
NAVIGATE PSYCHO-SOCIAL CHALLENGES FACING EMPLOYED WOMEN WITH UNDER TWO YEARS OLD CHILDREN IN PERFORMING GENDER ROLES

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Article Received: 17 November 2025

Article Revised: 07 December 2025

Published on: 27 December 2025

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.7123>

1.0 ABSTRACT

The study identified psycho-social challenges facing employed women with under two years old children in performing both reproductive roles and productive roles through a cross sectional research design, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from 60 respondents using interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and questionnaires. Analysis of qualitative data was done using a Likert Scale to assess psychosocial incidences, whereas quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical packages for Social Science) to establish frequencies and percentages. Overall, study findings revealed the existence of both psychosocial challenges facing employed women with under two years old children, including lack of concentration at workplace, child sickness, lack of time to rest, stress, lack of support from the employer and poor work performance, inability to practice exclusive breast-feeding, pressure from in-laws regarding child feeding and low incomes. Further, study findings revealed that employed women use different coping strategies such as changing their home and family arrangements, appealing for support from their close relatives as well as seeking support from their husbands.

2.0 KEYWORDS: Psychosocial, Gender roles, breast feeding, child care givers, and gender equality.

3.0 INTRODUCTION

Globally, developed and developing countries were mainly involved in agricultural activities, most of which were done by men and women near their homesteads. With the industrial

revolution, work slowly started to move outside the home environment. Initially, men and women (as well as children) worked in factories, but women gradually withdrew as part of the struggle for a “family wage” and belief that women should not work far from their homesteads due to their reproductive roles (Allen, 2015). During that time, most men became the main income earners or “breadwinners”, while women concentrated on providing care and support to dependents (children and old persons) and also looking after their homes. This gender division of labor enabled men to work for long hours, as well as become available for overtime; during that time men were rarely absent (Neufeind & Reilly, 2018).

Sub Saharan African (SSA) countries, parenting life styles largely depend on economic status, types of activities and income of the parents, which in turn affect caring of the children (UNICEF, 2014). In most Sub Saharan Africa countries, employed women perform multiple tasks/activities, both in their homesteads and at work . Likewise, the distribution of traditional gender roles among men and women are unbalanced because of gender differences in duties and responsibilities of caring children (Barnett, 2014). In East Africa, 54% of parents, both mothers and fathers work full time in their jobs. However at family level, working women tend to do more than their male counterpart in terms of taking care of children especially those below five years old, because in addition to that they are also expected to take care of other family members including the old and sick (UNICEF, 2016).

At national level, in Tanzania many people live in Dar es Salaam region which is one of the busiest and overcrowded places in the country, and most of public and private offices are located in Ilala city (Smith, 2017). It is reported that among the challenges facing people working in such overcrowded or populated cities include: returning home late due to traffic jams, incurring extra transport costs due to traffic jams, emotional stress, as well as physical and psychological torture (UNDP, 2018; WHO, 2019). However the ongoing changes in political, economic and social aspects of facilitating development in the country have a negative impact on child caring due to the fact that child caring, especially of under two years old children, is perceived to be the responsibility of the mother and father is just an assistant due to the existence of a patriarchy system (Kalumanga et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2015). However such circumstances create unnecessary difficulties to employed women who have multiple burdens of caring for their under two year's old children while also working in Ilala city.

4.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, where a study involved the use of descriptive research method which is generally carried out through cross sectional research design . The study used qualitative data collection methods. A total of sixty (60) respondents were involved in the study, including 40 employed women with under two years old children and 20 officials from the organizations. The study used a Purposive and simple random Sampling approach to select participants. Data was collected using key informant interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaire, documentary reviews and in-depth interviews. Based on the objective, this study used a thematic data analysis method where data was presented thematically and quantitative data were analysed by Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS)

5.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondents were asked to mention psycho-social challenges experienced in caring for their under two years old children while working in the formal sector. First, respondents were asked to list the psychosocial challenges and second, to indicate severity of those psychosocial challenges. The findings are summarized in table 4.8

Table 5.1 : Experienced Psycho-Social Challenges in Terms of Providing Care to Under Two Years Old Children n =40

Challenge	Yes		No		Total n	%
	N	%	N	%		
Lack of concentration at work	34	85	6	15	40	100
Child sickness	31	77.5	9	22.5	40	100
Lack of time to rest	30	75	10	25	40	100
Stress	27	67.5	13	32.5	40	100
Lack of support from the employer	26	65	14	35	40	100
Poor work performance	23	57.5	17	42.5	40	100
Decreased bond between mother and child	19	47.5	21	52.5	40	100
Cultural unacceptance of bottle feeding	12	30	28	70	40	100
Breast sores	11	27.5	29	72.5	40	100
Lack of support from the family	8	20	32	80	40	100
Workplace discrimination	3	8	37	92.5	40	100

Source: Field data (2025)

In the sub-sequent section, an attempt has been made to discuss each of the mentioned psychosocial challenge and number of women who mentioned this. Respondents were allowed to mention more than one challenge.

Lack of concentration at workplace

Study findings show that 85% of the respondents reported that they lacked concentration at work. Respondents further elaborated that they lacked concentration at work because they felt uncomfortable to be away from their young children. This was caused by the fact that employed mothers, after their maternity leave, were forced to stop breastfeeding their children and find an alternative for breast milk. The common alternative reported by respondents was formula milk, which respondents lamented that it was less nutritious compared to breast milk, therefore their children's health were more likely to be affected. In this regard, respondents revealed that they would ring home frequently to check on their children's wellbeing and therefore affecting their concentration at work.

The findings are consistent with those of Basrowi et al. (2018) that revealed that in Indonesia, employed breastfeeding mothers lacked concentration at work because their organizations did not have lactation facilities to enable them to undertake breastfeeding at work. Likewise in Tanzania, employed women with under two years old children have been reported to be facing difficulties in their parenting practices. This is because of lack of policy which allows them to go to work with their children, nor a policy or lactation program which reduces health risks of their children.

This calls for employers in Tanzania to have lactation facilities and programs in work places so as to enable working breastfeeding mothers to go with their children to workplaces and carry on breastfeeding their children. By having their under two years old children at work, employed mothers could be well motivated, as a result they would be able to improve their concentration at work. In this regard, breastfeeding at the workplace could actually lead to improvement in productivity and decrease days of absenteeism since infants of the working mothers would be healthier because of consuming sufficient amounts of breast milk from their mothers. It is very important for babies to be breastfed at least for the first six months to one year of their lives due to the several benefits of breast milk. Importantly, exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months lowers the risk of cardiovascular diseases. It also improves infants' mental health, quality of life and well-being. Lactation for less than 6 months and emotional distress during delivery, have been linked to an increased incidence of post-natal depression in several studies. Breastfeeding is also a natural contraception strategy that prolongs the amenorrhea method and helps maintain prolactin concentration often known as a lactation amenorrhea method (LAM).

Child sickness

Study findings showed that 77.5% of all respondents reported that they were experiencing child sickness as another psycho-social challenge. During discussions with the female respondents it was revealed that, one of the challenging issues encountered by most employed women with under two years old children was children's overdependence on their mothers, as a result of their inability to reach successive developmental milestones that, if attained, would have reduced the children's reliance.

One of them said:

I know that a child should be sitting at a certain age, but my child cannot sit until one supports him on a chair; one has to hold him he can't sit or stand, when I am with him, I have to carry him on my back whenever I go out. The challenge is when I have to go to work, whom do I leave this child with. Who can support the child of this kind? (December, 2021).

The implication of the findings is that, when the children fall sick, it increases their overdependence on their caregivers since they need full-time care and attention. These findings are in line with those of Parkes et al. (2011) in which it was revealed that, a child's overdependence puts a lot of stress on the caregivers. These include insufficient time for other chores and responsibilities, as well as isolation from work and community activities due to time spent at home caring for the child. This stress may result in poor sleep quality and, as a result, daytime dysfunction. Invariably, this would result in low quality of work and life for the parents.

This raises concerns about providing assistance to employed women with children under the age of two years old in order to reduce overdependence and stress. Many of these mothers need someone to stand in for them so that they can do other things at work and at home. It is therefore critical to provide these caregivers with ongoing support, through interventions that may help to improve their quality of life, and also assist employed women in dealing with various stressors associated with caring for a sick child.

Lack of time to rest

The study findings showed that 75% of all respondents involved in the study reported that they lacked time to rest due to the amount of care needed by their under two years children and work responsibilities as well. It was also reported that, this mostly happened to those mothers who had little support from their employers and husbands. It was expected that the

employed women with children under two years old were to be treated in a special way, for instance by reducing the number of activities and assignments to fulfill. However, the situation was different, as the women were occupied with responsibilities both at work and at home. It was further revealed that, at home the husbands did not support their wives to do house chores. One of the employed women involved in the study complained:

My husband is cruel and not kind to me... He does not support me in attending house chores. I take it all in and feel shattered on the inside... It is like pouring hot water into a cracked tea cup and having it fall apart because you did not see the crack... My heart breaks as my soul crumbles from within... I, on the other hand, act as if everything is fine. I do not have time to rest. At work I have a lot to do, the same at home (December, 2025).

Another respondent had this to say:

When the baby cries for something or is sick, I expect my husband to help, but he doesn't comprehend what I'm going through... I even overheard my husband telling a friend that he doesn't help with housekeeping because he doesn't want to reward me..... (December, 2025).

This other respondent added:

Several times, I wanted to take a break from work... But when it was time to act, I would reconsider and tell myself that I had worked hard to earn a degree... It would be a shame to throw it away, especially given our current economic situation (December, 2025).

Another respondent had this in addition:

Shiftwork interrupted mothers' daily routines, resulting in inadequate sleep and mental weariness. Irregular work hours meant less time for the infant and family, causing them to miss out on significant family occasions and escalating work-family tensions (December, 2025).

These study findings are in line with those of Valizadeh (2017) who observed that, returning to work after having birth was difficult for all of the participants to varying degrees, as they had to combine breastfeeding, family matters, and household tasks before and after work, respondents expected their partners to be more supportive and share household responsibilities, but it was the opposite. In this study, when compared to mothers who worked during the day, mothers who worked evening and night shifts reported more disrupted life rhythms and weariness. Although Vitale et al. (2015) discovered that some mothers chose night shifts purposely so as to share childcare tasks with their spouses and decrease conflicts,

the fathers in our study did not volunteer to help with childcare while the mothers worked night shifts.

Stress

Study findings show that 67.5% of all respondents claimed that they had experienced stress in caring for their under two years old children. These respondents further elaborated that, the stress was more likely to be caused by the distance between them and their children when they go to work. Respondents expressed their wish to be close to their children and care for them themselves, because they were quite unsure whether their children were cared for properly in their absence during work hours. However, this finding contrast that of Yeo and Teo (2013) who found that employed mothers were less stressed compared to stay at home mothers. According to their study findings, employment was found to lighten maternal stress as participation in the workforce helped to enhance mothers' prestige, increased sense of autonomy and independence in workforce, as well as other emotional and mental benefits associated with being at work. During discussions with some of the respondents (mothers), it was revealed that little time was given to them, especially those on shifts, to nurse their children and this stressed them. One of the respondents had this to say:

I was permitted to take 15-minutes break during my 6-hour shift to nurse. Before my infant could latch on, the break was over... I was tense, and trying to get back to work and avoid getting scolded became really difficult for me (November, 2025)

However, the study findings are inconsistent with those of Kwon (2011) in Korea that revealed that, mothers with infants experienced medium level of parenting stresses, mostly stemming in parenting costs, selection of parenting information, and the responsibility of their child's emotional stability. It was further revealed that non-employed mothers faced more difficulties in parenting than employed mothers. This is due to the reason that, employed mothers perceived their environment and their parenting itself in positive way. In this regard, employed mothers were found to be in good psychological conditions, having good relationship with their husbands and more knowledge on child rearing and social supports.

These study findings imply that parenting stress of most employed women in the study area could be caused by several factors, including poor relationship with husbands, lack of knowledge on child rearing and lack of social support. In this regard, employed mothers of under two years old children need to collaborate with their partners (husbands) in child rearing, be trained on how to handle their children and receive social support from their relatives such as in-laws, neighbors and

caregivers.

Lack of support from the employer

Study findings showed that 65% of all respondents involved in the study reported that they lacked support from their employers. These findings are similar to those of Valizadeh (2017), in which it was revealed that employed mothers had unpleasant experiences with their respective bosses and coworkers; these mothers reported that their bosses and coworkers were unsupportive of nursing and the need to express breast milk. When preparing for weekly shifts and responsibilities, employers apparently exhibited no regard for breastfeeding mothers.

During interviews with supervisors of the organizations involved in the study, it was revealed that, employed mothers with children under two years old were obliged to work in difficult conditions because some of the organizations had shortage of workers. One of the respondents had the following to say:

I am a mother, and I understand what other mothers go through when they come to work in similar conditions, yet we are short on employees, and my options are limited... There is nothing I can do about it (November, 2025).

The implication of these findings is that most of the employed women with fewer than two years old children lacked support from their supervisors at work. ‘Unsupportive employers’ was repeatedly mentioned by most respondents as a challenge facing working women with under two years old children; also most reported experiencing stress and exhaustion caused by taking care of their under two years old while also working for a living. Studies by Killien (2005), McGovern et al. (2007), and Wang and Tsai (2014) found that, working mothers who had a support network had better work-life balance. Wang and Tsai (2014) also emphasized the importance of a supportive social network for mothers within an organization in order to improve job performance.

Poor work performance

The study findings show that 57.5% of all respondents involved in the study revealed that their performances at work had dropped due to caring for their under two years old children. Respondents further elaborated that they were performing double roles, of caring for their young children at home and work responsibilities. During interview with the employers on this matter, it was revealed that, in most cases work performance dropped when employed

women had to go to nurse their children; subsequently this affected productivity as well because they could not be replaced. One respondent said:

Consider the circumstance where the company has two or three employees with children under the age of two, who are required to take maternity leave and must return to work at 1300 hours. Because they are working fewer hours, it is inevitable that their work performance would suffer. Others return to work, but they must still spend time at home thinking about their children. They are unable to devote all of their time to employment (November, 2025).

These findings are in line with those of Gebrekidan et al. (2020) that revealed that, in Ethiopia, organizations with women with children under two years old witnessed poor work performance and decreased productivity. It was found that, in many organizations, women going for maternity leave were not temporarily replaced by another employee prior to commencing their maternity leave, resulting in staff shortage. The shortage had a greater impact in some occupations, as well as in circumstances where two or more women were on maternity leave at the same time or had to leave work early to care for their children. In a normal setting, working women with children under the age of two years must go back home at 1300 hours to care for their children.

Decreased bond between mother and child

Study findings showed that 47.5% of all respondents involved in the study reported that, one of the psychological challenges they faced included decreased bond with their under two years old children. With these findings, it was discovered that there were positive and strong associations between maternal–infant bonding and postpartum depressive symptoms and maternal stress level. This might be due to the stress that the employed women had, which was caused by poor work environment and lack of support from their employers.

The findings are consistent Ohara et al., 2017 that found a link between postpartum depression symptoms and maternal bonding during the antenatal and early postpartum period. In contrast to these findings, other studies found that mothers with high levels of stress had a stronger bond with their baby as well as higher levels of responsiveness and sensitivity to the baby's needs. The mothers would like to be attached to their children and have a maternal love upon them. However, according to the findings of this study, parents had to be separated from their children by their employment. This becomes a challenge because sometimes these women failed to fulfill their responsibilities to their children because of separateness and

detachment between the two. These findings raise the importance of supporting mothers and their infant children in order to develop attachment between them. The period of infancy is critical for brain development. Also, in order to promote attachment, it is critical that babies and their parents are supported during this time. Studies have shown that children who do not have a strong bond with their parents are less likely to grow up to be happy, independent and resilient adults.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Study findings revealed that the employed women lacked support from their employers. It is recommended that the respective employers should advise the government of Tanzania to review and amend the existing labor and employment policy since it does not specify hours of breast feeding during a working day after the maternity leave. Due to this sometimes breastfeeding mothers and working mothers have encountered friction with their employers.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings revealed to this study, it is imperative to conclude that the psychosocial challenges facing the employed women with under two years old children were caused by poor work environment, poor working policy, as well as unorganized and unplanned family and home responsibilities.

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