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Negotiating Paid Work and Caregiving: Experiences of Japanese Mothers of Children with Special Needs

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Abstract: Mothers of children with special needs may encounter difficulties sustaining paid employment when caregiving demands intersect with working hours, school and service arrangements, and children's changing needs. This study examines how mothers negotiate paid work and caregiving within their caregiving circumstances. An exploratory qualitative design was employed with ten mothers whose children attended an elementary special support school in Japan. Data were generated through written interviews comprising 18 open-ended questions and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four interrelated themes were developed: conditions of work-care incompatibility and its consequences; negotiating employment through trade-offs and adaptation; care and workplace support as enabling conditions; and the continuing value of paid work. The findings show that difficulties in combining employment and caregiving were shaped not only by the demands of care but also by the timing and unpredictability of children's needs and care arrangements. Mothers responded by adjusting working hours, employment arrangements and career expectations, although these adaptations reflected different combinations of constraint, caregiving priorities and accommodation to children's needs. Family, formal and workplace support expanded employment possibilities when sufficiently compatible with mothers' and children's circumstances. Despite these difficulties, paid work continued to hold financial, personal or professional value for several mothers. The study contributes an experience-centred understanding of work-care negotiation by showing how caregiving demands, employment conditions and available support shape the forms of employment that remain feasible while paid work may continue to be a valued part of mothers' lives.

Keywords: *Children with Special Needs, Maternal Employment, Work-Care Negotiation, Qualitative Research*

1. Introduction and Background

Mothers of children with special needs may experience particular challenges in sustaining paid employment because caregiving responsibilities may go beyond routine childcare. Mothers may need to juggle medical appointments, rehabilitation, school arrangements, transport, and other forms of support with work to meet children's health, developmental, and educational needs. These demands can influence labour force participation, working hours and income (Vinck & Van Lancker, 2020; Wondemu et al., 2022). They may also have longer-term implications for the kind of employment mothers can take on and the career opportunities they are able to pursue (Østerud et al., 2024).

However, the extent to which mothers of children with special needs are able to retain paid employment is not solely determined by the demands of caregiving. Whether they are able to remain in employment also depends on the support they have and their working conditions. Adequate care services and family support can, for instance, help mothers balance their employment and caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, flexible working arrangements could allow mothers to meet the needs of their children without significantly reducing their employment commitment. However, the lack of support and the rigid working conditions can be a constraint to their employment opportunities. Previous studies have demonstrated that the experience of maternal employment is influenced by the interaction of caregiving demands, support available, and working conditions (Opoku et al., 2025; Østerud et al., 2024).

Paid employment should not simply be understood as an additional demand competing with care work. Working provides financial resources and independence and can be personally or professionally significant for mothers (Saputra & Karyono, 2014). Østerud et al. (2024), for example, identified substantial work-family conflict and adverse career consequences among mothers of disabled children but also instances in which

caregiving experiences contributed to new occupational directions. The relationship between work and care may therefore encompass both constraint and value. Reducing or relinquishing employment may ease some pressures associated with caregiving, but it may also involve reduced income, altered career prospects or the loss of work that mothers value.

The interaction between caregiving responsibilities, available support and employment conditions is also relevant in Japan, where the distribution of childcare responsibilities within families can influence mothers' participation in paid employment. Greater paternal involvement in childcare has been associated with higher odds of Japanese mothers remaining in full-time employment (Dhungel et al., 2023). For mothers of children with special needs, additional caregiving responsibilities associated with their children's disabilities may further influence their employment opportunities, particularly when working arrangements and available care services do not adequately accommodate their needs.

Accordingly, this study employs an exploratory qualitative approach to examine how mothers of children with special needs negotiate paid work and caregiving within their caregiving circumstances. Japan is treated as the empirical context of the study rather than as an explanatory cultural category. By examining the conditions that shape mothers' employment experiences, the adaptations they make and the value they continue to attach to paid work, the study provides an experience-centred account of work-care negotiation. The following research question guides the study: How do mothers of children with special needs negotiate paid work and caregiving roles in the context of their caregiving demands?

2. Literature Review

Caring for Children with Special Needs and Participation in Paid Work

Caring for children with special needs can differ from routine parenting in both the intensity and duration of care required. Functional limitations may increase children's dependence on others for everyday activities such as feeding, dressing, bathing and mobility, while healthcare, rehabilitation and other forms of support can create additional demands on parents' time and resources (Brekke & Alecu, 2023; Raina et al., 2005). The implications extend beyond the direct provision of care. Parents may need to organise services, respond to health or behavioural needs and accommodate circumstances that are difficult to reconcile with other areas of life. Accordingly, the significance of caregiving for paid employment lies not simply in the amount of care provided, but in the demands that caregiving places on the time, health and resources that parents also require to participate in work.

Parents of children with special needs have been found to experience greater stress, anxiety and depression than parents of children without special needs (Cheshire et al., 2010; Osmančević Katkić et al., 2017). Using longitudinal population-register data from Norway, Brekke and Alecu (2023) similarly found higher risks of depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and some physical health problems among mothers caring for children with disabilities. These findings are important to the work-care relationship because caregiving and employment draw upon some of the same finite personal resources, including time, physical capacity and psychological energy.

Parents of children with special needs have been found to take more time away from work, reduce working hours and decline overtime (Anderson et al., 2007; Wondemu et al., 2022), but the extent to which these demands disrupt employment depends partly on the resources available to accommodate them. Østerud et al. (2024), for example, identified substantial work-family conflict and adverse income and career consequences among mothers of disabled children in Norway, while inadequate health and welfare provision contributed to the difficulties they experienced. Similarly, working mothers of children with disabilities in the United Arab Emirates relied on different combinations of family members, paid caregivers and rehabilitation and support services to sustain care during working hours (Opoku et al., 2025). These studies shift attention from the caregiving burden alone towards the conditions surrounding caregiving, and suggest that similar responsibilities may have different employment consequences depending on the support mothers can mobilise.

Caregiving responsibilities may be particularly difficult to accommodate when employment is organised

around fixed expectations of employees' time and availability. Flexibility in working hours, leave arrangements and managerial responses can provide greater scope for employees to respond to caregiving demands, whereas rigid arrangements and limited organisational understanding may restrict their employment options. Research on mothers of children with intellectual disabilities, for example, has identified inflexible working arrangements and limited understanding from employers and colleagues among the difficulties encountered in employment (Al-Oraini, 2024). The extent to which caregiving affects mothers' employment therefore depends partly on how well employment arrangements accommodate their caregiving responsibilities.

Reduced working hours, occupational changes or withdrawal from employment may ease immediate incompatibilities between work and care but may also include financial and career consequences. Østerud et al. (2024) found negative effects on income and careers for mothers of disabled children but also identified cases where the knowledge and experiences gained through caregiving created new occupational pathways. A similar analysis in Iran by Yoosefi Lebni et al. (2021) showed lost opportunities and maternal sacrifice when considering broader socio-economic constraints. Hence, employment adaptation is not to be understood as either an automatic voluntary choice or an imposed sacrifice. Rather, mothers' decisions may reflect different combinations of caregiving priorities, employment opportunities, and constraints on the alternatives available to them.

Paid employment should not be understood only as a competing demand to caregiving. Working mothers of autistic children found value in work because it contributed to the family's finances and financial independence and allowed them to meet their children's needs (Saputra & Karyono, 2014). This complicates a straightforward work-family conflict interpretation. Jobs may make caregiving more difficult for carers by placing demands on them, but at the same time they provide resources that mothers value. Reduction or abandonment of paid work may thus not only reduce some types of work-care conflict but may also not be an unambiguous improvement in the situation of mothers.

The literature thus indicates that the link between paid work and caregiving is characterised as an interaction of care demands, available resources and employment conditions rather than as a straightforward contest between two roles. The time, health, and employment opportunities of mothers can be strained by caregiving; family and formal support can alter their capacity to respond to such strains; and workplace arrangements can widen or narrow the employment choices that are available. At the same time, paid work may have financial and personal value despite the difficulties of sustaining it. This perspective gives a wider platform to look at how mothers negotiate paid work and caregiving without presupposing that their experiences are well described by conflict, balance, sacrifice or choice.

Work and Care in the Japanese Context

The distribution of childcare and domestic responsibilities within Japanese families remains gendered, although caregiving arrangements vary across households (Porter & Loveland, 2019). For mothers raising children with disabilities, this division of responsibilities may intersect with caregiving demands that extend beyond those associated with routine childcare. Japanese research has documented higher psychological distress among mothers of children with disabilities than among mothers of children without disabilities (Yamaoka et al., 2016). Research has also highlighted the importance of social and formal support in reducing the burden experienced by Japanese mothers caring for children with disabilities (Moriwaki et al., 2022; Porter & Loveland, 2019). Collectively, these findings suggest that mothers' caregiving experiences need to be understood in relation to both their responsibilities and the support available to them.

The way families share childcare is also important for mothers' participation in paid work. Dhungel et al. (2023) investigated Japanese mothers who had worked full-time prior to childbirth, finding that roughly one-third were not working full-time 18 months after delivery. Greater odds of mothers remaining in full-time employment were associated with increased paternal involvement in child care. Similarly, Tanaka et al. (2026) reported that a workplace intervention promoting work-life balance increased fathers' involvement in childcare and their spouses' labour supply. Although these studies did not specifically examine mothers of children with special needs, their findings indicate that maternal employment is associated with how childcare responsibilities are shared within families and the workplace conditions that may facilitate such arrangements. Research focusing specifically on Japanese mothers of children with intellectual disabilities provides further

evidence of the challenges associated with sustaining paid employment. Ejiri and Matsuzawa (2019), in a study of mothers of school-aged children with intellectual disabilities, reported an employment rate of 49%, compared with an employment rate of 71% among mothers with children of the same age range in the same prefecture. Among mothers in the study who were not employed, 57% nevertheless expressed a desire to work. These findings suggest that non-employment should not necessarily be interpreted as a lack of interest in paid employment. Rather, mothers' employment participation may be influenced by caregiving responsibilities and the circumstances under which employment is possible. In a subsequent study, Ejiri and Matsuzawa (2023) found that mothers of school-aged children with intellectual disabilities sought working hours compatible with their children's school schedules, greater flexibility in taking leave, and extended operating hours for childcare services. These findings highlight the importance of employment arrangements and care services that accommodate mothers' caregiving responsibilities.

Existing Japanese research has contributed to understanding the employment circumstances of mothers of children with special needs, particularly in relation to employment participation, psychological wellbeing, family support and childcare provision (Ejiri & Matsuzawa, 2019, 2023; Moriwaki et al., 2022; Yamaoka et al., 2016). However, these studies have largely examined particular aspects of mothers' circumstances rather than how caregiving responsibilities, employment conditions, and available support are experienced together in their everyday working lives. Consequently, further qualitative inquiry is warranted to understand how mothers sustain, adjust or reconsider paid employment while fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to examine mothers' experiences of paid work and caregiving while caring for a child with special needs. The study focused on how participants described and interpreted their circumstances in their own words. Written interviews were used because the open-ended format allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and formulate their responses in their own time.
The written interview comprised 18 open-ended questions addressing participants' work and child-rearing circumstances. The questions were developed following a review of the literature and previous empirical studies concerning employment, caregiving and the experiences of parents of children with disabilities or special needs. The open-ended format allowed participants to identify situations and experiences they considered salient rather than restricting their responses to predetermined alternatives. Written qualitative approaches have previously been used to elicit accounts from parents and carers (Elliott & Luker, 1997; Heaton et al., 2006; Newman & Fawcett, 1995). A limitation of written interviews, however, is the absence of synchronous interaction, which prevented the researchers from probing responses or seeking clarification.

The interview questions were developed in English and translated into Japanese by a Japanese academic co-researcher who was a native speaker. A back-translation procedure was subsequently used to compare the Japanese and English versions. Any discrepancies were considered in relation to the intended meaning of the questions rather than literal word-for-word correspondence, with the aim of maintaining conceptual equivalence between the two language versions.

Following ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the primary researcher's institution, the researchers formally contacted an elementary special support school in Japan by email, explained the study and requested permission to conduct the research. Eligible participants were mothers who cared for a child with disabilities, resided in the same household as the child, and had been employed either full-time or part-time for at least the preceding 12 months. Following approval, the school mediated the recruitment and data-collection process. Study materials were distributed by the school to mothers of children in third-grade classes. Completed materials were collected by the school and returned to the researchers by mail. Eleven mothers returned written interviews. One respondent was excluded from the present analysis because she had been a full-time mother since giving birth and therefore did not meet the employment eligibility criterion. Ten mothers consequently constituted the final analytic sample.

The written responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2024). Analysis began with repeated reading of the complete responses to develop familiarity with each participant's account before examining patterns across the dataset. Initial codes were

developed systematically across the written material, with attention to participants' explicit descriptions as well as meanings relevant to their work and caregiving circumstances. Coding was not organised according to individual interview questions; related experiences described across different parts of participants' accounts were considered together. Candidate themes were developed through iterative engagement with the codes, extracts and dataset as a whole. Themes were conceptualised as patterns of shared meaning organised around a central concept rather than as summaries of individual interview topics. Theme development was recursive, with movement between codes, candidate themes, extracts and the complete dataset as interpretations were developed and refined. Differences and contrasting accounts were retained as analytically meaningful, and frequency alone was not treated as evidence of thematic importance. The final themes were refined for internal coherence and distinction from one another, and illustrative extracts were selected to demonstrate how the analysis was grounded in participants' accounts.

4. Results

The study involved ten Japanese mothers of children with special needs, aged between 30 and 47 years. Most had received tertiary education and had worked in various occupations, either full-time or part-time. Their children had a range of disabilities and health conditions, including autism spectrum disorder, intellectual and developmental disabilities, chromosomal conditions, and other developmental or health-related conditions. These characteristics provide context for understanding the mothers' employment and caregiving experiences, particularly the circumstances under which they sought to sustain paid work.

Analysis of the written interviews revealed four interrelated themes: (1) Conditions of Work-Care Incompatibility and Its Consequences; (2) Negotiating Employment through Trade-offs and Adaptation; (3) Care and Workplace Support as Enabling Conditions; and (4) The Continuing Value of Paid Work. The themes indicate that the experiences of paid work and caregiving of mothers were influenced by the interaction between care demands and the conditions under which employment and care were organised. Mothers responded to these conditions by making various adjustments to their work, while the employment arrangements that were still possible were influenced by the support of family, formal institutions and the workplace. For some mothers, paid work continued to be a source of financial, personal and professional value.

Theme 1: Conditions of Work-Care Incompatibility and Its Consequences

The difficulty of reconciling employment with the demands of caregiving was a key condition influencing the experiences of mothers. The problem was not simply the coexistence of work and care. Instead, tensions arose where working hours and expectations of employment intersected with school timetables, after-school services, hospital and rehabilitation appointments, school holidays, unforeseen disruptions and children's needs.

For a number of mothers, the opening hours of schools and care services were not aligned with the time needed for employment. P5 said: "In normal times I worked four or five days a week, from morning to night, but this was not possible during school holidays. Day services are only open from 10:00 to 16:00 during long holidays (summer holidays, etc.), so it is difficult to work as a full-time (regular) employee because of late starts or early departures." P6 had a similar incompatibility. Her job as a nurse required shifts and preparation before the formal start of duty, and the school buses and day services ran on different schedules. During summer holidays, day care began at 10:00, making her usual working arrangements particularly difficult. P7 likewise described difficulty reconciling full-time work with hospital appointments and developmental support. When her child entered special needs school, the timing of the school bus and limitations in after-school care could not be accommodated within her working arrangements.

Work-care incompatibility was not confined to scheduled services. Children's changing or unpredictable needs could also make fixed employment arrangements difficult. P3 provided a clear account of this difficulty. Her child was refusing to attend school at the time, making working from home necessary. However, this arrangement remained insufficient when working hours were rigidly fixed: "... Even with working from home, I feel it is tough if the working hours are rigidly fixed." She explained that her child sometimes wanted her to play or provide attention during working hours. Her account therefore distinguishes between flexibility in where work is performed and flexibility in when work can be performed. Working from home could reduce one constraint without necessarily resolving the competing temporal demands of work and care.

Unexpected disruptions created further difficulties. P8 described having to take prolonged absences when classes closed during COVID-19 or influenza outbreaks. Although sick-child care was formally available, she had not used it because staff were not accustomed to caring for children with disabilities. Thus, mothers could encounter employment difficulties even where services existed if those services could not adequately accommodate their children's needs.

The consequences extended beyond disruption to employment. Mothers described psychological and physical strain, financial consequences and concerns about the quality of care they were able to provide. P1 reported exhaustion, headaches and irritability while managing work alongside rehabilitation and care for two children. P5 reported reduced annual income and sometimes feeling negative because she wanted to work more. P4 described becoming emotionally unstable and subsequently reducing her workload. P7 reported that the stress surrounding schooling and whether she should continue working resulted in hives and other health effects. P3 similarly described the broader effects of being unable to move freely because of her child's needs. The restrictions extended beyond employment to ordinary activities such as shopping and having time for herself, which she described as becoming mentally painful and exhausting.

Some mothers also felt that work pressures affected the care they could provide. P4 was troubled that multiple work responsibilities prevented her from attending to her child as slowly and carefully as she wished. P7 felt that being busy with work reduced opportunities for developmental care and limited the time she could spend interacting carefully with her child. P6 described how the loss of personal fulfilment associated with her employment circumstances affected her experience of caregiving: “Because I did not feel fulfilled myself, I felt unable to fully engage with raising my child or to respond to my child as gently as I wanted. I felt that I was sacrificing too much of myself.”

Work-care incompatibility therefore had consequences across interconnected areas of mothers' lives. Depending on individual circumstances, these included reduced income, physical and psychological strain, career concerns and perceived limitations in their ability to provide care in the manner they considered desirable.

Theme 2: Negotiating Employment Through Trade-offs and Adaptation

Mothers responded to these conditions in different ways. Their accounts included reducing working days or hours, moving from full-time to part-time employment, changing workplaces, limiting the extent to which they pursued work, relinquishing career aspirations and, in one case, resigning from full-time employment. These adjustments made work more compatible with caregiving for mothers, but often at a cost.

P1 cut back on her labour force participation because the demands of a heavier workload were not compatible with her caregiving responsibilities: “I have to reduce the number of working days, otherwise I can’t cope.” For P5, the adjustment was to remain employed but in a different career direction. With limited hours of day services it was difficult to find regular full-time employment and she said: “At the time I graduated from university, I gave up on the career I’d dreamed of.” However, she continued to work part-time. Her experience thus distinguished giving up a particular career path from giving up paid employment altogether.

P6 had worked full-time as a nurse but moved to part-time work due to poor understanding of disability in her workplace. She then looked for a job that she felt was more understanding of her situation. This adjustment was at the price of a perceived career cost: "Of course, I could no longer build my career or hope for the future." For P7 the incompatibilities became difficult enough for her to resign from full-time employment when her child started primary school. The decision came at a time when the school-bus schedule and after-school care conflicted with working hours and the grandparents, who had previously helped, were ageing and finding physical care more difficult. Her experience demonstrates how an employment decision may be the consequence of a multitude of intersecting conditions rather than one caregiving demand.

Other mothers set boundaries around how much they worked. P9 talked about deliberately restricting her work involvement: "If I work as much as I want, my child's health deteriorates or I cannot take my child to developmental care, so I work with restraint. But I accept that now, feeling that my child's growth is more important.” Her story shows a trade-off between working as much as she would have liked and making time

for her child's health and developmental care. But she did not describe the adjustment as entirely negative. She said she had changed her working style and tried to work more efficiently. Similarly, P10 reported that caregiving had altered her preferred way of working, though her account suggested her preferences had also changed over time: "My feelings changed over time, and so did the way that I wanted to work. I learned to accept that some change was inevitable." At the time of the interview, she was working part-time and reported relatively little current difficulty in providing care under this arrangement.

These narratives illustrate that mothers' responses cannot be reduced to either unbounded choices or imposed sacrifices. Some adaptations were perceived as losses, especially when mothers curtailed career aspirations or desirable forms of work. Others were described as needed or acceptable changes to reflect shifting priorities. But the choices mothers made were influenced by employment arrangements, the demands of caregiving, and the support available to them. Negotiating work and care then often meant determining what form and extent of employment could be sustained, rather than simply deciding whether to work.

Theme 3: Care and Workplace Support as Enabling Conditions

The support available to mothers also affected their ability to retain employment. Family members, formal services and workplaces provided many types of support including direct childcare, transport, after school care and greater flexibility in working arrangements. However, their narratives suggested that support assisted with employment only when it was sufficiently available and appropriate to mothers' situations.

Family members sometimes provided care that allowed mothers to stay employed. P1 depended on her child's father and grandmother at the time of the child's return home and also used after-school day care and rehabilitation services. This informal network of care was explicitly dependent on her ability to continue working: "I can work as long as the grandparents (my parents and my husband's parents) are well, but if something happens I will quit." From her account, an employment arrangement could be viable so long as family support was available but could be uncertain if the capacity of those carers changed.

P7 similarly received assistance from her husband, grandparents and sister and used after-school day care and therapy services. Yet the declining physical capacity of ageing grandparents reduced the support available to her. P9 lived with her parents and received their assistance while also accessing public developmental and physical therapy services. These accounts show that informal and formal support could operate together rather than as alternative sources of assistance.

Workplace arrangements could facilitate employment differently by altering when or where mothers were required to work. P8's part-time hours were organised around seeing her child onto the school bus. She intended to remain with her employer because the workplace accommodated her preferred working days and hours. She also identified telework and hourly paid leave as arrangements that could assist mothers with short-duration care requirements such as school transportation and hospital visits.

P4 likewise described an understanding workplace with a family-first policy. Working from home and prioritising home life were important to her, and she indicated that because her workplace accommodated these requirements, her caregiving circumstances had not produced a particular negative effect on her career. However, interpersonal understanding did not necessarily guarantee that practical accommodation was possible. P7 described colleagues in her nursery workplace as understanding, but staffing limitations meant that taking frequent leave for her child remained difficult. Thus, supportive attitudes and an organisation's practical capacity to accommodate caregiving were not necessarily equivalent.

Formal support showed a similar distinction between availability and usability. P8 reported that sick-child care existed, but she did not use it because staff were not accustomed to children with disabilities. P6 knew of Family Support services but expressed distrust of leaving her child with unfamiliar people and preferred, where possible, to manage transportation herself. P5 limited her daughter's attendance at day services because she considered excessive use physically and mentally taxing for her child.

Support, therefore, facilitated work-care negotiation not simply through its existence, but through its fit with mothers' and children's circumstances. Family availability, day service operating hours, mothers' confidence

in care providers and workplace flexibility could widen or narrow the employment arrangements that mothers considered feasible.

Theme 4: The Continuing Value of Paid Work

Several mothers appreciated being in employment, financially, personally or professionally. This helps to explain why their responses often involved attempts to retain some form of paid work even when their working hours, employment arrangements or career expectations had to change.

One of the clearest contrasting accounts came from P2. Unlike mothers reporting high work-care strain, she viewed the support she received positively and did not describe a specific career impact. She enjoyed her part-time work because: "It's refreshing to have my own money and my own time, and I do enjoy it very much." In this account, paid work provided both financial independence and personal time, rather than simply being a competing responsibility. P5 also wanted to continue working even if she had given up on her earlier career ambitions: "I want to continue because I think it is necessary to spend time doing what I like (work) even if it is part-time." Her account suggests that the loss of a preferred career path did not destroy the personal value she attached to work.

For other mothers, the value of work was closely linked to professional identity and development. P4 said she found her work a rewarding experience and she wanted to keep learning, saying she had no intention of resigning. Despite the career limitations P6 had faced, she still strongly identified with nursing: "I wanted to do that profession, so I want to keep going if I can. As a nurse I want to use my experience of having a child with a disability". Her account reveals a tension that was present elsewhere in the findings: work could be a source of constraint and frustration, but also a valued part of the mother's life.

P9 also stated that she enjoyed her job and that her experiences could be useful to teach other people's children, giving a reason for the intention to remain employed despite deliberately limiting the extent to which she sought work. P10 also wanted to continue working and associated employment with the opportunity to try new things and learn from senior colleagues.

The accounts hence demonstrate that paid work could generate difficulties and retain value. Work provided income, personal time, enjoyment, a professional identity and opportunities to learn and achieve fulfilment for different mothers. This continuing value reflects that work-care negotiation did not necessarily lead to withdrawal from employment. Instead, many mothers sought ways to maintain work within the parameters of their caregiving circumstances, even when this meant changes to working hours, employment arrangements, or career expectations.

Discussion

This study explored how mothers of children with special needs negotiate paid work and caregiving in the setting of their caregiving demands. The results indicate that this negotiation was influenced by the demands of care, the organisation of employment and care arrangements and the support available for mothers. Mothers responded by changing working hours, employment arrangements and career expectations, but the extent and importance of these adaptations varied by participant. For many mothers, however, paid work continued to be financially, personally or professionally valuable despite the difficulties in sustaining it. Overall, the findings of these studies suggest that work-care negotiation is not well represented as a simple choice between employment and caregiving. Instead, it is about mothers adapting employment within the constraints of what makes some ways of working more feasible than others. A valued working role is sought to be maintained where possible.

One important finding concerns the conditions under which work and caregiving became difficult to combine. Previous research has established that caring for children with special needs can place considerable demands on parents' time and resources and affect their participation in employment (Anderson et al., 2007; Brekke & Alecu, 2023; Wondemu et al., 2022). The present findings provide a more detailed account of how such constraints were experienced. Difficulties arose not only from the amount of care required but from the timing and unpredictability of care. School schedules, transportation, after-school services, hospital and rehabilitation appointments, school holidays and unexpected interruptions could conflict with working hours. Even working

from home did not necessarily resolve these difficulties when working time remained fixed, and a child required attention during those hours. Temporal flexibility therefore appears to matter alongside flexibility in work location.

The temporal dimension is particularly relevant when considered alongside Japanese evidence concerning mothers of children with special needs. Ejiri and Matsuzawa (2023) found that mothers of school-aged children with intellectual disabilities wanted shorter and more flexible working hours as well as longer operating hours for after-school childcare services. The present findings illustrate why both may matter. Adjustments on only one side of the work-care relationship may be insufficient when employment and care arrangements continue to operate according to incompatible schedules. This helps to explain why the feasibility of employment may depend not only on whether care services are available but also on whether the periods covered by those services correspond sufficiently with the periods during which mothers need to work.

The repercussions of these incompatibilities extended beyond the mere participation in employment. Participants reported feeling exhausted, stressed, and experiencing financial strain, and in some cases, concerns that work demands affected the care they were able to provide. These results align with evidence of increased psychological distress among mothers of children with disabilities (Yamaoka et al., 2016) and the larger body of research on adverse mental and physical health consequences of intensive caregiving (Brekke & Alecu, 2023). The study does not prove that work-care incompatibility caused these outcomes. But the mothers' stories show how the demands of employment and caregiving might meet in the everyday, drawing on the same limited resources of time, physical capacity, and psychological energy. This highlights the significance of viewing maternal wellbeing as part of the context in which paid work is maintained, rather than an individual outcome of employment.

The second finding concerns mothers' responses to these conditions. Their adjustments entailed working fewer days or hours, moving from full-time to part-time work, and changing workplaces, thereby limiting career aspirations and exiting full-time employment. Similar employment consequences such as reduced working hours, time away from work, and negative income and career consequences have been reported in previous research among parents caring for children with disabilities (Anderson et al., 2007; Østerud et al., 2024; Wondemu et al., 2022). The present findings, however, indicate that the meaning of these adaptations was not uniform. Some mothers reported little ambition in their work or the loss of a desired job, while others came to view changes in their work arrangements as necessary or acceptable in light of their children's needs. This variation is important as it implies employment adjustment should not be understood as a fully voluntary choice or a uniform imposed sacrifice. Mothers did exercise agency in how they responded to their circumstances, but their agency was limited by the options available to them. For example, a mother may prefer to work part-time rather than full-time. However, that preference may simultaneously reflect her own caregiving preferences and the unavailability of care arrangements that can accommodate full-time employment. This corresponds to the findings of Østerud et al. (2024) regarding negative career effects and change of occupational orientation for mothers of disabled children, as well as the documentation by Yoosefi Lebni et al. (2021) of lost opportunities and maternal sacrifice within the general economic constraints. In this regard, the distinction between choice and constraint is not as clear as employment status in itself would suggest. Negotiation in this study often involved what form and extent of employment could remain viable within mothers' caregiving circumstances.

A third finding concerns the role of family, formal and workplace support in shaping those possibilities. Previous research has shown that mothers may rely on combinations of family members, paid caregivers and formal services to sustain employment and caregiving (Opoku et al., 2025). Japanese research has likewise highlighted the importance of social and formal support for mothers caring for children with disabilities (Moriwaki et al., 2022; Porter & Loveland, 2019), while Ejiri and Matsuzawa (2019) identified childcare-service use as one of the factors associated with maternal employment. The present findings support the importance of these resources but add a further distinction: the availability of support did not necessarily mean that it was usable for employment purposes.

Formal services, for example, could be available but operate for hours that did not correspond with employment schedules. A service might also be regarded as unsuitable because staff were not accustomed to

caring for children with disabilities, while another mother was reluctant to use available support involving unfamiliar caregivers. In another account, greater use of day services was limited because the mother considered it physically and psychologically demanding for her child. These experiences indicate that the practical value of formal support depends on its fit with both employment requirements and the needs of the child. Support should therefore not be treated as a simple present-or-absent resource. Its timing, appropriateness and mothers' confidence in the care provided can determine whether it actually expands their employment possibilities.

Similarly, family support was conditional. Some mothers were able to continue employment with the support of spouses, grandparents and other relatives, but dependence on ageing grandparents also rendered some arrangements potentially fragile. This is similar to Japanese research that has found a link between fathers' involvement in childcare and mothers' continuation in full-time employment (Dhungel et al., 2023). The current study extends this understanding by illustrating how mothers may cobble together care from multiple sources, and how the viability of employment may depend on the continued functioning of that assemblage. Family and formal support, then, seem less like distinct resources and more like components of the care arrangements which make employment more or less possible.

Another aspect of the environment of support was workplace conditions. Some mothers described employers that were flexible on working hours, working from home, or family priorities, but other accounts showed that understanding at work did not necessarily translate into practical accommodation. An employer or colleagues could be sympathetic, for example, while staffing requirements still made frequent leave difficult. This distinction is consistent with the broader literature showing that rigid working arrangements and limited organisational understanding can restrict employment opportunities for mothers caring for children with disabilities (Al-Oraini, 2024). The present findings suggest that workplace support has a practical as well as an interpersonal dimension: understanding is valuable, but its capacity to facilitate employment depends on whether it can be translated into workable arrangements.

The final finding adds an important qualification to an interpretation centred solely on work-care conflict. Several mothers continued to value paid work even when caregiving had required substantial employment adjustment. Work provided different combinations of income, personal time, enjoyment, professional identity, learning and fulfilment. This finding is consistent with Saputra and Karyono (2014), who found that employed mothers of autistic children valued work for its contribution to family finances and financial independence. Also echoing Østerud et al. (2024) where participants described career difficulties but in some cases occupational development from their caregiving experiences. As a consequence, employment can be both a source of demands and a valued life domain.

The combination of constraint and value is important in understanding why a reduction or leaving of paid employment should not be automatically taken as a solution to work-care difficulties. Less employment may also create more time for care, but may also mean a reduction in income, altered career prospects, or the loss of personally meaningful work. In contrast, remaining employed can conserve financial resources, professional identity, or time in a role of value outside caregiving, while adding additional pressures. A work-family conflict perspective captures an important part of these experiences because work and care clearly competed for finite time and energy. It does not, however, fully capture why mothers sought to retain employment despite those competing demands. The findings therefore support a broader understanding of work-care negotiation in which strain and value can coexist.

5. Managerial Implications and Recommendations

The findings have implications for organisations employing mothers with disability-related caregiving responsibilities. Workplace support is likely to be most useful when it addresses the practical circumstances that make work and care difficult to coordinate. In this study, difficulties arose when working hours conflicted with school transportation, care services, medical and rehabilitation appointments, or unexpected changes in children's needs. Where job requirements permit, flexibility in working hours, work location and access to leave may therefore help employees respond to caregiving demands without having to make more substantial changes to their employment. The appropriate arrangement, however, is likely to differ according to both the nature of the job and the employee's caregiving circumstances.

The findings also suggest that organisational understanding needs to extend beyond expressions of sympathy towards consideration of what adjustments are practically feasible. Some mothers described understanding workplaces, yet operational conditions such as staffing requirements still restricted their ability to take leave. Managers should therefore consider caregiving needs in relation to actual work arrangements rather than assume that a generally supportive workplace is sufficient. Regular communication between employees and their immediate supervisors may help identify where adjustments are possible while recognising the operational requirements of the organisation.

Organisations should also be cautious about interpreting reduced working hours or requests for flexibility as evidence of limited commitment to employment. Several mothers in this study continued to value their work financially, personally or professionally even after caregiving circumstances had led them to reduce their hours, move to part-time employment or modify their career expectations. Where feasible, employees who adjust their working arrangements because of caregiving should therefore continue to have access to meaningful work and opportunities for learning and professional development. The managerial priority is not to prescribe whether mothers should work full-time or part-time, but to widen the range of workable employment arrangements through which employees can remain engaged in paid work while meeting substantial caregiving responsibilities.

Conclusion

This study explored how ten mothers of children with special needs attending one elementary special support school in Japan negotiated paid work alongside caregiving. Their accounts show that work-care negotiation involved more than managing two competing roles. The feasibility of employment was shaped by the timing and unpredictability of caregiving demands, the organisation of work and care services, and the family, formal and workplace support available to mothers. In response to these circumstances, mothers adjusted working hours, employment arrangements and career expectations in different ways. These adaptations could involve loss or constraint, but they could also be regarded as necessary or acceptable responses to children's needs. They should therefore not be interpreted as either wholly voluntary choices or uniformly imposed sacrifices.

The study also shows that the availability of support alone does not determine whether it enables employment. Family assistance may become uncertain as caregivers age, formal services may not correspond with working hours or children's needs, and workplace understanding may not always translate into practical accommodation. What matters is whether the combination of care and employment arrangements is sufficiently workable for a mother to sustain employment. At the same time, paid work remained financially, personally or professionally meaningful for several participants. Work-care negotiation therefore involved not only responding to the constraints created by caregiving but, where possible, preserving a valued working role.

These findings should be interpreted within the boundaries of the study. The final analytic sample comprised ten mothers recruited through the third-grade classes of one elementary special support school in Japan, and participation depended on mothers choosing to return the written interview through the school-mediated recruitment process. The findings are therefore not intended to represent the experiences of all mothers of children with special needs in Japan. Written interviews also enabled participants to formulate their responses in their own time but did not allow the researchers to probe particular experiences or seek clarification. Future research could use in-depth or longitudinal interviews to examine how work-care arrangements change as children and family circumstances change and could include mothers across different occupations, employment arrangements and caregiving contexts.

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