A Systematic Literature Review: The Formation of Identity and Role Adjustment in Motherless Mothers

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Abstract. Motherless mothers—women who become mothers without the guidance of a maternal role model—face unique challenges, requiring alternative sources of knowledge and support to shape their parenting style. This experience not only affects their child-rearing methods but also influences their identities, leading them to redefine what motherhood means in their lives. This study explores how motherless mothers shape their identities through a systematic literature review. Following PRISMA guidelines, including studies with participants who lost their mothers during childhood or adolescence and are now mothers themselves. Six articles met the inclusion criteria, encompassing 74 participants aged 18 to 66. The findings identified three main themes: (1) the impact of maternal loss, (2) coping strategies, and (3) shaping personal identity as a mother. The findings highlight that motherless mothers experience significant psychological and social challenges that influence their identity formation and adaptation to motherhood, underscoring the significance of support systems in helping individuals adapt and maintain their emotional well-being.

Keywords: Motherless mother, identity formation, role adjustment, systematic literature review.

1 Introduction

New mothers encounter a range of demands and challenges as they adjust to their new role as parents. For many, this period can be difficult and stressful, with the difficulty level often shaped by how they perceive the situation and the resources available for support. The stress experienced by new mothers can stem from various factors, including the pressure of adapting to their new responsibilities, the expectations around caring for their children, and the shifts in their social relationships[1].

Initial research highlights that pregnancy is a critical developmental phase, much like puberty or menopause, as it involves significant hormonal and physical changes. Particularly, the transition to motherhood marks an irreversible turning point in a woman's life. One

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[1] D. B. Copeland dan B. L. Harbaugh, "It's Hard Being a Mama: Validation of the Maternal Distress Concept in Becoming a Mother," *The Journal of Perinatal Education* 28, no. 1 (2019): 28–42, https://doi.org/10.1891/1058-1243.28.1.28.

participant in a long-term study that explored the psychological experiences of first-time pregnant women (primiparas) described motherhood as something that lasts "forever and beyond." Once a woman becomes a mother, her role and identity are permanent. Her responsibilities, emotions, and the relationship she shares with her child endure for a lifetime. This underscores the deep commitment and lasting bond between a mother and her child, which remains strong even as the child grows older or life circumstances evolve[2].

Becoming a mother includes significant changes through various stages, such as pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period[3]. When experiencing this phase, many mothers feel confused because it is their first time facing the role of mother. They must adapt to physical changes, such as hormonal changes and physical recovery after giving birth, and adjust to the cultural and social changes that occur along with their new role as mothers. These changes include direct responsibilities in caring for the baby and relationship dynamics within the family and wider society[4].

Previous research has focused largely on identity formation as a mother. Rubin explains that becoming a mother is part of the transition process to build a strong maternal identity[5]. Research conducted in 2018[6] and 2017[7] takes a more comprehensive view of motherhood. It explores various aspects, including how individuals become mothers, the emotional connections they form with their newborns, the adjustments they make to embrace the role of a mother, and the broader contributions that mothers make to society.

As a mother, the experience of raising a child becomes more complicated when she has lost a parent during childhood or adolescence[8]. The term "motherless mother" refers to a situation where a woman loses her mother before she has children. As a result, she raises her children without the support and guidance of a loving mother, as is usually experienced by other women[9]. Meanwhile, "*motherless mothering*" is when a woman raises her children as the primary caregiver without her mother's involvement in her life as she grows up[10].

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[2] G. L. Bibring, T. F. Dwyer, D. S. Huntington, and A. F. Valenstein, "A Study of the Psychological Processes in Pregnancy and the Earliest Mother-Child Relationship: I. Some Propositions and Comments," *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* (1961): 9–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/00797308.1961.11823197.

[3] E. Van Vugt dan P. Versteegh, "'She Gave Me Hope and Lightened My Heart': The Transition to Motherhood among Vulnerable (Young) Mothers," *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2020, 1-12, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105318.

[4] C. Razurel, M. Bruchon-Schweitzer, A. Dupanloup, O. Irion, and M. Epiney, "Stressful Events, Social Support and Coping Strategies of Primiparous Women during the Postpartum Period: A Qualitative Study," *Midwifery* 27, no. 2 (2011): 237-242, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.midw.2009.06.005.

[5] Reva Rubin, "Maternal Identity and the Maternal Experience," *The American Journal of Nursing* 84, no. 12 (1984): 1480.

[6] Y. M. Diaz, "Enacting Motherhood: Time and Social Change in Chile," *Journal of Gender Studies* 27, no. 4 (2018): 411-427, https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1223619.

[7] M. Spector and R. G. Cinamon, "Identity Exploration During the Transition to Motherhood: Facilitating Factors and Outcomes," *Career Development International* 22, no. 7 (2017): 829–43, https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-01-2017-0021.

[8] M. Harris, *The Loss That Is Forever: The Lifelong Impact of the Early Death of a Mother or Father* (New York: Penguin, 1995).

[9] H. Edelman, *Motherless Mothers* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

Research shows that women who have lost their mothers make both conscious and unconscious choices to shield their children from the pain they have endured. These decisions affect their life choices and their relationships with their children. The findings indicate that many of these mothers struggle to form close bonds with their children and partners and often find it challenging to raise their children effectively[10].

Motherless mothers experienced greater difficulty in integrating motherhood into their identity. They tend to evaluate themselves in a negative way more often than mothers who have mothers. However, the study also confirmed that single mothers were not found to be as skilled as mothers. They are more critical of themselves and have higher expectations of their abilities as mothers[11].

A systematic literature review was chosen to understand in depth the psychological dynamics of identity formation and role adjustment for women motherless mothers. Many studies show that this role not only results in physical changes, but also causes psychological stress, and requires adaptation and new responsibilities. Early studies emphasized that the transition to motherhood does not stop during pregnancy or at birth, but rather, this transition is a process that takes place over time[12].

2 Method

2.1 Study Design

This research uses a systematic literature review method, an independent academic method, to identify and evaluate all relevant literature on a topic, to conclude the question being considered. A systematic literature review was carried out to clarify the status of existing research and the implications that can be drawn from it. Through a systematic literature review, researchers can demonstrate the current state of research on a topic, as well as identify gaps and areas that require further research related to the research question being discussed[13].

2.2 Procedure

In the data search and selection procedure, researchers use the applications *Publish or Perish Version 8* to search for relevant data sources and analyze various sources of scientific

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[10] R. M. Kijewski, "The Experience of Motherless Mothering" (PhD diss., Capella University, 2013), accessed September 20, 2024, https://www.proquest.com/openview/d354b068de7765e5894e3303be249676/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750.

[11] G. Mireault, T. Thomas, and K. Bearor, "Maternal Identity among Motherless Mothers and Psychological Symptoms in Their Firstborn Children," *Journal of Child & Family Studies* 11, no. 3 (2002): 287–297, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016868022570.

[12] L. Barclay, L. Everitt, F. Rogan, V. Schmied, and A. Wyllie, "Becoming a Mother—An Analysis of Women's Experience of Early Motherhood," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 28, no. 6 (1997): 719–728, https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1997.t01-1-1997025719.x.

[13] C. B. Feak and J. M. Swales, "Telling a Research Story: Writing a Literature Review," *English in Today's Research World* 2 (2009): 1–10, University of Michigan Press, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.309338.

literature[14]. Data searches were carried out through major databases chosen because of their trusted reputation and the abundant availability of articles, namely PubMed, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, and SAGE Publications. The Publish or Perish Version 8 application produced 1010 articles from 4 databases and 14 articles owned by researchers, then these articles were filtered based on title, abstract, and keywords.

Initial screening resulted in 530 articles that met the criteria for further processing after identifying and removing 20 duplicate articles, as well as eliminating 392 articles that were not research journals and 82 articles that were not fully accessible. A total of 480 articles were not relevant to the research topic, while 18 articles were literature reviews. After the screening process, six articles were selected that met the criteria for further analysis.

Technique *Boolean* is used in information searches to organize relationships between keywords to help users expand or narrow search results as needed. The keywords used are ("Identity" AND "Customization" AND "*Motherless Mother*" NOT "*Adoption*"). The search process for the application Publish, or Perish Version 8 uses a limitation of journal articles published within ten years, namely from 2014 to 2024.

In the journal search process, researchers filter based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria used are as follows:
1) Journals should examine the experiences of women who lost their mothers in childhood or adolescence due to death, absence from their lives, or emotional detachment,
2) The participants studied are adults and are currently actively carrying out their role as mothers. 3) The selected articles must be research articles.
4) Articles use English.
5) The journal can be accessed openly (open-access) or has the complete article available for download.

Figure 1 shows the process of how articles were selected systematically. The initial search produced 530 articles, then 480 articles could not be processed further because they were not relevant to the research, and only six articles met the predetermined criteria. These articles were then analyzed using PRISMA guidelines, the results of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

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[14] D. Adams, "Introducing Publish or Perish Release 8," Harzing.com, October 31, 2021, https://harzing.com/blog/2021/10/publish-or-perish-version-8 (accessed July 10, 2024).

Identification of new studies via databases and registers

Identification

Records identified from:
Databases (n = 1,010)
Registers (n = 14)

Records removed before screening:
Duplicate records (n = 20)
Records marked as ineligible by automation tools (n = 392)
Records removed for other reasons (n = 82)

Screening

Records screened
(n = 530)

Records excluded
(n = 480)

Reports sought for retrieval
(n = 50)

Reports not retrieved
(n = 18)

Reports assessed for eligibility
(n = 32)

Reports excluded:
The full paper cannot be accessed (n = 5)
Participants are not motherless mother (n = 10)
The article is not in English (n = 11)

Included

New studies included in review
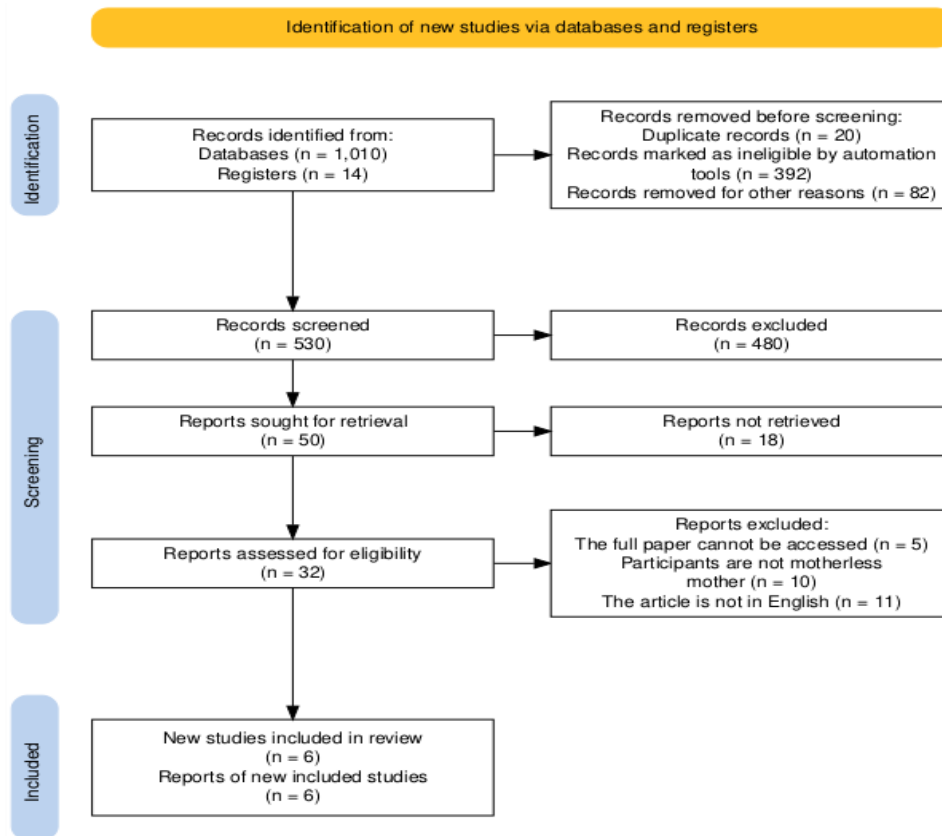(n = 6)
Reports of new included studies
(n = 6)

Figure. 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram tool (Haddaway et al., 2022)

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis using the Prisma Flow Diagram Tool to conduct a systematic literature review. This method makes it possible to identify, review, and synthesize evidence from various sources relevant to the research topic[15].

3 Result

Based on the six selected articles, 74 women aged between 18 and 66 years were research subjects. They all have a role as mothers, they also experienced the loss of their mothers when they were teenagers, namely between the ages of 13 and 20 years. Five articles discuss the phenomenon of motherless mothers, where those who lose their mothers because

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[15] N. R. Haddaway, M. J. Page, C. C. Pritchard, and L. A. McGuinness, "PRISMA2020: An R Package and Shiny App for Producing PRISMA 2020-Compliant Flow Diagrams, with Interactivity for Optimized Digital Transparency and Open Synthesis," *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 18, no. 1 (2022): e1230, https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1230.

they die due to disease. Another article examines the case of a mother who committed suicide. Additionally, another article examines situations in which the mother's role is not fulfilled, even though the mother is still alive.

The analysis of the six articles reveals three main themes: the impact of maternal loss, coping strategies, and shaping personal identity as a mother. These themes show that losing a mother deeply affects individuals, and they use various methods to manage their grief. Additionally, the experience of motherhood plays a significant role in shaping how they see themselves and their place in the world. The findings of each article analyzed are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Article Summary

No.	Researcher	Variable	Method	Research result
1.	Rowe & Harman (2014)	Role as mother	Qualitative	Four themes emerged in the context of loss, namely sadness felt, support received, lack of knowledge about the situation, and changes that occur in a person after experiencing loss.
2.	Laney et al. (2015)	Changes in identity as a mother.	Qualitative	Three themes include temporary loss of identity, exploration of new things, and strengthening of identity through motherhood.
3.	Leichtentritt et al. (2016)	Mothers' parenting experiences, and mothering roles differ from their mothers.	Qualitative	The four themes are the experience of being a mother before having children, the burden of the past that still influences it, the efforts of being a mother to repair broken things, and the lack of a mother's role.
4.	Gunn et al. (2018)	Identity and role as a mother.	Qualitative	Eight main themes: self-understanding, finding identity, unconditional love, seeking support, compassion for children who have lost their mothers, coping with emptiness, the uncertain process of grieving, and the experience of becoming a mother.
5.	Hardman (2020)	The meaning of losing a mother and the role of mother.	Qualitative	The five themes are suppression of grief, ongoing psychological impact, loss of relationship with mother and themselves, the healing process, and the formation of positive character traits.
6.	Walsh et al. (2022)	Change of identity and transition to motherhood.	Qualitative	The three main themes are changes in identity when becoming a mother, the process of mourning and feeling loss, and problems that arise when the relationship between mother and child is not well established.

3.1 The Impact of Maternal Loss

Maternal loss triggers complex emotional and psychological responses, leading to lasting grief, changes in self-identity, and altered perceptions of life and relationships. The deep emotional pain and unresolved grief can persist into adulthood, affecting individuals' emotional well-being and mental health[16]. Women who lose their mothers may struggle with identity loss, especially as they navigate motherhood. This role demands significant

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[16] B. Rowe and B. A. Harman, "Motherless Mothers: Maternally Bereaved Women in Their Everyday Roles as Mothers," *Journal of Family Studies* 20, no. 1 (2014), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263698207.

adjustments, often leading to confusion and difficulty distinguishing between their past and present selves[17]

Additionally, the ongoing emotional impact of losing a mother to suicide reveals that such trauma continues to influence the way women manage relationships, including those with their children. The emotional scars from these early losses create lasting challenges in their adult lives[18]. Even in cases where the mother is physically present but emotionally unavailable, the void left by an unfulfilled maternal relationship results in unresolved grief that profoundly impacts the individual's life, particularly during motherhood[19].

3.2 Coping Strategies

Social support is a crucial coping strategy for new mothers, as demonstrated in several studies. A lack of adequate support often intensifies the challenges faced by new parents. In contrast, support from extended family members, such as a mother-in-law, was shown to provide vital emotional and practical assistance[19]. In the absence of a biological mother, alternative support from siblings or aunts plays a significant role in helping mothers manage daily stress[16]. Family and community support are essential in helping new mothers adapt to their evolving identities[17]. Constructive coping strategies often involve overcoming past parenting experiences to create a more positive environment for the next generation[18].

3.3 Shaping Personal Identity as a Mother

The absence of a maternal relationship can lead women to develop positive qualities as they take on the role of a mother, illustrating that this transition is both an emotional and psychological journey[20]. Motherhood enhances a woman's identity, adding depth without changing her fundamental self[17]. Early responsibilities play a significant role in shaping maternal identity[21] while indicating that motherhood deeply influences how women see themselves and their families[19]. Furthermore, maternal identity is shaped by past caregiving experiences, including interactions with their mothers[18].

4 Discussion

This research aims to explore how mothers who have lost their mothers shape their identities through a systematic literature review of existing literature. An analysis of six journal articles highlights three main themes: the impact of maternal loss, coping strategies, and the formation of maternal identity. The loss of a mother deeply impacts both the

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[17] E. K. Laney, M. E. L. Hall, T. L. Anderson, and M. M. Willingham, "Becoming a Mother: The Influence of Motherhood on Women's Identity Development," *Identity* 15, no. 2 (2015): 126–145, https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2015.1023440.

[18] R. D. Leichtentritt, J. Leichtentritt, and M. M. Shamir, "Shadow from the Past: The Mothering Experience of Women Survivors of Maternal Suicide," *Journal of Social Work* (2016): 1–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017316656091.

[19] A. Walsh et al., "Nobody Taught Her How to Be a Mother: The Lived Experience of Mothering without a Mother," *Infant Mental Health Journal* (2022): 554–571.

[20] R. J. Hardman, "The Death of a Mother in Adolescence: A Qualitative Study of the Perceived Impact on a Woman's Adult Life and the Parent She Becomes" (master's thesis, University of Chester, United Kingdom, 2020), http://hdl.handle.net/10034/623450.

[21] J. Gunn, C. G. Huebner, and K. McCoy, "Perceptions of Adult Women on Losing Their Mothers at an Early Age: Implications for Nursing Care During Childbirth," *MCN: The American Journal of Maternal/Child Nursing* (2018): 126–132, https://doi.org/10.1097/NMC.0000000000000429.

psychological and social aspects of a woman's life, often leading to profound sadness and shifts in identity that affect their relationships with their children[16]. This loss can result in long-term psychological challenges, including mental health issues and a complex grieving process[20].

The journey to motherhood is filled with challenges related to forming an identity and reinforcing roles[17]. Motherless mothers not only face the transition to motherhood but also work to address unresolved issues and gaps in their understanding of the maternal role[18]. This journey involves creating a new identity, fostering unconditional love for their children, and seeking support to navigate the uncertainties of grief[21]. While motherhood can promote positive character growth, challenges may arise when the mother-child relationship struggles[20].

The process of forming and adjusting one's identity as a mother without a maternal figure is shaped by internal factors—such as emotional experiences, grief, and self-image—and external factors, including support from partners and family. Indicates that certain events, like birthdays and the birth of a child, can trigger strong feelings of loss, prompting motherless mothers to honor their mother's memory through storytelling and keepsakes[16]. Gunn et al. highlights the persistent emotional void caused by a mother's absence, with grief often resurfacing unexpectedly, particularly during significant life events[21].

Additionally, describes how losing a mother can lead to feelings of confusion, loneliness, and insecurity, affecting a person's sense of belonging and increasing the fear of future losses[22]. In contrast, Laney et al. discuss how the experience of becoming a mother often involves both loss and self-discovery. While some women quickly bond with their children, others may find it challenging to align their maternal role with their sense of self, eventually achieving confidence and balance over time. External factors, such as spiritual support and family connections, play a crucial role[17]. Motherless women often feel a strong motivation to succeed and maintain their identity, sometimes turning to spirituality for strength and comfort[21].

5 Conclusion

The analysis of six journal articles reveals three main themes: the impact of maternal loss, coping strategies, and the shaping of personal identity. The loss of a mother profoundly affects women on psychological and social levels, manifesting in deep sadness, long-term psychological challenges, and identity shifts. The journey of motherhood for these women involves not only adapting to their new roles but also confronting unresolved grief and a lack of maternal guidance, which complicates their emotional and psychological well-being.

Internal and external factors influence the process of identity formation in motherless mothers. Internally, they struggle with emotions such as grief, fear, and insecurity, while externally, they seek support from partners, family, and spirituality to strengthen their maternal roles. Despite the difficulties, many motherless women eventually find a balance between their responsibilities as mothers and their sense of self, suggesting that with adequate support, they can successfully navigate the complexities of their situation. This research underscores the need for a holistic approach to supporting motherless mothers as they embrace their maternal identity.

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[22] D. M. C. Pascual, "The Lifetime Effects of a Mother's Death in a Motherless Daughter" (master's thesis, Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2014).

The findings from this systematic literature review are expected to enhance understanding and inspire further research in the future. Research on the formation and adjustment of the maternal role for motherless mothers can be applied in the Indonesian context by considering local cultural aspects. In Indonesia, emotional and practical support from family and community is crucial. Close family relationships and support from extended family within Indonesian culture can enrich existing literature, improve understanding, and provide necessary support for motherless mothers navigating their maternal roles.

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