

An Interdisciplinary Study on the Impact of
Work-Family Conflict on Employed Mothers

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Historically, women have been regarded as the primary caregivers in a family unit, while men have been deemed the financial providers. These norms in the heteronormative nuclear family have been assumed for centuries. With the integration of women in the workforce in the twentieth century, this ideology is presumed to have shifted in society. Scholars have found that “The population of working mothers has greatly increased over the past few decades, yet cultural norms and standards for women have not progressed at the same rate” (Forbes et al., 2019). This cultural shift – or a lack thereof – has burdened employed mothers to feel a need to juggle a career and their family life. This perceived conflict afflicts employed mothers, which is referred to as the work-family conflict (WFC) by various academics (Heilman, Forbes, Borgogna, etc.). With this in mind, it is essential to note that male counterparts are less likely to feel the pressure of maintaining a work-family balance. Could this all be chalked up to age-old sexism? In research, it is revealed that employed mothers have encountered a fallacy that requires them to “do it all” to maintain a career while still being the primary caregiver in the home. In recent history, women were taught to be self-sufficient and work, whereas men were not told to refine their role in society – so who was left to be the caregivers? This paper discusses how societal norms influence what it means to be an employed parent and possibly how these norms are more selective toward employed mothers. These norms may cause employed mothers to hold a fair share of guilt in terms of their work-family balance. This conflict has inflicted psychological damage on employed mothers, and it is a crisis that affects society and the overall health of mothers to this day. It is important to note that this conflict is only intensified for working mothers of color and those belonging to a lower socioeconomic status, as factors like racial discrimination and financial burdens are stressors. Using sociological, historical, and psychological lenses, it is revealed that employed mothers experience work-family conflict (WFC) more than their male counterparts.

Using the framework of sociology to study the structure of human groups, the societal construct of gender roles plays a crucial aspect in employed mothers' work-family conflict (WFC). In society, the concept of gender roles, or gender norms, enforces the ideology that humans are expected to act following the roles associated with their assigned sex (Makwana et al., 2017). This ideology implies that masculinity is assigned to males and femininity to females. Social constructs define humans from the moment they are born, as humans are assigned a sex at birth. This leads to the concept of a stereotype which is "[an attribute] ascribed to a group and imputed to its individual members simply because they belong to that group" (Heilman, 1983). In other words, the stereotyping within gender norms creates a societally acceptable characterization of how certain genders are expected to present. Societal standards known as stereotypes define humans in more ways than one, which means these confining rules can influence human perception and behavior over generations. This is depicted when "Traditional masculinity ideology (TMI) specifically refers to a series of related masculine ideologies prominent within Western societies suggesting men should be dominant, heterosexual, avoidant-of-femininity, self-reliant, emotionally restrictive, physically strong, and overtly sexual" (Borgonga & McDermott, 2021). This idea of TMI is essential because it depicts how those presenting as men are dominant and unfeminine, so it can be assumed this idea would hold firm for how men present themselves in heteronormative relationships. On the other hand, women present as "warm, caring, and compassionate" (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). With this in mind, it can be concluded that men are not stereotypically considered caregivers in the family unit compared to women. But there is another, very interesting question we should ask at this stage: does this TMI ideology endure throughout a lifetime? A recent study found that this ideology endures between people who identify as men and women for over a year. Researchers argue that "Such results suggest that there

may be little fluctuation in one's TMI, indicating it can be considered an individual difference that may be present (consciously or unconsciously) in a variety of contexts" (Borgonga & McDermott, 2021). This finding only strengthens the idea that gender bias permeates all members of society, and it endures for a length of time, so it can only be assumed that such bias can persist over a lifetime. This lasting bias is bound to shackle modern employed mothers to the confines of their gender, while employed fathers are characterized as the providers of a heteronormative family. Even the phrase "employed fathers" reads unnaturally due to the bias associated with working parents – men in the workplace will always be men, while women are always a facet of themselves – a mother. This illustrates how gender norms imparted by society are stricter on women than their male counterparts.

As seen from the sociological motives of gender inequity, the implications of this social framework at play in history will help gain insight into why women experience work-family conflict today. As determined by the sociological lens, women are perceived as homemakers and caregivers as social norms suggest. A historical reference indicates that "Home economics from the fifth through the ninth grade is required in Paterson, N. J., every girl is required to take hygiene, first aid, and home nursing before she can graduate from high school" (Emeline S., 1931). This excerpt suggests that women were only valued for their homemaking rather than other facets of their personalities and abilities from an early age. In society, this has created the association of women-only belonging in the home or the kitchen and that they are gentle beings. This ideology is emulated decades later in the blockbuster Jurassic Park when John Hammond, the elderly CEO, insists to Dr. Ellie Sattler, "But you know, I should really be the one going," when they are in the face of a dangerous situation. Dr. Sattler then requests for him to clarify, and to that, Hammond stutters, "Well, because you're a... and I'm a...," and then, Dr. Sattler retorts, "Look, we can discuss

sexism in survival situations when I get back," (Crichton & Marmo, 1992). This is not just a commentary between mere action movie characters but an accurate representation of how art imitates life. Primarily, this movie scene depicts how women are considered unfit for certain settings and situations based on gender, showing how this ideology permeates our society and continues to do so today. History shows, "Even women with high school or college diplomas were regularly educated to be homemakers" (Wills, 2022). This only reinforces how men and women resided in two distinct spheres throughout history (Masterson, 2017). If this similar logic is applied to the workplace, predominantly a place for men – due to men being deemed breadwinners in a nuclear family (Masterson, 2017) – it can be gathered that there is a sense of division in the workplace based on gender. The gender norms as established by sociological factors only suggest that the history of men dominating the workplace has made the introduction of women into the workplace a less than welcoming experience. Sociology suggests that women have been conditioned to understand their place in the home. As women proved against this ideal, there has been an intangible disparity in women's place in society – and the workplace. History details women moving from their presumed role as a mother in the kitchen into male-dominated spaces. In the workplace, we see women entering a space not tailored to accommodate women – but tailored to the man – showing how women struggle to be a part of the modern workforce. A recent article published in the *American Scholar* suggests, "If women had more education or wider experiences, they were treated as intruders into areas not 'natural' for them" (Wills, 2022). This emphasizes that historically, women were not welcome in the workplace, and sociology supports that this idea only endures over time. A measurable disparity of women moving into the workplace is depicted through the gender pay gap. A recent study shows that women earned 82% of what men earned, meaning that women would have to work over forty extra days than their male

counterparts to make the same wage (US Census Bureau, 2022). Historically, a gap in gender pay has always existed, but it is important to note that this gender gap has been seen to be narrowing in recent years (Malladi & Mean, 2021). In other words, the gender pay gap is closing. However, historically, women have been unable to attain the same wages as their male counterparts, even in women-dominated fields, and this persists in the present day. This discrimination in pay stems from pay discretion and wage bargaining, as women are more likely to harbor sentiments that they deserve less money, especially when their counterpart is a man (Biasi & Sarsons, 2022). Furthermore, women have been found to less frequently engage in salary negotiation, which can assumingly be linked back to the ideology that women back away from metaphorically taking up space in the workplace as depicted through the findings of Arnold and Loughlin (2019). Gender norms throughout history are more selective toward women because women only had one role in society. However, in the modern world, they often fill multiple roles and are more dynamic beings. This relates to why working mothers feel the need to do it all: because they feel unwelcomed in the workplace and feel like they do not have enough time for motherly duties. Since women have entered the workforce, employed mothers have felt the pressure to overextend themselves, creating a divergence in their work life and home life. This only supports the question of why women feel a sense of guilt for not fully being the caregiver. Throughout history, it has been shown that women feel inadequate in their lives due to this work-family conflict. It is important to note that history does repeat itself – and modern-day continues to mimic history. Women will continue to assume the roles society has confined them to fulfill. Seemingly, no matter how much women succeed in their careers, employed mothers are incapable of giving up their role as caregivers – without guilt – due to the constraints of society and history. The confines of gender norms, as shown throughout

history, only depict how this construct is more selective toward employed mothers than employed fathers.

With the sociological and historical implications of being a working woman, studies have shown that being an employed mother has mental and physical health consequences. As discussed, women have taken up an additional role in society by becoming financial providers. In recent history, egalitarian views urged women to be multifaceted beings instead of only being caregivers (Mandel & Lazarus, 2021). The pressure of being a working woman while men had a permanent role in society has created a spillover effect in terms of the mental health of working mothers. Studies show that a “Significant proportion of working mothers in comparison to non-working mothers had parenting stress” (Rajgariah et al., 2021). This only addresses the short-term mental health effects of being a working mother. Along with stress, mental health disorders like anxiety and depression have a higher prevalence in those who identify as women (Martin et al., 2021). It can be assumed that the stressors of being a working mother only worsen the mental health disorders that women are already more likely to have. Another study finds that “Everyday stressors can impact brain health over the long term...” (Gilsanz et al., 2019). In other words, the stress that employed mothers undergo daily holds the possibility of damaging their overall brain health. This study also finds that long-term exposure to stress increases the chances of developing dementia in old age. Not only do employed mothers endure the sociological burden of juggling multiple roles and experience increased levels of stress, but they are more susceptible to a long-term negative impact on brain health than men. It is also important to emphasize that it is difficult for women to leave their various responsibilities behind due to the constructs of society. Studies only confirm that this is another stressor, considering that women are trapped in a society that expects them to fulfill multiple roles. There is a spillover effect on mothers’ physical health due to their stressful

lives. A study shows that “...Conditions of high contextual life stressor inhibited the ability of mastery to influence physical health of mothers, [suggesting] that the positive health impact of mastery on physical health is mitigated by stressful life experiences” (King et al., 2018). Essentially, this study helps support that mothers with already higher rates of stress are less inclined to focus on their physical health due to time constraints from their already demanding lives. This depicts how employed mothers are more likely to feel the burdening effects of poor mental health because this spills into adverse physical health effects. It is essential to note that this study finds that women who have less education and receive nationally lower pay rates are more expected to not focus on their physical health. With this in mind, it can be concluded that employed mothers decline both mentally and physically for the sake of the caregiver role because they do not have enough time to prioritize themselves. Employed fathers are likely to endure some stress levels; however, it is important to note that these stressors are not from the gender norms established by society. This is demonstrated when a study finds that “Family-to-work conflict is linked to distress among women only” (Bilodeau et al., 2020). On top of being a human who experiences life, women also succumb to the stressors of being a woman in society today – whether they believe that or not. Already, women, and employed mothers, are at a disadvantage over their male counterparts in terms of stressors. As discussed, working mothers encounter extreme pressure throughout the majority of motherhood, and they are more susceptible to experiencing poor cognitive health and more likely to neglect physical health over time than their male counterparts.

It is also important to touch upon aspects of race and class in this discussion of work-family conflict (WFC). On top of being a working mother in our society, factors like race and socioeconomic status effect symptoms of burnout and can add on piling sentiments of burnout. As mentioned, having a perceived low support from a partner intensifies WFC for working mothers,

but it is also mentioned that there are “elevated rates of illness, disability, and mortality seen among Black Americans as a physiological response to the structural barriers, material hardships, stereotypes, and other threats to one's identity that comprise the Black experience,” (Geronimus et al., 2016). In other words, marginalized groups are at risk of sickness and increased risk mortality due to their existence in society alone. If this finding is coupled with the idea that working mothers are already statistically proven to maintain extreme stressors, it only emphasizes that working mothers who also identify as people of color (POC) are even more likely to experience serious health concerns. On top of being a working mother participating in society, women of color experience the stressors of being a part of a marginalized group at such an early age, which prolongs sentiments of stress. From here, the idea of parental burnout arises. It is found that, “parents [who] chronically endure severe stress without sufficient resources to cope, [leads] to detrimental consequences not only for the parent but also for their partner.” These consequences are found to be marital conflict, and neglect and violence against children (Blanchard et al., 2023). In other words, a lack of parental support and extreme stressors are a danger to families entirely across society. These dangers only intensify for families of color. With this in mind, a study concluded that “Marriages of couples with higher income are more stable,” (Schmid, 2022). Therefore, lower-income families are likelier to maintain unstable or unhealthy family dynamics, which can be assumingly contributed by the stress of financial burdens. As it has been discussed, severe stress can debilitate working mothers which in turn is linked to create marital and familial strife. In other words, a lack of parental support and extreme stressors are a danger to families entirely across society, and these dangers only intensify for lower income earning families and especially lower income earning families of color. If this idea is applied to entire marginalized groups, there is a possibility that these groups have a more significant disadvantage of breaking

such a debilitating cycle. Overall, factors such as race and socioeconomic status must be considered when discussing the difficulties of being a working mother, but this culmination of factors further assert that the pressures of being a working mother creates a generational cycle of stress, adding on to and affecting people of color in our society today.

The work-family conflict gap based on gender persists in our society. The damaging effect of gender norms insists that employed mothers abandon their own needs and prioritize the needs of others in the family unit. This dangerous ideology can only hurt women for years to come – mentally and physically. Employed mothers are forced to become facets of themselves for the sake of others. This persisting ideology and attitude that women “can do it all” will surely be at the expense of employed mothers, but there is hope for a paradigm shift. Studies show that “...Once an individual develops an internalized sense of TMI, it may be resistant to change without some form of external influence (formal or informal) such as education, counseling, social interactions, and/or exposure to new ideas,” (Borgonga & McDermott, 2021). As long as participants in society educate themselves on the burdens placed on mothers – more specifically, employed mothers – this gap in work-family conflict will slowly close, just as the gender pay gap has been narrowing in recent years. That said, employed mothers have worked for others at their expense. This only hones into a more significant societal issue that women are more likely to experience symptoms of burnout than their male counterparts, and these factors only intensify for women of color and those in low-income earning families. History shows that women were left to carry the burden of being the sole caregivers and still carry that burden today. If our society maintains these gender norms, we will continue to have a society of burnt-out employed mothers – so only men would be left to resume this caregiver role.

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