



BALANCING MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND CAREER: A CASE STUDY ON SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS OF WORKING WOMEN

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ABSTRACT In recent decades, women's participation in education and the workforce has increased significantly. Despite these advancements, working women continue to face strong societal expectations related to marriage, motherhood, and career. These expectations often create challenges in balancing personal and professional responsibilities. In many societies, traditional gender roles continue to influence how women are perceived and how they manage their lives after marriage and childbirth. This study examines the societal expectations placed on working women and explores how these expectations affect their ability to balance marital responsibilities, motherhood, and professional aspirations. Marriage is often seen as an important milestone in a woman's life and is associated with expectations that she will take on greater household responsibilities. In many cultures, married women are expected to prioritize family needs, maintain harmony, and manage domestic duties. While men are generally encouraged to focus on career advancement, women are often expected to adjust or compromise their professional ambitions to meet family obligations. These expectations can create role conflict, as women struggle to balance career demands with family responsibilities. Motherhood further increases these challenges. Mothers are traditionally viewed as the primary caregivers, which adds additional responsibilities for working women. After childbirth, many women must manage childcare, household work, and professional duties simultaneously, leading to stress and time pressure. They may also experience guilt for spending time at work instead of with their children. Moreover, limited workplace support for mothers can make it difficult for women to continue and progress in their careers after becoming parents. This study uses a case study approach to understand the experiences of working women who try to balance marriage, motherhood, and career. The case shows how societal expectations influence decisions related to career growth, family responsibilities, and personal goals. Even when women receive support from family members, social norms often place the main responsibility for childcare and household work on them. As a result, many working women experience work–family conflict and unequal domestic responsibilities. The study highlights the strong influence of cultural attitudes on women's lives. Women who focus on their careers may face criticism for neglecting family duties, while those who prioritize motherhood may be seen as less ambitious. This creates a double burden as women balance personal and professional roles. Despite these challenges, many women show resilience and adopt strategies to manage their responsibilities. Family support, flexible work arrangements, childcare facilities, and supportive workplace policies can reduce these pressures. Growing awareness of gender equality is also creating more supportive environments. In conclusion, balancing marriage, motherhood, and career remains challenging due to societal expectations and traditional gender roles. Although women have progressed in education and employment, social barriers still affect their growth. Promoting supportive families, gender-sensitive workplace policies, and shared responsibilities is essential for better work–life balance.

KEYWORDS : Working Women, Marriage, Motherhood, Societal Expectations, Work–Life Balance.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in women's participation in education and the workforce, reflecting broader social and economic transformations. Women today are increasingly pursuing higher education, entering professional fields, and contributing to economic development. Despite this progress, societal expectations surrounding gender roles continue to influence women's lives, particularly in relation to marriage and motherhood.

In many cultures, including Indian society, traditional norms still define women primarily as caregivers and homemakers. Even when women are employed, they are often expected to take primary responsibility for domestic duties and childcare. This dual expectation creates a complex dynamic where women must navigate both professional responsibilities and family obligations simultaneously. As a result, working women frequently encounter challenges in maintaining a balance between their personal and professional roles.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although women have made notable advancements in education and employment, they continue to face persistent societal pressures that affect their ability to balance marriage, motherhood, and career. Traditional gender roles often place disproportionate responsibility for household management and caregiving on women, regardless of their professional commitments.

This imbalance leads to role conflict, work–family stress, and limited opportunities for career growth. Women are frequently required to adjust or compromise their professional aspirations to meet family expectations. Additionally, inadequate workplace support systems, such as limited maternity benefits and inflexible work environments, further intensify these challenges.

Therefore, there is a need to critically examine how societal

expectations shape the experiences of working women and influence their ability to achieve a sustainable work–life balance.

2. Review of Literature

Recent research on working women highlights the persistent influence of traditional gender roles, work–family conflict, and structural inequalities that affect women's ability to balance marriage, motherhood, and career.

Studies indicate that societal expectations continue to assign primary caregiving and domestic responsibilities to women, even in dual-income households. Waismel-Manor and Levanon (2024) found that gender norms significantly influence women's employment patterns, with many women adjusting their working hours to accommodate family responsibilities. Similarly, Okolie and Uwayah (2024) emphasized that cultural expectations reinforce women's roles as caregivers, leading to unequal distribution of household labor.

Work–family conflict has been widely identified as a major challenge for working women. It arises when the demands of work and family roles are incompatible, leading to stress and reduced well-being. Handelzalts et al. (2024) observed that modern working mothers face increased pressure to perform effectively in both domains, resulting in emotional strain and time constraints. A recent systematic review (2025) further highlights that the rise of dual-career families and evolving workplace demands have intensified work–family conflict globally.

Motherhood has been found to significantly impact women's career trajectories. Torres et al. (2024), in their scoping review, reported that women often experience career interruptions, reduced working hours, and limited advancement opportunities after childbirth. This phenomenon, often referred to as the “motherhood penalty,” contributes to gender disparities in employment and income.

Longitudinal studies (2025) also indicate that work–family conflict tends to increase after childbirth, affecting women's professional commitment and growth.

Another important issue identified in the literature is the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic labor. Research shows that women continue to perform a larger share of household and childcare responsibilities compared to men, even when they are employed full-time. This “double burden” leads to stress, fatigue, and decreased job satisfaction. Studies (2025) further suggest that caregiving responsibilities often compel women to shift to part-time work or reduce their career ambitions, thereby affecting their economic independence.

Organizational support and coping mechanisms play a crucial role in mitigating these challenges. Medina-Garrido et al. (2023) found that flexible work arrangements, parental leave policies, and supportive work environments significantly reduce work–family conflict and improve overall well-being. In addition, family support and shared responsibilities within households have been identified as key factors enabling women to manage multiple roles effectively.

Despite these advancements, existing research indicates that societal attitudes and cultural norms continue to shape women's experiences, limiting the effectiveness of workplace interventions. Furthermore, there is a lack of qualitative, context-specific studies that explore the lived experiences of working women, particularly in developing countries like India. This highlights the need for in-depth research to better understand the psychosocial dimensions of balancing marriage, motherhood, and career.

3. Objectives of the Study

- To examine societal expectations related to marriage, motherhood, and career among working women
- To analyse the challenges faced by women in balancing personal and professional roles
- To explore the impact of traditional gender roles on women's career progression
- To identify the nature and extent of work–family conflict experienced by working women
- To understand the coping strategies adopted by women to manage multiple responsibilities

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative research design using a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of working women. This approach enables a detailed exploration of how societal expectations influence women's ability to balance marriage, motherhood, and career.

4.2 Sample

The study focuses on a purposively selected working woman who is married and has children. The participant represents a typical case of a woman managing multiple roles in a socio-cultural context where traditional gender expectations are prevalent.

4.3 Tools and Techniques

Data for the study were collected using the following methods:

- In-depth Interview: To understand personal experiences, challenges, and perceptions
- Observation: To gain insights into daily routines and role management
- Narrative Approach: To capture the lived experiences and emotional aspects of balancing roles

4.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes were identified based on recurring patterns in the participant's responses, focusing on societal expectations, role conflict, and coping strategies. The analysis involved coding, categorization, and interpretation of qualitative data.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study provide a comprehensive understanding of how societal expectations influence the lived experiences of working women in balancing marriage, motherhood, and career. The analysis reveals a complex interaction between cultural norms, institutional structures, and individual coping mechanisms. The themes emerging

from the study are discussed below with critical interpretation and comparison with existing literature.

5.1 Gender Roles and Societal Expectations

The study clearly indicates that traditional gender roles continue to dominate the division of responsibilities within the household. Despite being professionally employed, the participant reported that she was expected to manage the majority of domestic duties, including cooking, cleaning, and childcare. These expectations were not explicitly enforced but were deeply embedded in cultural norms and family practices.

The internalization of these roles was evident, as the participant often perceived these responsibilities as part of her duty rather than as an unequal burden. This reflects the normalization of gender inequality within domestic spaces.

This finding highlights the persistence of patriarchal structures that shape women's identities and roles. Even in modern contexts where women are economically independent, societal expectations continue to prioritize their role as caregivers. This creates a structural imbalance, limiting women's ability to fully engage in their professional roles.

This observation is consistent with studies by Waismel-Manor and Levanon (2024), which indicate that gendered expectations significantly influence women's allocation of time and responsibilities within households. The findings also align with Hochschild's concept of the “second shift,” where women perform unpaid labor after completing paid work.

5.2 Role Conflict and Psychological Strain

The participant experienced significant role conflict due to competing demands from her professional and personal life. She reported difficulties in meeting work deadlines while simultaneously managing household responsibilities. This resulted in feelings of stress, frustration, and emotional exhaustion.

The constant pressure to perform effectively in both roles created a sense of inadequacy, as the participant felt she was unable to give her best either at work or at home. This psychological strain was further intensified by the lack of adequate support systems.

Role conflict emerges as a major psychosocial challenge for working women. It is not merely a matter of time management but reflects deeper structural inequalities and unrealistic societal expectations. The dual burden placed on women often leads to burnout and reduced overall well-being.

This finding supports the work–family conflict theory proposed by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), which identifies incompatible role demands as a source of stress. Recent studies (Handelzalts et al., 2024) also emphasize that modern working mothers face heightened emotional and psychological pressures due to dual-role expectations.

5.3 Motherhood and Intensified Responsibilities

Motherhood significantly increased the complexity of balancing roles. The participant reported that childcare responsibilities, including feeding, schooling, and emotional care, required constant attention and involvement. Unlike professional responsibilities, which had defined working hours, motherhood was described as a continuous, demanding role.

The participant also expressed feelings of guilt when she was unable to spend sufficient time with her children due to work commitments. This emotional dimension of motherhood added to the overall stress and influenced her career-related decisions, such as declining additional responsibilities at work.

Motherhood acts as a turning point in women's lives, intensifying gendered expectations and reinforcing traditional roles. The emotional expectations associated with being a “good mother” further increase the burden on working women. This often results in career compromises, limiting women's professional growth.

These findings are consistent with Torres et al. (2024), who identified the “motherhood penalty” as a significant factor affecting women's career progression. The study also aligns with recent research (2025) indicating that work–family conflict tends to increase after childbirth.

5.4 Work–Family Conflict and Time Constraints

A prominent theme in the study was the experience of work–family conflict, particularly in terms of time management and energy distribution. The participant reported that managing both roles often led to long working hours, reduced personal time, and physical exhaustion.

The conflict was both time-based (limited time for family due to work) and strain-based (stress from one role affecting performance in another). The lack of flexible work arrangements further aggravated this issue.

Work–family conflict is not an individual issue but a systemic problem influenced by organizational structures and societal expectations. The inability to balance roles effectively can lead to negative outcomes such as decreased productivity, poor mental health, and strained family relationships.

This finding is supported by recent systematic reviews (2025), which highlight the increasing prevalence of work–family conflict in dual-career households. The multidimensional nature of this conflict has been widely recognized in contemporary research.

5.5 Coping Strategies and Resilience

Despite facing multiple challenges, the participant demonstrated resilience by adopting various coping strategies. These included effective time management, prioritizing tasks, seeking support from family members, and maintaining a positive outlook.

The participant also emphasized the importance of emotional strength and adaptability in managing her responsibilities. However, these strategies were often reactive rather than preventive, addressing immediate challenges rather than underlying issues.

While coping mechanisms help women manage their roles, they place the responsibility of adjustment primarily on individuals rather than addressing systemic inequalities. True empowerment requires structural changes that reduce the burden on women rather than expecting them to adapt continuously.

Medina-Garrido et al. (2023) found that organizational support and family involvement significantly reduce work–family conflict and improve well-being. However, without broader societal change, individual coping strategies remain limited in their effectiveness.

Overall Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that working women continue to face a “double burden” of managing both professional and domestic responsibilities. Societal expectations, deeply rooted in cultural norms, play a significant role in shaping these experiences. While women have made progress in education and employment, structural and cultural barriers continue to limit their ability to achieve a balanced life.

The study highlights that the challenges faced by working women are not merely personal but are embedded in broader social systems. Addressing these issues requires a multidimensional approach involving changes at the individual, family, organizational, and policy levels.

Table. No.1: Coding Framework for Thematic Analysis

S. No.	Codes (Initial Codes)	Categories	Themes	Illustrative Meaning
1	Household responsibilities, cooking, cleaning	Domestic Roles	Gender Roles	Women expected to manage home despite employment
2	Childcare, school involvement, emotional care	Caregiving Responsibilities	Gender Roles	Primary responsibility of childcare assigned to women
3	Cultural expectations, family pressure	Social Norms	Gender Roles	Traditional beliefs influencing women's roles

4	Work pressure, deadlines, multitasking	Job Demands	Role Conflict	Difficulty managing work and family simultaneously
5	Stress, fatigue, emotional exhaustion	Psychological Strain	Role Conflict	Mental health impact due to dual responsibilities
6	Time constraints, lack of personal time	Time Management Issues	Work–Family Conflict	Limited time to balance both roles
7	Guilt, anxiety about children	Emotional Burden	Motherhood Challenges	Feeling of not fulfilling maternal expectations
8	Career sacrifice, missed opportunities	Career Constraints	Motherhood Challenges	Career growth affected due to motherhood
9	Lack of flexible work, limited leave	Workplace Barriers	Work–Family Conflict	Organizational challenges affecting balance
10	Family support, spouse help	Support Systems	Coping Strategies	Assistance from family reduces burden
11	Time planning, prioritization	Self-Management	Coping Strategies	Personal strategies to handle responsibilities
12	Adaptability, resilience	Emotional Strength	Coping Strategies	Ability to adjust to multiple roles

6. CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the persistent challenges faced by working women in balancing marriage, motherhood, and career within the framework of societal expectations. Despite significant progress in women's education and workforce participation, traditional gender roles continue to shape their lived experiences. The findings reveal that women are still expected to assume primary responsibility for domestic work and childcare, even when they are actively engaged in professional roles.

The study demonstrates that this unequal distribution of responsibilities leads to role conflict, work–family imbalance, and psychological strain. Motherhood further intensifies these challenges by adding emotional and physical demands, often resulting in career compromises and reduced professional opportunities. The presence of a “double burden” underscores the structural and cultural inequalities that persist in society.

Although women exhibit resilience by adopting various coping strategies such as time management and seeking family support, these measures are often insufficient to address the root causes of the problem. The study emphasizes that the issue is not merely individual but systemic, influenced by deeply rooted societal norms and inadequate institutional support.

Overall, achieving a balance between marriage, motherhood, and career requires a shift from individual adjustment to collective responsibility. Transforming societal attitudes, promoting gender equality, and implementing supportive policies are essential to ensure the well-being and empowerment of working women.

7. Suggestions/Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

At the Family Level

- Encourage shared household responsibilities between partners to reduce the burden on women
- Promote active involvement of fathers in childcare and parenting
- Foster supportive family environments that value women's careers equally

At the Workplace Level

- Implement flexible working arrangements such as remote work and flexible hours
- Provide adequate maternity and parental leave policies
- Establish workplace childcare facilities to support working mothers
- Ensure equal opportunities for career advancement without gender bias

- Promote a supportive organizational culture that recognizes work–life balance

At the Policy Level

- Develop and enforce gender-sensitive labor policies
- Expand government-supported childcare services
- Introduce policies that promote work–life balance and employee well-being
- Encourage equal pay and anti-discrimination measures

For Social Work Practice

- Conduct awareness programs to challenge traditional gender norms
- Provide counseling and mental health support for working women
- Facilitate support groups and community-based interventions
- Advocate for women's rights and gender equality at the grassroots level

Suggestions for Future Research

- Conduct large-scale quantitative studies to generalize findings
- Explore comparative studies between urban and rural women
- Examine the role of men's participation in household responsibilities
- Study the impact of organizational policies on women's work–life balance

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