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Work-life challenges and coping mechanisms among professional women in urban China

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences and reactions of professional women in urban China to work-family conflict in challenging work, family, and cultural environments. The study is based on 26 semi-structured interviews with working women from a variety of professions in Chinese cities, using a grounded theory design. Open, axial and selective coding were used to analyze the data and determine emergent categories, relationships between categories, and a conceptual model of work-family balance. The results indicate that the factors of long working hours, role overload, unequal domestic work, inadequate support systems, and continuing gendered expectations all contribute to emotional stress and limited career progression. Pressure is relieved by workplace flexibility, family and community supports, affordable childcare, and individual coping strategies; however, these do not completely mitigate structural and cultural limitations. The study builds a grounded theory model that describes how the work responsibilities and family responsibilities drain time, energy, and emotional resources, and how support systems and flexibility buffer these stresses. In practical terms, the results indicate that employers need to make flexible working more commonplace, offer family-friendly supervision and facilitate access to childcare, and that policymakers should improve access to affordable childcare and encourage more equal gender norms. The paper provides context-specific qualitative evidence from urban China and implications for organizations that want to increase women's employment, well-being, and long-term sustainability.

Contribution/Originality: This study makes a contribution to the literature by providing a grounded theory explanation of urban Chinese professional women's negotiation of work-family conflict. It captures the importance of role overload, cultural expectations, support systems, and access to resources, and how workplace flexibility and coping mechanisms buffer, but do not eliminate, structural pressures.

1. INTRODUCTION

Work-family balance has become a major concern in modern societies, where an increasing number of women are entering the labour market while still bearing a high burden of family responsibilities. Work-family conflict is an inter-role pressure that arises when expectations of work and family roles are incompatible, making it difficult to meet expectations in both roles (Skučienė, Crowley-Henry, & Grigužauskaitė, 2025). This problem has become more severe because of changes in family and work environments (Um, Kou, Waldrep, & Gerson, 2024). New opportunities, such as flexible work arrangements, technological developments, and gender-equality initiatives, have also created new tensions in how women balance their professional and personal roles (Escriva, Bermúdez Figueroa, & Minguela,

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2024). Although organizational efforts have eased these conflicts, work-family pressures still influence the lives of many working women (Raina & Cho, 2024).

While this literature highlights the significance of work-family conflict, the current study focuses on a more limited issue: how work demands, family demands, cultural norms, support networks, and resources are intertwined in the daily stories of professional women in urban China. These factors have been studied independently, and there is a lack of research on how these factors relate to emotional health, coping, and career development. This paper combines the theories of Role Theory and Conservation of Resources (COR). Role Theory suggests that multiple roles (occupational, caregiving, spousal, and family) result in strain when time, behavior, and emotional demands are incompatible (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964).

The COR theory goes on to explain that work-family conflict can lead to a loss of resources (time, energy, autonomy, emotional support, etc.), while support systems, flexibility, and childcare resources can help buffer the loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Qamar, Afshan, & Rana, 2023). The study thus poses three research questions:

RQ1: What work-, family-, cultural-, and resource-related challenges affect professional women's work-family balance in urban China?

RQ2: What are the interpretations and coping strategies of women in the face of these challenges?

RQ3: What are the emergent relationships among these categories that constitute a grounded theory model of work-family balance?

The goals are to:

1. Identify the primary sources of work-family conflict.
2. Understand how support systems, availability of resources, and workplace flexibility influence participants' experiences of work-family conflict.
3. Understand the relationship between cultural expectations, emotional well-being, and career advancement.
4. Create a grounded theory model based on the interview data.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows.

The relevant literature is discussed below, and the two theories (Role Theory and COR theory) are combined. Sampling, interviews, coding, saturation, and trustworthiness procedures are outlined in the methodology section. The results section presents emergent themes, and the discussion section presents propositions and an explanation of the conceptual model. The final section presents implications, limitations, and future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study does not view the variables that were reviewed as independent antecedents, but rather as mutually reinforcing conditions. Classic work-family scholarship views conflict as inter-role pressure, a situation where work and family demands are incompatible (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kahn et al., 1964). Most recent research supports this association, with some studies focusing on organizational flexibility and supervisor support, while others focus on ongoing domestic inequity and cultural expectations. These inconsistencies indicate that work-family balance is not simply an individual time-management issue, but is a process that is influenced by resources, norms, and institutional practices.

Research on women's work in urban areas shows that there are significant structural and social barriers to balancing work and family life (Tayal & Mehta, 2023). Imbalanced domestic work is still an issue (Chiza Kajibwami, Kayeye Magala, Butotima Safari, Murhula Bushenyi, & Mponyo Musamba, 2024). Although both partners in a dual-income family may work, women are likely to still be responsible for a larger portion of caregiving and household duties, and there is little room for work-life balance (Martucci, 2023). Previous studies also indicate that cultural norms persist in placing women at the center of family care while expecting them to work. This unequal burden is linked to stress, as women have to balance challenging work roles with family responsibilities, which often comes at the cost of their own recovery, family relationships, or career growth (Subhani, Ghalia, & Rokis, 2023).

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The pressures may be especially strong in urban areas where the cost of living is high, and the tempo of life is fast. Urban women are often engaged in full-time work, taking care of families, commuting, and coordinating households with limited time resources (Uddin, Ali, Khan, & Ahmad, 2023). Another challenge is the absence of flexibility in the workplace (Chauhan, 2023). Women may face a situation where they have to make a choice between career and family, leading to reduced working hours, lower-paid jobs, or leaving the workforce altogether (Faiza, Ali, Majeed, & Abbas, 2023). Previous research thus indicates that parental leave, affordable childcare, remote working, and flexible working are key institutional supports, particularly in urban areas where the combination of longer commutes and higher living costs exacerbates work-family conflicts (Vyas, 2025).

2.1. Work Responsibilities

Several empirical studies have found that work responsibilities are a significant cause of work-family conflict. Toluhi, Yusuf, Kihlström, Vereen, and Marshall (2023) found that the factors that disrupt employees' roles in family responsibilities include long working hours, job pressure, and role overload. These issues are particularly evident in the urban labor market, where competitive organisations may require workers to be available for longer periods and work at a high level of performance (Mathieu, Tremblay, Treleaven, & Fuller, 2023). Work-family conflict is linked to high stress levels and is common among employees in high-pressure jobs like corporate management, healthcare, and information technology (Munyeka & Maharaj, 2023).

Research on Chinese working women also finds that stress and burnout occur when family roles conflict with the time required for work roles (Syed, Memon, & Shah, 2025). Intensive work demands and work-family balance have been consistently empirically studied (Johnston, Tanwar, Pasamar, Van Laar, & Bamber Jones, 2022). Previous research suggests that high-pressure jobs can lead to less time and energy for family life, which can create a sense of role conflict (Smith, Fisher, & Ramprogus, 2022). Role overload, that is, feeling overwhelmed by work demands, is also linked to increased stress and decreased satisfaction with family life (Thébaud & Pedulla, 2022).

In general, the literature indicates that the more demanding work roles are, the more difficult it is for women to balance work and family life, especially in the urban context where flexibility in the workplace is limited.

2.2. Family Responsibilities

Family responsibilities, especially in urban areas, have been recognized as a critical determinant of women's work-life balance (Champagne, 2024). Women are still likely to take the main role in providing care for the family even when they are employed full-time, as revealed by various studies (Um et al., 2024). Traditional family norms in urban China may further contribute to the burden of childcare and eldercare on women, which can be a barrier to paid work (Raina & Cho, 2024).

Thus, it is suggested that the double burden of paid work and family care is still a significant source of stress for urban women, despite cultural changes (Sztányi-Szekér, Hőgye-Nagy, & Szemán-Nagy, 2024). Lee, Probst, Bettac, Jenkins, and Bazzoli (2024) also demonstrate that the demands of the family can limit women's ability to fully pursue career advancement. The time and energy that are required to care for family members are significant and can limit the resources available to complete professional tasks; the mental strain of managing both these tasks can lead to exhaustion and burnout (Chiza Kajibwami et al., 2024).

Research indicates that women who engage in a more equitable distribution of family duties experience reduced work-family conflict and greater satisfaction with their careers (Hosain, 2025). Overall, the literature suggests that family responsibilities play a key role in understanding women's work-family balance.

2.3. Workplace Flexibility

Studies have indicated that flexible working practices such as flexible working hours, compressed working weeks, and telecommuting are linked to employees' work-life balance (Chauhan, 2023). Research conducted in urban areas

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shows that women who have more flexible schedules are less stressed and have a more positive work-family balance (Faiza et al., 2023). Furthermore, Chinese studies show that many organizations still have traditional or rigid working systems, which further maintain work-family conflicts among urban women (Toluhi et al., 2023). Skučienė et al. (2025) also indicate that flexibility is likely to help alleviate work stress and promote emotional well-being for women who are balancing their careers with family responsibilities. Empirical research also suggests a positive correlation between flexible working practices and female retention, as employees who have more flexible working practices are less likely to quit because of work-family conflict (Escriva et al., 2024). Workplace flexibility can thus serve as a buffer against work-family conflict and contribute to career and family well-being.

2.4. Support Systems

Both formal and informal support systems are crucial resources for women who are balancing work and family (Xu et al., 2024). Empirical research indicates that women with supportive families, colleagues, supervisors, and community networks are less likely to experience work-family conflict (Muasya, 2024). The support system is crucial in urban China, where extended families are often spread out, and reliable support networks are essential (Okolie & Uwayah, 2024). Previous studies also show that childcare support, supportive partners, and family-friendly policies within the organisation can help to reduce the pressures women feel in their daily lives (Zumbyte, 2024). Support networks offer emotional and practical support, aiding women to cope with stress and maintain their well-being (Chiza Kajibwami et al., 2024).

2.5. Cultural Expectations

Empirical studies have demonstrated that there is a strong relationship between cultural expectations and work-family balance (Escriva et al., 2024). Conflict between work and family roles is more likely to be experienced by women in societies with strong gender socialization, as women are expected to work and have a family, while men are expected to work and have a family, but not simultaneously (Sztányi-Szekér et al., 2024). Traditional gender roles can worsen work-family conflict for urban women because they are judged by their performance at work and at home (Okolie & Uwayah, 2024). This dynamic can become more intricate when women adopt these expectations as their own, even if doing so hinders their professional growth (Chiza Kajibwami et al., 2024). Adhering to gendered role expectations has also been associated with increased role strain and emotional exhaustion, which, in turn, have repercussions for work performance and family satisfaction (Jabeen, Rahimuddin, & Khan, 2024). On the other hand, women who are able to renegotiate and share the load within the family are more likely to experience a positive work-family balance and reduced stress (Subhani et al., 2023).

This conceptual framework does not view work responsibilities, family responsibilities, cultural expectations, support systems, workplace flexibility, and resource availability as independent variables, but as interacting categories. The grounded theory categories include background and contextual conditions (work and family pressures), intervening conditions (support, flexibility, and resources), action strategies (coping mechanisms), and consequences (emotional well-being and career advancement) in participants' stories. These form the basis for the propositions and final conceptual model derived from the data.

3. METHODOLOGY

Grounded theory was chosen for this study because the aim was not to test a predetermined theory, but to develop an explanatory model based on the participants' accounts (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The method differs from many previous studies on work-family that are based on surveys and variable-centered testing; it allows for the inductive identification of processes, meanings, and relationships between categories in a particular socio-cultural context.

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Table 1. Respondent profile.

ID	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Years of Work Experience	Marital Status	Number of Children	Living Arrangement
1	28	Bachelor's Degree	Marketing Specialist	5	Married	1	Lives with spouse and child
2	35	Master's Degree	Project Manager	10	Married	2	Lives with spouse and children
3	42	Bachelor's Degree	Software Engineer	15	Divorced	1	Lives alone
4	29	Bachelor's Degree	Human Resources Coordinator	6	Single	0	Lives with parents
5	31	Master's Degree	Data Analyst	8	Married	1	Lives with spouse and child
6	38	Bachelor's Degree	Sales Executive	12	Married	2	Lives with spouse and children
7	26	Associate Degree	Customer Service Representative	3	Single	0	Lives with roommate
8	33	Bachelor's Degree	Graphic Designer	9	Married	1	Lives with spouse and child
9	40	Master's Degree	University Lecturer	18	Divorced	2	Lives with children
10	37	Bachelor's Degree	Financial Analyst	14	Married	1	Lives with spouse and child
11	32	Bachelor's Degree	Nurse	8	Married	1	Lives with spouse and child
12	44	Master's Degree	Corporate Trainer	20	Married	3	Lives with spouse and children
13	30	Bachelor's Degree	Content Writer	7	Single	0	Lives alone
14	36	Bachelor's Degree	Administrative Assistant	13	Married	2	Lives with spouse and children
15	41	Master's Degree	Research Scientist	17	Divorced	1	Lives alone
16	27	Bachelor's Degree	Event Planner	5	Single	0	Lives with parents
17	34	Master's Degree	Public Relations Manager	11	Married	2	Lives with spouse and children
18	39	Bachelor's Degree	Operations Manager	16	Married	3	Lives with spouse and children
19	29	Associate Degree	Retail Manager	4	Single	0	Lives with roommate
20	35	Master's Degree	Marketing Manager	10	Married	1	Lives with spouse and child
21	43	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher	19	Divorced	2	Lives with children
22	31	Bachelor's Degree	Software Developer	8	Married	1	Lives with spouse and child
23	36	Master's Degree	Clinical Psychologist	15	Married	2	Lives with spouse and children
24	28	Bachelor's Degree	Research Assistant	5	Single	0	Lives with parents
25	32	Master's Degree	Policy Analyst	9	Married	1	Lives with spouse and child
26	39	Bachelor's Degree	Supply Chain Manager	14	Divorced	1	Lives alone

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Twenty-six in-depth interviews were conducted with female respondents who were employed in urban areas of China. The participants were eligible if they were female, 18 years or older, worked full-time or part-time in an urban Chinese organization, and could speak about their current or recent work-family experiences. Women who were not working, lived outside urban China, or were unable to give informed consent were excluded. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit the participants from professional networks. This strategy resulted in cases with rich information but might have introduced a bias towards women who were part of professional networks; to minimize this, a variety of occupations, marital statuses, living arrangements, and caregiving situations were included.

A formal refusal rate was not calculated, as the recruitment process did not ensure a full record of all those who were exposed to the invitation and refused. Interviews were conducted until saturation was achieved. No new first-order codes were found after the 22nd interview, and interviews 23–26 confirmed and refined the first-order codes. Therefore, 26 interviews were deemed adequate for the purposes of grounded theory, as the sample was able to provide recurring patterns across occupations and family situations and still enable detailed line-by-line analysis. Table 1 presents the demographic and professional profiles of the 26 participants.

The data were analyzed using grounded theory coding (GT coding), which is a three-stage coding process, namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the process of open coding, the transcripts of the interviews were segmented into meaning units and initial codes were given. Relationships between categories were explored in the process of axial coding to determine how work responsibilities, family responsibilities, resources, support, cultural expectations, coping, and outcomes interacted. In the process of selective coding, the core category of work-family balance under resource constraint was combined with the other categories to formulate the propositions and a conceptual model.

Transcript matrices in Microsoft Word and Excel were used for coding, and no special qualitative software was used. A subsample of transcripts was coded independently by two researchers, and interpretations were compared. Any disagreements were settled through discussion and revision of the codebook, and the agreed codebook was then used for all transcripts. As this study is an interpretive grounded theory study, coding consistency was enhanced through negotiated agreement and was not viewed merely as a statistical reliability coefficient.

Table 2. Interview guide.

Theme	Interview Questions
Work responsibilities	Can you describe your typical workday and how it affects your ability to manage family duties?
Family responsibilities	What are your primary family responsibilities, and how do they influence your work-life balance?
Workplace flexibility	Does your organization offer flexible working hours or remote working options? If so, how helpful are they?
Support systems	What kind of support do you receive from your family or community to help you manage work and family life?
Resource availability	How do you access resources like childcare, transportation, or healthcare, and how do these affect your balance between work and family?
Cultural expectations	How do cultural or societal expectations around gender roles influence your experience of work-family balance?
Career advancement	Do you feel that managing work and family duties has affected your career progression? If so, how?
Emotional well-being	How do you feel emotionally when trying to balance work and family? Can you describe any stressors?
Coping mechanisms	What strategies or methods do you use to manage the demands of both work and family?
Perceived barriers	What are the biggest challenges you face when trying to balance your work and family obligations?
Suggestions for Improvement	What changes would you suggest, either at the workplace or in family dynamics, to improve your work-family balance?

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Trustworthiness was achieved by constant comparison, reflexive memos, an audit trail of coding decisions, triangulation of participants with varying occupational and family profiles, and member checking of theme summaries with selected participants. The interview questions, coding categories, propositions, and final conceptual model were all linked together, allowing for each proposition to be traced back to the interview prompts, coded excerpts, and emergent categories. Table 2 presents the semi-structured interview guide used to explore participants' work-family experiences.

4. RESULTS

The results are displayed as emergent grounded theory themes. To maintain the separation between Results and Discussion, participant accounts and coding interpretations are presented here, with comparisons with previous studies made in the Discussion. Figures 1-10 are qualitative thematic-salience displays based on the normalized frequencies of the codes and the co-occurrence of codes in the interview matrix. The values are not statistical scores, regression weights, or tests of causal effects, but rather visualizations of relative emphasis across participants.

4.1. Long Working Hours, Time Pressure, and Role Overload

Analysis of work-responsibility codes revealed that long hours, time pressures, constant availability, and overload were key sources of work-family conflict. Participants reported work extending beyond office hours and into the evenings, weekends, and family life. One interviewee said, "I work late almost every day, and when I come home, I don't have much time to spend with my kids" (Interviewee 3). One participant said, "I always think about deadlines because of the pressure at work, even when I'm with my family" (Interviewee 3). These accounts reveal that work responsibilities were a major source of conflict between work and family life and that job overload led to a lack of time and emotional energy.

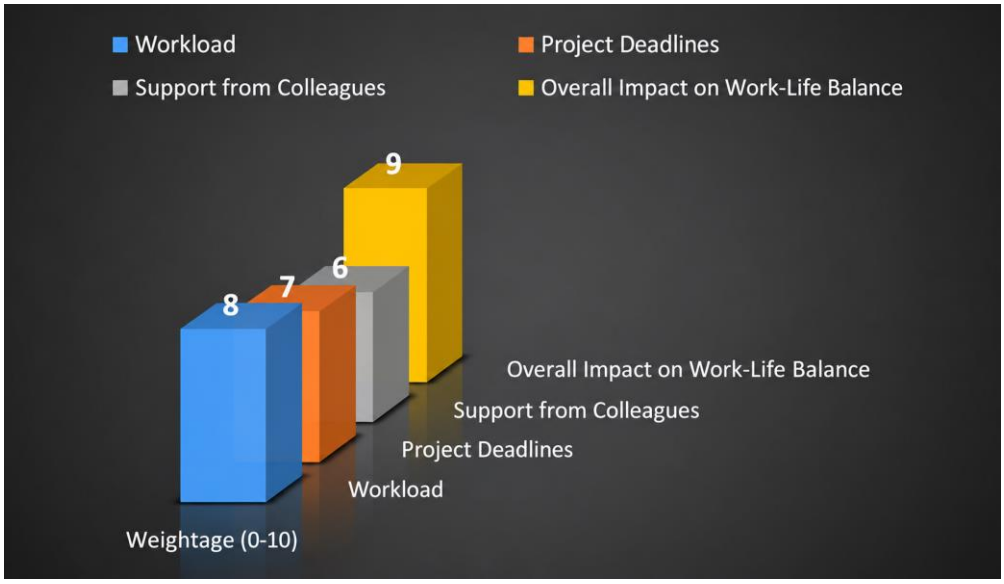


Figure 1. Thematic salience of work-responsibility codes.

4.2. Unequal Caregiving and Household Responsibilities

One of the main problems for professional women in urban China in relation to work-family balance was family responsibilities. Gendered expectations often placed participants as primary carers and household managers despite their being employed full-time. The expectation to work and to care for children or elderly family members, along with the expectation to perform household duties, led to fatigue, guilt, and a lack of time for personal recovery.

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One participant said, "Even though my husband and I both work, I'm supposed to do most of the chores, and I have no time for myself" (Interviewee 12). One of the participants also commented, "On weekends, I'm not resting; I'm doing housework and taking care of the children. It's a never-ending cycle" (Interviewee 4).

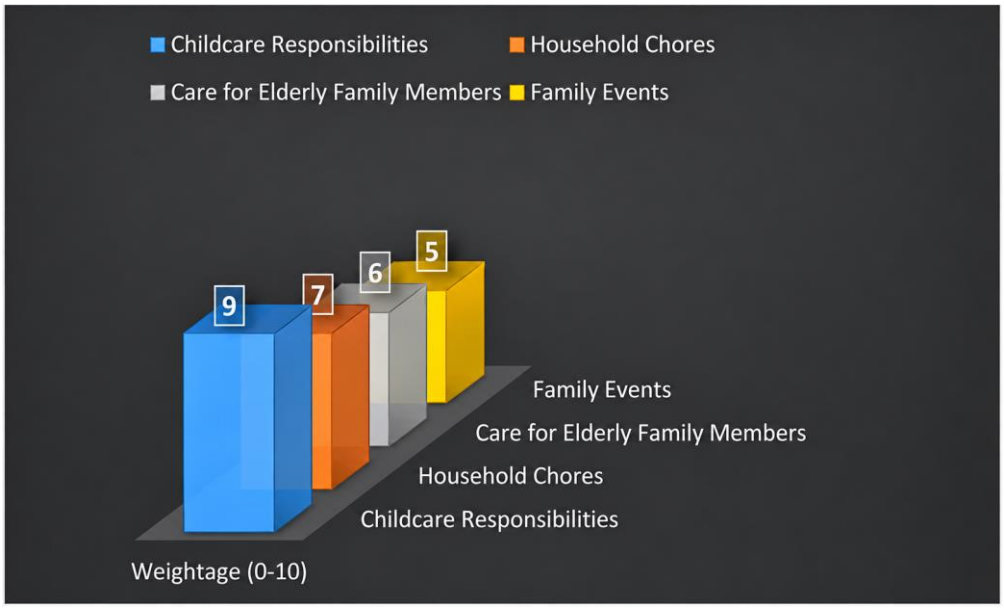


Figure 2. Thematic salience of family-responsibility codes.

4.3. Flexible Work Arrangements as a Buffer

One condition that stood out as a factor that helped to alleviate work-family balance issues was workplace flexibility. Those who were able to work remotely, have flexible hours, or adjust their schedules indicated that they had more control over family routines and less stress. But numerous participants reported that these were either unavailable, inconsistently offered, or culturally stigmatized in their organizations.

One interviewee said, "The days I get to work from home are easier because I can do my household duties without the pressure of having to rush, and it helps to relieve some of the pressure" (Interviewee 18). Another respondent commented that "My company doesn't allow flexible hours" (Interviewee 9). This inflexibility made childcare, commuting, and family emergencies more challenging.

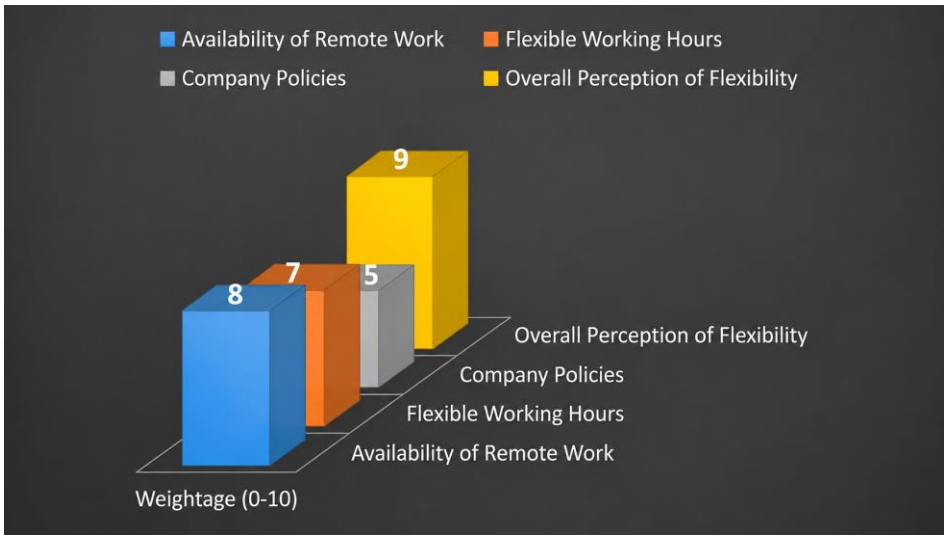


Figure 3. Thematic salience of workplace-flexibility codes.

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4.4. Formal and Informal Support as Key Buffers

Formal and informal support systems were identified as key buffers to work-family balance issues. Those receiving parental, spousal, childcare, coworker, or understanding supervisor support indicated higher levels of ability to manage multiple work and family responsibilities. Women who did not have such support, on the other hand, experienced work-family balance as fragile and easily disrupted.

"I'm fortunate that my parents live close by and help with the kids; otherwise, I don't know how I'd get it all done" (Interviewee 16). Another participant said, "There's no support at my workplace; they don't care if you have a family to support, and it makes things very difficult" (Interviewee 5).

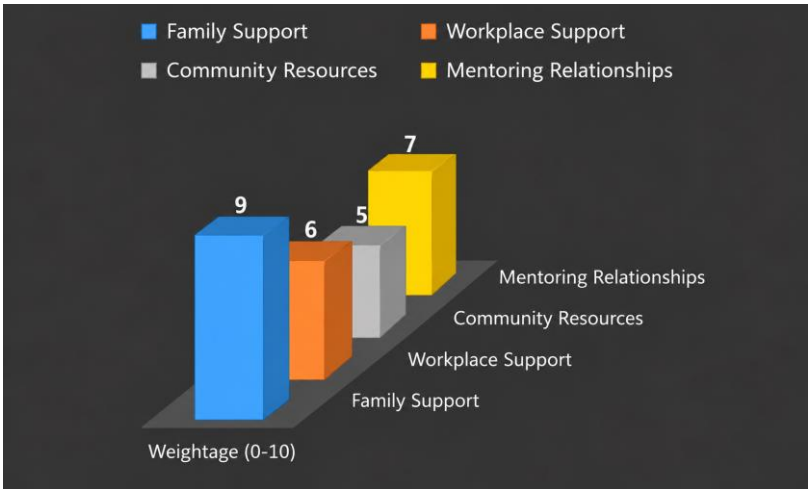


Figure 4. Thematic salience of support-system codes.

4.5. Resource Availability

Availability of resources, including low-cost childcare, transport, domestic staff, and time-saving technology, was identified as a key factor in work-family balance. Participants described how access to these resources freed up time and energy for family-related activities and enabled them to focus more on work-related activities.

However, many women found these resources to be costly or not easily accessible, making work-family issues worse. One participant said: "I can't afford to hire help, so I do everything myself, cleaning, cooking, taking care of the kids. It leaves me no time or energy to work" (Interviewee 14). Another participant said, "Childcare is a big issue. If there were more affordable childcare, I could work more during the day" (Interviewee 11).

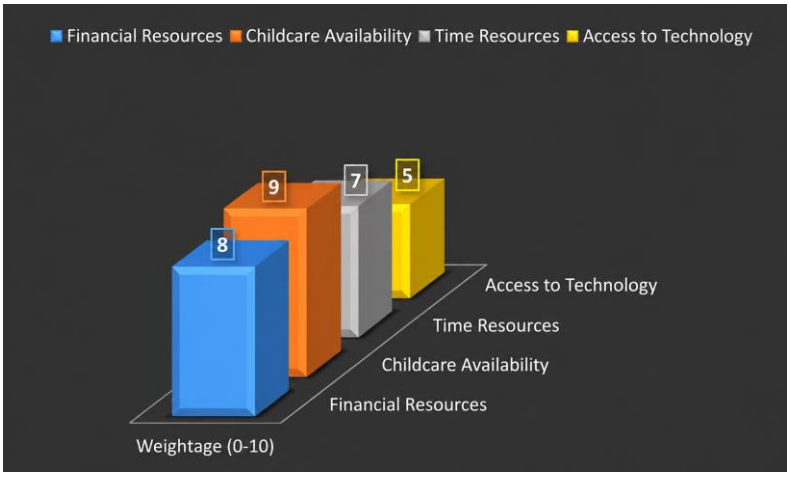


Figure 5. Thematic salience of resource-availability codes.

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4.6. Gendered Cultural Expectations and the Double Bind

The work-family balance issues for professional women in urban China were strongly influenced by cultural norms. Participants reported a "double bind" situation, where they were supposed to be both good workers and the "traditional" primary caregivers and organizers of the household.

One interviewee expressed this pressure: "In my family, no matter what I do at work, I am expected to cook dinner, take care of the kids, and make sure the house is running smoothly; my husband helps, but the responsibility is still mine" (Interviewee 10). Another respondent commented, "I feel judged when I put my career first; people expect me to put my family first, and when I don't, I'm selfish" (Interviewee 22).

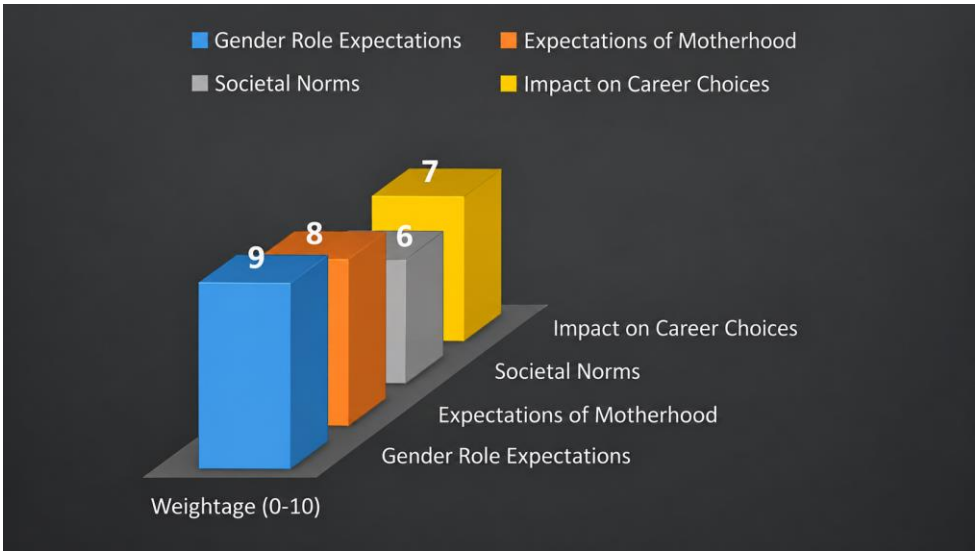


Figure 6. Thematic salience of cultural-expectation codes.

4.7. Career Advancement

Work-family conflict was also a constraint that participants reported in the area of career advancement. A number of women said that they were unable to take promotions, work overtime, go to networking events or seek professional growth due to family responsibilities. Employer bias was also mentioned, such as the assumptions that women with children are less available or less interested in leadership.



Figure 7. Thematic salience of career-advancement codes.

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One interviewee expressed, "I had to decline a promotion because I knew that it would involve more hours and I would not be able to spend as much time with my family as I wanted" (Interviewee 6). Another interviewee pointed to employer bias: "I've noticed my male colleagues being promoted faster than me; they think that women like me with kids can't work as hard and can't take on the added responsibility" (Interviewee 15).

4.8. Coping Mechanisms

Several coping strategies for work/family balance were identified. Practical strategies included scheduling, prioritizing tasks, delegating domestic tasks, and using childcare, if available. Emotional strategies included seeking advice from friends, talking to other women in similar circumstances, and making small moments for self-care.

One participant explained that "Speaking with friends in similar circumstances is very helpful; we can vent and give each other tips on coping" (Interviewee 21). However, participants also said that coping strategies could not eliminate stress. Another participant said, "I try to make the most of my days, making sure I have time for work and family, but it doesn't always work out the way I want it to, and that can be frustrating" (Interviewee 8).



Figure 8. Thematic salience of coping-strategy codes.



Figure 9. Thematic salience of perceived-barrier codes.

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4.9. Perceived Barriers

The key challenges identified by participants were a mix of inflexible work cultures, different expectations at home, lack of support services, and stereotypes of commitment and leadership for women. One of the participants said, "I feel like there are invisible barriers everywhere I turn. At work, they don't offer flexible hours, and at home, there's the constant expectation that I should be doing more" (Interviewee 17). Another interviewee stated, "It's difficult to even ask for a promotion at work; there's this unspoken thing that because I'm a woman, I'm not going to be able to do that and take care of my family at the same time" (Interviewee 3).

4.10. Suggestions for Improvement

Participants made recommendations that involved structural and cultural changes. At the workplace level, they highlighted the possibility of working remotely, flexible working hours, fair parental leave, family-responsive supervision, and childcare support. At the family and societal levels, they called for increased male involvement in domestic work and a reevaluation of the role of women in terms of their caregiving abilities.

"I believe flexible work hours would be a great start; it would help women like me to balance our work and family life better without feeling like we are neglecting either of them" (Interviewee 12). Another participant said: "There should be a change in the thinking of people about the roles of men and women; men should be more involved in the housework, and workplaces should be supportive of both men and women" (Interviewee 5).

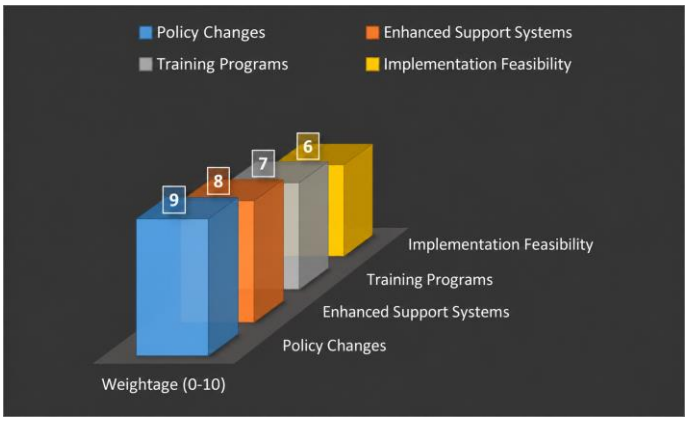
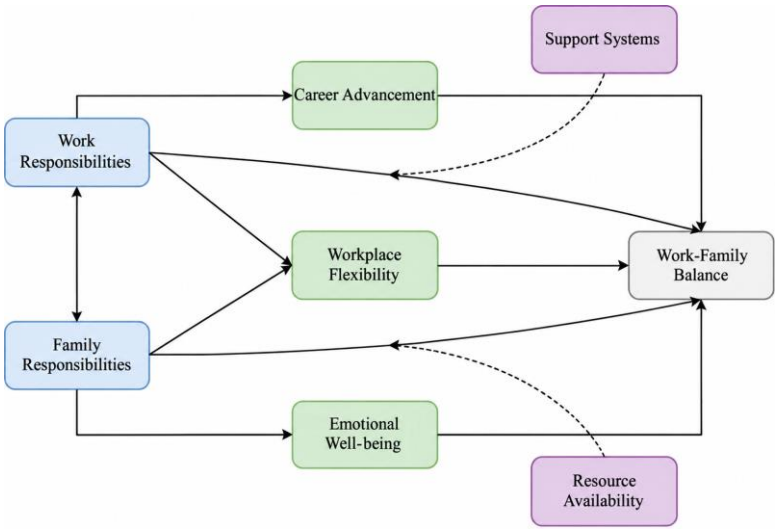


Figure 10. Thematic salience of proposed-improvement codes.



Note: The dashed arrows represent moderating relationships, while the solid arrows represent direct relationships.

Figure 11. Conceptual model based on findings.

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Figure 11 illustrates the grounded theory model and the qualitative, non-causal relationships among the study's principal categories.

5. DISCUSSION

The emergent themes are interpreted using Role Theory and COR theory, and propositions for the conceptual model are developed. The results indicate that work-family balance for professional women in urban China is not the result of any one factor but rather the interaction of demanding work roles, unequal family roles, gendered norms, and access to resources.

The arrows in the conceptual model are theoretical relationships that have been developed through axial and selective coding. They are not statistically determined causal relationships, but rather explanations that participants repeatedly gave when describing how one condition exacerbates, mitigates, or precedes another. Work responsibilities and family responsibilities were coded as reinforcing demands, and support systems, workplace flexibility, and resource availability were coded as intervening conditions that decrease resource loss. Emotional well-being and career advancement were coded as outcomes of the unresolved work-family conflict. Table 3 presents the ten propositions developed from the emergent categories through axial and selective coding.

Table 3. Proposition development.

Proposition Number	Emergent Category Relationship	Proposition Description
P1	Work Responsibilities ↔ Family Responsibilities	Greater work responsibilities were described as intensifying family-role strain and perceived work-family conflict among urban women.
P2	Workplace Flexibility ↔ Work Responsibilities	Flexible work arrangements were described as helping women manage work responsibilities with less perceived work-family conflict.
P3	Support Systems ↔ Work Responsibilities	Access to robust support systems was described as reducing burdens associated with work responsibilities and supporting women's capacity to fulfill family roles.
P4	Resource Availability ↔ Work-Family Balance	Limited access to resources was described as constraining women's ability to achieve a satisfactory work-family balance.
P5	Cultural Expectations ↔ Work Responsibilities	Societal norms that position women as primary caregivers were described as intensifying role strain and perceived work-family conflict.
P6	Cultural Expectations ↔ Career Advancement	Cultural pressures that prioritize family roles over career aspirations were described as constraining women's opportunities for career advancement.
P7	Emotional Well-being ↔ Work-Family Conflict	Higher perceived work-family conflict was associated in participants' accounts with lower emotional well-being.
P8	Coping Mechanisms ↔ Emotional Well-being	Effective coping mechanisms were described as supporting emotional well-being in the context of work-family conflict.
P9	Perceived Barriers ↔ Career Advancement	Perceived barriers related to work-family conflict were described as constraining career advancement opportunities.
P10	Suggestions for Improvement ↔ Work-Family Balance	Suggested improvements, including workplace policy changes and cultural shifts, were identified by participants as conditions that could support healthier work-family balance.

The first proposition, that there is a relationship between work responsibilities and family responsibilities, is based on the participants' descriptions of the reciprocal pressure. Time and energy required for work were used for caregiving, and time and energy for rest and career were used for domestic duties. This builds on the classical work-family conflict argument that incompatible role pressures generate strain (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kahn et al., 1964) and expands the argument to demonstrate how strain is exacerbated by urban commuting, long work hours,

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and gendered expectations in the household. Flexibility and support systems at work were identified as important buffering resources.

Telecommuting, flexible hours, supportive supervisors, grandparents, partners, and childcare were identified as ways to minimize the immediate time and emotional loss. This result is in line with the COR theory, which posits that people strive to gain and hold on to resources to ensure their well-being (Hobfoll, 1989). The finding of support systems is also consistent with the findings of Faiza et al. (2023) and Mathieu et al. (2023) that low family/organizational support is related to high work-family conflict. Structural barriers are evident in resource availability, cultural expectations, and career advancement. Childcare and household assistance were not optional luxuries but resources that affect the sustainability of career effort, as participants described.

Cultural expectations were also significant as women were judged as employees, as well as caregivers, daughters, wives, and mothers. This is why career progression was frequently limited by what was thought of as a glass ceiling linked to family responsibilities. The psychological pathway is depicted in the model by emotional well-being, coping mechanisms, and perceived barriers. Emotional support, self-care, planning and delegation were used, but these were not enough where there was no change in workplace policies and household norms. Coping thus served as a partial solution, but not a complete one.

The results indicate that individual interventions should be complemented by organizational and policy interventions. Finally, the suggestion for improvement is to implement grounded theory. Flexible work arrangements, equal parental leave, affordable childcare, training for managers, and cultural changes to shift attitudes toward shared responsibility for domestic life are not mutually exclusive interventions but can work together to address the conditions, resources, actions, and consequences outlined in the model.

6. CONCLUSION

In sum, this study suggests that the work-family balance of professional women in urban China is the result of the interplay between work responsibilities, family responsibilities, cultural expectations, workplace flexibility, support systems, resource availability, and coping mechanisms. The results indicate that individual coping may help to lower stress in the short term, but that balance can only be achieved through changes in organizations and society that redistribute resources and responsibilities. Theoretically, the study makes a contribution by bringing together the concepts of Role Theory and COR theory in a grounded explanation of work-family conflict. Role Theory provides an explanation of why incompatible expectations generate strain, and COR theory provides an explanation of how time, energy, flexibility, childcare, and support function as resources that increase or decrease strain.

The grounded theory model provides evidence from urban China and clarifies the linkage between family roles, emotional well-being, and career advancement in the cultural context. Managerial implications involve the need for normalized flexible working, family-friendly management, clear promotion rules, and support for childcare in the workplace. Policy implications involve increasing access to affordable childcare, increasing participation in shared caregiving through parental leave, and promoting public narratives that support shared caregiving.

The methodological value of grounded theory is demonstrated in explaining processes and relationships that are not captured in survey-only research. There are limitations to the study. The sample included 26 women in an urban context in China and does not necessarily represent all sectors, rural contexts, or life stages. Recall or social desirability bias could also be an issue with self-reported interviews.

Future studies should make comparisons across regions and industries, incorporate men's views on household work, and adopt longitudinal designs to explore work-family balance over the course of motherhood and career progression, as well as organizational policy changes.

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