GOING BACK TO WORK AFTER CHILDBIRTH: WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES

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I hereby declare that I am the legitimate author of this Long Essay/Dissertation/Thesis and that it is my original work.

No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or institution of learning.

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I declare that this is solely the product of my own research.

No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other academic award.

Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to

My Husband John
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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at understanding the experiences of first-time mothers who returned to work after paid maternity leave. The objective of the study was to explore the challenges new mothers faced during the transition of having a baby, taking fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave and then move on to re-enter the workforce.

The qualitative paradigm was used to conduct the study by using a semi-structured interview schedule at three different phases throughout the experience: prior re-entry at around 12 weeks, immediate re-entry at 16 weeks and again at 20 weeks following childbirth that is, 6 weeks after re-entry into the workforce. The interview guide was specifically designed for the purpose of the study. Ten women were chosen to participate in this study by purposive sampling. All participants took part in the three phases of the interviews which were audio-recorded. Ethical issues were taken into consideration and prioritised. The theoretical framework used to guide this thesis included phenomenology, transitional theory as described by van Gennep (1960) and feminism.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as described by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) was used for the analysing phase. The resulting three super-ordinate themes identified how after childbirth maternity leave is 'a time of preparation and planning ahead' followed by a period when 'lightening strikes on rejoining the workforce' and 'weathering the storm' via an attempt to balance work and family life.

This study identified the struggles and triumphs these mothers encountered during their transition back to work following childbirth. Findings showed that while society encourages mothers to return to work after the birth of their children, few attempts have actually been made to support them during this delicate transition. This study recognises the dire need to research this phenomenon as it is of crucial importance in our society. It identifies the need to improve local policy with regards to family-friendly measures and the importance of an increase in local maternity leave duration. Moreover, the midwife was identified as an important figure who can help empower mothers and prepare them for what is yet to come. Mothers showed an interest in courses that would help them in their transition to gainful work. Hence, this study recommends the introduction of such courses within the parentcraft education programme.

Keywords: Mother's employment, women's lived experiences, transition to parenthood, women's career issues, social support, midwives' role.
3.7 Rigour  
3.8 Ethical Considerations  
3.9 Pilot Study  
3.10 Data Analysis  
3.10.1 My personal reflections  
3.11 Limitations  
3.12 Conclusion  

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS  
4.1 Introduction  

4.2 A Time of Preparation and Planning Ahead  
4.2.1 Support from family of origin and relevant others  
4.2.2 A Whirlwind of Emotions  
4.2.3 Returning to Work – A Sense of Duty  
4.2.4 Financial Constraints  
4.2.5 Letting Go  
4.2.6 Missing out on Developmental Milestones  

4.3 Lightning Strikes – On Rejoining the Workforce  
4.3.1 Role Overload  
4.3.2 Time Management  
4.3.3 Changing Relationships  
4.3.4 Priorities Changing in their lifeworld  
4.3.5 Health Implications  
4.3.6 Discrimination and Lack of Support at Workplace  
4.3.7 Gender Issues  

4.4 Weathering the Storm  
4.4.1 Having the best of both worlds  
4.4.2 Making the most out of their situation  
4.4.3 Improving Local Maternity Leave Policy  
4.4.4 Society’s Impact  
4.4.5 Encouraging a Positive Experience of the Transition  
4.4.5.1 Fostering Family Friendly Working Conditions  
4.4.5.2 Involving the Midwife  
4.4.5.3 Individualised Coping Mechanisms  

4.5 My Own Interpretations  

4.6 Conclusion  

5 DISCUSSION  
5.1 A Time of Preparation and Planning Ahead  
5.1.1 Emotional and Physical Wellbeing  
5.1.2 Support Systems  
5.1.3 Experiences of Going Back to Work out of a Sense of Duty  
5.1.4 Mother’s Experiences of Letting Go
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Characteristics of the Participants 36

Table 4.1: The Experience of Going Back to Work after Childbirth 48

Table 4.2: Personal Interpretations of Women’s Experiences - A Time Of Preparation And Planning Ahead 75

Table 4.3: Personal Interpretations Of Women’s Experiences - Lightning Strikes On Rejoining The Workforce 76

Table 4.4: Personal Interpretations of Women’s Experiences - Weathering The Storm 76
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

'Anyone who talks about the family must also discuss work and money'
(Beck, 1992, p.103).

1.1 Background to the Study

Traditionally, women left paid employment and stayed at home while their children were still young (Hall, 1987; Kessler-Harris, 1981). However, in recent times more and more women are returning to work despite having young children to care for (Costello & Stone, 1994). Despite new mothers’ labour force participation, the health and social implications of employment re-entry for these women, their infants and their family remain poorly understood (Miller, 1996). Society still seems to expect that the idea of balancing work and family life is principally a women’s issue (Butler & Skattebo, 2004) as traditional gender roles still appear to prevail (Craig, 2006; McMahon, 1999).

1.2 Personal Perspective

Initially, the seeds for this research were my own personal experiences as a career-committed woman who in the near future hopes to become a mother, my feminist interest in women’s issues, especially issues of child rearing and employment, and my clinical work as a midwife caring for working women as they themselves become
new mothers. I wanted to understand their experience in order to be in a better position to help my future clients through the challenge of the transition to motherhood and going back to the workforce. While the transition to motherhood and even parenthood have been studied from various angles and have been diversely documented in the literature (Bailey, 1999; Borg Xuereb, 2008; Deutsch, Ruble, Fleming, Brooks-Gunn & Stangor, 1988; Porter & Hsu, 2003) very few researchers have focused their attention on the experience of the new mother as she returns to the workforce.

As a midwife with clinical experience working with postpartum women, I have come across women who intend on returning to their paid employment after their maternity leave. Some of these women show concerns and anxieties about their ability to combine work with mothering while others seem to be quite at ease with the situation since they have other people available and ready to support them with taking care of the baby and the other tasks that need to be carried out. Generally, first time mothers are more aware and afraid of management problems that might arise and show concern as to whether they would be able to cope if problems do arise.

1.3 Rationale

Becoming a parent is a challenging and stressful period in one’s life (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Feldman, Sussman & Ziegler, 2004). When one becomes a parent for the first time the anticipation is that much greater. New mothers are excited to start this new journey in their lives but at the same time they are fearful and feel “unprepared” for the rearing of their children (Borg Xuereb,
When a mother makes the decision to return to gainful work, she is unknowingly or not adding another role to the ones she already has as she starts to prepare for yet another transition. This impending transition may bring about even more unwanted feelings such as stress and guilt. Research has shown that stress can challenge the physical, psychological, social and emotional health of the parents and their children (Balcombe, 1996; Beck, 1995; Durkin, Morse & Buist, 2001). While Maltese society today encourages mothers to return to work after the birth of their children, however, not much has been done to help reduce the stresses involved in this transition. Indeed, professional literature runs short on research that provides insight into factors that may help women, mothers and professional staff including midwives to cope with the transition from having a baby to rejoining the workforce. Consequently, this study took a different perspective from mainstream research on the subject and tried to gain a better understanding of the actual experience of women returning to work after childbirth. Hopefully, this information will help midwives and other professionals such as academics address this issue further.

1.4 Aim and Objective of the Research Study

The main aim of this study was to understand the experiences of first-time mothers who return to work after paid maternity leave. The objective of the study was to explore the challenges new mothers face during the transition involving having a baby, taking fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave and then moving on to re-enter the workforce.
The main research question is the following:

➤ What are first-time mothers’ experiences of returning to work after paid maternity leave?

1.5 Overview of the Chapters

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 make up the introduction and the literature review giving an overview of the rationale underlying this research along with a critical analysis of the literature gathered and the theoretical framework of the study. Chapter 3 discusses the study design and methodology. Moreover, the operational definitions and the rationale for the chosen methodology are given. The philosophical underpinnings of the chosen methodology are also explained in Chapter 3. Inclusion criteria and sampling techniques, issues of rigour, ethical considerations, pilot work, issues of analysis and the limitations of the chosen methodology are outlined as well. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the research study using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as described by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Chapter 5 is the discussion of the research findings in light of available literature. The strengths and limitations of the study are also addressed. Chapter 6 concludes this thesis by discussing the implications arising from the study and giving recommendations for future research agendas, policy, management, practice and education, especially in the field of midwifery. The subsequent chapter comprises the literature review.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The ‘stay-at-home’ mother has become something of a rarity in the western world, both for financial reasons and also because women now are more likely to take on employment since they find it satisfying and enjoyable (Lupton, 2000). After childbirth, women have to consider whether to return to gainful work or not. Ericksen, Jurgens, Garrett and Swedburg (2008) explained how women contemplate a multitude of questions before returning to paid work after the birth of their children:

‘Do I need to go back to work to pay these bills? What will my family and friends think if I want to go back to work, instead of staying home with my children? Will everyone and everything be okay if I return to work? Can I make enough money to make it worthwhile? Can I do it? Do I really want to go to work?’ (p. 156)

Even though recent years have seen a growth in the body of research regarding women’s experiences of motherhood (Bailey, 1999; Borg Xuereb, 2008; Deutsch et al., 1988; Porter & Hsu, 2003), the actual lived experiences of new mothers who will return to work after their paid maternity leave hardly ever features in academic literature and is hence a phenomenon waiting to be explored. In Canada, Hall’s (1987) seminal study investigated the experiences of women returning to work following the birth of their first child. Grounded theory methodology was used to
collect, to code, to compare and to constrast the data gathered by interviews conducted with eight women over a 16 week period. The participants in Hall’s study however, had been in work for an average of 2-7 weeks after the birth of their child at the time of the first interview. Hence, while this study generated theory, it did not capture the actual lived experience as it was happening. The process of role redefinition emerged as a core concept since the women in the study changed their definition of their roles as wives, mothers and workers (Hall, 1987).

No local studies were done with regards to primagravida’s experiences of going back to work after paid maternity leave. This study attempts to probe this phenomenon as perceived and described by ten Maltese women. Hopefully the study will contribute to broadening the knowledge regarding such transitions in new mothers’ lives, which will in turn help midwives and other professionals alike to assist their clients when the need arises.

2.2 Societal Expectations of Women

Different cultural norms and social expectations shape how people construct their lives (Bailey, 2007). Traditionally, a mother would be expected to reduce her work commitments or give up working all together after the birth of her first child. We now live in an era of contested motherhood ideologies (Johnston & Swanson, 2006) where women all over the world are presented with conflicting ideological stereotypes in cultural and media discourses (Craig, 1992; Miller, 1996). On one hand, women are encouraged to construct their subjectivities increasingly through engaging in activities in the public sphere, including paid labour. On the other hand, they are also
expected to conform to the standards of 'good mothering' (Lupton, 2000). Popular media tends to highlight the dilemmas of working mothers, the troubles of having it all and even the disadvantage of being a mother with regards to career advancement (Schwartz, 1989; Swiss & Walker, 1993). These conflicting principles include both women's rights to identities and lives of their own (Coontz, 1992) and issues that deal with the adverse effects on the infants and children of working mothers (Quindlen, 1994).

Some mothers are aware of the diversity that exists amongst them and appear to recognise the different ways in which other mothers respond to employment and family needs (Hand & Hughes, 2004). In a qualitative study conducted by Probert and Murphy (2001) in Australia, women stated that decisions concerning mothering and employment should be taken privately, without having the views of others imposed on them. Detailed narrative analysis was used to analyse the rich material gathered through their interviews with mothers. Mothers with young children expressed ambivalent and contradictory desires and preferences when asked about the ways in which they tried to manage paid work and the care of young children. In particular, there was explicit tension and marked discrepancy between what some mothers thought they should do (stay at home with young children) and what they would have liked to do, and/or what they needed to do, either to pay off a mortgage, or maintain the possibility of some economic independence. Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) move on and explained how women's preferences regarding paid employment changed in order to accommodate the circumstances they find themselves in. Additionally, Bailey (2000) found that mothers' awareness of their identities vary, with the concepts of motherhood and work each influencing the other.
2.3 Maternal and Infant Health

Researchers have been unable to reach a consensus about whether or not combining parenting and employment is stressful or beneficial to women and their infants' health. While some researchers (Houston, Cates & Kelly, 1992; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1989) found that combining employment and family was too demanding for women, others (Barnett, Marshall & Sayer, 1992) stated that a satisfying job safeguarded women from the psychological distress generally experienced by working mothers. Moreover, they found that employed new mothers had higher levels of self-esteem and well-being than unemployed new mothers. Tulman and Fawcett (1991) also noticed that while some women indicated that returning to work was beneficial for their overall healing process, almost as many others cited that going back to work hindered their recovery. As a result of these conflicting findings, health care providers and social scientists are still uncertain as to the social and health effects of new mothers' early employment re-entry on themselves, their infants, their families and society at large (Miller, 1996). The relationship between mother and child during the first year of life has been seen to greatly impact infants' temperament (Han, 2005; Strazdins, Clements, Korda, Broom & D'Souza, 2006; van den Boom, 1994; Volling & Belsky, 1993; Wilson, White, Cobb, Curry, Green, Popovich, 2000).

Canadian quantitative results based upon a National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY) by Baker and Milligan (2008) showed how an increase in maternity leave entitlements had a direct impact on breastfeeding duration. The World Health Organisation (2001) recommends 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding. For policy makers and public health officials aiming at increasing breastfeeding duration, as is Malta, increasing maternity leave entitlement is an effective way of
achieving breastfeeding goals. Baker and Milligan (2008) also state that an increase in maternal care that would result with longer maternity leave may affect the child’s cognitive, behavioural and social development. In fact, Belsky (2001) pointed out that “early, extensive and continuous non-maternal care is associated with less harmonious parent-child relations” (p. 845). Belsky (2001; 2006) commented on how parents’ interactions with their young along with child-care have an important and lasting effect on the child’s development.

2.4 Maternity Leave Policy

Currently, under the 1992 directive, the minimum period of maternity leave within the European Union is 14 weeks (European Parliament, 2010). However, draft legislation is currently underway and proposes to lengthen the minimum duration of maternity leave in the European Union from 14 to 20 weeks (European Parliament, 2010). When Malta initially joined the European Union, it had to increase its 13 week maternity leave allowance by one week in order to conform with European Union legislation. The Women’s Right Committee within the European Union is aiming at creating a positive impact on the state of health of all mothers, helping them in their recovery after childbirth and helping promote a strong mother-infant bond. The members of the European Parliament are also proposing that full salary payment should be made compulsory for the six weeks following childbirth. For the remainder of the leave period, a minimum of 85% of salary is being proposed. Members of the European Parliament are also asking for a fully paid addition maternity leave in cases of premature births, stillbirth, caesarean section, multiple birth or children with disability (European Union’s Women’s Right Committee, 2010). The Women’s
Right Committee within the European Union is also trying to achieve additional protection for working mothers' jobs. These initiatives are aimed at trying to achieve a better balance between professional, private and family life. Eurostat (2009) recently showed that the rate of employment in Malta is generally low especially with regards to working females. Their figures revealed that the employment rate for women is 37% which is the lowest amongst other E.U. member states (Eurostat, 2009).

2.5 Reasons for Re-Entry

Research illustrates the variety of reasons that shape women's decisions for employment re-entry (Ericksen, et al., 2008; Hand & Hughes, 2004; Nomaguchi, 2006). These include beliefs about the compatibility of paid work and "good parenting" (Duncan & Edwards, 1999), employment opportunities or career aspirations, economic considerations, having time for themselves (Nomaguchi, 2006), access to child-care (Hand & Hughes, 2004) and the support provided by others.

The study by Hand and Hughes (2004) was conducted in Australia and investigated family and work decisions. It consisted of two parts; the first included a telephone survey with 2400 mothers while the second part made use of in depth semi-structured interviews with 61 mothers (chosen from the participating women of the survey). The interview however, took place approximately a year after the telephone survey which means that a lot of time had passed and these women had much more time to adapt into their new lifeworld. Hence there responses towards the questions posed were
based upon their reflections of what they had already been through. The authors took a life history approach to explore the different ways mothers combined paid work with having and caring for children, the ways they had made decisions about this and the events and circumstances that influenced this process and how they changed over time and in relation to other circumstances and events. A family’s financial status was seen to have a strong impact on a mother’s decision to return to her paid employment (Hand & Hughes, 2004; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004). Despite the fact that the majority of women wish to be able to stay at home longer or wish to work fewer hours than they actually do, they feel they have a financial necessity to do so (Hand & Hughes, 2004). Mothers are aware that their decisions about combining work and child rearing involve making compromises between financial and non-financial goals and needs (Hand & Hughes, 2004).

On the other hand, some mothers feel that it is important to spend time at home with their children (Hand & Hughes, 2004). They acknowledge that their decision to limit their participation in paid work has its financial downside; however, they emphasise that it is a worthy sacrifice they are willing to make as for them money is less important than the wellbeing of themselves, their families and their relationships with their children and respective partners. Himmelweit & Sigala (2004) in fact, noticed a change in priorities with motherhood.

Another reason to return to work could be that nowadays many women invest a great deal of time and effort in their careers and want to combine those careers with motherhood. One of the most often cited reasons for the increase in married women’s labour force contribution and its inverse relationship with childbearing is the increase
in the number of women who are willing to have both a career and a family (Martin, 2000). Some women actually delay having children until they build their career so that they would have enough earnings to afford good quality childcare. One may argue that it takes a long time to develop work experiences and to gain a good reputation especially in professional occupations and hence dropping out of the labour force completely presents a challenge to professional women more than non-professional women (Nomaguchi, 2006). These reasons may explain why some women return to work relatively fast after the birth of their children.

An additional reason could be the drastic change that results with parenthood, when an adult’s life significantly moves from an adult-centred world to one that is focused on the child. Young children are dependent on their parents and require a lot of time and attention from them. A new mother might yearn for the time she enjoyed on her own when she did not have children. Since women tend to be the main caregivers of their young, women are much more likely than men to end up sacrificing their personal time because of their child-care responsibilities (Borg Xuereb, 2008; Deutsch, 1999; Hays, 1996; Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003; Weaver & Ussher, 1997). Having to give up things she enjoys, a new mother might feel that her time at work may offer her the best chance of some adult time. At work, new mothers might be in the company of friends, who like them are also mothers. This might be seen as a congenial time to discuss issues and experiences. Although employment will reduce the time for leisure activities it can provide women with greater leisure opportunities by providing financial income, social networks and a sense of liberty (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003).
2.6 Taking on Multiple Roles

Motherhood in itself is challenging. Adding a work role to the strains of becoming a new mother generates demanding situations for these women (Hall, 1987). The varying roles of wife/partner, mother and worker can generate situations which can in themselves be demanding and conflicting even amongst partners themselves (Borg Xuereb, 2008; Hall, 1987; Maunthner, 1999; Weaver & Ussher, 1997).

While during the antenatal period household chores were seen to be almost equally divided, during the postnatal period, this seemed to diminish and childcare was seen to be mainly the mothers’ responsibility (Borg Xuereb, 2008). This was also demonstrated in international studies (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997). Women have to add on additional roles to the ones they previously had after the birth of a new baby: the role of the mother. Women who intend on returning to work after maternity leave have to accommodate the role of an employee to their other roles. When new mothers are contemplating whether or not to go back to their paid employment, they consider societal expectations, what their work role will entail, what their partner’s response will be, the availability of adequate childcare and their financial situation. For some women this may prove to be a challenge. Taking on multiple roles, especially after the transition back into the workforce, may cause women to feel overwhelmed (Choi, Henshaw, Baker & Tree, 2005; Hall, 1987).

Some women hold on to their previous lifestyle and expectations they have for themselves after returning to the workforce (Hall, 1987). These new mothers are faced with so many demands, from their young infant, from their partners, from work
and from society that they end up with not enough energy, time or resources to meet them all. This can often make women feel weighed down and overburdened, thus experiencing role strain. The women in Hall’s study came to realise that feeling overwhelmed stemmed from their impractical outlook as to how to go about with things. These women were trying to do it all flawlessly. This was described by theorists as the ‘Superwoman’ effect (Ussher, Hunter & Brown, 2000). Feeling overwhelmed and unable to meet the expectations they had for themselves caused women to have feelings of guilt, loss, exhaustion, ambivalence, resentment and anger (Hall, 1987).

Guilt feelings resulted when women felt that they were not being good enough mothers to their young. This especially happened when women were not being full-time mothers as generally they believe that they alone are responsible for their baby (Hall, 1987). Sometimes even other people such as family and friends may add to their guilt, either by unwittingly saying something upsetting or by expecting these women to act in a certain way. Upon losing their primary relationships with their baby women sometimes believed that their baby would not remember them if they went back to work (Hall, 1987) and felt guilty at missing out on developmental milestones (Mann & Thornburg, 1987). Women felt a sense of loss when they left their children with other people, especially when they left them at nurseries or day-care-centres. A local study by Borg (2003) showed that Maltese mothers were still very much apprehensive about nurseries. Preference is given to other members of the family to help with child-care rather than other institutions as they seemed to struggle with trust issues. The issue of trust was also demonstrated by some mothers in
Himmelweit and Sigala's (2004) study where they did not trust anyone who was not a family member to mind their young.

2.7 Supporting the Mother

From a psychological perspective, this choice as to whether or not to return to work may depend on different forms of support both within the home and at the workplace (Houston & Marks, 2003). Using a longitudinal approach the latter studied post-pregnancy work outcomes for full-time working women who were pregnant with their first baby. Data was generated by questionnaire surveys at two different time frames. Out of the 600 questionnaires that were sent, 412 valid responses resulted from the first session and 349 valid responses from the second. Regression analysis revealed that women who did not return to work as intended were differentiated from those who did by the amount of planning they had done in pregnancy as well as having lower pre-natal income and less anticipated support within the workplace. While this study noted the differences between groups of participants, they failed to go into the dept of the actual role planning and support had on the general experiences of their participants.

While domestic support was found to play no role in women’s ability to return to work as intended, support at work had a great impact (Houton & Marks, 2003). This emphasised the importance of workplace, employer, and colleagues in facilitating women’s return to work. This has also been demonstrated in other studies by Galinsky and Stein (1990), Thomas and Ganster (1995) and Warner and Johnson,

2.8 The Role of the Midwife

Even though the role of the midwife with regards to supporting new mothers transition back into the workforce is quite an unresearched area, as one may argue that it happens after midwifery care to women stops, midwives are still offering their care to the growing number of childbearing women who work outside their homes. Midwives, may address this issue during various phases throughout the childbearing cycle, which include the pre-conception phase, the antenatal phase and the postnatal phase (Hall, 1987; McCourt, 2006). Information sharing is in fact considered to be an important part of the role of the midwife (McKay-Moffat & Rotheram, 2007). While midwives are synonymous with 'being with the woman', it does not mean that the physical care is the basic care that midwives can offer. Midwives assist women and also address social and psychological aspects of care (McCourt, 2006) along with spiritual care. Going back to work after paid maternity leave involves a transition that the midwife can assist with as it has an effect on each individual member of a family as Cowan and Cowan (1992) rightly explained.

Along with Houston and Marks (2003), Hall (1987) had also shown that women decide whether or not they are going to take on multiple roles and work outside of the house even before they become pregnant. This could suggest that midwives can for example, design pre-conception or even post-natal classes which will help these women in understanding more how to take on multiple roles. Hall (1987) argued that this planned change in turn will contribute to healthy individuals and women’s health.
Women who are thinking of returning to work after maternity leave can use the support of midwives to go over their decision and plan ahead (McCourt, 2006). The midwife can be beneficial in providing women with information as they in turn are changing their outlooks, expectations, responsibilities and feelings. In the postnatal period, both in hospital and in the community, women continue to ponder their decisions to return to work after maternity leave (Hall, 1987). Expectations, myths and feelings are issues that can also be discussed with a midwife in order to reduce anxiety amongst these women. Midwives can also be beneficial in assisting women with setting priorities, adapting to their changing roles organising and planning, negotiating and incorporating new tasks, establishing new expectations and delegating responsibilities (Hall, 1987; McCourt, 2006).

Hall (1987), designed a course for first time mothers who were struggling with making a decision to return to work. This course required the women to look at the reasons that were influencing their decisions to go back to work. They needed to examine their own expectations, expectations held by their societies and their significant others. The course also made these women foresee role strain and they needed to recognise factors that would contribute to this strain while identifying strategies for role strain reduction (Hall, 1987).

Midwives can be key players in bringing about changes within their societies. Midwives should be ambassadors of adequate maternal health and adequate childcare. Consequently, the promotion of more flexible working hours for working women should be a priority. Even though this is a fairly unresearched area, midwives are also the point of reference for many women and hence, they should provide
women with holistic midwifery care as they attempt to transition back into the workforce, taking on more non-traditional roles.

2.9 Theoretical Framework

The following are the theoretical perspectives that are helpful in exploring the experiences of new mothers who return to work after maternity leave. It starts with the feminist perspective, laying out women’s challenges within the society we live in today. It moves on to introduce transitional theory as explained by van Gennep (1960). This will in turn help the reader understand the stages of transitions that a new mother may go through when applying it to mothers who rejoined the workforce. Lastly, the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology will be outlined since it also plays an important role in this study of women's lived experiences.

2.9.1 Feminist Perspective

For the past three decades, mothering and motherhood have rapidly gained interest amongst researchers. In fact, feminist scholars seem to show particular interest in conceptual developments with regards to maternal practice, including maternal employment. They have widened research on mothering and motherhood and on women’s lives and family in general, and have pushed for studies on identity and experiences (Adams, 1995; Baxter, 2005; Borg Xuereb, 2008; Choi et al., 2005; Lupton, 2000; Ross, 1995).

Dominant cultural ideology of mothering like that of intensive mothering implies that mothering is limited, completely child-centred, emotionally demanding and time-consuming (Hays, 1996). The mother represented in this ideology is dedicated to the
care of others and is self-sacrificing. She is the “good” mother (Berry, 1993; Ribbens, 1994). The philosophy of intensive mothering as explained above has its roots in the historical shift to an industrial capitalist economy and the division of paid labour from the household. This in turn brought about an increase in the family wage, generally earned by the male partner with the home being a totally different entity ruled by the mother (Ladd-Taylor; 1994; Lopata, 1993). According to feminist scholars (Cheal, 1991) the principles of motherhood are embedded within the family. The idea of intensive mothering presumes and emphasizes the traditional gender-based division of labour (Craig, 2006; McMahon, 1999). While mothers negotiate with their partners (Fox, 2001), fathers are seen to have a choice whether or not to be actively involved in the care of their baby (Fox, 2001; Kluwer, Heesink & Van de Vliert, 2000). The argument presented by Cowan and Cowan (1985) stating that parenthood should be discussed in terms of additional role obligations of the marital couples seems to agree with premise.

Feminists insist that patriarchy shapes the organisation of production, which results in economic, political and social subordination of women to men (Echols, 1989; Flax, 1990; Featherstone & Trimble, 1997). This theory will in fact be prominent when discussing the themes that were generated during this study especially with regards to discrimination at the workplace and when discussing gender issues. Some people might fail to consider the ideological constructs behind “family” and “motherhood” which are definitely shaping behaviour amongst women, employers and the organisation of work itself. Employers might, for example, be hesitant in hiring women who they think may leave a job at any time for familial reasons. This notion can be a significant impediment to employment and mobility for women. Feminist scholars view this particular development as consistent with the hegemonic power of
patriarchy over work and motherhood (Ferree, 1990). The strength within the dogma of motherhood is so great that women are continually trying to bring together the challenging models of motherhood and employment despite the lack of supportive structures at work or within their own families as is seen by the women participating in this study. Hochschild and Machung (1989) argued that since female workers are generally viewed as mothers, they are expected to work their 'second shift' when they go back home. This divergence between paid work and family work has caused significant amounts of ambivalence within women and can also generate feelings of guilt and anger (Hall, 1987; Mann & Thornburg, 1987; Schindler Zimmerman, Wieland Bowling & Moffat McBride, 2001).

### 2.9.2 Transitional Theory

The seminal work carried out by the anthropologist van Gennep in 1960 showed that 'rites of passage' represent a way of understanding traditional societies' rituals and rites. His theory provides a useful means by which one can better understand the experiences of mothers as they live their transition back into the workforce as part of new motherhood. van Gennep (1920) argued that the life of any individual may be seen as a series of passages from one point to another that can be classified into three main groups. However, 'all rites of passage have a similar tripartite form of separation, transition and incorporation' (Froggatt, 1997, p. 124). The first stage of these passages is in fact, separation where the individual is removed from his or her usual environment. Van Gennep (1960) writes about how during their pregnancy some women from different cultures are separated from society, their families and sometimes even from other women. The second part of these passages includes the actual transition or as he describes it 'limen' during which a person transitions into a
different role or state. For van Gennep (1960), the limen 'constituted a boundary in its own right and time (and place) where the people passing through the rite are cut off from the wider structure of society'. Turner, (1969) who continued to extend his work, differentiated between van Gennep’s traditional and small scale societies. Indeed he suggested that a new term 'liminoid' be used when referring to 'modern symbolic inversions and expressions of disorders' (Froggatt, 1997, p. 125). The last stage of the passages involves the reintegration of the individual within his or her society or a new one with new roles or positions (Borg Xuereb, 2008).

In more modern writings, the transitional theory has been linked to structural functionalist roots by Draper (2003, p. 66), who argues that the theory can be helpful in guiding 'contemporary transitions across the life-course'. Although van Gennep’s theory was based on more traditional societies with rituals, it can still be applied to our Maltese Islands. Borg Xuereb (2008) argues that when this theory is applied literally to the transition to parenthood, it fits quite weakly in the sense that parents not only keep their old roles but also add additional ones to the previous duties with the birth of their new baby. However, this theory still offers insight into new mothers’ transition back to gainful work after the birth of their baby, thereby creating the possibility for support to these women and their families as they experience such a transition.

When applying this theory to the present study, one can say that new mothers are in the separation phase while on their maternity leave. They have been separated from what they were used to - their previous life without a child, their place of work and their old relationships with their colleagues at work. During this stage new mothers
are exploring their new roles as mothers. They carry on with their old roles as wives but have not yet completed the next stage which is transitioning into the workforce and adding on a new role. Upon re-entering the workforce these women are in the transition phase or ("limen" or "liminoid") as they have to adapt to their changed lifeworld as working mothers. As time passes and these women start to settle into their new routines with their new roles and responsibilities, they enter the incorporation phase. Since all women who become mothers and are going through a transition, even more so when they have to return to work, the 'rites of passage' as proposed by Van Gennep (1960) can be useful in allowing one to gain a better understanding of their lived experiences.

2.9.3 Philosophical Underpinnings of Phenomenology

Phenomenology believes that central to any experience is intentionality, which is a key feature of consciousness (Langdridge, 2007). In fact, this theory of intentionality is central to phenomenology. Intentionality here means that all experience has an object-relatedness and thus whenever we are conscious, it is always to be conscious of something. As human experiences are always already related to the world, it is mistaken to overlook this basic fact (Langdridge, 2007). This is what in fact makes phenomenology different from other epistemologies, mainly that of Rene Descartes, whose subject-object division evolved into rationalism and empiricism where the focus is always on one of these aspects at the expense of the other. How can we ever come to understand the world of another person who is just as much trapped in their own subjectivity? Phenomenology therefore may be seen as a movement away from this Cartesian dualism of reality being somewhere 'out there' or completely separate from the individual (Koch, 1996). Phenomenology offers the researcher an
explanation of how the experiencing subject and the object experienced are not externally linked but internally unified.

The importance of intentionality within the phenomenological theory should become more evident with an understanding of noema and noesis. As already mentioned, traditionally there has always been this division between objects and subjects. The subject is generally the one that comes to know an object. Husserl argued, however, that all experience is an experience of something (Langdrige, 2007). By this statement Husserl was trying to correlate this difference with what is experienced, in other words, the noema and the way in which it is experienced or the noesis. It is this correlation that is intentionality. Even though it is possible to distinguish between these two poles, they are undoubtedly related. In fact, Ihde (1986) stated that:

"...every experiencing has its reference or direction towards what is experienced, and, contrarily, every experienced phenomenon refers to or reflects a mode of experiencing to which it is present." (p. 42-43)

Husserl, (1936) gave a transcendental turn to this theoretical framework and started viewing the subject as something not related to noema and noesis. In fact Husserl believed that a person could make a reflexive move (Ihde, 1986) and stand outside the relationship to see it from above. This notion, however, has been a bone of contention with the majority of those that followed Husserl rejecting this type of philosophy. In fact, Martin Heidegger gave the argument an existential turn when he asserted that the person remained an important part in the relationship between noema and noesis. Existing, for Heidegger was part of being-in-the-world. According to this philosophy, the way we view the world is within us and is dependent on how
we relate to our surroundings. I find myself relating more to the ideas of Heidegger rather than those of Husserl since I also believe that individuals interpret their world according to how they interact with all that is around them. Hence, for the purpose of this study I will be taking an interpretative stance.

This is in fact, one of the main differences in the way Husserl and Heidegger look at phenomenology. For Husserl, phenomenology was descriptive and focused more on the construction of the experience, the organising principles that give the life world its form and meaning, similar to narrative research which stresses the importance of chronology. Transcendental phenomenology is interested in revealing the essences of these constructions as they appear in consciousness or as Kvale, (1996) stated, it tries to make the invisible visible. On the other hand, phenomenology as described by Heidegger is interpretative in nature and is more interested in the historical meaning of the experience and its developmental and collective effects on individual and social levels. This type of phenomenology is interested in statements of the historical movements or philosophies that are leading interpretations as well as the presuppositions that inspire the individuals who make the interpretations (Barclay, 1992).

What is unique to all types of phenomenology is the fact that it focuses on the experience of the world as it is lived by people through their own insight. This means that a phenomenological investigation such as the one presented in this thesis needs to start with that which first appears in the experience (description of the immediate experience) and then proceed to the ‘how’ of experiencing. Finally, an investigation of the person who is experiencing and the way through which such a person surfaces through the reflective journey as a consequence of such an experience should also be
taken into account. As human beings, the person taking part in a phenomenological inquiry will show his true self by engaging with all that she comes across in the world. Both phenomenology and feminist theory seem to share with one another an obligation to ground theory in lived experience. They both proceed to reveal the way in which the world is shaped through the constituting acts of subjective experience (Buttler, 1988).

2.10 Conclusion

The transition of mothers back into the workforce after childbirth is a big step for mothers who have to live by socially constructed ideologies of what a “good” mother should be like. Women’s decision to return to gainful work may be dependent upon many factors such as financial need, career advancement or perhaps having some time for themselves. Adding another role may be challenging. However, the use of a midwife to offer support and guidance can be seen as a way forward with regards to helping new mothers. The conceptual framework of this study is kneaded by a number of theories namely phenomenology, transitional theory and feminism. The following chapter discusses the study’s methodology.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The choice of the research methodology that would best address the research question was very much dependent on eliciting the actual lived experiences of the participating women. Therefore, this chapter outlines the main research question. The operational definitions and the rationale for the chosen methodology are given. This chapter also outlines inclusion criteria and sampling techniques, issues of rigour, ethical considerations, pilot work, issues regarding analysis, personal reflections and the limitations.

3.2 Aim of the Study and Research Question

The central research question, together with the aim and objective of the study have already been highlighted in Chapter 1. To develop a better understanding of them, they are listed again below.

The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of first-time mothers who return to work after paid maternity leave. The objective of the study was to explore the challenges new mothers face during the transition of having a baby, taking fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave and then moving on to re-enter the workforce.
The main research question is the following:

> What are first-time mothers’ experiences of returning to work after paid maternity leave?

### 3.3 Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, operational definitions were clearly established (Cormack, 1996). The word ‘experience’ in this study refers to what these women encountered and underwent throughout this specific period in their lives. The term ‘transition’ refers to the passage from one phase to another, generally due to changes in circumstances as previously discussed in Chapter 2 in the works of van Gennep (1960). The phrase ‘paid maternity leave’ refers to the allowance of fourteen weeks after childbirth of full-time paid maternity leave that Maltese mothers can avail of prior to returning to work.

### 3.4 The Research Approach

The theoretical framework of this study together with the literature review as presented in the previous chapter puts forward the following philosophical perspectives. Going back to work after paid maternity leave involved a transition and had an effect on each individual member of a family (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Changing family dynamics and different support systems also come into play. These, however, vary amongst different individuals and different situations. As Borg Xuereb (2008), found that parents had the right to construct their own realities rather than
submissively accepting what society expected of them. It is our duty to acknowledge their rights and concerns and as midwives give advice and help as necessary.

Leonard (1994), states that the approach used in any given study depends on the questions being asked. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research method that offers a new way to interpret the nature of consciousness and an individual’s involvement in the world (Beck, 1994). Phenomenology seeks to understand the perspectives of those being studied and is interested in people’s lived, intersubjective experiences of their world (Taylor, 1993).

### 3.4.1 Rationale for the chosen methodology

Traditionally, most areas of scholarly research have used quantitative or empirical methods as a design. Some researchers, however, noted the restrictions of addressing certain significant questions to human beings within the requirements of the empirical method (Polkinghorne, 1983; Streubert Speziale & Rinaldi Carpenter, 2007). Existing literature on maternity leave issues are mainly survey-based and are mostly concerned with identifying the predictors of returning to work amongst women (Gutierrez-Domenech, 2005; Houston & Marks, 2003; Ondrich, Spiess & Yang, 1996; Ronsen & Sundstrom, 1996; Saurel-Cubizolles, Romito, Escriba-Aguir, Lelong, Pons & Ancel, 1999).

Since this study is interested in the lived experiences of mothers, a qualitative approach needed to be used in order to gain a profound understanding of each individual. Qualitative research involves the investigation of phenomena, typically in an in-depth and holistic fashion, through the collection of rich narrative materials.
using a flexible research design (Polit and Beck, 2006). Indeed qualitative research is descriptive in nature and is able to capture people’s perspectives. Qualitative research fits more neatly with the interpretative tradition based on assumptions that in order to make sense of the world, human behaviour should be interpreted in interaction with others. Hence, research that seeks to understand human behaviour and the social processes that we engage in must employ approaches and techniques that allow interpretation in natural settings (Gerrish and Lacey, 2006). Since this study deals with humans, their behaviours and their experiences, this design seemed to be more appropriate.

The interpretative stance goes a step further as qualitative methodologies also strive to emphasise that there is no single interpretation, truth or meaning but recognises that just as human beings are different, so are societies and cultures in which they live their lives. Qualitative methodologies allow the researcher to celebrate richness, depth, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity (Mason, 2002). Qualitative inquiry hence, has this unrivalled capacity to present compelling arguments about how things work in particular contexts (Mason, 2002). As a result, the growing body of knowledge achieved by qualitative research can be used in generating ideas to help solve any problems that may exist. Therefore, this study could inform health professional staff on how mothers are living the experience of returning to work following maternity leave. It may also inform policy makers about the benefits of increasing local maternity leave as advocated by these women. Qualitative data gathered from this study has the depth and richness needed to provide a deeper understanding of this change for these women.
While a quantitative approach would have presented a general picture of Maltese first-time mothers who return back to work following childbirth, a qualitative approach presented a real life picture of the actual process of the transition. Habermas (1988), added that social knowledge, similar to what was being explored here should be both interpretative and analytic. In fact, during the analytic phase of this study, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as suggested by Smith et al., (2009) was used. IPA is an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009).

Further to the discussion in the previous chapter on phenomenology as a philosophical method, phenomenological research as used by health care professionals is generally divided into two types: descriptive phenomenology and interpretative or hermeneutic phenomenology (Langdridge, 2007). Though there are a number of themes which characterise phenomenology, in general it never really developed a set of dogmas or sedimented into a system (Moran, 2000). It declared first and foremost, to be a thorough way of doing philosophy, a practice rather than a system. Moran, (2000) continued to add that phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the challenge to get to the truth of the matter, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense, as it presents itself to consciousness, to whoever is experiencing it.

3.5 Inclusion Criteria and Sampling

All participants that were recruited for the study had common characteristics, in that they were all first-time married Maltese mothers who had returned to gainful work
after their paid maternity leave. This allowed for the results to be particular to the Maltese culture. All participants were required to be first time mothers as this helped to minimise the likelihood of the present experience being coloured by previous happenings. Moreover, all participants were married and hence had more or less the same support systems. Even though my findings cannot be generalised, I did not want to be restricted to one region, city or village in Malta, so I tried as much as possible to gather participants from various geographical regions in Malta (Northern, Central and Southern regions of Malta) as different regions have different cultural norms (Mizzi O’Riley, 1981) and I wanted to gain an understanding of the whole spectrum. Another reason why I opted to gain access to participants from different locations was to ensure due consideration to the fact that different cultural regions in Malta have different perceptions towards family life and work (Abela, 2000).

The sampling method used for this particular study was purposive sampling. This is a non-probability sampling method which is quick and provides an opportunity to select participants with the characteristics of interest. This method is considered to be appropriate when conducting phenomenological studies (Polit, Beck & Hungler, 2001). I used my own personal judgement to recruit those participants who seemed most suitable to the aim of this study (Polit et al., 2001). Participants needed to be carefully selected, in that they had to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question. Participants needed to give more than just an opinion or view about the topic under study; they had to be willing and able to give detailed descriptions of their own personal experience.
Sample size in this study was determined on the basis of informational needs and for the aim of the study to be achieved (Morse, 1994). Smith et al., (2009) stated that there is no right answer to the question of sample size; however, they suggested using between three and six participants (Smith et al., 2009). I aimed at recruiting ten participants to take part in the study in order to make allowances for participant drop out.

I personally sampled the study participants from three main local health centres, located in the northern, central and southern regions of Malta. Participants were approached personally on the day they attended the Well Baby Clinic for their infants' immunisation. This is generally between 6 to 8 weeks postpartum. This seemed to be a good time to recruit women who were soon to re-enter the workforce, after fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave, especially since an initial interview at around week twelve in the postnatal period needed to be carried out. I explained the study to them and an information sheet (Appendix A) was given. Whenever women showed interest, further details were given and contact information was obtained in order to arrange appointments. This information was discarded after completion of the study. Verbal and written consent by each participant was also gained (Appendix B).

3.6 Operationalisation of the Interview Guide

In phenomenological studies, the main data sources are typically in-depth conversations, with researchers and informants as co-participants. Researchers help informants to describe lived experiences without leading the discussion (Gerrish &
Lacey, 2006). Topics for discussion could be formatted into questions since the semi-structured approach was used. Through in-depth conversations, researchers strive to gain entrance into the informants’ world, to have full access to their experiences as lived.

Two semi-structured interview guides each containing eight general questions (Appendix C – interview guide before returning to work and Appendix D – interview guide after returning to work) were planned specifically for the purpose of this study. One interview guide was used to collect data prior to re-entry to work while the other was used after re-entry at both times (16th week interview and 20th week interview in the postnatal period). The interview guides addressed the same questions but were worded purposely for each time frame. For example, the second question reads: *Could you tell me what you are expecting of the transition from being continually with your baby to starting work?* (Before returning to work – Time 1) and *Could you tell me about the actual transition of being continually with your baby to starting work?* (After returning to work – Time 2 and Time 3). All questions were the same for both interview guides.

Open-ended questions were used in order to encourage respondents to explain their answers and reactions to the questions being asked. The use of open-ended questions allowed for the emotional and psychosocial experiences to be revealed. The interview guides were planned in both the Maltese and English languages since I am aware that despite dealing with Maltese citizens, Malta is a bilingual country with both Maltese and English as the official languages and some people prefer to express themselves in English. I am well versed in both languages but I still used professional help of a
linguist when it came to translations. Nine of the ten participants felt more comfortable speaking in Maltese while one participant (Lilly) chose to speak in English.

The interview guide started off with a general question and then questions became more specific. The first question targeted the experience of going back to work after paid maternity leave. The second was about the actual transition of going back and leaving the baby behind. The third question dealt with support systems. The fourth and fifth questions focused on the positive and negative aspects of the transition. The sixth question dealt with changes in the lifeworld of the woman. The last two questions then were about what they really saw as important aspects needed for a positive experience. Smith et al., (2009) served as a guide in the formulation of questions for the interview guides. Every question had prompts associated with it in order to help both the researcher and the respondent. I also used encouragers to help participants talk about their experience such as, “Could you give me an example?”, “could you explain this better?”, “I understand”, “fhimtek” and “ehe ehe” amongst others. These encouragers helped me to ensure uniformity and consistency in my interviews.

Phenomenological studies encourage the use of two or more separate interviews. Since this study took place over a period of time, more than one interview was needed as it involved a transitioning experience that in fact occurs over time. Three interviews were conducted with each participant to capture the overall experience. Participants were interviewed first at 12 weeks after the birth of the baby, a second interview was conducted at 16 weeks and a final interview was carried out at 20
weeks postpartum. Locally, paid maternity leave is currently fourteen weeks and generally women go back to work after this statutory time. The rationale underlying the 12 week interview was to reveal aspects of the early stages of the experience such as planning ahead and expectations. The 16 week interview showed immediate aspects of the phenomenon under study such as the challenges, conflicts and resolutions these women had to deal with soon after re-entry. The 20 week postnatal interview allowed some time for the experience to evolve. Consequently, related aspects such as striking a work-life balance and ways forward could then be discussed. The timing of such interviews also helped reduce recall bias as much as possible. The gap between one interview and another also allowed time for reflection by the mothers themselves about what was discussed in the previous interviews and the changes they were all facing. After data collection was completed, one participant (Rose) also sent me an e-mail to let me know how she had settled some issues she faced at her place of work. The interviews took place at the womens’ convenience; some women preferred to meet in a cafeteria, others at their place of work and some preferred the comfort of their own home. These interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate exploration of the participants’ description of their experience (Smith & Osborn, 2004; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000).

For some phenomenological researchers, the inquiry targets not only gathering information from study participants but also efforts to experience the phenomenon in the same way, typically through participation, observation and introspective reflection. With regards to reflection, a reflective journal was kept, as this is considered to be an integral part of the interpretative research process with phenomenological research (van Manen, 1990). This came into use later on during
analysis and helped with keeping records of insights gained, noticing patterns in the work itself and also analysing previous reflections.

3.6.1 Characteristics of the Participants

All ten women taking part in this study had had their first baby a few weeks prior our initial meeting: seven girls and three boys (Table 3.1). All women had been married for two to five years before they planned this pregnancy. All these pregnancies were planned. The educational background of these women ranged from secondary school level of education to tertiary education. Moreover, all women stated at some point during the interviews that their husbands were employed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDO-NAME</th>
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<th>SEX OF INFANT</th>
<th>EMPLOYMENT SECTOR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Central</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
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<td>Tina</td>
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3.7 Rigour

The issue of rigour in qualitative research is very important to the practice of good science (Streubert-Speziale & Rinaldi-Carpenter, 2007). It relates to the overall planning and implementation of the research design and concerns whether a study has been carried out in a logical and systematic manner or not. Rigour is sometimes also
referred to as trustworthiness. According to Lincoln and Guba, (1985) trustworthiness in qualitative research is judged by its credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a realistic conceptual version of the data drawn from participants' original data. In other words, it can be described as the fit between the participant's views and the researcher's presentation of them (Beck, 1993). To address credibility in this research study, I used two techniques. The first consideration, as advised by Lincoln and Guba, (1985) was the inclusion of member checking. As a researcher, I went back to the participants with copies of the transcripts so that I was sure that what I had understood chimed in with what the participants had actually experienced. The second technique used in order to try and maintain credibility is that of getting help from a competent peer debriefer, also advised by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Therefore, an expert in the area was consulted for the duration of this project. The emerging themes were discussed with this person who was also well versed in IPA as suggested by Smith et al., (2009).

Transferability is the adequacy of the description given by the researcher that will assist in noticing similarities with other situations so that findings might be transferred. To address transferability, I included in my research study the documents that were used to generate data (Appendix C and Appendix D). The complete set of transcripts and data analysis documents were kept and stored and will be available upon request. This access into the inquiry's trail allows other researchers the means
to transfer the conclusions of this process to other cases, or to replicate as closely as possible the procedures of this particular study.

Moreover, dependability is the transparency of the research process and decision trail while confirmability links the data findings with interpretation of the data. To address the issues of dependability and confirmability, I relied on an independent audit of my research methods by a competent peer as advised by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (1990). Audit trail is crucial in order to establish authenticity and trustworthiness of the data. This process allows the reader to clearly follow the line of thought I used during analysis of the data. Connections between the way I moved from raw data to the themes and super-ordinate themes will be made in the next chapter.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The proposed title for this study was initially approved by the M.Sc. Health Sciences (Nursing/Midwifery) Board of Studies. In order to have access to the research site to recruit women to participate in the study, the researcher asked permission from the Director of the Primary Health Department (Appendix F). Permissions from the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Board and the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee were also granted (Appendix G).

One of the main ethical considerations that was adhered to for the duration of this study was consent, which is considered to be probably the most fundamental of all ethical principles (Langdridge, 2007). In phenomenological research the norm is to
provide the participants with full knowledge about the nature of the study in order to secure their agreement to participate. Since it is crucial that research participants are aware of what is going to happen during the course of the study to ensure informed consent, an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study was given to each woman so that she could gain a better understanding of the process. This information sheet also made clear that participation was voluntary. Moreover, this information sheet gave information about how many interviews were needed to be conducted and how long the interviews were likely to take. Women who accepted to take part in the study were also asked to sign a consent form. Participants were also told that even if they would have given consent, they were free to withdraw their consent at any stage of the research process. Participants were also made aware that they would not directly benefit from taking part in the research study; however, findings would be available to them upon request.

Another important ethical principle that was maintained throughout the process of this research study was that of ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were made aware that all information gathered from them would remain confidential. Despite the fact that with phenomenological research it is sometimes hard for participants to remain anonymous due to the closeness and continuing contact made between them and the researcher, their identities were concealed by using fictitious names instead of their real ones.

One should also keep in mind the issues of deception, discomfort and harm when thinking about ethics in research. In this particular study, the research participants were not deceived in any way. In phenomenological research, the norm is for the
researcher and the participants to work together to achieve a common goal. Considerable care was taken to avoid any harm or discomfort especially with regards to the questions of the interviews.

3.9 Pilot Study

Before the actual study was started, a pilot study was conducted. A pilot study is a small scale version, or trial run in preparation for the major study (Polit & Hungler, 1999). This was done to ensure that the questions were easy to follow and understand and that they were in fact sufficiently appropriate to obtain the required data. The pilot work was also useful in determining the timing of the interview and data transcription (Polit & Hungler, 1999). Moreover, piloting the interview schedule allowed me to learn about the process since I am still a novice qualitative researcher (Holloway, 1997). This gave me the opportunity to go through the interview process prior to the actual data collection phase. Two different women were asked to participate in the pilot study. An initial pilot test of only the 16th week postnatal interview was done with the first interviewee. No changes were made; however, since the whole experience was not encompassed from beginning to end (that is from week twelve to week twenty), the data generated here was not included in the main study. With the second, all three phases of the interviews were conducted. This was done in order to test all parts of the interview schedule. Had changes been made to the interview schedules after the pilot study, the data gathered would not have been included within the main results. However, the interview schedule appeared to be appropriate and relevant to the research question being asked and no changes were made. The results were eventually included in the main study.
3.10 Data Analysis

Analysis of the data in this study was carried out according to Smith et al., (2009). As the first step of IPA suggests I had to read each individual transcript over and over again until I was familiar with it. I took note of anything significant that the participant might have stated (Smith et al., 2009). Transcripts were done verbatim using a digital voice recorder within the first 24 hours. This helped me include my personal reflections as faithfully as possible. Transcriptions were done in the spoken language, generally Maltese with some English and one participant in English. Analysis continued with the original language of the interview in order to avoid issues being lost in translation. The next step of the analysis involved developing emergent themes from the data available. Connecting emerging themes and identifying the links between them followed (Smith et al., 2009). In this part frequent analysis of the original transcript was needed to ensure that the themes that were emerging were relevant and representative of what the participants were actually saying (Smith et al., 2009). The main themes identified were then listed, each of which having an indication of its place in the transcript (Smith et al., 2009). This was done with all the interviews. Common themes were then translated into a narrative account, where verbatim extracts were used to exemplify each theme clearly (Smith et al., 2009) and translations of these extracts were done for further clarification. At this point my personal reflective journal became very useful. Interpretation of data with this type of analysis is considered to be an unending process with the reader of the final thesis making the final interpretation (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Doing IPA with numbers of participants allowed for negotiating relationships between convergance and divergence, commonality and individuality (Smith et al., 2009). Appendix E includes guidelines for transcriptions as advised by Smith et al., (2009).
3.10.1 My personal reflections

The fact that for almost all the interviews, mothers had their babies with them was a challenge for me during transcription as the infants tended to babble while their mothers would be speaking. This made the transcription process take longer in many cases as I had to listen to the tape several times to make sure I was being true to what they had said. Meeting with interviewees at local cafeterias created some inconveniences though sitting in a secluded area kept disturbances to a minimum.

For two of the interviews of separate participants the husband was present and I felt that with one of the cases the woman was holding back. It was as if she knew he was listening in on our conversation and she did not want to give me much detail despite my prompting. This happened at Time 2 so I could tell the difference to the initial interview as she seemed to be quite expansive. For the last interview her husband was not present and I felt that the interview proceeded more smoothly and she was eagerly giving me details of her experience. Another interviewee who was accompanied by her husband appeared to be unaffected by his presence.

Even though the participants knew I am a midwife with background knowledge about certain issues that were brought up during our conversations, they also knew that I had not gone through this experience first-hand as I do not have any children of my own. This provided them with an opportunity to expand on their actual lived experience, and allowed participants to feel empowered in their position. I made it clear that my role was to actively listen and to provide them with an opportunity to share their experience with me without unnecessary interruptions. I made sure that the respondents felt that I was interested in what they had to say.
3.11 Limitations

While Gerrish and Lacey, (2006) view the use of a phenomenological approach as a limitation since descriptions of an actual experience requires someone who is fully capable of articulation, this did not prove to be a constraint in my case since I was dealing with grown women who were fully capable of expressing themselves. They also argued that people themselves are not the best placed to be asked about their experience, though it is difficult to see who can speak more knowingly about experiences than those who have been through them. It is also important, prior to conducting a phenomenological study for one to have some understanding of the broader philosophical assumptions that I have previously discussed. Moreover, I am still a novice in phenomenological interpretation and therefore this is a limitation in itself.

Another limitation of this study involved recruitment issues. All participants came from the middle class and no participants could be recruited from the lower social class, probably because their poor educational background that meant they were in poorly paid jobs. Consequently, these people may not view going back to work after having a child as worthwhile since the Maltese Government social benefits for unemployment are equivalent to the minimum wage in our country, which is close to what these women would be earing.
3.12 Conclusion

This chapter presented the main research question, together with the method and materials used in collected data to answer these questions. The following chapter presents the research findings of this study.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the interpretation of the data gathered from 10 first time mothers about their lived experiences of returning to work after paid maternity leave. This chapter tries to answer the core question of the study. Interpretative phenomenological analysis as described by Smith et al., (2009) was used during the analysis phase. I met each woman, three times at places which were most convenient to them. Each interview lasted about 45-90 minutes. As one would expect, these qualitative interviews generated a large amount of transcribed data. For the purpose of this study I will only be presenting the themes and super-ordinate themes along with my interpretations that seemed to be most relevant to the core question of this dissertation. Below is a summary of the general findings, a taste of what is to follow along in this chapter. I will be focusing mainly on the experience of joining the workforce irrespective of the profound experience that these mothers have also gone through at childbirth.

Transitioning back into the workforce found these women unprepared for the impact that this phenomenon had on their lifeworld. Having just had their first baby, the women described motherhood as “l-esperjenza li kelli qisu hadd ma jippreparak ghalija, jew x’se jigri ghax tispicca tahseb mod u jigri iehor” (nobody had prepared me for this experience, for what would happen as you cannot predict what’s going to happen.) Adapting to motherhood compelled them to let go of all that they were used
to in order to make room for their new way of life, as individuals, as mothers, as wives and as workers or professionals in their own right. They now formed part of something greater in the sense that they now had many more duties and responsibilities both at home and at their place of work. These women described the impact of the change in their lifeworld as remarkable and they used metaphors to describe how “Hajti nbidlet mill-lejl ghan-nhar” (my life has drastically changed) and that “as such din kienet l-ikkar esperjenza li bidlitli ħajti. Iħem meta ġżewwigt ma tantx rajt bidla kbira, ma tantx affetwatni ħekk.” (Jane T3, p2, 65-67) (This was a life-changing experience.) To Jane, marriage hardly changed her lifeworld. Rose explained how in reality going back to work was more of a change for herself than for her daughter “Jiġifieri x’hin toqghod tahseb ċkar din kienet a change għaliża milli għaliha (it-tifla) fil-verità” (Rose T3, p.2, 44-45).

A metaphor used by Ella (T3, p2, 44) describing her whole experience was used as a telling statement in order to try and understand the overall phenomenon of going back to work after childbirth. Smith, Jarman & Osborn, (1999) advise the use of such a statement when using IPA. Transitioning back into the workforce after just having their first born child and making use of just fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave offered by the Maltese Government was described in this metaphorical way:

“Mela bdejt tiela’ gholja...għal bidu bdejt naqta’ naqra qalbi, bdejt naraha diffiċli imma ċkar ma bdejt tiela’, ċkar bdejt nara d-dawl u bdejt nara li mhux xi ħaġa li ma tistaż tintlahaq”

She is comparing this process to her climbing a hill. In the beginning (during her maternity leave prior to re-entry into the workforce) she was disheartened as she was
seeing it as too demanding a task but then the more she climbed the hill (the more she got used to her new routine), the more she started to view it as something that she could cope with. The use of the ‘light’ metaphor also brings out the intensity of this movement from darkness to light.

The process of the transition mothers passed through was in line with van Gennep’s theory of transition and the specific phases are shown along with the themes and super-ordinate themes in Table 4.1 below, which illustrates the overall experience of going back to work after childbirth.
Table 4.1: The Experience of Going Back to Work after Childbirth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMATIC STATEMENT</th>
<th>SUPER-ORDINATE THEMES</th>
<th>THEMES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternity leave is once again the beginning of an uphill journey which needs much preparation and planning ahead</td>
<td>A time of Preparation and Planning Ahead (separation phase)</td>
<td>➢ This time requires a lot of support from family of origin and relevant others</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ This time caused an emotional whirlwind for these women</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Returning to work out of a sense of duty towards family</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ A time of deepening financial constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Letting go - of their infant, of their old way of life and of controlling the situation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>➢ Main worry - missing out on child's developmental milestones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going back to work strikes these women like lightning, resulting in many changes in their lifeworld</td>
<td>Lightning Strikes – on rejoining the workforce (transition phase)</td>
<td>➢ Experiencing role overload</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ The importance of time management</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>➢ Changing relationships with self, spouse and child</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>➢ Changing Priorities</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>➢ Health Implications on mother and child</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>➢ Discrimination and lack of support at the workplace</td>
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<td>➢ Gender issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitioning well into the new lifeworld as something that can be achieved if well supported</td>
<td>Weathering the Storm (incorporation phase)</td>
<td>➢ Having the best of both worlds – striking a work-life balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Making the most of their new situation</td>
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<td>➢ Improving local maternity leave policy</td>
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<td>➢ Society's Impact</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Individualised Coping Mechanisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ The importance of support, planning ahead, improved working conditions and involving the midwife as a means to help women pass through this transition without trauma.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4.2 A Time of Preparation and Planning Ahead

During their fourteen-week maternity leave, women reflected upon their former and current lives. Women reflected upon the differences between their situations and the ones their own mothers faced when they themselves became mothers. While nine of the women stated that their own mothers did not go out to work when they were young as most married women had to resign from their jobs around thirty-five years ago. Rose, on the other hand, reflected upon her own past experience of how her mother like herself had to go back to work when she was born. These women discussed and referred to support as being a vital component of making this transition a smooth one. Support seemed to play an important role with regards to preparation and planning ahead for the future. The imminent change looming ahead seemed to be the cause of many undesirable feelings these women experienced.

For the majority of women going back to work was an obligation they had to fulfil to improve the overall wellbeing of their new family. This responsibility was mainly brought about by the financial constraints these women and their husbands encountered. A major issue that was brought up during discussion was that of missing out on developmental milestones of their children upon re-entry into the workforce. All women seemed to have struggled with this as Lilly (T1, p5, 150) explained how she “might not be with him when he says his first word or when he crawls for the first time”.

These women speak about the importance of planning ahead in order to have as much of a positive experience as possible. According to them if you plan ahead you can do this. They discussed planning ahead with regards to housework and childcare. The
fact that they had left their child with the carer as early as possible so that key players
got used to their changed situations helped them to return to the workforce with their
minds at rest. Planning ahead allowed them more time to do other things apart from
housework.

"Imma kif dejjem nghidiek, trid taghmel pjan.
If you plan you will succeed. Dan hu i-motto
tieghi. If you don't plan naiseb iktar ikolok
genn. Jien il-fatt li nipppjana tghinni hafna."
(Ella T2, p4, 119-121)

As I always tell you, you have to have a plan. If
you plan you will succeed. This is my motto. If
you don’t plan I think there will be more chaos.
The fact that I plan helps me a lot

4.2.1 Support from family of origin and relevant others

Immediate family and close friends took on a new meaning for the interviewees.
They all emphasised that their respective husbands, parents, in-laws, siblings and
close friends were their main point of reference and source of help in times of need.
Out of the 10 women that participated in this study, four are still living in their home
towns close to their own parents while the remaining six moved elsewhere. This,
however, did not prove to be a hindrance to the amount or type of support they
received from their respective families as they were still willing to offer any type of
support that was needed. These key players offered all kinds of help, such as, helping
around the house, helping with child-care, providing emotional and physical help.
Tina (T3, p3, 79) explained how "Kieku ma kellix min jghinni kienet tkun differenti l-
haija u diffiċli iktar", (if I had been on my own, it would have been a different
matter.) These women appreciated the unconditional support they received from
those around them, namely their husbands and their immediate family and friends.
They also refer to communication as being a key player in helping one cope with
such a transition. In the last interview, Tina (T3, p3, 87-88) explained how “Nahseb li jkollok is-support u li kull mother ikollha l-opportunita’ li titkellem nahseb li huwa sew. Il-komunikazzjoni u hekk”, (I think that every mother should have support and an opportunity to talk and communicate.) Lilly also talked about the importance of communicating any worries, feeling or concerns as keeping these bottled up inside will not help. She added that if you confide in family members, they would be more than willing to help out in any possible way.

“The fact that my mother is going to take care of my daughter is a great deal of help. The fact that I can open up to my husband and he listens to me and understands me helps you. Even if I arrive home tired and he helps me, you feel better.”

“Jiena l-fatt li t-tifla ha żżommie li-mummy ghajnuna kBira.” (Nicole T1, p2, 59-60)

“The fact that I can open up to my husband and he listens to me and understands me helps you. Even if I arrive home tired and he helps me, you feel better.”

“Il-fatt li ftuht gahlbi mar-ragel u fhemni u semaghni u x’naʃ jiena, tghinek ha. Speci anke jekk wasalt ghajjiena u sibt l-ghajnuna tiegha ha tghinek u thosrok aljar.” (Catherine T2, p5, 170-172)

“Il-fatt li ftuht gahlbi mar-ragel u fhemni u semaghni u x’naʃ jiena, tghinek ha. Speci anke jekk wasalt ghajjiena u sibt l-ghajnuna tiegha ha tghinek u thosrok aljar.” (Catherine T2, p5, 170-172)

Women also expressed their pleasure in sharing their experiences with their friends and colleagues at work. They enjoyed discussing issues with others who had already passed through this experience or were in the same situation. Catherine, (T2, p4, 134) explained how having other mothers to share experiences with was a source of joy and a learning experience: “il-fatt li jkollok ma min titkellem u ma min taqsam l-esperjenzi tieghek ma’ ommijiet ohra pereżempju tiehu gost titkellem u titghallem.”

“...hbieb ohra tax-zoghol l-di ghandhom it-tfal, 7 year olds, four year olds, 5 year olds, dawk imbaghad jını pariri what to expect u hekk.” (Francesca T1, p8, 287-292)

“...other friends at work that already have children, 7-year-olds, four-year-olds, 5-year-olds, those then give me advice about what to expect and things like that.

“Gieli noqoghdu nitkellmu u nqablμu u hekk per ezempju tieghi qieghda taghmel hekk u l-ohra qed taghmel hekk.” (Ann T2, p2, 72-74)

“Sometimes while we are talking we compare stuff like for example my daughter is doing this and the other is doing that”

What was interesting to note is that all ten women commented on the fact that they would not consider day care or nurseries for their infants at this young age. Beth (T2,
showed she had issues with trusting people when she stated that "ma nafsidahbiex ma' tad-dar ahseb u ara ma nies barranin" (I do not trust her with family members let alone with strangers.) Participants showed that they felt more comfortable knowing that they had left their child with their husband or a family member rather than using other forms of support such as day care centres or nurseries. Nicole (T1, p8, 272-273) added that, "Tkun hafna inqas traumatic ghal baby" (This would be less traumatic for the baby when she is in a familiar environment with familiar faces.) Rose (T1, p13, 492-493) would feel upset if she had to take her daughter to a nursery at such a small age: "Jiena inhosni ddispračuta li kieku f'eta tant żghira rrid nohodha f'nursery."

"mhux li ha nibghata n-nursery biex jiena mmur ix-xoghol. Żgur li le. (Beth T2, p3, 104-106)

...jiena xorta nippreferi li t-tarbija tkun ma xi hadd familjari...I am sure li hemm nies kwaliżkati biex jiehdu hsiebhom, pero xorxa inhosni mhux tajba kieku nhalilha ma nies barranin. U plus hekk, mal-mummy ha tkun hi biss bhal speçi jekk tohodha go nursery iktar ha jkun hemm ifal u nabseb l-attenzjoni tkun inqas..." (Ann, T1, p2, 48-51).

"I have considered day care, but only after he is one year old. Not before. First of all I don't think that it is fair on a newborn baby or a young baby to be thrown into the world of sick children who are older than they are. You know, even the fact that he is not potty trained, he is just too young. Sending him there would involve too many drastic changes for him all at once, which is not fair." (Lilly T1, p2, 48-53)

4.2.2 A Whirlwind of Emotions

The impending change seemed to cause an emotional whirlwind within these women. They experienced a wide range of mixed feelings which included worries, feeling sad, feeling panic, fears, feeling down, bad moods, uncertainty but at the same time excitement and looking forward to returning to work. Some women spoke about the
guilt feelings they had of letting their child down. They felt as if they were losing control of their own situation by having to return to their employment. It seemed as if these women found difficulty in articulating these complex emotions as they used repetitive words in their descriptions to emphasize their importance. Other women used long pauses (... ...) in their descriptions to show a certain reluctance to talking about these difficult feelings. This showed that these women were themselves reflecting on their experiences at the same time they were discussing them with me.

"bhal speci bhalissa anke bi-leil nqum... ...nifakar li baqghali fit granet u nqum nibki... ...ippankijata, ma nkunx nista' norqod." (Ann T1, p2, 62-63)

"Ghandi hafna bezhght... ...halma na'heb li jkolha kull onmn li tghaddi minn din l-esperenza, li trid tera tmuq lurad ghas xoghol." (Ella T1, p1, 7-8)

"Imma mbaghad tibda tghid veru thossok guilty imma ft-lisstess hin tghid jiena sejra x-xoghol habba fiha wkoll ghas ma jiatax ikun li ma nahdinx." (Rose T3, p2, 41-42)

"I know I will be crying my eyes out for the first week." (Lilly T1, p2, 35-36)

At the moment I am even getting up during the night... ...and when I remember that I only have a few days left I wake up crying... ...panic-stricken and I cannot sleep.

I have a lot of fears... ...as I think every other mother that passes through this experience of having to go back to work would have.

But then you really start to feel guilty and at the same time you think that you are going back to work for her sake as well. You cannot not work.

These feelings were sustained during the first two weeks upon re-entry as was expected by the interviewees. The beginning of this transition proved to be a hard time for these women who still hadn’t come round to the fact that they had to work and leave their infant behind. They also tended to tail off while speaking about their feelings, showing their struggle to articulate their complex feelings. I could actually feel and empathise with what they were passing through as they recounted their experiences.

"Hassejtni guilty u naqra mdajga ghal fatt li qisu ma kontx ha ngatta' biztejed hin mat-tifla." (Rose T3, p1, 40-41)

I felt guilty and a bit sad at the fact that it was like I was not going to spend enough time with my daughter.
"L-ewwel fiti jiem hassejni daqsxejn hekk, daqsxejn imdejga speçi ta ‘...’" (Ann T2, p1, 13-14)  

The first few days I felt a bit sad sort of...

“I was very angry. Angry at the situation... ...angry at myself... ...angry at my husband. Angry at everyone and everything, sort of thing. Obviously for the fact that I have to leave him and at the same time sad that I’m feeling angry. Sorry that I’m feeling angry, so a lot of mixed emotions.” (Lilly T2, p3, 78-81)

4.2.3 Returning to Work – A Sense of Duty

The thought of going back to work was also considered as an obligatory adjustment period which they would have preferred to do without as they had just settled into a routine, and their return to work had once again disrupted their lifeworld. It was as if it was something they had to do out of duty towards their family. In fact Catherine (T1, p1, 33) explained how “Ma narahix fair li jaga’ kollox fuq, fuq spallejh...mhux fair jekk ma nahdimx”, (I don’t think it would be fair if I did not work and my husband would have to carry this burden alone. It just would not be fair.) The sense of duty that was driving them to re-enter paid employment really comes out in this statement. It is almost as if their situation left them no choice and forced them to return to work.

“Nista’ nghidlek li minhix looking forward, langas xejn ghax ha nhalli lit-tarbij a tiegħi warajja u din hi xi haga li qatt ma xtaqta pero sfortunament id-dinja tal-lum ma tippermettix li noqghod id-dar u ngawdi lil ibni kif nixtieq.” (Ella T1, p1, 4-7)  

I can tell you that I am not looking forward, not at all because I am going to leave my baby behind and this is something that I never wanted to do but unfortunately today’s world does not allow me to stay at home and enjoy my son as I want.

“I know that the more responsible thing to do is to actually go back because it would have been too much of a burden on my husband.” (Lilly T1, p3, 82-84)
Once they entered this new lifeworld of work and home, they found that they could cope better than they had expected and the actual experience was not as bad as they had anticipated. They said that once they got back into a new routine they felt better.

It was not such a bad experience as I had thought it would be. I felt a lot more upset before I went back to work because I did not know what I would find. I did not know how I would feel and I did not know what my daughter would feel. I had a lot of mixed emotions but then once I got myself back into a routine and started to settle in, I felt peace of mind particularly when you see that she is doing well...

Now that I have sort of gotten into a routine it is like I’m used to it.

Regarding the experience in the beginning I was a bit sceptical as I did not know what was going to happen but once I went back in I actually feel calmer, more settled.

4.2.4 Financial Constraints

These feelings of obligation to resume one’s job seem to all centre on financial constraints as all women seemed to agree that if their family was more financially comfortable, they would have chosen to stay at home with their baby. Francesca (TI, p10, 378) explained how she worked only because she felt compelled to do so, “Nahdem purament ghax hemm il-bżonn.” It is as if there is a realisation that they cannot do otherwise. Most of the women stated that they were still paying mortgage on their houses and it was this financial obligation that prevented them from staying...
at home with their child. They acknowledged that a new member in their family brought about yet another financial burden.

"...if we had just enough money with one pay cheque definitely I would not even think of going back, not because I don't love my work because I do love my work and I've worked hard to get to where I am but as I said before my son comes first and nothing will take his place...but due to financial needs I have to go back." (Lilly T1, p3, 72-77)

"Il-finanzi, il-hajja trid, membru iehor fil-familja, it-tfal illum iridu hafna, tobba, medicini, kollox hu...U biex tlahhaq ma l-affarijiet trid tahdem. B'paga wahda ma jistax ikun... dejjem hemm il-bzonn. Ma tistax ma tahdimx." (Tina T2, p7, 268-274)

"Ghad ghandi d-dejn fuq il-post u dik hija l-main reason. Issa l-ispejjez zidedu. Fejn qabel konna injejn min nies fid-dar issa qegndin filita. Heg, il-bzonnijiet tat-tarbijja huma kontiniwi u huma bzonnijiet li ma nistax nghaddi minghajrhom." (Ella T1, p2, 41-44)

The financial situation, you need money to live, another member in the family, children need a lot, doctors, medicines, everything...And to cope with all these things you need to work. With one salary we could not manage...there is always the need. You have to work.

I still have a loan on our house and this is the main reason. Now costs have increased. Where before we were two people in the house now we are three. The baby's needs are never-ending and they are needs that we cannot do without.

4.2.5 Letting Go

The sense of duty towards their family to return to gainful work led to conflict between staying with the newborn and letting go of their baby as they return to work. It seemed as if this caused them much stress. They anticipated that letting go of the child would be difficult and their fears were confirmed during the first weeks of returning to the workforce. Having to leave a child behind was considered to be the most negative aspect of the overall experience of returning to employment after paid maternity leave. There was a deep sense of loss in the confessional descriptions of these women. It is as if letting go of the situation will make them less worthy as mothers. Lilly (T1, p2, 41-44) explains that "Now all of a sudden, it is just going to be me by myself without him, you know...It's going to be hard for sure." It is as if she was feeling that this change was going to be harder for her than for her child. Apparently she needed her child to be able to feel good and not the other way around.
The interviewees appeared to be constantly worried about their baby even though they had all left their child with their husbands or with the child’s grandparents. They found themselves continually calling or texting to check on the situation back home.

"...xorta ta... Il-hin kollu nċempiltiha l-mummy, qaghdet, raqdet, xarbott. Il-hin kollu nibaghtu l-messaggi u hekk..." (Catherine T2, p4, 121-122)

"Il-hin kollu il-liin kollu nibagntu l-messaggi u hekk." (Jane T2, p1, 12-13)

"Möhnni fit-tifla. Il-hin kollu nċempel lil mummy biex nara x' qed taghmel u hekk." (Ann T2, p1, 5-6)

...but still I am always phoning my mother, asking her if she was ok, if she slept, if she drank; we are always sending messages and stuff like that...

I phoned a couple of times, I phoned because I started to wonder what she was doing and stuff like that.

I am always thinking of her. I am always phoning mummy to see what she is doing.

Some women were struggling to once again make a major change in their life so soon after having become new mothers; it was overwhelming. Women felt that their lives would never be the same again. They had to make sacrifices and sometimes this included giving up their personal interests such as hobbies and their old way of life. They now had to adapt to the new situation they were in and get used to new routines.

"Il-himni jiena kont naghmel hafna volontarjat imma tissa ha jkolli nieqaf. Issa mhemmxi post u mhemmxi hinn. Req xi haga trid qisek tissagrifika" (Jane T1, p5, 171-173)

"M'gnadnix nagnmel crafts, xejn, kollox abandoned ship..." (Nicole T2, p3, 106-108)

I used to do a lot of voluntary work but now I am going to have to stop. There is no place for it now and there is no time. It’s like you have to sacrifice something.

I don’t do crafts anymore. Nothing. I’ve had to abandon everything...

Moreover, women also felt a sort of loss of control over decision making and the rearing of the child. Nicole (T3, p2, 64) rightly spoke about her having to stop exclusive breastfeeding in preparation for returning to her job. She said she had to do this against her will. She explained how she would have liked to at least give her daughter six months of breastfeeding, but there was nothing she could do, "jiena
xtaqt intiha mqar six months. Imma issa m’hemmx x’taghmel.” It is as if she had to let go of what she really believed in to prepare for the looming transition.

4.2.6 Missing out on Developmental Milestones

All women showed apprehension and fear about missing out on their child’s developmental milestones such as crawling for the first time, walking and talking for the first time. They would love to be the person who got to witness their child’s first achievements but they felt that they would surely have to miss out on some of these milestones as they would be at work. They were disappointed about this but said that they needed to be realistic. They all associated their return to work with losing important steps in their child’s life. Milestones are important for mothers as they are precious memories they will cherish for life.

“I’ll be missing out on a lot of things...I might not be with him when he says his first word or when he crawls the first time.” (Lilly T1, p5, 150-152)

“I already sad about the fact that she might start walking or something like that and I won’t be there, or she says her first words and I would not have heard her. I think that I will miss out on something for sure because it is a bit impossible to be there for everything. You have to be realistic in life.

That she starts doing some things, for example things that she would never have yet done for example, she starts to crawl and I will not be there. That...especially when she does it for the first time. I worry that I will not be there.

I worry...that he says ‘mama’ and I will not be there. I worry that he takes his first step and I will not be there...I worry that my mother will phone me and tell me that my son is walking...I really wish to be there.
"...jekk hi ha taghmel xi haqa gdida, hafna mid-drabi jiena mhux ha nkwu presenti ghaliha. Ghax issa kull haqa li taghmel gdida, perezempju li bdiet tissuckja subghajha Jew hekk. Jew forsi meta taghmel l-ewwel pass jew hekk...L-omm ha titlef." (Jane T1, p3, 92-97)

...if she is going to do something new, a lot of the times I will not be present for it. Now everything she does is new; for example she started to suck her thumb or something like that. Or maybe when she takes her first steps...the mother is going to miss out.

4.3 Lightning Strikes – On Rejoining the Workforce

Going back to paid work, "tolqtok bhal sajetta", another metaphor meaning that it struck them like lightning. These women experience a kaleidoscope of feelings after they go back to work. They are faced with role overload; they struggle with time management and notice a change in their relationships with their spouses, infants and with themselves as a result of their changing priorities. They acknowledge how this change has affected them health wise and comment on the issues they faced with regards to feeding the baby. Francesca (T2, p3, 101) adds that, "...min ma jkunx fiha, ma jasalx li jifimha", (whoever is not going through this same experience cannot understand the deeper issues.)

4.3.1 Role Overload

The women explained how their return to work has caused them stress and feelings of exhaustion. They have added a role to mothering and being a wife to their husbands while at the same time trying to retain their own individuality. This new role they have taken on is quite challenging.

"Mhux facl, li taghmel l-affarijiet koliha. Xi kultant nhossni ha niggermen...ghax ara kemm irid tiggagitfa affarijiet." (Ella T2, p3, 112-119)

It is not easy to do everything. At times I feel like I am going crazy...because look at how many things you have to juggle.
"...qed ngnejja nagra hux ghax inti ghandek role ishor...ghandek ingas time on your hands. Imbaghad qisek tipprova to make the best out of everything" (Nicole T2, p2, 48-50)

"mbaghad l-izvaniogg hu li speci wara x-xoghol trid tmur lura d-dar u tkompli bix-xoghol tad-dar." (Catherine T2, p1, 5-6)

"...four hours of sleep after a very long day. And then they tell you you’re stressed...I don’t know why? (sarcastically)." (Lilly T2, p4, 112-113)

4.3.2 Time Management

Women identified time management as an important factor in decreasing the stress associated with balancing multiple roles. They found themselves planning more in advance and eventually performing more duties in less time. This proved to be stressful at times and chaotic “genn” but it still had to be done in order to manage to carry out all their duties. As Ann (T2, p1, 10) described she had to cram everything in the little time she had: "tipprova ddeffes kolloxfil-ftit lijkollok".

"Hajit bhal ma ghidilek, zaret iktar busy, il-hin trid tqassmu iktar, trid tippjana iktar." (Tina T2, p6, 220-221)

"Ghal bidu kont nghid ma nafs kif ilabhqu dawn in-nisa li jibgew jahdmu. Imma ilum il-gurnata nghid emm...hemm hin ghal kollox. Jekk tqassam il-gurnata bil-ghaqel, hemm hin ghal kollox." (Catherine T3, p4, 130-132)

"Irrid nippjana kif ser ingassam l-hin u x-xoghol biex inkun nista’ nalhag." (Francesca T2, p3, 83)

As I told you, my life became busier. You have to divide time more and you need to plan more.

In the beginning I used to say I don’t know how these women that go back to work manage. But today I say...there is a time for everything. If you manage your day well, there is time for everything.

I have to plan how I am going to manage my time and my work so that I will be able to cope.
4.3.3 Changing Relationships

The women spoke about how their relationship with their husbands, with themselves and with their infants has changed with this new lifeworld. This change is in their view one for the better, in the sense that their time away from their children has actually allowed them to appreciate much more the time they do spend together. They say that "qisek iktar tapprezza lilha once li tmur id-dar, qisek iktar tiehu pjaciqt tqatta' l-hin maghha. Isir iktar quality time", (I appreciate her more once I get home, it is like you enjoy spending more time with her. It is more of quality time.) They said that their time together with their infants "sar nafna iktar prezzjuz", (has become more precious.) With regards to their relationship with their husbands they commented on the fact that time spent together for each other as a couple had decreased as now this time turned into family time; however, they did try to make an effort and have some time for themselves even though this was sometimes a struggle. Their relationship as a couple after having their first child was at times challenged due to the shift in priorities that always put the newborn at the centre of attention.

"Fil-weekends ma nahdmux, la jiena u lanqas hu allura niddedikaw irwiehma ghat-tifel... Imma anka jiena u r-ragel bejmien, naghmiu mezz li isma, jekk hemm bżomm intalhu lit-tifel lejl man-nanriet biex niddedikaw ruxna ghal-xulxin. Nghidu gqhadna d-dar relaxed just me and him." (Ella T2, p4, 152-156)

"Il-liin mar-ragel naqas specjalment. Mat-tifla fit imma mar-ragel biss, biss hu jkun jumexn xoghol, il-granet l-ohra hu jkun mat-tifla, jiena ma nkuxx hemm inkun is-xoghol u gurnata jibqa' ghal flimkien." (Beth T2, p3, 77-80)

"Ahna s-Sibt u l-Hadd inqattghhom flimkien, nipprawaw dejjem bhala familja, jigsawi kemm hu u kemm jien." (Tina T2, p3, 110-112)

My husband and I do not work on the weekends so we dedicate ourselves to our son... But even between us, my husband and I are ready to have him spend the night with his grandparents so that we can dedicate ourselves to each other. Maybe we stay at home relaxed just me and him.

Time with my husband especially is less. A bit with my daughter but with my husband, he is working two days, the others he is with our daughter and I am not with them as I am at work so we have one day left to be together.

We spend Saturday and Sunday together, we try to be a family, both him and myself.

61
Moreover, finding time for themselves was even more of a challenge for these women. Lilly (T2, p6, 194) described herself as being “lucky” when she actually managed to find some time for herself. Other women talked about how during their maternity leave they would spend days in their pyjamas without even doing their hair because they could not find the time to do so. Francesca (T2, p3, 124) associated this with a realisation that she has turned into a person she does not want to be. She talked about how she was looking forward to the day when she could find the time to take care of herself. She felt that she could only feel good about herself when this happened. Her words hinted that this would happen when she went back to work:

“thossok tajba ghax tkun komda u qieghda bil-hwejjeq komdi u hekk imma fl-istess hin tghid tarak kif intlaqt fhint kif. Allura ma rridx li jkolli iktar ġranet minn dawn inkella ma nhossninx tajba.”

“...l-hin għaliża naqas hafna, avolja nohdem ftit sigħat, naqas hu.” (Beth T2, p2, 73-74)  

"Hin għaliża issa...kwati xejn nista' nghid ghax bhal speci sakemm intesti lit-tifla, torqod u hekk as such imbaghad ninhasel jiena u xejn u ma naghmel ghax ma jibqax hin. Kif qed nghidilek imbaghad nibda nghajja u hekk hu." (Ann T2, p3, 99-102)  

"...my personal time decreased a lot even though I work only a few hours; it has decreased. Time for me now...near to nothing I can say because by the time I get my daughter ready, she sleeps, then I shower and I don’t do anything else because I do not have more time. As I said then I start getting tired.

4.3.4 Priorities Changing in their lifeworld

These new mothers have commented on the fact that now their priorities have changed. They state that “l-ewwel it-tifel u mbaghad the rest”, (my son comes first and then the rest.) They commented on how housework was no longer a priority. The most important thing for them was to have the time to spend with their family, husband and child. Work had now taken a secondary role vis-à-vis their family life.
"Like I have said before, obviously my priorities have changed. Certain things that maybe should be done or have to be done, now in my eyes can wait for another day. I won't go do things that now seem less important right now. If I can leave it for tomorrow, I will leave it, I don't have to do it right, right, now." (Lilly T2, p3, 93-96)

"Jiena nghid lewwel it-tifla mbaghad l-affarijiet l-obra li ma ma tantx huma importanti. Il-housework li fiħ speċi li m'ghandek il-hadd jيجri warajk, li ma itlahqaż taghmel illum ha taghmelu l-ghada." (Catherine T3, p5, 170-173)

4.3.5 Health Implications

These women spoke about how this transition caused them to feel more stressed, nervous and short-tempered due to the current situation they found themselves in. Beth (T2, p4, 141-150) blamed this added stress for her over-indulgence in eating and for the consequent guilty feelings: "Kemm ilni li dhalt lura ghax-xoghol qed insibha iktar diffičli biex nikkontrolla x'qed niekol, bis-serjeta'. Nahseb ghax qeghdha iktar stressed." Francesca (T2, p2, 73), on the other hand, explained how she sometimes forgot to eat or did not have time to when she said, "gieli ninsa niekol jew ma jkollix hin niekol". This change in their lives of "always being on the go" made the women feel uncomfortable, exhausted and overwhelmed with all the things they had to cope with. Lilly’s experience was the one that stood out most as she experienced a number of negative health effects brought about by her re-entry into the workforce. A section of her detailed description is featured below:

"In fact, the second day I went into work, I fainted and ended up in hospital. I sort of got a sharp pain in my head. I thought it was a headache, but it wasn't. My head bounced on my desk and I ended up in hospital several hours later. I did not even know how I got there, so, I spent the second day of my working day in hospital. They just said it was stress-related anxiety from going in after my maternity leave. Then I spent another two weeks with anxiety and panic attacks, extremely bad ones. I suffered from asthma attacks, extremely bad ones. I was going crazy, shaking, and panicking for absolutely nothing. Freaking out as soon as my son starts to cry or starts whining. I would see it as something really big...as an amazingly humongous task but then luckily I got out of it... It did affect me health wise. It affected me greatly." (Lilly T2, p1, 7-20)
Others felt that this change has helped them recover mentally and physically. Being at home all day, carrying a newborn around took its toll on the women’s bodies. Catherine (T2, p2, 36-40) explained how “kien jugani hafna dahri”. She complained of backpain when she was at home with her child. The pain subsided upon her return to employment. Indeed she felt physically better “fiżikament inhossni li ġejt ahjar.” It seems that work served as a mental break for these women who were used to spending all day with their newborns during maternity leave but they now realise that “Il-fatt li inti ma tkunx maghha l-hin kollu, mentalment tistrieħ” (not being with your child all the time helps you.)

“I think I almost feel better because I spend an afternoon without carrying her. It is true that you are at work; on the other hand you are not carrying someone. She is not that heavy but when you spend a whole day carrying her...you have a long time with her in your arms. At work you spend time sitting down without holding anyone.”

These women noticed a change in their child’s temperament. They could see that the infant would be eagerly waiting for them to pick them up after work. They also commented on the way their child recognised them and identified them as their mother. Although these infants are just about four months old, they already know who their mother is. Maternity leave and the time each woman spent with her child have definitely paid off in the sense that they have established a strong bond with their infant and the latter recognises his or her mother. These mothers noticed a difference, “rajt differenza”, in their children’s reaction to their return home from work. When they returned home from work or went to pick up their child, the latter was happy to see his or her mother, “tifrah bija”.

“Kwazi kwazi jit ahjar nahseb ghax naghmel nofs ta’ nhar ma versfoghbiex biżejjed. Ghas ini veru li tkun tahdem imma mhur qed dejjem terfa' lil xi hadd. Veru ma tiżira hafna imma li toqghod iddur biha gurnata shieha ...ghandek hin twil biha f'idejk. Is-xoghol ghandek hin bilqieghda, ma terfa' lil hadd.” (Nicole T2, p3, 80-86)
"...my husband tells me that he has gotten into a very bad and cranky mood and attitude. Even when I go and pick him up after work around 6 o'clock, 6:15pm, you could tell from his face that he would just want to get out of there, wherever he is and he just wants to go home. Then when he gets home and he is with me he is happy, he is laughing, he is fine..." (Lilly T2, p1, 21-24)

4.3.6 Discrimination and Lack of Support at Workplace

From a social point of view it is important to note that almost all women especially those in the private sector spoke about the lack of support from their managers at their workplace when they said, "mhix a supportive attitude" and "M'ghandniex dagshekk support". Their bosses made them feel like just another pair of hands without even acknowledging their new situation. The reaction of their boss upon their return to work was one of insensitivities to the experience the women were going through. Their insistance that their managers did not "care" brought out how upset they felt, and highlights the impact support or lack of it at the workplace has on female workers returning after maternity leave. Rose (T3, p5, 158) felt that she had to stand up for her rights when she said "Jiena kelli nahišibha, jien kelli nghidilhom, u niggieled maghom biex niehu xi hağa". They sometimes felt that an injustice was being done towards them by their employers when they were not given any options of family-friendly measures. Rose felt that she was being squeezed to the limit like a lemon, "...ghaliya jiena rajha li jiena lumija u qed jaghsruha, jiena ghaliya hekk rajha."

(Rose T1, p11, 402-403). The difference between women working in the private sector and those working within the public sphere was also apparent in rights, support and benefits. This discrepancy is leaving its mark on many female workers.

Moreover, they commented on the lack of practical support at the workplace. Only two participants both of whom were employed with the government, (Beth and Nicole) had a day care on site at their workplace and had private rooms where they
could express their breast milk if they wanted to. Similarly, Jane and Rose talked about how they had to resort to the use of the “bathroom” as a private room to express their breast milk if they wanted to do so. Doing this on company time was not encouraged either as it was seen as a “waste” of precious time. Day care on site or nurseries were also seen as not “financially worthwhile for the company”.

"Ta' fuqi galli trid tkisser il-pjanijiet tieghek u taggħod bifors ghal overtime. Dak it-tip. Dik inħassha jiena...Jigifieri, issib min jgħimiek, u ssib min jifjhemek, u issib min jifjghek il-bahar. Jiena jigifieri, hin minnihom nibbi kelli apiti. x’hin gie jgħidil daq is-diskors. Ma stennejx li ta’ fuqi ma jiğmuhiex." (Tina T2, p5, 169-183)

"Jiena naħseb l-ambjent tax-xogħol ukoll jagħmel differenza fis-sens...They weren’t willing li jilhaalu tiża’ tagħmel hekk jew hekk jekk trid. Naħseb kieku kont xogħol differenti, forsi mal-gvern qiswa tiġi awtomatika l-ħaġa, li jekk trid tiehu reduced hours tapplika u toħodhom. Id-drittijiet mal-gvern qishom iktar qegħdin written down on black and white. Mal-gvern tat’ħixx qiegħed..." (Rose T3, p4, 152-161)

My boss told me that I had to cancel my plans and that I had to work overtime. This really made me feel bad... So you find people who help you and you come across others that do not. I felt like crying at one point when he told me such things. I thought my managers would be more understanding.

I think that the environment you work in also has an effect on the situation....They weren’t willing to tell me you can do this or that. Maybe if I had a different job, maybe a government job it would have came automatically. I would have been granted reduced hours if I wanted them. Government workers have more rights, rules are written down on black and white. You know where you stand.

In contemporary patriarchial society women are still faced with discrimination at their place of work. Rose talks about how she noticed a difference in the way she was treated by her managers before she was pregnant and then when she was pregnant. It was as if their approach towards her changed when she was pregnant and this clearly upset her as they made her feel that she was no longer competent and, worse still, they made her feel as if she had done something wrong.

"M’għandniex daqs hekk support fhimt. Jiena perezempju meta hadti il-promotion u hekk...mort inkellem il-kbir ta’ fuqi blex nghidil li jiena pregnant u qalli ma konnix nafu, indirettament qalli kieku konna nafu ma konnix ntuk il-promotion." (Tina T1, p 4, 132-137)

We do not have that much support. When I got promoted I told them that I was pregnant...he told me that they did not know about it; it is as if he was hinting that if they had known they would not have given me the promotion.
4.3.7 Gender Issues

Despite the fact that these women have returned to their paid employment after having their first child they still seemed to be the main caregivers and home makers of their family. Traditional division of labour at home was still accepted as the norm with the husband supporting rather than equally sharing with their wives. Nevertheless, the husbands did acknowledge their efforts to juggle everything that needed to be done, but they still felt that their husbands needed to accept that things were different, “Irid jaccetta li l-affarijiet differenti”. They explained how, “il-bidla l-kbira tkun ghall-mara” which means that it was the woman that has to bear the burden of this major change in her life but “Ir-ragel irid jifhem li jrid jaghti l-parti tieghu” (the husband has to understand and do his bit as well.)

The issue of gender was also brought up when issues at the workplace were discussed. Rose explained how her managers were men and she thought that this had an effect on their lack of understanding and insensitivity to her changed situation. “...ara min jiehu dawn id-decijjonijiet it-tnejn irgieł u jiena naheb li dik tafertwa. Nghiđha straight. U bdeb jghidulí issa bil-familja tinbidel ta’...imma fil-verita’ ma jafux x’jigfieri...It-tnejn li huma fathers, ta’ zewg it-tfali it-tnejn li huma pero n-nisa taghhom it-tnejn id-dar u ma jahdmux allura s-sitwazzjoni hija differenti.” (Rose T1, p2, 48-52) ...he does help but sometimes you have to push him to do something....As I am saying a man is always a man and they take some things for granted. Sometimes maybe I don’t think he appreciates the things I do. ...I do not think that he realises the load of things I have to do. Or maybe he does but for him it is nothing...

...look the people who take decisions are both men and I think that this has its affect. I say it straight. They told me that now with a family I would be different...but in reality they do not know what it is like...They are both fathers of two children but their wives are stay at home mums so their situations are different.
4.4 Weathering the Storm

All participants encouraged other women to make a similar decision and return to gainful work after the birth of their babies as Francesca (T2, p4, 143) said “imma jien nqhidilhom morru ahdmu, naghmlilhom kurogg” (I encourage them to go to work, I try to empower them.) The women used phrases like “you are not alone” and “ma jaqtghux qalbhom” that transmit resilience and the will not to get disheartened about the transition. They acknowledged that it was not an easy step to take and the thought of it might be disturbing at first but it should be seen as a challenge which could be overcome, “mhux xi hağa impossibli langas”.

Their own personal determination empowered them to make the most of this experience and this in turn helped them to feel a sense of achievement. They talked about having stamina and how this was a challenge they wanted to see through. They spoke about the importance of being prepared mentally so that the transition could be perceived as a challenge not a threat.

"Parir, li kiekę naghii, li jiena personali użajtha hi li ilesti ruhehk mentalment ghax importanti hafna. Ghax tipo jekk inti l-attudni tieghék m’hix pozitiiva, ovvajment m’ intix ha taghmel the utmost." (Rose T3, p5, 188-190)

"L-iktar hağa li qhenitri li ghax qisu jiena kelli stamina qabel, u ridt naghmlilha, kienet qisha challenge li ridt naghmlilha." (Beth T3, p2, 40-41)

I would advise to prepare oneself mentally as this is very important. I myself did. If you do not have a positive attitude, you will not give your utmost.

The main thing that helped me was that I had stamina from before and I was something that I wanted to do, it was sort of a challenge that I wanted to do.

4.4.1 Having the best of both worlds

After having passed through this experience, these women had a sense of accomplishment in the way they were balancing work and family life. They
repeatedly used phrases to show that they felt really good; they felt satisfied and competent in that they had done it (returned to work), “inhossni kuntenta hafna”, “Inhossni hafna sodisfatta”, “kapaci u ghamiltha”, “Thossok tajba”. This repetition emphasises the feelings of achievement amongst these women. They have managed to strike a balance between two worlds which at first seemed impossible and this makes them feel good as if they had achieved something great, “imbagnad tnossok li ghamilt xi haġa kbira”. They have noticed that their experiences have made them more responsible individuals. They have identified themselves more as individuals in their own right, contributing to society with whatever it is they do.

“Issa li ghadda naqra żmien mhux ħażin qed inkompli nikkonferma li speci kienet xi haġa pozittiva... qed inhossni qisni nerga’ naghti kontribut, u din iggieghini nhossni ahjar minn dak il-lat. Qisni ergaġjt ġejjt il-persuna ta’ gabel, inhossni hafna ahjar... din l-esperjenza gagħlita nirrealizza li jiena persuna mhux omm biss.” (Beth T3, p1, 15-25)

Now that some time has passed, I can confirm that it was a positive experience...I feel that I am giving my contribution, this makes me feel better. It is as if now I am once again the person I was before, I feel much better...I think that the fact that I am not all the time with my baby made me realise that I am a person and not just a mother.

4.4.2 Making the most out of their situation

The actual experience of these women was different from what they had expected it to be. They had imagined that it would be a much more difficult task, “sibtha ha tkun gravi” one in which they would not be able to cope. All of them deliberated on how this experience affected them positively and how they were proud of having gone through with it successfully. These women showed resilience as they were willing to adapt to this new lifeworld. Despite the difficulties they came across, they managed to rise to the occasion and make the most of their new realities. The time they spent at work was described as a “break” from everything they had to do at home. Their
actual experience of returning to gainful work surpassed their expectations of it. They managed to overcome their fears and worries and have settled into their new routines, and this filled them with pride and a sense of achievement.

"Hassejini tajeb, ma hsibtx li ha nhosse daqsekk taqba f'sitwazzjoni daqsekk antipatika. Hsibt li ha tkun iktar sitwazzjoni diffiċi u hsibt li rrid hin iktar biex norganizza lili nnifsi, x-xoghol u havnek." (Francesca T2, p1, 2-5)

I felt good, I didn’t think I would feel so good in such an awkward situation. I thought that it was going to be a more difficult situation and I thought that I needed more time to organise myself, my work and here.

4.4.3 Improving Local Maternity Leave Policy

Maternity leave was considered as an important rite of passage by these women. It was as if their fourteen weeks of maternity leave allowed them to start the process of detachment from their old lives while granting enough time for their new beings to flow into their new lifeworld; at the same time they were also adapting to the role of motherhood. They acknowledged the importance of this time and stated how they would have liked to have some more time to spend with their infants. They referred to this time as "l-iktar żmien krucjali", (the most crucial time) for mother and baby to interact and bond with each other. They added that by returning to work after fourteen weeks, the baby was still too small, "il-baby thalliha wisq żghira", still totally dependent upon them.

"nemmen li dawk il-fourteen weeks kienu ta' hafna ghajnuna ghax tkun il-hin kollu mal-baby, ikkomunikata maghha u hekk..." (Catherine T2, p2, 49-51)

I believe that those fourteen weeks were a lot of help because you are always with your baby, communicating with her...
4.4.4 Society's Impact

Women noted a general change in the expectations of Maltese society. They discussed how depending upon the generation of people "saru qishom jaċċettawha li qisha l-mara bżonn li trid toħroġ tahdem"; (they have started to accept that women need to go to work.) It is becoming "aċċettata" or acceptable for women to go back to work after having had their baby. The importance of the father comes into play as he needs to share responsibilities with the mother. The women harped on about the importance of the father and his role in this transition

"...il-lum il-ġurnata irridu johorgu jahdmu n-nisa imma flit ta' żmien ilu fi żmien omni...il-mother dejjem kienet tkun id-dar...Illum il-ġurnata niddependu haļna fuq in-nanniet jiġifieri nahseb fi żmienijiet tal-lum, irridu miflamu li mhux bifors il-mother trid tkun hemm, il-mother u l-father ukoll. Ghax qabel nahseb iktar kienet l-emphasis fuq il-mother biss imma issa qegħdin fi żmien fejn huwa importanti l-father ukoll." (Nicole T2, p4, 145-153)

...in today’s world, women need to go to work but a few years ago, in my mother’s time...a mother would always be at home...Today we depend a lot on grandparents. I think that in today’s world we need to understand that it is not necessarily the mother that needs to be there, both mother and father have to give their share. Before, the emphasis was on the mother only but now the father is important as well.

4.4.5 Encouraging a Positive Experience of the Transition

Throughout the course of the interviews, participants discussed issues that they thought would enhance the experience of going back to work after paid maternity leave and make it smoother. As already described earlier on in the chapter support and planning ahead were critical for the mothers, both during the anticipation phase and on their return to work. They also spoke about the importance of promoting family-friendly working conditions and the important role of the midwife in helping mothers throughout this change.
4.4.5.1 Fostering Family-Friendly Working Conditions

These women talked about how their work orientation has helped them acquire a sense of achievement. Having the opportunity to work from home through telework, having flexi hours, decreasing their working hours by either working reduced or part-time all seemed to be beneficial to these women.

“If-xoghol kieku jien naf jkollok daqxejn itkar support minn tax-xoghol pereqempju jew li jhalluk tibqa' reduced, jien jien naf ikollhom xi speci ta' nursery...jew forsi telework” (Jane T2, p3, 131-140)

If you were to have more support from work as when they allow you to continue working with reduced hours, or maybe having a nursery on site... or maybe telework

“I think it falls back to employers and the support you get from work. I think that it needs to be realised more, even maybe half an hour flexi time, would be so helpful. It is just half an hour but believe me in half an hour it would make such a difference for a mother.” (Lilly T2, p8, 278-282)

4.4.5.2 Involving the Midwife

The women realised that “il-midwife tista' tghin”, (the midwife can help.) They talked about ante-natal education or parentcraft classes as being an opportunity for the midwife to discuss with her clients issues related to employment and transitioning back into the workforce. They noticed a missing link in parentcraft lectures and Tina (T3, p3, 92) commented about how “Fil-parentcraft qatt ma qalulna xejn fuq ix-xoghol” (during their parentcraft lectures we were not informed about employment.)

They acknowledged that during their pregnancy their main focus was on labour and delivery and they did not really think far ahead as they believed that “at that stage dawn l-affarijiet langas biss jahttu ma rasek. Tant tkun mohhok fil-hlas li ma tarax 'l boghd” (at that stage you do not even think that far. You would be so focused on delivery that you don’t think ahead.) However, when they found themselves
unprepared to face reality they all stated that they would have wished some sort of contact with their midwife to discuss certain issues. They showed faith in the midwife when they said “il-midwife tkun taf twegibni”, (the midwife would know.)

They proposed the introduction of courses for mothers who intended to return to paid employment after the birth of their baby because “x’tista’ ssib fuq ix-xoghol huwa mportanti wkoll” (what one may find at one’s place of work is also important.) Ella (T2, p5, 185) thought that such courses “jghinu lill ommijiet li jkunu ha jghaddu minn din it-tranżizzjoni” (would help mothers that will be transitioning back to the workforce). Nicole encouraged midwives to make women aware that adapting to this change was not an impossible task but something that could be achieved.

"...x’ser jgri wara. x’hemm fil-futur hadd ma jghidilek. jew ma’x’hiex tista’ thabbat wiċċek. Ma kontx naf x’għandi nistenna, naħseb ghandu jkun hemm naqra ġhajnuna, naqra tqharif, għall-ommijiet...Forsì mhux kulħadd jaf x’inħuma d-drittijiet tiegħu. Naħseb ghandu jkun hemm naqra ġhajnuna ta’ x’nistgu nstbu u ma nstbu...Emozzjonalment u mentalment ukkoll ikollok bżonn l-ġhajnuna u l-midwife tista’ tghan." (Tina T3, p3, 98-105)

...what is going to happen next, what is in the future nobody tells you, or with what you can be faced with. I did not know what to expect. I think that there should be some help, some information for mothers...maybe not everyone is aware of their rights. I think that there should be some help about what we can or cannot find...Emotionally and mentally you would also need help and the midwife can help.

4.4.5.3 Individualised Coping Mechanisms

These women spoke about how their situation and experience was specific to them. They acknowledged the fact that what might have been positive in their experience might not necessarily help other women. They realised that there are multiple realities and that everyone adaptes to the situation they find themselves in, trying to achieve the best possible outcome. This showed that they were aware that there may be other ways in which such a transition could be dealt with. They realised that there
can be no ‘one-size-fits-all’ type of solution to what is a challenging situation. Nicole (T2, p5, 158-160) spoke about the type of “job” and the amount of hours a woman worked as having an effect on the general experience.

"...mhux kulhadd bhali. Fis-sens li kulhadd irid jara č-cirkustanzi tieghu fis-xoghol li jaghmel. Qisek trid tara x-xoghol tieghek jippermattileks li tadatta ghal mal-baby. Ezempju jiena komda hafna imma forsi nhabbit bieb iehor u jghidli differenti." (Francesca T3, p4, 121-124) ...not everyone is like me. I mean everyone has to see their own circumstances at work. It is like you have to see if you work allows you to adapt to your child’s needs and schedules. For example I am very comfortable but someone else may be in a different situation.

4.5 My Own Interpretations

Following analysis of the findings illustrated in Table 4.1 and my reflections on the themes, I am bringing forward the following interpretative tables to present an overview of the lifeworld of these women during their transition to the workforce after childbirth. Smith et al., (2009) stresses the importance of personal interpretations, the ‘I’ in IPA, as it helps to bring together the participants’ lived experiences and the researcher’s interpretations while the resulting analysis is the product of both collaborating efforts. Smith et al., (2009) suggests the support of some form of visual guide like the one shown below (pg. 80).
Table 4.2: Personal Interpretations of Women’s Experiences - A Time Of Preparation And Planning Ahead

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>SUPER-ORDINATE THEME – A TIME OF PREPARATION AND PLANNING AHEAD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning Ahead</td>
<td>▶ Planning ahead became an important factor when trying to acquire a sense of achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Planning with regards to childcare helped alleviate worries upon re-entry back to work – allowed for more peace of mind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Planning ahead with regards to housework actually allowed them to find more time and be proactive with their time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Having a plan in an attempt to avoid showing depressive symptoms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Wellbeing – emotional and physical</td>
<td>▶ Becoming a new mother generated an abundance of new feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Having to go back to work after a short period of time brought about undesirable feelings amongst the women and increased stress levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ The sense of challenge also made them look forward to returning to work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Being tired was a common factor in the first two interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ All mothers felt emotionally and physically better by the last interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support systems</td>
<td>▶ The new mothers and their children become a central focus receiving support from their spouses, immediate family, friends and colleagues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ This support made a huge difference to their overall experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Being supported also identified as an important factor in reducing the risk of postnatal depression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Expressed the importance of communication with relevant others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Maltese women appear to be apprehensive about nurseries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Lack of workplace and practical support provided more of a challenge for these women, and was the cause of more stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Issues of oppression due to lack of choice and forcefulness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ The importance of workplace support and support from the midwife identified as instrumental in having a positive overall experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of duty</td>
<td>▶ Returning to work was considered an obligatory adjustment period they would have preferred to do without.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Familial obligations brought about this sense of duty to go back to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Dividing the economic load with husband.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ It is as if their new situation forces them to return to work due to deepened financial constraints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ A sense of deepened responsibility towards their new family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letting Go</td>
<td>▶ Women struggled to let go of their babies causing them much stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Having to leave a newborn infant behind was considered to be the most negative part of the overall experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ The women’s descriptions entail a deep sense of loss – feeling as if they are not good enough as mothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Letting go of the child also implied that there was loss of control in the decision-making and rearing of the child e.g. with regards to breastfeeding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ A sense of apprehension and fear regarding missing out on their child’s developmental milestones e.g. crawling, walking, talking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ As new mothers, they need their child to be able to function in their new lifeworld.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Having to leave the child behind causes much uneasiness among these women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Women had to let go of their old selves and lifestyles – they had to be ready to grow as individuals and change and sacrifice their own interests.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.3: Personal Interpretations Of Women's Experiences - Lightning Strikes On Rejoining The Workforce

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>SUPER-ORDINATE THEME – LIGHTNING STRIKES ON REJOINING THE WORKFORCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Role Overload**                  | ➢ Adding new roles to the ones they already had made these women challenge themselves.  
                                       ➢ Retaining their individuality became harder.  
                                       ➢ Always in a race with time: more things to do, less time to do them.  
                                       ➢ Good time management as a means of improving the quality of their overall experience. |
| **Changing Relationships**         | ➢ Spending time with child upon re-entry turned into more quality time.  
                                       ➢ Finding time as a couple is now more of a struggle as now this has turned into family time.  
                                       ➢ Personal time was put aside so that these women could manage to do everything else that was expected of them.  
                                       ➢ Relationships are challenged due to a shift in priorities. |
| **Health Implications**            | ➢ Going back to work resulted in increased stress levels in the participating women.  
                                       ➢ Overall general feelings of being unhealthy: feeling tired, exhausted and overwhelmed.  
                                       ➢ Increased appetite due to additional stress causing even more negative feelings about changed body image.  
                                       ➢ Returning to work for some women also helped them recover mentally and physically  
                                       ➢ Changes in infant temperament were also evident |
| **Gender Issues**                  | ➢ Women are still the main caregivers within Maltese families.  
                                       ➢ Parenthood being a change for the mother more than for the father.  
                                       ➢ Lack of appreciation from spouse.  
                                       ➢ Lack of understanding at workplace partly due to having male managers who cannot understand such an experience. |

Table 4.4: Personal Interpretations of Women’s Experiences - Weathering The Storm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>SUPER-ORDINATE THEME – WEATHERING THE STORM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Having the best of both worlds** | ➢ Striking a work life balance as something that can be achieved.  
                                       ➢ Becoming family-friendly through improving local maternity leave policy and introducing other initiatives such as telework, flexi-hours, day care centres on site and private rooms for expressing breastmilk.  
                                       ➢ The need for awareness within our society with regards to the importance of motherhood and the need for a supportive attitude.  
                                       ➢ Different people have different ways of coping with the changed lifeworld and there is no one right or wrong method as to how one should go about transitioning back into the workforce.  
                                       ➢ Involving the midwife can be a way forward in helping women and their families adapt well in life-changing transitions. |
4.6 Conclusion

The interviews allowed these women to voice their high and low moments that they faced during this transition back to the workforce. They emphasised that after the experience they could fully understand what it was really like to become a mother and go back to work immediately after the expiry of paid maternity leave.

At the end of the interviews some women commented that they really enjoyed going through this process with me as the researcher. They stated that they would be looking forward to meeting me, and expressed their pleasure in being able to share their experience. Lilly (T3, p4, 138) said that this process for her was “a cheaper way of therapy.” Jane (T3, p4, 109) enjoyed the continuity that we shared and the fact that I was there to hear all parts of her experience, “Tajjeb ghax kien hemm process bejnieta mhux just darba u hekk. Kienet sabiha.” Ella (T3, p4, 155) added that this allowed her the opportunity to stop and reflect about her actual experience when she said, “minghajr ma rrid qisek ċertu affarijiet jekk ma jkollokx il-ħin ma tieqafx u tahseb fuqhom.”

The next chapter discussed the overall findings in light of existing literature. Theoretical and practical implications arising from these findings are also discussed.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This chapter offers a discussion of the experiences of Maltese women who have just had their first baby and re-entered the workforce after fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave in the light of available literature and my own personal interpretations. Appreciation of how these mothers identified and described their experiences in relation to the ideology of motherhood itself which has been socially constructed as a vehicle for executing their femininity will also be taken into account. Moreover, theoretical and practical implications arising from the findings will also be discussed. A critique of the strengths and limitations of this study ends this chapter.

5.1 A Time of Preparation and Planning Ahead

Maternity leave is given to support new mothers in adapting to their new lifeworld as mothers; however, the mothers of the study were passing through yet another change, that is returning to gainful work. According to transitional theory described by van Gennep (1960), new mothers are in the separation phase while on their maternity leave. They have been separated from what they were used to - their previous life, their place of work and their old relationships with their spouses. During this stage new mothers are exploring their new roles and adapting to motherhood, continuing with their roles as wives but still in the process of completing the next stage, which is transitioning back into the workforce, another new role; a mother in gainful work.
This time called for much planning ahead as was demonstrated by all of the mothers in this study. As Coulson, Skouteris, Milgrom, Noblet and Dissanayake (2010), stated planning to return to the workforce is a complex and multi-faceted process. My participants talked about how planning in advance helped to put their mind at ease knowing that they had settled things beforehand. Planning commenced during pregnancy and continued after childbirth adapting gradually to their everyday experiences. Planning was seen as a continuous process as was demonstrated by Scholnick & Friedman, (1993). Planning with regards to childcare seemed to bring about much stress amongst the participants and they were grateful to have family available to watch their children as being indispensable to being able to go back to work so soon. The findings of this study correspond to another local study by Borg (2003) which demonstrated that child-care centres were not very popular with Maltese mothers. Preference was given to other members of the family to help with child-care rather than to other institutions as working mothers seemed to struggle with trust issues. The issue of trust was also demonstrated by some mothers in Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) study which found that they did not trust anyone who was not a family member to look after their children. Beth (T2, p3, 104) felt so strongly about this that she said that “mhux li ha nibaghtha n-nursery biex jiena mmur ix-xoghol”. It is obvious that she would actually stop working if she had to send her daughter to a nursery. This emphasises the importance of family within our culture (Abela, 2000; Tabone, 1995). Literature likewise cautions parents that child-care centres can impact a child’s development either positively or negatively (Belsky, 2001, 2006; Belsky, Vandell, Burchinal, Clarke-Stewart, McCartney & Tresch Owen, 2007; Harker & Kendall, 2003, Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004).
Moreover, planning was also done with regards to housework and domestic chores. By organising themselves around the house and planning to get things done beforehand helped to stave off exhaustion and consequently their role strain. This finding was also demonstrated in an earlier study by Hall (1987) who also studied the experience of women returning to work following the birth of their first child. She explained how after organisation and planning occurred, women could find time for other things. The participants I interviewed also commented on the fact that their planning ahead actually allowed them to have more time to spend on what was really important to them such as spending time with their spouses and children. Ella (T2, p4, 119) explained how “If you plan you will succeed.” Succeeding or having a positive transition was attributed to feeling good about managing family life and being able to retain one’s identity and individuality while working outside of the house as well.

Planning to return to work following childbirth was positively stimulating to women. Moreover, having a plan acted as a bridge to the separation issue mentioned by van Gennep (1960) between their previous lifeworld and their new experience. For these mothers their plans ‘legitimized’ their right to reclaim a part of their previous lifestyle with regards to working outside their homes. Since motherhood does not involve financial gain and its worth is generally not recognised as Jane (T2, p2, 69) explained, “Is-sożjeta’ qisha ma tapprezzahx x-xoghol tad-dar”, returning to gainful work gave these women accreditation in the eyes of society, even if this income was directed towards the family. Ferree (1990) adds that the perception that women’s paid employment as a non-traditional activity or as something that is intruding on their prior responsibilities needs to be revised and revisited to reflect current
responsibilities of women include providing income for the family as well. Going back to their previous employment was a form of coping mechanism in dealing with issues of gender and stereotypical beliefs of motherhood. Houston and Marks, (2003) comment on how planning ahead plays a vital role in the success of women’s transitions back to work after the birth of their children.

5.1.1 Emotional and Physical Wellbeing

Childbirth and mothering brought about an array of different feeling amongst women. The participants spoke about how motherhood took them by surprise and how they felt unprepared when the new baby came into the picture as Jane (T1, p1, 3) explained, “l-esperjenza li kelli qisu hadd ma jippreparak ghaliha.” This is in line with local findings by Borg Xuereb (2008) where participants felt unprepared for the impact the child had on the family. It could be that women’s expectations of motherhood are influenced by false ideologies and mistaken expectations and when faced with the reality of the situation they have no other way but to accept that their life has changed forever. In fact they realised that their life had changed drastically “mil-lejl ghan-nhar”, (Ann T2, p3, 85). This drastic change could generate conflict between spouses as was shown in studies by Mauthner (1999), Weaver and Ussher, (1997) and Borg Xuereb, (2008). Mauthner (1999) linked this conflict with the possibility of depression after childbirth. However, this concept is not clear and it does not necessarily mean that all women who experience conflict will suffer from some form of depressive illness. Adding to this challenge is women’s sense of obligation to return to gainful work after just a limited period of time to spend with their child. This caused the participants much distress, fear and anxiety. The participants wished they had more time to spend with their infants and this is similar
to the findings of Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) and Borg Xuereb (2008) that found that women felt that precious time with their baby was lost since they had to re-enter the workforce, especially in the first week or two.

Besides this, participants had to deal with feelings about their changed status as women and the loss of their former selves. They also had to come to terms with changes in their relationship with their husbands. While all this was happening participants also had to deal with fatigue that followed childbirth; some were still in pain because of certain childbirth procedures while learning to care for a newborn baby. Going back to work combined with all these changes resulted in feelings of exhaustion. Lilly in particular exhibiting the most profound consequences. One cannot suggest however that exhaustion is a true response to mothering and all that it involves as we would be implying that women are simply passive victims of social conditioning (Mauthner, 1999).

Upon re-entering the workforce after the birth of their babies some women apparently grew more sensitive to others’ perceptions of them, especially when it came to their changed bodies and their overall poor health (looking and feeling tired and exhausted). Rose struggled with feelings of insecurity as she took over her job from a competent temporary worker who had replaced her while she was away on maternity leave. The experiences shared amongst these women highlight the multifaceted dynamics between colleagues during this transition mainly between working mothers who share different experiences and preferences. Furthermore, Catherine, (T2, p4, 134) explained how having other mothers to share experiences with was enjoyable and allows you to learn, “il-fatt li jkolkok ma’ min titkellem u ma’ min taqsam l-
Despite this, they agreed how individual experiences could not be generalised to all women as all women live through different situations. This is in line with other international findings who recognise that there is no right or wrong way of doing things (Hand & Hughes, 2004; Pocock, 2003; Probert & Murphy, 2001).

5.1.2 Support Systems

After childbirth the women noticed that their child became the centre of attention and focus for many key players around them, namely their spouses, immediate family such as their parents and siblings, friends and colleagues. The support offered by these important individuals with regards to childcare, emotional and physical support along with household and domestic aide was credited with having a positive impact upon the general experiences of these women as Tina (T3, p3, 79) explained when she said, “Kieku ma kellix min jghinni kienet tkun differenti l-hajja u diffidi iktar.” They acknowledged that being supported throughout this transition was an important factor in helping maintain their mental health, possibly the reason behind not suffering from postnatal depression. This finding is consistent with previous research regarding maternal depression and social support (Beck, 2001; Cooper & Murray, 1998; Feldman et al., 2004; Mills, Finchilescu & Lea, 1995; O’Hara, Schlechte, Lewis & Varner, 1991; O’Hara & Swain, 1996). Having the opportunity to speak about their worries and concerns with their spouse, relevant others or even with the midwife was seen as important form of support for the women and was also deemed relevant in another local study by Borg Xuereb, (2008). Women credited communication with others as a step forward and they stated that talking about a problem made it seem better.
Workplace support was an external force that had a direct impact on women’s experiences of transitioning back into the work-place. Colleagues and managers played a critical role in these women’s transition. All women praised their colleagues for their invaluable support. Interacting with them was very important in the experience of these ten mothers. However, not all employers were as supportive. Not all managers were responsive to the needs of these women in their changed situations and Tina (T2, p.5, 169) talked about what her superior told her, “qalli trid tkisser il-pjanijiet tieghek u toqghod bifors ghal overtime”, (you have to change your plans and accept to stay for overtime.) Such employers were portrayed as being insensitive to the needs of these new mothers. Some women stated that they encountered difficulty in retrieving adequate information regarding maternity leave policy from their place of work. Research showed that employers often fail to provide adequate information about maternity policies (Liu & Buzzanell, 2004; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). This lack of information in turn hinders women who would like to plan ahead.

The women who worked in environments that were more flexible than others seemed to have a better overall experience than others. Research has shown that flexible workplace arrangements have positive effects on a woman’s decision to go back to work (Desai & Waite, 1991; Estes & Glass, 1996; Glass & Riley, 1998; Houston & Marks, 2003; McRae, 1993). This positive impact was most evident in Beth, Nicole and Francesca’s experiences, who all worked in the public services. Studies also showed that the more supportive mothers perceived their place of work as being throughout their transition back to work, the more committed they were (Lyness, Thompson, Francesco & Judiesch, 1999; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2005). Perhaps this
could be the reason underlying Lilly's unease upon going back to work after childbirth as she lacked the support of her employer. Women who felt supported were more likely to work longer and go back to work earlier (Houston & Marks, 2003, Liu & Buzzanell, 2004). The way these women perceived that they were being supported at their place of work affected their general experience. Rose and Lilly felt that their lack of support at the workplace was related to their managers' male gender. These women appeared vulnerable in this situation as they were helpless and had to accept their situation without protesting since they could not afford to leave their work due to financial constraints. This brings about issues of gender which will be discussed further along this chapter. Francesca, on the other hand, perceived a connection with her boss as she too had children and worked with teleworking as she did after returning to her previous job. She commented how she perceived her boss to be more understanding towards her new situation having gone through it herself. No literature was found that supported the notion that mothers feel more comfortable with and more supported by their managers when these are parents or more importantly mothers themselves. This perception is intimately related to gender issues.

Moreover, what was also evident was the lack of practical support at the workplace for these women. Only two women (Beth and Nicole) both working in the public services were aware that they had a day care on site along with the possibility of a private room that could be used for expressing breast milk if the need arose. It is as if society expects these mothers to carry on working but is not helping them in a concrete way by providing supportive structures. Such women in today's world are still being oppressed because of their gender and role expectations from society.
While more women are participating in the labour force, more needs to be done to break down structural and psychological barriers that hinder women in their re-entering paid employment or that make it difficult for them to return. There has already been considerable improvement both in terms of employment conditions as well as in terms of policy and more public sector employees are making use of such benefits (Gonzi, 2009). However, the provision for care services for children and other dependants needs to be regulated and enforced by adequate legislation. It appears that women working in the private sector are even more discriminated against at their workplace than their counterparts in the public sector. The introduction of a teleworking policy has also been a step in the right direction as is the ETC campaign Nista’ – Sharing Work-Life Responsibilities (ETC, 2011).

5.1.3 Experiences of Going Back to Work out of a Sense of Duty

The place of women in modern society has changed in the past few decades. Arguably they have more opportunities within the labour market than ever before (Knowles, Nieuwenhuis & Smit, 2009). While some women chose to return to work after childbirth driven by career aspirations (Jayita & Murali, 2009; Martin, 2000), the women in this particular study all commented that they had returned to work because of financial obligations, a finding which is comparable to the findings of Hand and Hughes (2004), and Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) where financial constraints also acted as a determining factor in driving mothers back to work after childbirth. The women in my study felt that the economic burden had to be shared with their husbands. It is as if they were only returning to work out of a sense of duty towards their family. This sharing between mothers and their partners of the burden
and necessity of paid work was also demonstrated in a study by Edwards, Callender & Reynolds (2005) in which participants spoke about sharing the financial responsibility of raising a family so that their partner would not be over burdened by being the sole financial provider.

While the financial situation of these women acted as an external force influencing the choice of their return to the workforce after childbirth which was similar to the findings of Himmewlweit and Sigala (2003) and Hall (1987), their financial situation also impacted on the amount of planning that was required to try to make the most of the transition. This economic context partly determined the levels of stress and satisfaction experienced by working mothers. Participants in my study were used to living a dual earner lifestyle and they felt that this had to be sustained after the birth of their first born. Their strong commitment towards their family obliged them to return to paid employment albeit they would rather have spent more time with their babies as was also shown in a study Leach, Barnes, Nichols, Goldin, Stein, Sylva, Malmberg and the FCCC team, (2006). Francesca (Tl, p10, 369) explained “Kieku komdu noqoghod hawn jahasra u nkun full-time mummy” (I would have stayed at home to be a full-time mommy had I been well off.) Returning to work was considered an obligatory adjustment period by the participants in my study as they would have preferred to do without it since they were still trying to get used to their new role as a mother which was going to be disrupted. They had to let go of what had become a comfort zone to them to adjust to a new lifestyle.
5.1.4 Mother’s Experiences of Letting Go

Having to go back to work and leaving the child behind was described as the most negative aspect of the whole experience. Cronin (2003) also found mothers having difficulty in letting go of their babies to go back to work. Not being there for their child initially made them feel like ‘lesser mothers’, as if they had failed their child as Schindler Zimmerman et al., (2001) found in a study that revealed guilt arising from social pressure placed on women due to pervading stereotypical social norms. Before actually returning to the workforce, the women thought that without having exclusive intimate contact with their child, they believed that the baby would not remember them as was similar in Hall’s study (1987). Moreover, these women felt at a loss as they had to share their child-care responsibilities with others. They felt as if it was them who really knew what their baby needed and no other carer could match the ‘know how’ of a mother. Ella (TI, p1, 28) commented on how “L-omm hija deijem l-omm. Bhal l-omm ma hemm hadd” which means that the mother is always a mother. There is nobody like a mother. Moreover, their descriptions actually highlighted their need to be with their baby rather than the other way around. It is as if they needed to be there with their child to be able to function properly. These women had to let go of their previous selves and make sacrifices in order to accommodate their family’s needs. Another major issue that was brought up during these women’s descriptions of their situations was the fear of going to miss out on their infant’s developmental milestones as Lilly (TI, p5, 150) explains how she “might not be with him when he says his first word or when he crawls for the first time”. This local finding concurred with earlier ones by Mann & Thornburg (1987) where mothers felt guilty as they realised that they were missing developmental milestones in their children’s life. Although these women made sacrifices to improve their family life they were the
ones who were going to miss out on important aspects of their child's life. Consequently, despite being their mother and their primary caregiver, they would be deprived of the pleasure of savouring every moment of the infant's life.

5.2 Lightning Strikes on Rejoining the Workforce

These participants discussed the stresses involved in dealing with multiple roles at the same time. Certain roles took over others, and retaining one's individuality became more of a struggle as it was always put aside to accommodate the needs of others as Tina \((T1, p9, 319)\) rightfully said "titraskura nagra lilek innifsek", (you sort of abandon yourself.) Working mothers battle against time and learn to use it more wisely. Role overload leads to a shift in their day-to-day relationships and their priorities. The women spoke about how this transition affected their overall health, and they also noted a change in their infant with regards to temperament. Upon re-entering the workforce these women move on to another transition phase or (l'imen' or 'liminoid') as they had to get used to their changed lifeworld as working mothers as described in van Gennep's transitional theory (1960). This transition phase according to van Gennep (1960) occurs when one passes from one role or state into another.

5.2.1 Women's Experiences of Role Overload

Having added another role to the ones they already had, the women in this study talked about how having to do more things in less time resulted in feeling
"overwhelmed" as Rose explained (T1, p7, 226.) This correlated to the findings of Hall (1987) and Choi et al., (2005) that also reported participants’ feeling of being overwhelmed due to their unrealistic expectations they previously held regarding motherhood. The women felt as if they did not have enough energy or time to meet the demands placed on them by others. This is comparable to the findings of Hall (1987). This raises the issue of the perception of working mothers as ‘superwomen’, who have to do it all and do it well. As explained by Ussher, et al., (2000) cultural representations of femininity in today’s world are that women are able to cope with various competing demands and are hailed as ‘superwomen’. This is congruent with the findings of my study since women felt obliged to live up to all their responsibilities in a society that does not do its best to help these women, as Lilly (T1, p3, 99) rightfully explained, "women are depicted as super people and if anything is thrown at them they should be able to juggle” While our family values accounted for the support these women received by their family of origin, the same could not be said of the support received at their place of work. This lack of support and understanding at the workplace served as a hindrance for these women who were trying hard to strike a balance between work and family life.

5.2.2 Changing Relationships

Malta offers a unique backdrop in the study of family matters. The unity of a family is an important value embedded in our culture (Tabone 1995; Borg Xuereb, 2008). Every aspect of the participants’ lives was affected when they had a baby and even more so when they returned to work. This concurs with findings by Choi et al., (2005) in whose study women described how their lives had changed completely. They had to get used to new routines. The women spoke about how exhausting and
time-consuming life with an infant was but at the same time referring to motherhood as being the best experience of their life. These women, however, had to renegotiate the dynamics of their relationships mainly with themselves, their spouses, and their newborn child. Participants in my study noticed how their relationship with their husbands changed. These women struggled to find time to spend with their spouses as this time was now replaced with “family time”. This corresponds with the findings of Borg Xuereb, (2008) as her study showed that while couples became collaborators during pregnancy, during the postpartum they hardly found any time for each other as the newborn child took up most of their time. Moreover, Broderick (1993) also found that a newborn baby could act as a source of competition for the couple’s restricted time, space and energy.

Women commented on how they noticed a shift in their relationship with their infant. Since their time together decreased, the restricted time they spent together was seen as more enjoyable, “hin ta' kwalita”, (quality time.) However, the interviewees also commented on the fact that finding time for themselves had become now more than ever a struggle. Mothers placed their own needs and interests to a side in order to ensure that other family members got what they needed. Weaver & Ussher (1997) showed similar findings in participants who spoke about the self-sacrificing aspect of motherhood. Feminist theory and the cultural construct of mothers who are interested only in the care of others, and who are expected to be self-sacrificing come into play here (Hays, 1996). Despite wanting to be ‘good mothers’ (Berry, 1993; Ribbens, 1994) by the end of the interviews they commented on how important finding time for one’s self was. They believed that despite searing impossible demands at the beginning of this journey, these demands eventually turned out to be manageable as
long as time was well used. There appeared to be a consensus that their child became their number one priority as Catherine (T3, p5, 170) explained “l-ewwel it-tifla” (my daughter comes first.) Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) also noticed a change in priorities with motherhood. Children rather than work became the “number one priority”.

5.2.3 Health Implications

The World Health Organisation (1948) describes health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and is not just the absence of a disease or an infirmity. These women felt unhealthy as they were tired, exhausted and overwhelmed by everything they had to do. This in turn caused them more stress and even drove some women to over indulge in food. This reasoning made the situation only worse as they were already struggling with changed body images. Finn (2000) adds that nutritional requirements may be neglected by working mothers in the quest to complete and meet all targets at home as well as at work. Francesca (T2, p2, 73) explained how she sometimes forgot to eat or did not have time to when she said, “gie/i ninsa niekol jiew ma jkollix hin niekol”.

Feelings of exhaustion could have been addressed had the women received more support in the house by their husbands and at work. These women were struggling to cope during the first few weeks despite their husband’s “help” as this was not enough. The use of “ir-ragel jghinni”, (my husband helps me) also shows gender issues. Women did not portray their husband as someone who shared their responsibilities with them but as their helper. This implies that housework and taking care of the child is the mothers’ job and not the fathers’. This use of language here is
very important as it highlights that society is still patriarchal. There is a difference between having full responsibility for a job and giving occasional help (Craig, 2006). The role of helper was far less demanding. In many cases, men’s help with domestic labour was not obligatory and routine but a matter of choice (McMahon 1999). Men might help with tasks, but the “job” remained the woman’s responsibility.

Moreover, dramatic changes in family life with regards to an increase in the number of women returning to work after the birth of their children have resulted in altered experiences of many young children worldwide (Marshall, 2004). These infants are spending more and more time with other people, apart from their mother, namely their grandparents, babysitters or other carers instead of spending precious time with their own mothers. This was reiterated by the mothers themselves. With regards to feeding for example, while it is recommended that mothers give their young a minimum of six months exclusive breastfeeding, many women do not manage to breastfeed their child for six months because of lack of support. Eight of these women switched to formula milk before going back to work in order to be sure that the child would get used to it. This is in line with findings in Ryan, Zhou and Arensberg, (2006) where much less employed mothers were seen to continue breastfeeding when compared to stay-at-home mothers. Once again working mothers are the victims of conflicting messages in that society tells mothers to breastfeed exclusively for six months as advised by WHO (2001) but then women are not supported so they cannot comply with this directive. This generates feelings of guilt as they are not maximising their child’s well-being. As this might impact on child’s health, it may be necessary to introduce labour policies that facilitate breastfeeding or the expression of breast milk at work (Baker & Milligan, 2008). Increasing the
duration of maternity leave and supporting breastfeeding at the workplace may go far in helping women continue breastfeeding while offering the best conditions for their child, as Schmeid and Lupton (2001) emphasised that 'breast is best' for infants. Moreover, one must not forget the mother-child bond that is strengthened by breastfeeding (Hays, 1996; Knaak, 2005). Although Malta voted against the European Parliament’s proposition to extend maternity leave from fourteen weeks to twenty weeks, this proposal is still on EU agenda for further debate (European Parliament, 2010).

Moreover, the participants commented on how they noticed a change in their infant’s temperament ever since their return to work as Lilly (T2, p1, 21) explained, “He has gotten into a very bad and cranky mood and attitude.” Infant-mother interactions and mother-infant attachment relationships have been shown to have an impact on infant’s temperament (Han, 2005; Strazdins et al., 2006; van den Boom, 1994). The relationship between mother and child during the first year of life is seen to exert a strong influence on infants’ temperament (van den Boom, 1994).

5.2.4 Gender Issues

Media portrays women as caring, nurturing and sexual objects while men are almost always viewed as being macho (Craig, 1992). This can eventually lead to discrimination and cause a barrier to equality. Maltese women are used to having men controlling the political and religious spheres and being assigned high positions at the workplace. The latter are generally the ones who are in charge of taking major decisions in society. As a result of this, modern day women still tend to associate males with authority. This principle propagates chauvinism (Borg, 2011). Knowingly
or not men and women engage in power sharing but when one tries to confront issues such as inequality and abuse of power, women are faced with an uneven playing field as shown in Tina’s situation (T1, p4, 137) “indirettament qalli kieku konna nafu ma konniex ntuk il-promotion.” The underlying meaning is that if her employers had known about her pregnancy they would not have promoted her. This disparity of power is reinforced and encouraged by our patriarchal society. However, any attempts to apply new methods to equalize gender balance, are met with stiff opposition. Radical feminist theory has a long history of explaining women’s behaviour in response to male oppression (Echols, 1989; Flax, 1990; Featherstone & Trimble, 1997). These explanations generally take one of two positions: women defer to their subordination out of powerlessness and self-preservation and secondly, women are conditioned to adhere to the male dominated structure of society, internalising their oppression (Echols, 1989)

While a great number of men enjoy the benefits of having a career and family, their wives play the role of homemakers and stay at home to take care of the house and their families. Women who actually do go back to work have to struggle with the demanding task of juggling work and family life. Hochschild and Machung (1989) explained how gender roles force working mothers to take up the “second shift” when they return home. Due to fear, lack of self-confidence, culturally ingrained attitudes and lack of support structures, the full potential of many competent women is lost. Borg (2011) argues that unless we stand up for equality of burdens, we cannot talk about equality of opportunity. This was supported by Rose (personal communication via email) when she explained that when mothers are sufficiently
determined and try to improve their work conditions through negotiations with their managers, everything can be made possible.

Barriers to equality need to be addressed to ensure that men and women are better exposed to a wide range of roles, both traditional and non-traditional; in employment, social, family and leisure activities (Bartolo, 2005). Legislation can go a long way and solve this problem by promoting parental leave especially among fathers. This will in turn help to bring up a more widespread sharing of the responsibilities of parenthood. Moreover, employers will no longer see the women as a liability or a hindrance to have around. Maltese society needs to send a clear message that men are as important as women when it comes to nurturing their young and taking care of family life as this can help in reducing inequalities (Attard, 2011).

5.3 Women’s Experiences of Having the Best of Both Worlds

After settling into their new lifeworld, hence in the incorporation phase as described by van Gennep (1960), the women spoke about how this experience made them realise that they had their own identity as individuals as well and were not just mothers, as Beth (T1, p1, 25) rightfully explained “din l-esperjenza ġagħlitni nirrealizza li jiena persuna mhux omm biss”. This corresponds to the findings of Vincent and Ball (2006) who spoke about ‘the liberation of working’ (p.78) which provided women with a publically recognised sense of self-fulfilment. It also provided them with adult relationships separate from their identities of mothers. This new experience of a changed lifeworld these women found themselves in is related to their society and it is important for this to be acknowledged since this is a phenomenological study. The phenomenological aspect of this study enabled the
researcher to interpret the experiences of these women and to probe deep into their descriptions.

5.3.1 Being Family-Friendly

Female employment rates (37%) and total fertility rates (1.4) for the Maltese islands are below the EU average (Eurostat, 2009). This could indicate that combining work with family life is still a struggle for many women. Previous research findings suggest that providing family-friendly working conditions and a supportive work environment may improve mothers' transitions into the workplace after maternity leave and actually encourage them to go back to work after childbirth (Galinsky & Stein, 1990; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Warner & Johnson, 1995). While family-friendly initiatives for employees working in the Maltese public sector are becoming increasing popular, the private sector is still behind in enforcing such measures. This was evident in the descriptions given by the participants. While workers in the public sphere can benefit from a 12 month career break, the option to work with reduced hours until the child reaches 12 years of age and the possibility to work from home via telework, the same cannot be said for the private service. Parents working in the private sector of our society cannot avail themselves of these benefits and women are expected back in for work after fourteen weeks of full pay maternity leave in accordance with the Employment and Industrial Relations Act (2002). They may also choose to take 3 months of unpaid parental leave or make use of 15 hours of urgent family leave (which is really deducted from their annual leave). Parental leave may be used by the fathers working in private sectors. However, there is very little indication that they are actually benefiting from this (Borg, 2009).
Women's needs in today's world must be balanced between the family and work outside the home. Therefore from a practical aspect maternity leave entitlement and work-place facilities should encourage breast-feeding. Other forms of structural support could be partial/full maternity leave entitlement to paternity leave, nursing breaks and workplace facilities for expressing and storing milk. Such initiatives as crèche facilities and lactation breaks should be promoted by the health sector (Busuttil, Abela & Borg, 2000).

A comparison between local working conditions and conditions in other European countries reveals that Maltese families are at a disadvantage when it comes to combining family life with employment. Child-care provision is limited and this prevents mothers from returning to the labour market. As the child grows older, problems persist as school hours are short and Malta also has very long summer holidays (Borg, 2009). If a mother chooses to return to the workforce, compromises have to be made and if they do not find flexible working conditions, they might choose to stay at home. Refusing to offer more opportunities for parents to combine employment with their family is not economically effective either. By becoming more family-friendly, more women might return to their jobs after the birth of their children, hopefully raising Malta's low female employment rate. Family-friendly measures may in turn help maintain future pensions. Moreover, generous family-friendly measures and an increase in paid maternity leave may alleviate some of the problems generated by Maltese demography and decreasing birth rates.
5.3.2 Involving the midwife to help with the transition.

The mothers in this study identified the midwife as a key player in helping other mothers cope with such a transition. They claimed that it would have been very helpful if they had received some sort of continuity by their midwife during the postnatal period. Even at home as they felt as if they could relate to her more. They showed interest in speaking with the community midwife. This could imply the need to extend community care to mothers. It was also suggested that a postnatal course be included in the parentcraft education programme with regards to employment and balancing work and family life as these women felt unprepared for such a change. Tina (T3, p3, 98) explained “x'ser jigri wara, x'hemm fil-futur hadd ma jghidlek” (nobody tells you what will happen after, nobody tells you what the future has in store for you.) They lacked knowledge and felt as if the midwife could have been the right person to discuss these topics with them. They thought that the midwife could make fathers more aware of the increased load and multiple changes as Rose (T2, p8, 286) explained “Trid iddahhal l-rigiel ukoll biex forsi jifhmu, li isma ha jkun hemm hafna load, hafna changes” They all spoke highly of midwives in general and showed that they had total trust in them. Since locally all midwives are female, they felt as if she could truly understand them better. This finding is in line with another local finding by Borg Xuereb (2008).
5.4 Methodological discussion: Strengths and Limitations

5.4.1 Strengths

Since this is the first local study focusing on returning to work after childbirth, one of the main strengths is that the findings are of significant importance to the growing body of knowledge on motherhood and maternity leave issues, especially since the findings here reveal the in-depth lived experiences of these women.

From a methodological standpoint this study offered information about the experiences of these women that would not have been obtained had the quantitative paradigm been used. The interviews conducted gave the women the opportunity to voice their feelings and to reflect upon their lived experiences. This method also allowed the women to reflect upon and think about the future of their family life and personal life as it allowed time and space for them to go into detail about their changed realities and this was seen to be therapeutic for them as Lilly explained in the last interview, "It is a cheaper way of therapy. I think it's great! I think everyone should do this." (T3, p4, 138)

As previously mentioned in Chapter 3 of this study, the women felt empowered in telling me their stories as they knew that I did not have firsthand experience of this transition. However, the fact that I am a midwife gave them the opportunity to express their worries and elaborate on challenges that they faced perhaps as they thought that I could make a change or at least put forward their suggestions as described by them. This could have resulted in the presence of bias in their stories as they could have focused on negative aspects of their overall experience in voicing
their concerns rather than elaborating on what was good about it. This point, could be looked at as both a strength and a limitation of this study.

Another major issue that was brought to light in this study was that the experiences of Maltese married women of going back to work after just having had a baby in today's society were highly dependent on their relationships with their spouses and other family members, as well as the support gained from their place of work and from the midwife. The midwife should be involved in the dynamics of the new emerging family, giving support and advice whenever necessary in order to provide holistic care to her clients. So, this study highlights the importance of the midwife working in the community to ensure the best possible outcomes for all families in transition. This definitely adds strength to the study in relation to midwifery practice and education.

### 5.4.2 Limitations

Along with the limitations already discussed in Chapter 3, had I chosen to use both paradigms to study this phenomenon more strength could have been given to the findings. The advantage this would have brought about would have been the added value of gaining a more complete picture of the experiences of going back to work after childbirth since the weakness of one paradigm would have been compensated by the other (Corner, 1991).

Moreover, the fact that I am a midwife and have some experience dealing with women going through transitions might have affected my phenomenological interpretation of the data. Furthermore, I am still a novice in phenomenological interpretation and therefore this is a limitation in itself.
Owing to the small sample size results cannot be generalized to the whole Maltese population of first-time mothers who are returning to work after childbirth. However, generalisability was not a priority in this study, which is not typical of qualitative research.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has given an overview of the main themes derived from this study with detailed discussion and comparisons with other literature. Mothers' role in society is changing and will continue to do so. While mothers are still considered as the primary care givers of their children, they also lead challenging lives while contributing to the labour market. The next chapter concludes the study by giving an overall summary of the whole thesis and discussing the implications of this research while giving recommendations and suggestions for future research, practice, management and education.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This chapter begins by giving a brief summary of the overall study along with the implications. It then moves on to give recommendations that can improve and support the needs of women with regards to policy, management, education and practice. Themes comprising an outline for potential research complete this thesis.

6.1 Summary and Implications of Overall Study

While the experiences of motherhood have been widely investigated by various researchers both locally and internationally (Bailey, 2000; Borg Xuereb, 2008; Durkin et al., 2001; Mauthner, 1999; Nicolson, 1993; Weaver & Ussher, 1997) very few have focused on the simultaneous transition of motherhood and going back to work after childbirth. This study is in fact the first of its kind locally as it has tried to cast revealing light on the lived experiences of first-time mothers upon returning to employment after the birth of their baby.

The main aim of the study was to understand the experiences of these women who returned to work after fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave. As it was imperative for participants to be given the opportunity to express what was most meaningful to them, a qualitative paradigm was deemed to be the best method of investigation to be adopted. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from ten first-time
mothers at three specific time-frames. Data was analysed using IPA as described by Smith et al., (2009). Super-ordinate themes were elicited and findings were discussed and compared with other literature in light of the theoretical framework of the study.

Becoming a mother, especially for the first-time means taking on a lifelong responsibility; consequently balancing family life and paid employment was something central in these women’s lifestyles. While the commitment towards their careers or jobs was generally strong and the contribution they give to society was fulfilling, the challenge came when they tried to combine work and family life. Most of the time women manage to do so well but at other times they struggle to juggle work and family due to lack of support systems available and stereotypical beliefs about gender roles. This implies that our society needs to become more aware of the challenges faced by working mothers. Fathers need to become more attentive and sensitive to changes that occur in a woman's life and they must understand that they are important individuals in this transition. Another implication is that employers need to become aware that they play a crucial role when it comes to help balance work and family life. The women in this study also agreed that it would have been more beneficial to them if they had more time to spend with their child prior to having to go back to gainful work. This implies that they would like to see a change in local maternity leave policy that would increase the current fourteen-week allowance. The mothers were eager to speak about their experiences and challenges and this implies that they were interested in having people who can understand them such as midwives, available to discuss pertinent issues with.
6.2 Recommendations for Social Policy

➢ Strengthening family-friendly measures in order to try and achieve work-family balance, especially in the private sphere. These include flexible work arrangements, such as flexi-hours and telework. This not only ensures the stability of all employees and their families but also provides the long-term sustainability of the employer's own company (Gonzi, 2009).

➢ It would be ideal to extend local maternity leave from fourteen weeks to twenty three weeks which is the average duration of maternity leave in the European Union (Institute for Family Policy, 2008) for all new mothers who are gainfully employed. Since Malta voted against this, one may suggest that it is more feasible to extend maternity leave to approximately 18 weeks into the postnatal period.

6.3 Recommendations for Midwifery Education, Practice and Management

➢ Interventions by the midwife can help support mothers who plan to re-enter the workforce, as early as the pre-conception phase, during the antenatal period, the postnatal period and within the community.

➢ The critical role that the midwife can play in helping families should be introduced in local curricula and taught to student midwives. With regards to registered midwives, continuing professional development workshops could be organised.
Participants suggested using parentcraft education as a means of reaching out to such women who are contemplating such a change in their lives. They identified the need to have more classes in the postnatal period to discuss issues that were more pertinent to that period, topics that would support them during their transitions, such as time management, planning, stress management, coping strategies, balancing multiple roles and also awareness of local policies. Awareness of changing relationships and the importance of division of housework were also proposed as themes that could be developed in postnatal classes.

The community midwife may offer advice and support during her postnatal visits with new mothers. Providing women with the opportunity to speak about any concerns or worries they may have will go a long way to alleviate their distress and help them settle smoothly into their new lifeworld. Extending local community services may also be a beneficial measure that can provide concrete support. We must keep in mind that community support by midwives must be given its due importance if we are to invest in the future stability of Maltese families especially in view that there is no system of Health Visitors in Malta.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

It would be interesting to conduct a comparative study with women who chose to return to work after one year unpaid parental leave. This would be a comparative exercise that can provide insight into the experiences of the
participants in both groups. One could also examine how having more time with the child affects the overall experience, the woman herself and her relationships with her child and her husband vis-à-vis the women in the study presented here.

- Given that this phenomenon is so dependent upon support systems, perhaps a similar study to the one carried out but with single mothers would be an interesting exercise as differences or similarities in their experiences and explanations can be noted, analysed and interpreted.

- Moreover, one could also choose to investigate women who have already had children and would still be returning to work after the birth of their second or third child. It would be interesting to see if previous experience helps women transition back successfully into the workforce. Differences or similarities in the dynamics of the family and social support units may also be noted.

- This study has explored this phenomenon from the mother’s perspective. A similar study that focuses on the experiences of fathers who take only a few days of paternity leave and then go back to work soon after the birth of their baby would be extremely revealing and insightful. If enough participants were found, it would be interesting to compare the findings obtained from both mothers and fathers in order to gain a wider and deeper view of this issue.

- Since this study showed the responsibility of grandparents for the baby when the mother is at work, it would also be interesting to investigate this issue from their perspective. One could note their coping strategies, the effects on
their own personal health and the extent to which they had to sacrifice personal interests for the sake of the child.

6.5 Conclusion

This dissertation looked into the day-to-day experiences of women during their transition to the workforce after childbirth. It identified many challenges and concerns new mothers face during the transition of going back to gainful work after having had their first baby. Being specific to the Maltese population, this study has also contributed to the general and local understanding of diverse changes in women's lives. The findings disclosed the need for additional exploration through a process of replication and refinement in order to give a wider, many-sided view of the transition back into employment. Providing more family-friendly opportunities at the workplace can help to make a difference in the quality of the lives of women who go back to work. This study also highlighted the important role of midwives as instrumental in effecting positive changes in their communities by providing support in listening actively to working mothers' concerns and fears and offering advice that can help these women cope in their new lifeworlds.
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Dear Mother,

I am Georgette Spiteri and I am presently reading for an M. Sc. Health Science (Midwifery) degree. As part of my course requirements, I am conducting a research study entitled, 'Back to Work Following Childbirth: Women's Lived Experiences'. The aim of the study is to understand experiences of women who return to work after paid maternity leave. Hopefully, this study will reveal information that professional staff and mothers alike will be able to use in supporting other new mothers while preparing for this new chapter in their lives. In order to do this, I need to conduct some interviews with mothers who will be going through such an experience.

With this letter I am inviting you to participate in this study. Your participation will be greatly appreciated. If you agree to participate, you will be expected to take part in three one-on-one, audio tape recorded interviews with myself regarding your experience. These will be conducted at 12 weeks, 16 weeks and 20 weeks postpartum. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 1.30 hours of your time and can be carried out in a place that is most comfortable for you. I will need access to your telephone number in order to contact you to arrange for meetings. I will be the only person who will have access to this telephone number for the duration of data collection. These will then be discarded once the study is completed. Pseudo names will be used throughout the whole study. Hence anonymity and confidentiality will be respected at all times.

You are free to accept, refuse or withdraw from the study at any time during the research process and this will not affect you or your infant's care in any way.

Thank You

Georgette Spiteri
Lura Lejn ix-Xoghol Wara t-Twelid tat-Tarbija: L-Esperjenzi tan-Nisa

Ittra ta’ Informazzjoni

Ghaxija Omm,


Inti libera li taċċetta, tirrifjuta jew twaqqaf il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek f’kull ġin waqt dan l-istudju u dan mhux ser jaffettwa b’ebda mod il-kura tiegħek u tat-tarbija.

Grazzi

Georgette Spiteri
Back To Work Following Childbirth: Women's Lived Experiences

Consent Form

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Georgette Spiteri. I have been given written and verbal information about the purpose of the study and I also understand that I will need to take part in three (3) interviews with regards to my return to work following paid maternity leave. I am aware that these interviews will be audio recorded for the purpose of the study. I also understand that I am free to accept, refuse or stop participation at any time I choose without this having any affect on the care towards me or my infant. Moreover, I understand that I have the right to ask for the results if I wish to do so.

Participant: __________________________
Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Supervisor: Dr Rita Borg Xuereb
Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Researcher: Georgette Spiteri
Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Address: Manresa Mansions
Block D, Maisonette 1
Saint Domenica Street
Victoria Gozo, Malta.
Tel: 99841741
Lura Lejn x-Xoghol Wara t-Twelid tat-Tarbija: l-Esperjenzi tan-Nisa

Formula ta’ Kunsens


Participanta: ____________________  
Firma: ____________________  
Data: ____________________

Supervisor: Dr Rita Borg Xuereb  
Firma: ____________________  
Data: ____________________

Riċerkatriċi: Georgette Spiteri  
Indirizz: Manresa Mansions  
Blokk D, Maisonette 1  
Triq Santa Dminka,  
Rabat, Ghawdex.  
Numru tat-telefon: 99841741

Firma: ____________________  
Data: ____________________
Appendix C – Interview Guide Before Re-Entry - English Version

INTERVIEW GUIDE

BEFORE Returning to Work

1. PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE OF PLANNING TO GO BACK TO WORK AFTER YOUR PAID MATERNITY LEAVE.
   Prompt: What has this been like?
   Prompt: How about any thoughts and feelings now that you will soon back to work?

2. COULD YOU TELL ME WHAT ARE YOU EXPECTING OF THE TRANSITION FROM BEING CONTINUALLY WITH YOUR BABY TO COMMENCING WORK?
   Prompt: What is this like for you?

3. WHAT KIND OF HELP DO YOU PLAN TO RECEIVE?
   Prompt: Parents, siblings, friends, day care centres, nurseries etc
   Prompt: Financial, emotional, physical etc

4. WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST POSITIVE EXPERIENCES ABOUT GOING BACK TO WORK AFTER PAID MATERNITY LEAVE?
   Prompt: Why do you think so? Could you give me an example?

5. WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL BE THE MOST NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES ABOUT GOING BACK TO WORK AFTER PAID MATERNITY LEAVE?
   Prompt: Why do you think so? Could you give me an example?

6. HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR LIFE WILL CHANGE UPON RE-ENTERING THE WORKFORCE?

7. IF YOU GOT PREGNANT AGAIN, IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD WANT TO BE DIFFERENT?
   Prompt: Could you please give me a specific example?

8. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE A WOMAN WHO HAS JUST HAD HER FIRST CHILD AND IS PLANNING ON GOING BACK TO WORK AFTER PAID MATERNITY LEAVE?
   Prompt: How do you think this will help your overall experience?

We are now at the end of the interview. Is there anything that we did not cover that you would like to add before we finish recording? Feel free to give me feedback and make suggestions regarding what I might have not asked that is of importance to you.

Thank you again for talking to me. The information you provided will be very helpful. You may contact me if you have any further questions or comments. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule.
Interview Guide Before Re-entry - Maltese Version

GWIDA GHALL-INTERVISTA
QABEL ir-Ritorn Fuq il-Post tax-Xoghol

1. JEKK JOGHGBOK TISTA’ TGHIDLI FUQ L-ESPERJENZI U L-PJANIJET LI GHANDEK BIEX TERGA’ TIRRITORNA LURA FID-DINJA TAX-XOGHOLWARA LI JGHADDILEK IL- LEAVE TAL-MATERNITÀ.
Kif kien dan iż-zmien ghalik? X’inhuma l-hsibijiet tieghek meta taf li dalwaqt terga’ tiritorna lura fuq il-post tax-xoghol?

2. KIF TAHSEB LI SER TAFFETWAK IL-BIDLA, INTI LI S-SOLTU TKUN MAT-TARBIJA U ISSA SER TIRRITORNA LURA FUQ IL-POST TAX-XOGHOL?
Kif ser tkun ghalik din?

3. X’FORMA TA’ GHAJNUNA TAHSEB LI SER TIRCIEVI?
Mill-genituri, ahwa, hbieb, ċentri ta’ bi nhar tat-tfal, nurseries etc?
Finanzjarjament, emoczjonally, fizikament etc?

4. X’TAHSEB LI HUMA DAWK L-ESPERJENZI L-IKTAR POZITTIVI META TMUR LURA GHAX-XOGHOL WARA L-LEAVE TAL-MATERNITÀ?
Ghalfejn tahseb hekk? Tista’ taghti xi ezempji?

5. X’TAHSEB LI HUMA DAWK L-ESPERJENZI L-IKTAR NEGATTIVI META TMUR LURA GHAX-XOGHOL WARA L-LEAVE TAL-MATERNITÀ?
Ghalfejn tahseb hekk? Tista’ taghti xi ezempji?

6. KIF TAHSEB LI SER TINBIDEL HAJTEK META DARBA TIRRITORNA LURA FUQ IL-POST TAX-XOGHOL?

7. JEKK IKOLLOK TERGA’ TINQABAD TQILA, HEMM XI AFFARIJET LI KIEKU TIXTIEQ LI JKUNU DIFFERENTI?
Tista’ taghti xi ezempju specifiku?

8. X’ PARIRI TAGHTI LIL MARA LI GHADU KEMM KELLHA L-EWWEL TARBIJA U QIEGĦDA TIPPJANA BIEX TERGA’ LURA GHAX-XOGHOL WARA LI JGHADDILHA Z-ZMIEN TAL-LEAVE TAL-MATERNITÀ?
Kif tahseb li dan jista’ jghin lill-esperjenzi tieghek?


139
Appendix D – Interview Guide After Re-entry - English Version

INTERVIEW GUIDE

AFTER Returning to Work

1. PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE OF GOING BACK TO WORK AFTER YOUR PAID MATERNITY LEAVE.
   Prompt: What was it like?
   Prompt: How about any thoughts and feelings that you have had at the beginning of such an experience?

2. COULD YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE ACTUAL TRANSITION OF BEING CONTINUALLY WITH YOUR BABY TO STARTING WORK?
   Prompt: What was this like for you?

3. WHAT KIND OF HELP ARE YOU RECEIVING?
   Prompt: Parents, siblings, friends, day care centres, nurseries etc
   Prompt: Financial, emotional, physical etc

4. WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MOST POSITIVE EXPERIENCES ABOUT GOING BACK TO WORK AFTER PAID MATERNITY LEAVE?
   Prompt: Why do you think so? Could you give me an example?

5. WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MOST NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES ABOUT GOING BACK TO WORK AFTER PAID MATERNITY LEAVE?
   Prompt: Why do you think so? Could you give me an example?

6. HOW HAS YOUR LIFE CHANGED UPON RE-ENTERING THE WORKFORCE?
   Prompt: How did you react to such changes?

7. IF YOU GOT PREGNANT AGAIN, IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD WANT TO BE DIFFERENT?
   Prompt: Could you please give me a specific example?

8. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE A WOMAN WHO HAS JUST HAD HER FIRST CHILD AND IS PLANNING TO GO BACK TO WORK AFTER PAID MATERNITY LEAVE?
   Prompt: How has this helped your overall experience?

We are now at the end of the interview. Is there anything that we did not cover that you would like to add before we finish recording? Feel free to give me feedback and make suggestions regarding what I might have not asked that is of importance to you.

Thank you again for talking to me. The information you provided will be very helpful. You may contact me if you have any further questions or comments. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule.
Interview Guide After Re-entry - Maltese Version

GWIDA GHALL-INTERVISTA
Wara r-ritorn fuq il-post tax-Xoghol

1. JEKK JOGHGbOK TISTA’ TGHIDLl FUQ L-ESPERJENZA TIEGHEK
ISSA Li RRITORNAJT LURA FID-DINJA TAX-XOGHOL WARA Li
GHADDIELEK IL- LEAVE TAL-MATERNITÀ?
Kif kien dan iż-zmien ghalik? X’hassejt fil-bidu ta’ din l-esperjenza?

2. KIF KIENET DIN IL-BIDLA GHALIK, INTI Li S-SOLTU KONT TKUN
MAT-TARBIJA U ISSA RRITORNAJT LURA FUQ IL-POST TAX-
XOGHOL?

3. X’FORMA TA’ GHAJNUNA QIEGHDA TIRĊIEVI?
Mill-genituri, ahwa, hbieb, ċenti ta’ bi nhar tat-tfal, nurseries etc?
Finanzjarjament, emozzjonalment, fiżikament etc?

4. LIEMA KIENU DAWK L-ESPERJENZI L-IKTAR POŻITTTIVI TA’ META
MORT LURA GHAX-XOGHOL WARA L-LEAVE TAL-MATERNITÀ?
Ghalfejn tahseb hekk? Tista’ taght xi ezempji?

5. LIEMA KIENU DAWK L-ESPERJENZI L-IKTAR NEGATTIVI TA’ META
MORT LURA GHAX-XOGHOL WARA L-LEAVE TAL-
MATERNITÀ?
Ghalfejn tahseb hekk? Tista’ taght xi ezempji?

6. KIF INBIDLET HAJTEK ISSA Li RRITORNAJT LURA FUQ IL-POST
TAX-XOGHOL?
Kif affetwawk dawn il-bidliet?

7. JEKK IKOLLOK TERGA TINQABAD TQILA, HEMM XI AFFARIJIET Li
KIEKU TIXTIEQ Li JKUNU DIFFERENT?
Tista’ taght xi ezempju specificu?

8. X’ PARIRI TAGHTI LIL-MARA Li GHADHA KEMM KELLHA L-
EWWEL TARBIJA U QIEGHDA TIPPJANA BIEX TERGA’ LURA
GHAX-XOGHOL WARA Li GHADDILHA Ż-ZMIEN TAL-LEAVE TAL-
MATERNITÀ?
Kif tahseb li dan jista jghin lill-esperjenzi tieghek ingenerali?

Wasalna fl-ahhar tal-intervistà. Hemm xi haga li tahseb li hallejna barra u tixtieq
tghaddi xi kummenti dwarha qabel ma nwaqqaf ir-‘recording’? Tiddejjaq xejn milli
tikkummenta jew taght xi suggerimenti dwar xi affarrijiet li jien ma saqsejtekx
dwarhom u li ghalik ghandhom importanza.

Grazzi mill-gdid talli aċċettajt li taqsam dawn l-esperjenzi mieghi. L-informazzjoni li
tajni ser tkun utili hafna. Meta trid tista’ tikkuntattjani biex issaqsin xi mistoqsijiet
jew tghaddi xi kummenti ohra. Grazzi talli offrejt il-hin tieghek biex tghinni f’dan l-
istudju.

141
Appendix E – Guidelines for Transcription and Analysis

GUIDELINES FOR TRANSCRIPTIONS

The transcribed interviews were analysed using the following format as suggested by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Step 1: Reading and re-reading
- Listen to the audio-recording at least once while first reading the transcript. Imagine the voice of the participant during subsequent readings to allow for a more complete analysis.
- Read each individual transcript several times.
- Record some of your most powerful recollections of the interview experience itself or observations about the transcript.

Step 2: Initial noting
- The aim here is to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data.
- Contains a descriptive core of comments which have a clear phenomenological focus and stay close to the participants’ explicit meaning.
- Developing from this comes more interpretative noting by looking at language that they use, thinking about context of their concerns and identifying a more abstract idea of what is being said.
- On one margin of the text write down any comments while on the other take note of any emerging themes.

Step 3: Developing emergent themes
- Go back to the transcripts and try to organise the data while reducing the volume of detail. This involves an analytic shift from merely using the transcripts to using the initial notes of step 2.
- This stage is very important for personal interpretation to help develop emerging themes.

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes
- This step involves the mapping of how one theme fits with another.
- Not all emergent themes need to be incorporated into this stage of analysis, some may be discarded.
- Take note of the research question and its scope at this stage.
- By using ‘abstraction’ identify patterns between emergent themes and develop a sense of what can be called a super-ordinate theme. This involves the development of a new cluster.
‘Subsumption’ can also help since the emergent theme itself acquires a superordinate status as it helps to bring together a series of related themes.

Through ‘Polarization’ oppositional relationships between emergent themes may be noted.

Identify the contextual or narrative elements within an analysis to help bring out themes.

One can also take note of the frequency with which a theme is supported.

Importance to the function of the theme is also necessary.

Next, the researcher should attempt a graphic representation of the structure of the emergent themes.

**Step 5: Moving to the next case**

Moving to the next participant’s transcript and repeating the process, treating each case on its own terms in order to do justice to its individuality.

Try to bracket ideas emerging from the analysis of other cases in order to keep with IPA’s idiographic commitment allowing new themes to emerge with each case.

**Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases**

Identify which themes are most potent through noticing how a theme in one case illuminates a different case.

The result of this step can form a table showing how the themes for the group are nested within super-ordinate themes and illustrating the theme for each participant.

Deeper analysis by the researcher is needed here to add depth to the findings.
To be completed by Faculty Research Ethics Committee

We have examined the above proposal and advise

Acceptance ✓ Refusal Conditional acceptance

For the following reason/s:

Signature: [Signature]

Date: 01/09/2010

To be completed by University Research Ethics Committee

We have examined the above proposal and grant

Acceptance Refusal Conditional acceptance

For the following reason/s:

Signature: [Signature]

Date: [Date]
Ms Georgette Spiteri (nee Thewma)
Manresa Mansions D
Maisonette 1
Sta. Domenica Street
Victoria VCT 9037
Gozo Malta

Re: Your Request for a Research/Project within Primary Health Dept. entitled “Going Back to Work Following Childbirth: Women’s Lived Experiences.”

Dear Ms Spiteri,

I am pleased to inform you that your request to carry out the research within the department has been fully approved.

May I inform you that as we have to abide to the Data Protection Law, we cannot provide you with a list of data subjects’ contact details unless the data subjects and the researcher are both public officers. The data subjects also have to sign a consent form that also includes a data protection statement prior to participating (see E below). Any modifications of this approach would have to be first discussed with the data protection officer. Where statistics are involved, only data in terms of age, sex etc can be forwarded to you but not names of individuals.

May I bring to your attention that the researcher is obliged to apply necessary safeguards as a condition for carrying out this research, namely -

A. The personal data (of data subjects) accessed or given are only to be used for that specific purpose to conduct the research and for no other purpose;
B. At the end of the research, all personal data should be destroyed;
C. All references to personal data should be omitted in the report unless consent is specifically obtained from the person being identified in the research report;
D. Participation in the research being conducted should be at the discretion of the individual, and they can refuse any participation whatsoever if they so wish;
E. If data subjects (patients/staff) are going to be interviewed, video recorded or given a non-anonymous questionnaire to fill, a consent form should be signed by the participating data subject and a privacy policy statement read to them; Faces should be hidden or digitally modified as to conceal identity;
F. Any other measure deemed fit by the respective Head, depending on the research to be carried out.

Yours truly,

Dr Mario Vella, DPO
f/ Dr D Vella Baldacchino, Data Controller, Primary Health Department