Article

Intersectional Factors Influencing Stepmother Roles in Durban, South Africa

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Abstract

Stepfamilies are increasingly common, yet they present unique challenges, particularly for stepmothers as they navigate their roles within these complex systems. While previous studies have examined stepmother experiences, limited research addresses the intersectional factors influencing their roles in the African context. This study explored the multifaceted roles stepmothers assume and the factors that influence these roles within stepfamilies in Durban, South Africa. This study employed a qualitative case study approach. Five stepmothers, aged 18 or older, who were living with a stepchild and had been in this role for at least two years, were selected. Participants were selected through snowball sampling. Data were collected by means of in-depth interviews in isiZulu, and transcribed and translated into English. The intersectionality theory guided thematic analysis. Stepmothers adopted five distinct roles: mother, replacement, kinship keeper, spectator, and troubleshooter. Intersecting factors, including the non-biological identity of stepmothers, the respect and recognition they received, and social stigma, shaped the roles of these stepmothers. Stepmothers' gendered caregiving expectations and power dynamics intersect with their non-biological identity to create a unique vulnerability. Addressing these dynamics in policy, family practice, and community education is crucial to creating conditions in which stepmothers can engage in caregiving without the burden of stigma, thereby fostering healthier, more equitable family environments.

Keywords: stepmothers; intersectionality; stepfamilies; South Africa; case study

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Introduction

Stepfamilies are becoming a common phenomenon due to shifts in societal norms, economic conditions, and high rates of divorce and remarriage (Ganong et al. 2019; Raley and Sweeney 2020). A stepfamily is formed when one or both partners in a new committed relationship bring with them a child or children from a previous relationship (Papernow 2018). These types of families are more complex than nuclear families, with varied roles and histories (Ganong and Coleman 2017; Jensen and Ganong 2020). Establishing the role of the stepmother within a stepfamily presents a significant challenge for stepmothers (Pritchard 2023), as this role is frequently ambiguous and lacks a precise definition (Doodson 2014). This ambiguity often leads to efforts to imitate traditional family roles, which can create unrealistic expectations and place additional pressure on the stepmother (Ganong and Sanner 2023).

Stepmothers often experience uncertainty about how to navigate their roles while maintaining family boundaries (Ganong et al. 2022). Several challenges, including societal stigma, and gendered expectations, compound this uncertainty (Ozbay and Ugurelli 2024; Pritchard 2023). Stepmothers are frequently held to higher standards of parenting while simultaneously having limited authority within the family, a tension that can be especially pronounced in contexts where strong cultural traditions shape family dynamics (Pritchard 2023; Van Dijk and Mangai 2024).

While entering biological motherhood is widely celebrated as a significant rite of passage, the transition to becoming a stepmother typically does not receive the same level of recognition (Sanner and Coleman 2017). Despite the growing prevalence of stepmothers, motherhood is still predominantly viewed in terms of biological relatedness (Pritchard 2023), and biological motherhood remains more highly valued within the hierarchy of motherhood (Sanner and Coleman 2017). The role of stepmother is often not regarded as a key marker of success or fulfilment for women (Sanner and Coleman 2017). Leading scholars in stepfamily research in Western contexts identified various roles that mothers in stepfamilies may assume, including gatekeeper, defender, mediator, and interpreter (Weaver and Coleman 2010). A review of stepfamily typologies identified six broad categories of stepparents: replacement parents, bonus parents, parental assistants, friend stepparents, foe stepparents, and detached stepparents (Ganong and Sanner 2023). However, it remains largely unclear how the roles of South African stepmothers align with or differ from those reported in Western contexts, where cultural and gender norms significantly influence family dynamics (Smith-Greenaway 2020).

Stepfamilies are becoming increasingly common in South Africa due to high rates of cohabitation and non-marital childbearing (Mohapanele et al. 2023); however, the specific experiences of stepmothers within these families remain underexplored. This study sought to fill this gap by examining the roles of stepmothers in South African stepfamilies and the factors that influence these roles. Using an intersectional lens, the research will deepen the understanding of how gender, culture, socioeconomic status,

and family structure shape stepmothers' experiences, thereby informing policies and interventions that support family cohesion and well-being.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1989) explains how overlapping identities and systems of oppression shape lived experience. Applied to stepmotherhood, it highlights how gender, cultural norms, socioeconomic status, and family structure jointly influence stepmothers' roles and challenges. This lens is especially relevant in South Africa, where historical and cultural legacies shape family dynamics and gender expectations (Van Dijk and Mangai 2024). Although stepmother experiences have been studied, little research examines these intersectional influences, particularly in South Africa. Drawing on intersectionality, this study seeks to unpack the layered complexities of stepmotherhood and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach (as per Creswell 2007) to allow for an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of stepmothers, capturing the nuances of their roles within the intersectional context of gender, culture, and family dynamics.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Cato Manor, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa, chosen for its accessibility. The community, predominantly black African and isiZulu-speaking, includes both formal and informal settlements with diverse socio-economic backgrounds, offering a rich context for exploring stepmotherhood dynamics.

Study Population and Sampling

The study included black African stepmothers aged 18 and older who had been living with at least one stepchild for at least two years. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling (see Patton 2015), which helped to access this hard-to-reach population, build trust, and encourage open sharing of experiences. The study sample consisted of five stepmothers within stepfamilies, all of whom were living full-time with their stepchildren (table 1). The participants were between 34 and 48 years old, and resided with one to five stepchildren, whose ages ranged from eight to 28 years. The length of time participants had been in their roles as stepmothers varied from two to 15 years.

Table 1: Demographic profile of study participants.

Participant	Age	Years Living with Stepchildren	Number of Stepchildren Living with Participant	Number of Mutual Children
Participant 1	48	6	1	3
Participant 2	46	2	1	1
Participant 3	44	9	1	1
Participant 4	34	5	5	1
Participant 5	46	15	1	1

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted in isiZulu. Data collection was conducted by the first author, who is fluent in isiZulu and trained in qualitative research. Using a semi-structured interview guide, the interviewer probed emerging themes and gathered detailed narratives about participants' roles, experiences, and challenges as stepmothers, guided by the study's objectives and the intersectionality framework. Interviews were held in private, with all participants opting to be interviewed at their workplaces. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, supplemented by field notes on non-verbal cues and context, and lasted 60–90 minutes each.

Data Analysis

The first author transcribed and translated interviews into English. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, involving familiarisation with the transcripts, generating initial codes, identifying and reviewing themes, defining and naming them, and synthesising the findings into a coherent narrative of how stepmothers navigate their roles and influencing factors within families.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Human and Social Sciences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (reference number: HSS/1295/011M). Participants gave written informed consent after being fully briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could avoid questions or withdraw at any time without consequence. Because the topics discussed were sensitive, the researcher was prepared to pause or stop interviews if participants became distressed. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymised data and secure, password-protected storage.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with participants, while detailed descriptions of context and experiences supported transferability. Dependability was maintained via a clear

audit trail of field notes and coding decisions, and confirmability was supported through reflexivity and a reflexive journal to account for researcher biases. Findings were also triangulated with existing literature to enhance objectivity.

Findings

Two categories were inductively derived and aligned with the study's broad objective: 1) roles adopted by stepmothers, and 2) factors influencing stepmother roles. Within these broad categories, specific deductive themes and subthemes were identified.

Roles Adopted by Stepmothers

The study identified five distinct roles adopted by stepmothers in stepfamilies: mother, replacement, kinship keeper, spectator, and troubleshooter, reflecting the complex and dynamic nature of the stepmother role.

The Mother Role

At the beginning of stepfamily formation, participants perceived themselves as assuming the role of a mother. Stepmothers stated that they were frequently addressed as "mama" by the children, a designation they embraced because it was consistent with their self-perception and the family's expectations. According to participant 4, "They call me 'mama.'" Participants highlighted that there was an expectation, both from themselves and within the family, that they would assume the roles typically attributed to biological mothers, including caregiving, nurturing, and managing the household. This sentiment was similarly expressed by participant 3, who stated, "I consider my stepson as my child. Some neighbours are aware that he is not my biological son, but I tell others that I am his mother and that he is my firstborn." This expectation was not only upheld by cultural or societal norms, but was also strongly reinforced by their spouses, who anticipated that stepmothers would seamlessly integrate into the family and fulfil maternal duties without hesitation. As such, participants mentioned that they portrayed themselves as mothers to all children in the family, regardless of biological ties, providing care, fulfilling material needs, and offering emotional support. Participant 2 said, "I buy clothes for my stepdaughter, give her transport fees, and give her money for hairdressing."

Furthermore, participants emphasised treating all children equally as mothers, applying consistent house rules and responsibilities. As expressed by participant 3, "I do punish children for unacceptable behaviour, and I do not differentiate whether the child is my biological child or not. My stepson is the same as my children." This quote highlights that, in the mother role, participant 3 assumed the significant responsibility of disciplining all children under her care, regardless of whether the children were her biological or stepchildren. This role extended beyond mere disciplinary actions to include fostering an environment of fairness and equality. Participants were expected to

treat all children impartially, ensuring that each child had the same opportunities for growth, education, and development.

The commitment to equal treatment within the mothering role is met with difficulties, however. Participant 1 highlighted the challenge of enforcing household rules when a stepchild resists guidelines that apply to all children: "If I allow my stepson to sleep all day, then I would have to let all the children, including my biological ones, sleep and leave the dishes unwashed." The quote reflects the stepmother's commitment to treating all children equally by enforcing the same household rules, regardless of biological relationship. These women who took on the mother role typically worked to build close relationships with their stepchildren and treated them as if they were their own children.

The Replacement Role

Participants viewed themselves as taking over the parental roles and responsibilities within the stepfamily household, effectively stepping into the place of the deceased or absent biological parent. The replacement role was characterised by empathy and a sense of duty to restore family balance, as stated by participant 1: "I took him because both his biological mother and his grandmother are deceased … I looked at the fact that the child had no one to care for him." The replacement role was echoed by participant 2, who indicated, "I am stepping in to fill the role of her mother after her biological mother abandoned her." The participants' accounts show that stepmothers assume a replacement mother role by taking on caregiving responsibilities in the absence of the child's biological mother.

The Kinship Keeper Role

One participant mentioned acting as a kinship keeper, nurturing paternal family ties, and maintaining relationships among all children within the family. She saw herself as responsible for fostering connections, ensuring that stepchildren were included in family rituals, and promoting unity within the family. Talking about this issue, participant 1 said, "They are family with my kids, and I cannot separate them. They share the same blood. They all have the same surname." This quote illustrates how the stepmother assumes a kinship-keeping role by actively facilitating relationships between her children and their stepsiblings, thereby maintaining family unity and identity.

The Spectator Role

Some participants described adopting a passive spectator role, withdrawing from active involvement in family matters due to feelings of exclusion and a lack of authority within the family dynamic. In one case, participant 2 commented, "I feel like a piece of furniture in the house because my husband and stepdaughter make all the decisions, and sometimes they do not even tell me what is happening. It would be better to be a domestic worker, at least then I would know that I am not involved in family matters. I am just an observer." This point was affirmed by participant 5, who mentioned, "My stepson excludes me from his life. He only talks to his father. I am just an outsider. I

have decided to keep quiet, observe, and not involve myself." The spectator role was similarly expressed by participant 4, who remarked, "My husband told me not to discipline his children … I now keep quiet and observe. I cannot discipline them anymore because I have no say." Participants emphasised that they assumed an observer role when their husbands and stepchildren set boundaries, which prevented them from participating actively. They withdrew from active participation in family decision-making, caregiving, or relational dynamics, instead observing events without influence or involvement, often because they felt excluded, lacked authority, or faced relational boundaries within the household.

The Troubleshooter Role

One participant described adopting a troubleshooter role, stepping in to address family issues or emergencies as they arose. This role was reactive and performed on an ad hoc basis, typically when problems escalated or when her intervention was explicitly requested. According to participant 5, "my stepson and husband do things together and leave me out. They only come to me when there is a problem, and they need me to fix it. When things came to a standstill, they finally told me about the issue, and I was the one who ended up resolving it." The participant highlighted that the troubleshooter role was adopted, in which she was excluded from daily family matters but called upon to resolve problems when they escalated within the household.

Factors Influencing Stepmother Roles

The Non-Biological Identity of Stepmothers

The non-biological identity of stepmothers emerged as a key factor in shaping their roles within stepfamilies. Participants shared that their status as non-biological mothers often led to their exclusion from specific family rituals and practices, which were perceived as the rightful domain of biological mothers. As stated by participant 4, "During *umemulo* [coming-of-age ceremony], my stepdaughter did not go to my brother's house for the spear because of tradition … During *lobola* [bride wealth] negotiations, *inkomo kamama* [a cow given to the mother of the bride for giving birth to the bride] was not given to me but to her biological mother's family." This quote illustrates how some stepmother's non-biological identity placed limitations on her role within the family, and her exclusion from significant cultural rituals and acknowledgements, despite actively participating in raising the child. In these cultural contexts, participants explained that the identity of the biological mother is privileged, reinforcing the distinction between biological and stepmothers and emphasising the boundaries of stepmothers' roles within the family.

Moreover, participants reported that husbands reinforced the boundaries of stepmothers' roles within the family by limiting their authority to discipline the children, citing their non-biological status as the basis for this restriction. According to participant 5, "My husband said I must never discipline the child because he is not my biological child … I cannot say anything to him." This perspective was supported by participant

4: “When stepchildren are still young, there are no challenges … When they grow up, they think you discipline them because you are not their biological mother.” She further explained that as stepchildren grew older, they increasingly questioned the stepmothers’ authority, asserting that disciplinary actions should be carried out only by their biological mothers. This highlights how stepmothers’ non-biological identity not only shaped their day-to-day interactions with the children but also restricted their participation in maintaining discipline within the family. Such limitations further reinforced the distinction between stepmothers and biological mothers, shaping how stepmothers navigated their caregiving roles within stepfamilies.

Respect and Recognition

One participant mentioned that receiving respect and recognition from her stepchildren influenced how she performed her stepmother role, enabling her to engage more confidently and actively in the mother role and family matters. Participant 3 reflected, “My stepson has so much respect for me … it is all I need from him to be a mother.” In contrast, a lack of respect from stepchildren left stepmothers feeling frustrated, leading them to withdraw and adopt a spectator role within the family. According to participant 2, “My stepdaughter has no respect for me and speaks to me as if I am one of her peers, even though I am much older. The only way I can handle her behaviour is by keeping my distance and just observing.” This view was similarly expressed by participant 4, who remarked, “It feels like my stepdaughter has become my ‘rival,’ acting with such rudeness and disrespect, as if we are competing for the same man.” Respect from stepchildren emerged as a key factor shaping how stepmothers fostered their mother role. A lack of respect from stepchildren often led stepmothers to withdraw and adopt a more passive, spectator role within the household.

Moreover, respect and recognition from the biological mothers of the stepchildren also influenced stepmother roles. Participant 4 said, “She often praised me, saying it is rare to find someone who cares for a stepchild the way I do on behalf of another woman. We have maintained this respectful relationship, and she has never treated me rudely.” The respectful relationship with the biological mother influenced the stepmother’s role by enabling her to care for her stepchild as a surrogate mother, on behalf of the biological mother. By contrast, participant 3 faced challenges from a biological mother who influenced her stepson negatively and undermining her capacity to perform her stepmother role. Participant 3 stated, “My stepson’s biological mother told him to run away from our home because she claimed I would not be able to take care of him if his father died.” The participant further mentioned that this forced her into a distant position. A lack of recognition and respect from biological mothers shaped how stepmothers navigated their roles within the household, leading to withdrawal and passive roles.

Stigma

Stigma emerged as another significant factor influencing how stepmothers performed their roles within the family. Participants described experiencing negative perceptions from the community and extended family, often being labelled as abusive simply because they were stepmothers. This societal stigma influenced their daily interactions, restricted their caregiving abilities, and, in some cases, led to feelings of isolation, ultimately affecting how they performed the stepmother role within the family. Participant 4 shared, "Some of my neighbours told my stepchildren that I was abusing them just because I asked them to do household chores. They even compared me to the women who had previously lived with my husband and had mistreated the children." She reflected on how community stigma, rooted in negative assumptions about stepmothers, undermined her caregiving efforts, and strained her relationship with her stepchildren. Participant 1 also pointed out that society views stepmothers as incapable: "Society holds negative perceptions about stepmothers, always siding with the stepchild and ignoring the stepmother's perspective. As a stepmother, your voice is often dismissed, while people expect you to go above and beyond for your stepchild, even when it is beyond your means. Any good that a stepmother does is overlooked and unappreciated, as if no matter what you do, it is never enough." Societal stigma and constant scrutiny diminished the stepmother's voice and contributions, creating pressure to overperform, for example, as a troubleshooter, while undermining her role within the family. In addition to neighbours and community members perpetuating the stigma against stepmothers, family members and husbands also reinforced this stigma by making remarks such as, "You are not their biological mother," or accusing them of not truly loving the children. These remarks from within the family further undermined stepmothers' roles, questioning their legitimacy as caregivers.

Discussion

This study explored the multifaceted roles stepmothers assume within stepfamilies, revealing the complex interplay among individual agency, family dynamics, and broader societal expectations. The findings demonstrate that while stepmothers adopted various roles, including mother, replacement, kinship keeper, troubleshooter, and spectator, these roles were shaped by multiple factors, including their non-biological identity, the level of respect and recognition they received, the nature of their relationship with biological mothers, and the societal stigma surrounding stepmotherhood. Cann-Milland and Southcott (2018) explain that stepmothers are in a continual process of self-discovery through their everyday interactions, requiring ongoing adaptation to changing family circumstances. Reflecting this, the stepmothers in this study navigated multiple roles in response to the specific dynamics within their families.

To further unpack these complexities, this discussion applies an intersectional lens, recognising that social identities such as gender, cultural expectations, and family relationships intersect to create overlapping systems of privilege and constraint

(Crenshaw 1989). This perspective enables a deeper understanding of the contradictions and tensions that shape stepmothers' roles within their sociocultural and familial contexts. The findings illustrate that stepmothers' roles are not solely shaped by their identity as stepmothers but are also influenced by gendered expectations and power dynamics within families and communities. These intersecting factors determined whether stepmothers could confidently and actively engage in parenting roles or were relegated to more passive positions, highlighting the tension between their intentions to parent and the relational and structural barriers they faced within the family context.

The non-biological identity of stepmothers emerged as a pivotal factor shaping how they navigated their caregiving roles within the household. Participants described how being labelled as a "non-biological mother" often positioned them as outsiders, with their caregiving efforts and authority frequently questioned or undermined by family members and the broader community. This finding aligns with existing research indicating that stepmothers are often denied full recognition as caregivers due to their non-biological status (Ganong and Coleman 2017; Sweeney 2010). A study by Renegar and Cole (2019) revealed that stepmothers are frequently depicted as secondary to biological mothers, yet are still expected to engage in intensive mothering toward their stepchildren.

Applying an intersectional lens, the findings further reveal how stepmothers' gendered caregiving expectations intersect with their non-biological identity to create a unique vulnerability. Stepmothers are often expected to fulfil mothering duties while being denied the authority and legitimacy typically afforded to biological mothers (Sanner and Coleman 2017; Weaver and Coleman 2010). For instance, the findings indicate that although stepmothers actively contributed to raising the child, their non-biological status often led to their exclusion from important cultural rituals and acknowledgements, including coming-of-age ceremonies and bride wealth negotiations. This tension significantly influenced how stepmothers performed their stepmother roles within their families. Participants described taking on roles such as mother, replacement, kinship keeper, and troubleshooter. However, in response to specific family dynamics, they sometimes withdrew into more distant roles, such as that of a spectator, particularly when their non-biological status was used to undermine or invalidate their contributions. While distanced parenting is often associated with neglectful parenting strategies (Lubiewska et al. 2023), Kagitcibasi (1996) suggests that, within harsh eco-cultural contexts, parents may adopt this role as an adaptive strategy. Lubiewska et al. (2023) further note that assuming distanced parenting can help parents conserve emotional energy by avoiding the effort required to mask suppressed negative feelings. However, Le and Impett (2016) caution that this strategy comes with significant costs, including reduced well-being and caregiving responsiveness among parents, as well as a deterioration in the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Additionally, husbands were reported to reinforce the boundaries of stepmothers' roles within the family by limiting their authority to discipline the children, citing their non-

biological status as justification for this restriction. This finding expands on previous research indicating that traditional gender role stereotypes associate authority and dominance with men, while attributing submission and powerlessness to women, reinforcing societal power imbalances (Erzse et al. 2021; Koenig 2018). Such dynamics reflect the persistence of gendered family power structures (Few-Demo and Allen 2020), where stepmothers are held responsible for caregiving yet are denied decision-making power, leading to role strain and emotional labour (Peichich-Aizen and Segal-Engelchin 2025). In many African countries and beyond, men are traditionally expected to serve as primary decision-makers for the family, while women are assigned caregiving roles and relegated to a secondary position in decision-making processes (Ali, McGarry, and Maqsood 2022). Such gendered internalisations, when transformed into the context of marital relationships in stepfamilies, can shape the stepmother role with respect to effective child discipline within a family.

Situating these findings within the culturally constructed dominance of the biological mother's role within the family system (Kalmijn et al. 2019) is critical. Biological motherhood is commonly viewed as the ideal and legitimate foundation for providing childcare, often positioned as superior to stepmotherhood (Peichich-Aizen and Segal-Engelchin 2025; Sanner and Coleman 2017). The role of the "biological mother" thus serves as the cultural benchmark for maternal identity, embodying the idealised standard of what it means to be a mother and becoming the reference point against which all women's mothering identities are evaluated (Pritchard 2023). Collectively, these findings reveal that stepmothers' caregiving experiences are shaped by cultural ideals of motherhood, family power dynamics, and gendered expectations, reinforcing the need for a nuanced, intersectional understanding of stepmotherhood within stepfamily systems research.

The theme of respect and recognition emerged as another central factor in shaping stepmothers' caregiving roles, consistent with studies highlighting the importance of relational acceptance within the family for stepmothers to feel secure in performing stepmother roles (Ganong and Coleman 2017). In this study, respect from stepchildren and recognition from biological mothers created opportunities for stepmothers to engage actively in the stepmother role, fostering stronger relational ties and supporting their caregiving identities. Stepmothers who felt supported and recognised as integral members of the family experienced a stronger sense of belonging (Murtorinne-Lahtinen and Jokinen 2020) and viewed the adjustment to stepfamily life in a positive light (Miller, Cartwright, and Gibson 2017). In contrast, a lack of respect often led to emotional withdrawal and the adoption of passive or spectator roles, as stepmothers perceived their contributions as undervalued within the household. However, Jensen and Ganong (2020) explain that stepmother–stepchild relationships are often fragile and prone to tension because they are typically formed through their connection to the biological parent rather than through a relationship of mutual choice. As a result, conflicts in these relationships may arise from the difficulty of accepting that their bond

is shaped by circumstance, leading to a reluctance on both sides to engage with one another fully.

Notably, the power of biological motherhood within family systems structured these dynamics of recognition and exclusion. Biological mothers frequently retain symbolic and practical authority over caregiving, establishing the boundaries within which stepmothers' caregiving efforts are either legitimised or constrained (King 2007). For example, one participant described how the biological mother actively undermined her ability to perform the stepmother role by telling the stepson that she was not capable of caring for him. This maternal authority, underpinned by societal assumptions that biological ties confer superior caregiving legitimacy (Kalmijn et al. 2019; Sanner and Coleman 2017), often positioned stepmothers in subordinate roles regardless of their caregiving intentions, compelling them to seek validation from biological mothers to gain credibility within the family system. These findings reflect intersectional dynamics, where stepmothers' gendered caregiving expectations intersect with power hierarchies within the household, dynamics that are further shaped by the entrenched primacy of biological motherhood in caregiving legitimacy. Together, these factors influenced whether stepmothers were able to exercise caregiving agency and feel secure in their roles.

Recognition and cooperation from biological mothers further shaped how stepmothers performed their caregiving roles within the family. Participants described how supportive and cooperative relationships with biological mothers enabled them to embrace caregiving responsibilities with confidence, fostering kinship connections, and easing tensions within the household. Conversely, conflictual relationships with biological mothers, particularly when biological mothers undermined the stepmother's authority or encouraged children to resist her, created emotional strain and disrupted caregiving efforts. Previous studies further explain that stepmothers who perceive an imbalance between the costs and rewards of their caregiving efforts, particularly when their contributions to their stepchildren are unappreciated or unrecognised, experience heightened anxiety and emotional distress (Doodson 2014; Roper and Capdevila 2020). When stepmothers feel frustrated and disempowered in their role, it can lead to various emotional, relational, and family dynamics, including emotional stress (Doodson 2014), strained relationships (Roper and Capdevila 2020), a negative family environment (Dodo and Nyoni 2016), and diminished sense of self-worth (Gates 2019).

In addition to relationships with biological mothers, spousal support emerged as a critical factor in shaping stepmothers' caregiving experiences. Some participants reported that they felt sidelined when their husbands prioritised biological children's preferences or made decisions with them without involving the stepmother, leading to feelings of exclusion and disempowerment. These findings align with previous research emphasising the importance of spousal support in facilitating effective stepmothering (Ganong and Coleman 2017; Papernow 2013).

Through an intersectional lens, these relational dynamics intersect with the stepmother's gender and non-biological identity, shaping the degree of authority, recognition, and emotional security she experiences in performing her caregiving role. The analysis highlights how societal and familial expectations intersect to pressure stepmothers into "proving" their caregiving worth, while simultaneously denying them the authority and recognition necessary to perform these roles effectively, a tension well-documented in stepfamily negotiations (Sweeney 2010). A study by Renegar and Cole (2019) found that stepmothers are expected to prioritise their stepchildren's needs above their own and to take on the responsibilities of mothering within the family. Overall, these findings illustrate how respect and recognition within stepfamily structures are relationally produced and regulated by the enduring power of biological motherhood, spousal alliances, and gendered caregiving norms, shaping stepmothers' caregiving identities and well-being.

Stigma emerged as a significant factor shaping stepmothers' roles in stepfamilies. Participants described experiencing negative perceptions from the community and extended family, often being labelled as abusive simply because they were stepmothers. This aligns with existing literature highlighting persistent cultural narratives that cast stepmothers as unkind, abusive, or morally suspect, regardless of their actual caregiving practices (Ozbay and Ugurelli 2024). One participant further noted that society often views stepmothers as incapable of caring for children, a perception that diminished her confidence and sense of legitimacy in performing caregiving tasks.

Importantly, these stigmas were not only confined to the broader community but were also reinforced within family systems. Participants described how family members and husbands made remarks such as, "You are not their biological mother," or accused them of not truly loving the children, reinforcing the notion that stepmothers are inherently less capable or less emotionally invested than biological mothers. Such comments served to discriminate against stepmothers within the household, limiting their ability to enact caregiving agency even when they were actively fulfilling caregiving responsibilities. Ozbay and Ugurelli (2024) argue that when a social system is saturated with stereotypes portraying stepmothers as unloving and harsh, these cultural narratives can shape how stepmothers' behaviours are interpreted, even when those behaviours are neutral or caring.

Through an intersectional lens, these experiences of stigma intersect with gendered caregiving expectations, where stepmothers are expected to provide care beyond their means while being denied social recognition and legitimacy due to their non-biological status (Doodson 2014; Ganong and Coleman 2017). The fear of being judged harshly by the community or extended family led some stepmothers to overextend themselves in caregiving roles to prove their worth, engaging in intensive caregiving to counteract negative stereotypes. Others, however, chose to withdraw and adopt a distant role to protect themselves from potential accusations or emotional harm, demonstrating how

stigma shapes the negotiation of stepmother identities and caregiving practices within everyday family life.

These findings underscore how stigma operates as a structural and relational constraint, shaping the emotional labour, relational positioning, and caregiving agency of stepmothers within stepfamilies. By reinforcing narratives of inherent inadequacy and potential harm, stigma compels stepmothers to navigate caregiving under the pressure of societal suspicion, which compounds their emotional and relational burdens and limits the possibility of equitable caregiving participation within family systems (Papernow 2013; Sweeney 2010). This analysis highlights the need to recognise and address the societal and familial stigmas that continue to undermine stepmothers, shaping not only how they are perceived but also how they can perform caregiving roles within the stepfamily context.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study have several practical implications for practitioners, policymakers, and families seeking to support stepmothers in their caregiving roles. First, there is a need to recognise and address the social stigma surrounding stepmothering within communities and extended family systems. Practitioners should implement community education and public health campaigns that challenge negative stereotypes of stepmothers and promote realistic, supportive narratives about stepfamily life. Second, family therapists and social workers supporting stepfamilies should actively facilitate conversations about caregiving roles. Family therapists and social workers should validate stepmothers' contributions, help families negotiate respectful role boundaries, and encourage biological mothers and spouses to acknowledge the stepmother's caregiving work openly.

Study Limitations

The study focused solely on stepmothers, excluding perspectives of stepfathers, fathers, or stepchildren, and its cross-sectional design does not capture how roles evolve over time. All participants had biological children, so the experiences of childless stepmothers were not represented. Given the small, context-specific sample, findings should be interpreted cautiously and may not be generalisable. Future research addressing these limitations could provide a more nuanced understanding of stepmother roles and support for stepfamilies.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have demonstrated that stepmother caregiving roles are shaped by a complex interplay of respect, recognition, societal stigma, and the non-biological identity of stepmothers, intersecting with gendered expectations and the enduring power of biological motherhood within family systems. Respect and validation

from stepchildren, biological mothers, and spouses were found to facilitate stepmothers' ability to engage confidently and actively in the stepmother role, while a lack of recognition often led to emotional withdrawal and constrained their caregiving agency. Societal stigma surrounding stepmothering, fuelled by persistent negative stereotypes, further shaped how stepmothers navigated their roles, compelling them to withdraw in self-protection.

The analysis highlights that biological motherhood retains symbolic and practical authority within families, structuring the boundaries within which stepmothers can perform caregiving and seek legitimacy. These dynamics are compounded by gendered caregiving expectations, where stepmothers are expected to be a "mother" while simultaneously being denied recognition and authority within the family. Consequently, stepmothering emerges as a role negotiated within non-biological identities, shaping how stepmothers construct their caregiving identities and relationships within stepfamilies.

Overall, these findings illustrate that their experiences in performing the role of stepmother are not solely personal but are deeply embedded in structural, cultural, and relational contexts that continue to marginalise and constrain them. Addressing these dynamics in policy, family practice, and community education is crucial to creating conditions in which stepmothers can engage in caregiving without the burden of stigma, thereby fostering healthier, more equitable family environments.

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