

The Real Lives of Working Mothers

Understanding the lived experiences of professional working mothers in Australia, with children in their early years: Identifying their resource needs from a work, family and community perspective.

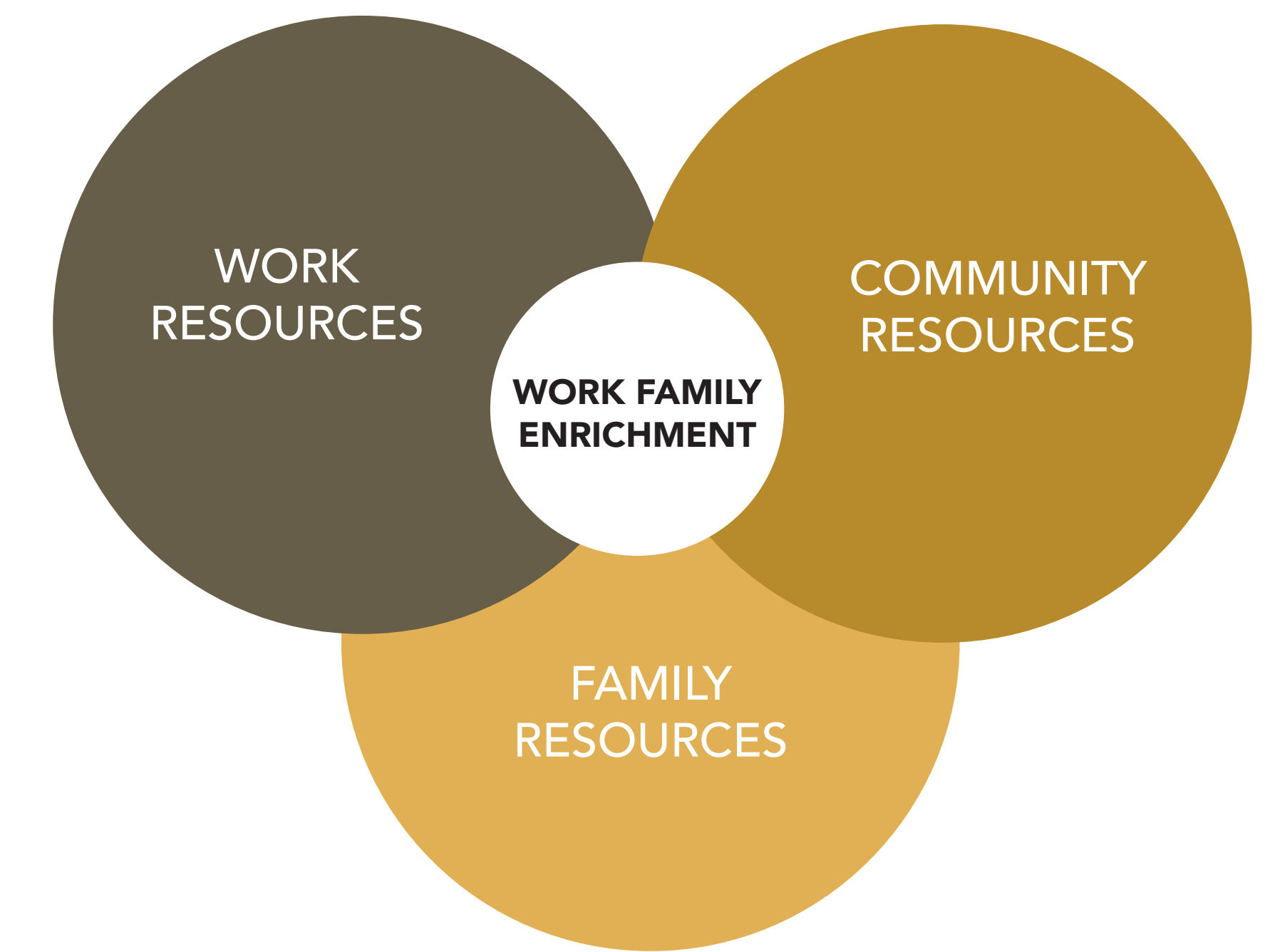


Figure 1: Study conceptual model

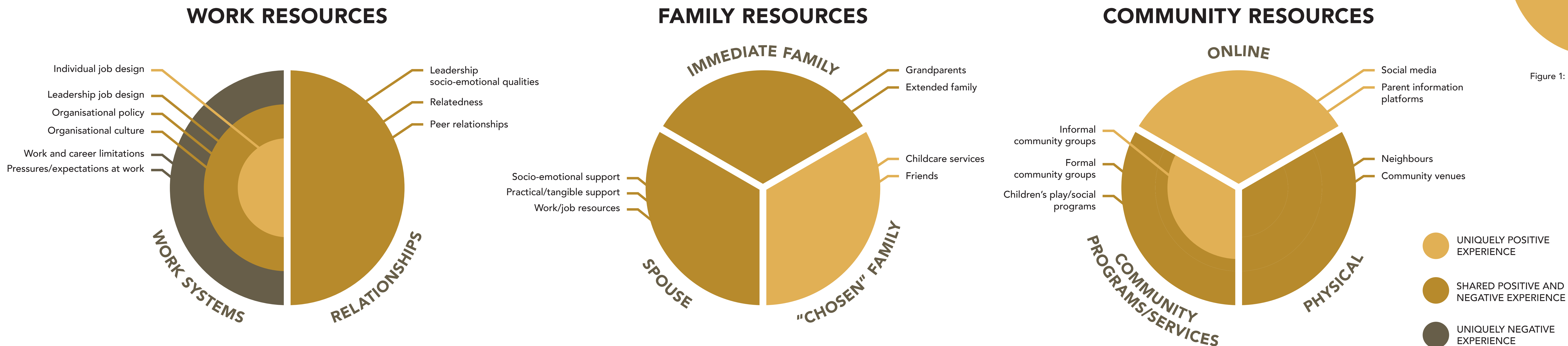


Figure 2: Identified primary themes and respective resources across work, family and community domains

Introduction

Women's participation in the workforce has been recognised as one of the greatest economic developments of the last century. Yet, it is currently estimated that it will still take more than **169 years to close the global economic gender gap**. This ongoing global gender gap is estimated to cost the world approximately **\$12 trillion** in global gross domestic product (GDP).

In Australia, women's overall workforce participation rate remains below other global rates, and in **2024 Australia was ranked 24th globally for gender equality** compared to New Zealand, which ranked 4th.

According to the 2022 Australian Job and Skills summit:

"Despite Australian women being among the most educated in the world, our economic participation is still not where it should be globally".

Despite various advances in policies and legislation, women with children in their "early years" (i.e., 0-5 years) in Australia still experience the greatest gender disparity in workforce participation; including the following impacts:

- Professional women in Australia still experience **disparate career opportunities** and remain under-represented in leadership positions.
- Termed the **"motherhood penalty"**, mothers loss of earnings last up to ten years into parenthood.
- Australian mothers remain significantly more **responsible** for caregiving, and domestic duties and the household mental load.

Overall, it has been identified that **policy and legislation alone cannot solve women's workforce participation**.

This study builds on the strengths and gaps of decades of research into the work-family interface, gender equality, social and family studies, and workforce and organisational development and proposes that:

Working mothers' lives in managing work and family needs to be appropriately addressed from a broader multi-level perspective such as the socio-ecological theory of work, family and community; to identify the actual **resources** that can enable positive workforce participation and work-family enrichment for professional working mothers, with children in their early years **Figure 1** provides a visual depiction of the study conceptual model.

Methods

A qualitative research design, implementing semi-structured focus groups, was employed to explore the research aims:

- to understand professional working mothers' **lived experiences** and impacts (positive and negative) participating in the workforce with children in their early years and;
- to identify the **resources** professional working mothers had access to or used (i.e. resource gain) or did not have access to or used (i.e. resource loss) across work, family and community domains.

A total of 16 x 90-minute focus groups were facilitated online and in person with 42 participants who were currently working professionally in Australia and had at least one child aged 5 years or under.

Results

Thematic content analysis was conducted to identify primary themes and sub-codes across both research aims. Sub-codes within each overarching theme were thematically identified to contextualise the identified experiences and resources.

A summary of the primary themes identified through the content analysis and the subsequent identified resources, are summarised in **Figure 2**.

Conclusions

This study provides a socio-ecological framework for understanding the lived experiences and resource needs of professional working mothers with children in their early years from a work, family, and community perspective.

This deeper understanding of lived experiences and perspectives from a multi-level perspective, contributes to the understanding of what resources contribute to the experiences of professional working mothers' workforce participation, particularly while caring for children in their early years.

Furthermore, this study innovatively inter-twines the theory of conservation of resources from a socio-ecological work, family and community perspective, with the actual experiences and voices of working mothers. By doing this, this study aims to unlock the **reality of what might contribute to more positive participation** in the workforce for mothers with young children.

This study will be followed-up with a quantitative study to further understand the **process and impact of the work, family and community resources** identified in this study, on working mothers' well-being and work, family, and community outcomes.

The intention of this follow-up study is to provide a quantitative understanding of the role of multi-layered resources on professional working mothers' lives across work, family and community outcomes.

Ultimately, this research extends the work-family literature by exploring the role of community resources. In addition, it will build practical evidence-based resources for workplaces, policy makers, community organisations, families and individual working mothers, to **promote and enable positive workforce participation and work-family enrichment** for mothers with children in their early years.



Image is a collage collection of photos mothers provided as part of their participation in the study.

