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FULL-LENGTH RESEARCH ARTICLE

Childcare Negotiation Among Low-Income Working Mothers in Malaysia

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Abstract

Reliable childcare is a significant yet often precarious dimension of quality of life among low-income working mothers. This study examines how urban low-income working mothers in Klang Valley, Malaysia, negotiate childcare while sustaining paid work, family responsibilities, and emotional well-being. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data were collected from eight working mothers through seven-day semi-structured diaries followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews; diary entries and interview transcripts were analysed idiographically before cross-case patterns were developed into Group Experiential Themes. The findings show that childcare was experienced not merely as a practical arrangement, but as a fragile form of care infrastructure shaped by financial constraint, limited support, and mothers' continuous responsibility for family well-being. Although participants developed resourceful strategies to manage care and employment, these arrangements affected mothers' emotional security, sense of maternal adequacy, family relationships, children's safety, and ability to remain engaged in paid work. The study further shows that affordability alone is insufficient if childcare is not also accessible, trustworthy, and responsive to mothers' working realities. This study contributes to quality-of-life scholarship by showing how childcare negotiation operates across emotional, relational, psychological, and time-related dimensions of everyday well-being, beyond material deprivation. The findings underscore the need for childcare policies that recognise unpaid care work and strengthen accessible, affordable, trustworthy, and high-quality childcare support for low-income families.

Keywords: childcare negotiation; low-income working mothers; quality of life; unpaid care work; Malaysia

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 5: Gender Equality; SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being

1. Introduction

Reliable childcare is a significant dimension of quality of life among low-income working mothers because it connects paid work, caregiving, emotional security, and household survival. Globally, women continue to perform a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and care work, reflecting the gendered distribution of caregiving responsibilities (United Nations, 2025). Childcare therefore extends beyond supervision during working hours. It is intertwined with emotional well-being, psychological functioning, family stability, work sustainability, and everyday survival (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). For low-income working mothers, childcare negotiation is an ongoing adaptive process involving emotional compromise, resource management, and the continual balancing of caregiving and economic responsibilities (Elliott & Bowen, 2018).

Quality of life may be understood through both objective and subjective dimensions, including material conditions as well as individuals' evaluations of their well-being and life circumstances (Cummins, 2000). In

the context of low-income working mothers, quality of life is shaped not only by income or material resources, but also by the stability and emotional sustainability of everyday caregiving arrangements (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). When childcare arrangements are limited, costly, or unstable, mothers' everyday well-being may become harder to sustain, as paid work and caregiving responsibilities must be continuously negotiated with limited support (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024; UNICEF Malaysia, 2024). Childcare negotiation therefore offers an important lens through which lived quality of life may be understood across emotional security, relational stability, time pressure, and work sustainability.

Childcare instability is particularly consequential because it links family life directly to mothers' ability to remain in paid work. For low-income working mothers, childcare arrangements are often shaped by the fit between care availability, work schedules, affordability, and family support. Unpredictable work schedules may further intensify these difficulties when mothers have limited control over time and caregiving arrangements (Henly & Lambert, 2014; Harknett et al., 2022). In this context, childcare negotiation becomes not only a family responsibility, but also a condition that shapes work sustainability and everyday well-being.

The gendered nature of childcare further complicates this process. Despite women's increased participation in paid employment, caregiving responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately on mothers. Recent work on mental load has shown that women remain largely responsible for anticipating needs, organising routines, planning contingencies, and monitoring family well-being (Daminger, 2019; Dean et al., 2022). Dean et al. (2022) further argued that mental load should be understood as both cognitive and emotional labour, because it involves not only remembering and organising household needs, but also carrying the emotional pressure of ensuring that family life runs smoothly. For low-income working mothers, these pressures may be intensified by financial limitations, limited childcare choices, and the need to make constant trade-offs between work, care, household survival, and their own emotional well-being.

Childcare arrangements are also shaped by broader cultural expectations surrounding motherhood. Working mothers may experience guilt when reconciling paid work with expectations of intensive, emotionally available, and self-sacrificing motherhood (Aarntzen et al., 2019; Montano et al., 2023). For low-income working mothers, such guilt may become more pronounced because caregiving decisions are often constrained by financial limitations rather than freely chosen.

Digital technology is increasingly embedded in parenting. Smartphones, video calls, online platforms, CCTV, and children's media may allow parents to monitor, communicate with, or occupy children when physically absent (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Nikken & Schols, 2015). Among low-income working mothers, however, such tools may function less as convenience than as compensatory care when adult supervision or formal childcare is unavailable. Digital supervision may reduce immediate uncertainty, but it cannot replace responsive adult care and may extend maternal mental load by keeping mothers psychologically tethered to caregiving while at work.

Within the Malaysian context, childcare remains closely tied to women's employment, family well-being, and household survival. Recent Malaysian evidence indicates that childcare access remains a practical barrier for working mothers. In a study of 362 working mothers, Amin and Rameli (2022) found that 55.8% of respondents faced difficulties finding childcare in residential areas, 61.3% had difficulties finding childcare near the workplace, and 62.7% identified high childcare cost as a major challenge to remaining in the labour market. In line with this, Amin et al. (2024) found that childcare availability and childcare cost were significantly associated with mothers' participation in the Malaysian labour market, with financial assistance mediating the relationship between childcare cost and mothers' employment participation. These findings suggest that childcare constraints are not peripheral concerns, but material conditions shaping mothers' capacity to sustain paid work.

Affordability and accessibility therefore remain central concerns. These findings are consistent with Malaysian policy reports which continue to highlight the need for affordable, accessible, and well-governed childcare services, particularly for working and low-income families (Kaur et al., 2022; Mukhriz et al., 2024; UNDP, 2024). UNDP's analysis of the Malaysian care economy also noted that childcare provision in

Malaysia remains largely shaped by private sector provision, raising concerns about affordability and equitable access for lower-income households (UNDP, 2024).

Malaysian findings also suggest that working mothers may rely on informal, family-based, or unregistered childcare when formal care is inaccessible, unaffordable, or incompatible with working schedules. Abd Shukor et al. (2024) found that 53.3% of surveyed working mothers used unregistered childcare services, compared with 40.0% who used registered services. This suggests that informal or unregistered care may reflect constrained choices rather than simple preference. While informal arrangements may offer flexibility, familiarity, and lower cost, they also raise concerns about care quality and continuity.

For low-income households, childcare decisions are made alongside wider pressures such as food, rent, transport, debt, employment continuity, and children's safety (UNICEF Malaysia, 2024). Childcare costs and arrangements therefore do not operate separately from household survival, but form part of the everyday conditions through which mothers attempt to sustain work and family life.

Malaysian studies and policy evidence show that childcare is not a peripheral concern, but a significant issue affecting women's employment, household resources, and family well-being (Amin & Rameli, 2022; Amin et al., 2024; Abd Shukor et al., 2024; UNICEF Malaysia, 2024). However, much of the existing discussion approaches childcare through labour force participation, affordability, accessibility, service provision, and policy support, with less attention to how low-income working mothers live through these constraints in everyday life. This leaves room for closer examination of how childcare negotiation shapes mothers' quality of life as an emotional, relational, and practical experience.

This issue aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 5, particularly Target 5.4, which calls for the recognition and valuation of unpaid care and domestic work through public services, infrastructure, social protection, and shared family responsibility (United Nations, 2025; UN Women, 2024). In this study, childcare negotiation reflects the everyday consequences of unpaid and under-supported care work among low-income working mothers.

Accordingly, this study examines childcare negotiation as a lived process shaping the everyday quality of life of urban low-income working mothers. It positions childcare as a central dimension of everyday well-being that shapes emotional security, family life, time pressure, and the capacity to sustain paid work. The study therefore expands understandings of quality of life beyond material deprivation by foregrounding the emotional, psychological, relational, and time-related dimensions of childcare negotiation.

2. Methods

2.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

This study was guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a methodology that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of significant lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). IPA was considered appropriate for this study because the aim was not to measure the frequency or prevalence of particular experiences, but to understand how low-income working mothers interpreted, negotiated, and gave meaning to their everyday realities. IPA is rooted in three philosophical foundations: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Larkin et al., 2006; Noon, 2018; Smith et al., 2022).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is concerned with lived experience and encourages researchers to return to participants' own accounts of how phenomena are experienced in everyday life (Ashworth, 2016; Smith & Nizza, 2021). In this study, the mothers' quality of life was examined through their own descriptions of daily routines, emotional responses, family demands, and coping efforts.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics recognises that experience is always interpreted. Within IPA, this involves a double hermeneutic process, whereby participants make sense of their experiences, while the researcher attempts to make sense of the participants' meaning-making (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Smith et al., 2022). The participants did not merely report daily events, but they reflected on what those events meant for their sense of well-being, stability, motherhood, work, and family life. The researcher's role was therefore not

limited to description, but involved careful interpretation of how these experiences were constructed and understood.

Idiography

Idiography emphasises close and detailed attention to each individual case before examining patterns across participants (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith et al., 2022). This idiographic commitment was central in this study because low-income working mothers do not experience work, caregiving, and household responsibilities in identical ways. Although participants shared similar socioeconomic conditions, their experiences varied according to their unique backgrounds. IPA therefore allowed the study to attend to both shared patterns and individual differences in how quality of life was experienced and negotiated.

2.2 Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Snowball referral was also used, where existing participants recommended other eligible mothers within their social circles. Eight working mothers living in the Klang Valley were selected based on their ability to provide rich and relevant accounts of the phenomenon under study. The inclusion criteria were: being a mother of at least one dependent child, being employed full-time, having a monthly household income of RM4,000 or below, residing in Klang Valley, holding direct childcare responsibilities, and reporting no history of mental illness. The exclusion criteria were: mothers who were not in full-time employment, lived outside Klang Valley, had a monthly household income above RM4,000, did not have direct childcare responsibilities, or reported a history of mental illness. Participants were asked about any history of mental illness before the interview, and eligibility was based on their self-reports. The sample size was appropriate for IPA because the study prioritised idiographic depth, information richness, and detailed engagement over statistical representativeness (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Smith et al., 2022). Rather than claiming saturation in a quantitative sense, sample adequacy was assessed through the depth and relevance of the diary-interview material, the specificity of the participant group, and the convergence and divergence identified across cases (Malterud et al., 2016). Recruitment was conducted through targeted social media advertisements and informal community networks involving working mothers in the Klang Valley. Demographic characteristics are reported at the beginning of the Results and Discussion section to situate the analytic account.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using a seven-day semi-structured diary followed by in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews. The use of diaries enabled participants to document their daily experiences, while the follow-up interviews allowed the researcher to explore their written reflections in greater depth. This combination was useful in capturing both immediate daily experiences and more detailed retrospective accounts. The use of diary and interview methods is also consistent with IPA's concern with detailed, personal, and meaning-rich accounts of experience (Cudjoe, 2022; Smith et al., 2022).

Diary procedure

The diary phase was conducted between June and July 2021. Participants were asked to begin recording at the start of their work week and to continue for seven consecutive days, including both weekdays and weekends. The diary was semi-structured to provide guidance while still allowing participants to write freely in their own language and style. The prompts invited participants to describe their daily childcare arrangements, work-related demands, emotions experienced during the day, situations at home or work that contributed to distress, childcare decisions made, and coping strategies used. Participants could complete the diary either in handwritten or typed form, depending on their preference. They were briefed individually before the diary phase to ensure that they understood the purpose of the task and the importance of honest and reflective writing. Participants were informed that short entries were acceptable and that they could write in Bahasa Malaysia, English, or a mixture of both, depending on how they naturally expressed their daily experiences.

Interview procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the diary phase, between November and December 2021. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 to 120 minutes. Each interview was informed by a preliminary reading of the participant's diary entries, which allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions about specific events, childcare decisions, emotional responses, and work-family tensions recorded during the diary week.

The interview topic guide covered participants' work routines, childcare arrangements, financial constraints, family support, experiences of formal and informal care, use of digital technologies, emotional responses, and perceived effects on their own and their children's well-being. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to follow participants' own accounts while ensuring that the main areas relevant to childcare negotiation and quality of life were discussed.

The interviews were conducted in a mixture of Bahasa Malaysia and English, audio recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Non-verbal cues and contextual details were also noted where relevant. For reporting, a language expert translated Bahasa Malaysia extracts into English and back-translated them into Bahasa Malaysia to check consistency of meaning.

2.4 Data Analysis

The diary entries and interview transcripts were analysed using the seven-step IPA procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2022). Analysis began with repeated reading of each participant's diary entries and interview transcript together to develop familiarity with the participant's account as a whole. Exploratory notes were then made to capture descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations. These notes were gradually transformed into experiential statements that reflected meaningful aspects of each participant's account. The analysis proceeded idiographically, with each participant's data examined in detail before moving to cross-case comparison. Experiential statements were clustered into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for each participant. After all cases had been analysed individually, patterns of convergence and divergence were examined across participants. This process led to the development of Group Experiential Themes (GETs), which represented shared meanings while preserving important differences between individual accounts. All coding and theme development were conducted manually using Microsoft Word to allow close engagement with participants' language and context.

The analysis was guided by IPA quality criteria, particularly close engagement with participants' words, attention to convergence and divergence across cases, and the development of a coherent experiential account (Nizza et al., 2021; Smith, 2011). The analysis was further strengthened through triangulation of diary entries, interview transcripts, and researcher field notes. Field notes were used to provide contextual observations, including participants' tone, interruptions, and surrounding conditions during interviews, which helped deepen the interpretation of participants' accounts (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Team discussions with two experienced qualitative researchers were also conducted to review interpretations, refine coding decisions, and strengthen the development of themes.

2.5 Researcher Reflexivity

Given IPA's interpretative orientation, reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis. The researcher approached the study as a qualitative researcher interested in mothers' work-family experiences, while recognising that prior familiarity with gendered care debates could shape what appeared analytically salient. To manage interpretative bias, the researcher kept reflexive notes after interviews, documented assumptions during coding, returned repeatedly to participants' words, and discussed emerging interpretations with two experienced qualitative researchers. These strategies did not remove interpretation, but made the analytic process more transparent and grounded in participants' accounts (Berger, 2015; Smith et al., 2022).

3. Results and Discussion

In line with IPA writing conventions, the Results and Discussion are presented together so that participant accounts, interpretation, and engagement with literature can be developed within the same analytic

narrative. To improve readability, the section begins with participant demographics, followed by the Group Experiential Theme and its subthemes.

Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of the eight participants. The participants were Malay Muslim working mothers aged between their late twenties and mid-forties. They were employed in areas such as customer service, administration, retail, education, and marketing. Five participants were married and three were divorced. The number of children ranged from one to five. One participant had a child with autism, while another also had caregiving responsibilities for elderly parents.

Table 1. Participant demographic data

Pseudonym	Age	Relationship status	Occupation	Number of children	Special needs child	Parents as dependents
Kia	42	D	Clerk	2	Second child is autistic	N
Suri	44	D	Admin Officer	5	N	N
Melor	28	M	Admin Officer	1	N	N
Orked	42	M	Private school teacher	3	N	N
Dara	28	M	Customer Service Agent	3	N	N
Embun	33	D	Front Desk Officer	1	N	Y
Anom	43	M	Storekeeper	2	N	N
Seroja	30	M	Marketing Executive	1	N	N

Note. M = Married; D = Divorced; N = No; Y = Yes.

3.1 Childcare as Precarious Care Infrastructure

Childcare as Precarious Care Infrastructure captures how participants negotiated childcare as a lived condition that shaped their everyday quality of life. Across the accounts, care infrastructure did not exist as a stable public or institutional support. Instead, under financial constraint, participants had to assemble childcare through informal family support, spousal adjustments, older children's caregiving, digital technologies, and their own constant monitoring. This makes childcare negotiation a quality-of-life issue because mothers' well-being depended on arrangements that were necessary but fragile, resourceful but emotionally costly. In this sense, childcare became both an everyday survival strategy and an emotional burden that mothers continued to carry even when a workable arrangement was found. This aligns with existing studies showing that low-income parents' childcare arrangements are shaped by intersecting constraints such as affordability, work schedules, transport, trust, and the uneven availability of formal and informal care (Chaudry et al., 2012; Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012). The structure of the Group Experiential Theme and its associated subthemes is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Group experiential theme and associated subthemes

Group Experiential Theme	Associated subthemes
Childcare as precarious care infrastructure	1. Family-based childcare as support, guilt, and fragile dependence
	2. Trust, safety, and spousal shift-work as family-level childcare negotiation
	3. Sibling care and the hidden redistribution of care work
	4. Digital supervision as compensatory childcare and remote vigilance
	5. Childcare negotiation as emotional, relational, and time-related quality of life

Family-based childcare as support, guilt, and fragile dependence

Dara and Embun derived meaningful support from having their mothers available to assist with childcare and daily mobility. For Dara, however, grandparental care was not an uncomplicated source of relief. Her three children did not go to babysitters because the family could not afford the fees, and she had to manage full-time work while caring for three young children. Although her mother's home offered a

temporary space where the children could be cared for and where Dara could work more peacefully, this arrangement also produced guilt because her mother was already caring for another grandchild.

"I feel quite guilty because my mother is currently caring for my brother's child. Aaa.. my brother has to go to work, his son is the same age as my eldest. Aaa.. so they are all growing up.. very handful. So I can't ask my mother to care for all three of my children (everyday). So I take care of them myself."

(Dara, interview/line 276)

Dara's account shows how informal childcare support may function as both a resource and a source of emotional tension. Her words suggest that her mother was a trusted and accessible caregiver, yet not someone Dara felt she could continuously depend on without burdening her. This reflects the wider issue that reliance on informal care may emerge when formal childcare is inaccessible, unaffordable, or incompatible with working schedules, especially as family and community support becomes less assured (Abd Shukor et al., 2024; Mukhriz & Hsu, 2026). In Dara's case, the childcare arrangement helped her to sustain work, but it also intensified the mental load of having to calculate what was fair, possible, and morally acceptable within the family. This shows that childcare affected Dara's quality of life not only through the absence of affordable care, but through the emotional burden of deciding how much support she could ask from another already burdened family member.

Embun's experience similarly illustrates the value of grandparental support, but her narrative also shows that childcare was embedded within a wider system of daily routines. As a single mother of one living with her parents, Embun repeatedly described her mother's ability to drive, fetch, and care for her daughter as central to the family's everyday functioning.

"So it's like my daily routine in the morning, after fajar prayer and ready to work.. We'll send Ain to school first since she has to get in by 8am. I need to get in by 8.30am. So Ain has to go first. Then my mom will send me to work. After work.. our routine is the same. Mom will pick me up at work and then we'll go to pick up Ain. Alhamdulillah that she's still healthy. She can drive here and there. Even.. for me, she is very strong because she can drive from.. up to Langkawi, Perlis, Singapore."

(Embun, interview/line 618)

For Embun, her mother's support was not limited to looking after a child at home. It enabled the flow of the day itself, including school drop-off, transport to work, and after-work routines. This matters because it broadens the meaning of childcare beyond supervision. It also includes mobility, punctuality, and the practical coordination that allows paid work and family life to continue.

"So I considered myself lucky because Mom.. because my mom can drive around. Like this morning I had to get a Grab because Ain was on sick leave. When she's not going to school, she will stay at home. So I told my mom it's okay. Ain isn't feeling well so don't need to send me to work. I can get a Grab and Mom can take care of Ain at home."

(Embun, interview/line 698)

Embun's use of "lucky" points to the precarious nature of everyday well-being, where work routines, transport, and childcare depended heavily on the continued health and availability of her mother. Her gratitude therefore sits alongside the vulnerability of the arrangement. Without her mother, ordinary disruptions such as a child being unwell would immediately require alternative costs, such as using the Grab car service, or new adjustments to work and family routines. Read through a quality-of-life lens, Embun's account shows how childcare support was also time support, mobility support, and emotional security.

Melor's account also reflects the importance of family proximity and trusted caregiving. Her mother-in-law was staying with her temporarily and cared for Alif (her six-month-old son) while Melor went to the office. At the same time, Melor considered the possibility of sending Alif to her own mother if her mother was physically fit enough to care for him.

"My mother-in-law took care of Alif for now. I'll send Alif to the babysitter after she goes back to Sarawak.. but hm.. I'm also thinking to send Alif to my mom.. if she's fit to care for him."

(Melor, interview/line 83)

Melor's account supports the argument that informal childcare is often shaped by trust, proximity, and perceived safety. Her mother-in-law's temporary care enabled Melor to continue working while delaying

the need for paid childcare. This reflects wider evidence that family-based care, particularly grandparental care, can support mothers' labour force participation by providing regular and unanticipated childcare (Aassve et al., 2012; Compton & Pollak, 2014; Bratti et al., 2018). However, Melor's phrase "if she's fit to care for him" also signals the limits of this arrangement. Family care may be emotionally reassuring and economically helpful, but it remains dependent on the caregiver's health, location, and capacity. Thus, grandparental care can buffer low-income mothers against the cost of formal childcare, but it does not remove childcare insecurity entirely.

Trust, safety, and spousal shift-work as family-level childcare negotiation

In contrast, Anom's childcare arrangement was shaped by a negative experience with low-cost childcare. Her account shows that childcare insecurity is not only about whether care is available or affordable, but also whether the care is perceived as safe and trustworthy. After her child was harmed and became ill at a childcare centre, Anom and her husband decided to care for their children themselves, even though this required her husband to work evening shifts.

"We don't send our children to childcare center because we chose to babysit them.. because.. err.. I have experienced sending my kid to one. On the first and second day, there were lots of bite marks on her. She was very small, around one year plus. The marks were all over her hand. And then she was infected by hand, foot and mouth disease. Then I became.. traumatized. I got a phobia to send my kids to the center. Since then I told my husband it's okay. He can find jobs on evening shifts since I have secured a morning job. So he made his sacrifice. Go to work in the evening and come home late at night. Yea.. it's like that for us." (Anom, interview/line 1489)

Anom's experience complicates the assumption that access to formal childcare necessarily translates into secure or reassuring care for working mothers. For her, an affordable childcare centre became associated with danger, fear, and loss of trust. The family's alternative arrangement depended on her husband's willingness to alter his work schedule, which protected the children but also reorganised family time around employment. This shows how childcare quality, not only childcare cost, shapes mothers' emotional well-being and their sense of security. This is important for quality of life because trust in childcare shaped whether paid work could be sustained without continuous fear about the child's safety.

Anom later described the emotional reassurance she felt when her husband cared for the children.

"Alhamdulillah.. because when my husband is at home with the kids, I don't have to worry. I'm not worried when the kids are with him." (Anom, interview/line 763)

Her relief shows that a trustworthy spouse can become a significant caregiving resource. However, this should not be read simply as an ideal solution. The arrangement still required employment sacrifice, shift coordination, and the continued availability of one parent at home. It therefore illustrates how childcare negotiation becomes a family-level strategy for sustaining work and care when affordable, high-quality childcare is unavailable.

Sibling care and the hidden redistribution of care work

Kia's narrative presents the most constrained form of childcare negotiation. As a low-income single mother, paid childcare was beyond her reach and family support was not available. Her eldest daughter, Iris, became deeply involved in caring for her autistic brother, Willy, from a young age. Kia's diary makes visible the extent to which sibling care substituted for adult caregiving.

"My boy just needs the PC (computer) and his sister. She has been preparing him lunch or plating lunch and dinner ever since she was 7. She combs his hair, gets his bag and all his uniform ready. She was his mother too. Nowadays, she is not bossy as before. He has understood her routine. It's no longer a chore, it's natural." (Kia, diary day 1/line 130)

"My daughter did a lot of work. A lot in raising him for me. We didn't have much.. rent was ¾ of my salary. It was a struggle." (Kia, diary day 2/line 31)

The phrase "She was his mother too" carries particular analytic weight. Kia's account shows that the mother's quality of life was sustained through a hidden redistribution of care to the child. While this arrangement helped the family function and protected Kia's employment, it also compromised family roles

and children's everyday life. Childcare scarcity therefore became visible not only in the mother's burden, but also in the child's assumption of adult-like responsibilities when no adult-based alternative was available.

This finding resonates with research on parentification and young caregiving, where children in resource-constrained families may take on responsibilities usually expected of adults. Chee et al.'s (2014) qualitative study of low-income families in Singapore is particularly relevant, as it shows how children may actively negotiate caregiving responsibilities within constrained family contexts. Brolin et al. (2024) also highlight that young people who provide care to siblings with disabilities or long-term conditions may experience effects on their health, social life, school engagement, and quality of life.

Digital supervision as compensatory childcare and remote vigilance

Kia's account also shows how technology entered the family's childcare arrangement as her financial situation gradually improved. She described her children as "latchkey kids" and explained how phones, CCTV, apps, internet access, and YouTube became tools for monitoring, occupying, and managing children while she worked.

"Before, it was harder. I had to leave to fate to protect my latchkey kids. They had their phones at an early age but that time I couldn't afford ones with camera. I had to check with them and with my son too." (Kia, diary day 2/line 24)

"I have learnt to monitor my kids via CCTV and use all apps I can to make life bearable, from before." (Kia diary day 1/line 149)

Kia's use of digital tools reflects resourcefulness, but it also shows the emotional weight of remote mothering. CCTV and apps allowed her to check on her children, yet they could not provide immediate adult intervention. In this sense, technology reduced some uncertainty, but it did not remove the underlying childcare gap. It kept Kia psychologically connected to the home while she was physically away at work, which aligns with the literature review's discussion of digital supervision as a compensatory caregiving strategy rather than a true replacement for care.

"You have YouTube. Okay when I first made an investment on Unifi, I call it investment. That Unifi.. I got them installed since they were little. The internet took care of them, babysit them." (Kia, interview/line 336)

Kia's description of the internet as something that "babysit them" is striking because it captures both necessity and compromise. The internet became an investment not only in entertainment or learning, but in making everyday life manageable. However, the quote also reveals the extent to which childcare had to be improvised through non-human resources when paid care and family care were absent.

Anom's diary similarly shows how digital monitoring became a source of reassurance when her children were briefly left without adult supervision at home.

"My husband left to work at 3pm so my children were at home by themselves during the two hours. Alhamdulillah they are big enough can take care of themselves at the age of 8 and 9. I'll video call them sometimes to make sure they are okay at home. There's no school this MCO so we had to leave them at home but in my heart.. I'm extremely worried. I always told my husband to switch of the gas switch." (Anom, diary day 1/line 46)

Although Anom described her children as old enough to look after themselves for a short period, her words "in my heart.. I'm extremely worried" show that remote monitoring did not resolve her anxiety. The video call functioned as a substitute for physical presence, but it also kept her emotionally tethered to home safety while she and her husband were managing work schedules. This supports Daminger's (2019) argument that cognitive labour involves anticipating needs, identifying problems, making decisions, and monitoring outcomes. Yet Kia's and Anom's accounts also complicate the mental load literature by showing how technology does not simply ease mothers' caregiving responsibilities. Instead, digital tools relocated care into a form of remote vigilance, where mothers could monitor children from work but remained responsible for anticipating danger, checking safety, and managing worry from a distance. This resonates with Dean et al.'s (2022) view of mental load as cognitive, emotional, boundaryless, and

enduring, while extending it by showing how digital supervision can make care feel continuously present even when mothers are physically absent.

Although this study did not directly examine housing conditions, Kia's and Anom's accounts suggest that unattended childcare should be considered in relation to the physical and neighbourhood environments in which children are left without adult supervision. Malaysian studies on low-cost and high-density housing have shown that residents' well-being and children's everyday mobility may be shaped by safety, lighting, surveillance, maintenance, shared facilities, and environmental hazards (Alias et al., 2025; Amran & Jabar, 2025; Ning et al., 2025). In this sense, digital supervision may be understood as an imperfect strategy for managing childcare risk from a distance rather than a substitute for reliable adult care. This also shows that the consequences of childcare shortages are not confined to mothers' work performance or emotional well-being, but may extend to children's everyday safety and quality of life.

Dara's account echoes this use of technology to create time and space for paid work while she was caring for young children. In her case, YouTube and gadgets became tools for occupying the children and, when possible, for encouraging basic learning.

"Since the kids like to disturb me when I'm working, I have to feed them with a gadget each so they can watch YouTube. At least I have the time to finish up my work." (Dara, diary day 4/line 51)

"Since Arisa didn't really want to learn, I forced her to watch YouTube videos that are based on studying such as ABC, 123 videos. So that she can learn by herself and can easily understand. Who knows she'll get to pick up something from the videos.. because she watched them every day. So that is the only way to let her learn alphabets and numbers. Yeah.. hope so." (Dara, diary day 6/line 93)

Dara's words suggest a deeply ambivalent use of technology. On one hand, gadgets allowed her to finish her work and offered some educational content for her daughter. On the other hand, the phrase "I have to feed them with a gadget each" suggests compulsion rather than free choice. Technology helped her cope with immediate work demands, but it also reflected the absence of adequate adult support. This is consistent with Livingstone and Blum-Ross's (2020) argument that digital technologies are increasingly embedded in parenting, while also extending the concerns and responsibilities parents carry. It also resonates with Nikken and Schols's (2015) point that parents' management of children's media use is shaped by concerns about learning, regulation, and children's needs.

Together, Kia's, Anom's, and Dara's accounts show that digital technology did not resolve the childcare gap; it redistributed it into remote vigilance, child self-management, and screen-based occupation. This has implications for maternal mental load because mothers remained responsible for anticipating risk and monitoring children from a distance. It also has implications for child well-being because children's safety, social interaction, learning, and autonomy became shaped by the absence of reliable adult care rather than by deliberate parenting preference.

Childcare negotiation as emotional, relational, and time-related quality of life

The participants' accounts show that childcare negotiation involved more than choosing between formal and informal care. Childcare shaped their ability to remain employed, but it also shaped their emotional well-being, sense of maternal adequacy, family relationships, and perceived security. The concern was not merely that childcare was expensive. Rather, affordable care was not always trusted, trusted care was not always available, and available care was not always sustainable. Childcare negotiation therefore became an ongoing form of emotional and practical labour for the mothers in this study. Read through a quality-of-life lens, these findings show that childcare negotiation affected both objective conditions, such as work continuity and children's physical safety, and subjective dimensions, such as worry, guilt, perceived maternal adequacy, and emotional security.

These findings echo longstanding arguments on the importance of affordable and quality childcare for low-income families, particularly in contexts where mothers' employment and family well-being are constrained by limited care options (Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012). However, they also extend this discussion by showing how, in the absence of such childcare, mothers may be forced to rely on fragile networks of family support, spousal sacrifice, sibling caregiving, and digital substitutes. While these strategies demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness, they also reveal a childcare crisis that affects

mothers' quality of life. In this study, subsidised, accessible, and high-quality childcare emerges not only as a work support, but as a central condition for protecting the everyday well-being of low-income working mothers and their families.

4. Conclusion

This study examined childcare negotiation as a lived process that shapes the everyday quality of life of urban low-income working mothers. The findings show that childcare was not merely a practical arrangement, but a precarious form of care infrastructure assembled through informal family support, spousal adjustments, older children's caregiving, digital technologies, and mothers' continuous monitoring. While these arrangements enabled mothers to sustain paid work and manage family life, they were often fragile, emotionally demanding, and difficult to sustain.

The study contributes to existing discussions by showing how childcare constraints are lived and felt in everyday life. Beyond affordability and accessibility, childcare shaped mothers' emotional security, family relationships, sense of maternal adequacy, children's safety, and ability to remain engaged in paid work. In this sense, childcare negotiation became an ongoing form of emotional and practical labour that directly affected mothers' quality of life.

4.1 Implications of the Study

The findings suggest that childcare should be understood not only as a work support, but as a central condition of everyday well-being for low-income working mothers and their families. Policies aimed at supporting women's employment should therefore address the availability, affordability, trustworthiness, and quality of childcare services.

The study also supports the broader aims of Sustainable Development Goal 5, particularly Target 5.4, which calls for the recognition and valuation of unpaid care and domestic work. When stable childcare support is absent, care is often absorbed privately within families through unpaid and under-recognised forms of labour. Strengthening childcare provision is therefore important for gender equality, family well-being, children's safety, and mothers' quality of life.

4.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study involved a small and homogeneous sample of eight urban low-income working mothers in Klang Valley. The sample was appropriate for IPA because it allowed detailed idiographic analysis of a relatively specific participant group. The shared Malay Muslim background of participants also provided contextual homogeneity, which supported close comparison across cases. However, this homogeneity may shape transferability, as the findings may not fully reflect childcare negotiation among mothers from different ethnic, religious, regional, occupational, or family backgrounds. Future research could examine how childcare negotiation is experienced across more diverse groups of mothers in Malaysia.

The study also focused only on mothers' accounts. Upcoming studies could include fathers, grandparents, older children, childcare providers, and employers to better understand how childcare responsibilities are negotiated across households, workplaces, and care systems. Further research could also explore how digital technologies reshape childcare, maternal mental load, and children's safety. Overall, the study suggests that improving mothers' quality of life requires attention not only to mothers' resilience, but also to the conditions that make such resilience necessary.

Declarations

Ethical approval and consent to participate: Ethical approval was obtained from the IIUM Research Ethics Committee (IREC 2019 235) prior to participant recruitment. All participants were adults. The study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and participants' rights were explained in simple language that they understood. Written informed consent was obtained before their participation. As an acknowledgement of their time and contribution, participants received a small monetary token of appreciation after completing both the diary and interview components. All data were handled with strict confidentiality, and

pseudonyms were used to protect participants' and families' identities throughout data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

Use of generative AI tools: Generative AI tools were used only to support language refinement and editorial clarity during the preparation of this manuscript. The author reviewed, revised, and verified all AI-assisted outputs and remains fully responsible for the accuracy and originality of the final manuscript.

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