (years)
E1	48	Private	Manufacturing	Accounting	2	7 and 10	Yes	12
E2	43	Public	Energy	Executive manager	2	12 and 13	Yes	1.2
E3	37	Mixed	Oil and gas	Planning and project	2	1 and 5	Yes	1
E4	38	Private	Retail	Corporate communication	2	1 and 4	Yes	1.5
E5	36	Private	Oil and gas	Equipment and materials	2	1 and 7	Yes	4
E6	42	Private	Insurance	Sales	1	5	No	10
E7	38	Private	Aviation	Sustainability	1	6	No	4
E8	37	Mixed	Oil and gas	Process automation	2	1 and 4	Yes	4
E9	39	Private	Technology	Business controls	1	3	Yes	1
E10	36	Private	Technology	Operations	2	2 and 15	Yes	1
E11	49	Private	Telecommunications	Accounting	2	11 and 15	Yes	6
E12	41	Private	Consulting	Sales	2	2 and 7	Yes	1
E13	40	Mixed	Energy	IT governance	1	4	Yes	11
E14	45	Private	Retail	Market intelligence	2	9 and 9	Yes	10.5
E15	47	Private	Technology	Operations	2	5 and 11	Yes	11
E16	40	Private	Education	Education solutions	1	5	Yes	2
E17	37	Private	Logistics	Corporate communication	1	6	Yes	1.3
E18	41	Private	Consulting	Finance	2	7 and 9	Yes	1.5

Note. Elaborated by the authors.

Data analysis

Content analysis was chosen to analyze the data (Bardin, 2011; Schreier, 2014), supported by the software Atlas.ti. We began with a preliminary reading of the interview transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the collected material. Subsequently, we categorized and interpreted the text segments through a process that integrated both deductive and inductive approaches.

A priori categories and subcategories were defined based on the core constructs of the JD-R model and the specific objectives of the study. These predefined categories included: job demands, personal demands, job resources, and personal resources. Within each of these, both expected and emergent subcategories were identified.

Two other categories — challenges and experiences and personal support networks — were also part of the analysis. The former was defined a priori and subdivided into challenges related to motherhood and those related to work, reflecting our aim to capture participants' experiences in managing work and family demands. The personal support networks category emerged from the data as an important resource for these working mothers. The complete set of categories is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Analytical categories.

Categories	Subcategories
Challenges and experiences	Challenges and experiences related to motherhood Workplace challenges and experiences
Job demands	Work overload Pressure for results Managerial responsibilities (*) Maternal workplace prejudice and discrimination (*) Lack of organizational support for maternal reintegration (*)
Personal demands	Motherhood demands (*) Self-imposed maternal standards (*)
Job resources	Job control Family supportive supervisor behaviors (*) Remote work Flexible work schedule
Personal resources	Self-efficacy Optimism Resilience Managerial skills (*)
Personal support network	Family support: spouse, parents, in-laws, and other relatives Service providers: nannies and housekeepers, daycare and schools Psychological support

Note. (*) Emergent subcategories. Elaborated by the authors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first section discusses the participants' experiences as mothers and professionals and how motherhood has influenced their careers. The second addresses their job and personal demands. The final two sections focus, respectively, on the job and personal resources employed by the participants.

Motherhood and career trajectories

For some participants, motherhood represents a significant personal achievement and encompasses a wide range of emotions — happiness, love, and pride in being a mother — that align with the traditional social role expected of women (Hirata, 2015; Rocha-Coutinho, 2004).

It was something I always imagined, right? I always imagined myself as a mother, that at some point I would get married and become a mother. (E11).

I love being a mother. I love it, although I regret a little that, in the hustle and bustle of daily life, we can't give as much attention as our hearts wish to our children. (E12).

However, for other women, motherhood was either a difficult choice — due to the perceived challenges of juggling several personal interests — or a struggle, especially in the child's early years.

It took me a long time to want to be a mother... I was always very attached, not only to my professional life but also to my freedom... A great concern was about how I would balance motherhood with all my other life interests. (E14).

Nowadays, I try to have a lighter approach to motherhood. I don't want it to become a burden in my life, because it is not. But I didn't know how to deal with that love, so I couldn't manage it. (E9).

Some participants also revealed that they should not be solely defined by their role as mothers and that motherhood and career can complement and reinforce each other — a point also raised by Loureiro et al. (2012).

I'm thrilled. I have a life out there. I'm not just a mother. Because I highly value this other side, my other professional and personal self that goes beyond motherhood. (M13)

My children drive me to always want to do more, right? To evolve, to give them a better life. (E15)

On the other hand, the perceived need to prioritize their children led some of them to make decisions that negatively affected their professional advancement, pointing to the motherhood penalty and its impact on their careers (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020; Guiginski & Wajnman, 2019; Hennekam et al., 2019; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019).

It was a very heavy decision I had to make because it was a 23-year career that I had to put aside ... When the proposal to go to São Paulo came, I had to put my family first and put my career on hold. (E1)

I made stops in my career trajectory to be able to dedicate myself to motherhood, during a time when the children needed me, right? I really had an expectation, a desire to become a manager, but I knew that when they were small, I needed to dedicate myself to them as well. (E2)

Shortly before I left the position, I realized that the cost was too high for me, you know? The cost of leaving my son, leaving my husband, to work 12 hours, 14 hours, sometimes even working weekends. (E3)

I returned to a company to earn less than I was earning, but to be close to my son, so that I could be there for him if anything happened. (E11)

Motherhood delayed my career development, and yes, it delayed it, and that's okay because my son is worth much more to me than my career. (E15)

Finally, some participants are seeking work alternatives due to a lack of balance and the belief that, while work is important, it is not everything.

My life goal today is balance, right, which is something very difficult to achieve. But I understand that it is my life goal. (E3)

The environment in the institutions in this sector is bad. It took me 12 years to figure that out ... So my focus is to find a job more aligned with these values of quality of life, of balancing my professional and personal life. (E16)

In summary, the participants' accounts reveal that motherhood shapes career trajectories in different ways. For some women, it was experienced as a source of meaning and complementary to their professional lives, whereas for others it involved difficult trade-offs, career interruptions, and even decisions to forgo advancement opportunities. These findings underscore the persistence of the motherhood penalty and highlight how dual responsibilities at work and at home generate tensions that influence career choices and outcomes, in line with the literature (Arena et al., 2023; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019). By contrast, Domínguez-Soto et al. (2025) found motherhood to be a key driver in the career growth of a group of Spanish female executives, a result that was not echoed in our findings. The narratives also point to the agency of these women in redefining priorities and seeking balance, providing a background for understanding the specific job and personal demands they face, as well as the resources mobilized to navigate these dual roles.

Job and personal demands

The participants reported experiencing intense job demands, such as a heavy workload and pressure for results, which are consistent with previous findings (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). They also emphasized demands inherent to their role as leaders — such as dedicating time to subordinates and handling tasks associated with the position — which, in line with the JD-R framework, can be conceptualized as job demands (Schaufeli, 2015; Tummers & Bakker, 2021).

I think it's a big demand. Like, being attentive to people, connecting with them to have a closer relationship. That was a big complaint regarding the previous management, that the whole management team was very distant. (E2)

We have to deal with crisis all the time. … A store gets robbed, a roof collapses, or instead of a computer, a brick is delivered to a customer's house. All kinds of crisis you can imagine …, and we have to manage them. (E4)

The pressure has been very excessive lately. (E8)

In addition, the participants also need to manage motherhood demands, which often lead them to experience work–family conflict (Byron, 2005; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Recuero & Segovia, 2021).

If you dedicate too much to one thing, you can be sure you're failing at another point, you know? No one is Wonder Woman; you can't be a 10 in all areas, you know? No, you can't. So, some area will falter, and then there's a lot of therapy. (E4)

It's very heavy. And trying to handle things in a lighter way, right? I try, but many times I'm overwhelmed by the stress of daily life, and I find that awful, horrible, because it's not who I am. (E8)

I think motherhood, especially with the first child, you think, where did I end up, I don't sleep, I work like crazy, this is inhumane, right? And how will I survive this? (E12)

For some, this experience of conflict seems to be exacerbated by a personal demand that emerged from the analysis — self-imposed maternal standards — associated with the perception that they have to be perfect and assume the primary responsibility for their children's care (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018; Rocha-Coutinho, 2004).

I brought two children into the world. Now I have this challenge, I need to raise them, I need to do it in the best way. I need to be the mother I have to be. (E14)

So you go through this guilt, right? Like, I left my daughter in someone else's care because I'm here working late. (E15)

I say that, after she was born, my agenda was never mine again, it was hers, you know? So, the CEO is not the CEO of the company, the CEO of my life is her… My focus is to offer her a quality education and my presence because there is no point in me giving her everything she needs and not having a connection with her. (E16)

Maternal workplace prejudice and discrimination, or maternity bias, emerged as a recurring theme during the interviews. According to Arena et al. (2023, p. 82), maternity bias refers to "mistreatment, stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination that working mothers endure while at work." The participants reported contending with the belief that motherhood negatively affects their job performance, stemming from the biased perception that their responsibilities as mothers hinder their ability to fully dedicate themselves to work (Arena et al., 2023; Crowley, 2013; Hennekam et

al., 2019; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). This discrimination arose from colleagues, subordinates, and immediate superiors.

> She [immediate superior] was a single woman who didn't want children. So I don't know if she saw favorably women who had kids... She took a long time to give me those promotions. (E4)

> When I said I was pregnant, my supervisor swore. He said that and I left the room crying, feeling guilty, thinking, why did I get pregnant now? (E16)

> I sat next to a colleague, a friend, someone whose work I admire, but who said to me, 'I think women with children are less productive.' (E15)

Within the JD-R framework, we conceptualize maternal workplace prejudice and discrimination as a job demand, recognizing its propensity to create stress and entail psychological effort. According to Ridgeway and Correll (2004, p. 697), motherhood tends to "lower people's expectations for a mother's competence on the job, reduce her perceived suitability for positions of authority, and raise the standards she must meet to prove ability in the workplace."

At the same time, some women experienced prejudice due to decisions that were interpreted as not prioritizing their children, in line with traditional views of motherhood (Hirata, 2015; Rocha-Coutinho, 2004).

> When I tell people that I was selected for this role while on maternity leave, it's shocking for many... They say things like, 'You chose to take on a management role with a baby and another child?' And other people, on the contrary, say, 'What a crazy company, selecting someone who's on maternity leave.' I mean, this is prejudice, right? (E3)

> You have a four-year-old daughter, and you're here for six weeks? Why? It was an extremely unequal program in terms of diversity. There were eight men and four women, and of the four women, I was the only one with a child ... I was known as the mom who left her daughter in Brazil for six weeks, you know? ... While the dads there, who also had children, no one asked them who was watching their kid, because it's obvious that the mother is. (E6)

The analysis further revealed the lack of organizational support during the period ranging from mater-

nity leave to the return to work, including having only four months of maternity leave (instead of six), inadequate structures for breastfeeding, and insufficient career support upon returning to work.

> It's very difficult to leave your little baby at home ... because here we only have the right to four months of maternity leave, plus one month of vacation. ... Your baby is still exclusively breastfeeding. You don't want any nipple confusion; you don't want to give a bottle — it's chaos. So, for the new mother, you need strong support, but I know it will take a while to change, mainly because our management is mostly men. (E4)

> When I came back from maternity leave, it was that period where you're in the freezer, you almost have to start over... It's like my whole past was forgotten. (E13)

> Returning from maternity leave was very tumultuous for me. The experience was bad because I came back, and there was no team for me. (E15)

Regarding breastfeeding, some participants mentioned the lack of a suitable physical space for pumping milk or the possibility of breastfeeding while at work.

> With my second daughter, for example, I had no place to pump milk during the day, so there are some policies that the company really needs to advance. I think society as a whole needs to advance a lot. (E4)

> I already did a project here, called 'women's room.' A room, because when I had to pump, I did it in the bathroom... The bathroom is not a place for pumping milk, especially a bathroom that other people use. (E5)

We conceptualize this lack of support for mothers as a job demand. It encompasses the absence of breastfeeding facilities, limited maternity leave time, and insufficient support for their reintegration process. In this sense, implementing HR policies that specifically address these needs is crucial for helping mothers continue their journeys as both caregivers and professionals.

Taken together, the analysis shows that participants are exposed to a range of job demands, spanning from those well-documented in the literature,

such as heavy workload and pressure for results (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001), to additional demands that extend the JD-R framework. Specifically, our study highlights managerial responsibilities as leadership-related job demands (Schaufeli, 2015; Tummers & Bakker, 2021), the weight of self-imposed maternal standards (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018; Rocha-Coutinho, 2004), maternal workplace prejudice and discrimination, and insufficient organizational support for maternal reintegration (Arena et al., 2023; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Framing these elements as job demands, our findings expand the JD-R model and offer a more nuanced understanding of how the intersection of managerial and motherhood roles generates unique stressors that impact women's career trajectories.

Job resources

Throughout the interviews, we identified some job resources that facilitate the reconciliation of the participants' roles as mothers and professionals. Job control and supervisor support emerged as crucial elements, in line with the JD-R model (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001). Notably, job control proved to be related to the leadership positions these women hold, which is further strengthened by the supportive style of some direct supervisors. In this sense, and in line with the literature, we propose that family-supportive supervisor behaviors are an important job resource for working mothers. Evidence shows that such support helps not only to reduce work–family conflict but also to promote job satisfaction, engagement, and retention (Komlenac et al., 2022; Ladge et al., 2018; Premeaux et al., 2007).

> He's super calm, really calm, he supports me … Sometimes my child shows up while I'm in a meeting with him, and he hears the child's voice, you know? He says: 'go, take care of your kid, we'll finish this tomorrow.' (E10)

> I think in any company, it will always depend on your immediate supervisor… Even if sometimes companies have certain rules, certain policies and such, the one-on-one relationship between you and your supervisor is much stronger. (E17)

> Remote work also emerged from the analysis. Of the 15 companies that were part of the research, 12 adopted a hybrid or fully remote model after the COVID-19 pandemic. While the literature shows both positive and negative consequences of remote work

for working mothers (Aguiar et al., 2022; Ollo-López et al., 2020; Villamor et al., 2023), most of the participants in this research pointed to it as a crucial element for reconciling the demands of motherhood and career.

> With the pandemic, we proved that we could get things done from home … And that was very cool… You have the ability to manage the entire department while working from home, taking care of the kids. The service has improved. (E1)

> Now with remote work, it's wonderful because I stop, I go breastfeed my daughter and come back. And at lunch, I go back and breastfeed her again, see my daughter, see my son, and at the same time I'm here producing, I'm working. (E3)

> So I can work, even if it's crazy, but I'm here, having lunch with them. (E14)

Flexible work schedules — allowing workers to step away during the day and complete tasks outside regular hours — were identified by participants as another valuable resource. This finding supports Anderson et al. (2002), who argue that schedule flexibility plays a key role in reducing work–family conflict.

> I never had any problems, you know? Needing to leave and arrive later, or leave early, or leave and come back. That, thank God, I always had. (E11)

> The work model has always been very flexible. There's no rigid schedule, right? I can make my own schedule, so this allows me to take my child to the doctor at 2 p.m. if I want or go to the dentist at 3 p.m. if I want, and no one will hold me accountable for it. (E12)

To balance their dual responsibilities at work and home, some women establish routines that involve working outside regular business hours. Specifically, they eventually take breaks during the day to address their children's needs and compensate for this time by working early in the morning or late at night, after putting their children to bed. While this off-hours work practice enables them to manage these competing demands, it may also have adverse consequences, as it requires additional working hours during unconventional times, potentially affecting their well-being and productivity (Niemistö et al., 2021).

When I need to solve an issue, I start working at 5 a.m. because then I can manage my day, right? Stop to give breakfast to my child and continue working. (E3)

Several times I work until, I don't know what time. Or I stop at 7 p.m., 7:30 p.m., stay with the kids until 9 p.m., and then I go back, you know? (E12)

In line with these findings, the study by Michaelides et al. (2023, p. 10) with Swedish mothers shows flexibility as a valued job resource. As the authors note, "all mothers talked about how important it was to be able to work from home or to vary their hours depending on demands from the home domain." Yet, because such flexibility is often based on informal arrangements, it tends to be uneven, uncertain, and contingent on personal negotiations. This highlights the importance of embedding flexibility within HR practices to ensure that it functions as a reliable resource.

Personal resources

According to the JD-R model, personal resources play a critical role in enabling employees to effectively cope with job demands (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). In our analysis, and in line with the literature, self-efficacy and optimism emerged as key personal resources (Bakker et al., 2023; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), aiding participants in reconciling personal and professional demands. These resources foster the perception that they can influence their environment and deal with the challenges they encounter.

They say I have a 'Buddha button' because the world is ending, and I'm there: let's go, calm down, we'll solve it. (E1)

I don't think life is all wonderful; we go through some things that are difficult, of course. But I try to handle it, what can I do about this difficulty? Is it within my control? No. So let's do the best we can. If it's within my control, let's solve this difficulty, you know? (E6)

I'm not afraid. Of course, I have concerns, but I'm not afraid to face whatever comes my way, right? So, I see life in a very positive way. You know, I even try to see problems as learning opportunities. (E7)

My work is very aligned with what I value, and I really believe in what we do, and I feel genuinely happy with what we achieve within the company. (E2)

I've been with the company for 10 years. During these 10 years, I've been promoted three times, right? So, I think it's a recognition. I think it's recognition of your work, of your competence. (E11)

Resilience was another personal resource highlighted by the participants, also in accordance with the literature (Bakker et al., 2023).

First, you have to have very strong emotional intelligence to deal with the challenges of managerial demands. And also with the challenges and routines at home. Because it's very tough, so I think you have to have great adaptability, great resilience. (E8)

I'm not a person who's scared of problems. My profile is to fight. My resilience, I had to discover it … So, I went through 10 interviews before getting promoted again. (E15)

Finally, it became evident that these professionals developed a set of managerial skills that help them in their daily lives, which we propose is another important personal resource. These skills include the ability to organize their routines and activities, to prioritize tasks and projects, as well as to delegate and 'say no.' Together, these skills enable them to manage demands effectively without harming their physical and mental health or their time with family. In a study with school principals, Prieto et al. (2008) also found evidence that mental and cognitive competencies are personal resources that influence burnout and engagement.

We have to take a stand. We own this life; our life belongs to us, not to the company, not to my boss, you know? So, I think there's a role for women to turn around and say, no, no. Today I can't make it at this time, I'll be with my child. (E3)

In the past, I thought I had to deliver everything, and I would give my blood for the company. I would get stressed when I couldn't deliver. I used to push myself too much, and motherhood helped me draw boundaries… I learned to say no, and second, I learned to handle urgencies … And planning. We need to plan. (E4)

It's a lot about holding your ground and not giving in, because sometimes it's easier to give in and work until midnight. (E14)

For a long time, I was doing everything by myself, and I learned to work as a team. I need people. If I don't have my little helpers there to assist me and for us to help each other, I won't make it. (E4)

The team also helps, right? I try to delegate … when it's a challenge I can involve the team in, I share it with them and try to coordinate. (E8)

Finally, the personal support network emerged as an essential element in reducing domestic demands, in line with the literature (Niemistö et al., 2021; Rocha-Coutinho, 2004). All participants reported having some form of support, including family members (spouse, parents, in-laws, and other close relatives), service providers such as nannies, housekeepers, schools, daycare centers, and psychological support.

I had people in my house every day, from Monday to Monday. I had a housekeeper and a nanny during the week, I had my mother giving support. I had someone on the weekend to help me, because … I was exhausted on weekends. (E2)

My ex-husband's mother helps me a lot. (E7)

I have a 100% partner husband, he's very evolved in this matter of participation … So, I had this privilege as well. (E15)

My husband is also a very active father. He has a much calmer work rhythm, so we share a lot of responsibilities. (E14)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study examined how mothers in leadership positions manage their motherhood and work responsibilities, considering both the demands they face and the resources mobilized to mitigate them. Within the JD-R framework, the research makes a significant contribution by identifying specific demands and resources relevant to the unique experiences of women who have to deal with family and management responsibilities.

The participants' accounts revealed that they face significant demands in the domestic sphere, which seem to be intensified by self-imposed maternal standards, consistent with the social norm that women should be the primary caregivers (Hirata, 2015; Rocha-Coutinho, 2004; Scavone, 2001). In the professional sphere, demands include a heavy workload, pressure for results, and other demands related to their management role. In this regard, our findings add to the JD-R framework by providing further evidence that leadership itself can be a job demand, which we refer to as managerial responsibilities, as occupying a managerial position requires additional time, emotional investment, and responsibility for others (Tummers & Bakker, 2021).

Moreover, our research unveiled that these women face maternal workplace prejudice and discrimination — from colleagues, subordinates, and immediate superiors — and a lack of organizational support for maternal reintegration. Some participants experienced difficult and embarrassing situations, both when announcing their pregnancy and upon returning to work after maternity leave. In the latter case, besides the lack of appropriate breastfeeding infrastructure, some found themselves without career prospects and devoid of their previous responsibilities.

This is an important contribution to the JD-R literature within the context of motherhood, with relevant practical implications. Our results showed the lack of organizational practices aimed at addressing the needs of working women who become mothers, an issue that is intensified by a wide range of biases against them. Therefore, our findings suggest that organizations could develop strategies to embrace motherhood, promoting a more inclusive culture at all hierarchical levels, including awareness and training on maternity bias, leadership training to foster family-supportive supervisor behaviors, and a range of family-friendly organizational practices, especially breastfeeding and childcare facilities.

To cope with these demands, participants rely on job and personal resources. In terms of job resources, job control and supervisor support are important, consistent with the JD-R model (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001). Additionally, two other job resources emerged as crucial for participants: remote work and flexible work schedules. Regarding personal resources, self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience appear to be important, also in line with the literature (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001). Furthermore, the study pointed to the importance of a set of managerial skills, as well as a personal support network composed of family members and service providers.

Finally, our research revealed that, due to the challenges of reconciling motherhood and work responsibilities, many chose to forgo higher positions within the hierarchy of their organizations. This suggests that, although motherhood is a significant social phenomenon, it is still superficially addressed in organizations. The absence of clear policies to support mothers hinders their advancement into leadership positions and limits their representation in such roles. This process seems to create a vicious cycle in which women are hired, advance in their careers, become mothers, and, despite being well-prepared, choose not to advance their careers. Given the lack of female representation in leadership roles, policies that support women fail to become a priority, thereby perpetuating the status quo.

Among the limitations of our study, it is noteworthy that the participants were selected from the authors' personal networks, although expanded by the snowball technique. The relatively small number of women interviewed is also a limitation, particularly considering the diversity of career trajectories that may exist beyond those captured in the study. The cross-sectional design, based on single interviews, does not allow for capturing changes in perceptions and strategies over time, which could be particularly relevant in the case of motherhood, as demands and resources evolve across different phases of children's development. As with most qualitative studies, there is also the possibility of social desirability bias, since participants may have emphasized certain experiences or minimized others to present themselves in a more socially acceptable manner.

The women who participated in this research are, to some extent, successful, as they have managed to balance the multiple demands of work and home. In other words, they became mothers while also reaching leadership positions in their organizations. In this regard, a suggestion for future studies would be to conduct research with women who gave up on advancing their careers due to motherhood or who chose not to have children to avoid jeopardizing their professional trajectory. Moreover, we recommend future quantitative research with larger samples to examine aspects that emerged from the analysis, including remote work, flexible work schedules, managerial skills, self-imposed maternal standards, maternal workplace prejudice and discrimination, and lack of organizational support for maternal reintegration.

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15