

Strength in Scarcity: A Diary-interview Study on the Lived Experiences of Malay Urban Low-income Working Mothers in Klang Valley, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how low-income working mothers in urban Malaysia nurture personal and spiritual growth amid economic and caregiving challenges. Using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research draws on diary narratives and in-depth interviews with eight participants to uncover their lived experiences. Findings showed that the mothers actively fostered personal development through spiritual and/or religious engagement, knowledge acquisition, and gratitude practices. They displayed great character traits like perseverance, optimism, and self-efficacy in the face of ongoing hardships. However, because not all participants found relief from practising gratitude, the study also emphasises the emotional complexity of this practice. These insights offer a more nuanced understanding of coping strategies among low-income working mothers and emphasise the importance of psychological and spiritual resources. The study calls for strength-based and culturally sensitive interventions to enhance the well-being of these women. Supporting their well-being is crucial not only for improving

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their quality of life but also for enabling their sustained participation in the workforce, ultimately contributing to an increase in the female labour force participation rate.

Keywords: Coping strategies, female labour force participation, interpretative phenomenological analysis, low-income working mothers, urban population

INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in the labour force plays a critical role in driving economic growth and promoting social equity (UN Women, 2023). Economists have long emphasised that when women engage in paid employment, they not only contribute to national productivity but also increase their bargaining power within households (Winkler, 2022). As a result, it will lead to a significant enhancement of their economic value, both within the family unit and across broader societal structures (UN Women, 2023; Winkler, 2022). In Malaysia, addressing the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) is a priority outlined in the 12th Malaysia Plan (12MP) 2021-2025 (Economic Planning Unit, 2021).

However, for low-income working mothers, the realisation of paid employment is often hindered by systemic inequalities (Dodson, 2013). Many navigate a precarious balancing act involving constrained financial resources (Chen et al., 2017), demanding caregiving responsibilities (Ervin et al., 2022; Kida et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2016), and insecure employment within systems that are frequently ill-equipped to provide the structural support required for sustainable well-being (Dodson, 2013). Financial security is determined not only by access to resources but also by their

effective management, as daily spending and saving decisions can have a significant impact on long-term stability (Sabri et al., 2022a, 2023). Positive financial behaviours, influenced by financial literacy, socialisation, values, gender, and personality traits, have been found to improve well-being and resilience in Malaysia, particularly among female-headed households (Burhan et al., 2022; Khalisharani et al., 2022; Sabri et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2022b;). This concern aligns closely with United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5 Gender Equality), which calls for the recognition of unpaid care work, the promotion of women's full participation in the economy, and equal access to leadership and decision-making opportunities (United Nations, 2025).

Indeed, existing literature on low-income women has contributed significantly to our understanding of their socio-economic vulnerabilities (Puteh & Kadir, 2022), including limited access to essential services such as quality child care (Clark et al., 2021; Kowalewska & Vitali, 2021), and the psychological toll of persistent gender inequality both at work and at home (Christopher, 2012; Lamar et al., 2019; Lamar & Forbes, 2020). However, there is a discernible gap in the research when it comes to exploring these working women's active strategies such as how they adapt,

negotiate, and draw upon internal and relational strengths to survive and thrive. Much of the current discourse tends to present them through a deficit lens, often neglecting the agentic ways they respond to their circumstances. In addition, the dichotomy often drawn between economic challenges (Berkman et al., 2014) and psychological resources (Atal & Cheng, 2016) overlooks the interconnectedness of these domains in everyday lived experience.

Theoretical perspectives on stress and coping offer useful tools for examining this intersection. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as “the constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). Their transactional stress model emphasises the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments, foregrounding how personal and contextual factors shape coping processes. Importantly, they acknowledged the central role of personal and social resources in determining one’s capacity to appraise and respond to stress. Building on this, Hobfoll’s (2002) The conservation of resources theory further posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect resources, and that stress arises when these resources are threatened, lost, or insufficient to meet environmental demands. These two models demonstrated how an individual's resource base, which includes psychological, relationship, and spiritual assets, influences stressor perception and coping strategies (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Hobfoll (2002) defines resources as intrinsically valuable, such as internal peace or pride, or useful for achieving desired goals, such as financial means or social support. Individual personality traits like self-efficacy, optimism, and goal-directedness are critical for developing resilience. Recent research has expanded on this perspective, discovering that individuals' proactivity, reflexivity, and hope are critical for adapting to and growing in difficult situations (Contreras et al., 2020; Kerksieck et al., 2019). These internal resources improve people's coping abilities and give them a greater sense of agency, thereby increasing their overall ability to cope effectively (Abdullah & Wider, 2022; Hobfoll, 2002; Hobfoll et al., 2003).

Furthermore, resilience is typically defined in modern discourse using two perspectives that complement one another. The first emphasised the ability to recover and function normally after experiencing adversity, while the second emphasised the proactive aspect of personal development. As a result, individuals not only overcome challenges, but also emerge with increased psychological well-being and capacity (Métais et al., 2022). Core features of resilience include adaptability, self-confidence, a solid sense of self-worth, and the use of effective coping mechanisms (Braveman et al., 2011). Individuals with higher levels of resilience tend to experience reduced stress, lower incidences of depression, and fewer physical symptoms in response to life stressors (Ryan et al., 2005).

In situations where direct action is limited, emotion-focussed coping has been found effective (Folkman et al., 1986) where religious and spiritual coping strategies are prominent within this domain (Zainal-Abidin et al., 2022). While religiosity and spirituality are conceptually distinct, they share a common feature: the pursuit of the sacred human efforts directed toward meaningful goals and ultimate concerns (Hill & Edwards, 2013). These constructs often overlap but are not identical (Krok, 2015). As a result, researchers frequently identified them as complementary constructs such as in the context of personality and mental health (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015; Gall & Guirguis-Younger, 2013).

Religion generally encompasses beliefs, practices, and rituals centered on transcendence, such as belief in God, Allah, Buddha, or a Higher Power (Tuczyńska, et al., 2022). Religious systems typically express specific doctrines about the afterlife and ethical behaviour within a social context, rooted in sacred texts, faith traditions, and moral norms (Tuczyńska, et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Even though it is sometimes practiced within an organised religion, spirituality is associated with mystical, supernatural, individual transcendent experiences (Koenig, 2012; Lavorato Neto et al., 2018). Such experience includes both the experiential discovery of meaning and purpose that are superior to oneself and the pursuit of them.

Recent research has shown that spirituality and faith can be the sources of strength, particularly for those going through

difficult times. For example, Dipierro et al. (2018) discovered that people who engage in spiritual practice can increase hope while decreasing anxiety. Along the same lines, Smeraldo Schell and Silva (2020) emphasised that the difficulties faced by working women are critical for triggering growth in them, provided that these difficulties are supported by faith. Spiritual community is important in helping them develop resilience and a strong identity, which provides both emotional and practical support.

Khamis et al. (2023) investigated the effectiveness of cultural and educational programmes in empowering marginalised mothers. In their study of Arab American parents, they discovered that initiatives based on their own culture and beliefs strengthened their faith and resilience and increased their sense of belonging among mothers, because these programmes connected them with their own family tradition, which channeled into increased emotion and spirituality. Furthermore, Chung's (2017) study on the role of practical theology in daily life discovered that Korean women who have successfully integrated faith into their daily routine have increased emotional strength and a sense of purpose in life. This evidence demonstrates that spirituality and mental health work together to promote healing and personal growth.

However, there is still a scarcity of research on urban low-income working mothers facing life challenges. Specifically, there is a lack of understanding about the use of personal resources and spiritual

support for well-being and development. The scarcity of phenomenological studies has created a barrier to understanding how marginalised groups maintain agency in an environment marked by constant challenges and rising living costs. As a result, it is critical to investigate internal perspectives to understand how these mothers interpret their experiences (Conrad, 1987).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of low-income working mothers in urban areas of Malaysia using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Through the combined use of diary narratives and in-depth interviews, this research seeks to understand how these women manage their scarce resources and cope with ongoing stressors. The study offers insights that support the advancement of UN's SDG 5 Gender Equality and FLFPR through socially and culturally informed policies and interventions that reflect the realities of women's lives on the ground.

METHODS

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA made its first debut in mid-1990s where Jonathan Smith who pioneered the methodology, argued for an experiential and qualitative approach that is born from and centred in the discipline of psychology itself, without borrowing from other disciplines (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is a systematic exploration of human experience, examined in its own terms without the influence of prior psychological constructs or the researchers' own proclivities (Smith, 2017; Tomkins,

2017). It is a set of methodologies that has been informed by three main areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Larkin et al., 2006). These three components are central to IPA study as it will steer the researcher to probe participants with questions within the IPA's theoretical orientation (Noon, 2018).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology explores human experience from a first-person perspective and emphasises direct investigation of lived experiences without reliance on existing theoretical frameworks (Ashworth, 2015; Smith & Nizza, 2021). IPA draws significantly on phenomenological philosophers like Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. Husserl's principle of "going back to the things themselves" underscores phenomenology's focus on intentional consciousness and experiential reflection (Smith et al., 2022). Unlike Husserl's approach of self-description, IPA extends to understanding others' experiences by integrating phenomenology with hermeneutics to interpret experiences within their specific social and historical contexts (Larkin & Thompson, 2011).

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is IPA's second theoretical foundation and is concerned with interpretation, particularly how individuals make sense of their experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2021; Tuffour, 2017). Heidegger emphasises the subjective and interpretive nature of phenomenology and introduced

the double hermeneutic, where researchers interpret participants' interpretations of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Heidegger also highlighted the importance of recognising researchers' preconceptions. He urged a continuous effort to bracket one's preconceived thoughts to let phenomena emerge naturally (Smith et al., 2022). This aligns closely with reflexive practices in qualitative research (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

Idiography

The third pillar of IPA, which is ideography, involves a detailed exploration of individual experiences. This contrasts with nomothetic approaches that aim for generalisations (Smith et al., 2022). IPA's idiographic focus provides rich insights by thoroughly analysing each participant's unique perspective and the intricate relationships among their thoughts, emotions, and actions (Smith & Eatough, 2007). This approach underscores IPA's commitment to exploring deeply personal and context-specific experiences (Tuffour, 2017).

Research Design

This study employed a combination of a seven-day semi-structured diary study followed by semi-structured interviews. These methods are recommended for effectively capturing lived experiences in IPA research (Cudjoe, 2022; Smith et al., 2022). Diaries were semi-structured with minimal open-ended prompts to encourage expressive writing. Participants must write at least 250 words daily. Follow-up

semi-structured interviews complemented the diary entries by providing deeper insights and clarifying experiences where participants may not fully express in writing alone. Interviews were flexible, conversational, and participant-driven to align with IPA's focus on capturing nuanced personal insights (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

Sampling and Recruitment

Following ethical approval from IIUM (IREC 2019 235), participants were recruited via social media adverts and snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria are household income \leq RM4000/month, full-time employment, living in Klang Valley, having caregiving responsibilities, and no prior mental illness history. The study was conducted on a homogenous sample of eight working mothers. The participants were selected purposively to focus on homogeneity relevant to the phenomenon under study. Homogeneity was defined based on their roles as urban low-income working mothers and primary caregivers, rather than marital status. The small sample size ensured the sample's relevance and depth of insights for the IPA approach (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the participants.

Data Collection

Diary Procedure

The diary study was conducted from June to July 2021. Participants began recording at the start of their work week and

Table 1
Participant demographic data

Pseudo-nym	Age	Race*	Religion	Relationship Status	Occupation	Number of Children	Special Needs Child	Parents as Dependent
Anom	43	M	Islam	Married	Storekeeper	2	No	No
Dara	28	M	Islam	Married	Customer service agent	3	No	No
Embun	33	M	Islam	Divorced	Front desk officer	1	No	Yes
Seroja	30	M	Islam	Married	Marketing executive	1	No	No
Melor	28	M	Islam	Married	Admin officer	1	No	No
Orked	42	M	Islam	Married	Private school teacher	3	No	No
Suri	44	M	Islam	Divorced	Admin officer	5	No	No
Kia	42	M	Islam	Divorced	Clerk	2	Second child is autistic	No

*M=Malay

continued daily for seven consecutive days to include both weekdays and weekends. They completed entries each evening by reflecting on significant daily events. To ensure clarity and relevance, participants received thorough explanations of each diary component during the initial briefing to enhance the richness of their narrative responses.

Interview Procedure

Interviews were conducted individually via Zoom from November to December 2021, which lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. All sessions were video recorded. Each interview was tailored specifically to participants' diary entries, which were guided by preliminary IPA analysis of their diary narratives. Customised interview guides were created based on key diary

insights. This guide serves as a flexible framework, not a rigid transcript. The format is appropriate for the method proposed by Elliott and Timulak (2005). Recordings were transcribed verbatim, including nonverbal cues, and saved under participants' pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Both diaries and interviews in this study were analysed using Smith et al.'s (2022) IPA seven-step methodology. This analysis entails reading, taking exploratory notes, creating experiential statements, continuing to analyse other cases, and using personal experiential themes (PETs) to develop group experiential themes (GETs). Diaries were the first thing analysed to gain a better understanding of working mothers' lives. These diaries were created as a

series of personalised interview guides, and the interviews were then analysed. The analysis concentrated on the depth of interpretation, the ideographic approach, and the triangulation of diary entries, interview transcripts, and researcher notes.

Data Triangulation

This study used diary entries, interview transcripts, and researcher field notes to conduct triangulation, which is critical in qualitative research (Fusch et al. 2018). Field notes captured critical information such as participant utterances, keywords, and notable interactions, such as family interruptions during the interview session, indicating a lack of personal space for mothers to speak. To ensure a more in-depth and clear analysis, the researcher writes about the mother's thoughts on personal bias and performance immediately following the interview.

These three sources were compared iteratively. For instance, when a potential theme such as personal spiritual growth appeared in diary narratives, it was cross-checked in subsequent interview analysis and substantiated by field notes that captured moments where participants became visibly emotional when speaking about relying on faith during hardship.

Where diary and interview accounts diverged, these differences were treated as analytically meaningful and interpreted within participants' evolving sense-making rather than as inconsistencies. Such differences were viewed as reflecting shifts in perspective, emotional processing, and reflexivity over time. Diaries captured

participants' immediate lived experience, while interviews enabled reflective (re) interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyses the Group Experiential Theme (GET): Committed to Nurturing Self-Growth and its two accompanying subthemes, using the most important quotes from participants.

Group Experiential Theme: Committed to Nurturing Self-growth

Amidst the trials and tribulations of their circumstances, low-income working mothers exhibited an unyielding determination to evolve. These mothers do not merely view challenges as obstacles but as opportunities for growth. Through their stories, they strove to break free from the constraints of their economic status and drew strength from the belief in self-improvement to thrive. All these underscore the valuable role of strong personality traits that positively shape the way the mother responds to challenges.

Sub-theme 1: Cultivating Personal and Spiritual Development

Orked was very determined to strengthen her connection with Allah SWT by diligently practising religious deeds such as praying on time, doing *zikr*, reciting Qur'an, and performing *tahajjud* of which practices she hardly did before the pandemic hit. She believed that by engaging in those practices will bring her closer to *Allah SWT* of Whom the ultimate strength for her to push competently through her arduous life came.

I am determined to change. I want to improve myself. I want to get closer to The Creator, The God of The Entire Universe. I am determined to recite the Quran every day, doing zikr and send selawat so I can get more strength to face my life every day. (Orked, diary day 2/52)

Orked's determination to connect with *Allah SWT* was apparent when she continuously penned down her religious deeds throughout her diary narratives. She would invoke Allah's beautiful names and attributes as a symbolic way to instill the value of *tawakkul* or reliance in *Allah SWT* as the One who is in control of her affairs. Orked also engaged deeply in self-reflection and connect that with *Allah SWT*'s generosity.

Allah SWT is the All Knowing. The All Hearing of His slaves' pleas. I was just thinking the other day about which budget I can use to buy my kid's milk and milk bottles. *Allah SWT* granted me with *rizq* (provision) that I didn't expect. "Then which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?" (Surah Ar Rahman). (Orked, diary day 6/line 29)

In another diary entry, Orked's narrative reflects her strong commitment to self-improvement and personal growth. She was listening to a motivational live sharing by Mommy Hana company, where she earned her supplementary income from selling educational children's products.

Orked found the discussion to be both interesting and beneficial, which indicates her appreciation for opportunities to gain new knowledge and insights, especially in areas that are relevant to her own personal growth.

Her reflection on feeling "small" and recognising her own flaws suggests that the discussion has had a profound impact on her self-perception. She may have become aware of areas in her life where she can improve or where she falls short, which is a crucial step toward personal growth. Further, Orked expressed a strong desire to grow and improve as a person. Her use of the phrase "*Aamiin Ya Rabbal A'lamin*" indicates a prayerful and sincere aspiration for self-improvement. She sees this knowledge-sharing session as a catalyst for positive change in her life.

Tonight I'm writing while listening to live stream from Mommy Hana. The discussion topic for tonight is very touching that is about the sacrifice of a mother. It's very interesting, a very beneficial knowledge sharing session. It makes me feel so small and made me realised my flaws. I'm hopeful that the sharing tonight can make me to become a better person. *Aamiin Ya Rabbal A'lamin*. (Orked, diary day 4/line 1)

Kia's diary entries revealed her strong desire for education and knowledge despite being deprived of resources. Kia authored impactful narratives on her perception of her family as low-income, which is a status often stigmatised with associations of

limited educational attainment and negative attitudes. Kia expressed her commitment to investing in books and education despite financial constraints. She did not want herself or her children to lack knowledge or intelligence because of their economic situation. This suggests that she values education to overcome adversity and believes in the power of learning to improve her life. She wrote in her diaries:

I spend a lot on books too. I don't want to be stupid. I don't want my kids to be stupid even though we are poor. (Kia, diary day 2/line 124)

Kia emphasised her determination to protect her children from feeling inferior or being demeaned due to their economic status. She believes that acquiring knowledge and building confidence is a way to empower themselves and gain an advantage in life. On top of that, Kia sees education as an avenue to break the cycle of poverty and give her family opportunities for a better future. In another diary narration, Kia wrote:

I fought all odds to make sure they were never belittled and made sure we had an upper hand. Knowledge and confidence is power. (Diary, day 1/line 44)

Highly committed to self-improvement, she also gained knowledge from being an avid listener to podcasts, talk shows and motivational shows on her way to work which she stated to have boosted her self-confidence and social skills. Kia's reference to various talk shows and podcasts, including those that may disagree with

women, indicates that she values exposure to different viewpoints and opinions. She is open to hearing perspectives that challenge her own, which reflect a commitment to intellectual growth and critical thinking. She recognised that listening to these podcasts has practical benefits for her, including improving her communication skills and helping her with her work. Kia's dedication to listening to podcasts reflects her commitment to personal and professional growth, her openness to diverse perspectives and her recognition of the practical benefits of this habit, particularly in terms of communication and presentation skills. As a result, being knowledgeable made her feel empowered to thrive as a breadwinner from a low-income household.

On the way to work, I have to listen to one talk show. So last time it was Ellen, then it was Jordan Petterson. It was all this talk show, talk show, talk show, all the podcast, podcast including the one that disagrees with the women [...] All from the Western countries. Why? Because we don't want to be like that. But it help me with my communication. Because they help me with my works, with what I want and how to put it in proper, what Jordan Petterson say aa, you must know how to present what you want properly. (Kia, interview/transcript 1, line 1459)

Seroja and Anom both thrived by viewing challenges at work as an opportunity for growth. For Seroja, she was driven by the sense of achievement and success hence

she would make sure to perform greatly at any given roles. This mindset reflects her commitment to personal and professional development. It emphasises the value of acquiring new skills and accomplishing challenging goals. Therefore, having this optimistic mindset steers her to not easily give up when facing adversities.

If I like something, I will do it. But even when I work as the Marketing Executive.. it's not something I like to do but I feel like if I can achieve.. especially when I don't have any experience.. that will be something like a big achievement.. (Seroja, interview/line 1085)

Anom resonates Seroja's buoyant character when it comes to work-related strains as she perceived heavy workload as a challenge to further improve herself. Anom conveyed a deep sense of responsibility and commitment to her job which she viewed as essential for their livelihood. Her willingness to adapt to changing responsibilities and her motivation to excel in their role demonstrate a strong work ethic and a desire to contribute significantly to her workplace. Interestingly for Anom, she was motivated to give more to her job also because she held firm to the belief that her job was her source of *rizq*, which means she should not take the responsibilities lightly as *rizq* ultimately came from *Allah SWT*.

I have to wait for the lorry. Sometimes they came in late so I will stay until 6pm. Even on Saturday I will stay until 3pm. Ahh.. it depends.. depends on

the responsibilities at hand. It's very important (laugh) for me to take care of.. because our job is where we get our *rizq* from. So I don't mind given lots of work to do.. I feel like.. hm.. they gave me that position I have to challenge myself and give more than that. (Anom, interview/line 570)

This analysis highlights the significance of character strengths as delineated by Seligman et al. (2005) and McGrath (2023). It reflects how low-income working mothers navigated ongoing hardship. Participants demonstrated intellectual strength, curiosity, perseverance, and courage through continuous learning, self-reflection, and intentional efforts toward self-improvement. These practices were not merely aspirational but functioned as adaptive coping strategies that enabled the mothers to maintain a sense of agency and dignity amid structural constraints. Engagement in learning and personal development appeared to foster a sense of self-efficacy. In line with Hobfoll's (2002) conservation of resources framework, participants seemed better able to manage daily stressors and sustain psychological resources over time. Within this context, character strengths operated as internally cultivated resources that supported psychological adaptation rather than as indicators of unproblematic resilience.

Sub-theme 2: Practising Gratitude and Emotional Coping

These working mothers demonstrated a strong sense of gratitude and a positive

attitude by emphasising the importance of appreciating their blessings. They realised that the blessings bestowed upon them, no matter how small, can give them strength and happiness. This perspective allows them to seek relief and satisfaction when confronted with challenges. Suri's empowered mindset is evident in her refusal to give up on difficult challenges in her life. When she mentioned, "Always believe that happiness is to be created," it conveys that she was actively pursuing positivity during her struggle as a low-income single mother of five.

Always believe that happiness is to be created. That's how we set our mind to be positive.. so I don't continuously feeling down. Of course, to think deeply.. our lives are filled with tests.. since the divorce, I have to make lots of work to survive.. doing all sorts of things to stay relevant.. small income.. I feel embarrassed when compared to my friends from school or uni. When I'm aware that my test is from the financial side.. what I have to do is to be grateful of other things.. my kids are healthy is one blessing.. my kids enjoy memorizing the Qur'an.. even more of a bigger blessing.. my kids are less problematic.. also a huge blessing.. my neighbours are kind.. also a big blessing. My friends are always helping and caring. Isn't it perfect? So which one of the favours to deny? Maybe the downside is when their children's father is not living with us and that my career is not as good as my friends.. but that's

very little (compared to her blessings) [...] more gratitude, less complaints, count your blessing.. always. Only then we'll feel the relief. (Suri, diary day 4/ line 26)

Anom echoes Suri's deep reflection of her life trajectory that eventually brought her back to a deep sense of gratitude towards the provisions that she has now as opposed to what she has not. Having gratitude gave her the clarity to differentiate between her needs and wants which often unaccomplished due to financial constraints.

At the end, I don't want to think so much about buying a house. For me, if my rizq says that it's just renting for me then what can I do? This is comfortable too. I have it all. Enough food, clothes.. Alhamdulillah.. it's fine. We.. we want a luxurious life. When we see others are driving that car and this car. But when.. we want all that. What's that for? It's like.. they have their target and we have our targets [...] For me.. I aimed to buy a house but I also don't want to force myself to it. (Anom, interview/ line 1309)

This finding corroborates with existing research that shows gratitude can have a significant impact on individuals' mental health and well-being, where it positively influences their ability to cope with adversity (Taylor et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2010). Specifically, the narratives of the participants captured the gratitude trait as conceptualised by Wood et al. (2010). They showed gratitude in ways

such as verbalising, focusing on what they have, frequent feelings of awe and enjoying the present moment. They were also committed to nurture gratitude as part of their lifestyle. Seligman et al. (2002) describes 'transcendence' which consists of 'appreciation of beauty and silence', 'gratitude' and 'hope' among others as part of the strength-based traits a person can possess. However, Wood et al. (2010) contended that gratitude should be considered a life orientation distinct from other emotions like optimism, hope, and trust.

Yet, there was also a glimpse at the complexity of gratitude as a coping mechanism as some mothers grappled with its effectiveness in alleviating emotional distress. It is fascinating to see how some participants felt discouraged despite having practised gratitude. Dara and Seroja both expressed feelings of emptiness and disappointment, despite their efforts to focus on what is important to them. This demonstrates that emotional complexity and potential causes extend beyond undesirable outcomes. It implies that these young mothers might have certain expectations about what gratitude should bring them. Perhaps they assumed that simply being aware of their blessings can give them significant emotional relief or life satisfaction. When those expectations were not met, they felt even more perplexed and at loss for solutions.

In the thick of the constantly pressuring work-life predicaments, Dara narrated a high sense of self-blame when she failed to force herself to feel better by being grateful

for having family around her. This kind of maladaptive spiritual coping further pushed Dara to feel downhearted and obstructed in improving her troubled life situation.

I always remind myself that I have three most beautiful kids, I have a husband, my parents and my siblings. What else is lacking? Why do I still feel empty? (Dara, diary day 5, line 25)

The same circumstance was depicted in Seroja's diary narration:

Today is no better than yesterday. I should be grateful to have a roof for shelter and I am still breathing.. but I don't know why I still feel really empty.. just empty. (Seroja, diary day 2/line 1)

The reactions of Dara and Seroja point towards the practice of gratitude as maladaptive to them. As such, not all individuals will have the same cathartic outcomes from gratitude practices, and what may be maladaptive for one person might be adaptive for another. Indeed, existing studies suggest that gratitude alone may not offer adequate protection against maladaptation in the context of prolonged stress or traumatic experiences (Krause, 2009). This could be due to the association between greater adversity accumulation and heightened depressive symptoms, which consequently leads to diminished life satisfaction (Infurna et al., 2023). As a result, the challenges and difficulties individuals encounter might surpass the support provided by gratitude alone. Thus, there appear to be constraints

on gratitude's stress-reducing abilities, with its beneficial impacts being overshadowed by highly stressful life events.

CONCLUSION

The themes highlight the resilience demonstrated by low-income working mothers in their pursuit of personal and professional advancement. Rather than viewing economic hardship and life challenges as impassable obstacles, these women saw them as opportunities for self-improvement and personal development. Their stories revealed the magical role of religion and spirituality in coping, the importance of gratitude, and, most importantly, the promotion of optimistic and positive attitudes toward life.

These findings have drawn attention to the internal strength gained by these mothers, specifically optimism, goal-directed behaviour, and self-esteem. They actively used these personal resources to advance their personal and professional development. These insights revealed not only their tenacity, but also their astute strategy for dealing with adversity. These coping strategies provide useful guidance for designing more effective support interventions.

Importantly, this study's analysis suggests that designated programmes to assist low-income working mothers should go beyond simply overcoming obstacles. In contrast, they should be given more time to identify and develop their character strengths. These women's life experiences remind us that, while

overcoming weaknesses can help prevent failure, purposeful cultivation of strength serves as a foundation for long-term growth among low-income working mothers.

Implications of the Study

The study's findings have significant implications for both research and practice. First, they challenge deficit-based narratives about low-income working mothers by demonstrating how these women actively cultivate personal resources and spirituality to succeed despite adversity. This emphasises the need for future research to employ a more empowering and positive framework when dealing with marginalised groups, particularly in Malaysia, where this viewpoint is frequently overlooked.

Second, while the findings foreground individual strengths such as resilience, gratitude, self-efficacy, and spiritual engagement, these resources do not operate in isolation. Participants' narratives consistently revealed structural constraints that shaped how and to what extent such strengths could be mobilised. Limited access to affordable childcare, rigid workplace arrangements, long working hours, and the rising cost of living in urban areas constrained mothers' capacity to rest, reflect, and sustain well-being. In this sense, personal strengths functioned as adaptive responses within structurally restrictive conditions rather than substitutes for systemic support. Therefore, interventions should adopt a dual approach that combines psychological and emotional support with structural measures such as accessible childcare provision and

flexible work policies, to avoid placing excessive responsibility on mothers to cope individually.

Third, the nuanced findings surrounding gratitude as both a facilitative resource and, at times, a source of emotional tension suggest that psychosocial interventions should be applied sensitively and on an individual basis. While gratitude practices may foster meaning and emotional regulation for some mothers, they may also evoke self-blame or emotional dissonance for others when relief does not follow. Practitioners should therefore support emotional literacy and validation alongside positive coping strategies to ensure that women are not encouraged to suppress distress in the name of gratitude or positivity.

Finally, this study advances the call for socially and culturally grounded policies that support low-income working mothers, particularly in the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Malaysia's 12th Malaysia Plan targets for female labour force participation. Efforts that honor the lived realities and inner strengths of these women such as accessible childcare, flexible work arrangements, and community-based faith and education initiatives can create environments where resilience is sustained and agency is amplified.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study provides an in-depth look into a small sample of urban low-income working mothers' coping mechanisms using diary

narratives for seven-consecutive days followed by interviews. Future studies should employ longitudinal approaches to explore the stability or transformation of coping mechanisms and growth strategies over extended periods. Such research could offer deeper insights into the dynamic nature of resilience of this group. Additionally, future research would benefit from incorporating multiple perspectives, such as those of family members, employers, and social service providers. Including these diverse viewpoints can provide a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the challenges, coping strategies, and resources available to low-income working mothers. This multi-stakeholder approach could reveal insights into how social and workplace environments influence mothers' coping mechanisms and personal growth, thus could enable the development of more robust and context-sensitive interventions and policies.

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