

BANGLADESHI WORKING MOTHERS' WORK-LIFE EXPERIENCE

by

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A Thesis Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Communication

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

August 2024

## ABSTRACT

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2024  
Under the Supervision of Professor Sarah Riforgiate, PhD

This qualitative study explores the experiences of educated working mothers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, focusing on challenges encountered and the communication strategies they utilized for managing work-life boundaries. Grounded in Clark's (2000) work-family border theory, an in-depth interview study with nine participants was conducted. Key findings of the thematic analysis highlight that the challenges faced by Bangladeshi working mothers are influenced by societal expectations, familial pressures, and workplace dynamics about boundary management. Participants navigated these challenges using various communication strategies, such as directly requesting childcare support from extended family members, communicating work schedules with family, having purposeful conversations with their spouse, and disclosing personal information to workplace supervisors. The findings underscore the critical need for communication strategies that acknowledge cultural norms and organizational barriers to facilitate effective work-life boundary management for working mothers in Bangladesh. The study implications suggest the initiative of workplace daycare facilities and family-friendly workplace policies, also highlighting the Bangladeshi working mothers' role as models for their children to contribute to societal progress toward gender equality. The study also identifies areas for future research, including exploring the intersection of boundary management with mental health, marital relationships, and societal shifts influenced by increasing female workforce participation in Bangladesh.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Sarah Riforgiate, for her invaluable guidance, support, and encouragement throughout the course of this research. Her insights and feedback have been instrumental in shaping this thesis. I am also profoundly thankful to my committee members, Dr. Erin Parcell and Dr. Ali Gattoni, for their constructive critiques and thoughtful suggestions which greatly enhanced the quality of my work. I am immensely grateful to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the Department of Communication, for providing me with the opportunity and resources to pursue this research.

My heartfelt thanks also go to my parents, whose encouragement and sacrifices enabled me to pursue higher education in the US. Without their belief in my potential, this achievement would not have been possible.

I would like to acknowledge all my friends and colleagues who have provided me with emotional support and company throughout this process. I would also like to thank my roommate, Sarra, who has been an amazing friend, a great roommate, and a colleague at the department. From sharing late-night discussions to cheering me on with countless “YOU CAN DO THIS!” moments, your belief in me has meant everything.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my husband, my partner in life and beyond, Farhan Ahmed. You have seen my moments of despair and frustration, as well as my excitement and hopefulness about this research. You have been there for me through it all. Thank you for giving me the strength and motivation needed to complete this journey.

## **Introduction**

In Bangladeshi families, mothers are regarded as the most tolerant individuals who are expected to accommodate all manner of requests from the family members (Mim, 2020). The general expectation for mothers in most societies is that women should concentrate their time and energy on nurturing and supporting their family members over focusing on their professional careers (Gatrell, 2013). Working women in patriarchal societies, like Bangladesh, have been faced with challenges that make juggling their work and family responsibilities difficult (Uddin, 2021).

A higher proportion of women are employed in the workforce today compared to the past because of factors such as education, age, social status, place of residence, opportunity, and family structure (Haque et al., 2021), which is changing past social patterns. The increased participation of women in the wage labor force has contributed to the country's overall economic growth and altered family dynamics through the additional income brought into households (Asian Development Bank, 2004; 2010). In addition to benefitting the economy and the household, working women are also a symbol of development and empowerment of Bangladeshi women (Hossain, 2021). The empowerment women experience through working and earning an income can contribute to their equality, dignity, rights and ability to fulfill their responsibilities (Kona et al., 2018). Further, working women contribute to the overall progress and development of society (Haque et al., 2021). However, women's increasing participation in the workforce in Bangladesh has caused many extended families to separate (Haque, 2021). Chowdhury (2016) argues that nuclear families are replacing joint families, easy carefree dads are replacing fearful head-of-house fathers, working moms are replacing stay-at-home mothers, and love marriages are replacing arranged marriages.

Considering the implications of the increase of women in the workforce, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the overlapping dynamics between work, and family for women. Women experience a range of life transitions during their working years which frequently include pregnancy while working, maternity leaves, and childcare concerns (Buzzanell et al., 2005). Inter-role conflict often results from juggling parental, marital, and employment responsibilities (Buffardi & Erdwins, 1997). Women are also hindered in their career development when imbalances between work and family life commitments occur, often resulting from unequal distribution of domestic household responsibilities (Haque et al., 2021). With the development of globalization and the increase in women's participation in paid work, work-life conflict is no longer an exclusively Western phenomenon (Uddin, 2021). While numerous studies have focused on Western and developed nations (Zhang et al., 2020), less attention is paid to Eastern and developing nations (Lewis, 2020). Further, the types of women examined in previous studies varies. Importantly, a great deal of research on women's issues in Bangladesh have considered women with less education and who live in low-income families (Hossain et al., 2014). Few studies examine the experiences of educated working women in urban areas of Bangladesh and the various communication strategies they use to seek support to help them negotiate their lives at work and at home (e.g., Hossain et al., 2014; Mim, 2020; Uddin, 2021).

Considering the growing prevalence and importance of working mothers in the Bangladeshi economy, and to extend research on understanding the experiences of educated urban working women, this study focuses on the challenges Bangladeshi working mothers experience and the communication strategies they use to navigate work and family commitments. Specifically, informed by Clark's (2000) work-family border theory, this study explores how Bangladeshi working mothers manage and negotiate the boundaries between their

work and home domains, addressing the complexities of balancing these dual responsibilities in a culturally nuanced context. By examining their strategies, this research aims to shed light on effective boundary management practices that can help mitigate work-life conflicts and enhance the overall well-being of working mothers in Bangladesh. Below, I explore motherhood expectations maintained in Western cultures and how these standards apply to Bangladeshi working mothers. Then I review research on work-life stress factors, sources of support, and Bangladesh culture and family dynamics, followed by the work-family border theory that serves as a theoretical framework for this study. This literature review contextualizes and highlights the culturally specific aspects of motherhood that impact the lives of Bangladeshi working mothers.

### **Good Mothering and Working Mothers**

According to Hays (1996), the Western ideology behind “good mothering” is built on three fundamental tenets. First, women are the best caregivers for children; second, raising children properly requires a lot of resources, particularly time and money; and third, children have special value that cannot be measured using the usual logic of the market. Similarly, Elliott and colleagues (2015) explain that there are societal expectations that to be a good mother, mothers must place their children’s needs first, protect and provide for children to the best of their abilities, and teach children to be responsible and self-reliant. These beliefs are further reinforced by Drago’s (2007) explanation of the motherhood norm, which describes how society expects women to fulfill the role of mother, provide unpaid family care, and offer low-paid care for those in need. This intensive mothering ideology drives cultural expectations for motherhood (Odenweller et al., 2020). Additionally, the media’s portrayal of “good” mothers and motherhood is influenced by societal conventions, gender roles, and social values; in other words, media reflects what society values and expects (Lee et al., 2020). Hays (1996) “intensive

mothering model” explains that “good mothers” are child-centered and primary caregivers who seek the advice of experts and who view raising children as “emotionally consuming,” “labor intensive,” and “expensive” (p. 8).

At present, both employed and unemployed mothers generally aspire to these motherhood norms to be attentive mothers (Hays, 1996), and motherhood is highly valued by women who also prioritize professional success (McQuillan et al., 2008). Most working mothers spend a large amount of time compensating for the time they are not able to spend with their children (Bianchi, 2001; Hays, 1996). In practice, many mothers have accepted the norms of intensive mothering, given the substantial increase in time mothers spend with their children (Bianchi et al., 2012). Additionally, mothers may feel a sense of guilt as they strive to maintain “good mothering” standards, which can require a great deal of time and be personally demanding (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; Sutherland, 2010).

Despite the gradual acceptance of women’s entry into the labor market, questions remain regarding the compatibility between intensive motherhood and women’s labor force participation (Folbre, 2001; Williams, 2001). Due to the perceived incompatibility of motherhood and paid employment, Western cultural concerns have been raised about women’s ability to mother and commit to work adequately (Damaske, 2013). Although intensive mothering appears to have widespread consensus, mothering itself continues to be devalued from a cultural and political perspective (England, 2005; Folbre, 2001). As a result of the devaluation of being a primary caregiver, mothers who leave work to care for children often struggle with their new identity and fitting into a society that values paid work more than caregiving (Folbre, 2008; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Stone 2007). Since mothers working and not working are both stigmatized in Western cultural contexts, women have limited options for pursuing a culturally acceptable

pathway (Damaske, 2013). The evolution and persistence of Western ideologies related to “good mothering” and the challenges faced by working mothers are similarly sedimented in Bangladeshi culture, where parallel societal expectations and norms regarding motherhood and caregiving are deeply entrenched, despite variations in cultural, economic, and historical contexts.

### **Working Women in Bangladesh**

There has been a substantial rise in Bangladesh’s female labor force participation rate (FLFP). During the period 2003–2016, women aged 15 and older joined Bangladesh’s labor force at a 10-percent increase, moving from 26% to 36% (Solotaroff et al., 2019). Further, there is a positive trend that Bangladeshi married women are becoming more active in the labor market than ever before (Solotaroff et al., 2019). The Bangladeshi society remains patriarchal, in which women are encouraged to perform domestic duties for their families through a rigid division of labor and restriction of their mobility (Asian Development Bank, 2001). The traditional customs of the country encourage women to reside within the four walls of their houses (Hatcher et al., 2005); however, the persistent poverty of the country has ironically led to an increase in women’s mobility and participation in the paid labor force (Hossain & Rokis, 2014).

According to Sultana (2010), socio-cultural norms have a tremendous impact on the “everyday forms of discrimination” against women in Bangladesh (p. 36). Despite socio-cultural traditions in Bangladesh that encourage women to not work outside the home (Hatcher et al., 2005), globalization, increased female education and awareness, and structural changes encourage them to work and contribute to the country’s socio-economic development (Asian Development Bank, 2010). Further, because of extreme poverty in the country, many

Bangladeshi women have had to leave their homes to work, mostly in the garment industry (Asian Development Bank, 2010). Due to the dual responsibility of work and household activities, women must carry a heavier workload, which they (un)consciously accept (Alam et al., 2011; Huq, 2003; Sultana, 2010).

Haque et al., (2021), noted some alarming concerns regarding working women in Bangladesh:

The rates of divorce, separation, single mother or single father family, broken family are increasing at an alarming rate because of working women in Bangladesh. Because of a long-distance conjugal relationship, working women face a lot of problems in their intimate relationships. (p. 816)

This statement reflects the cultural belief that the changing role of women in the workforce is impacting traditional family structures and relationships in Bangladesh. When the wife in a household is working, family relations tend to become tense. Thus, working mothers in Bangladesh find it extremely difficult to navigate their personal and professional responsibilities. They are expected to be super-women, who will make sure the children and elderly members of the family are taken care of, as well as working outside of the home to earn money for their families.

Although women contribute significantly to the country's economy (Solotaroff et al., 2019), very little effort is made by the society to minimize the obstacles that working women face daily. Previous research has primarily focused on lower-class working mothers (e.g., Alam et al., 2011; Amin & Pebley, 1994; Stark, 1993; Amin, 1997; Ahmed & Sen, 2018) and additional research is necessary to understand the struggles that educated working mothers in Bangladesh face when navigating their work and family commitments simultaneously.

## **Stress Factors Contributing to Work-Life Challenges**

Women's participation in the labor market promotes their economic position and greater equity, while also empowering them in terms of their socio-political standing (Haque et al., 2021). In the United States (U.S.), 43.3% of women over the age of 16 were working in 1970; as of 2009, there are close to 60% of women participating in the workforce, as well as 71% of working mothers with children who are under the age of 18 (Chao & Rhones, 2009). Women are also spending more time in the labor market during their adult years (Bianchi et al., 2006). Even so, some women take a break from working for family related reasons; approximately 32% of women in the U.S. who took a substantial break from their professional pursuits for family-related reasons expressed that this decision negatively impacted their career trajectory, in contrast to 18% of men facing similar repercussions (Parker, 2015).

Williams (2001) portrayed work-family conflicts as either/or situations in which women had to make a choice on which side they want to be. Deciding or fluctuating between work and family roles often is associated with conflict. According to Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) work-family conflict is classified as an inter-role stress that arises from simultaneous and often incompatible pressures from an individual's personal and professional life. Even while more women are working longer hours outside the home, there hasn't been a corresponding decrease in childcare responsibilities (Buffardi & Erdwins, 1997). Buzzanell (2005) noted that professional women who share a commitment to two ideologies that have historically been contradictory (motherhood and career) may face greater conflicts and have more difficult time managing their emotions and identities than women who prioritize one over the other.

Within the intensive mothering culture, working mothers are under pressure to carry a majority of childcare and housework responsibilities (i.e., 60%-90%) while also being successful

at work (Coogan & Chen, 2007). A report released by the International Labor Organization (ILO) found that, on average, U.S. women spend four hours and 25 minutes every day performing domestic and care duties, compared to one hour and 23 minutes by their male counterparts (Pozzan & Cattaneo, 2020). As a result of this unequal distribution of work among men and women, working women face many challenges in finding a balance between work and their family responsibilities (Uddin, 2021). Unfortunately, women feel greater pressure to compromise between their family and career obligations than men do while spending more time taking care of their homes, spending time with children, and adjusting work schedules (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000).

Career and family ideological tensions are also evident in decisions about when to have a child, since the workplace stipulates work hours, project deadlines, and employability requirements for employees who have children (Blair et al., 1994). Employees are dealing with a changing workplace where career and employment issues are particularly crucial (Buzzanell et al., 2005). Shoemaker (2011) illustrated some of the challenge in her autoethnography, describing how she was:

Juxtaposing the intensely intimate pleasures and challenges of parenting my now garrulous and headstrong toddler with the often hidden, embarrassing, and demoralizing struggles that caregivers endure while trying to ‘balance’ home and work life. (p. 191)

The quote illustrates the exhaustion and tensions working mothers frequently experience while caring for their children. Often, the struggles between mothering and work responsibilities are hidden from people and it is embarrassing for the mother when she is not able to successfully fulfill both her duties as a mother and an employee. In previous research specific to Bangladeshi working mothers, work pressure, spousal refusal to assist in household duties, social and family

traditions, as well as gender-based issues are among their primary challenges that they face every day (Uddin, 2021). In the U.S., Edwards (2006) found that double bind beliefs, work-family conflict, stress, and inequitable household labor are several challenging situations that frequently affect working mothers. Additionally, these working women tend to be less productive at work when they are involved in an increased number of domestic chores (Power, 2020). Raihan and Bidisha (2018) noted, Southeast Asian women's mobility and employment opportunities are often constrained by traditional gender norms and patriarchal values (Raihan & Bidisha, 2018). Often conservative Southeast Asian society places different roles and responsibilities on men and women based on their gender, which hinders the working women's development (Haque, 2021).

### **Sources of Support for Working Mothers in the USA**

To maintain a healthy work and family life at the same time, working mothers get support from various sources, including their workplaces and families. Working mothers belonging to two different spheres and managing the work and home simultaneously necessitates a balancing act between the public sphere of work and the private sphere of home (Edley, 2001). However, a supportive workplace is helpful and can have a positive impact on women's experience of work-family balance (McManus et al., 2002). In recent years, there has been a significant increase in women's participation in the labor force while unpaid family work has remained the same (Perna, 2019). Women's increasing participation in the workforce has raised concerns that work, and home life are separate "spheres" that need to be managed simultaneously (Cowan & Bochantin, 2009). To increase productivity and satisfaction at work among mothers, particularly new mothers, flexible working practices and good organizational support can be beneficial for both employers and employees (Coulson et al., 2010). For example, recognition from supervisors regarding the family demands of single mothers plays a crucial role in successful management of

their work-family balance (Goldberg et al., 1992; Greenberger et al., 1989). Women who work in family friendly organizations experience less of a career penalty for mothering and can enjoy the benefits that a satisfying job gives (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). Additionally, building friendships, gathering useful information through work colleagues, and gaining work-life management knowledge through social networks can act as different support systems that help working mothers with managing family issues (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). Such networks can offer a sense of community and shared understanding, making it easier for working mothers to navigate the complexities of their responsibilities and maintain a sense of well-being.

In addition to workplace support system and workplace friendships, spouses can also provide crucial support for women's work-family life management. Household chores and the care of children are now more often shared between women and men as roles are changing (Perna, 2019). Edwards (2006) explained that there are at least five types of support practices by husbands that are relevant to their wife's management of work-family demands. First, encouraging discussion occurs when communication is used in a way that provides others with the opportunity to share their feelings. Husbands who want to give mental support to their working wives can communicate in a manner that allows their wives to feel comfortable sharing feelings. Lamar et al. (2019) considers mental health support as necessary for working women. They mentioned several contributing factors (such as unrealistic societal expectations, role overload, career development concerns, and physical demands associated with pregnancy and childbirth) that cause increased anxiety, stress, and depression among working mothers which can be reduced with mental health support. Second, interpersonal involvement happens when one expresses concern towards a person in distress that enhances that person's feeling of well-being and acceptance (Burlison, 1990). Thus, husbands who show concern for their wives can help

their wives feel more comfortable at work and at home. Third, acceptance involves allowing another's feelings to become legitimate (Edwards, 2006). Granting legitimacy has important applications to the context of employed mothers since acceptance allows mothers to realize that their feeling of stress with work and family is legitimate. Fourth, dialogue invites conversation to explore new alternatives to the current situation (Edwards, 2006). Finally, assistance includes support to reappraise women's situation and reduces stress as a result (Burlison & Goldsmith, 1996).

Gaining support from work and family is important as women manage their work and life spheres. The support systems for working mothers in Western countries can differ from other countries due to variations in family dynamics and societal norms. Thus, understanding the unique features of Bangladeshi culture and family dynamics is crucial to exploring Bangladeshi working mothers' work-life experience.

### **Culture and Family Dynamics in Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh, heterosexual married couples generally live with more than two generations in their family under the same roof, which is the most common form of extended family in Bangladeshi society (Mim, 2020). Generally, in rural areas, a combined family system exists in which three or more generations live together (Jasmine, 2022). People from rural areas often migrate to urban areas as nuclear families in search of opportunities, and sometimes their extended families join them later (Hossain, 2013). This extended family structure is still present in Bangladesh, even in the 21st century, since this society has high patriarchal values, where gender inequality is deeply ingrained in all spheres of society (Tasnim, 2006). After marriage, women are expected to move to their husband's or in-law's house and adapt to the customs and

culture of the in-laws (Kandiyoti, 2002). As men take care of their own parents, women are responsible for taking care of their children and in-laws (Jasmine, 2022).

The patriarchal family structure places men as the primary breadwinner, forcing women to position themselves in the lower strata of this gendered hierarchical system and care for family members (Agarwal, 1997). Bangladeshi families normalize the notion that women are obligated to supervise household tasks, even when they do not feel inclined to do so and be “obedient” while fulfilling the demands of the family (Mim, 2020). Bangladeshi women traditionally undertake the primary responsibility for household work and most of this work includes taking care of children, husbands, and elderly members of their households (Kabeer, 1991; 1988).

Despite these traditional roles, women from middle-class to upper-class families often rely heavily on domestic “helping hands” to manage household affairs. According to Islam & Amin (2016), paid domestic labor is a longstanding and widespread practice in Bangladesh. These researchers also mentioned tasks usually done by the “helping hands” include cooking, doing laundry, doing dishes, doing grocery, cleaning the house, taking care of children and elderly dependents of the house. Murshed et al., (2021) notes that the domestic “helping hands” can work full-time or part-time, be employed by a single or multiple households, and may reside either in the host household (live-in worker) or their own residence (live-out worker). Additionally, a good number of men work in households, usually as gardeners or drivers, however the domestic work sector remains highly feminized, with women comprising about 80% of all domestic workers (Murshed et al., 2021).

Traditional Bangladeshi society places a dominant role on men to provide financial support for the household, and women are considered to have a secondary role in the economic system (Ward et al., 2004). Women therefore lack economic power and are considered less

capable of negotiating due to this socio-cultural structure (Uddin, 2021). According to Cha and Thébaud (2009) traditional gender norms dictate that women should be committed to their families and play an active role in supporting their husband's professional success. As a matter of fact, middle-class patriarchal families in Bangladesh generally do not support the career aspirations of both unmarried and married women (Mim, 2020).

The cultural emphasis on women to provide caregiving and familial duties (Agarwal, 1997; Jasmine, 2022; Mim, 2020), alongside the limited support for women's professional aspirations (Mim, 2020), highlights the critical need for a deeper understanding of the intersections between gender, culture, and work-life balance of Bangladeshi working mothers. Addressing these gendered dynamics and promoting gender equity in caregiving responsibilities are crucial steps towards fostering a more inclusive and supportive work environment for Bangladeshi women. Clark's (2000; 2002) work-family border theory provides a useful theoretical framework that outlines essential variables that have been most effective in negotiating work and family life for working mothers residing in the United States. Utilizing this framework can offer valuable insights into the experiences of Bangladeshi working mothers, providing a structured approach to examining the dynamics of boundary management and work-family conflicts within the unique socio-cultural context of Bangladesh.

### **Work-Family Border Theory**

Work-family border theory explains the way individuals manage and negotiate work and family domains, including the borders between them so that individuals can work towards a balance between the two (Clark, 2000). According to Clark (2002), balance is characterized by a feeling of comfort derived from a fair distribution of time, energy, and responsibilities between work and home. This suggests that the perception of balance varies among individuals, as each

person may define and achieve their own distinct equitable allocation based on their personal circumstances and priorities. Shedding light into the complexities of navigating the boundaries between work and home domain, Clark (2000) explains four central concepts of the border theory: the work and home domains, the borders between work and home, the border-crossers, and the border-keepers.

### ***Borders Between Work and Home Domains***

Work and home are regarded as two distinct domains, where the domain borders indicate the line at which domain-relevant behavior begins or ends (Clark, 2000). Additionally, borders can take three main forms: physical, temporal, and psychological. Physical borders (such as the walls of workplace or home) specify the place where domain specific behavior happens. Temporal borders (such as scheduled work hours) specify the time when work or family responsibilities are taken care of on pre-planned time. Finally, psychological borders are created by individuals according to the characteristics of physical and temporal borders (Clark, 2000).

At the same time, the domain borders can be permeable, which is the degree to which elements from one domain may enter another (Beach, 1989; Hall & Richter, 1988; Piotrkowski, 1978). Borders can also be flexible, which is the extent to which borders are adaptable based on the demands of one domain or another (Hall & Richter, 1988). Because work and home are separated and often contrasting spheres, they are viewed as two different domains in terms of culture and purpose, but they are divided by a border that is not always fluid in its permeability (Clark, 2000; Hall & Richter, 1988). The permeability, flexibility, and blending of borders are further discussed to better understand the border characteristics.

The permeability of the border between work and family refers to when aspects of one domain penetrate the other domain (Leung & Zhang, 2017). Leung and Zhang (2017) defined

permeability as the ability to be physically present in one domain while psychologically or behaviorally involved in a different domain, such as doing office work at home or taking care of family affairs at work. It is also possible for permeations to be psychological. Even though psychological permeation can be perceived as negative, it can be positive too. Whetten and Cameron (1998) stated that creativity can be cultivated in a space where ideas and insights can be transferred from one place to another. For example, while preparing dinner, a working mother finds herself mentally reviewing a project she's been working on at the office. As she slices vegetables, her mind shifts between brainstorming ideas and ensuring the sauce doesn't burn. Suddenly, her daughter asks about her day, prompting her to explain her work in a simplified manner. As they chat, her daughter innocently suggests a creative solution to a problem she had been struggling with. To her surprise she realizes how her work mindset has permeated into her home life, sparking unexpected inspiration. This exchange demonstrates psychological permeation as the mother's professional thoughts seamlessly blended with her personal life, leading to a valuable idea born from the interaction with her daughter.

The second border quality is the flexibility of the borders. According to Clark (2000) individuals' ability to work at their preferred hours makes the border between work and family very flexible. Whenever individuals are permitted to work from any location they choose, the physical border is flexible. In a similar manner, the psychological border is flexible when a person can think about work when at home and think about home when at work. Given the permeability and flexibility of domain borders, communication becomes essential in negotiating flexibility.

Blending happens when a great deal of permeability and flexibility occurs around the border (Clark, 2000). Clark (2000) explains that the area around the borders is no longer

exclusively associated with one domain or the other, but combines work and family, creating a borderland that cannot be solely identified with either. An example of blending would be an individual who works remotely from their home. The blending begins when he/she is required to start taking calls from work while also taking care of the children's needs. As the blending of work and home occurs throughout the day, working while attending to the family members' needs becomes the norm. When examining the borders between work and family, one can determine the balance between the work and home domains based on the degree of separation, or integration. The permeability, flexibility, or blending of borders can allow individuals to integrate or combine these domains (Clark, 2000).

### ***Border-Crossers and Border-Keepers***

As work and family are the two most important institutions in a person's life (Mortimer et al., 1986), one of the major goals of border-crossers is to fulfill the needs of both institutions. Clark (2000) described border-crossers as domain members who have the ability to alter the domains and control the borders to suit their needs. On the other hand, border-keepers are defined as domain members who play a significant role in defining the domain and border-crossers' boundaries. For example, at work, supervisors often act as border-keepers, while at home, this role is typically fulfilled by spouses. To better understand the dynamics between the border-crossers and the border-keepers, Clark (2000) explains that these border-keepers have their own definitions of what constitutes "work" and "family" based on their personal experiences. Thus, border-keepers often guard these domains and borders so closely that border-crossers have limited flexibility to manage conflicting demands. Here, communication can play a crucial role in negotiating and managing the borders between the work and home domains, and applying the principles of this theory can offer insights into effective communication strategies.

To explore Bangladeshi working mother's experience navigating and maintaining boundaries between their work and home domains, work-family boarder theory provides a useful lens to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What challenges do Bangladeshi working mothers communicate while navigating boundaries between their work and home domains?

**RQ2:** What communication strategies do Bangladeshi working mothers employ to maintain and negotiate boundaries between their work and home domains?

### **Method**

Considering the research questions, qualitative interviews were selected to capture the rich and detailed narratives of Bangladeshi working mothers. As Goulding (2005) noted, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences by conducting qualitative research. Qualitative data analysis allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the challenges Bangladeshi working mothers encountered in balancing work and family responsibilities and the specific communication strategies they used. In this method section, I discuss participant recruitment procedures, participants demographic information, data collection, and finally analysis methods.

#### **Recruitment Procedure**

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB #: 24.193), I recruited participants for the study through social media and personal contacts (See Appendix A for Recruitment Materials). Participants eligible for this study were required to be working mothers residing in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and living with their children. Initially, two participants were recruited through personal contacts and then they referred me to other participants using snowball sampling, which led to a total of nine interview participants. The snowball sampling

technique involves targeting a specific group and asking group members to suggest others who qualify for the study and might be interested in participating (Noy, 2008; Rahman et al., 2020). This snowball approach was effective for locating participants and enabled me to connect with eligible participants for this study who were working mothers residing in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Additionally, each participant received a \$5 incentive for their time and interview contribution.

### **Interview and Transcription Procedure**

As a native speaker of Bangla language, I conducted interviews in participants' native language Bangla to enable a deeper connection, fostering open and candid responses as well as ensuring a more culturally sensitive and authentic exploration of their experiences as Bangladeshi working mothers. I conducted all the interviews online, using audio and video meetings on Zoom or Teams. Prior to the interview, I electronically sent each participant the study consent form (via email or WhatsApp) so they could familiarize themselves with the study and be fully aware of their rights and obligations. At the beginning of each interview, I obtained verbal consent from the participants to record the whole interview. See Appendix B for the Consent Form and Interview Questions.

I used a semi-structured interview format to encourage participants to open up and share anything they felt comfortable with disclosing. I designed my questions to be open-ended to allow interview participants freedom to discuss their experiences and at times lead the conversation rather than being confined to direct questions. To address the first research question, some of the interview questions included: "How would you describe your relationship and your interaction with your family members?", "How do your work and family life relate to each other?", and "What are the factors at home that contribute to your experience of your work

and family life?” To address the second research question, some of the questions asked included: “Do you talk about your family at work? If yes, then who do you talk to the most and about what?”, “How do you share household responsibilities with your family? Who helps you the most with the household responsibilities?”, and “Have you ever received any support from your employer and workplace community that helped you with your work and family responsibilities? Vice versa.” Additionally, I asked demographic questions to contextualize the findings from the study. Interviews ranged between 40 to 61 minutes long. In total, the combined duration of all interviews was 438 minutes (7 hours 18 minutes), averaging approximately 49 minutes per interview.

As a native Bangla speaker, I was the primary translator for the interviews, ensuring accuracy and reliability of the participants’ expressions. Additionally, a fellow native speaker and communication student proofread the transcripts to ensure that the initial translation preserved the authenticity, and emotional nuances captured during the interviews. After completing the translation and transcription process, the total length of nine interview transcripts amounted to 83 single-spaced typed pages.

### **Participants**

Nine Bangladeshi working mothers participated in this study. Their ages ranged between 26 and 42, with an average age of 33.33 years. Among them, two were widowed mothers and the rest were married. In terms of family structure, one participant lived with her in-laws, seven participants lived with their parents or paternal family members, and one participant alternated between living 15 days with her in-laws and 15 days with her parents. Seven participants had one child each, while the other two participants each had two children.

The average annual participant income was \$47,635 (no data is available for household income). All participants held a master's degree as their highest educational qualification which is common for Bangladeshi college students. According to the Bangladesh Education Statistics in 2022, 39% of all female college students completed their master's degrees. In terms of professions, two worked in the banking sector, four worked for private corporations, and three were high school teachers. On average, participants had been in the workforce for 10.27 years, ranging from 6 months to 20 years. Two of the mothers worked entirely from home, one held a hybrid position by working from home some days and commuting on others, while the remaining six commuted to their workplaces daily. All the participants worked full-time, averaging 40 hours per week. This diverse mix of backgrounds and circumstances allowed for a rich exploration of how these women navigated the intricate balance between career ambitions and family duties in urban Bangladesh. See Appendix C for Participant Information.

### **Analysis**

To answer the research questions, I conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data. The process for identifying themes was based on the approach detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which requires that patterns within the data be identified, analyzed, and reported according to a set of selected criteria. Familiarity with the narrative interviews was gained through transcribing the data, reading, and re-reading the transcripts (Scharp & McLaren, 2018). I began my analysis by first transcribing the interviews, listening carefully for details and nuances in what participants shared that could be important for the analysis. Then, I carefully read all the transcripts holistically. Conducting the interviews, transcribing, and then re-reading the transcripts and listening to audio recordings of the interviews allowed me to identify the

challenges working mothers encounter and the communication approaches they frequently takes to overcome those challenges.

To address the research questions, I began with line-by-line coding, where I identified responses with similar issues and developed initial themes. I then identified responses with similar issues and developed themes through iterative coding (Tracy, 2020). I then refined these themes by copying and pasting excerpts from interview transcripts that aligned with the identified themes. To ensure the robustness of the themes, I compared the quotes within each theme, assessed the relevance of supporting data, and ensured the coherence of the themes (Cabral & Dhar, 2019; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). After establishing preliminary themes, I reorganized the themes and quotes. I then reviewed the transcripts again to make sure I did not miss any important quotes and presented the most salient themes relevant to the research questions. Then I drafted sections of my paper that explored how quotes reflected the emerging themes. Additionally, I consulted with another work-life scholar to further refine the themes. Finally, I organized and presented the themes in my findings, ensuring they accurately captured the experiences and perspectives of the participants as Bangladeshi working mothers,

While analyzing the data, I used work-family border theory as a lens to identify the challenges Bangladeshi working mothers encounter while maintaining work and family responsibilities and the communication strategies they use to maintain and negotiate boundaries between their work and home domains. The framework of work-family border theory provided a structured approach to analyze how impacts in one domain affected the other, shedding light into the ways in which these dynamics influence the challenges and boundaries between work and family.

## **Findings**

Clark's (2002) work-family border theory explains that work and home are two different domains, where physical, temporal, and psychological borders exist between these two. Maintaining and negotiating these borders is a communication process that requires regular maintenance and collaboration with work and family relationships. Below, I describe the challenges participants experienced navigating these boundaries between their work and family responsibilities, and how participants employed a variety of communicative strategies that underscore the complexities they navigate daily.

### **Work-Life Boundary Challenges**

The first research question asked: *What challenges do Bangladeshi working mothers communicate while navigating the boundaries between their work and home domains?* Three main themes reflect the major challenges Bangladeshi working mother participants described when trying to navigate their work-life boundaries: societal expectations, familial pressures, and workplace dynamics and professional challenges. Below, I discuss how these working mothers articulate their challenges to navigate their work-life boundaries.

### ***Societal Expectations***

Bangladesh is a highly patriarchal society (Agarwal, 1997) where working mothers often express the societal pressure they feel to prioritize family responsibilities over their careers. All the participants described how the societal expectation of being a care giver for their family while maintaining a career created challenging work and life disruptions. Raha, a 38-year-old working mother, expressed how societal expectations challenged her ability to maintain clear boundaries between her work and family life. She shared:

I have to go to work every day, and on top of that, I'm a mother, a homemaker, and a student. I am expected to cook for my family and take care of my children. I cannot prioritize one role over another.

Raha's statement highlights the challenges she encounters while trying to excel in both work and family roles without prioritizing one over another. Because she could not prioritize one role over another, perceived societal expectations challenged her ability to navigate her work and family boundaries to make a reasonable arrangement. Raha also shared the social expectation that working women were expected to be in constant contact with family and call home once or twice to check on their children's well-being, noting: "I think every mother is expected to do this." The constant juggling act between work and family care expectations created a complex dynamic where Raha shared that she needs to continuously shift focus and resources between her professional and personal responsibilities.

The societal expectation on working mothers to take care of the family and the children can add more difficulty in achieving a satisfactory work-family arrangement. Jennie, a 34-year-old working mother, expressed the societal judgments she faces regarding her childcare choices:

So many people tell me that my son is suffering because I leave him at the daycare. There are countless comments about why my child isn't gaining weight or maybe the daycare isn't feeding him properly or taking good care of him. People often say that if I were handling everything myself, things would have been better.

However, fulfilling gender expectations for nurturing can clash with expectations for women to provide financial support to their spouse and in-laws. As more women in Bangladesh join the paid labor force, societal expectations have shifted, recognizing them from as caregivers to as joint financial providers alongside their husbands. Anna, a 26-year-old working mother, shared

her experience with societal expectations placed on women during discussions with her advisor in her master's program. In one of their conversations, her major professor gave examples from his own life where his wife “supported him financially” a lot of the time. Anna could sense that the examples were directed towards her to further emphasize the societal norms that expect women not only to excel in their professional lives but also to shoulder significant financial responsibilities within the household. She said:

By giving this example, [my professor] was trying to say that it is our responsibility as wives to take care of everyone and help our husbands and in-laws financially... Everyone thinks that it is our responsibility to live with our in-laws and take care of the family.

Here, Anna’s reflection reveals the clear and often conflicting expectations from women regarding demands of their work and home domains. She underscores the societal pressure to be a primary caregiver and financial supporter simultaneously. All nine participants indicated strong societal gender role expectations that directly competed for time and energy while fulfilling an emerging set of expectations that women also are responsible for providing financial support to their families.

### ***Familial Challenges***

Six out of nine participants shared the challenges they faced from familial pressure. The subthemes emerging from their experiences include feeling inadequate in front of family, where balancing work and domestic expectations proved difficult; lack of husband’s support, highlighting the burden of managing household chores alone; lack of in-laws’ support, with unrealistic expectations and unsupportive behaviors adding emotional strain; guilt of pursuing a career over focusing solely on childcare; and worrying about their children's health and well-being, as work commitments limited their ability to be constantly present for their children.

**Feeling inadequate to care for the family.** Working Bangladeshi mothers in this study noted how familial pressure often imposed emotional and practical challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities, which contributed to feelings of inadequacy as participants struggled to meet both professional and domestic expectations. Shila, a 42-year-old working mother, shared her experience when her in-laws visited her, and she could not take care of them properly because she had to spend a significant amount of time at work. She explained: “Since I had to go to work, I could not take care of them that well. I know they get upset because of that.” Her story highlights the feeling of inadequacy participants experienced when they could not meet familial expectations due to work commitments. Another participant, Poppy, a 29-year-old working mother, often felt inadequate in front of her family because she could not meet her in-law’s expectations of being fully present when guests come over. She shared:

My mother-in-law sometimes asks if I really need to work on days when we have guests coming over. I then have to explain to her that it's a regular workday for me and I can't take a leave whenever I want.

This situation impacted both Poppy and her family because she could not spend enough time with the guests, and the guests could not spend time with her because of her work. This often led to feelings of inadequacy on her part, and created tension within her family, as she felt the necessity to explain her situation to her mother-in-law. Poppy felt inadequate to take care of her family because she perceived herself as failing to meet her in-law’s expectations of being fully present for family gatherings.

Despite their efforts, participants often described emotional strain from perceived or actual disappointment from family members. This feeling of inadequacy can challenge the ways participants were able to fulfill professional responsibilities alongside societal and familial

expectations of being the primary caregiver. Similarly, Isha, a 26-year-old working mother, expressed feeling inadequate in front of her in-laws when she shared:

Before I started working, whenever anyone in my family didn't feel well, they would call me for assistance. Now that I'm working it's not as easy for them to reach out. If someone gets extremely sick, they call me on my phone...I feel like this upsets them. Even though they never say anything to me, I can sense it.

Her statement indicates the emotional strain and boundary challenges that working mothers face in the context of familial expectations. Shila and Isha's work commitments physically and temporally separate them from their families, making it difficult for them to fulfill the role as a caregiver to the family. Feeling unable to attend to family expectations contributes to a sense of inadequacy and emotional burden when participants feel that their family might be disappointed by their absence.

**Lack of husbands' support.** Considering the importance of spousal support in addressing the complexity between work and family responsibilities of participants, the lack of this support represented a challenge. Three out of nine interview participants (33.33%) shared that they never received any spousal support regarding household chores. Despite both spouses working, only the female partner managed the household responsibilities. Rosie, a 42-year-old working mother, reflected on this imbalance: "My husband never helped with household chores because he never had the time due to his job." Lack of spousal support made it difficult for women to maintain and negotiate their work-family boundaries. Without shared responsibilities, women described how they bore the burden of household duties on top of their professional roles.

Inconsistent support was also problematic, as Anna described how the inconsistent support that she received from her husband made the challenges of attending to work and family responsibilities more difficult for her. She said:

Sometimes my husband supports me. It's not that he never supports me, but there are moments when I get disappointed at his behavior. At times, he tells me to "do it by yourself," making it seem like it would be a relief for him if I handled everything on my own. Sometimes he helps me, and other times he doesn't.

Anna expressed disappointment and frustration with her husband for his lack of consistent support, which created an uneven partnership between them. The work-family border theory suggests that the support from partners significantly affects how individuals navigate the borders between work and home domains (Clark, 2000). Husbands' inconsistency or lack of support lead to participants feeling fully responsible in both domains which contributed to challenges in fulfilling both work and family roles with limited resources. This lack of consistent support can disrupt the ability to maintain a balanced integration of work and family life, which can eventually lead to higher stress level with attending to work and family at the same time.

**Lack of in-laws' support.** Most of the interview participants (66.67%) talked about the challenges they faced in balancing work and family responsibilities, particularly when confronted with unsupportive actions and unrealistic expectations from their in-laws. Unsupportive in-law behaviors often added to participants emotional burden and the complexities involved in managing both work and family roles. Anna, a mother of a toddler, who does not wish to live with her in-laws shared:

Women who live with their mothers-in-laws have to wake up early in the morning to cook for the family, get the kids ready, and then go to their jobs. Despite these efforts,

they often face criticism from their in-laws. For example, they hear remarks like, “Since you work outside, we have to take care of your children.”

Anna expressed how an unrealistic expectation is put on women that they should somehow be responsible to manage all family duties on top of their professional work. Similarly, Sana shared that she is responsible for entertaining her in-laws whenever they come to visit her family.

Whether Sana has to work that day or not, her in-laws expect her to be available and take care of all the household responsibilities. She expressed her frustration, saying: “My in-laws do not consider my situation.”

The absence of help from in-laws exacerbated the challenges working mothers faced in maintaining and negotiating work-family boundaries. For instance, Rosie, a 42-year-old working mother and widow, shared: “I didn’t receive any support from my in-laws after my husband passed away, which made me worry a lot about my daughter’s future.” Without a support system, Rosie explained that she had to navigate her professional responsibilities while also managing the full scope of household duties and childcare. This lack of in-law’s support during such a crucial time led to increased stress and difficulty in attending to her work and home life needs. A 30-year-old working mother, Sana, shared a similar experience she had with her in-laws:

My father-in-law wanted me to leave my job and take care of my child at home, which was not possible for me. Fortunately, my husband supported me throughout. However, my in-laws prefer that I prioritize taking care of my son over my career.

Sana’s in-laws’ preference for her to prioritize childcare over her career indicates their expectation for her to follow the traditional family roles, leaving little room for her professional identity. The support from her husband helped mitigate the expectations from the in-laws, but

also added to her ongoing negotiation of roles within the family. Because she continued working, despite her in-laws' preferences, she needed to actively negotiate her professional and personal identities. Sana also shared her experience when her in-laws failed to acknowledge or appreciate the importance of her work and the responsibilities associated with it. She shared:

My in-laws do not understand the importance of my work. They are unaware of my role and its significance, and they don't care to know. They don't consider my studies or my work. They think that I go to the office just for fun. They don't understand my workload or other responsibilities, and they are not supportive.

Sana's in-laws' lack of awareness regarding her workload and other responsibilities reflects their disapproval and disregard for the significance of her career. Since Sana's in-laws did not acknowledge her professional role, Sana indicated that she felt her professional identity was not honored which added stress to her work-life boundary management.

**Guilt of pursuing a career instead of focusing solely on childcare.** Five out of the nine interview participants shared that they felt guilty about prioritizing their careers over dedicating more time to childcare responsibilities. Isha, a 26-year-old working mother, concisely captured this sentiment when she said: "Every day I go through a guilt trip." Similarly, Shila, a 40-year-old working mother of two, described feelings of guilt regarding her inability to spend sufficient time with her daughters:

I sometimes feel guilty that I cannot give my daughters enough time...If their father was alive, the situation might have been different.... I don't have the time to take them anywhere to visit. Even on weekends, it feels like I don't have any opportunities to go outside.... Of course, I feel guilty because I cannot meet their expectations.

Shila's feelings of guilt come from her belief that she falls short of meeting her daughters' desires for parental presence and engagement. Shila suggested that she might have managed her responsibilities differently had circumstances been different, which impacted how she understood her work and family boundaries. Despite Shila's efforts to separate work and family responsibilities, emotional and practical demands often overlapped and made it difficult for her to maintain a separation between her work and family life. This overlap and the associated guilt represent a challenge that can contribute to increased feelings of stress as Shila strives to balance career ambitions with fulfilling familial roles.

Similarly, Sana, a 30-year-old working mother, shared her struggle with guilt, stating: "At the end of the day, I have to finish my work, and in the process, my child misses out on quality time with me." This statement highlights how Sana's sense of professional responsibility took a toll on her personal life, emphasizing her difficulty managing career demands with the need to nurture family relationships. Sana's experience underscores the emotional burden that comes with the constant push and pull between work and family commitments. This internal conflict of feeling guilty about prioritizing work complicates the negotiation and maintenance of clear boundaries between her professional responsibilities and her family life.

**Worrying about children's health and well-being.** All nine of the participants shared their worries about their children's health and well-being because as working mothers they recognized that they could not always be present mentally or physically to take care of their children's health. Often, participants needed to rely on other people (i.e., family members, paid helping hands, daycare facilities) to take care of their children. Jennie, a 34-year-old working mother, shared the concerns that working mothers often experience regarding their child's well-being and safety when entrusted to a caregiver. She emphasized her worries about leaving her

child with a paid helping hand (caregiver), who may essentially be a stranger without proper training in childcare, stating: “There is no security in that!” By highlighting the challenges of leaving her child with someone who may lack proper training and familiarity, Jennie expressed a fear rooted in the uncertainty and potential risks involved. Here her necessity of employment clashed with her anxieties about the quality and reliability of external childcare options.

Similarly, Lisa, a 32-year-old working mother, expressed concerns about her son’s unhealthy dietary habits due to the lack of parental supervision during her work hours. She stated:

Since my son is at school most of the day and then with me outside the house, he tends to have various snacks and unhealthy food throughout the day. Sometimes, I end up buying snacks for him just to keep him occupied while I focus on my work. But I know that this isn’t the healthiest option for him.

Here Lisa expressed concern about her son's unhealthy dietary habits and acknowledged the trade-offs she made between managing her work and ensuring her child's nutrition. Lisa’s son spent a significant amount of time at her workplace; to prioritize her professional tasks, she sometimes did so at the expense of closely monitoring her child’s diet and well-being throughout the day. Raha, a 38-year-old working mother of two, shared a similar experience:

During weekends when I’m at home, I make sure my children don’t eat highly processed foods, and they feel okay with that. When I’m home, I can feed them homemade food and take care of them. However, on the workdays of the week, I can’t stay home with them, so they end up eating whatever they want.

Both Lisa and Raha’s experiences lead to feelings of guilt or concern about not being fully present and meeting their children’s nutritional needs. Through this juggling act the participants

sometimes struggled to take care of their children's health and well-being, illustrating another challenge faced by working mothers when performing dual roles. In addition to family challenges, workplace challenges also significantly impact work-life boundary management of Bangladeshi working mothers.

### ***Workplace Dynamics and Professional Challenges***

Workplace dynamics and professional challenges faced by Bangladeshi working mothers revealed a complex interplay between fulfilling workplace demands and managing household responsibilities. Participants described two main workplace challenges: meeting workplace demands and fulfilling childcare while at work. These issues blurred the boundaries that created challenges at the intersection between personal and professional domains for Bangladeshi working mothers.

**Fulfilling workplace demands.** Seven out of nine participants described how they struggled to fulfill workplace demands while managing household responsibilities, which created situations where personal and professional domains overlapped. This overlap demonstrated the high permeability of work-family boundaries, making it challenging for participants to maintain a clear separation between professional and personal responsibilities. Lisa, age 32 and a mother of one child, described the significant work pressure she faced, that extended beyond her designated office hours. Describing how her work responsibilities continued into her home life, she said:

The work pressure comes from various directions. There are times when we find ourselves working round the clock. For instance, after school hours, work continues at home, perhaps over the phone or through online platforms. There are times when I need

to reach out to students or participate in Zoom meetings with other teachers, which extends my workday to as long as 18 hours.

Lisa talked about her immense workload that created the expectation she should be constantly available for work-related tasks, even outside regular working hours. This work expectation intruded into Lisa's personal time to spend with her family or pursue personal interests. She also highlighted that despite personal preferences to separate work and home life, external factors such as work emergencies blurred her work-life boundaries. She mentioned: "Emergencies at work often mean I need to keep working at home." These work emergencies contributed to Lisa's feelings that she had a lack of control over her time and space, which made it difficult to establish her boundaries between professional responsibilities and personal life.

Similarly, Raha, a 38-year-old working mother of two, shared how her work obligations interfered with her personal time. She preferred to spend her weekends with family, which sometimes were disrupted because of work emergencies. She talked about her frustration when she had to attend to work on weekends: "It's really frustrating because my weekends are only meant for my family." Not being able to spend the weekends with her family made Raha feel that she had to prioritize her work over family, which contributed to her sense of inadequacy, frustration, and emotional strain.

Likewise, Shila, a working mother of two, expressed the impact of her unpredictable work demands on her family dynamics when professional emergencies frequently invaded on her personal time:

There are times when I suddenly get assigned to a lot of work out of the blue. For instance, I might receive unexpected calls from my workplace, saying that I have to be there immediately due to an emergency. Even if I'm in the middle of cooking for my

family or attending to my sick children, I have no choice but to drop everything and rush to work.

The demanding nature of Shila's workplace obliged her to set aside her family obligations and prioritize her professional commitments. She noted that this unpredictability took a toll on her family life and emotional well-being. Shila's experience demonstrated how work demands breached the boundaries of her home domain unexpectedly, disrupting her ability to maintain a clear separation between her professional and personal life.

**Challenges at work because of childcare.** Balancing work responsibilities with childcare needs often led to significant challenges for participants. All the participants shared their struggles with balancing childcare and their careers simultaneously. When the demands of one domain frequently spilled over into the other, it became challenging for these working mothers to maintain clear and distinct separations between their professional and personal responsibilities. Poppy, a 29-year-old working mother, described a chaotic situation that happened every morning as a challenge for balancing her morning routine between childcare and work responsibilities. She mentioned:

In the morning, I have to feed my daughter breakfast and at the same time log into my work. It's usually very chaotic and I feel like I don't know what I'm actually doing. Am I working? Or am I feeding my daughter? I feel overwhelmed and frustrated in those moments, especially because I have immense work pressure in the morning.

This situation created confusion and frustration for Poppy, as she struggled to prioritize between fulfilling her maternal duties and meeting her professional obligations. Her experience shows how challenging it can become for working mothers who work from their home in remote positions. Poppy also shared her experience with her daughter's curiosity and need for attention

during work hours, which created a situation where her personal and professional spheres overlapped. She shared incidents, like: “There were times when she (my daughter) wouldn’t leave me alone, and I would let her sit on my lap while working.” The unavoidable situation where Poppy was required to manage both her work and family responsibilities simultaneously blurred the lines between her work and life domains.

Dealing with a sick child also contributed to inefficiency at the workplace for participants. Sana, a 30-year-old working mother discussed how difficult it was to concentrate on work at the office when her son became ill:

When my child is sick, I constantly check my phone for his health updates while I’m at work. I try to be in regular contact with my family during this time, and I often mention to my colleagues that my child is unwell.

Sana’s concern for her sick child impacted her work life and the distraction of checking her phone impacted her efficiency and productivity at work to such an extent that she felt she had to give an explanation to her colleagues. Sana’s experience illustrates how the demands of family responsibilities can intrude into the work domain and contribute to the ongoing struggle to maintain responsibilities in both her work and home domain. While navigating boundaries between work and home domains can be challenging, Bangladeshi working mothers employ several communication strategies to maintain and negotiate boundaries to meet the demands of both domains effectively.

The main themes for challenges faced by the participants as Bangladeshi working mothers include societal expectations, family pressures, and workplace demands. The first theme, societal expectations, demonstrate how patriarchal societies like Bangladesh often require women to prioritize family over their careers, that often create difficulties in maintaining their

work-life boundaries. Then comes family pressures on working women that contribute to the participants' feeling of inadequacy for caring for their family. As part of the theme of family pressures, the participants also experienced a lack of support from their husbands and in-laws, which eventually increased their household responsibilities and led them to feel guilty about focusing on their careers and concerns about their children's well-being. At work, high demands and the need to manage childcare further blur the borders between the participants' personal and professional responsibilities. Overall, these challenges highlight the struggle of working mothers to navigate conflicting societal norms, family expectations, and work obligations.

### **Communication Strategies**

To answer the second research question: *What communication strategies do Bangladeshi working mothers use to maintain and negotiate boundaries between their work and home domains?* All the interview participants shared their desire to keep their work and family life separated, however they also talked about how challenging it is to do so. The participants frequently relied on direct conversations and actions as strategies to navigate their challenging situations and seek assistance from both their families and workplaces. These strategies involved: seeking assistance from family members for childcare, openly communicating work schedules with family to establish clear boundaries, engaging in thoughtful conversations with their spouses to coordinate responsibilities, reciprocating the support they receive from family, reciprocating the supportive environment fostered by their workplaces, and sharing personal details with employers to negotiate support and flexibility. Through these transparent and ongoing communication strategies, participants explained how they negotiated and maintained boundaries to create a more balanced and supportive environment both at home and at work.

### *Requesting Family for Childcare Assistance*

The most common communication strategy used by all nine participants was making direct requests to family members for assistance regarding childcare. Poppy, a 29-year-old working mother who works from home, faced significant work pressures during her morning routines which contributed to her hectic schedule. To manage this, she often sought assistance from her mother-in-law, explaining, “Sometimes I ask my mother-in-law to prepare food for my daughter.” Individuals like Poppy actively managed and negotiated boundaries between their work and family roles to mitigate conflicts and make things less hectic. By delegating childcare tasks to her mother-in-law during her busiest times, Poppy effectively divided her responsibilities, allowing her to focus on work without compromising her daughter’s care. Sana, a 30-year-old working mother, used multiple direct requests to manage her work-family boundaries. She explained: “at first, I asked my mother-in-law to take care of my child, but she declined and showed no interest. Then I asked my mother for childcare assistance and thankfully, she agreed to help.” Sana’s relief that her mother would take care of her child while she is at work was evident in the interview and helped Sana manage her work-family boundaries. Moreover, while at work, Sana maintained communication with her mother through WhatsApp: “When at work, I usually text my mother on WhatsApp, where she gives me updates about my baby.” This communication strategy facilitated effective coordination between her work and parenting duties. By staying informed about her child’s status during working hours, Sana effectively managed the demands of both her career and parenting responsibilities to maintain connectedness and support her work-family boundaries.

Lisa, a 32-year-old working mother, additionally shared how seeking help through open communication with her spouse helps her manage the demands of her work and family life:

Sometimes, after my school finishes, I have important meetings to attend. During these times, I call my husband, and he comes to my school to take our son home. He bathes him and feeds him, and then when I return in the afternoon, he goes back to his work.

Lisa's comment shows how she and her husband both shared parenting responsibilities and coordinated those through direct communication, which allowed Lisa to attend important work meetings without compromising her son's care. In this case, her husband's involvement and support enabled her to navigate the boundaries between her professional and personal responsibilities more smoothly. This cooperative approach helped mitigate potential conflicts and ensure that both work and family needs are met.

### ***Communicating Work Schedules with Family to Set Boundaries***

Communicating work schedules and commitments with family members helped all nine of the participants effectively manage their time and reduce conflicts between their work and family responsibilities. Raha, a 38-year-old mother of two, described how she communicated her work schedules and commitments with her family:

When I have meetings or important tasks at the office, I inform my family in advance. I let them know that I'll be attending a program or handling important matters, so they understand not to contact me during that time.

By being aware in advance and proactively communicating her schedule to her family allowed Raha to effectively negotiate the boundary between work and family; doing so, Raha established clear expectations between her professional responsibilities and her family obligations. Similarly, Sana, a 30-year-old working mother, also emphasized the importance of communication regarding her work commitments:

If I have an important meeting, I make sure to text my mother beforehand. I let her know that I'll be occupied for the next two hours and request her to avoid calling me unless it's an emergency. Texting helps us stay connected without interruptions during my meetings.

Here, Sana utilized text messaging as a tool to inform her mother about her schedule, including important meetings. Sana set a clear boundary between her work and home to prepare her family for her unavailability by requesting them to limit non-emergency communications during that period. She also shared that: "I've already told my family that if I don't pick up after one call, they should wait for me to call or text back since I might be busy." Communicating work schedules and setting boundaries allowed Sana to focus on her work without disruptions while maintaining her connection with her family.

### ***Engaging in Purposeful Conversations with Spouse***

Six of nine interview participants shared that they had open communication with their spouses while seeking advice and understanding about their workplace and sharing work related responsibilities with them. Isha, a 26-year-old working mother shared how her husband's guidance and support provided her with a better understanding of workplace dynamics and the reassurance that she will adapt to these challenges over time. She shared:

My husband gives me guidance on work life. He helps me understand what people are saying and what they want from me. He reassures me that I'll learn to navigate everything over time. We always have these open conversations about my work life.

Isha's open discussions with her husband provided her with emotional support which helped her negotiate expectations and responsibilities in the workplace. This emotional support reduced

Isha's feelings of emotional strain and enhanced her ability to function effectively in both work and home domains.

Similarly, Sana, a 30-year-old working mother, expressed: "I have always said that it is not possible for me to stay at home the whole day. So, my husband always gives me mental support regarding my work." Her husband's continuous support helped Sana cope with her work-related challenges more confidently. In both Isha and Sana's cases, their husband's communication of emotional backing facilitated a better management of boundaries between their work and home domains to navigate their professional and personal responsibilities.

### ***Reciprocating Family Support***

By acknowledging support, expressing appreciation, and paying the support/ help back, Bangladeshi working mothers effectively managed the complexities of work and family life that promoted harmony and fulfillment in both their work and family domains. Five out of nine participants expressed gestures to reciprocate for their family support. Sana, a 30-year-old working mother, shared how she expressed her gratitude:

Sometimes I buy gifts for my mother to show my appreciation for the extra time she spends taking care of my child. Since she is getting old, it's a lot of pressure on her. I give her gifts to make her feel good and to let her know I recognize and appreciate the great job she's doing for my child.

By acknowledging her mother's contributions with gifts, Sana supported her family relationships; at the same time her gifts helped to ensure her mother would be willing to assist with her child while she was busy working in the future. This exchange shows a dynamic where the money earned from Sana's job was used to buy gifts, which in turn helps to maintain the caregiving support system provided by her mother.

Similarly, Raha, a 38-year-old mother of two, took on all household chores herself to show her appreciation to her mother because her mother cares for the children: “Since my mother takes care of the children, she cannot do any other household chores. That is why I cook for the family and manage all the other household chores with the help of my helping hands.” Raha’s statement reveals how she negotiated her work-family boundaries by exchanging household chores as a gift for her mother who cared for the children when Raha worked. Raha’s actions demonstrated gratitude and recognition for her mother’s support, effectively maintaining family harmony and maintaining her work-family boundaries.

Isha, a 26-year-old working mother, adapted her approach to household responsibilities based on her evolving circumstances:

I know I cannot take care of my family and the household responsibilities as I did before. Even though they (my in-laws) never complain about it, whenever I get some time—whether during working hours, on weekends, or during breaks on weekdays—I try my best to do as many household tasks as possible.

Isha communicated her sense of responsibility toward her family by assisting as she could. By utilizing her available time—whether during work hours, weekends, or breaks—Isha optimized her ability to meet family needs while fulfilling her work commitments.

### ***Reciprocating Workplace Support***

While reciprocating support from their families remains crucial, participants also express a sense of responsibility to reciprocate for their workplace support. Seven of nine participants indicated that they received significant support from their workplace during their tough times, and now they feel a strong sense of responsibility to give back to their employers. Poppy, a 29-

year-old working mother, further emphasized her sense of duty and appreciation towards her supportive workplace:

My workplace supported me during my difficult times, so I feel a sense of responsibility toward them. When I have work obligations and my family needs me simultaneously, I prioritize my work responsibilities. I believe that if I'm receiving 60% support from my workplace, it's my duty to give back the remaining 40%.

Her prioritization of work responsibilities when faced with simultaneous demands from her family shows her commitment to maintaining clear boundaries between her professional obligations and personal responsibilities.

Similarly, Sana also feels grateful to her workplace for giving her support during her pregnancy. This support makes her prioritize work more now:

During my pregnancy I got significant support from my office. That is why I am taking work pressure now. Since they supported me during my difficult times, I feel it's my duty to take on more work now.

Sana's acknowledgement of the support received during her pregnancy motivates her to focus on work now. Her belief in reciprocating by taking on more work reflects her commitment to work.

By prioritizing their work responsibilities, both Poppy and Sana show gratitude for the opportunities and assistance provided by their employers which strengthens their professional relationships and contributes positively to their expected work-family boundary management.

### ***Disclosing Personal Information to Gain Workplace Support/ Flexibility***

All nine of the interview participants reported that they often relied on support and flexibility from their work supervisors and colleagues to effectively manage their dual responsibilities at work and home. By sharing details about their family or health obligations,

these mothers were able to negotiate more accommodating work schedules. For example, Jennie, a 34-year-old working mother, shared about the importance of developing workplace relationships and disclosing personal information:

Last month, I needed to take a two-day leave from work to travel with my son. When I informed my supervisor and colleagues, they were very understanding and didn't question my decision. Instead, they were incredibly supportive. They assisted me with buying tickets and other travel arrangements. They also shared plenty of advice on how to manage traveling alone with a child.

Jennie's experience highlights that when she disclosed personal information to her supervisor and colleagues, she was able to effectively negotiate the boundary between her professional obligations and family responsibilities.

Isha, a 26-year-old working mother, also shared how informing her team leader about a situation with her son's health helped her manage work obligations. Isha remarked: "Fortunately, I have always got the support I needed." Isha's disclosures about family needs helped ensure that her workplace understood and accommodated her family commitments. Similarly, Raha, a 38-year-old working mother, sought and found crucial support from her workplace management during her pregnancy:

When I was pregnant with my second daughter, my doctor recommended complete bed rest throughout the pregnancy to ensure the child's survival. I promptly informed my workplace about this situation and sought their assistance...Fortunately, the management was supportive...they not only approved six months of maternity leave but also granted me medical leave prior to the childbirth.

Raha's story demonstrates how workplace relationships and disclosures facilitated tangible and emotional support to manage personal challenges impacting work. Communicating issues openly helped Raha get the medical and emotional support she needed while negotiating her work-family boundaries while facing a difficult personal time.

The second research question focused on the communication strategies used by Bangladeshi working mothers to maintain and negotiate boundaries between their work and home domains. All interview participants expressed a strong desire to separate their work and family lives, though they acknowledged the difficulty in keeping the domains separated. To navigate these difficulties, the participants employed direct communication and actions as communication strategies to seek assistance from family members and workplaces to better negotiate their work-life boundaries. The participants requested family members, particularly their mothers-in-law and mothers, for childcare assistance during busy work periods. They also communicated their work schedules with family to set clear boundaries and reduce conflicts. Further, open conversations with spouses were perceived as essential, involving seeking advice, sharing work-related responsibilities, and receiving emotional support. Participants reciprocated family support through gestures such as gifts or taking on additional household chores. Additionally, participants felt a responsibility to reciprocate workplace support by prioritizing work responsibilities and taking on more tasks as a way of showing appreciation for the flexibility and understanding provided by employers. Finally, disclosing personal details about family or health obligations to workplace supervisors and colleagues also helped participants negotiate more accommodating work schedules, facilitating understanding and support from the workplace. These transparent and ongoing communication strategies allowed the participants to negotiate and maintain boundaries, creating a supportive environment both at home and at work.

## Discussion

This study's exploration of work-life experience among Bangladeshi working mothers reveals a nuanced interplay of culture, society, family relationships, workplace dynamics and other support systems. The findings include several challenges unique to Bangladeshi working mothers, as well as communication strategies used to negotiate and uphold boundaries between their work and home domains. Further, the findings underscore the significance of familial support networks and workplace accommodations in facilitating work-life boundary management.

The framework of the work-family border theory posits that effective boundary management is crucial for reducing role conflict and enhancing well-being (Clark, 2000). The border types (i.e., physical, temporal, and psychological), and the border characteristics (i.e., permeability, flexibility, and blending) helped me explore the experiences of Bangladeshi working mothers' navigation, negotiation, and management of boundaries between their work and home domains. Additionally, the concept of border-crossers and border-keepers provided a framework to understand how the working mothers as border-crossers communicated strategies to their support system (i.e., spouse, parents, workplace supervisors) that allowed these people to act as border-keepers at times between work and life.

To address the first research question, the findings suggest that participants encountered challenges regarding their work-life boundary management from three key areas: societal expectations, familial pressures, and workplace dynamics and professional challenges. The societal expectations that women act as the primary caregiver and provide unpaid care to the family that is prevalent in research (Drago, 2007; Hays, 1996) was confirmed throughout the findings of this study. Participants, such as Anna and Raha faced challenges related to societal

expectations and gender norms that expect women to prioritize domestic duties over career aspirations. Thus, the findings of this study suggests that societal expectations frequently permeate the physical and temporal boundaries for Bangladeshi working mothers to be available for caregiving and to attend to their families when needed. This cultural expectation can make it difficult for women to keep their work and family life separated, which contributes to heightened work-family conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In Bangladesh's highly patriarchal society (Agarwal, 1997), this study confirmed the expectation to prioritize family responsibilities over working mothers' careers places, which created considerable pressure on Bangladeshi working mothers in the study to navigate their work-life boundaries.

Familial pressure emerged as another significant challenge for Bangladeshi working mothers in navigating their work-life boundaries. Previous research has documented the heavy influence of familial expectations on women's work-life experience (Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Participants, such as Shila, highlighted the emotional burden of feeling inadequate when she could not meet her in-laws' expectations due to work commitments. This supports research that contends that after marriage, Bangladeshi women are expected to move in with their in-laws and are responsible for taking care of the family and in-laws (Jasmine, 2022; Kandiyoti, 2002).

The lack of husbands' support among Bangladeshi working mothers in this study further compounded work-life boundary navigation challenges. Participants, such as Rosie and Anna, illustrated how the absence of consistent spousal support led to an unequal distribution of household responsibilities for them. This imbalance forced participants to bear the brunt of domestic chores on top of their professional duties.

Additionally, the impact of family pressures on interview participants indicated more permeability in the physical and psychological border between their work and home domains. The lack of spouse or in-laws' support suggested more permeable physical borders as well. Without support, the working mothers in this study described how they were required to be physically available to take care of household responsibilities and childcare that permeated the physical boundaries and interrupted the overall boundary management. Participants' feelings of inadequacy and guilt suggested more permeable psychological borders; participants struggled with being fully present at work without worrying about childcare or household duties. This flexibility of psychological work-family border eventually made it difficult for Bangladeshi working mothers to be productive in their work domains. The study participants experienced a "second shift" where women are expected to manage both professional and domestic responsibilities (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Additionally, some participants, for example Shila, Isha, and Sana, expressed feelings of guilt about prioritizing their careers over dedicating more time to childcare responsibilities. This supports previous research which indicates that mothers often feel a sense of guilt as they strive to maintain "good mothering" standards that require a significant amount of time and are personally demanding (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; Sutherland, 2010).

While some participants, such as Isha, Rosie, Poppy, and Sana, benefited from flexible work arrangements and understanding supervisors, others, such as Anna, Jennie, and Shila, encountered rigid organizational cultures that posed difficulties in managing work-life boundaries for working mothers. Rigid workplace cultures required participants to be available for any work emergencies at any time. This demanding uncertainty made the temporal borders of the Bangladeshi working mothers work-life domains highly permeable and contributed to

negative experience of participants' work-life boundary management. Additionally, the challenges faced by the participants in balancing childcare and career responsibilities, as seen in Poppy's chaotic mornings and Sana's struggles with a sick child, underscored the dual burdens that working mothers in Bangladesh likely navigate. In Sana's case, dealing with a sick child involved frequently checking her phone while at work, which was an indication of psychological work-life border permeation which made it difficult for Sana to keep her work and family life separated. On the other hand, Poppy's struggle with feeding her child and logging into work at the same time in the morning is an example of how the physical borders of her work and home domains were permeated. The emotional burden and feelings of overwhelm reported by the study participants aligned with Nomaguchi and Milkie's (2020) findings that stress factors related to childcare can disproportionately burden mothers, particularly those with fewer socioeconomic resources and marginalized statuses. The challenges faced by Bangladeshi working mothers emphasize the importance of communication strategies that acknowledge and address cultural norms and organizational barriers to facilitate work-life boundary management.

Any unintended and frequent permeability or flexibility of physical, temporal, or psychological borders can disrupt the smooth functioning of work-life domains (Clark, 2000). These interruptions posed challenges for Bangladeshi working mothers in this study in effectively navigating their work-life boundaries and maintaining a clear separation between both domains. When these borders become difficult to navigate, it impacts the decision to allocate time, energy, and attention appropriately to both work and family demands. As evidence from the participants suggests, work-family boarder disruptions can lead to heightened stress, role conflict, and difficulty in managing work and family life boundaries. Thus, effective boundary management strategies become crucial in mitigating these challenges, ensuring that

work and home domains remain distinct and boundary management and negotiation allow Bangladeshi working mothers to handle the demands of both domains more efficiently, reducing stress and role conflict.

To address the second research question, while exploring the communication strategies utilized by Bangladeshi working mothers to maintain and negotiate boundaries between their work and home domains, the data emphasized that direct communication with family and workplace helped to manage work and family boundary challenges. As Clark (2000) mentioned, direct communication to maintain and negotiate boundaries allows individuals to act as border-crossers who must negotiate with border-keepers to manage their dual responsibilities effectively.

All the participants directly requested extended family members, such as mothers-in-law or parents, to provide childcare support. This practice by participants aligned with the traditional Bangladeshi extended family system where multiple generations live together and share responsibilities (Jasmine, 2022; Mim, 2020). In this context, the working mother participants acted as border-crossers, who navigated between the domains of work and home, negotiating the boundaries to suit their needs. They sought support from family members who often served as border-keepers. Seeking help from family members ensured the psychological borders between their work and home domains were less permeable or flexible. The mothers-in-law or parents, acting as border-keepers, played a significant role in defining and maintaining these boundaries for participants. By taking on childcare responsibilities, these border-keepers helped uphold the separation between work and home domains, allowing the working mothers to focus on their professional duties without psychological border interruptions.

Assigning childcare tasks to other family members helped participants ensure effective division of time and shared responsibilities without worrying about family while working. Requesting help for childcare also helped participants maintain the physical border between their work and home domains. As their family members took on the responsibility of childcare, they acted as border-keepers, ensuring that the working mothers, as border-crossers, could remain physically present in their work environment without being interrupted by domestic duties. This division of responsibilities helped maintain clearer physical boundaries, allowing the working mothers to manage their dual roles effectively.

Additionally, participants like Raha and Sana communicated their work schedules with their families to set boundaries and manage their responsibilities effectively. Raha and Sana acted as border-crossers, who navigate between the work and home domains. By understanding and respecting the communicated work schedules, their family members, as border-keepers, helped maintain the psychological borders, ensuring that family commitments did not permeate into the work domain. This practice facilitated coordination and enhanced the participants' ability to navigate the demands of both their work and home domains. Clearly communicating work schedules helped Bangladeshi working mothers in this study manage the psychological borders between work and life, which could easily be permeated if the work commitments were not directly communicated to the family members. This approach ensured that the psychological borders remained intact, allowing the working mothers to focus on their professional duties without mental interruptions from home responsibilities.

Despite the patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society, Bangladeshi married women are participating in the workforce more than ever before (Solotaroff et al., 2019). The findings of this study suggest that the trend of increased participation of women in the workforce requires

working mothers to communicate directly with the family to establish boundaries and manage their responsibilities effectively. This shift in the societal dynamic considers women as border-crossers who are increasingly manage traditional family roles alongside professional commitments, with the support of their families as border-keepers.

By having intentional and purposeful conversations with their spouses, participants like Isha and Sana acted as border-crossers who actively manage and negotiate the psychological borders between their work and home domains. Through these conversations, they clarified expectations and managed stress effectively, to ensure that work-related concerns did not permeate their home domain and vice versa. Furthermore, reciprocating family and workplace support played a crucial role in border management for Bangladeshi working mothers. By fostering mutual respect and understanding within both the family and workplace, these participants ensured that their family and workplace played a border-keeper's role to help maintain the physical and psychological borders between their work and home domains. This support allowed working mothers to focus on their professional responsibilities without undue interference from their personal lives, thereby maintaining effective work-life boundaries.

The final strategy employed by participants like Jennie, Isha, and Raha was by disclosing personal information to their workplace supervisors. Clark (2000) stated that border-keepers are more likely to give support to the border-crossers when they have the information and understanding of other domain happenings. Thus, by being transparent with the workplace supervisors, these working mothers effectively negotiated and managed the physical and temporal borders between their work and life domains. This transparency allowed the study participants to define when and where their professional responsibilities began and ended, thereby maintaining a temporal boundary between work and home domains. On the other hand,

workplace supervisors and colleagues served as border-keepers in this scenario and played a significant role in navigating borders when they were understanding and accommodating the participants' personal needs. By providing support and flexibility, supervisors and colleagues helped participants navigate and uphold the physical borders of their work commitments. This support ensured that the working mother's physical presence at work aligned with their family commitments. This allowed the Bangladeshi working mothers to manage their roles effectively without any overlap between work and home domains.

The framework of work-family border theory highlights that boundary management is essential (Clark, 2000); this study provides support for this claim through findings that Bangladeshi working mothers' boundary management enabled them to balance their dual responsibilities effectively. Effective boundary management strategies proved to be crucial for Bangladeshi working mothers in mitigating the challenges posed by unintended permeability or flexibility of physical, temporal, or psychological borders. These strategies assisted Bangladeshi working mothers, as border-crossers, in keeping their work and home domains separated through the help of their family and workplace, as border-keepers, to prevent disruptions that can complicate the border management of both domains.

### **Implications**

This study focused on the communication aspect of the Bangladeshi working mothers' experiences of managing dual roles at work and home. Using the work-family border theory the findings of this study address the challenges working mothers in Bangladesh communicated while navigating their work-life responsibilities, as well as the communication strategies they employed to overcome those challenges to navigate boundaries of their work and family life.

### *Implications for Working Mothers*

The themes from this study have practical implications that can significantly aid Bangladeshi working mothers in navigating the conflicts between their work and family responsibilities. By addressing the societal expectations placed on Bangladeshi working mothers, this study highlights the factors contributing to their feelings of frustration and inadequacy. The findings of this study also demonstrate ways Bangladeshi working mothers can better manage their work and family life. The data suggests that when working mothers engage in clear and direct communication with their employers, colleagues, and family members they can obtain support and negotiate work and family obligations with greater success. Clearly stating when they cannot be reached due to family commitments and establishing boundaries can help them manage work-life expectations and reduce role conflicts. This type of communication can help foster a strong support system among family members, friends, and even colleagues that can be beneficial for Bangladeshi working mothers.

Further, engaging in conversations with their spouses, in-laws, and other family members to get mental support and share household responsibilities can alleviate the burden on working mothers. Building a support groups or networks of other working mothers can also provide emotional support and practical advice. Examining the lives and issues of working mothers within the broader Asian cultural context is vital. The cultural and thinking patterns of women from underdeveloped or developing countries differ significantly from those in the West. For example, Anna, a 26-year-old working mother, shared her concerns:

Since I am working at a government institution, if I leave my job now, I won't be able to secure another government job when my son is older because my age will exceed the requirement by then... In Western countries, you can work whenever you want. If you

stop working now, you can start working after two years if you want, or you can study further and switch to a different sector. But this flexibility is not there in Bangladesh.

This is one example of how Bangladeshi working mothers perceive work opportunities; some participants shared that they feared that if they took a break from their work for a few years for childcare, they would not be able to restart their careers. This fear highlights the inflexibility within the Bangladeshi job market, which contrasts with perceptions of the more flexible career options available in Western countries. Recognizing these unique challenges can encourage Bangladeshi working mothers to advocate for supportive workplace policies that can reduce work-life conflict.

### ***Implications for Organizations***

Raising awareness about the economic, social, and personal benefits of supporting working mothers can be crucial for driving positive change in communities and workplaces. Advocating for workplace daycare facilities came up several times in the interviews as a critical need for Bangladeshi working mothers to lessen childcare responsibilities and enhance their work-life balance. Raha, a 38-year-old mother of two, advocated passionately: “The only path to help working mothers in Bangladesh is by creating daycare facilities.” By advocating for these facilities, Raha aimed to reduce the stress and logistical challenges associated with childcare. This could allow mothers like herself to focus more effectively on their professional roles. Lisa, a 32-year-old working mother, emphasized the benefits of workplace daycare:

I think if organizations facilitate with a standard daycare for their employees, working mothers would be able to work efficiently. Because if the working mother is not stressed out thinking about their children, then she will be able to perform better at her workplace.

Lisa's statement highlighted that daycare facilities can support mothers by providing a safe environment for their children and can also contribute to a more flexible work-life boundary. This flexibility would allow mothers to engage more fully in their professional tasks while knowing that their children are well-cared for nearby.

As a result of this research, organizations in Bangladesh will be better able to understand the unique challenges their female employees may experience. Thus, these organizations may be able to use these findings to identify and offer family friendly benefits to their female employees, who are also mothers, to help them achieve their expected work-life balance. By highlighting the contributions and challenges faced by Bangladeshi working mothers, there is an opportunity to advocate for policies and practices that better accommodate their needs. This could include initiatives such as flexible working arrangements, improved childcare options, and support networks that alleviate the dual burdens of work and family responsibilities.

### ***Implications for Children***

In Bangladesh, the influence of women working outside can not only benefit the children individually, but this can also broadly contribute to the narratives of societal progress toward gender equality and unbiased treatment toward women in general. The impact of Bangladeshi working mothers on their children's perspective can be significant. The participants, as working mothers, can serve as powerful role models for their children, especially for daughters, by challenging traditional patriarchal norms and demonstrating that women can successfully manage both their careers and family life. This visibility can help normalize the idea of women in the workforce, and potentially influence children's future aspirations and career choices.

By observing their mother's dedication and resilience, children may develop a broader perspective of what is possible for women with dedication and hard work. This can foster a

mindset in the children that values gender equality and supports the idea that both men and women can work outside and share the domestic responsibilities. This mindset of children, who are the future generation, can help combat the norms of highly patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society. Additionally, children can develop skills through observing and modeling their parents. Male and female children may benefit from different models: fathers modeling support and mothers modeling direct communication and building family relationship.

Therefore, it is crucial to address the work-life issues faced by working mothers in developing countries, such as societal expectations, and lack of support from spouses and in-laws, and introduce productive communication solutions to the newer generation. This awareness can help children prepare for their futures to drive significant societal change.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This research, although intentionally designed, includes some limitations that point to directions for future research. One limitation is that participants were recruited only from Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Even though working mothers are struggling all over the country, this research only considered participants from Dhaka to keep a clear focus and gain a deeper understanding of Bangladeshi working mothers experiences in urban areas. It is important to remember that the findings of this research are only based on experiences of nine working mothers, thus the findings cannot be generalized for other groups of working mothers in the country. One strength of this study is that it represents the challenges and communication strategies of educated working mothers from Bangladesh and furthers our understanding of this important group. However, the number of participants for this study was limited because the data was collected through in-depth interviews. Therefore, additional research is needed with more participants to further understand this important group.

Another limitation is that it is common for working women to experience a great deal of difficulty during pregnancy, however, eligibility for participating in this study did not include pregnant women. It is important to acknowledge that the struggles of working mothers who are expecting a baby might be different from those who already have a child or children at home. While analyzing data from pregnant working women is beyond the scope of this study, this could be a topic for another research study that would solely focus on pregnant working women in Bangladesh.

Moreover, this research focused on work-life boundary management of Bangladeshi working mothers, and during the interview, the participants talked about the detrimental impact of work-family stress on their mental health and wellbeing. For instance, Lisa shared her struggle with managing motherhood and her profession: “I think I might have a mental disorder because I become very angry and abusive with my child when I'm stressed from work.” Lisa’s behavior indicated a significant impact of work-family stress on her mental health and well-being. Here she questioned her mental health status due to her aggressive reactions to work-life stress. Therefore, conducting research to explore how work-life boundary management intersects with “mental health needs” in helpful or detrimental ways could be interesting and important. The study also found that marital support varied from person to person. It would be worthwhile to explore the impact of boundary management on marital relationships and how it can help or harm relationship dynamics. Finally, while this study answers the call for and furthers the need for research to recognize the differences in cultural expectations and perspectives, more work is needed. It is crucial to specifically examine the lives of working mothers who live in middle to upper-class families. For instance, in lower-income families, women often work out of necessity, with both spouses needing to contribute financially to support the family. On the other hand,

upper-class families and educated women in Bangladesh often face societal scrutiny regarding their decision to work. Applying Western standards to the lives of working women in underdeveloped or developing countries may not provide a full understanding of the situation due to differences in culture, religion, tradition, and expectations. Therefore, future studies should delve deeper into the unique challenges faced by working mothers in these regions and develop proper approaches to address the needs of working mothers in South Asia and beyond.

This research can serve as a foundation for future studies focusing on the communication challenges faced by working mothers in underdeveloped or developing countries in South Asia. Additionally, this study focused exclusively on the difficulties faced by working mothers in Bangladesh. Thus, future research could look at how society is slowly changing due to the increasing number of working women in Bangladesh. With increasing workforce participation (Haque et al., 2021), there has been an increase in divorce rates in Bangladesh, particularly in the urban areas, over the past few years (Haque, 2021). One of the reasons for the high divorce rate is stated to be the inability of working women to spend ample time with their family members (Mannan, 2020). Therefore, it would be interesting to research the extent to which, if at all, working women are responsible for the high divorce rate in Bangladesh.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the challenges and communication strategies employed by educated working mothers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, as they navigate their work-life boundaries. Using the framework of Clark's (2000) work-family border theory, the findings reveal a complex interplay of societal expectations, familial pressures, and workplace dynamics that influence how these mothers manage their dual roles. Societal norms expect women to prioritize domestic responsibilities which often permeate physical and temporal boundaries, complicating the

separation of work and family life boundaries. Familial pressures, particularly from in-laws and spouses, further challenge boundary management by influencing psychological borders and contributing to feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Moreover, rigid workplace cultures and the lack of supportive policies can lead to heightened stress and difficulty in balancing professional and personal responsibilities. Despite these challenges, the study highlights how the Bangladeshi working mother participants employ various communication strategies to negotiate and uphold boundaries. Direct communication with family members and workplace supervisors emerges as crucial in managing expectations and responsibilities effectively. These strategies position the mothers as border-crossers navigating between the demands of work and home, while family members and supervisors act as border-keepers supporting their efforts. The implications of this research extend beyond theoretical insights, emphasizing the practical need for organizational policies that promote flexibility and support for working mothers. Initiatives such as workplace daycare facilities and flexible scheduling can significantly alleviate the dual burdens faced by working women, enhancing their well-being and productivity. This study also implies that working mothers in Bangladesh can serve as role models for their children, by challenging patriarchal norms and demonstrating that women can maintain careers and family life simultaneously. Future research should explore the intersection of boundary management with mental health outcomes and marital relationships in similar cultural contexts. Ultimately, this research contributes to understanding the nuanced experiences of Bangladeshi working mothers and informs strategies to support their dual roles effectively. This study tries to contribute valuable insights into the global discourse on gender, work, and family, advocating for policies and practices that empower working mothers to succeed in both the workplace and family life at large.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Materials

The social media post used for recruiting participants:

IRB #: 24.193  
IRB Approval Date: March 26, 2024

### Calling for Research Participants!



Are you a working mother living in Dhaka? I want to hear your story! Join my study exploring the experiences of educated working mothers in Dhaka as they navigate work and family life responsibilities.

Your voice matters! Share your insights and experiences through an online interview (40-60 minutes).

To be considered for the interview-

- You must be 18 years of age or older
- Living with your children
- Have an internet connected device (computer, smartphone, or tablet)

As a token of appreciation, participants receive 500 Taka!

Interested in participating? Please email me at [jzinia@uwm.edu](mailto:jzinia@uwm.edu) for more information.



## Appendix B: Interview Consent Form and Interview Protocol and Questions



Informed Consent for Research Participation

IRB #: 24.193

IRB Approval Date: March 26, 2024

### Interview Consent Form

<b>Study title</b>	Experiences of Bangladeshi working mothers.
<b>Researcher/s</b>	University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Sarah Riforgiate, Professor of Communication Jannatul Ferdous Zinia, Graduate Student, Communication MA

We're inviting you to participate in a research study. Participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now, you can always change your mind later. There are no negative consequences, whatever you decide.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

This study aims to examine challenges Bangladeshi working women experience, as they adjust to their lives as employed mothers. The communication strategies utilized by these women and the support they get (e.g., emotional, social, instrumental) from a variety of sources (e.g., supervisors, coworkers, family, and friends) will be identified to help them maintain boundaries between their work and home domains. The information gathered will be shared to shed light onto the struggle Bangladeshi working mothers go through and will also be used in presentations and publications to share the work broadly.

**What are the requirements for participating in this study?**

To be eligible for this study, you must reside in Dhaka, the nation’s capital. Participants must be aged 18 or more, who work outside of their home and live with their child/children in the same household to be qualified for this study. **What will we do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will take part in an interview over Microsoft Teams or Zoom that will be audio/visually recorded. The interview questions ask about Bangladeshi working mothers family dynamics, their relationships with their families, their sources of support, and their communication strategies to maintain work/life balance. We will ask you to share stories and examples of experiences that you have had while balancing your personal and professional lives. We will end the interviews by asking a few general demographic questions.

<b>Possible risks</b>	<b>How we’re minimizing these risks</b>
As you recall personal experiences, some of these might be triggering or upsetting.	You can stop or pause the interview at any time. Additionally, you can skip questions and/or ask me to remove your information from the study, and we will remove it.
There is a minimal risk that you may be identified based on your answers.	To safeguard against this, all study information will be stored within a password protected computer. Further, your interview information will be de-identified, meaning that all identifying information (i.e., names, locations, class titles) will be removed from the interview transcripts and the recordings will be deleted after transcription.

There may be risks we don't know about yet. Throughout the study, we'll tell you if we learn anything that might affect your decision to participate.

### Other Study Information

Possible benefits	Participation in this study provides an opportunity for you to share stories about your experiences. Talking can be beneficial because it allows you to reflect and develop new insights, knowledge, or increased self-awareness. This expanded understanding can empower you to make more informed decisions regarding your work-life balance in the future.
Estimated number of participants	25 Working mothers living in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
How long will it take?	Interviews are anticipated to last between 40 to 60 minutes depending on how much you want to share.
Costs	None
Compensation	Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants will receive a \$5 gift card equivalent to 500 Taka (Bangladeshi currency) compensation.
Future research	Interview transcripts without identifying information (de-identified) may be shared with other researchers or used in future studies. You won't be told specific details about these future research studies.
Audio/Video Recordings	We would like to audio/video record your interview so that we can create transcripts of what you say during the interview. The

	audio/video recording is optional. If you do not want to be recorded, please let us know and we will instead take detailed notes during our discussion.
Funding source	John Paul Jones Scholarship

**Data Security**

What identifying information will be collected and why?	Your image and voice will be recorded during the interview to allow me to focus on what you are saying and your stories. We will first translate, and then transcribe the interview and delete the recordings once the transcripts have been checked for accuracy. Once the recording is destroyed, we will remove any identifying information that may link you to the interview in the transcripts.
How long will my data be kept?	Audio/visual recordings will be kept for approximately one month to allow for transcription and to verify the transcripts are correct. Then the recordings will be deleted. The de-identified transcripts will be kept indefinitely for future research.
How is data kept secure?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All recordings will be deleted once the interview has been transcribed and checked for accuracy.</li> <li>• Your name and identifying information will be removed from the interview transcripts.</li> <li>• All electronic data and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As with any data collected online, there is always a risk of data being hacked or intercepted. We are using a secure system to collect this data, but we cannot completely eliminate this risk.</li> </ul>
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**Who might see my data and why?**

The researchers	To conduct the study and analyze the data
The IRB (Institutional Review Board) at UWM  The Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) or other federal agencies	To ensure we are following laws and ethical guidelines
Anyone (public)	Study findings will be shared in publications or presentations.  You will not be identified by name. If we quote you, we will use a pseudonym.

**Contact information:**

For questions about the research, problems, or complaints	Sarah Riforgiate, Professor of Communication  Jannatul Ferdous Zinia, Graduate student, Communication MA	<a href="mailto:sriforgi@uwm.edu">sriforgi@uwm.edu</a>  <a href="mailto:jzinia@uwm.edu">jzinia@uwm.edu</a>
For questions about your rights as a research participant, problems, or complaints	IRB (Institutional Review Board; provides ethics oversight)	414-662-3544 / <a href="mailto:irbinfo@uwm.edu">irbinfo@uwm.edu</a>

## **Interview Protocol and Questions**

### **Opening Script**

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about your experiences as a working mother. Before we begin, I want to ensure that you have had a chance to review the consent form. I also need to confirm that you are at least 18 years old and currently a working mother in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Can you please confirm this? Thank you.

As you know, this study aims to learn more about the experiences of working mothers in Bangladesh who juggle both work and family responsibilities. Please know that there are no right or wrong answers, and you are free to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. Providing examples in your responses can help me understand your experiences better, but please try to avoid using specific names of people or entities. If you do share any identifying information, I will remove or replace it in the interview transcripts to maintain confidentiality. I want to assure you that everything you say during the interview will remain confidential. The study may report some themes and use direct quotations, but we will not include any information that can be traced back to you.

Would you be comfortable with me recording this interview? Once you confirm your verbal consent, I will begin the recording. (Confirm verbal consent and begin recording on the video call.) Are you ready to begin?

### **Work-family intercept**

- What led you to your current career path?
- When did you start your position?
- Please tell me about your current position/job.
  - How do you feel about your work?

- What do you enjoy the most about your work?
- What are some of the challenges?
- Can you give me some examples?
- Do you talk about your family at work?
  - If you do, can you give me an example?
  - If you don't then why don't you?
- What is your family like?
  - What does your family structure look like?
  - How many people are living in your household?
  - How would you describe your interactions and relationships with your family members?
  - How do you share household responsibilities with your family?
  - Who helps you the most with the household responsibilities?
- What does your family say about you working? Can you give me some examples?
- How do your work and family life relate to each other?
  - Could you please give me some examples of those experiences?
  - What are the factors at home that contribute to your experience of your work and family life? Can you give me an example of that?
  - What are the factors at work that contribute to your experience of your work and family life? Can you give me an example of that?
- Have you ever received any support from your employer and workplace community that helped you with your work and family responsibilities?

- Please give me some examples of what kind of support you received and how that might have helped you?
- Have you ever received any support from your family that helped you with your work and family responsibilities?
  - Please give me some examples of what kind of support you received and how that might have helped you?
- Do you get support from other sources for your work and family?
  - Could you give me some examples of what kind of support you received and how that might have helped you?
- What advice would you give to other working mothers about work and family responsibilities?

### **Demographic information**

- What is your current age?
- Do you currently have a partner or a spouse?
- Did you choose to get married out of love or was it an arranged marriage?
- For how long have you been married or how long were you married for?
- How many children do you have?
  - What are their ages?
- What is the highest degree you have obtained?
- For how long have you been in the workforce?
- What industry/ field do you work in?
- Do you work from home or outside your home?
- What is your current designation in your workplace?

- How many hours do you work in a typical week?
- What is your estimated salary for a year?

Thank you again for your participation in this study. Before we conclude, is there anything else you would like to add that could be valuable to my research? If you don't have anything to add that's ok too. Thank you for your participation!

### Appendix C: Participant Demographics

List of all interview participants, including their age, number of children, years employed, nature of work, industry/ field of work, weekly working hours and their estimated salary for a year:

Participants	Interview length (in minutes)	Age	No of children	Years employed	Nature of work	Field of work	Weekly working hours	Yearly salary (in \$)
Isha	47	26	One	0.5	Remote	Education	45	4084
Anna	40	26	One	4	In-person	Bank	35	2978
Jennie	40	34	One	10	In-person	Pharmaceutical	45	5105
Rosie	44	42	One	19	In-person	Education	25	2553
Shila	50	42	Two	20	In-person	Education	35	2127
Raha	61	38	Two	15	In-person	Bank	40	5105
Lisa	48	32	One	10	In-person	Education	45	2127
Poppy	55	29	One	7	Remote	Engineering	40	5105
Sana	53	30	One	7	Hybrid	Software development	50	13615