



Akademik Eğitim ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi (AJESS Journal)

Motherhood and the Career Development of Working Women: In the Context of the Challenges of Work–Life Balance

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Article History

Received : 05/08/2026; Accepted : 04/10/2026; Published :06/10/2026

Abstract

This study examined the impact of motherhood on the career trajectories of working women and explored the role of family, social, and organisational support, as well as individual strategies, in achieving work–life balance. The study adopted a descriptive-analytical approach and used a questionnaire administered to a sample of 80 working women. The findings indicated that support, workplace flexibility, time management, and the sharing of family responsibilities contribute to women’s ability to remain professionally active and advance in their careers after becoming mothers. The results further indicated that reconciling professional and family responsibilities requires the interaction of individual, family, and organisational factors.

Keywords: motherhood, working women, career development, work–life balance, organisational support

Introduction

Economic, technological, and cultural transformations have reshaped the structure of work and the distribution of social roles, as reflected in women’s increasing participation across a range of professional and productive sectors. Women’s roles are therefore no longer confined to the family sphere. However, this increased professional participation has not eliminated their family responsibilities, particularly those associated with motherhood and childcare, leaving many women to reconcile competing demands from work and private life.

Working women perform dual roles as employees and as mothers responsible for family care. These concurrent responsibilities may generate role conflict and affect career continuity and development. In this context, work–life balance has become a key concept for understanding the relationship between professional and family roles, particularly given the persistence of traditional patterns in the distribution of responsibilities within the family.

Organisations also play an important role in helping women manage these challenges by offering flexible working arrangements, remote work, maternity leave, and supportive organisational environments. Such measures can alleviate pressure and facilitate continued career participation. Examining the impact of motherhood on working women’s career trajectories is therefore important for understanding the social and organisational challenges they face and for informing policies that better support the reconciliation of professional and family life.

Research Problem

Recent decades have witnessed a marked increase in women’s participation in the labour market, reshaping social roles within the family and society. At the same time, this expansion has created challenges in reconciling professional and family responsibilities, particularly after motherhood. Motherhood represents a pivotal stage at which family responsibilities intersect with career development, as women face professional demands relating to productivity and occupational commitment alongside responsibilities for childcare and the management of family life.

The overlap of these roles may generate conflict between professional and family domains, particularly in the absence of supportive organisational policies, such as flexible working arrangements, and adequate family support. Such conditions may affect women's opportunities for career development. It is therefore important to examine the relationship between motherhood and career trajectories and to analyse the contribution of social and organisational factors to work-life balance. Hence, the study addresses the following main research question:

To what extent does motherhood affect the career trajectories of working women, and how do organisational and social factors facilitate or hinder the achievement of work-life balance?

Research Questions

- How does motherhood affect promotion trajectories and opportunities for career advancement among working women?
- To what extent does work organisation within institutions, including working hours and schedule flexibility, support or hinder work-life balance among working mothers?
- What strategies do working women adopt to reconcile professional and family responsibilities?
- To what extent does family and social support affect women's ability to continue their career trajectories after motherhood?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses guided the study:

General Hypothesis

Working women's ability to achieve work-life balance after motherhood is associated with organisational, family, and social support, with implications for career continuity and opportunities for advancement.

Subhypotheses

First hypothesis: Motherhood is associated with a relative slowing of promotion trajectories and opportunities for career advancement among working women as a result of increased family responsibilities and childcare demands.

Second hypothesis: The organisation of work within institutions, particularly through flexible working hours or flexible work arrangements, contributes to enhancing working mothers' ability to achieve work-life balance.

Third hypothesis: Working women rely on a range of individual and family strategies, such as time management and the sharing of family responsibilities, to reconcile work demands with family responsibilities.

Fourth hypothesis: Family and social support contribute to strengthening working women's ability to continue their career paths after motherhood and to reducing conflict between professional and family roles.

Definitions of Key Terms

Motherhood: Motherhood is defined as a set of behaviours and interactions undertaken by a mother towards her child, such as care, feeding, protection, and responsiveness to the child's needs, to ensure the child's survival and development. These behaviours are influenced by a range of biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors (Qantar, 1992, pp. 10–12).

Working woman: A working woman is defined as a woman who performs regular paid work outside the home while continuing to fulfil her family responsibilities, such as caring for her husband and children and managing household affairs, thereby combining professional and family roles (Aoufi & Hadidan, 2017, p. 167).

Career path: A career path is defined as the sequence of jobs and tasks undertaken by an individual throughout their working life, from employment until retirement, and can be measured through promotions, acquired experience, job mobility, and the level of professional performance over time (Braf & Bachir, 2019, p. 357).

Work-life balance: Work-life balance is defined as an individual's ability to reconcile the demands of work and personal life in a manner that achieves balance and satisfaction in both domains and reduces conflict between professional and family roles (Boukhedouni, 2024, pp. 174–175).

Significance of the Study

This study derives its significance from several aspects.

From a scholarly perspective, the study contributes to the literature on the relationship between work and family within contemporary sociology and supports a better understanding of the challenges working women face in balancing their different roles.

From a practical perspective, the findings may inform organisational policies aimed at providing greater support for working women, including flexible working arrangements and paid maternity leave.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify the impact of motherhood on the career paths of working women.
- To highlight the role of family and organisational support in achieving work-life balance.
- To identify the strategies that help women reconcile their professional and family responsibilities.
- To provide recommendations for supporting women's career development after motherhood.

Rationale for the Study

Personal Reasons

- To understand the challenges of reconciling work and family life and their impact on women's career paths.
- Interest in issues relating to working women and the balance between their professional and family roles.

Scholarly Reasons

- The increasing importance of work-life balance in light of social and professional transformations.
- To highlight the challenges faced by working women after motherhood and their impact on career development.
- To examine the role of family and institutional support in the continuity of women's career paths.
- To enrich sociological studies on work and family within the Algerian context.
- To provide recommendations for improving the working conditions of mothers and enhancing the balance between professional and family life.

Theoretical Framework

Role Conflict Theory: Role conflict theory explains human behaviour in terms of multiple social roles whose demands and expectations may conflict. This conflict is particularly evident among working women who combine professional roles with family responsibilities as mothers and wives, potentially creating pressure and difficulty in reconciling and balancing these roles (Soudani, 2021, p. 33).

Work-Life Balance Theory: Work-life balance theory emphasises the importance of achieving compatibility between professional and family demands by considering spillover effects between the two domains and the potential for role conflict. Greater balance is associated with improved performance, job satisfaction, and quality of life, whereas imbalance may contribute to tension, pressure, and reduced productivity (Pollack, 2021).

Gender Approach: The gender approach is based on the premise that roles and opportunities for women and men are socially and culturally constructed. It helps explain the challenges working women face after motherhood as they combine professional and family responsibilities, as well as the influence of traditional role patterns on opportunities for career development and promotion. This perspective contributes to understanding occupational inequalities and identifying more equitable mechanisms for supporting women (Younsi & Telli, 2020).

Previous Studies

Arab Studies

Madoui's (2014) study aimed to identify the difficulties working women experience in reconciling family responsibilities with work demands and the strategies they adopt to achieve balance between them. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, the study concluded that dual roles generate psychological and physical pressures and difficulties related to childcare. Women's success in reconciling work and family was associated with support from husbands and other family members and with the sharing of household responsibilities, whereas the absence of family support was associated with tension and family disruption.

Mansour and Saadou (2024) examined the effect of balancing women's work and family life on children's socialisation and the challenges faced by working mothers. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, the study found that limited social support and a lack of work flexibility increased tension and exhaustion. Imbalance adversely affected family relationships and communication, whereas greater balance contributed to family stability and the healthy social development of children.

Lahcen (2010) examined the family roles of married working women and the extent of husbands' participation in household work. The study employed a descriptive-analytical approach and interviews with a sample of 30 working women. The findings indicated that women's employment contributed to changes in the division of family roles while women continued to bear a dual burden. Husbands' participation in household work alleviated pressure and supported family balance, whereas traditional values constrained equality in the distribution of responsibilities.

International Studies

Allen et al. (2013) examined the relationship between flexible work arrangements and work-family conflict, distinguishing between temporal and spatial flexibility. Their meta-analysis included 58 independent studies with a total sample of 112,834 participants. The findings indicated that flexible work arrangements reduced work interference with family and that temporal flexibility was more effective than spatial flexibility in reducing work-family conflict, whereas effects on family interference with work were limited.

Craig and Sawrikar (2009) examined how children's developmental stages affect work-family balance and the gender division of labour. Using data from two nationally representative Australian surveys with samples of 7,271 and 4,265 participants, respectively, the study applied a range of statistical analyses. The findings showed that mothers bore the greater share of care and household responsibilities, while work-family balance improved as children grew older. Fathers also reported greater satisfaction with work-family balance when they participated more in childcare and perceived greater workplace support for family-friendly policies.

Synthesis of Previous Studies

Contributions of Previous Studies

The current study drew on previous research in the following ways:

- Constructing the theoretical framework related to women's work, motherhood, and the balance between professional and family life.
- Identifying the principal concepts related to the subject of the study, such as family balance, multiple roles, motherhood, and professional work.
- Identifying the main challenges and difficulties faced by working women in combining their family responsibilities with their professional ambitions.
- Drawing on previous findings to guide the analysis and relate the subject of the study to the social reality of working women.

Similarities

The current study is similar to previous research in its focus on working women and the balance between professional and family life, as well as its attention to the pressures and challenges arising from multiple roles within the family and workplace, particularly those associated with motherhood and family responsibilities.

Differences

The current study differs from previous research in its direct focus on the impact of motherhood on the career development of working women. It seeks to clarify how motherhood-related responsibilities influence professional ambition, career advancement, and the reconciliation of professional success with private life, whereas much of the previous research has focused more broadly on family, educational, or intra-household role-division issues.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-analytical design to examine relationships among the study variables.

Population

The study population consisted of women employed in university institutions.

Sample

Purposive sampling was used to select women employed in university institutions who were relevant to the study themes of employment, motherhood, and work-life balance. This approach was selected because the total number of eligible working women could not be determined precisely and because it was considered appropriate to the nature and objectives of the study. The final sample comprised 80 working women.

Data Collection Instrument

An electronic questionnaire was used to collect data because it was appropriate to the study objectives. The instrument was developed with reference to relevant theoretical literature and previous studies.

The questionnaire comprised two main sections. The first collected respondents' personal and professional information, including age, marital status, number of children, years of professional experience, and nature of work. The second comprised 30 statements across five dimensions: motherhood and career path (7 items), work organisation within the institution (8 items), individual and family strategies (5 items), family and social support (4 items), and institutional support and the university work environment (6 items).

A five-point Likert scale was used to measure participants' responses, with options ranging from strongly agree to disagree strongly. Responses were coded on a five-point scale for statistical analysis using SPSS.

Reliability of the Study Instrument

Cronbach's alpha for the 30-item study instrument was $\alpha = .81$, indicating good internal consistency among the questionnaire items.

Thus, the instrument demonstrated an acceptable level of reliability for the analyses conducted in this study.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise sample characteristics, while means and standard deviations were used to describe questionnaire responses. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal consistency. One-sample *t* tests were used to compare dimension means with the midpoint (3) of the five-point Likert scale.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	Under 30 years	3	3.8
	31–40 years	43	53.8

	41–50 years	26	32.5
	Over 50 years	8	10.0
Marital status	Married	77	96.3
	Divorced	2	2.5
	Widowed	1	1.3
Number of children	No children	6	7.5
	One child	16	20.0
	Two children	23	28.7
	Three or more children	35	43.8
Years of professional experience	Less than 5 years	32	40.0
	5–10 years	15	18.8
	More than 10 years	33	41.3
Nature of work	Full-time	35	43.8
	Part-time	39	48.8
	Flexible/remote work	6	7.5

Note. $N = 80$.

As shown in Table 1, the 31–40 age group represented the largest proportion of the sample (53.8%), followed by the 41–50 age group (32.5%). Thus, most respondents were in age groups commonly associated with established professional and family responsibilities, consistent with the study's focus.

Most respondents were married (96.3%), a distribution consistent with the study's focus on motherhood and the relationship between family responsibilities and women's career trajectories.

Regarding the number of children, the largest proportion of respondents had three or more children (43.8%), followed by those with two children (28.7%). These distributions indicate substantial family responsibilities among a large proportion of the sample.

Professional experience was distributed relatively evenly between respondents with more than 10 years of experience (41.3%) and those with less than 5 years of experience (40.0%). This variation provides a range of professional experiences relevant to understanding working women's experiences in relation to motherhood.

Regarding the nature of work, 48.8% of respondents worked part-time and 43.8% worked full-time, whereas only 7.5% reported flexible or remote work. This distribution may indicate limited use of flexible work arrangements within the institutions represented in the study.

One-Sample t Tests

Table 2 presents the one-sample *t*-test results for the five study dimensions.

Table 2. One-Sample t Test Results for the Study Dimensions

Dimension	<i>M</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Conclusion
Motherhood and career path	3.357	4.335	< .001	Supported
Work organisation within the institution	3.877	23.707	< .001	Supported
Individual and family strategies	3.923	18.000	< .001	Supported
Family and social support	3.981	17.851	< .001	Supported
Institutional support and the university work environment	3.481	7.949	< .001	Supported
Overall mean	3.724	—	—	Consistent with the general hypothesis

Note. The test value was 3, the midpoint of the five-point Likert scale. All reported probability values for the five dimensions were $p < .001$.

All five study dimensions had mean scores above the scale midpoint of 3, and each one-sample *t* test was statistically significant ($p < .001$). Family and social support had the highest mean ($M = 3.98$, $t = 17.85$), followed by individual and family strategies ($M = 3.92$), work organisation within the institution ($M = 3.88$), institutional support and the university work environment ($M = 3.48$), and motherhood and career path ($M = 3.36$). Taken together, these findings supported the four subhypotheses and were consistent with the general hypothesis.

Discussion

First Hypothesis

The first hypothesis states: “Motherhood is associated with a relative slowing of promotion pathways and opportunities for career advancement among working women as a result of increased family responsibilities and childcare demands.”

The results supported the first hypothesis. The motherhood and career path dimension had a mean of 3.36 and differed significantly from the scale midpoint, indicating that respondents perceived motherhood as affecting their career trajectories and opportunities for advancement. From the perspective of role conflict theory, this pattern may reflect the difficulty of simultaneously meeting the demands associated with motherhood and paid employment.

This finding may also be interpreted through a gender perspective, which highlights the continued concentration of family and childcare responsibilities among women and the potential consequences for participation in training and promotion opportunities. The result is consistent with Madoui (2014), who reported pressures arising from the combined demands of work and family, including childcare, and with Lahcen (2010), who found that working women continued to bear a dual burden of paid and domestic work.

Second Hypothesis

The second hypothesis states: “The organisation of work within institutions, particularly through flexible working hours or flexible work arrangements, contributes to enhancing working mothers’ ability to achieve work–life balance.”

The results supported the second hypothesis. Work organisation within the institution had a mean of 3.88, indicating that respondents attached considerable importance to organisational arrangements in facilitating work–life balance. This finding is consistent with work–life balance theory, which emphasises that flexible working conditions can facilitate the reconciliation of professional and personal demands and may support professional performance and psychological well-being. It is also consistent with Mansour and Saadou (2024), who identified limited work flexibility as a major challenge for working women and linked work–life balance with greater family stability and lower psychological strain.

Third Hypothesis

The third hypothesis states: “Working women rely on a range of individual and family strategies, such as time management and the sharing of family responsibilities, in order to reconcile work demands with family responsibilities.”

The results supported the third hypothesis. The individual and family strategies dimension had a mean of 3.92, indicating that working women relied on multiple strategies to manage professional and family demands.

This finding may be interpreted in light of work–life balance theory, which proposes that individuals develop behaviours and strategies to reduce role conflict and achieve greater compatibility across life domains. It is also consistent with Madoui (2014), who found that working women used a range of organisational and family strategies to reconcile professional and family responsibilities and that the effectiveness of these strategies was closely associated with the availability of family support.

Fourth Hypothesis

The fourth hypothesis states: “Family and social support contribute to strengthening working women’s ability to continue their career paths after motherhood and to reducing conflict between professional and family roles.”

The results supported the fourth hypothesis. Family and social support had the highest mean among the study dimensions (3.98), reflecting the importance respondents attached to such support in managing the challenges associated with motherhood and employment.

From the perspective of role conflict theory, family support may alleviate conflict between social roles by facilitating the sharing of family responsibilities and providing psychological and social support. The gender approach also supports this interpretation by emphasising that a more equitable redistribution of family roles between spouses can reduce inequalities in the burden of household responsibilities.

This finding is consistent with Lahcen (2010), who reported that husbands’ participation in household work reduced pressure on working women, and with Madoui (2014), who found that women’s ability to reconcile work and family was strongly associated with support from husbands and other family members.

General Hypothesis

The overall pattern of results was consistent with the general hypothesis, indicating that working women’s ability to achieve work–life balance after motherhood is associated with interrelated factors, including organisational support, family and social support, and the individual strategies women use to reconcile their different roles.

This pattern is consistent with work–life balance theory, which suggests that balance does not depend solely on individual effort but is also shaped by supportive organisational conditions and effective family and social support. It is likewise consistent with role conflict theory, which suggests that reducing pressures arising from multiple social roles may support professional functioning and family stability. The findings also underscore the relevance of the gender approach in explaining the continuing influence of traditional roles on working women’s professional experiences despite broader changes in women’s labour-market participation.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, the study recommends the following:

- Enhancing flexible working arrangements and institutional support for working mothers.
- Developing social and psychological programmes and services to support working mothers.
- Encouraging the sharing of family responsibilities between spouses.
- Supporting balance between professional and family life.

Future Research

The study suggests the following directions for future research:

- The impact of remote work on work–life balance among working women.
- A comparative study of women working in the university sector and those employed in other economic sectors.
- The role of public policies in supporting balance between professional and family life.

Conclusion

The study examined the impact of motherhood on the career development of working women and the role of organisational, family, and social factors in achieving work–life balance. Using a descriptive-analytical approach and an electronic questionnaire, the findings indicated that multiple roles and responsibilities after motherhood may affect women's career trajectories and opportunities for advancement, whereas work flexibility and organisational support may facilitate the reconciliation of professional and family roles.

The findings also highlighted the importance of individual and family strategies, including time management and shared responsibilities, as well as family, social, and institutional support, in reducing role conflict and supporting career continuity. The study concludes that balancing motherhood and employment does not depend on women's efforts alone; it also requires supportive organisational environments, flexible work policies, and family and social support. Together, these factors can contribute to women's career development and to the quality of their professional and family lives.

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