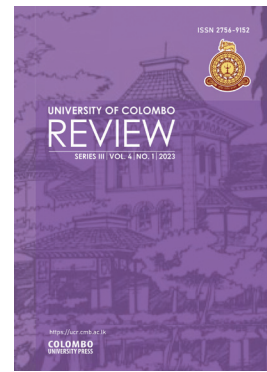


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## **Pursuing Work-Life Balance: A study of Sri Lankan mumpreneurs**

**Malisha Kumaranatunge**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article attempts to identify the strategies women entrepreneurs use to balance their work and family life through an analysis of the daily lives of a subgroup of women entrepreneurs called ‘mumpreneurs’ – defined as women who tailor a business that is suitable for (i.e., does not interfere with) their primary role as caregiver to their children, with the objective of achieving work-life balance (Ekinsmyth, 2011). Research participants were selected from a middle-class demographic because the class background of the entrepreneur is a central analytical category in this study; what differentiates the mumpreneur is her practice of ‘intensive mothering’ as a middle-class mother, which compels her to live a lifestyle that is spatially and temporally restricted as it revolves around her maternal and household responsibilities (Ekinsmyth, 2014). This article interrogates how mumpreneurs attempt to balance their dual (and competing) demands as mother and entrepreneur by exploring their household and business practices. In-depth semi-structured interviews with fifteen respondents indicate that mumpreneurs balance their dual societal roles by (1) prioritizing motherhood over entrepreneurship, (2) designing businesses that are small, flexible and resistant to growth, and (3) managing their double burden by outsourcing their care and domestic responsibilities to working class women and men employed in their homes.

### **KEYWORDS:**

Gender; Entrepreneurship; Motherhood; Care work; Work-Life balance

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✉ malisha13@gmail.com

### **Pursuing Work-Life Balance: A study of Sri Lankan mumpreneurs**

*Growing up, Rabia had dreamt that her life would follow a certain path. She would study hard in school and get into a good university, thereafter securing a professional job so that she could climb the career ladder. Coincidentally, she dreamt that she would also fall in love, get married and start her own family.*

*Rabia enjoyed science in school and decided to study Information Technology (IT) at university. Even before her graduation, she had secured an internship at a leading IT company, where she went on to work as a business consultant for 3 years. The work was intense, and the hours were long, but Rabia enjoyed every minute of it.*

*Then Rabia met her husband to be. She began to wonder how she would balance being a wife and mother whilst working such long hours at her job. She realised that having a career alongside a family was no easy feat: she and her partner planned to live alone, which meant that there would be no family members around to care for their future children if she were to keep her job, and she did not want to be the kind of mother that would leave her young children in the care of strangers. A choice had to be made, and for Rabia, the decision was easy. A career was not essential, but family was. However, as a self-professed “workaholic”, Rabia was reluctant to give up on the idea of engaging in meaningful work altogether. Due to her upbringing in a career-oriented family, she felt that earning an income, even if it was not substantial, was still vital to her personal fulfilment and wellbeing. She envisioned the kind of job where she would be able to put her family first, and where she could devote ample time to her home-life. But part time and flexible work options were rare.*

*Slowly, an idea dawned on her: she could build an online platform where women like her could find freelance jobs and work from home. In turn, by setting up her own business, she too could work from home. It was the perfect solution... what could go wrong?*

This is a familiar story, especially for those belonging to a particular segment of society in Colombo, Sri Lanka – the upper middle-class - to which I too belong. It is a challenge for a woman to perform the social roles of mother and worker in tandem because the activities and responsibilities of each role can conflict with the other. Rabia’s narrative illustrates the research problem that developed into this article, i.e., the dual and conflicting responsibilities women experience when performing their societal roles as wife/mother versus that of a worker/producer – in the case of this article – an entrepreneur. Due to their hefty care burden and domestic responsibilities, entrepreneurial mothers experience daily demands on their time, resources and energy in a way that sets them apart from other entrepreneurs; and it places significant time-space limitations on their mobility as their activities are restricted to the home (Ekinsmyth, 2011, 2013). As a result, these mothers operating

micro and small businesses – referred to as mumpreneurs – are considered to have unique motivations, objectives, and resulting business models when compared to male entrepreneurs or women entrepreneurs without dependents (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Nel et al., 2010).

The term ‘mumpreneurs’ appears to have been coined in the 1990s by two home-based mumpreneurs called Ellen Parlapiano and Patricia Cobe who pioneered a networking website called ‘mompreneursonline.com’ and wrote a book to help mumpreneurs achieve success (Dhaliwal, 2022). These women recognized that mumpreneurs were distinctive entrepreneurs and could benefit from organizing as a group. Ekinsmyth (2011) defines a mumpreneur as “an individual who discovers and exploits new business opportunities within a social and geographical context that seeks to integrate the demands of motherhood and business-ownership” (p. 105). These entrepreneurial mothers craft a business that complements what they perceive to be their primary duties as wives and mothers. A mumpreneur firm is, therefore, a style of business that expounds work-life balance as its foundational goal through an attempt at integrating two roles that are generally considered to be at odds with one another, that of a ‘good’ mother and entrepreneur (see, e.g., Dhaliwal, 2022; Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Ekinsmyth, 2011; Nel et al., 2010).

In recent years, there has been a call to study entrepreneurship using gender theory as an analytical lens rather than using gender as an empirical category where difference can be measured between male and female entrepreneurs (Rouse et al., 2013). This article identifies that other (gendered) forms of entrepreneurship exist outside the masculinized norm. The objective of this article is to spotlight this specific subgroup of women entrepreneurs, termed mumpreneurs, as warranting attention in their own right because their form of entrepreneurship has unique features and characteristics as it is integrated with (and influenced by) motherhood. This article focuses on a key research question: how do mumpreneurs attempt to balance their competing responsibilities resulting from the performance of their dual societal roles as mother and entrepreneur? This article aims to gain a better understanding of the thought processes and behaviour of mumpreneurs, what resources and opportunities are available to them and how they utilize it, and the socio-cultural environment in which they operate.

Work-family knowledge is an area of research that is still in its nascent stages, with research primarily being conducted in the western hemisphere (see, e.g., Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Ekinsmyth, 2011, 2013, 2014; Lewis, 2022; Nel et al., 2010). As work and family dynamics are entrenched in the larger societal context, conducting research in diverse cultural settings is important (Shockley, 2017). A comparative analysis of 37 countries found that women are more likely than men to experience both work interference with family as well as family interference with work (Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2020). With these considerations in mind, this

article seeks to identify what strategies women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka employ to achieve balance between their work and family lives.

Research into women's entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka began with women from low-income households where entrepreneurship was considered a form of poverty alleviation, such as studies on the state-run Samurdhi program as well as research conducted by NGOs and INGOs on rural and working-class women entrepreneurs (Gunatilaka & Williams, 1999). In more recent years, responding to the dearth of research on women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka, research efforts have considered what influences the networking behaviour of women entrepreneurs (Surangi, 2018), factors affecting the performance of women entrepreneurs (Chathurangani et al., 2019), how work-life balance affects their overall wellbeing (Jayawardene, 2020), perceptions of work-life balance amongst women entrepreneurs (Siyam & Kailasapathy, 2021), factors affecting the success of women entrepreneurs (Thilakarathne et. al., 2022), and how their behaviour impacts their business and family life (Kodagoda & Samarathunge, 2022). However, as observed by Kodagoda and Samarathunge (2022), there is currently little understanding of what strategies women entrepreneurs use to balance their business and family. This article aims to fill a gap in women's entrepreneurship research in Sri Lanka by considering how mumpreneurs attempt to achieve their work-life balance objective.

## Literature Review

### *Mumpreneurs: integrating motherhood and entrepreneurship?*

It is a mumpreneurs distinctive foundational objective – that of work-life balance – which distinguishes them from the traditional entrepreneur, and this results in their businesses having unique characteristics (Ekinsmyth, 2011). In a South Asian context, work-life balance is considered an antecedent to mumpreneurship, as well as one of its most significant challenges (Dhaliwal, 2022). Furthermore, a recent study in Sri Lanka found that work-life balance was a priority amongst women entrepreneurs and was tied to their emotional wellbeing (Jayawardena, 2020). Evidently, work-life balance is positively correlated with job satisfaction amongst women professionals in the region (Apsara & Sulaiha Beevi, 2020).

Whereas an entrepreneurship is set up with a core objective of earning profit, secured through seizing opportunities, innovating, taking risks, and expanding the business (Baumol, 1993 as cited in Bird & Brush, 2002), mumpreneurs set up their businesses in a way that does not interfere with their maternal duties and responsibilities (which are significant). They construct their business operations so that they can earn an income without inhibiting their ability to perform care labour in their homes. Duberley and Carrigan (2012) argue that mumpreneur operations reconstruct entrepreneurship in a manner that is conducive to being good mothers.

Research from Sri Lanka suggests the same: Kodagoda and Samaratunge (2022) argue that entrepreneurial mothers perceive their profession to be coalesced with their motherhood responsibilities in their roles as nurturers as well as financial providers. Moreover, research on women professionals reveals that, despite the downsides of working long hours, these women value being gainfully employed (Kodagoda, 2018).

### ***Feminized business***

Ekinsmyth (2014) describes mumpreneur businesses as a feminized form of entrepreneurship practice. She argues for the necessity of labelling this subgroup of women entrepreneurs, where “the objective is not to join men in a man’s game, but to establish a woman’s game, and practice, publicize and in time, legitimize it” (Ekinsmyth, 2014, p. 1239). Due to its work-life balance objective, mumpreneur businesses tend to be small, flexible, low risk and resistant to growth, anticipating the substantial time and effort that mothers are required to commit to their children and their homes. Mumpreneurs tend to operate in relatively unimportant spaces from an industrial standpoint. They predominantly stick to the retail and service sectors, usually in female-friendly industries such as food and beverage, beauty and hygiene, apparel, childcare, homeware and lifestyle products (Ekinsmyth, 2014; Nel et al., 2010). Mumpreneur firms belong to an inconsequential section of industry due to its proliferation in retail and lifestyle sectors that tend to be of low innovation and profitability (Nel et al., 2010).

Mumpreneur firms, unlike traditional entrepreneurship, are also not growth-oriented. Mumpreneurs prefer keeping their businesses small so that they can meet their demands as caregivers in their homes (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012). The growth of these businesses is contingent on changes in family circumstances (Ekinsmyth, 2013). For example, as their children grow older, mumpreneurs benefit from the reliability of specific blocks of time, such as while their children are in school, which can be utilised for business activities instead. Clearly, profit and business growth (without reservation) is not a strategy pursued by a mumpreneur because this conflicts with her primary objective of a work-life balance. For mumpreneurs, their business should not expand to the extent that it interferes with their ability to be “good” mothers according to societal and cultural expectations. Therefore, mumpreneurs define success differently to traditional entrepreneurs.

### ***Proximity to home***

Mumpreneur businesses end up functioning in a significantly different way to a traditional entrepreneurship because mumpreneurs are geographically and temporally constrained in their role as middle-class mothers. Ekinsmyth (2011)

asserts that mumpreneurships are a spatial phenomenon that assimilates business operations into and around the time-space restricted lifestyle of urban middle-class motherhood. Mumpreneurs cite spatial problem-solving – through incorporating work into family spaces – as a common motivator for building businesses around the work of motherhood (Ekinsmyth, 2013). Mumpreneur operations are embedded in gendered ideology regarding the role of mumpreneurs as mothers, which are enacted in how they set limits on their business activities. Their decision to take on the role of caregiver in their homes and limit their businesses reflects an “adaptive preference” where this preference position is informed by societal pressures and has adapted to the structural realities of life as a middle-class mother (Leahy & Doughney, 2006 as cited in Ekinsmyth, 2013, p. 528).

Duberley and Carrigan (2012) note that although business and family are positioned as oppositional in entrepreneurship literature, mumpreneurs reframe the two as intertwined: the business is seen as a conduit to good mothering, affording mothers the flexibility, control and freedom they need to be “good” mothers whilst also working to contribute financially towards their family. However, the dark side of mumpreneurship – as self-exploitative, exhaustive, anxiety-ridden work with poor prospects and no legal protections – remains hidden (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012). Due to the influence of neoliberalism (a political and economic philosophy that advocates for economic freedom and the transfer of economic power away from the government and towards private corporations and individuals), mumpreneurs perceive themselves as autonomous individualized subjects, striving to be both successful businesswomen and mothers, ignoring the persistent structural injustices that continue to govern their lives (Lewis et al., 2022). Mumpreneurs are able to work flexibly, but this comes at a cost to their business prospects, their personal achievements, and their leisure time (Ekinsmyth, 2013).

### ***Theoretical framing of mumpreneurs***

This second section considers the theories that are used in the analysis of, and discussion on, mumpreneurs in this article. Theories on middleclass motherhood, such as the ideology of intensive mothering, and socio-cultural perceptions of motherhood in Sri Lanka, help situate the mumpreneurs in this article in terms of their behaviour and preferences.

#### ***Intensive mothering ideology.***

Ideology is a key factor in the care negotiations that take place within the home, and how domestic activities are apportioned (Ekinsmyth, 2013). Research on intensive mothering ideology began in the 1990s with the understanding that mothering, particularly amongst the middle-classes, was becoming more intensive, supervised, and professionalized: first coined by Hays (1996), the term describes



the phenomenon of middle-class motherhood as “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (p. 8). More recent research has found that intensive mothering ideology remains commonplace in the present day and is not restricted to Anglo-Saxon countries (see, e.g., Forbes et al., 2020; Gauthier et al., 2021; Verniers et al., 2022). As a result of the move towards a more organized and supervised childhood, the maternal workload is increasing, which puts more pressure on working mothers.

Intensive mothering ideology, which is endorsed by both men and women regardless of their parental status, holds mothers to be the preferred caregiver who must be physically and emotionally available for their children and responsible for their physical, social, cognitive and emotional outcomes (Forbes et al., 2022). As a result, middle-class motherhood is altogether exhaustive of a mother’s time and energy and cements her place at home with her children. Verniers et al. (2022) describes intensive mothering as “a social construction pertaining to ideological coercion” (p. 2). This system-justifying ideology benefits men by absolving them from doing unpaid domestic work whilst also reducing competition in the job market and political arena, inevitably maintaining their dominance in the social hierarchy (Verniers et al., 2022). Mumpreneurs operate a unique form of business because their resources and opportunities are constrained by their work as intensive mothers (Ekinsmyth, 2013). Thus, mumpreneur activities have been criticized as reinforcing rather than dismantling gendered inequalities (Lewis et al., 2022).

### ***Motherhood in Sri Lanka***

In Sri Lanka, mothering is seen as essential to a child’s wellbeing and development. In her study of Sinhala-Buddhist culture (representing 70% of the Sri Lankan population), Bartholomeusz (1999) highlights how motherhood in Sri Lanka is characterized by self-sacrifice and how socio-cultural depictions of wifehood and motherhood describe women as homely, demure and dutiful. There is a moral element to the gendered duties undertaken by women in Sri Lanka because it is through their work as nurturers that they are socially and morally valued as “good”; for Sri Lankan women, it is therefore crucial that they are perceived as dutiful wives and mothers, so as to have value within their communities and wider society (Surangi, 2018).

Care work places spatial and temporal limitations on women’s mobility, which can be a significant deterrent to their labour force participation. The Sri Lankan female labour force participation rate has remained stagnant at between 30 to 40% over the last few decades (Solotaroff et al., 2017). In her study of female health professionals in Sri Lanka, Kodagoda (2013) argues that caregiving responsibilities are a key impediment to women’s achievements in the workplace. Furthermore, a study by Samarakoon and Mayadunne (2018) indicates that regardless of education and income levels, marriage – and the care of children below the age of 10 years – is

the primary reason for women exiting the labour force.

The socio-cultural conditions in Sri Lanka are not conducive to women and mothers engaging in paid work. These factors are discussed at length in a report compiled by the World Bank (Solotaroff et al., 2017). In such a climate, entrepreneurship presents an opportunity for women to earn an income whilst maintaining flexibility over their work schedule and helping them achieve work-life balance (Jayawardena, 2020). Moreover, Kodagoda and Samaratunge (2022) argue that entrepreneurial mothers do not perceive entrepreneurship as distinct from their understanding of motherhood; they consider entrepreneurship as a part of their motherhood responsibilities, where they are able to fulfil their role as nurturers whilst also financially providing for their children. Building on this research, identifying what strategies are used to balance their work and family life may provide some insight into women's experiences and challenges engaging in entrepreneurship.

### **Research Methodology**

Contemporary feminist studies on entrepreneurship, which are based on standpoint feminism, emphasize the social construction of gender and entrepreneurship where what sets women entrepreneurs apart are their gendered identities and role performances (see, e.g., Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Ekinsmyth, 2011, 2013, 2014). These studies address early feminist critique that entrepreneurship research, by being “gender blind”, overlooks alternate forms of gendered organisations and organisational behaviour (see, e.g., Bird & Brush, 2002; Bruni et al., 2004; Lewis, 2006). Current research on mumpreneurs fulfils the aim of bringing attention to this subgroup of women entrepreneurs whilst also emphasizing the heterogeneity of women entrepreneurs as a group (see, e.g., Dhaliwal, 2022; Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Ekinsmyth, 2011, 2013, 2014; Nel et al., 2010). However, studies based on standpoint feminism have been criticized for lacking a postmodern approach. For example, Gunnerud Berg (1997) notes that a postmodern perspective of entrepreneurship should draw from multiple disciplinary sources when developing a theoretical framework. She suggests incorporating feminist geography (the study of gendered beings and their gendered environments) into the study of entrepreneurship so that we can re-orient our understanding of concepts such as ‘gender’, ‘entrepreneur’, ‘work’ and ‘home’ as unstable, interrelated and mutually constitutive.

### **Analytical framework**

Feminist geography helps us understand the relations of production and reproduction in a new light. Through historical analysis of the activities and attributes of women, feminist geographers have observed that gender categories are in constant change and proceed in a reciprocal manner: the activities and attributes accorded to a gender evolve over time and this, in turn, changes perceptions of what it means to



be a woman or man (Mackenzie, 1999). Moreover, gender relations are dependent on environmental relations and vice versa. In this perspective, environments are viewed as “changing sets of resources appropriated in historically variable ways, their modes of appropriation altering through alterations of space and time patterns” – in analytical terms, gender is seen as a “space-structuring force” that is dynamic, relational, and susceptible to change (Mackenzie, 1999, p. 420).

The research takes a social constructionist/post-structural feminist approach, where gender is used as a starting point and an analytical lens with which to conduct research (Rouse, 2013). Rather than oversimplifying gender as a concept to which particular traits, values and perceptions can be ascribed, this article considers gender to be a context-specific phenomenon where gender is constructed and reproduced by the women studied as they go about their day-to-day lives. It is particular to these Sri Lankan women from an urban setting and a middle-class background as it is based on their own embodied and situated knowledge. The claims made are partial to these women and can be used to theorize about this specific sub-group, but it is inapplicable on a universal – or even a national – level. However, these perspectives, although partial, can be considered objective knowledge because the accounts of these women are authoritative of their own experiences.

### ***Research method***

This article explores the activities and livelihoods of mumpreneurs. As mumpreneurs have been described as a middle-class phenomenon in the current literature (see, e.g., Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Ekinsmyth, 2011, 2013, 2014; Lewis, 2022; Nel et al., 2010), the sample of respondents for this article were selected from businesswomen belonging to the middle-classes of urban Colombo. The sample of fifteen was chosen from the middle-class demographic because the class background of the mumpreneur is a central analytical category in this study. Class analysis is crucial in the study of mumpreneurs because what distinguishes these women as a unique subgroup of entrepreneurs is a result of the social norms and class privileges they experience as middle-class mothers.

The participants’ status as middle-class was determined through an assessment of key factors such as their residence, educational and work background, where their children attended school, the occupation of their husband and their fluency in the English language. The participants of my study lived in central Colombo or in bordering suburbs, such as Rajagiriya, Battaramulla, and Dehiwala. They were hailing from, and/or now belong to, affluent families with parents who were either entrepreneurs themselves or retired professionals. They were educated in local private schools or educated abroad and spoke English fluently. Most participants had completed their tertiary studies in various disciplines, and many undertook these studies in the United Kingdom and the United States. Fourteen were married at the

time of the study; the fifteenth was recently divorced. Their husbands too, were either engaged in family business or in senior management positions in leading corporate firms. These mumpreneurs were the primary caregivers in their families whereas their husbands were the primary breadwinners.

The network sampling method was used to recruit the research participants of this article beginning with mumpreneurs from my own social network of friends and acquaintances. I also attended a meeting of the Business Mum's Club, a network of affluent women entrepreneurs from Colombo that hosts regular get-togethers where mumpreneurs connect and share their experiences. This gave me access to the thirty-odd mumpreneurs present that day, three of whom agreed to participate in my study. Lastly, I contacted mumpreneurs through Instagram (their most used online platform) and was able to acquire two participants through this strategy as well.

My sample was purposefully small in scale in order to conduct a richer and deeper analysis of the subjects selected through purposive sampling, based on their suitability to the criteria uncovered from the literature review. The following selection criteria were incorporated into the study: (1) participants were female; (2) participants had one or more children under the age of 18; (3) participants were the primary caregivers in their family; and (4) participants owned or managed their own business. My criteria are broader than what is posited in the literature – that mumpreneurs began their business after becoming mothers (Ekinsmyth, 2011) – as I include mumpreneurs who started their businesses prior to the birth of their first child but later reconfigured it to suit their needs as a mother.

### ***Sample characteristics***

Women of various ages, ethnicities, family size, age of children, product type, size of business, and age of business were selected to ensure diversity within the boundaries of this purposive sample. This diversity of characteristics and circumstances ensured that each participant was able to contribute different viewpoints and perspectives to the research. Fifteen mumpreneurs participated in the study. Participants were between the ages of 30 to 45 when the research was conducted. The sample were from various ethnicities and religions – eight Sinhalese, five Muslim, and two Tamil participants. Respondent profiles show that these women are affluent, educated, and ambitious. They operate micro- to medium-sized businesses that are either home-based (informal) or externally located (formal), ranging in a variety of products in the retail and service sectors. Although not true for all the businesses studied, many of these businesses tend to cater predominantly to women and children.

Mumpreneurs live in nuclear household setups (with one exception). Eleven participants occupied houses in city and nearby suburbs and four occupied apartments in the city. They employ between one to five domestic staff depending on the size of their family, which range from two to five individuals per household.

**Table 1: Participant profiles**

Name	Business Type	Age	Years in business	Education level	Children's age (years)
Thanishka	Bedding, Lifestyle, Home I	39	15	Undergraduate	8 and 10
Rabia	Employment Agency, Online agency (HB)	32	6	Undergraduate	2, 5, 8
Shamali	Hotel	38	5	Postgraduate	6
Tharuka	Apparel (HB)	30	4	Undergraduate	1
Farida	Lifestyle Boutique	30	32	Undergraduate	4
Alicia	Food, Catering (HB)	31	2	Ordinary level	2, 5, 7
Ruqayyah	Lifestyle, Beauty products (HB)	36	2	Advanced	12, 14
Mayanthi	Lifestyle, Home Decor	42	3	Undergraduate	3, 7, 9
Indira	Art, Counselling (HB)	36	2	Undergraduate	7, 9
Serika	Lifestyle, Home Decor (HB)	34	2	Postgraduate	2, 4
Thayani	Apparel	45	1	Undergraduate	8
Raya	Apparel, Jewellery (HB)	36	2	Postgraduate	2, 5
Amreen	Education, Childcare, Teaching (HB)	37	2	Undergraduate	5, 8
Sarana	Hair & Makeup (HB)	31	2	Diploma	1, 3
Preetika	Yoga teacher (HB)	39	3	Postgraduate	4, 6, 8

Note. "HB" refers to the business being home-based.

### **Data collection**

In-depth individual interviews were conducted with my participants in order to learn how these women operated their businesses and governed their daily lives as caregivers. The interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom software and the videos were recorded. Each interview was between 40 to 90 minutes in length and some participants were contacted for follow-up interviews where clarification was needed. They were conducted in English. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions where I, as the researcher, could be flexible and sensitive to the needs of my participants when generating and collecting data.

In order to comprehensively understand the productive and reproductive processes and operations of these mumpreneurs, as well as the social world they inhabit, I asked questions on various aspects regarding participant lives. Some questions were formulated to determine their social class, such as their educational history, demographic variables, family background, and other social indicators. Other questions focused on the operations and activities of the participants, to explore their experiences and challenges, such as their experience of starting and managing

their businesses, their journey navigating motherhood and the expectations and responsibilities that come with it, and examining their relationships with their family, friends and the wider community.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data was interpreted mainly through thematic analysis of the interviews, so that emergent themes and theories could be identified from the data. Preliminary notes and summaries of the interviews were compiled to gain a better understanding of the data collected. Thereafter, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and carefully read through multiple times before a coding method was used to analyse the interviews sentence by sentence. The coding was done manually using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.

These codes were then used to formulate themes that would address the research questions posited in this study: categories and sub-categories were constructed accordingly. The themes emerged from the data, but theoretical ideas and concepts from the literature also were used to analyse the themes drawn from the mothers studied. In order to protect the confidentiality of respondents, pseudonyms were used throughout the data analysis. Some information has been changed to avoid disclosing the identities of the participating mothers. This article has been approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the University of Colombo.

### ***Findings and Discussion***

The purpose of this section is to propose the major themes and sub themes emerging from the narrative analysis of the interview data gathered from the mumpreneurs in my study, in order to address the research question of how mumpreneurs balance their dual roles as mother and entrepreneur. Three common themes were identified related to strategies and coping mechanisms mumpreneurs employ to address their competing demands, based on key words and concepts that were repeated by respondents. Within these major themes, five sub-themes emerged from participants' accounts, which were determined by analysing the data in the light of the relevant literature on women entrepreneurs.

#### ***Prioritizing Motherhood***

The first theme of my findings relates to how mumpreneurs prioritize their duties as mothers over those of being a business owner. Under this theme, respondent accounts are grouped into three sub-themes: how motherhood has precedence over entrepreneurship for mumpreneurs, the impact that culture has played on this preference position, and how their depictions of motherhood illustrate the internalisation of gender norms.

### ***Motherhood before entrepreneurship***

Eleven of the fifteen respondents made references to prioritizing motherhood over entrepreneurship. These mumpreneurs routinely prioritized their role of mother over entrepreneur – family came first. This understanding of prioritizing home and family over career was echoed by all respondents and is consistent with the national and global scholarship on mumpreneurs (see, e.g., Dhaliwal, 2022; Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Ekinsmyth, 2011; Jayawardena, 2020; Surangi, 2018).

Rabia:

*“I always consider myself a mum before I’m an entrepreneur. So, family for me is number one.”*

Thayani:

*“If there’s one pie of 100% then you have to cut it into pieces... you have to decide what has priority at that time in your life... so when my daughter was born, I decided that [she] was going to be my bigger pie piece.”*

Thanishka:

*“I realize it’s about prioritizing whether I want [my business] to be extremely successful... and I have to sort of let go of home a bit in terms of my sons... or do I want the home front – my sons – to be a priority or be second. So for me [my priority] is my sons and my husband... and work to be second.”*

Firstly, Rabia’s statement explains this theme succinctly. To mumpreneurs, family is number one. Secondly, Thayani’s account demonstrates that, rather than balancing the two roles of mother and entrepreneur, mumpreneurs clearly prioritize (and convey a preference for fulfilling) their role of mother over that of entrepreneur. Thirdly, Thanishka’s account presents the notion of work and home as in conflict – she would have to “let go” of one, to some extent, in order to pursue the other. She perceives the success of her business as something that can only be achieved at the cost of sacrificing family, which she is not willing to do. Thanishka’s account highlights that, for mumpreneurs, succeeding in business is only acceptable where it is earned within the ambit of having a work-life balance.

Ekinsmyth (2013) asserts that mumpreneurs favouring their work as caregivers reflects an “adaptive preference” on their part: mumpreneurs form their preference positions based on the socio-cultural pressures they face as middle-class mothers. Their preferences, therefore, have adapted to the structural realities of urban middle-class motherhood (Leahy & Doughney, 2006 as cited in Ekinmsyth, 2013,

p. 528). As a result of their attitudes towards their businesses, and the importance they place on their role as mothers, mumpreneurships are likely to be situated on the lower end of the entrepreneurship spectrum in terms of size, profitability and potential for growth (Ekinsmyth, 2014; Nel et al, 2010).

### ***Impact of culture***

Participant statements reveal that culture plays a significant role in these women's understanding of their societal role as mothers, along with the duties and responsibilities that are required to adequately fulfil this role. Six respondents made direct references to socio-cultural norms and values in Sri Lanka that placed the burden of nurturing and caregiving on mothers.

Mayanthi:

*"I always felt like... where my parents, and my in-laws and my husband are concerned... my business always comes second."*

Alicia:

*"The responsibility that the culture puts on women's shoulders to raise and to educate the family... the children... it's a lot more than is expected of men and I don't think that's fair."*

Kodagoda (2012) observes that motherhood practices have a significant impact on women's working lives and that mothers tend to prioritize their children's needs above their own. Cultural values act as structural constraints shaping the decisions women make about their business and family lives (Kodagoda & Samaratunge, 2022). Mayanthi's account highlights that she perceives prioritizing motherhood over entrepreneurship as a familial expectation that must be adhered to, rather than a personal choice. Moreover, for Alicia, it is the wider community and society she holds responsible for imposing the unfair socio-cultural norms that place the burden of caregiving on women. These mumpreneur accounts show that their preference position to prioritize their role as mother over that of entrepreneur is informed by the cultural norms and values of the society to which they belong, evidenced by the opinions and judgements of their family members and wider community.

### ***Internalising gender norms***

Eleven respondents accounts highlighted, either directly or indirectly, that mumpreneur preferences are influenced by gendered cultural norms that are internalized.



Tharuka:

*“Feeding her and putting her to bed and stuff I always do because... I mean like usually I can handle that better.”*

Indira:

*“I am always going to be the most skilled person... there’s a thing that women from a young age are highly skilled... we can do a lot more than a man can do... let’s accept it because we can’t change it... being the adult female of the house, I can do more than my kids can and I can do more than my husband.”*

Both Indira and Tharuka explain their disproportionate household and care work as the result of being more skilled, or having a better aptitude for it, as women. Intensive mothering ideology alludes to an instinctive and deep-seated drive in women to be nurturers whereas fathers are perceived to be less competent and more suitable to supplementary help (Verniers et al., 2022). These respondent accounts demonstrate that mumpreneurs have embraced or adapted towards a preference for taking on the more involved role when it comes to their children and domestic life (Ekinsmyth, 2013). Thus, the ideology of intensive mothering is well-suited for the labour and moralities of mumpreneurs (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012).

Sarana:

*“We’ve decided he’s in charge of the finances, and I’m in charge of the house and the kids. And we’ve given each other the roles of what’s more important for us.”*

Sarana’s statement accords the gendered labour divisions in her house as the result of fulfilling their personal preferences, i.e., gravitating towards their preferred roles of Sarana managing the domestic activities and looking after the children whilst her spouse manages the finances of the household. Ekinsmyth (2013) notes that gender ideology informs couple negotiations regarding who needs to perform what work and whose work is more serious. The culture of intensive motherhood props up the social structures that regard men’s work as more important and becomes self-fulfilling once the mumpreneur restricts her business in order to play the role of good mother (Verniers et al., 2022). For example, Sarana had scaled down her beauty business to a minimum, taking only one or two customers a month, so that she could devote her time to her two young sons. Thus, taking on the role of primary caregiver directly impacts the size, nature and scope of mumpreneurships, restricting these women’s mobility and time available to engage in enterprise.

This theme highlights that mumpreneurs have clear priorities. Their work as mothers takes precedence over their work as entrepreneurs. These priorities, or

preference positions, demonstrate an adaptive preference in line with the culture of the society to which they belong, where there is an expectation that all mothers would do the same, and that these gendered norms and values have been ingrained in mumpreneurs, by their family and society, from a young age.

### ***Feminized entrepreneurship***

The second theme of my findings relate to what strategies mumpreneurs employ in relation to their businesses in order to balance their competing responsibilities as mother and entrepreneur. This is grouped into two sub-themes: flexibility and deprioritising income.

#### ***Flexibility***

Participants chose to engage in businesses that had low start-up costs and very little overheads so they could have flexibility over their workdays, i.e., they could easily suspend operations if the need arose. Nine of the fifteen respondents discussed flexibility as a key benefit of running their own business.

Raya:

*“At the moment I find the flexibility and balance great with having a small child... but I think it depends... I think the more you scale up it also means taking on more and more... and the moment you have fixed costs... you can’t afford to take a back seat... with me it works because of the way I run things... even when I take a back seat, I’m not sitting on a huge fixed cost.”*

Flexible work hours are an important characteristic of women-owned businesses, which facilitates, and improves, their overall wellbeing (Jayawardena, 2020). By remaining purposefully small through operating her jewellery business from home, and thereby avoiding fixed costs, Raya maintains the ability to suspend operations when needed, for instance, following the birth of each of her three children. Therefore, the mumpreneur firm’s ability to contract is more important than its ability to expand.

Raya’s account highlights how important it is for young mothers to have businesses that can stop and restart easily, indicating that “balance” in some instances, such as immediately after the birth of a child, means ceasing operations entirely. Balancing work and family, therefore, clearly takes precedence over earning high levels of profit. In other words, earning a profit is contingent on maintaining a work-life balance. Moreover, full time work was perceived negatively as compromising the wellbeing of mothers due to its lack of flexibility. For instance, Sarana perceived mothers having to return to fulltime work after maternity leave as highly stressful, pressure she was glad to avoid as a mumpreneur:

*“I think a lot of mums who go back to work, they get more stressed and wired up because there’s so much to think about... and I’m so grateful that I don’t have to. They do it... but I’m sure the mental stress is way more than what I’m feeling... and I feel like when I had my kid, I knew that I wouldn’t be able to juggle both.”*

My findings indicate that when their firms are perceived to be expanding too fast, growth is actively discouraged by mumpreneurs. The downside of this decision to remain purposefully small, which means that their businesses are less lucrative and profitable, is viewed as an unfortunate but necessary consequence of being a “good” mother.

Thanishka:

*“I opened a second branch in Rajagiriya soon after my baby was born but I closed it... because I thought I could do it but I was never able to run it as well as my main store... I couldn’t handle too many things.”*

Thanishka’s statement indicates that growth is not always a benefit to mumpreneurs because it can be an obstacle to achieving their core objective of work-family balance. Overall, these mumpreneur accounts highlight that business growth tends to compromise its ability to remain flexible and since flexibility is a key benefit for mumpreneurs, they prefer their businesses remaining small and stable.

### ***Deprioritising income***

Ten respondents made references to their business objectives not being primarily motivated by finances. Mumpreneur accounts of running their businesses highlight that their businesses being money-minded or overly financially motivated is negatively perceived amongst mumpreneurs as well as their spouses.

Alicia:

*“At the beginning I was overworking myself because I wanted to please everybody... taking on all the orders that came my way and earning all the money... then my husband was like, you are all about the money, you are all about the money!”*

Rabia:

*I have learned to let go of money... if I were to put it in raw business terms... you need to understand that you need to let things go to attend to the business at home.”*

These accounts show that my respondents, as well as their husbands, had a negative perception of their businesses being driven by the pursuit of money.

Evidently, that was not its objective. Rather, their business was set up to ensure they could meet their intrinsic needs and achieve their core objective of a work-life balance (Dhaliwal, 2022; Kodagoda & Samarathunge, 2022).

Mumpreneurs took on a secondary or supplementary role in relation to financial responsibility. Participants explained their business income as playing a complementary or supplementary role to their husband's, allowing for more "comforts" for the family as a whole (Mayanthi), as "something extra for the family and for myself" (Amreen), or as "pocket money" (Thanishka). These women were working for personal fulfilment rather than financial returns, allowing them to engage in a relatively low risk passion whilst leaving the onus of the financial responsibility on their husbands.

This second theme illustrates that, with a clear understanding of their priorities as mothers, mumpreneurs formulate feminized versions of entrepreneurship that are purposefully small and flexible, in order to meet their intrinsic needs and achieve work-life balance, rather than being solely profit-motivated.

### **Support systems**

The third theme of my findings relate to the strategies mumpreneurs use in relation to the care negotiations in their households that allow them to outsource some of their childcare and domestic responsibilities to free up some time to engage in entrepreneurship. My research found that it was not common practice amongst my respondents to utilize their extended family to alleviate their care burden. Fourteen of the fifteen mumpreneurs in my sample lived in a nuclear household, which made it more difficult to involve grandmothers in daily routines. Ten respondents made reference to employing between one to four domestic workers in their homes, for a range of activities, including cooking, cleaning, bathing and feeding children, grocery shopping, gardening and driving of the household vehicles.

There was some variation in the data on mumpreneurs relying on family support: whereas, for some participants, enlisting help from family members was the norm, for others, using extended family for childcare support was considered inappropriate. Only three participants had regular help from their mothers in raising their children. Thayani and Shamali incorporated their mothers into their daily routine, whereas Sarana had her mother come in three times a week. Other participants made reference to calling on their mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters and/or sisters-in-law, but these occurrences were not consistent or regular - it was more of a last resort.

It is now common practice amongst middle-class working mothers, to meet the heavy demands on their time both at home and at work, to outsource some or all of their housework and childcare duties to informally hired domestic workers. Family was absolved from childcare and other domestic support in middle-class

households due to the employment of domestic workers (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). Mayanthi, for example, did not think it appropriate to enlist grandparents for regular help with childcare:

*“I don’t depend on my parents or my in-laws to look after my children at all because I firmly believe they are my children... I’ve had them. They are my responsibility. I can’t palm them off to someone else.”*

Although Mayanthi did not feel comfortable enlisting the help of family, which she construed as “palming off” her children on to others, she did not have the same reservations about devolving care work to paid staff. Neetha & Palriwala (2011) observe that the practice of employing domestic workers takes the responsibility of childcare away from middle-class grandmothers, who would otherwise be expected to take on more caregiving responsibilities toward their grandchildren, by passing on their care burden to working-class women. It has resulted in an ever-reducing reliance on extended family in relation to childcare in the middle-classes. As a result, the model of the nuclear household, which is popular amongst the urban upper middle class – is propped up on the shoulders of women of lower-classes (Yeoh et al., 1999).

Thanishka:

*“I have two nannies and then I have a person who looks after our home and a cook. So that also gives a great, great system because when you know that your children are well looked after and their food is provided... that gives an amazing release in your mind to concentrate on what you need to when you go out of the house. But if your home front is not stable in terms of what I discussed, there’s no way you can come in an efficient manner and do your work at work... because you’re always trying to correspond things at home.”*

It is only by shifting her care burden on to working-class women (and men) that Thanishka is able to pursue a work-life balance. Ten of the fifteen participant accounts revealed that they would not be able to run their business, or do so efficiently, without employing domestic staff to take on the care and domestic burden at home. My findings suggest that mumpreneurs would find their care and domestic responsibilities a significant barrier to entrepreneurship (or any form of paid work for that matter) without the assistance of domestic workers in their households.

Viewed in this light, domestic workers provide an essential service to the Sri Lankan economy – effectively sustaining the middle-class, dual earner, nuclear household model that is now common in urban zones (Yeoh et al., 1999). It is only through the employment of poorly paid workers with limited opportunities (and legal protections) that these middle-class mumpreneurs are able to enter the workforce and make use of their education and skills; conversely, if not for the employment of

domestic workers in their households, mumpreneurs would likely have to sacrifice their human capital and earning potential in order to perform the unpaid domestic and care work required in their homes.

Amreen:

*“We do 50/50 - my husband and myself. When it comes to my helper of course, she does most of it if she’s around, but if she’s not around, my husband makes sure that he is there. And he’s very supportive about the work that I do. He gives me 100% whenever it is possible for him.”*

The practice of employing female domestic workers also ensures that care work remains a gendered space. Neetha & Palriwala (2011) observe that the hiring of domestic workers serves to cement patriarchal constructions of gendered divisions of labour in the home, by upholding the socio-cultural norms that absolve the father’s involvement in the domestic sphere. As care work continues to be a female-dominated space, particularly by women from low-income households, it reduces the likelihood of any revaluation of care work in either the legal or political spheres. This is because the economic processes that result in domestic workers being cheap, unprotected and readily available, benefit middle-class individuals by freeing up their time and available resources, allowing them to pursue opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach. Overall, this theme reveals that care work remains a gendered space in mumpreneur households, where it is predominantly working-class female domestic workers that perform care responsibilities so that mumpreneurs are able to engage in entrepreneurship.

### **Implications**

The findings of this article have some important implications. Firstly, motherhood practices have a significant impact on mumpreneurs’ working lives (Kodagoda & Samarathunge, 2022; Kodagoda, 2012). Their business characteristics and orientation must be understood in that context, and therefore, should not be assessed purely on conventional patriarchal indicators such as profit and growth (See, e.g., Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Mirchandani, 2005; Nel et al, 2010). Secondly, it can be observed that, although mumpreneur operations are set up with the objective of achieving work-life balance, that this is not easy to accomplish in practice: appropriate time and resource management is required. Thirdly, the findings demonstrate that mumpreneur operations are sustained through the performance of essential services by domestic workers (Yeoh et al., 1999). This practice of hiring female domestic staff to take on the care burden ensures that care work remains a gendered space where caregiving remains undervalued and unregulated (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). A revision of the gendered division of labour practices in the household would require fathers taking on more domestic and childcare responsibilities.



## Limitations

The qualitative and exploratory nature of this study limits the generalisability of the results. Another major limitation is the small sample size of fifteen participants; therefore, new findings may be revealed through further research with a larger sample. A possible avenue for future research is a comparative analysis between urban middle-class and working-class entrepreneurial mothers, to understand how women's experiences of balancing motherhood and entrepreneurship differ across the class spectrum. It may reveal how motherhood is understood and enacted differently based on the class grouping of a mother, and how that affects their business operations and outcomes.

## Conclusion

My findings indicate that structural barriers persist in middle-class households due to the practice of gendered labour where care and domestic responsibilities are considered women's work. Due to their significant care burden, the resources, opportunities and capabilities of middle-class mumpreneurs are constrained, resulting in businesses of limited profitability and scope. Moreover, through their conformity to the gendered roles of wife and mother, and the disproportionate care labour that it entails, mumpreneurs further entrench the gendered practices that structurally oppress women within the household.

## Conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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