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# Exploring the lived experiences of Singapore's "opt-out" mothers: Introducing "Professional Motherhood"

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## Abstract

This article explores the experiences of 10 educated middle-class Singaporean women who act in contrast to the state's neoliberal focus on continuous employment, opting-out of full-time professional work to intensively parent their children. Using the theoretical lens of intensive motherhood and a qualitative longitudinal approach, we explore how these women legitimize their position, highlighting a culturally specific performance of motherhood ("Professional Motherhood"). Professional motherhood enrolls elements of former professional identities and skillsets into everyday motherhood, performed through three strategies: *positioning*, *productive*, and *practicing* motherhood. We contribute to existing literature by demonstrating that culturally informed variations of motherhood exist beyond the (largely Western) dominant lens of intensive motherhood ideology. Professional motherhood is experienced as a radical step by women, proving partially successful in legitimizing opt-out decisions. However, by incorporating and further emphasizing deeply ingrained ideal worker expectations, women risk further upholding the state's competing logics and their obligations as mothers/workers.

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## KEYWORDS

family/work integration, intensive motherhood, neoliberalism, opt-out, professional motherhood

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the experiences of a group of middle-class Singaporean–Chinese mothers who have chosen to “opt-out” (Stone, 2007) of paid employment to care for their children. Opting-out is a strategy used by mothers to reconcile the dual demands of work and care (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Prior research has explored how women reconcile expectations around employment and maternal identities (Bailey, 1999; Johnston & Swanson, 2007), a tension which is particularly apparent in Singapore (Teo, 2010). Government policy encourages Singaporean women in managerial-professional occupations to reproduce to ensure the longevity and success of the nation (Teo, 2014). They are encouraged to maintain continuous paid employment to support their ongoing welfare costs and skillset development, as well as state labor needs (SkillsFuture, 2015). In addition, for the middle class, a career is an intrinsic part of their identity (Quek, 2014). Maternity leave in Singapore, while meeting ILO standards, is comparatively short (Teo, 2010) and as living costs are high, dual incomes are generally considered necessary. Opting-out of employment, even temporarily, is positioned as an illegitimate strategy for Singaporean women to reconcile the competing demands of paid work and motherhood (Teo, 2014), given concerns surrounding Singapore's shrinking/aging workforce (Teo, 2010).

However, a significant number of educated, middle-class Singaporean mothers in managerial-professional occupations are making the decision to opt-out of employment to care for their children. These women fit with Kuperberg and Stone's (2008) “mommy elite”—status conferred based on their high education levels, their former high-status profession, and husbands' current employment. In this article, we focus on Singaporean–Chinese opt-out mothers, given that just under 75% of Singapore's population is ethnic Chinese (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2020). Through the theoretical lens of intensive motherhood, a dominant approach to motherhood which is “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays, 1996, p. 8), combined with neoliberal governmentality (Liow, 2012), we explore competing discourses between mothering and employment expectations. While intensive mothering has seized scholarly attention as the most prevalent motherhood ideology in Western settings, it fails to recognize how “other” women perform motherhood (Dow, 2016; Duncan et al., 2003). Accordingly, in this paper we ask how is intensive motherhood enacted in a society like Singapore with its competing logics and pressures on working mothers?

Our analysis is based on 20 longitudinal in-depth interviews conducted with ten Singaporean–Chinese mothers who had opted-out of employment to focus on meeting the needs of their children. Building on Dow (2019), we seek to build on “the specific cultural, social, economic, structural, and ideological characteristics and configurations of the family and the market” (p. 123). Our approach recognizes women's specific circumstances, rather than understandings of work/care which are based on an assumed norm of white middle-class mothers. We therefore respond to calls for research to investigate motherhood in non-Western contexts (Dow, 2016; Duncan et al., 2003) via exploring how women “reconcile competing pulls for intensive mothering and labor force participation” (Johnston & Swanson, 2007, p. 450). We also contribute to calls for research which explore how neoliberalism is lived out (Scharff, 2016); capturing the lived experiences of women, often ignored in neoliberal studies (Baker & Kelan, 2019).

Our findings demonstrate how participants legitimized their opt-out through performing what we term “Professional Motherhood.” This provided a means to counter criticism that they were wasting their education and that through personally raising the next generation of citizens, they were hindering Singapore's economic success. Professional motherhood is a culturally situated approach to full-time caring which enrolls elements of former professional identities and skillsets into everyday motherhood and often involves developing skillsets as mompreneurs (Goransson, 2016). Professional motherhood is performed via three strategies, which reconcile Singapore's work/care demands:

(1) *Positioning* motherhood (for the good of the child and state); (2) *Productive* motherhood (accommodating self-employment around childcare); (3) *Practicing* motherhood (keeping employment skillsets alive).

We adopt the following structure. First, we introduce the context of Singapore's family policy. We discuss how the intensification of mothering practices combine with neoliberal thinking to develop competing logics and contradictions. After outlining our methodology, we present our data. We first highlight how women legitimized their opt-out, allowing us to introduce the concept of professional motherhood. We then offer three illustrative case studies incorporating varying approaches to reconciliation through professional motherhood (*positioning, practicing, and producing* motherhood). We discuss wider implications for Singapore's normative expectations concerning women's obligations as mothers/workers, concluding with recommendations for policy and practice.

## 1.1 | Research context: Singapore's family policy

Given Singapore's comparative lack of natural resources, the population is seen as key to its economic success, and this informs its neoliberal, yet regulatory, approach to governance (Liow, 2012; Teo, 2014). Citizens are encouraged to resolve their needs through labor market participation (Teo, 2014), paying a proportion of their monthly salary into the nation's Central Provident Fund, matched by employer contributions. This highly regulated fund covers education, healthcare, and housing costs (Teo, 2014). Critics argue the fund's reliance on continuous employment fosters gender inequality, offering disincentives to stay-at-home motherhood (Lee, 2001).

While neoliberalism is primarily associated with economic practices, "the political rationality that...organises these policies...reaches beyond the market" (Brown, 2005, p. 38) and in the case of Singapore, it involves transforming the populace into neoliberal subjects through governmentality (Liow, 2012). To avoid overburdening infrastructure, Singapore introduced a series of measures in the 1970s to achieve zero-population growth. These included campaigns (e.g., "*Keep your family small*" and "*Stop at two*" [Tan, 2003]); government incentives for voluntary sterilization, particularly among the poor and less educated, and the liberalization of abortion laws (Teo, 2010). This "anti-natalist" approach was not reversed until the 1980s, following enduring concerns that fertility had fallen below replacement level (Tang & Quah, 2018; Teo, 2010).

Rapid industrialization offered greater education and employment opportunities for women, resulting in delayed and reduced marriage rates and, in the mid-1980s, below-replacement fertility. Many female graduates chose to focus on their career, which attracted state criticism: such women "had become too modern—overly career-minded, insufficiently oriented towards motherhood...the loss of their progeny was a loss to the nation's talent pool" (Teo, 2010, p. 339). In response to falling birth rates, Singaporean women, particularly well-educated, middle-class ethnic Chinese, were encouraged to marry and bear children as "a gendered call to patriotic duty" (Tang & Quah, 2018, p. 651). Bound by neoliberal morality (Teo, 2012), Singaporeans experience institutionalized relationships and ethical meanings that link citizens to each other and to the state, with the state viewed as the upholder of moral good. Graduate mothers were afforded generous tax relief, medical insurance benefits, baby bonuses, and promised the best school places for their children (Tang & Quah, 2018). While elements of this eugenics phase were short lived, its legacy continues to inform many of Singapore's current pronatalist policies (Teo, 2014).

Women's participation in Singapore's labor force has increased steadily. In 2014, 74% of women of prime working age (25–45 years) were employed (Teo, 2014) with mothers working an average 45.5-h week (Quek, 2014). Working mothers receive paid maternity leave (currently 16 weeks), paid childcare leave, subsidized childcare, a baby-bonus scheme, and other tax incentives to promote reproduction (Quek, 2014). Yet working mothers are encouraged to promptly return to work following childbirth, given ongoing concerns surrounding a shrinking workforce and aging population (Teo, 2010).

Most contemporary middle-class citizens adhere to the state's pro-family ideals (Quek, 2014); two or more children born to a young, married, heterosexual couple in full-time employment (Teo, 2014). Childcare responsibility rests primarily with mothers, but middle and upper-income families benefit from tax relief by hiring a "foreign domestic

maid" (Teo, 2014) and this has become a norm. Mothers typically remain in paid employment "long after marriage and childbirth" having internalized the government view that they should be employed (Quek, 2014, p. 146) with working mothers reportedly experiencing guilt and insecurity (and negative reactions from co-workers) when taking time off work (Teo, 2014). Combined with high living costs this means that caring for children full time is out of reach for most women (Quek, 2014).

Although lower-income/class mothers also experience the dual demands of working motherhood (a point we return to in our discussion), we specifically focus on middle-class mothers who (1) provide a key focus for the state (Teo, 2014); (2) are granted greater options (e.g., tax relief, "foreign domestic-worker levy") to balance contradictory demands (Quek, 2014; Teo, 2010); and are given (3) intensive parenting norms are particularly acute among Singapore's middle class (Quek, 2014).

## 1.2 | Neoliberalism and intensive motherhood

While much research seeks to understand the historical origins of neoliberalism, less attention is given to how neoliberalism is lived out on a subjective level, and the experiences of women are often ignored (Baker & Kelan, 2019). The psychic life of neoliberalism (Scharff, 2016) recognizes that life is played out within discourses of power. While power can be viewed as subordinating, it can also help form the subject: "providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire...power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are" (Butler, 1997, p. 2).

Young, middle-class women are often positioned as entrepreneurial and neoliberal subjects possessing resource to transgress obstacles and adversity (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Bound by ambition and personal accountability, the neoliberal subject disavows vulnerability (Scharff, 2016); self-improves (Orgad, 2009); is creative and adaptive to change, learning new skills (Gill & Orgad, 2018); maintains a positive attitude (Sandberg & Grant, 2017) acting as the manager of their own life. Scharff (2016) highlights how female musicians viewed themselves as an enterprise which needed constant work and attention, with neoliberal ideology centering on being continually productive, rather than idle (Baker & Kelan, 2019). The neoliberal expectation is that individuals continually work on, and improve, themselves (Rottenburg, 2019). Given the social stigma associated with failure, it has, however, been difficult to nurture entrepreneurial spirit among Singapore's populace—with most of Singapore's middle class working in multinational corporations or the civil service (Chua & Bedford, 2016; Tan, 2003).

We now turn to consider how this dominant political rationality which instills responsibility on the individual to incessantly achieve their best self, producing human beings as human capital (Rottenburg, 2019), is played out among women who have chosen to opt-out of Singapore norms promoting continuous employment.

The tensions between mothering expectations and employment feature prominently in prior literature (Bailey, 1999). Mothering and worker identities are understood as potentially contradictory (Johnston & Swanson, 2007). Singapore has largely adopted an "adult worker model" with various mechanisms to try and ensure this can/will continue after the birth of a child. However, mothers' work/care decisions are made based on what Duncan et al. (2003) term "gendered moral rationalities" which consider what women feel is the right or responsible thing to do with respect to participating in the labor market. A number of different studies have looked at how middle-class women have explored what Crowley (2014) terms "alternative roadmaps" for appropriate childrearing. Johnston and Swanson (2007) describe employed women as engaging in "cognitive acrobatics" to navigate these tensions with women widely assumed to adopt "a primary care-giver identity if they stay at home, or a mother-worker identity if they are employed" (Crowley, 2014, p. 115).

Intensive motherhood indicates a dominant approach to motherhood. Such an intensification of mothering practices positions the child's well-being center stage and implies that full attention to caregiving is incompatible with paid employment. Intensive mothering is viewed as part of a contemporary neoliberal rationality, emphasizing individual responsibility, risk management, self-surveillance, and control (Shirani et al., 2012). But it can also be

understood as identity work, providing a vehicle for personal fulfillment. Under intensive motherhood, women pay heed to scientific knowledge and expert advice, taking on responsibility for parenting decisions focused on a range of educational, emotional, and developmental outcomes (Hoffman, 2010; Vincent & Ball, 2007). Mothering therefore becomes concerned with ensuring optimal longer-term outcomes, including raising the next generation of responsible citizens. "Bad" parenting is conceptualized as leading to many social ills, including poor educational attainment and even criminality (Hoffman, 2010; Shirani et al., 2012).

While intensive mothering is widely accepted as the most powerful mothering ideology, existing studies primarily draw on prevalent (white) Western contexts, failing to recognize the distinct stereotypes and expectations relating to other groups of mothers and mothering identities (Dow, 2016; Duncan et al., 2003). Christopher (2012, p. 74) suggests "extensive mothering" as a means to better recognize how employment "fits into notions of good mothering." Women in Christopher's (2012) study reject core tenets of intensive mothering, delegating some caregiving tasks while maintaining ultimate responsibility, and justifying employment based on their personal needs. In other studies, the role of provider is incorporated into motherhood (Segura, 1994); notably there is often cultural support for American black women to work outside the home, which Dow (2016) suggests is informed by shared histories in slavery. These counter examples demonstrate that there exist culturally informed variations, exceptions, and re-framings (Johnston & Swanson, 2007) of the prevalence of intensive mothering, even among middle-class mothers.

In summary, women experience tensions between work/care roles and are pulled in competing directions. Prior research makes clear that identities can be "potentially powerful mechanisms for establishing purpose and meaning in mothers' lives," with mother-carer or mother-worker offered up by media and popular culture as "distinct and alternative roadmaps for appropriate childrearing" (Crowley, 2014, p. 115). While intensive mothering has seized scholarly attention as the most prevalent ideology, how is this enacted in a society like Singapore with its competing logics and pressures on working mothers? We explore the mothering practices of a group of middle-class Singaporean-Chinese mothers who were previously professionally employed and now care for their children full time. Our study is guided by questions exploring women's opt-out experiences, and how they reconcile their at-home caring role with Singapore's focus on continuous employment and the emphasis given to career identities.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

We recruited ten Singaporean-Chinese mothers who had opted out of full-time employment in order to care for their children. Recruitment was through a mothering forum and subsequent snowballing through participant referrals (a maximum of one per participant to avoid restricting our understanding to established friendship groups, following Hays, 1996). Our sample is "illustrative" in nature (Bailey, 1999), reflecting recruitment by convenience with purposive elements (Patton, 1990). The recruitment parameters informed the homogeneity of the sample, all of whom were married, university educated, identified as middle class, and aged between 31 and 45 with diverse professional backgrounds (see Table 1). In-depth interviews were conducted by one of the authors, who is Singaporean-Chinese, between 2016 and 2017. Interviews took place within participants' homes to help participants feel at ease and allowed the researcher to observe participants within their home environment (offering a practical solution to childcare). All interviews were conducted in English given this is accepted as the working language of Singapore (Tan, 2003).

Participants were interviewed twice to develop rapport and understanding around their experiences. A loosely structured interview guide was employed for both interviews. This included standard questions across participants and, in the case of the second interview, allowed follow-up questions to further develop emergent themes. The first interview aimed to elicit personal accounts of life histories in relation to past and current domestic/childcare responsibilities (Atkinson, 2002). Our intention was to capture dialog which emerged naturally, guided by participants as experts in their own lives. Each of these first interviews began with a grand tour question ("can you start by

TABLE 1 Participant information table

Pseudonym	Age	Age (in years) of children	Years at home	Domestic worker?	Professional career prior to opt-out (number of years working)
Adele	35	2 daughters (5; 16 months)	5	Temporary	Public relations manager (8)
Nikki	40	Son (7); daughter (2)	7	Temporary	Teaching (15)
Nova	33	2 sons (4; 3)	4.5	None currently	Design engineer (5)
Tiffany	39	2 daughters (11; 8)	2	Live-in	Banking (15)
Sonia	30	Son (4); daughter (20 months)	4	None	Healthcare (4)
Estelle	45	Son (15); daughter (13)	2	Live-in	Banking (19)
Inez	38	Son (1)	3	Temporary	Pharmaceuticals (10)
Yvette	31	Son (3); daughter (8 months)	3	Temporary	Social worker (7)
Ingrid	34	Daughter (7 months)	2	Live-in	Flight attendant (10)
Stella	32	Son (3); daughter (10 months)	3	Temporary	Civil servant (8)

telling me about yourself?"; McCracken, 1988), and subsequent questions focused on participants' experiences prior to, and following, motherhood/opt-out. Discussions progressed to include reflections on employment experiences; combining work and motherhood; discussion around their home-based role. Interviews lasted approximately 90 min to two hours.

The second interview was conducted several weeks after the first and was typically slightly shorter (between 60 and 90 min). This passage of time allowed the researchers to develop an overall understanding of participants' experiences and follow-up lines of inquiry, in addition to those questions that were common to the project. Conducting a second interview also helped to mitigate some of the concerns that a participant-led approach can introduce (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure the opportunity to return to key themes of the study.

We follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach to data analysis. Each transcript was initially read and re-read by individual members of the research team (developing within-case stories using the verbatim transcripts). Notes and memos were exchanged which focused on developing a full understanding of each participant. Once this preliminary analysis was complete, the next stage involved looking for patterns, connections and (dis)similarities across transcripts, a process sharing similarities with Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open coding. In the final stages, *Professional Motherhood* was identified as a global theme, and key to women's reconciliation of the competing logics of professional work and care.

### 3 | FINDINGS

We first highlight how participants appeared torn between the competing logics of maintaining continuous employment and meeting the caregiving needs of their children. We then introduce professional motherhood to illustrate how participants responded to competing work/care demands, adopting three reconciliation strategies (*positioning*, *productive*, and *practicing* motherhood). Professional motherhood recognizes that former workplace identities and

practices migrate into a culturally situated approach to motherhood. We then present three cases to exemplify each strategy.

### 3.1 | Singapore's competing logic

Every participant highlighted norms surrounding the primacy of paid work to middle-class Singaporean mothers and the need to return to work promptly following childbirth: "that is what the government wants to promote, right? They want to bring all the mums from home back to work, so that our workforce would be full again" (Adele). However, common workplace practices (e.g., long, unsociable working hours) jarred with caregiving. For some participants the challenges associated with international trade (e.g., anti-social working hours), aggressively pursued by Singapore, had potential to encroach on home lives and disrupt childcare, as Nova illustrates: "it was quite common for us to sleep in the office...it was not so healthy if you start a family with that kind of life." Gendered assumptions (rather than economic rationality) meant that it was our female participants, not their male partners, who assumed childcare responsibility.

Given the centrality of paid work to their identity (Quek, 2014), our participants never intended to opt-out of employment. The majority decided to leave employment shortly after the birth of their first child, with paid childcare falling short of expectations. Nikki, for example, placed her son in nursery after returning to her teaching role. She quit 3 months later, feeling that "my son got mistreated there." Similar experiences led participants to engage in more significant periods away from work, deeming working motherhood incompatible: "I can't have the best of both worlds, so I have to decide between my children and work" (Yvette). As full-time carers, the physical, mental, and emotional development of participants' children became a project to manage. Participants became expert in their child's development, accompanying them to music classes, phonics groups, gymnastics,<sup>1</sup> trips to the zoo, theater, and library, in line with intensive mothering expectations (Hays, 1996). Education took center stage of participants' efforts (Quek, 2014), often home tutoring their children in attempts to expedite learning. For example, Nova says: "I want my son to be able to read before he attends kindergarten.<sup>2</sup> In kindergarten, he will have to get other skills. At nursery, I pushed him in the phonics class, focused him to get the phonics done at home since he has interest in reading. Basically, we are planning ahead, what kinds of skill he needed to get and by when."

All our samples (except for Nova and Sonia) hired domestic workers (Table 1) but were keen to highlight they "are support, they cannot replace parents...we are still responsible to make sure that the values we want to impart is from us" (Inez), suggesting an affinity with the employed mothers' justifications in Christopher (2012). This paid help was often directed toward mundane household chores which afforded participants greater time to perform "important" motherly duties: "I provide psychological support, emotional support. Otherwise, it defeats the purpose of me staying at home" (Tiffany).

Opting-out from employment was met with criticism. Adele explained:

To a stay-at-home mum, a lot of people in the beginning will say very blunt things. Like why are you wasting your education? Why are you staying at home when the economy needs you? Why are you wasting your time being with the kids? Why do you want to be a housewife? Why don't you get a maid? A lot of times this decision to stay at home is questioned by other family or friends, or even strangers that we meet.

Inez discussed feeling "very shy, very shameful" when explaining her stay-at-home role, given Singapore's prominent continuous work ethic. In the early phase of opt-out most participants discussed their doubts surrounding whether this was the right thing to do: "I felt like I am rotting my day away, like wasting...I still struggle with staying at home, I am feeling a bit aimless and then I don't feel like I have added value in my life" (Yvette). For many Singaporeans "value" is instilled through workplace success and position.



### 3.2 | Introducing professional motherhood

To help reconcile the tension between maintaining economic productivity and balancing “good” motherhood ideals, the women performed what we term *professional motherhood*. Professional motherhood is an approach to full-time caring which describes how our sample of middle-class Singaporean mothers retained elements of professional identities and skillsets in their everyday motherhood performances, in readiness for their eventual return to employment. Practicing professional motherhood helped the women to legitimize their opt-out, counter associated stigma, and ensure continuities with elements of their professional self (c.f. Bailey, 1999). Professional motherhood integrates three key strategies to reconcile work/care demands: (1) *positioning*; (2) *productive*; (3) *practicing* motherhood. We define these strategies in Table 2 which function as complementary and somewhat fluid means to enact professional motherhood. The strategies emerged prominently across our dataset, with positioning and practicing more prevalent (see column 3), and each participant embraced at least two of the three strategies identified. Table 2 also offers illustrative examples of each strategy across our dataset (highlighting differences). We now present three cases to exemplify the three strategies, while recognizing multiple strategies were employed simultaneously, as evident in the cases.

### 3.3 | Positioning motherhood: Adele

Adele worked for 8 years as a Public Relations Manager for a multi-national company. She had been a full-time mother since the birth of her first child (Hannah) 5 years ago. She lived with her husband, Michael (a teacher) and their two daughters. Before Hannah's birth, Adele enjoyed a highly successful career, with paid work central to her self-identity:

For as long as I remember, my identity has been pegged to how I succeed at the workplace. You are Executive. You are the Assistant Manager. You are the Manager. And then you are Director. It seems that the only way that people would give you any credit is when you have a name card that says something impressive. So, it was always the next promotion, the next pay rise, the next bonus.

Given that she enjoyed her job and felt prolonged maternity leave would harm promotion, Adele returned to work after 3 months and found juggling work and childcare difficult. Colleagues were unsympathetic to her caregiving needs and she subsequently opted-out of employment.

Faced with public criticism, Adele worked to find ways to legitimize her decision. She highlighted the importance of full-time motherhood through what Sandberg and Grant (2017) label “moral elevation.” To do this, she simultaneously enrolled meeting the needs of the state (rearing the next generation of responsible, productive Singapore citizens) while prioritizing mothering practices, somewhat in line with elements of intensive mothering:

Sometimes someone would ask me ‘don't you miss it? Meeting important people, doing important things, feeling important?’ Well, it used to bother me. But as soon as I realised it, it was like a huge weight was lifted off me. I *am* amidst important people, every day, the most important ones to me. I *am* doing something important. I *am* molding the people of tomorrow. I *am* contributing toward them growing as happy, healthy, honest, and empathetic people.

For Adele, the success of her children was bound within the success of Singapore, and she re-positioned the importance of full-time motherhood as intrinsic to state advancement. Yet Adele was keen to return to paid work (“we talk more and more about me going back”) but acknowledged her career had been damaged irreconcilably (“I know I have committed career suicide”). To counter negativity and aid re-entry to employment, Adele undertook ad hoc freelance work from home and regularly updated her parenting blog, which generated modest advertising revenue.

TABLE 2 Examples of reconciliation strategies

Strategy	Illustrative example	Prevalence of strategy
<p><i>Positioning motherhood:</i> Women re-positioned the importance of stay-at-home motherhood/opt-out as simultaneously good for their children and Singapore.</p>	<p>“Mine [KPIs] would be like how to teach them well, how to instill the right values, the mother, their counsellor, their tuition teacher... all for the good of Singapore” (Tiffany)</p> <p>“I attended character building seminars, how to drill children with characters, strong characters rather than academic only. Strong in academic is insufficient. It is more crucial to have strong character... you hire a person because of the person’s qualification, but you fire a person because of the characters” (Estelle)</p>	<p>All participants, except for Ingrid. While Ingrid recognized herself as the “best person” to care for her children, she did not explicitly link this to the success of the nation.</p>
<p><i>Productive motherhood:</i> Involved commercializing the family home and commodifying motherhood experiences (e.g., incorporating entrepreneurial skills into a home-based role).</p>	<p>“I may still continue with my online business. I started this sewing thing, I sell name flags. Name flags are like bunting...I make toys, basically anything I can make, I will make. But if I can’t, I tell them that I can’t. So, it is very flexible. I only do it if it does, not at the expense of my children” (Yvette)</p> <p>“Not working in a full-time job does not mean that I have not been working, because I have done a lot of freelance writing, I write for magazines. And I have done a lot of editorial work for my [motherhood] blog as well... the blog is about five-years old and it has grown very, very much over the years...in the past twelve months, I have had more advertisers and sponsors than I have had in the previous years. I love it and it is bringing in some income” (Adele)</p>	<p>Adele, Nikki, Nova, Estelle, Inez, Yvette.</p> <p>Ingrid/Stella did not actively undertake <i>productive</i> motherhood but explored employment opportunities (from home).</p> <p>Tiffany/Sonia did not undertake paid work (dedicating themselves to their children’s needs e.g., Sonia was considering home-schooling).</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Strategy	Illustrative example	Prevalence of strategy
<p><i>Practicing</i> motherhood: Drawing on former professional training and skills to help manage motherhood and keep skillsets alive.</p>	<p>“My work experience [former engineer] and study help me to see what is important versus what is urgent. I know how to differentiate them. I know how to see daily needs versus future needs of, say, the children and start to have a diagram in my head, on what is needed now and what is needed later, and how to plan to achieve that goal...I need to have a diagram in my head, to see how we divide the time. It can be a timetable. It can be a fishbone diagram” (Nova)</p> <p>“I remember that smiling, like I smile, makes a difference to her. Also, in fact, to anyone, customer service smiling makes a difference to the person, and then it makes a difference to my daughter, and when I am running out of patience, smiling helps, too. To take the stress and the negative energy out of the situation, which is what happens a lot at work” (Ingrid)</p>	<p>All participants.</p>

### 3.4 | Productive motherhood: Nikki

A former teacher, Nikki had cared for her two children for 7 years and yearned to return to work (“one day I will get my time again”). She acknowledged her first years of at-home motherhood marked “the beginning of the toughest journey in my life: to be a hundred percent housewife and stay-home mother.” Nikki, like all participants, openly admitted questioning her decision to stay at home—reflecting the conflicted and ambivalent experiences of opt-out women (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Like Adele, Nikki looked forward to returning to full-time employment; yet also recognized the problematic 7-year gap in her employment history, reflective of re-entry literature (McGrath et al., 2005):

Whatever situation we are in, whatever decision we have, we have made, it is not a bed of roses. And I find that a mature individual should not regret our decision, but rather find ways and means to counteract problems, to step over hurdles and to cultivate oneself. I am definitely not in a favorable situation now, as an individual who wants to do what I want to do [return to work].

Negative feelings, which break with neoliberal ideology, were instead replaced by an emphasis of the importance of her at-home role. Nikki adopted a professional title to signal her ultimate authority and responsibility for familial success (incorporating elements of *positioning* and *practicing* professional motherhood, expanded in the next findings section):

I look at my family as an entity, as a company, I am definitely the CEO. Because yes, my husband brings back the bacon. But without me distributing the bacon carefully, I mean it would be meaningless. The whole household is, I would say, under my control.

Nikki's former work identity endured, she sought revised pathways to integrate this with her home-based role. She ran an online jewelry business and a highly successful motherhood blog. Her motherhood experiences were transformed into a business like entity, mimicking what McNay (2009) refers to as the economization of subjectivity. Such enterprises allowed her flexibility to take on work from home, becoming one of Singapore's growing mompreneurs, multi-tasking women who balance business with motherhood (Goransson, 2016). While employment discontinuity would ordinarily signal downward mobility, Nikki's alternative approach: (1) supported a planned return to full-time employment (learning new skillsets e.g., financial accounting for her jewelry business/copyediting for her blog; filling the gap on her CV); and (2) afforded her "value" as a Singapore citizen (of equal importance to other CEOs). Her blog was highly lucrative, yielding advertising revenue: "it documented my pregnancy journey and his growth, all the way till the arrival of my second daughter...I mean there were people who came up to me and say 'eh hi, you are the blogger I know?'...advertisements started swarming in."

Nikki engaged in creative and entrepreneurial activities in adapting to (and thriving on) this change in personal circumstance (Gill & Orgad, 2018), a (neoliberal) subject of self-invention (Scharff, 2016). Like the women in Scharff's (2016) study, Nikki viewed herself as a business: commodifying motherhood/family experiences which required constant work.

### 3.5 | Practicing motherhood: Estelle

Estelle lived with her husband and their two children. Her former career in wealth management spanned 15 years. Unlike other women in our sample, Estelle maintained full-time employment while her children were young and opted-out 2 years prior to interview. Estelle initially positioned motherhood in Singapore in line with breadwinner ideology: "my role mainly was to be a mother and just sufficiently provide the finance." Although not a native Singaporean,<sup>3</sup> Estelle appeared hyper-assimilated with the state's desire to instill a strong work ethic among the populace.

Estelle's career history charted frequent moves between organizations because of being headhunted. Promotion was rapid due to exceptional performance ("during the very first year, I was promoted six times...that very first year I joined, I already hit a million dollar round table"), with annual sales targets easily met ("one year target I hit in 3 months"). Far from complacent, Estelle pushed herself harder: "each time I challenge myself I must break my next record. When I hit it, the next time I would hit higher. So, each time I am always set, you know, to break my own record and also set a new goal for myself."

Estelle earned more money than she could spend, reporting that work was her initial focus ("I basically work. I wake up to work, work, and then sleep"). This continued as her children grew up, cared for by a domestic worker: "I almost have no time for them. And I left my home very early in the morning and then came back very late. So, I don't see my children growing up." This took its toll on Estelle's family life. She found it difficult to compartmentalize work and family commitments and struggled to switch off from work demands: "I don't have peace in my mind because [it's] all about work...my whole mind is about work."

Estelle's mental health suffered, and she re-assessed her purpose and absence in her children's lives. Despite having resigned 2 years previously, Estelle commented: "I would not call myself unemployed. I would say that I'm very active, but just different aspect of active," stressing "I don't believe that I totally leave my job in a way."

Estelle viewed motherhood as a full-time occupation and took steps to professionalize her at-home role. She discussed a "portfolio of work" some of which she delegated to her husband, with Estelle taking sole charge of her children's educational needs. The children became a project for Estelle who was particularly keen to develop their employability skills (reflecting *positioning* motherhood). Estelle cultivated "protective factors" (Hoffman, 2010) at

home through incorporating what her children needed to “get on” and thrive in Singapore, taking the somewhat risky decision to home-school her children (despite Singapore's effective education system):

I must be insane, you know, to pull them out from such a fantastic, the Asia's well-known educational system and out to teach by myself. And I'm not, I'm not a trained educator, nor am I a qualified teacher. All I have is perhaps during my work life, as a mentor or a trainer to my own employees and training them and coaching them.

Estelle's work-based skills (training, coaching, and mentoring) were enacted in the management of her children's lives. From a neoliberal view, Estelle clearly embraced the risk that home-schooling posed to her children/their progress. She utilized her corporate skillset to help manage family life, ensuring that such work-based competencies did not become redundant, facilitating her eventual re-entry to employment while exposing her children to workplace cultures:

I organize my schedule, my time slot, just like my PA used to do, block out my time for appointment with people and clients. Now at home, I also block my time for people who want my time. If my children want to see me, they must block my time, too. So indirectly, that behavior at work is here with me at home.

Estelle adopted a corporate approach in her performance of motherhood, taking risks (and control) seemingly for the good of her children (and, eventually, the state; simultaneously demonstrating *positioning* motherhood). Estelle developed new skills through attending parental training courses in a constant model of becoming and self-improvement (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Orgad, 2009) and illustrates how neoliberal subjects are far from idle (Baker & Kelan, 2019). Estelle self-imposed key performance indicators, which shifted in focus from meeting sales targets to mentoring/instilling employability competencies/skills to her children.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Singapore's approach to family policy has been described as “neoliberal morality,” a term which recognizes inherent contradictions within a society where family and economy are intertwined, and state intervention is paired with individual responsibility (Teo, 2012). Within Singapore there is an historical acceptance of the degree to which government policy shapes citizens' lives. With respect to professional working women, this has led to a situation where ideal worker norms, which require employees to be constantly available, demonstrating commitment to employers through long, often excessive working hours (Weisshaar, 2018), function alongside state interventions. These initiatives encourage individual responsibility around meeting the state's reproduction/labor force crisis, reflecting a situation where the needs or wishes of the individual are often subsumed by the needs of society. However, in common with women around the world, childrearing is mainly seen as women's work. Singaporean mothers experience similar pressures as have been noted elsewhere, a pressure to prioritize the needs of their child above individual interests, to parent in line with intensive mothering (Hays, 1996).

In this article, we investigated the lived experiences of ten Singaporean–Chinese mothers who tackled this established contradiction (between a professional career and child-centered ideology) by opting-out of paid labor in pursuit of full-time motherhood. Whereas women in other countries, such as the UK, often reduce their working hours or opt-out of the labor market completely after childbirth (Borgkvist et al., 2021; Lott, 2020; OECD, 2017), this is not an accepted norm in Singapore (Teo, 2014). Our participants, who share similarities to the “mommy elite” identified by Kuperberg and Stone (2008), were pulled between two competing logics. They simultaneously sought to meet the logic of Singapore's labor market as “good” workers/citizens while recognizing a maternal ideology of

care (personally meeting the needs of their children). These two (contradictory) logics were underpinned by Singapore's particular neoliberal, yet regulatory, approach to governance (Liow, 2012; Teo, 2014), with negativity/stigma surrounding opt-out.

To legitimize opt-out and reconcile the dual demands of work/family (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012), the women performed *Professional Motherhood*. Professional motherhood is a culturally specific approach to caregiving which incorporates elements of (former) professional identities/skills into everyday performances of opt-out motherhood. To perform professional motherhood the women drew on three strategies: (1) they *positioned* the importance of their stay-at-home role for the good of their children *and* Singapore (rearing the next generation of human capital, see Rottenburg, 2019), deflecting opt-out criticism; (2) were *productive* stay-at-home mothers (accommodating elements of paid work from home around childcare, granting autonomy over work time (Bari et al., 2021), with elements of motherhood experiences commercialized); (3) they *practiced* motherhood in a corporate manner (drawing on former workplace competencies to manage family life, which mitigated skill deterioration).

While the women chose to shift their overall focus toward meeting the needs of their children, rather than their careers, our findings diverge from prior opt-out motherhood studies. Mothers who purposefully pursue stay-at-home motherhood are depicted as pursuing intensive motherhood ideology (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). However, while intensive motherhood is read as a global cultural script (Hays, 1996), it is embedded within a specific cultural context, and fails to recognize how motherhood intersects with other culturally informed factors. In our study, this included how issues such as neoliberal governmentality, ideals of human capital and non-Western family culture, feed into motherhood practices. Our paper offers additional support to understandings of how alternative forms of motherhood play out according to the norms and demands of local environs (see Dow, 2019). Our participants, for example, outsourced elements of care. This approach mimicked Christopher's (2012) extensive motherhood, releasing women from more mundane aspects (e.g., cooking/cleaning) which are devalued by the Singapore middle class (and associated with the work of hired domestic-workers).

Our participants tended to continue with elements of paid employment, diverging from existing intensive motherhood literature which foregrounds child-centric practices. This included temporary and ad hoc paid activities organized around childcare demands, and participants reflected on former careers and Singapore's lack of family friendly working practices. Rather than tackling their existing workplace's lack of flexibility head on, they took matters into their own hands, pursuing entrepreneurial activities over which they had ultimate control. This was surprising as Singaporeans are positioned as lacking entrepreneurial spirit (Chua & Bedford, 2016). Whereas entrepreneurship is often discussed as a masculine trait (Mayes et al., 2020), our female mompreneurs (Goransson, 2016) often commercialized motherhood experiences. Women opt-out because of inflexibility afforded by full-time employment (Weishaar, 2018). Given Singapore's lack of flexible work arrangements, our participants were driven to "craft their own employability" (Adkins, 2016, p. 3), pursuing nuanced configurations of work/care.

Given stigma surrounding opt-out in Singapore, a *complete* opt out from paid employment was rendered unusual/problematic. Professional Motherhood met the needs of the locale by accommodating childcare, yet without completely dismissing employment needs. This motherhood performance departs from Western-specific renderings of intensive motherhood, often embedded in personal fulfillment and natural bonds with the child (Quek, 2014); a choice that women make. Dow (2019), however, questions the freedom all women have to opt-out, critiquing the universal applicability of intensive motherhood to women in "different" positions/circumstances.

The women in our study engaged in what could be read as a *partial* opt-out (through maintaining elements of paid work/upholding Singapore values). While participants felt compelled to step away from intensive patterns of work, they lacked confidence to radically rearticulate the values of Singapore and transcend obligation to the state. They opted to adjust, rather than abandon, employment practices given enduring socialization and institutionalized values evident within this particular system of meaning, moral rationality, and obligation. Singapore's populace is unlikely to gather together via collective effort to radically contest norms and expectations (Teo, 2012). Although our participants attempted to do something different in work/care terms, they did so within the tolerances of the state.

Participants also appeared to perpetuate the very logic they were moving away from (i.e., the centrality of full-time paid work to Singaporeans), through equipping their children (as human capital) with the very competencies needed to “get on” within a culture orientated toward full-time employment. As role models to their children, and catalysts of change to disrupt traditional work/care patterns, they are unlikely to radically unsettle tradition for the next generation of Singapore's workers. Of course, their children may internalize their entrepreneurial endeavors, and mimic such patterns in their own later working lives, although it is telling that most of our participants were hoping to return to full-time employment as soon as they could.

Citizenship within neoliberal discourse rewards those who can produce favorable economic contributions (Teo, 2012), such as the “elite” women in our study. However, Singapore's relatively short maternity leave, combined with a highly competitive employment context, could risk placing undue pressures on mothers who are obliged to return to paid employment promptly after birth (e.g., failing to recognize the potential for postnatal depression). Lower class/income mothers also face the dual demands of working parenthood in Singapore, yet seemingly cannot opt-out as easily (or access the foreign domestic maid levy) to reconcile work/care demands. This propagates a two-tier parenting system in Singapore, and potentially excludes low-income/class mothers from playing more pronounced roles with their children. This appears reminiscent of Singapore's former eugenic position. Current state policies support a particular type of citizen procreating, with intensive parenting norms most acute among Singapore's middle class (Quek, 2014), and most state help directed to employed, educated, married, ethnic-Chinese women (Teo, 2010).

## 5 | RECOMMENDATIONS

From a practical perspective, to counter the brain drain of female talent, organizations should be encouraged to offer returner programs to working mothers; paid placements to help re-entrants refresh their skills, build their confidence as employees, and demonstrate their commitment to resuming paid employment. Government should incentivize such schemes, further recognizing the importance of highly educated and skilled citizens to the success of the nation. Singaporean initiatives, like Mums@Work, which match companies to mothers who have taken a career break, should be supported/extended to help women re-enter the workplace.

Opportunities also exist for employers to adopt family friendly policies which offer greater flexibility for employees. This can help counter cultural assumptions regarding women's position as sole carers and should be offered to both women *and* men (Rittenhofer & Gatrell, 2012). Most obvious would be more widespread use of flexible working. For example, flexible start and finish times could help parents to balance work/family life, with flextime central to many work/life balance strategies (Lott, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has yielded an important shift in acceptance of homeworking/flexible working, which could also prompt fathers' greater involvement in childcare (Margaria, 2021). Other practical options to help parents balance work/care could include greater state provision of good quality/affordable childcare (Gov.sg, 2020).

There is also opportunity for Singapore to provide more support for mompreneurial/entrepreneurial activity. The 2017 “Startup SG” initiative saw the Singapore Government co-investing in new businesses start-ups, and further grants have been offered following the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside business incubation infrastructure (Ting, 2020). This has potential to support further entrepreneurial endeavors, like those reported in our findings.

From a policy perspective, male partners were notably absent from participants' stories with childcare resting firmly with Singapore's mothers (Teo, 2012). As such, fathers should be encouraged to play more pronounced roles in childcare to ease burdens placed on working mothers. Since 2017, Singaporean fathers can take 4 weeks of their partner's maternity leave via Shared Parental Leave (SPL) to legitimize involved fatherhood. However, such maternal transfer models of SPL have been criticized as continuing to position mothers as primary carers, upholding traditional patterns of gendered division of labor (Moss et al., 2019). Singapore's SPL scheme should be redesigned to accommodate designated time for fathers to care for their child alone, which has proven successful in Nordic countries, to radically unsettle ongoing cultural expectations regarding early childcare provision. Aligned to this is the need for

senior male figures to take SPL/flexible work arrangements to legitimize uptake by other men, although we recognize that flexible working is most readily spoken of in relation to women (Borgkvist et al., 2021).

## 6 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We acknowledge limitations to our study. We focus on a relatively small group of mothers—who Kuperberg and Stone (2008) label “elite” or privileged—who had the support (financial and otherwise) to opt-out. Our participants also identified as ethnic Chinese, the focus of the state given the legacy of former eugenic policies (Quek, 2014; Teo, 2014). While Singaporean–Chinese represents the largest ethnic group in Singapore, opportunity exists to capture the experiences of mothers from wider ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Malay, Indian), recognizing the multitude of cultural expectations surrounding motherhood.

Future research could valuably employ a longitudinal approach to explore opt-out women's trajectories—for example, when and whether women return to work and at what level, exploring the question of whether professional motherhood supports work/care reconciliation for a longer term. It would also be interesting to return to our participants to explore whether their entrepreneurial activities endured. While our sample focused on educated, middle-class mothers, it seems pertinent to explore how/if mothers from different social classes (who also encounter competing demands) reconcile work/family tensions. We captured the stories, but not direct voices, of others (e.g., partners/colleagues), and future research could widen the participant base, recognizing the complexities of the co-constructed nature of opt-out decisions and worker identities. However, while our focus was deliberately restrictive, the women in our sample represent an important group, with professional, educated (“elite”) women regarded as cultural barometers for what is acceptable for women as a whole in both work and family life (Stone, 2007).

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared; confidentiality was promised to the interviewees.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gymnademics is a childhood enrichment program, promoting physical exercise, learning, and reading.

<sup>2</sup> Kindergartens in Singapore provide up to 3-years of pre-school for children aged three to six.

<sup>3</sup> Estelle moved to Singapore from Malaysia as an 18-year-old.

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