Research Article

Maternal Employment and Self-Esteem of School Children in Kolkata: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

Background: The rise in maternal employment has raised questions about how a mother's work status relates to her child's self-esteem. Evidence from Indian city schools, including Kolkata, remains limited.
Objective: To compare the self-esteem of children of working and non-working mothers.
Methods: A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with 300 school children (aged 10–16 years) in Kolkata, comprising 150 children of working mothers and 150 children of non-working mothers, selected by stratified random sampling. A structured 5-point Likert self-esteem questionnaire was administered in person on printed forms under supervision. Internal consistency was α = .831. Data were analysed in SPSS using an independent-samples t-test.
Results: Children of working mothers reported higher self-esteem (M = 34.96, SD = 5.46) than children of non-working mothers (M = 32.54, SD = 5.96), t(295.76) = 3.67, p < .001, Cohen's d = 0.42.
Conclusion: Maternal employment was not associated with lower self-esteem; in this sample, children of working mothers reported higher self-esteem. Because the design is cross-sectional and based on self-report, the finding indicates a difference between groups, not causation.

Keywords: Maternal employment; Working mothers; Non-working mothers; Self-esteem; School children; Kolkata.

1. Introduction

Self-esteem shapes how children see themselves, how they approach learning and friendships, and how they cope with difficulty. Families are the first setting in which self-esteem develops, and mothers are often the primary caregivers. At the same time, women's participation in paid work has grown, and research and policy attention has turned to how employment interacts with care, for example through paid parental leave and access to childcare (Bergemann & Riphahn, 2023; Bousselin, 2022). The debate about children's outcomes is not settled: some accounts link a working mother to greater independence, resilience and adaptability in children, whereas others worry that reduced maternal presence may weaken children's sense of self-worth. Large cities such as Kolkata, where family structures, socio-economic circumstances and cultural expectations of motherhood vary widely, are a useful setting in which to examine the question (Bhaumik & Sahu, 2021).

This article is derived from the author's doctoral thesis, A Study of Self Esteem & Self Confidence of School Children of Working & "Non-working" Mothers (A Social-psychological Study of Kolkata). It reports one part of that work: a comparison of the self-esteem of children of working and non-working mothers, using data from 300 school children in Kolkata. Other variables studied in the thesis will be reported separately.

1.1 Objective

- To compare the self-esteem of children of working and non-working mothers.

1.2 Hypothesis

The hypothesis follows the thesis (the alternative hypothesis is stated; the corresponding null hypothesis is that there is no difference).

H1: There is a significant difference in self-esteem between children of working mothers and children of non-working mothers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-esteem in childhood

Self-esteem refers to a person's overall evaluation of their own worth (Rosenberg, 1965). It is shaped by many influences, of which the family is one of the earliest (see Chen & Ma, 2023, for a review of the influencing factors and ways of supporting self-esteem). In Kolkata, research on adolescent mental health has linked psychological outcomes with socio-economic circumstances (Bharati et al., 2021), which makes the family context a relevant place to look for correlates of self-esteem.

2.2 Maternal employment and children's development

Studies of working and non-working mothers in India have examined mothers' roles and everyday challenges in Kolkata (Bhaumik, 2018; Bhaumik & Sahu, 2021), as well as outcomes for children, such as personality factors (Biswas, 2018) and study habits (Aditya & Ghosh, 2014). Women who combine employment with childrearing face competing expectations about what "good" mothering should look like, and these expectations form the social context in which children's outcomes are discussed (Bhaumik, 2018). Findings on children are mixed and tend to concern a narrow set of outcomes; few studies place self-esteem at the centre.

2.3 Research gap

Existing work on working and non-working mothers in India has concentrated on mothers' own experiences or on a limited range of child outcomes. Few studies compare the self-esteem of children of working and non-working mothers within a sample of school children in Kolkata. The present study addresses this gap.

3. Theoretical Framework

Two perspectives inform the study. Rosenberg's (1965) conception of self-esteem as a stable sense of one's worth guides what is measured as the outcome. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that children learn by observing and imitating important models, so a mother who is seen balancing responsibilities, working hard or running a household may model independence and perseverance. Table 1 summarises these perspectives.

Table 1. Theoretical perspectives and their relevance to the study

Perspective	Key idea	Relevance to the study
Self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965)	Self-esteem is an overall sense of one's own worth	Defines the central outcome (self-esteem score, 0–40)
Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977)	Children learn by observing and imitating models	Maternal role-modelling as a possible route from maternal employment to children's self-esteem

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative survey design. It compared two groups defined by maternal employment (working and non-working) on self-esteem.

4.2 Participants and sampling

The sample comprised 300 school children from Kolkata: 150 children of working mothers and 150 children of non-working mothers. Stratified random sampling was used so that both groups were equally represented. Respondents came from several educational institutions and a variety of family backgrounds, and were aged 10 to 16 years (Table 2). Children were eligible if they were enrolled in a recognised school in Kolkata, lived with their biological mother, had lived under the same maternal status (working or non-working) for at least one year, were able to understand and respond to the items, and were willing to participate with parental or guardian consent. Children not residing in Kolkata, those living with guardians or stepmothers, those whose mother's employment status was temporary, recently changed or unclear, those with diagnosed severe psychological, cognitive or developmental disorders, those absent on the day of data collection, and questionnaires with incomplete or inconsistent responses were excluded.

4.3 Measures and data collection

Self-esteem was measured with a structured questionnaire of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" (example item: "I feel that I have a number of good qualities"). The questionnaire was administered in person on printed forms under supervision to ensure completeness and clarity. Content validity was established through feedback from subject experts, the research supervisor and the scrutiny committee, and the questionnaire was pre-tested on a sample group and revised. Internal consistency was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .831$). The scale score is the sum of item scores, so higher scores indicate higher self-esteem; self-esteem was interpreted as low (0–13), normal (14–27) or high (28–40). Maternal employment was recorded as a two-category variable (working or non-working mother), which defined the two groups.

4.4 Data analysis

Analyses were run in IBM SPSS Statistics. Internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's α (Cronbach, 1951). The hypothesis was tested with an independent-samples t-test (Levene's test was significant, so the unequal-variances result with Welch-adjusted degrees of freedom is reported). The 95% confidence interval for the group

difference and Cohen's d (Cohen, 1988) were calculated from the reported statistics. Significance was set at $p < .05$.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary and required the willingness of the child and informed consent from parents or guardians. Children with severe disorders that could affect reliable responding were not included, and incomplete or inconsistent questionnaires were removed before analysis.

5. Results

5.1 Participant characteristics

Of the 300 children, 155 (51.7%) were male and 145 (48.3%) were female. Age groups were similar in size, and mothers' education, family structure and time spent with the mother were spread across categories (Table 2).

Table 2. Participant characteristics (N = 300)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	155	51.7
	Female	145	48.3
Age	10–12 years	110	36.7
	12–14 years	86	28.7
	14–16 years	104	34.7
Mother's education	Below secondary	54	18.0
	Higher secondary	63	21.0
	Graduate	75	25.0
	Postgraduate and above	55	18.3
	Others	53	17.7
Family structure	Nuclear	78	26.0
	Joint	82	27.3
	Extended	77	25.7
	Single-parent	63	21.0
Time spent with mother	Less than 1 hour	81	27.0
	1–2 hours	72	24.0
	2–4 hours	68	22.7
	More than 4 hours	79	26.3

Note. Percentages are within each variable. Age bands are reported as in the data collection form.

5.2 Self-esteem of children of working and non-working mothers (H1)

Children of working mothers had a higher mean self-esteem score than children of non-working mothers (Table 3, Figure 1). Levene's test indicated unequal variances, $F = 6.98$, $p = .009$. The difference of 2.42 points (95% CI [1.12, 3.72]) was statistically significant, $t(295.76) = 3.67$, $p < .001$, with Cohen's $d = 0.42$, a small-to-medium effect. H1 was supported.

Table 3. Self-esteem scores by maternal employment group

Group	n	M	SD	SE
Children of working mothers	150	34.96	5.46	0.45
Children of non-working mothers	150	32.54	5.96	0.49

Note. Mean difference = 2.42, SE = 0.66, 95% CI [1.12, 3.72]; $t(295.76) = 3.67$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.42$. The 95% CI of each mean is shown in Figure 1.

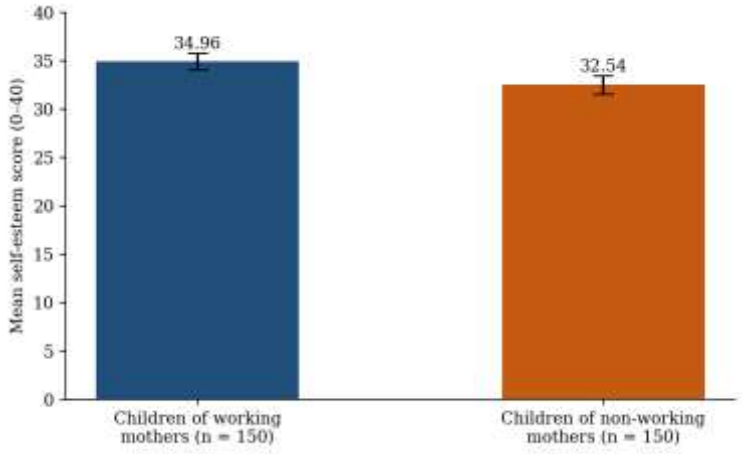


Figure 1. Mean self-esteem score by group (error bars: 95% CI).

Overall, 256 children (85.3%) fell in the high self-esteem range (28–40), 41 (13.7%) in the normal range (14–27) and 2 (0.7%) in the low range (0–13). Most children in Kolkata in this sample therefore reported favourable self-esteem regardless of maternal employment; the narrow room above the mean should be kept in mind when interpreting the group difference.

6. Discussion

This study compared the self-esteem of 300 school children in Kolkata according to whether their mothers were working or non-working. Children of working mothers reported higher self-esteem than children of non-working mothers. Maternal employment was therefore not associated with lower self-esteem, which runs against the concern that reduced maternal presence harms children's sense of self.

A caution applies to reading this result. The difference is modest in size (2.42 points; d = 0.42) and set against a high overall level: about 85% of all children scored in the high range, leaving little room above the mean. In addition, self-esteem was self-reported, and the groups were compared on one variable only, so other family characteristics that may differ between the groups were not accounted for.

The finding is consistent with social learning theory, which would suggest that children who see their mothers manage multiple roles with confidence may adopt similar habits of independence and responsibility (Bandura, 1977). This mechanism was not measured here and is offered as a possible explanation only.

6.1 Implications

The results suggest that a mother's employment need not be viewed as a risk to children's self-esteem. Schools can strengthen parent–teacher cooperation, offer parent-education programmes, and employ counsellors or child psychologists who can identify children with low self-esteem. These implications are tentative given the cross-sectional design.

6.2 Limitations

(1) The design is cross-sectional and self-reported, so the finding indicates a group difference, not causation. (2) Family structure, mother's education, age and gender were collected but not controlled for in the comparison. (3) The scale was developed for the study. (4) Self-esteem scores show a ceiling effect, with most children in the high range. (5) The sample is limited to school children in Kolkata, so generalisation to other settings should be cautious.

6.3 Directions for future research

Future studies should use longitudinal or matched designs, include other variables such as maternal involvement, quality of mother–child time, parenting style and socio-economic status, and use validated child self-esteem instruments with greater variability. Some of these will be reported in later papers from the thesis.

7. Conclusion

Among 300 school children in Kolkata, children of working mothers reported higher self-esteem than children of non-working mothers (d = 0.42, p < .001). Maternal employment was therefore not associated with lower self-esteem. Because the data are cross-sectional and self-reported, this result shows a difference between groups and not causation; longitudinal and multivariable studies are needed to confirm and explain it.

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