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Between care and career: Discursive positioning of motherhood in using Q-methodology

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the discursive positioning of motherhood in navigating caregiving responsibilities and professional aspirations, employing Q-methodology to explore how contemporary maternal identities are negotiated within varying social expectations. Through the analysis of Q-sorts from 46 participants, four distinct factors emerged, reflecting divergent maternal perspectives: traditional care-oriented motherhood, privileging full-time caregiving aligned with conventional gender norms; progressive and emotionally dual-role motherhood, endorsing equitable parenting and institutional reform; emotionally attuned negotiating identity and expectation, revealing internal conflict between societal expectations and personal autonomy; and supportive structure for maternal empowerment, which highlights the need for emotional, social, and policy-based supports to enable maternal thriving. These factors illuminate the complex landscape mothers navigate in reconciling cultural ideals with lived realities, highlighting tensions between self-sacrifice and self-actualization. Notably, many participants advocated for systemic change rather than individual compromise, reflecting evolving attitudes toward work-life balance and maternal legitimacy. The findings highlight value of Q-methodology in surfacing nuanced perspectives on motherhood and contribute to broader feminist discourses on identity, care, and institutional accountability. This study calls for inclusive policy frameworks that acknowledge the plural and negotiated nature of motherhood and support diverse maternal trajectories. The study concludes that recognizing the multiplicity of maternal identities is essential for developing equitable social and policy frameworks that reflect the lived realities of modern motherhood.

1. Introduction

The intersection of motherhood and professional life has long been a contested space in both academic literature and public discourse. Primarily, societal norms have evolved in recognizing women's participation in the workforce, and the role of motherhood continues to be framed by traditional expectations of care, sacrifice, and moral responsibility (Anderson, 2025). However, women navigating the dual responsibilities of caregiving and career progress often find themselves entangled in conflicting societal expectations, institutional constraints, and internalized ideals of motherhood (Woodbridge et al., 2021). In this context, how motherhood is discursively positioned becomes a critical lens for understanding individual identity formation and broader sociocultural expectations. Despite the growing inclusion of women addressed by Rosa (2024) in the labor force and academic attention to the work-life interface (Beauregard et al., 2020), the cultural construction of motherhood remains deeply rooted in immersive ideals prioritizing self-sacrifice and unconditional caregiving at present. These normative pressures pose significant challenges for working mothers, who must continuously negotiate their identities across multiple, often contradictory, domains (Aplin-Houtz et al., 2025). This duality places mothers in a position of moral tension, even compelling them to negotiate and defend their roles in the public sphere constantly. Thus, this study examines how mothers discursively construct and position their identities in response to the competing demands of care and career. Drawing on Positioning Theory (Davies and Harré, 1990) and employing Q-methodology (Younas et al., 2024) as a mixed-method approach, this research investigates working mothers' narratives and subject positions within five key dimensions: immersive motherhood, empathy and sensitivity, self-identity, denial and defense, and societal expectations. These dimensions illuminate the complexity of identity negotiation, moral legitimacy, and public perception in the context of contemporary motherhood.

Q methodology is a research approach that examines human

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subjectivity—individuals' viewpoints, beliefs, and lived experiences by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods (Younas et al., 2024). Through a structured process of Q-sorting and factor analysis, this methodology systematically uncovers patterns in how people perceive and interpret complex social issues (Brown, 1980). It is particularly well-suited for investigating the discursive positioning of motherhood, a phenomenon profoundly shaped by personal values, cultural narratives, and social expectations. Q methodology has been widely employed in studies on identity, gender roles, and caregiving, including research on fatherhood ideologies (Schmidt et al., 2025; Verniers et al., 2022) and perceptions of work-life balance among working women (Aplin-Houtz et al., 2025; Hosain, 2025). These applications highlight their effectiveness in capturing diverse perspectives on socially constructed roles. Applying Q methodology in this study aims to generate a comprehensive insight into how women negotiate the intersecting demands of caregiving and professional life.

Nevertheless, empirical research remains limited (Aplin-Houtz et al., 2025; Aytaç-Demirçivi, 2025) regarding how mothers navigate, resist, or internalize these positions across diverse contexts, mainly through the lens of their meaning-making process. Current academic discourse and feminist analyses on motherhood reveal that women's identity construction is profoundly shaped by discursive expectations that frame caregiving as a moral imperative, particularly within the ideal of immersive motherhood, where total self-sacrifice and the prioritization of care are central to the socially constructed ideal of the 'good mother' (Mishra and Saraswat, 2025; Schmidt et al., 2025). This ideal is not just personal but socially reinforced, positioning mothers within moral hierarchies that legitimize or delegitimize their choices. Within this moral discourse, empathy and sensitivity emerge as emotional competencies mothers are expected to embody, often reinforcing their positioning as naturally nurturing and morally superior caregivers (Rankin et al., 2024). Positioning Theory highlights how such narratives offer specific subject positions that women may adopt or resist, contributing to emotional and social tension (Raudasoja et al., 2022) when these ideals conflict with career aspirations. Besides, self-identity becomes a site of active identity management as mothers strategically navigate public and private spaces, often prioritizing maternal over professional identities in line with societal scripts (Gao, 2025). Yet, many engage in denial and defense, crafting counter-narratives to defend against perceived moral failings or accusations of neglect, especially in contexts where work competes with caregiving duties (Manna et al., 2021). These discursive acts are shaped by societal expectations, such as gendered labor norms and workplace inequities, which implicitly position mothers as secondary workers and primary caregivers (Kayi-Aydar, 2021).

Positioning Theory offers a powerful discursive lens for analyzing how mothers adopt, negotiate, and sometimes resist these culturally available positions, revealing the dynamic interplay between individual and structural discourse in the ongoing negotiation of maternal identity (Davies and Harré, 1990). While previous research has extensively explored the structural barriers to work-life balance (Mendonca et al., 2023; Uddin, 2021), less attention has been given to the discursive processes (Anderson, 2025) by which mothers make sense of their roles. Current literature often fails to adequately capture the subjective experience and moral reasoning underlying these identity negotiations (Moos and Shaikh, 2024), and the Bangladeshi context reflects similar patterns without exception (Hosain, 2025). Furthermore, the predominant reliance on either qualitative interviews or large-scale quantitative surveys overlooks the interplay between individual meaning-making and collective belief systems (Bhaumik and Sahu, 2025). There is a pressing need to adopt methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks that can bridge this gap. In light of this literature, positioning theory, developed by Davies and Harré (1990), offers a valuable lens to examine how individuals construct their identities through discourse, adopting and resisting particular roles or positions made available within a given cultural context. While it has been applied in educational and structural settings, its application to maternal identity remains underutilized. Similarly, Q-methodology (Younas et al., 2024), which is designed to explore subjectivity, has rarely been integrated with 'Positioning Theory' to explore identity formation in the motherhood-career nexus. Most existing studies examine either societal discourse (Aplin-Houtz et al., 2025) or personal experiences in isolation without considering how individual narratives interact with broader discursive frameworks and power dynamics (Schmidt et al., 2025). This study also addresses this gap by combining Positioning Theory and Q-methodology to uncover the discursive positions that mothers take up and resist when navigating motherhood and careers. It seeks to capture the plurality of maternal identities and the moral dilemmas that arise from cultural contradictions.

Building on the aim to investigate how working mothers negotiate their identities within the intersecting realms of care and career, this study is guided by four interrelated research questions. *First*, to understand the range of subjectivities available to mothers, the study asks: What discursive positions do mothers adopt when navigating the tensions between caregiving and professional aspirations? This question aligns directly with the core aim of identifying how maternal identities are shaped through discourse. *Second*, to capture the complexity of these identity constructions, the study explores: How are these positions shaped by the five key dimensions, i.e., immersive motherhood, empathy and sensitivity, self-identity, denial and defense, and expectations from society? This question connects the discursive positions to the specific thematic areas that reflect internalized values and societal pressures. *Third*, to investigate mothers' negotiation within these narratives, the study asks: How do mothers resist, accept, or redefine ideological constructs of motherhood through discourse? This question emphasizes the dynamic process of negotiation and resistance central to Positioning Theory. *Finally*, to reflect on the methodological and theoretical contributions of the study, it asks: In what ways can the integration of the aforementioned theoretical framework and Q-methodology deepen our understanding of the processes underpinning maternal identity positioning? These research questions operationalize the study's aim by facilitating a holistic inquiry into the discursive, emotional, and structural dimensions that shape maternal subjectivity.

The contribution of this study to the interdisciplinary literature on gender studies, discourse analysis, and work-life balance is multifaceted. Firstly, the research advances both theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of maternal identity by integrating positioning theory with Q-methodology—an innovative analytical framework that captures the multifarious and often contradictory ways in which working mothers construct and negotiate their identities within discursive spaces shaped by moral norms, institutional structures, and societal expectations. Secondly, the study offers a discursive review of social recognition as constructed, maintained, and contested, providing empirical insight into how mothers navigate identity tensions across five critical dimensions: immersive motherhood, empathy and sensitivity, self-identity, denial and defense, and societal expectations. Thirdly, the research encompasses the plurality of maternal subjectivities, disrupting hegemonic ideals of motherhood and foregrounding the diverse ways in which women articulate their maternal identities within and against dominant discourses. Fourthly, by exposing the complexity of the care-career dichotomy, the study makes a novel contribution to the discourse on work-life balance and maternal identity, bringing to light the interplay between individual and structural constraints. Finally, the findings have important implications for policy, organizational practice, and broader societal discourse by advocating for more inclusive, flexible, and context-sensitive understandings of motherhood in contemporary professional environments.

2. Underlying theoretical perspective

This study draws on Positioning Theory as a discursive lens to understand how working mothers navigate and negotiate their identities between caregiving and professional life. Rooted in social interaction

and narrative, Positioning Theory conceptualizes identity as shaped through three core elements positions, storylines, and illocutionary force—each contributing to how rights, duties, and moral legitimacy are claimed or contested in discourse (Davies and Harré, 1990; Slocum-Bradley, 2016). As illustrated in Fig. 1, the positioning triangle model (Harré and Moghaddam, 2015) theorizes the interaction between positions, storylines, and illocutionary force as foundational elements that discursively negotiate identities. The framework enables an exploration of the diverse and often conflicting identity positions mothers adopt across five thematic domains. According to Mishra and Saraswat (2025), immersive motherhood reflects the moral imperative of self-sacrifice and the centrality of care, typically positioning mothers as primary caregivers expected to forgo personal ambitions. Along with empathy and sensitivity, it highlights the emotional and moral depth required in caregiving roles, reinforcing the legitimization of maternal identity (Rankin et al., 2024). Self-identity reveals the tension in how mothers perform or suppress professional identities with their maternal role, often situating motherhood as a primary identity, as addressed in a very recent paper by Wen et al., 2024. In turn, denial and defense capture mothers' strategies to justify choices and shield themselves from public scrutiny or accusations of neglect, primarily when professional demands compete with caregiving (Aytaç-Demirçivi, 2025). Finally, expectations from society illuminate the discursive pressures mothers face regarding gender norms and workplace fairness, reflecting broader social storylines that shape what is seen as acceptable or deviant maternal behavior (Verniers et al., 2022; Wen et al., 2024). By integrating Positioning Theory with Q-methodology, this research captures the subjective configurations of maternal identity, mapping how women accept, resist, or reinterpret cultural scripts of motherhood within a discursively constructed social world.

Thus, Positioning Theory (Davies and Harré, 1990) rests on two interrelated foundations: the ongoing nature of social interaction and the construction of narrative accounts within these interactions. Together, these dimensions give coherence to the process of positioning, which is understood as the discursive construction of identity through stories that assign meaning to individuals' actions and roles (Slocum-Bradley, 2016; Verniers et al., 2022). Within these narratives, individuals adopt specific positions that make their behaviors intelligible to themselves and others. In the context of motherhood, such positions are shaped by culturally embedded storylines—such as those related to sacrifice, moral legitimacy, or societal expectations—which inform how women understand and justify their roles across various domains. These discursive positions not only reflect the individual's self-concept but also signal their alignment with or resistance to broader social norms and expectations.

3. Literature review

3.1. Immersive motherhood

The concept of Immersive Motherhood—defined by total devotion, self-sacrifice, and caregiving as central to maternal identity—remains a dominant cultural narrative that equates good mothering with the suppression of personal ambition in favor of intensive caregiving (Horne and Breitkreuz, 2018). Rooted in maternalist ideologies and shaped by the framework of intensive mothering studies conducted by Budds (2021) and Arroyo et al., 2025, this model portrays motherhood as a moral obligation that prioritizes children's needs above maternal autonomy. Such discourses, perpetuated in policy and cultural representations, position mothers within narrow, gendered roles that valorize sacrifice while marginalizing alternative maternal identities (Cox et al., 2021; Mendonca et al., 2023). Positioning Theory, coined by Davies and Harré (1990), offers insight into how these narratives shape maternal subjectivity by placing mothers in storylines that uphold full-time caregiving as the ideal, often creating internal conflicts between career and care. As women grapple with these societal expectations, they encounter a binary that devalues maternal labor outside the domestic sphere, reinforcing structural inequities and limiting women's agency (Walnicki, 2024). By interrogating these normative constructs, this study contributes to feminist critiques that deconstruct the naturalization of maternal sacrifice and reimagine motherhood as a plural and negotiated identity.

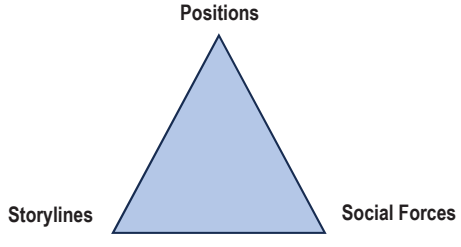

Fig. 1. The Positioning Triangle Model.

3.2. Empathy and sensitivity

The ideological discourse of motherhood frequently associates empathy and sensitivity with natural, feminine virtues (Tronto, 1993), framing these traits as innate emotional capacities that confer moral legitimacy and caregiving authority upon mothers (Cox et al., 2021). Grounded in care ethics, this discourse valorizes maternal intuition and affective responsiveness as biological imperatives and moral virtues, situating mothers as emotionally attuned caregivers whose authority stems from emotional rather than rational reasoning (Verniers et al., 2022; Woodbridge et al., 2021). Such narratives position emotional labor as central to maternal identity, reinforcing gendered stereotypes that conflate caregiving with women's supposed inherent sensitivity (Davis, 2023) while paradoxically devaluing these same traits in professional or strategic contexts (Schuck and Rabe-Hemp, 2024). Feminist critiques argue that although maternal empathy may empower women as moral arbiters, it also risks essentializing their roles and obscuring the structural inequities that render care as unpaid, invisible labor (Dowling, 2024). Positioning Theory (Davies and Harré, 1990) reveals how mothers internalize these discursive norms, with emotional sensitivity functioning both as a source of moral legitimacy and as a burden that justifies unequal caregiving responsibilities. Furthermore, concepts such as temporal emotion work (Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2023; Lois, 2010) underscore how mothers actively manage time and emotional energy to sustain a socially validated sense of maternal adequacy. Thus, empathy-centric narratives serve as both a discursive strategy and a cultural constraint, compelling mothers to navigate tensions between personal ambition and the expectation of 'natural' emotional devotion.

3.3. Self-identity

The literature studies on motherhood and self-identity reveal persistent tensions between maternal and professional aspirations, shaped by societal discourses that position motherhood as a primary, morally laden identity requiring strategic negotiation (Arroyo et al., 2025; Moos and Shaikh, 2024). Because the formation of maternal self-identity often exists within a hierarchy of roles, motherhood is framed as the primary identity, and professional life is seen as secondary or negotiable. Many working mothers strategically position themselves by emphasizing their maternal role to maintain social legitimacy while carefully negotiating the perception of their professional identity in both public and private spheres (Torres et al., 2024). The studies by Hosain (2025) and Wall (2013) describe this balancing act as a dialogic identity, where women continuously navigate their roles as mothers and professionals, influenced by both internal commitments and external expectations (Aplin-Houtz et al., 2025). Similarly, Khadka (2020) notes that professional women frequently downplay their careers or

overemphasize their roles as mothers to gain social respect and avoid the perception of neglect, particularly in collectivist societies (Raudasoja et al., 2022). This negotiation of identity also involves emotional labor, as mothers work to maintain a coherent and socially acceptable public image that aligns with dominant maternal discourses. According to Positioning Theory, these self-representations are not static but are produced contextually through discourse (Davies and Harré, 1990). Mothers accept, reject, or redefine available positions in response to cultural narratives and normative pressures. Consequently, maternal identity becomes an active site of role negotiation shaped by the intersecting demands of care, career, and community (Davis, 2023).

3.4. Denial and defense

Previous literature examining motherhood's discursive negotiation of denial and defense reveals the pervasive societal scrutiny that necessitates mothers' preemptive justifications of their dual roles as caregivers and professionals (Alwadi et al., 2024). Dominant ideologies of intensive mothering (Verniers et al., 2022) construct caregiving and career as morally oppositional, often positioning working mothers as transgressors of normative maternal expectations centered on self-sacrifice (Aytaç-Demirçivi, 2025). This moral tension fosters what Heru (2023) terms 'moral jeopardy', wherein mothers internalize systemic shortcomings as personal failures, all while resisting reductive narratives that equate individual autonomy with maternal deficiency (Horne and Breitkreuz, 2018). As articulated by Davies and Harré (1990), Positioning Theory provides a lens through which to understand how mothers construct counter-narratives that reassert agency—strategies identified in this study, including the rejection of the 'invincible mother' ideal and the refusal to legitimize intrusive societal judgment. These defensive discourses not only underscore persistent gendered inequities, particularly as fathers remain largely exempt from comparable moral scrutiny (Kislev et al., 2025) but also reflect the patriarchal foundations of maternal accountability. Moreover, recent academic literature links these discursive practices with intense psychological strain as mothers contend with a persistent 'double bind', as Andelsman Alvarez (2025) observed, wherein visibility in caregiving or professional domains consistently invites societal critique (Alwadi et al., 2024). By interrogating these dynamics, it contributes to feminist critiques of neoliberal individualism, which obfuscates structural inequities by attributing responsibility to mothers and promoting what Gatrell (2025) identifies as 'defensive motherhood'—a survival-oriented performance that sustains cycles of self-surveillance, emotional labor, and symbolic erasure (Dowling, 2024).

3.5. Expectations from society

Societal expectations surrounding motherhood are profoundly influenced by culturally embedded gender norms and institutional structures that frame maternal identity as both a moral obligation and a social ideal, compelling women to fulfill unrealistic standards across the caregiving and professional domains (Andelsman Alvarez, 2025; Schmidt et al., 2025). Drawing on the Social Role Theory, as mentioned by Tabassum and Nayak (2021), which conceptualizes gender roles through caregiving and career-oriented expectations, current literature reveals that mothers are routinely positioned to represent the dual ideals of the perfect mother and ideal worker despite structural barriers such as inflexible work arrangements and insufficient childcare support. This dual burden generates what the literature identifies as the 'motherhood penalty' (Deming, 2022), where professional competence is constantly weighed against adherence to traditional maternal norms, particularly those emphasizing emotional resilience and self-sacrifice. These gendered expectations are exacerbated in cultural contexts like Bangladesh, where maternal success is judged through the lenses of family honor and patriarchal tradition, intensifying the scrutiny mothers face for pursuing public or professional roles. Research by Szekeres et al. (2023), as well as Turner and Norwood (2013), highlights how mothers navigate these constraints by engaging in 'bounded motherhood' and facing social sanctions when they deviate from dominant maternal ideals. Positioning Theory, originating in the work of Davies and Harré (1990), provides insight into such discourses and shapes normative storylines that morally and socially constrain mothers, limiting the legitimacy of alternative maternal identities rooted in autonomy or non-traditional caregiving roles.

4. Research method

This study explores the discursive positioning of motherhood through women's perspectives from varied occupational and social contexts, including garment workers, university faculty and staff, small business owners, NGO professionals, and unemployed individuals, intending to contribute to theoretical and policy-oriented understandings of maternal discourse. The research uses a Q-methodology approach in conjunction with one-on-one semi-structured interviews to capture the nuanced interpretations of opinion on motherhood. Conducted in five stages, as outlined in Fig. 2, the study began with developing a concourse comprising an initial pool of 52 statements. These statements were drawn from various sources, including relevant academic literature, expert opinions, national policy reports, and the opinions of university professors. After a rigorous refinement process to ensure clarity, relevance, and representativeness, the pool was narrowed down to a final set of 40 Q-statements used in the study. A purposive P-set, detailed in Table 1, was selected to ensure diverse representation among participants. After completing the Q-sorting exercise, each participant took part in an in-depth interview. Subsequently, the researchers conducted a Q-factor analysis to identify shared viewpoints across the participant group. The study identified patterned discourses among participants' Q-sorts, drawing insights from semi-structured interviews. These interviews explored the reasoning behind participants' statements' placement, particularly those ranked at the extremes of the distribution. Participants reflected on all Q-statements, offering more profound insight into their values, enriching interpretation, and capturing the complexity of how women balance caregiving and professional roles.

4.1. Concourse developments and selection of the P-set

Participants (the P-set) were selected using both structured and unstructured strategies to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced representation of perspectives. Meanwhile, the Q-sample comprising the set of statements was systematically sampled from the broader concourse to capture the diversity of viewpoints on the topic. Initial Q-statements were developed through a thematic analysis of existing literature on motherhood, gender roles, and work-life balance, drawing on key sources such as Raudasoja et al. (2022), Davis (2023), Rankin et al. (2024), and Aytaç-Demirçivi (2025), etc. These sources provided an initial understanding of the discourses surrounding motherhood and professional life. Subject matter experts in Women's Studies reviewed the drafted statements to ensure conceptual clarity and enhance face validity. Preliminary interviews were conducted with working mothers who were not included in the final participant (P-set) but shared similar demographic and experiential characteristics. These interviews helped assess the clarity, relevance, and interpretability of the initial Q-statements, ensuring they were conceptually meaningful and accessible to the target population. The finalized Q-sample consisted of 40 statements (Appendix 3), chosen to capture a range of discourses on motherhood, care, and career. In accordance with Q-methodological conventions and the principle of sample sizes that minimize overlapping factor loadings (Younas et al., 2024), 46 participants were purposively recruited from diverse professional and socioeconomic backgrounds. Notably, participants engaged in individual interview sessions, during which they reviewed the Q-statements following a structured protocol and sought

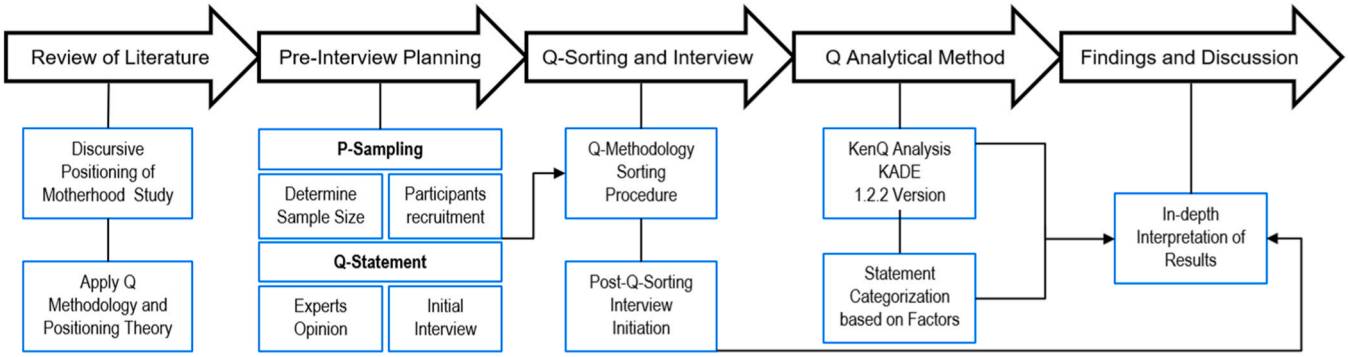

Fig. 2. Schematic representation of the research process.

Table 1
Demographic overview of study participants (N = 46).

Participant Details	Frequency	Percentage	Participants details	Frequency	Percentage
Age of participants			Employment status		
20–30 years	18	39.1	Homemaker	11	23.9
31–40 years	9	19.6	Self-employed	11	23.9
41–50 years	11	23.9	Full-time employed	9	19.6
51 years and above	8	17.4	Part-time employed	15	32.6
Marital status			*Sector of Work*		
Married	19	41.3	Public sector	15	32.6
Single	17	37.0	Private sector	13	28.3
Divorced	10	21.7	Informal sector	18	39.1
Educational qualifications			*Participants residence*		
SSC/HSC certificates	17	37.0	Urban	23	50.0
Bachelor's degree	13	28.3	Peri-urban	12	26.1
Master's degree	10	21.7	Rural	11	23.9
PhD degree	6	13.0	*Stakeholder role*		
Motherhood status			Garments worker	7	15.2
Young children (0–6 years)	17	37.0	University teachers/staff	10	21.7
School-age (7–18 years)	14	30.4	Small business owner	14	30.4
Adult children	15	32.6	NGO workers	9	19.6
Socioeconomic status			Homemaker/unemployed	6	13.0
Low-income status	12	26.1			
Middle-income status	18	39.1			
High-income status	16	34.8			

clarification as needed. They then completed a Q-sort, ranking the statements within a forced-choice, quasi-normal distribution, as shown in Fig. 3, along with an 11-point ordinal scale ranging from −5 (least agreeable) to + 5 (most agreeable). This symmetrical, bell-shaped distribution facilitated the systematic prioritization of perspectives, a key feature of Q-methodology's approach to quantifying subjective viewpoints. Each participant completed a one-on-one Q-sorting session in person at a designated location, conducted between September 15, 2024 to February 18, 2025. During these sessions, participants sorted the 40 Q-statements, printed on individual cards, into a standardized Q-sort distribution grid based on their level of agreement with each statement. The sorting process lasted approximately 30–40 min, with procedural clarification and content-related support as needed. Immediately following the Q-sort, participants took part in a semi-structured interview designed to elicit detailed reflections, clarify their sorting rationale, and explore their underlying discursive positions. With informed consent, all sessions were recorded to facilitate subsequent Q-factor analysis and integrate qualitative insights.

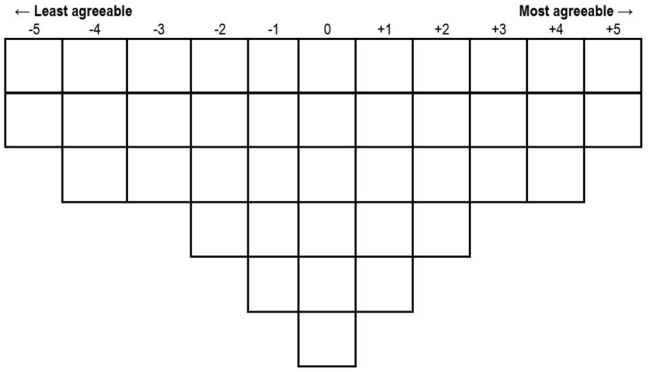

Fig. 3. Q-sort distribution grid.

5. Results

5.1. Demographic profile of respondents

This demographic overview, summarized in Table 1, presents the characteristics of 46 study participants, providing insights into their age, marital status, education, employment, socioeconomic status, motherhood, work sectors, residence, and stakeholder roles. The largest age group was 20–30 (39.1 %), with fewer participants in older age brackets. Most were married (41.3 %) or single (37.0 %), and 21.7 % were divorced. Educational attainment was highest among SSC/HSC certificate holders (37.0 %) and Bachelor's degree holders (28.3 %), while 13.0 % had PhDs. Socioeconomic status skewed toward middle (39.1 %) and high-income (34.8 %) groups. Motherhood was evenly represented among those with young children (37.0 %), school-age children (30.4 %), and adult children (32.6 %). Part-time employment

was most common (32.6 %), with homemakers and the self-employed each comprising 23.9 %. The informal sector had the highest representation (39.1 %), followed by the public sector (32.6 %) and the private sector (28.3 %). Half of the participants lived in urban areas, while others resided in peri-urban (26.1 %) and rural (23.9 %) regions. Small business owners were the most represented stakeholder group (30.4 %), followed by university staff (21.7 %), NGO workers (19.6 %), garment workers (15.2 %), and homemakers/unemployed (13.0 %). The diverse demographic spread reflects an inclusive sample that supports varied and context-rich interpretations.

5.2. Factor structure and inter-factor relationships based on Humphrey's Rule

The Q-sort data were analyzed using KenQ Analysis Desktop Edition (KADE) version 1.2.1(Banasick, 2023). Based on the responses from 46 P-sample participants, the analysis confirmed a mean score of 0 and a standard deviation of 2.578. Additionally, principal component factor analysis was conducted using various factor extraction criteria, and factor loadings obtained from the varimax rotation were used to assess the strength of the correlation between the extracted factors and the representative participant statements, as outlined in Appendix 2. Higher loadings indicated stronger associations. Table 2 presents the results of a factor analysis using Humphrey's Rule, illustrating the properties and relationships among the four extracted factors. Each factor displays an eigenvalue above the standard threshold of 1.0, indicating a meaningful contribution to data variance, with values ranging from 2.9568 (Factor 4) to 3.6873 (Factor 1). Each factor explains 7 % of the total variance, cumulatively accounting for 28 % of the variance across the dataset. As cited by Brown (1980), Humphrey's rule offers a criterion for deciding how many factors to retain in factor analysis, suggesting that any factor with a value of 0.10 or above is meaningful and should be considered for interpretation and ensures that the factor reflects a shared or collective viewpoint rather than an outlier or unique individual perspective mentioned by Espartinez (2024). In practical terms, this rule enhances the credibility and interpretability of the final factor solution by ensuring that each retained factor represents a common pattern of subjectivity among multiple participants. According to Humphrey's Rule—which retains factors with values ≥ 0.10—each factor qualifies for inclusion, with values ranging from 0.5035 to 0.6737. The number of defining variables per factor is relatively balanced, with Factor 3 exhibiting the highest number of defining variables (10), thereby enhancing its interpretability. All factors demonstrate high internal consistency, with average reliability coefficients of 0.8 and composite reliability values ranging from 0.966 to 0.976, affirming the dependability of each construct. Standard errors of Z scores remain low, from 0.155 to 0.184, reflecting precision in measurement.

The correlation matrix in Table 3 reveals minimal overlap among factors, with all inter-factor correlations below 0.07, suggesting distinct conceptual boundaries between factors. Notably, Factor 1 shows a slight negative correlation with Factor 4 (-0.0156), reinforcing their conceptual independence. However, statistical data devoid of contextual grounding may lead to misinterpretation or a loss of substantive meaning. Therefore, correlation values should be interpreted within the context of a comprehensive understanding of the distinctive characteristics associated with each factor group. The differences in factor Z scores in Table 3 are modest but consistent, ranging from 0.219 to 0.260, which further supports distinct factor profiles. Collectively, these findings confirm a robust factor structure with reliable and independent constructs suitable for further Q-factor analysis or interpretation in behavioral or attitudinal studies. The clarity and separation among factors validate the theoretical dimensions underpinning the study.

5.3. Factor 1: Traditional care-oriented motherhood

Factor 1 depicts a traditional, care-centered discourse on motherhood, where participants prioritize maternal caregiving over professional engagement. This factor was defined by strong agreement with statements emphasizing the moral and emotional centrality of the mother's role within the family and resistance to narratives promoting career-oriented maternal identities. Statistically, participants associated with this factor displayed high positive agreement with Q-statements such as 35 ($Z = 2.337$), 22 ($Z = 1.93$), and 20 ($Z = 1.813$), all of which were distinguishing statements ($p < 0.01$). These statements affirmed the belief that a mother's primary responsibility lies in child-rearing and emotional support. Conversely, participants strongly rejected progressive perspectives that challenge traditional maternal roles, as seen in Q-statements 19 ($Z = -2.253$), 21 ($Z = -1.352$), and 26 ($Z = -1.073$), further solidifying this group's ideological alignment. Fig. 1A displays the composite Q-sort for Factor 1, visually representing the collective perspective of participants who loaded significantly on this factor. Complementing this, Table 4 presents the associated statements and their respective scores, enabling a side-by-side comparison of statement salience and factor-specific emphasis. Thematically, this discourse constructs motherhood as biologically rooted and inherently nurturing, with career aspirations viewed as secondary or potentially disruptive to family cohesion. There was apparent resistance to structural or cultural reforms—such as paternal caregiving or workplace accommodations—that might undermine the mother's central role in caregiving. As evidenced by Factor 1, women strongly internalize motherhood as a moral identity, prioritizing their children's needs over their own and feeling pressured to continually defend their abilities in both their professional and parental roles. To satisfy their idealized notions of parenting, these mothers frequently sacrifice their personal goals and endure emotional labor and social scrutiny. They strive to uphold moral authority, empathy, and dignity in their responsibilities and oppose ideas that undermine the value of motherhood. Their caregiving identity and emotional depth enable them in spite of societal obstacles. In summary, Factor 1 captures a conservative, essentialist model of motherhood, emphasizing caregiving as the dominant identity

Table 2
Number of factors based on Humphrey's Rule.

Particulars	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Eigenvalues	3.6873	3.2356	3.1555	2.9568
% Explained Variance	7	7	7	7
Cumulative Explained Variance	7	14	21	28
Humphrey's Rule	0.6737	0.5266	0.5035	0.6307
No. of Defining Variables (P-set in the group)	8	8	10	7
Average Reliability Coefficient	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Composite Reliability	0.97	0.97	0.976	0.966
Standard Error of Factor Z scores	0.173	0.173	0.155	0.184

Note: According to Humphrey's Rule, values equal to or greater than 0.10 are included in the Q-factor analysis.

Table 3
Correlation value between factors and difference in factor Z scores.

Factors	Correlation with Factors				Differences in Factors Z scores			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Factor 1	1				0.245	0.245	0.232	0.253
Factor 2	0.0638	1			0.245	0.245	0.232	0.253
Factor 3	0.0266	0.0301	1		0.232	0.232	0.219	0.241
Factor 4	−0.0156	0.0278	0.0057	1	0.253	0.253	0.241	0.260

marker for women and positioning professional pursuits as a secondary concern. This finding highlights ongoing tensions between traditional maternal ideologies and evolving gender norms in contemporary discourse. It emphasized a progressive view of motherhood, reflecting a consensus that traditional gender roles should not constrain women. Participants agreed that mothers can pursue careers without being socially judged or penalized. Rather than positioning caregiving as a woman's exclusive responsibility, this group supported shared parenting duties and institutional support, such as childcare systems, to enable work-life balance. Statements rejecting the idea of self-sacrificing motherhood were strongly endorsed, while those reinforcing conventional maternal ideals were opposed. This discourse redefined motherhood through autonomy, equality, and structural empowerment, allowing women to integrate care and careers without compromise.

5.4. Factor 2: Progressive and emotionally dual-role motherhood

Factor 2 represents a progressive discourse that frames motherhood as compatible with career aspirations. Participants in this group rejected the notion that maternal identity must be defined solely by full-time caregiving and instead supported shared parenting responsibilities, structural support, and gender equality within both the family and the workplace. Fig. 1B illustrates the composite Q sort for Factor 2, visually representing the shared viewpoint among participants who significantly define this factor. Alongside this, Table 4 lists the corresponding statements and their positions, directly comparing the most prominent and distinguishing perspectives within Factor 2. Participants associated with this factor strongly agreed with Q-statements 17 (Z = 2.226*), 35 (Z = 1.602), and 9 (Z = 1.372*), all of which were distinguishing statements (D) that advocate for women's agency and the right to pursue professional roles. Q-statement 32 (Z = 1.178) also supported gender equity, reinforcing this group's emphasis on flexible, modern motherhood. Statements that challenged traditional gender roles were well-received, while those that portrayed mothers as primarily responsible for domestic care were rejected. This is clearly shown in the strong negative Z-scores for Q-statements 29 (Z = -1.999*), 3 (Z = -1.98*), 10 (Z = -1.713*), and 30 (Z = -1.158), which were all distinguishing statements opposed by this group. The factor also showed opposition to emotionally prescriptive roles of motherhood—such as responsibility over pursuing personal ambition or detachment from caregiving—suggesting a shift toward recognizing maternal individuality and choice. Participants expressed moderate support for statements emphasizing social and structural accommodations (statements 26 and 4), indicating that policies such as institutional childcare or workplace reforms are welcomed when they support mothers in balancing care and careers. So, Factor 2 represents an idealized view of motherhood as a sacred and emotionally fulfilling calling, where maternal identity is central to self-worth and social respect. Participants emphasize emotional depth, moral clarity, and self-sacrifice as defining features of good motherhood. Despite the pressure to excel in both roles, they maintain motherhood as a role of divine significance and fight losing their uniqueness. They define success by prioritizing the well-being and safety of their children above all else, despite social criticism. Importantly, this group's perspective repositions motherhood from a singular identity to a pluralistic role, shaped by personal values, partnership, and societal structure. Hence, Factor 2, progressive dual-role motherhood, reflects a discourse that embraces maternal autonomy, shared caregiving responsibilities, and systemic support for work-life balance. This group challenges traditional norms, advocating for motherhood that integrates care and career without moral compromise.

5.5. Factor 3: Emotionally attuned, negotiating identity and expectation

Factor 3 reflects a discourse shaped by emotional tension and the negotiation between societal expectations and personal autonomy, but rejects the expectation of total self-sacrifice. Fig. 1C presents the composite Q sort for Factor 3, capturing the collective views of participants associated with this factor. The corresponding statements and their z-scores, Q-SV, are detailed in Table 4, facilitating the interpretation of the most insightful and distinguishing perspectives characterizing Factor 3. Participants associated with this factor supported the value of caregiving but resisted the idea that motherhood should involve complete self-sacrifice. They agreed with statements emphasizing the importance of maternal roles while affirming the right to personal well-being and individuality. Strong positive agreement with Q-statements such as 12, 24, and 13 (Z = 1.482*, 1.375*, 1.335*) suggests that this group seeks a balanced maternal identity. At the same time, they strongly rejected guilt-driven ideals (if they do not put their children first at all times) and martyr-like portrayals (sacrifice their own needs, careers, or well-being) entirely for the sake of their children or family of motherhood, as reflected in the low Z-scores of Q-statements 4 (Z = -1.813*) and 9 (Z = -1.915*). These participants did not oppose caregiving but rather the pressure to conform to rigid norms. Their position, further supported by consensus around a Q-statement of 6 (Z = 0.743), suggests openness to structural support such as daycare but underscores that such support must align with a broader rethinking of maternal identity. Distinct from other profiles, Factor 3 reflects a pragmatic and emotionally aware approach to motherhood, where women emphasize empathy, sacrifice, and visible competence in both personal and professional domains. They view caregiving as a source of moral strength, but resist romanticizing it; instead, they highlight the emotional labor and identity negotiations involved. These mothers prioritize their children's needs while maintaining a strong sense of self and public image. Despite societal pressures, they seek to integrate personal aspirations with maternal responsibilities through resilience and self-awareness. In this discourse, motherhood is an identity shaped by care and self-preservation. This factor portrays motherhood as a dynamic negotiation between societal expectations and individual needs, reflecting the psychological and

Table 4
Factor array, Z-score, and distinguishing/consensus statements by each factor.

Statements	Factor 1			Factor 2			Factor 3			Factor 4		
	Z-score	Q-SV	D/C	Z-score	Q-SV	D/C	Z-score	Q-SV	D/C	Z-score	Q-SV	D/C
My child's needs always come before mine, no matter the situation.	−0.314	−1		−1.021	−3		0.157	0	D	−1.387	−4	
Being a mother defines who I am more than any other role.	−0.025	0		−0.46	−1		−1.145*	−2	D*	0.946*	2	D*
Motherhood is a full-time responsibility that leaves little room for personal growth.	−0.041	0		−1.98*	−5	D*	−0.024	0		−0.43	−1	
I measure my success by how well I nurture and protect my children.	−0.239	−1		0.919*	3	D	−1.813*	−5	D*	0.39	1	
No professional achievement compares to the joy of being a mother.	0.658*	2		−0.248	0		−0.005	0		2.051*	5	D*
I often sacrifice my own dreams for the sake of my child's future.	0.191	1		0.608	1		0.743	2	C	0.389	1	
Being a mother is not a choice but a divine calling.	−0.971	−3		0.299	1	D	−0.246	−1		−1.233	−4	
My presence at home is more important than earning money outside.	1.146	3		0.211	0		1.173	3		−0.296	−1	D
As a mother, I feel things more deeply, which helps me understand others better.	0.484*	2		1.372*	4	D*	−1.915*	−5	D*	−0.54*	−2	
I can sense my child's pain even when they don't say a word.	−0.9*	−3		−1.713*	−4	D*	1.623	5		1.348	4	
My decisions are often based on what feels right emotionally, not just logically.	−0.326*	−1	D*	0.682	1		0.861	2		1.522*	4	D*
My motherhood has made me more compassionate toward other people's struggles.	−0.163	0		0.234	1		1.482*	5	D*	0.143	0	
Women lead with empathy, especially when they become mothers.	0.13	1		0.141	0		1.335*	4	D*	0.225	1	
My sensitivity as a mother gives me moral clarity under challenging situations.	−0.668	−2		−1.054	−4		−1.487	−4		0.532*	2	D*
Mothers naturally think about what's best for everyone—not just themselves.	−0.373	−1		−0.802	−2		−0.155	0		−0.02	0	
Being emotionally attuned is not a weakness—it is a mother's strength.	0.925	3		1.338	4		0.706	1		0.19	1	
No matter my professional title, I introduce myself first as a mother.	−0.917	−3	D	2.226*	5	D*	−0.37	−2		0.071	0	
I always remind people that I'm a mother before anything else.	1.18	4		0.728	2		−1.212*	−3	D*	0.997	3	
Even when I succeed at work, I must prove I'm still a good mother.	−2.253*	−5	D*	0.839*	2	D*	0.17	1		−0.248	0	
I sometimes downplay my career so people won't think I'm neglecting my family.	1.813*	4	D*	−0.574	−1		−0.332	−1		0.994*	3	
I present myself as a multitasker: a mother and a professional.	−1.352*	−4	D*	−0.287	−1		1.33*	4	D*	0.524*	2	
It's important to me that people know I didn't sacrifice motherhood for my job.	1.93*	5	D*	−1.019	−3		1.264*	3	D*	−0.914	−3	
Being seen as a caring mother helps me gain respect in my community.	−0.044	0		−0.628	−1		0.943*	2		−0.366	−1	
I balance my public and private image to avoid being seen as selfish.	0.14	1		−0.039	0		1.375*	4	D*	−0.734*	−2	D*
People assume I neglect my children just because I have a job.	0.685	2		0.815	2		0.138	0		−1.257*	−4	D*
I have to defend my choices as a working mother constantly.	−1.073*	−4	D*	1.054	3	D	0.446	1		0.524	1	
Being a mother doesn't mean I should lose my individuality.	0.678*	2		−0.372*	−1		−0.986*	−2	D*	1.417*	4	D*
I reject the idea that career-minded women are bad mothers.	1.158*	3	D*	0.153	0		0.452	1		−0.996*	−3	D*
Society blames working mothers for problems they didn't create.	−0.001	0		−1.999*	−5	D*	−0.346	−1		−0.087	0	
I shouldn't have to explain myself every time I'm away from home for work.	0.345*	1	D*	−1.158	−4		−1.481	−4		−1.572	−5	
I face more scrutiny as a mother than my husband ever does as a father.	1.416	4	D	0.866	2		−1.164*	−3	D*	−0.364*	−1	
People forget I'm still human—motherhood doesn't make me invincible.	−0.681	−2		1.178*	4	D*	0.186*	1		−1.028	−3	
People expect me to be the perfect mother and a perfect worker at the same time.	−1.617*	−5	D*	−0.824	−2		−0.282	−1		−0.899	−2	
Society treats motherhood like a duty, not a choice.	−0.748*	−2	D*	0.87	3		0.832	2		1.337	3	
There's more pressure on mothers than fathers to maintain a work-life balance.	2.337*	5	D*	1.602	5	D	1.072	3		−0.08*	0	D*
Workplaces rarely accommodate the real needs of mothers.	−0.797	−2		−0.889	−3		−1.282	−3		1.855*	5	D*
If a woman succeeds at work, people question her commitment to her family.	−0.65	−1		−0.075	0	D	−1.309	−4		−0.844	−2	
I am expected to be strong and nurturing, even when I am exhausted.	−1.252*	−4	D*	0.461	1		0.059	0		−0.424	−1	
Mothers in Bangladesh are judged by how well they uphold tradition.	0.187	1		−0.686	−2		−0.553	−2		0.591	2	
Society needs to recognize that mothers deserve support, not just praise.	0.003	0		−0.766	−2		−0.238	−1		−2.328*	−5	D*

Notes. $p < 0.05$: an asterisk (*) indicates significance at $p < 0.01$; D: distinguishing statements from a specific factor from others; C: consensus statements representing all participants (common viewpoints), Q-SV: Q-sort value.

emotional complexity many modern mothers navigate.

5.6. Factor 4: Supportive structure for maternal empowerment

Factor 4 demonstrates a discourse centered on the need for external support and structural conditions that empower mothers to fulfill caregiving and personal aspirations. The composite Q sort representing the shared viewpoint of participants associated with Factor 4 is shown in Fig. 1D. The related statements and their respective scores are presented in Table 4, aiding in the interpretation of the central themes and distinguishing features of this factor. Participants in this group strongly endorsed statements emphasizing practical, emotional, and social support for mothers without expecting them to sacrifice their identities or ambitions. High agreement with distinguishing statements such as 5 (Z = 2.051*), 36 (Z = 1.855*), and 11 (Z = 1.522*) shows strong support for providing mothers with adequate resources, recognition, and shared responsibility in parenting. This group also affirmed the value of the emotional well-being statement (27) (Z = 1.417*) and moderately supported institutional measures of statements 2 and 14, both of which distinguished themselves with Z-scores above 0.9. In contrast, they rejected norms that promote emotional burden or self-denial as central to motherhood, as seen in the strong disagreement with 40 (Z = -2.328*), 30 (Z = -1.572), and 25 (Z = -1.257*), all of which depict self-neglect, excessive strain, or judgment of working mothers. Based on this perspective, Factor 4 portrays parenting as a moral and emotional compass, with women stressing that providing care is a strength rather than a weakness. While rejecting strict notions of perfection or invisibility, they place a high priority on emotional expression, compassion, and resilience. This group places a high value on being real at home, but they also contend that institutional assistance and social acceptance are necessary. They strive for balance rather than self-erasure, resisting the need to sacrifice personal identity in the face of societal burdens. This group did not reject caregiving but emphasized that it should not be carried out alone or under pressure. Overall, participants in this factor promote a balanced, supported vision of motherhood, where institutional backing, family involvement, and societal understanding are central to maternal fulfillment.

5.7. Reflections on discursive mapping through Q-methodology

The application of Q-methodology in this study proved particularly effective in capturing the nuanced and often contradictory subjectivities surrounding motherhood. Unlike conventional survey methods, which prioritize generalizability, Q-methodology enables a more in-depth exploration of how individuals construct meaning within socially and morally charged discourses. By requiring participants to sort predefined statements according to their personal beliefs, the method illuminated the positions they adopt and the tensions they navigate between competing cultural expectations. This approach was especially valuable in a topic like motherhood, where public narratives often obscure the complexity of lived experiences. The method's combination of qualitative depth and quantitative structure allowed for identifying coherent discursive patterns, each reflecting a unique stance within broader maternal ideologies. Moreover, in this paper, the participatory nature of the sorting process empowered participants as co-constructors of meaning, aligning with feminist methodological values of voice, agency, and reflexivity. Overall, Q-methodology facilitated a rigorous yet empathetic analysis of maternal identity, rendering it a powerful approach for research in areas of identity, care, and social expectations.

6. Discussion

Women manage the competing demands of caregiving and professional aspirations in complex and often contradictory ways. These experiences reveal how motherhood is influenced by changing social norms, individual priorities, and workplace pressures. This study employed Q-methodology to explore the diverse discourses through which women position motherhood in relation to caregiving, career, and identity. The findings revealed four distinct yet intersecting narratives: traditional care-oriented motherhood, progressive and emotionally dual-role motherhood, emotionally attuned motherhood, negotiating identity and expectations, and supportive structures for maternal empowerment, reflecting different ways of negotiating maternal expectations in contemporary society. These discourses illustrate the multiplicity of maternal identities and the cultural, emotional, and structural forces that shape them. In this research, Factor 1 traditional care-oriented motherhood aligns with the ideology of intensive mothering (Verniers et al., 2022), wherein mothers are expected to prioritize their children's needs above all else, often at the cost of personal or professional ambitions. Participants in this group emphasized maternal presence as morally essential, resisting ideas of shared caregiving or institutional childcare. This aligns with Aytaç-Demirçivi (2025) and Horne and Breitkreuz (2018) conceptualizations of motherhood as a selfless vocation embedded in emotional labor. Their resistance to modernization reflects what Davis (2023) describes as the moral economy of motherhood, where maternal value is judged through sacrifice and devotion. Such views persist despite increasing female labor force participation, indicating a lag between evolving roles and cultural expectations (Iregui-Bohórquez et al., 2024). In contrast, Factor 2 progressive and emotionally dual-role motherhood embraces an egalitarian view that legitimizes the pursuit of both career and caregiving. Participants in this discourse endorsed institutional and cultural reforms that support mothers' ability to integrate professional aspirations with family life. This finding aligns with Alwadi et al. (2024) and Uddin (2021) framing of matricentric feminism, which argues for structural recognition of mothers' multifaceted roles. These findings also align with those of Schuck and Rabe-Hemp (2024), highlighting the importance of gender-inclusive policies such as paid parental leave and accessible childcare in reducing the motherhood penalty. Participants in this factor actively rejected the judgment of working mothers, contributing to a redefinition of good motherhood as inclusive of ambition, equality, and autonomy (Wall, 2013). Factor 3, named emotionally attuned, negotiating identity and expectation, highlights the psychological complexity and inner conflict experienced by many mothers. Participants expressed ambivalence, valuing caregiving while simultaneously rejecting societal expectations of complete self-denial. This perspective aligns with findings by Raudasoja et al. (2022), who documented maternal norms and identity conflict as common among women balancing work and family responsibilities. It also reflects what Fielding-Singh and Cooper (2023) describe as neoliberal motherhood, where mothers are individually accountable for achieving ideal caregiving outcomes without sufficient structural support. These women are not resisting motherhood but seeking space for self-preservation within it, navigating a balance between traditional ideals and modern autonomy (Gao, 2025). The emotional nuances of this discourse Hosain (2025) underscores the lived reality of many women who feel caught between roles that do not fully accommodate their needs or values. Finally, Factor 4, named supportive structure for maternal empowerment, centers motherhood in a broader emotional, social, and institutional support framework. In this study, participants emphasized that

mothers can thrive only when caregiving is recognized as a shared responsibility, echoing the findings of Schuck and Rabe-Hemp (2024) on how institutional constraints shape maternal trajectories. This factor rejects the assumption that personal sacrifice is a maternal virtue, instead demanding structural solutions to maternal stress. It aligns with a feminist-based study that critiques the privatization of parenting and advocates for systemic changes that redistribute care labor across family, workplace, and state (Andelsman Alvarez, 2025; Manna et al., 2021). By advocating for balance and support, this discourse offers a pragmatic reimagining of motherhood that honors care without erasing the self.

Together, these four factors reveal that motherhood is far from a universal or static identity. Instead, it is shaped by tensions between cultural norms, personal values, and institutional arrangements. The persistence of traditional discourses alongside more progressive ones reflects what Daniluk and McMahon (1996) describe as the paradox of motherhood—where mothers are revered but regulated, celebrated, and scrutinized. Importantly, these findings challenge the notion of a singular maternal experience and highlight the diversity of maternal subjectivities within contemporary discourse. The motivation behind this research is to contribute to feminist and family studies by centering the voices of mothers and providing insights into how they interpret, negotiate, and internalize dominant cultural narratives surrounding motherhood. By applying the Q methodology, this research study maps the subjective belief structures that shape the construction of maternal identity, highlighting both areas of consensus and contestation. As shown in Appendix 1, the composite factor visualizations clearly depict the key dimensions that influence mothers' experiences at the intersection of caregiving responsibilities and professional aspirations. Figs. 1A–1D, specifically highlight the interactions among Factors 1 through 4, demonstrating how these elements work together to shape maternal decision-making. By visually presenting these composite factors, Appendix 1 enhances understanding of motherhood's diverse and context-dependent configurations. This visual analysis supports the argument that maternal strategies are not uniform but developed through complex negotiations influenced by social, economic, and institutional conditions. The findings underscore the need for policy and cultural interventions that acknowledge this diversity and promote inclusive frameworks that support all mothers rather than privileging those who align with normative maternal ideals.

7. Implications and contributions

7.1. Theoretical implications

This study presents several important theoretical contributions through the lens of Positioning Theory, which views identity as fluid and constructed through discourse rather than fixed. By identifying four distinct maternal discourses namely, traditional care-oriented motherhood, progressive and emotionally dual-role motherhood, emotionally attuned negotiating identity, and supportive structures for maternal empowerment, the research illustrates how women adopt, resist, or redefine the socially available positions related to motherhood. Each factor reflects a unique discursive stance through which participants engage with cultural narratives, moral obligations, and structural realities, emphasizing the relational and dynamic nature. From a Positioning Theory perspective, these findings suggest that motherhood is not simply a social role imposed externally but rather a positioning process where individuals locate themselves and are located by others within complex moral and cultural narratives. For instance, participants aligned with Factor 1 tend to embrace the culturally dominant moral position of the devoted mother, while those in Factor 2 actively challenge this ideal by asserting their right to career autonomy and shared caregiving responsibilities. Factor 3 highlights the internal conflict of occupying hybrid or conflicting positions, where individuals seek to reconcile competing discourses. Factor 4 illustrates efforts to reposition the maternal subject within a narrative that legitimizes the need for external support and shared responsibility, thereby challenging the traditional expectation of maternal self-sufficiency.

These findings enhance the application of Positioning Theory by demonstrating that women do not passively accept their available roles; instead, they strategically negotiate and sometimes resist these positions. They draw on alternative discourses to construct identities that more accurately reflect their lived experiences. Furthermore, the study reveals that positioning is inherently relational and contextual, influenced by broader socio-political structures such as labor markets, policy frameworks, and localized cultural norms, and also aligns with recent feminist discourse analysis, which views identity as shaped by a dynamic interplay of agency, discourse, and power (Anderson, 2025; Kayi-Aydar, 2021). Additionally, the research emphasizes the significance of multiplicity and contradiction within positioning. Many participants, particularly those in Factor 3, navigate dynamic and tense positions that embody competing moral frameworks, challenging the binary view of maternal identities (stay-at-home vs. working mother). This calls for theoretical models recognizing ambivalence, negotiation, and partial identification. In summary, the study enriches our understanding of how Positioning Theory can be applied to motherhood by highlighting the discursive complexity involved in constructing maternal identities. It illustrates that positioning reflects not merely dominant social roles but a dynamic site of negotiation, resistance, and identity work shaped by discourse and context.

7.2. Methodological contribution

This study makes a meaningful methodological contribution by demonstrating the utility of Q-methodology as a mixed-methods research approach for exploring the subjective and discursive construction of motherhood. Positioned at the intersection of qualitative and quantitative techniques, Q-methodology enabled the systematic identification of shared viewpoints while preserving the complexity and nuance of individual meaning-making. With a view of this Positioning Theory, this methodological approach is compelling, as it allows researchers to uncover how individuals locate themselves within competing social narratives rather than merely reporting what they believe. Unlike traditional surveys or interviews, which may impose predefined groups or rely solely on self-report, Q-methodology allows participants to actively construct meaning through the ranking of statements, thereby revealing not only individual perspectives but also underlying discourse structures. This method thus aligns with the post-structural foundations of Positioning Theory, which emphasizes identity positions as dynamic, context-dependent constructs shaped through discourse and interaction.

Furthermore, the method's ability to identify distinct factor groupings, each representing a coherent, internally consistent discursive position, will add depth to the analysis of identity formation. In the case of this study, Q-methodology enabled the distinction between traditional,

progressive, ambivalent, and support-seeking maternal discourses, capturing the pluralism and contradictions often overlooked in role-based typologies. This moves beyond dichotomous frameworks (working vs. stay-at-home mothers) and provides a multidimensional view of maternal subjectivity, a perspective rarely achieved through qualitative or survey-based designs. Additionally, this study shows how Q-methodology can be fruitfully applied within feminist research to give voice to diverse maternal experiences while maintaining analytical rigor. Its participatory nature positions participants as meaning-makers rather than passive subjects, which aligns with feminist methodological principles of agency, reflexivity, and representation (Horne and Breitkreuz, 2018; Rankin et al., 2024). Finally, integrating Q-methodology insights with Positioning Theory showcases a novel methodological pairing. While Positioning Theory is often used in discourse analysis or narrative inquiry, this study demonstrates how Q-methodology can serve as a discursive mapping framework, revealing how subject positions are negotiated across a population and systematically clustering shared identity frameworks. In summary, this study makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating that Q-methodology is a powerful yet underutilized approach for exploring discursively constructed identities, particularly where those identities are morally charged, socially contested, and emotionally complex, as is the case with motherhood.

8. Limitations and future research directions

This study provides valuable insights into the discursive positioning of motherhood; however, several limitations should be acknowledged, along with directions for future research. First, the small and non-representative sample, typical of Q-study, prioritizes depth over generalizability. While effective for identifying shared subjectivities, the findings reflect a specific cultural and temporal context and cannot be extended to the broader population of mothers. Future research could address this by employing more extensive and diverse samples to explore how factors such as class, race, marital status, and employment shape maternal discourses. Second, since the participant group (P-set) consisted solely of mothers, the findings reflect the subjective perspectives of individuals with direct maternal experience. While this aligns with the study's focus, it may limit the generalizability of the results to broader populations or to individuals who engage with discourses on motherhood from different social positions. Future studies should consider including a more demographically diverse P-set or exploring contrasting perspectives across various social roles. Third, the use of pre-constructed Q-statements, though grounded in literature and expert input, may reflect dominant cultural framings, potentially overlooking alternative marginalized contexts. It limits the inclusivity of the discursive range captured. Future studies should consider adapting the Q-set for different cultural contexts or employing participatory methods in statement development to reflect the diverse experiences of mothers. Fourth, while Q methodology captures subjective positions at a fixed point in time, research has shown these positions to be relatively stable, with Brown (1980) reporting conservative test-retest reliability estimates around 0.80. Nonetheless, given the dynamic and evolving nature of motherhood across life stages and shifting social contexts, longitudinal or narrative-based studies could offer valuable complementary insights into how discursive positions may develop or adapt over time. Finally, the findings are shaped by the sociocultural and policy context in which the study was conducted. Comparative, cross-cultural research could light how maternal discourses vary across policy regimes and cultural settings, highlighting the influence of structural conditions. Future studies should thus pursue intersectional, cross-national, and temporal approaches to deepen understanding of motherhood's discursive construction.

9. Conclusion

This study examined how women position themselves within modern discourses of motherhood, utilizing Q-methodology informed by Positioning Theory. The findings identified four distinct yet interconnected discourses: traditional care-oriented motherhood, progressive emotionally dual-role motherhood, emotionally attuned identity negotiation, and supportive structures for maternal positioning. These discourses illustrate the complex and often contradictory ways maternal identities are formed, negotiated, and challenged within cultural, emotional, and institutional contexts. Through the lens of Positioning Theory, the study reveals that motherhood is not a fixed role, but a discursive space where individuals actively position themselves within dominant social narratives. Some participants embraced traditional ideals of maternal devotion, while others resisted or redefined these expectations in their pursuit of autonomy, balance, or systemic support. This underscores the dynamic interplay between personal agency and structural constraints in shaping maternal subjectivity.

Methodologically, the study highlights the value of Q-methodology in capturing diverse and nuanced perspectives, providing a robust framework for analyzing how individuals navigate morally and socially charged identities. Theoretically, it contributes to ongoing discussions in feminist and identity research by demonstrating how motherhood is discursively constructed and continually reshaped in response to evolving societal expectations. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the importance of moving beyond singular definitions of motherhood toward more inclusive, flexible, and supportive understandings that reflect contemporary mothers' actual conditions, choices, and struggles. Acknowledging and legitimizing this discursive plurality is crucial for individual well-being and informing equitable social policy and cultural change.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Munshi Muhammad Abdul Kader Jilani: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Ethical statement

All participants were fully informed about the aims and procedures of the study, and each provided written informed consent before participating. This research utilized Q methodology—a qualitative technique that explores subjective viewpoints without clinical or biomedical intervention—no experimentation on humans or animals was involved. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the study was conducted in accordance with recognized ethical standards for social science research. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout all data collection, analysis, and reporting stages. No personally identifiable information was disclosed or recorded, ensuring the privacy and rights of all individuals involved.

Funding

This research was conducted without the support of any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The researcher independently carried out all activities related to the study's design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation without external financial assistance.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that no known competing financial interests or personal relationships could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix 1. Each composite Q-sort represents a shared viewpoint or factor extracted from the data

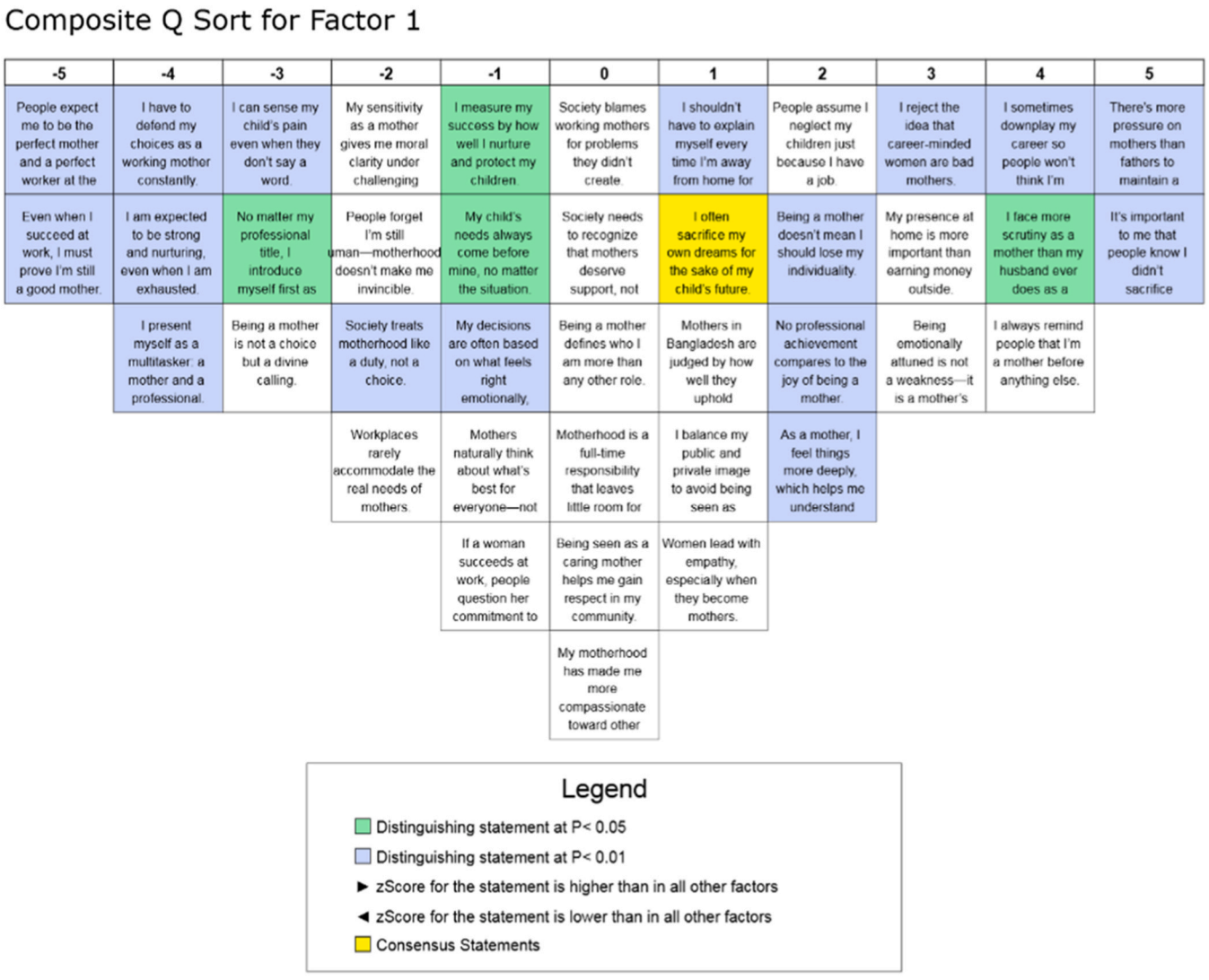

Figure 1A. Composite Q sort statements associated with Factor 1

Composite Q Sort for Factor 2

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
Motherhood is a full-time responsibility that leaves little room for	My sensitivity as a mother gives me moral clarity under challenging	Workplaces rarely accommodate the real needs of mothers.	Mothers in Bangladesh are judged by how well they uphold	I present myself as a multitasker: a mother and a professional.	My presence at home is more important than earning money outside.	My decisions are often based on what feels right emotionally,	I face more scrutiny as a mother than my husband ever does as a	I have to defend my choices as a working mother constantly.	As a mother, I feel things more deeply, which helps me understand	No matter my professional title, I introduce myself first as
Society blames working mothers for problems they didn't create.	I shouldn't have to explain myself every time I'm away from home for	My child's needs always come before mine, no matter the situation.	Society needs to recognize that mothers deserve support, not	Being a mother doesn't mean I should lose my individuality.	I reject the idea that career-minded women are bad mothers.	I often sacrifice my own dreams for the sake of my child's future.	Even when I succeed at work, I must prove I'm still a good mother.	I measure my success by how well I nurture and protect my children.	Being emotionally attuned is not a weakness—it is a mother's	There's more pressure on mothers than fathers to maintain a
	I can sense my child's pain even when they don't say a word.	It's important to me that people know I didn't sacrifice	Mothers naturally think about what's best for everyone—not	Being a mother defines who I am more than any other role.	Women lead with empathy, especially when they become mothers.	I am expected to be strong and nurturing, even when I am exhausted.	People assume I neglect my children just because I have a job.	Society treats motherhood like a duty, not a choice.	People forget I'm still human—motherhood doesn't make me invincible.	
			People expect me to be the perfect mother and a perfect worker at the	I sometimes downplay my career so people won't think I'm	I balance my public and private image to avoid being seen as	Being a mother is not a choice but a divine calling.	I always remind people that I'm a mother before anything else.			
				Being seen as a caring mother helps me gain respect in my community.	If a woman succeeds at work, people question her commitment to	My motherhood has made me more compassionate toward other				
					No professional achievement compares to the joy of being a mother.					

Legend

- Distinguishing statement at P< 0.05
- Distinguishing statement at P< 0.01
- ► zScore for the statement is higher than in all other factors
- ◄ zScore for the statement is lower than in all other factors
- Consensus Statements

Figure 1B. Composite Q sort statements associated with Factor 2



Figure 1C. Composite Q sort statements associated with Factor 3

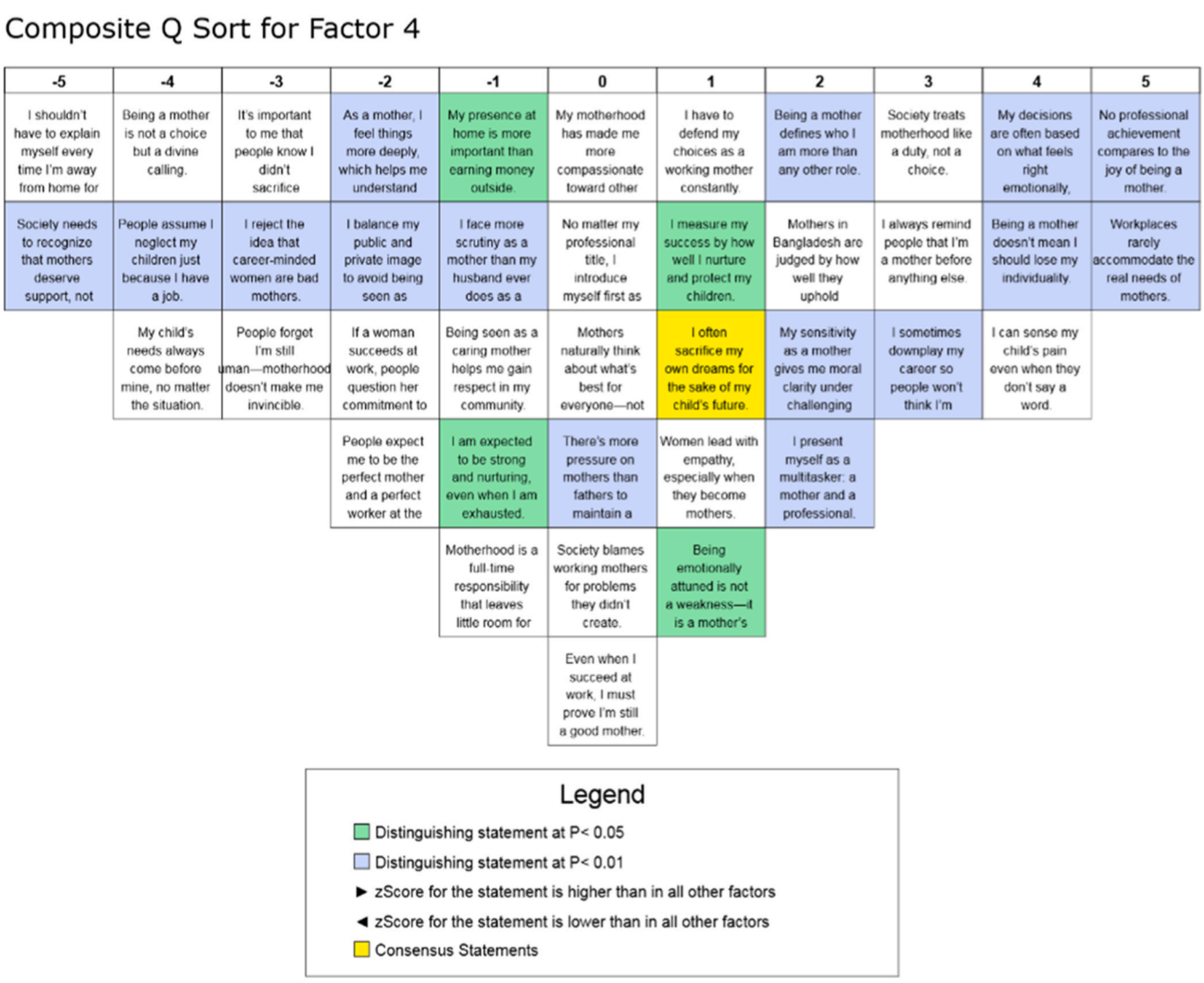

Figure 1D. Composite Q sort statements associated with Factor 4

Appendix 2
Factor loading for each factor and participants with flagged sorts are marked in bold

Q sort ID	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
1	0.0708	**0.3895**	0.1067	−0.0446
2	−0.3284	0.2286	**−0.5572**	0.3422
3	0.0770	0.1112	**0.5007**	0.0807
4	**0.4131**	0.1752	0.1156	0.0705
5	−0.3636	**−0.5572**	0.2008	0.2457
6	−0.078	−0.487	−0.0941	0.0056
7	**0.4716**	−0.0592	−0.4335	0.2375
8	−0.0905	−0.363	−0.0063	**0.6307**
9	0.1003	−0.2288	**0.4906**	0.1628
10	−0.2972	0.1170	0.1569	0.0215
11	0.1272	0.0409	0.0494	**0.3595**
12	0.0347	−0.0977	−0.0558	−0.2916
13	0.1781	0.2276	**0.3485**	−0.164
14	−0.0465	−0.2009	−0.3764	−0.3074
15	0.2372	**0.4136**	0.1167	0.2268
16	−0.0069	−0.0762	0.0206	**0.2515**
17	0.3575	**−0.5135**	−0.1261	0.0997
18	0.0979	**0.3159**	0.0910	0.0003
19	0.2034	−0.0664	**−0.3899**	−0.0339

(*continued on next page*)

Appendix 2 (*continued*)

Q sort ID	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
20	0.3586	−0.1267	**0.3904**	0.1900
21	−0.0013	0.1578	0.3163	−0.3150
22	**−0.3505**	0.2548	−0.1430	0.0224
23	0.3038	−0.2196	**−0.4568**	−0.2063
24	−0.0881	0.1261	**0.5035**	−0.0891
25	−0.4329	0.2322	−0.1205	0.0442
26	0.0326	0.1604	**0.3639**	0.0289
27	0.0515	−0.1184	0.1642	**−0.5194**
28	−0.1919	−0.1214	0.0011	−0.0976
29	**0.4172**	0.0001	−0.1678	−0.2026
30	0.3072	0.2177	−0.1798	−0.3653
31	0.0365	0.3600	−0.4104	−0.0183
32	0.2611	0.0081	−0.3805	0.3505
33	−0.1945	**0.3319**	0.3300	0.1119
34	−0.0912	**0.5266**	0.0056	0.0758
35	−0.2636	−0.1849	0.1419	−0.1242
36	0.0608	−0.0045	0.2731	**0.4507**
37	**0.5390**	0.1692	−0.2037	−0.1472
38	−0.1141	**0.5222**	−0.0052	0.1278
39	**0.5076**	0.0692	0.0483	0.4431
40	**0.6737**	0.0216	0.0599	−0.1447
41	**−0.5332**	−0.0609	−0.1206	0.0381
42	0.1252	−0.1849	0.0073	**−0.5907**
43	0.1419	0.1282	−0.2431	−0.2161
44	0.1146	−0.3877	**0.4231**	−0.0080
45	0.0853	0.2921	0.0566	**0.5345**
46	0.0424	0.0275	0.0436	−0.2577

Appendix 3. . Q-Statements for this study

1. My child's needs always come before mine, no matter the situation.
2. Being a mother defines who I am more than any other role.
3. Motherhood is a full-time responsibility that leaves little room for personal growth.
4. I measure my success by how well I nurture and protect my children.
5. No professional achievement compares to the joy of being a mother.
6. I often sacrifice my own dreams for the sake of my child's future.
7. Being a mother is not a choice but a divine calling.
8. My presence at home is more important than earning money outside.
9. As a mother, I feel things more deeply, which helps me understand others better.
10. I can sense my child's pain even when they don't say a word.
11. My decisions are often based on what feels right emotionally, not just logically.
12. My motherhood has made me more compassionate toward other people's struggles.
13. Women lead with empathy, especially when they become mothers.
14. My sensitivity as a mother gives me moral clarity under challenging situations.
15. Mothers naturally think about what's best for everyone—not just themselves.
16. Being emotionally attuned is not a weakness—it is a mother's strength.
17. No matter my professional title, I introduce myself first as a mother.
18. I always remind people that I'm a mother before anything else.
19. Even when I succeed at work, I must prove I'm still a good mother.
20. I sometimes downplay my career so people won't think I'm neglecting my family.
21. I present myself as a multitasker: a mother and a professional.
22. It's important to me that people know I didn't sacrifice motherhood for my job.
23. Being seen as a caring mother helps me gain respect in my community.
24. I balance my public and private image to avoid being seen as selfish.
25. People assume I neglect my children just because I have a job.
26. I have to defend my choices as a working mother constantly.
27. Being a mother doesn't mean I should lose my individuality.
28. I reject the idea that career-minded women are bad mothers.
29. Society blames working mothers for problems they didn't create.
30. I shouldn't have to explain myself every time I'm away from home for work.
31. I face more scrutiny as a mother than my husband ever does as a father.
32. People forget I'm still human—motherhood doesn't make me invincible.
33. People expect me to be the perfect mother and a perfect worker at the same time.
34. Society treats motherhood like a duty, not a choice.
35. There's more pressure on mothers than fathers to maintain a work-life balance.
36. Workplaces rarely accommodate the real needs of mothers.

37. If a woman succeeds at work, people question her commitment to her family.
38. I am expected to be strong and nurturing, even when I am exhausted.
39. Mothers in Bangladesh are judged by how well they uphold tradition.
40. Society needs to recognize that mothers deserve support, not just praise.

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