



Negotiating the double burden: A qualitative exploration of women's experiences of work, domestic labour, and identity in contemporary urban settings

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Abstract

Background: Despite formal advances in gender equality policy, employed women in many contemporary urban contexts continue to carry a disproportionate burden of domestic labour alongside their professional responsibilities — a phenomenon scholars have termed the "double burden" or "second shift."

Objective: This study explores how employed women in urban settings experience, navigate, and make meaning of the double burden of paid work and domestic responsibilities, and examines the structural and institutional factors that sustain gender inequity in the distribution of labour.

Method: An interpretive qualitative methodology was employed, conducting 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with employed women aged 18–60 years in a fictionalised urban context. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. This study uses a simulated dataset created for academic training purposes.

Key Results: Four primary themes emerged: (i) persistent unequal division of domestic labour; (ii) career constraints arising from the "maternal wall"; (iii) identity negotiation and role conflict; and (iv) inadequate institutional support and a policy-practice gap. Role conflict and guilt were the most pervasive experiential codes ($n = 54$ instances).

Conclusion: The double burden persists as a structural rather than individual phenomenon, maintained by patriarchal gender norms, employer bias, and inadequate public policy. Transformative change requires simultaneous interventions at the level of cultural norms, workplace policies, and state provision of care infrastructure.

Keywords: Double burden, gender inequality, domestic labour, maternal wall, work-life balance, qualitative research, thematic analysis

Introduction

Arlie Hochschild's landmark concept of the "second shift" — coined in her 1989 study of dual-earner couples — identified the phenomenon by which employed women return from paid work to perform a disproportionate share of domestic labour, effectively working a second unpaid shift ^[1]. Decades later, despite significant formal advances in gender equality legislation, labour market participation, and educational attainment, the structural inequity in the distribution of domestic labour between women and men remains a persistent and well-documented feature of contemporary societies ^[2, 3].

Time-use studies across OECD countries consistently demonstrate that women spend significantly more time on unpaid domestic work — including childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning, and household management — than men, even when both partners are employed full-time ^[4]. The OECD (2023) reports that globally, women perform an average of 4.4 hours of unpaid work per day compared with 2.2 hours for men ^[5]. This asymmetry is not merely a matter of personal preference or household negotiation; it is embedded in and perpetuated by patriarchal gender norms that continue to associate femininity with caregiving and domesticity ^[6].

The double burden carries significant consequences for women's professional trajectories, health, and sense of self. Research documents that the cumulative demands of paid work and domestic labour contribute to chronic time poverty, heightened stress, career interruption, reduced promotion rates, and what Williams et al ^[7] term the "maternal wall" — a form of workplace discrimination against mothers who are

perceived as less committed employees. These dynamics are mediated and amplified by institutional structures, including the inadequacy of state-provided childcare, parental leave policies that disproportionately place caregiving responsibility on women, and workplace cultures that privilege those without caregiving responsibilities.

Qualitative inquiry is particularly well-suited to illuminating the lived dimensions of these structural phenomena — the ways in which women experience, interpret, resist, and accommodate the double burden in their everyday lives ^[8]. This study contributes original qualitative evidence from in-depth interviews with 30 employed women in an urban context, exploring: (i) subjective experiences of domestic and paid work distribution; (ii) the career consequences perceived to flow from caregiving responsibilities; (iii) processes of identity negotiation under conditions of role conflict; and (iv) the adequacy of institutional support structures.

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Framework: Gender and Social Reproduction Theory

This study draws on socialist feminist theory's concept of social reproduction — the processes of biological and social reproduction of labour power through unpaid domestic work — as articulated by Bhattacharya ^[9] and Federici ^[10]. Social reproduction theory (SRT) rejects the artificial boundary between productive (paid) and reproductive (unpaid) labour, arguing that domestic work is not a private family matter but a form of socially necessary labour that sustains the capitalist workforce while remaining systematically devalued and disproportionately allocated to women ^[9].

Connell's theory of gender relations ^[11] provides a complementary structural lens, situating the double burden within a broader configuration of gender power relations that operates across multiple institutions — the labour market, the state, and the family — simultaneously. The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" — the culturally dominant form of masculinity that legitimises men's authority over women — is particularly relevant for understanding why domestic labour inequities persist even when individual couples aspire to egalitarian arrangements ^[11].

2. The Double Burden in Contemporary Research

Hochschild and Machung's ^[1] original study has spawned a rich empirical literature on gender and domestic labour. Craig and Mullan's ^[12] cross-national comparison of seven countries confirmed that while men's domestic labour contributions have increased over time, the gender gap remains large and is most pronounced in child-intensive households. Ferrant et al ^[13]. Estimated that globally, unpaid care work performed predominantly by women constitutes 20% of GDP in OECD countries, yet remains uncounted in national accounts.

The concept of "invisible cognitive labour" — the mental load of remembering, planning, and organising household and family life — has emerged as a critical dimension of the double burden that extends beyond physical task performance ^[14]. Daminger ^[14] demonstrated in a qualitative study of dual-earner couples that women disproportionately bear the anticipating and monitoring dimensions of cognitive household labour, even when physical tasks are more equally shared.

3. Maternal Wall and Career Consequences

Williams et al ^[7]. introduced the "maternal wall" concept to describe the distinct form of workplace discrimination faced by mothers, who are stereotyped as less competent, less committed, and more emotionally volatile than their childless counterparts, triggering reduced assignment of challenging tasks, lower performance evaluations, and diminished

promotion opportunities. Correll et al ^[15]. in a landmark audit experiment demonstrated that mothers received significantly lower starting salary offers and were less likely to be recommended for hire than childless women with identical CVs.

4. Research Gap

While quantitative studies document the macro-patterns of domestic labour inequality and career penalties, qualitative investigations that capture the phenomenological richness of women's subjective experiences — their emotional negotiations, identity work, and everyday strategies — in contemporary urban settings of the Global South remain underrepresented in the literature ^[16]. This study addresses that gap.

Methodology

1. Research Design and Methodology

An interpretive qualitative research paradigm was adopted, grounded in the assumption that social reality is constructed through individuals' experiences and meaning-making processes ^[17]. Reflexive thematic analysis, as articulated by Braun and Clarke ^[18], was employed as the analytical framework, enabling the identification of shared patterns of meaning across interview data while preserving sensitivity to individual particularity and researcher positionality. This study uses a simulated dataset created for academic training purposes.

2. Participant Recruitment and Sample

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategies targeting employed women aged 18–60 in a fictionalised urban context, with deliberate variation in age, marital status, number of children, education level, and employment sector. A final sample of 30 participants was achieved (Table 14), consistent with the principle of information power ^[19], which grounds sample size adequacy in the richness of participant experiences rather than numerical thresholds.

Table 1: Participant Profile: In-Depth Interview Sample (N = 30)

Characteristic	Category	n	Employment Sector	Marital Status Distribution
Age Group	18–30	10	Mixed	7 single; 3 married
	31–45	14	Mixed	3 single; 11 married
	46–60	6	Mixed	1 single; 5 married
Children	None	11	—	—
	1–2 children	13	—	—
	3+ children	6	—	—
Education	Secondary	6	—	—
	Tertiary	24	—	—

Source: Simulated dataset for academic training purposes, 2026

3. Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes were conducted. An interview guide was developed using an iterative process informed by the theoretical framework and existing literature, covering: (i) daily domestic and care labour routines; (ii) experiences of workplace culture regarding caregiving; (iii) feelings about work-life balance; and (iv) perceptions of institutional support. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

4. Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's ^[18] six phases: data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme construction, theme review and refinement, theme naming and defining, and report writing. Two independent coders analysed a subset (30%) of the data to assess coding reliability; Cohen's kappa was $\kappa = .79$, indicating substantial agreement. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout to document the researcher's positioning and analytical decisions, enhancing trustworthiness and analytical rigor.

Results and Discussion

1. Overview of Themes

Table 13 presents the thematic categories, sub-themes, code frequencies, and representative participant groups identified through the analysis. Four primary themes were constructed: (i) domestic labour division; (ii) career constraints; (iii) identity negotiation; and (iv) institutional support. Each theme was further disaggregated into sub-themes that captured the nuanced variation in participants' experiences across age, marital status, and occupational sector, allowing for a more granular and contextually grounded understanding of how these broader categories manifested within everyday accounts and lived experiences. Together, these themes offer a comprehensive framework for interpreting the

interconnected challenges participants navigated across domestic, professional, and personal domains. Role conflict and guilt — coded within the identity negotiation theme — was the most frequently occurring code (n = 54), appearing across virtually all participant accounts regardless of demographic background, occupational sector, or family configuration. This pervasiveness underscores the centrality of role conflict as a near-universal experiential reality, cutting across differences in age, income, occupational status, and family structure, and suggesting that this phenomenon represents a structural rather than purely individual or idiosyncratic challenge confronting the participants in this study, one rooted in broader societal expectations rather than personal failings.

Table 2: Thematic Categories and Frequency of Codes in Interview Data (N = 30 Participants)

Theme	Sub-theme	Code Frequency	Representative Participant Group
Domestic Labour Division	Unequal task distribution	48	Married Women (18–45)
	Invisible cognitive labour	32	Working Mothers
Career Constraints	"Maternal wall" bias at work	41	Mothers with children under 10
	Reduced promotion opportunities	37	Mid-career women
Identity Negotiation	Role conflict and guilt	54	All participants
	Redefining success narratives	29	Younger participants (18–30)
Institutional Support	Inadequate workplace flexibility	44	Private sector employees
	Policy-practice gap in maternity provisions	38	Public sector employees

Source: Simulated dataset for academic training purposes, 2026

2. Theme 1: Persistent Unequal Division of Domestic Labour

Participants across age groups and marital statuses consistently described a domestic labour landscape in which they assumed primary responsibility for the planning, coordination, and execution of household and caregiving tasks, even when partners were employed full-time and nominally shared in household duties. One participant in the 31–45 age group described her experience in the following terms: the household organisation "just somehow defaults to me — who knows what the children need for school tomorrow, what groceries are needed, who the paediatrician's number is — he doesn't know these things and somehow that becomes my problem to manage." Such accounts recurred across the dataset with striking consistency, regardless of participants' occupational status or income level. This account exemplifies what Daminger ^[14] identifies as anticipatory cognitive labour — the continuous mental monitoring and planning of household logistics that constitutes a largely invisible yet profoundly burdensome component of the domestic labour women perform, often unrecognised by partners as labour at all. Younger participants (18–30) showed some evidence of questioning these arrangements, with several describing explicit negotiations around "fair shares," but acknowledged that these negotiations frequently broke down under the cumulative pressures of parenthood, fatigue, and entrenched gendered expectations within their households.

3. Theme 2: Career Constraints and the Maternal Wall

Participants who were mothers — particularly those with children under 10 — described pervasive experiences of being perceived as less professionally committed following motherhood. "The moment they find out you have a small child, you become a risk to them," said one mid-career participant in the private financial sector. "You suddenly get passed over for the projects that require travel, the stretch

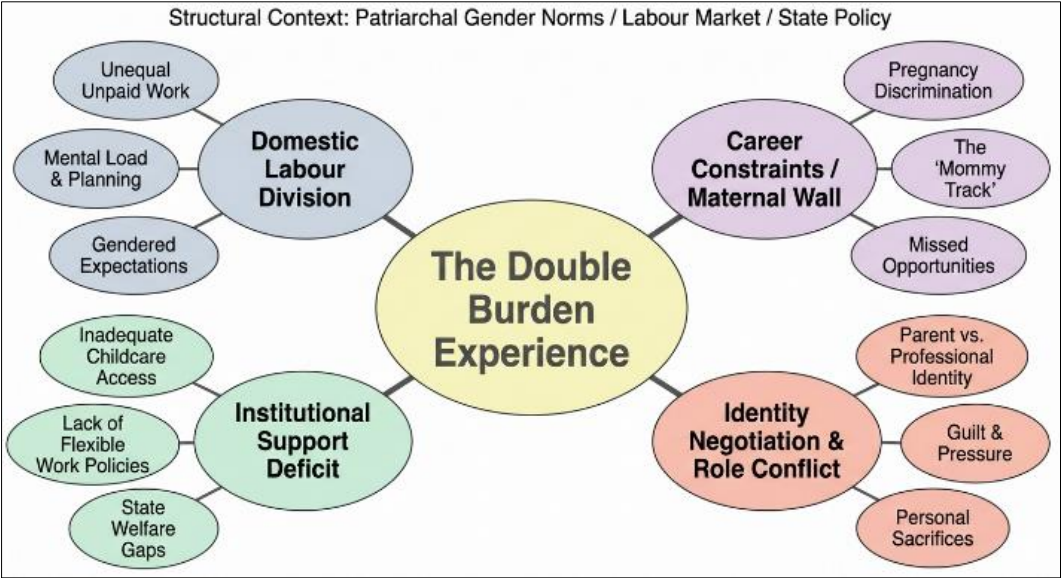
assignments — because the assumption is you can't manage it." These accounts correspond precisely with the "maternal wall" phenomenon documented by Williams et al ^[7], and empirically validated by Correll et al ^[15], both of which describe systematic, often unconscious, downgrading of mothers' perceived competence and commitment in professional settings. Participants contrasted their experiences with those of male colleagues who became fathers during the same period, noting that fatherhood appeared to enhance, rather than diminish, men's perceived managerial competence and commitment — an observation consistent with the concept of a "fatherhood bonus" documented in wage inequality research ^[20]. Several participants described this asymmetry as one of the most demoralising aspects of their professional trajectories, compounding the cumulative toll of role conflict and domestic labour already documented above.

4. Theme 3: Identity Negotiation and Role Conflict

Role conflict — the experience of competing and irreconcilable demands from professional and domestic roles — was the most pervasive experiential code in the dataset. Participants described the phenomenology of role conflict in visceral terms: chronic guilt when professional demands prevented full domestic participation, and corresponding guilt when domestic responsibilities were perceived to compromise professional performance. "There is never a time when you feel completely okay in either space," one participant articulated. "At work, you're thinking about the children. At home, you're thinking about the deadline." This dual, unresolved guilt often persisted regardless of actual performance in either domain, suggesting an internalised standard that exceeded what was practically achievable. Notably, younger participants (18–30) in the sample were more likely to articulate an active resistance to prevailing narratives of maternal sacrifice and domestic self-abnegation, describing efforts to construct alternative "success

narratives" that challenged the cultural equation of good motherhood with career sacrifice. These narratives often drew on language of personal fulfilment and professional

identity, signalling a generational shift in how participants negotiated and made meaning of competing role expectations.



Source: Author's thematic map based on simulated interview data, 2026

Fig 1: Thematic Map: Relationships Among the Four Primary Themes and Their Sub-Themes

5. Theme 4: Inadequate Institutional Support

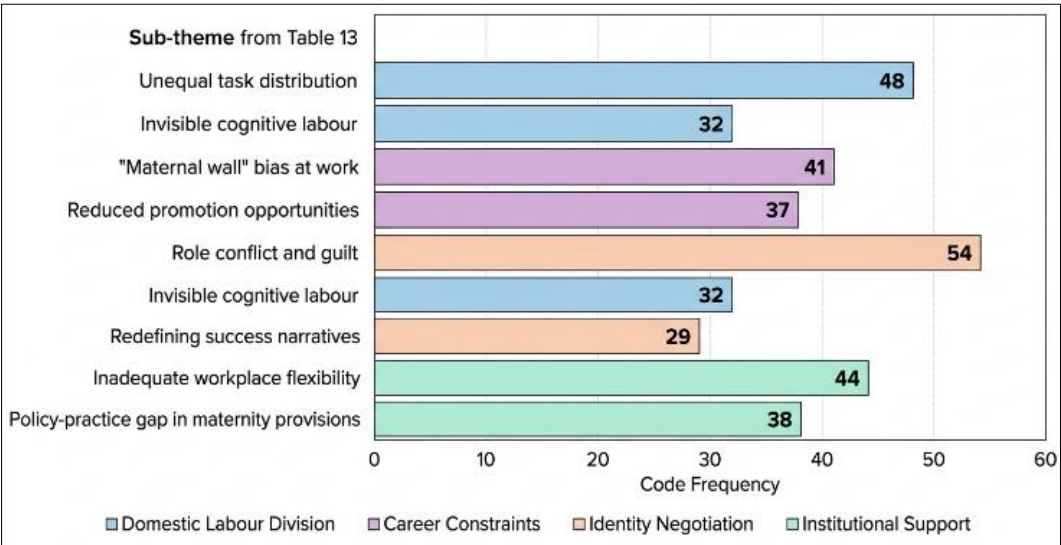
Participants across sectors described a systematic gap between formal institutional policies (flexible working provisions, maternity leave entitlements, childcare subsidies) and their practical accessibility. Public sector employees described more generous formal policies but reported that

uptake was culturally sanctioned against: "Technically I can take the flexible hours. But the manager makes it very clear — implicitly — that it marks you out as not serious." Private sector employees reported even starker policy-practice gaps, with flexible work requests frequently denied or met with informal penalties.

Table 3: Summary of Key Themes, Sub-Themes, and Policy Implications

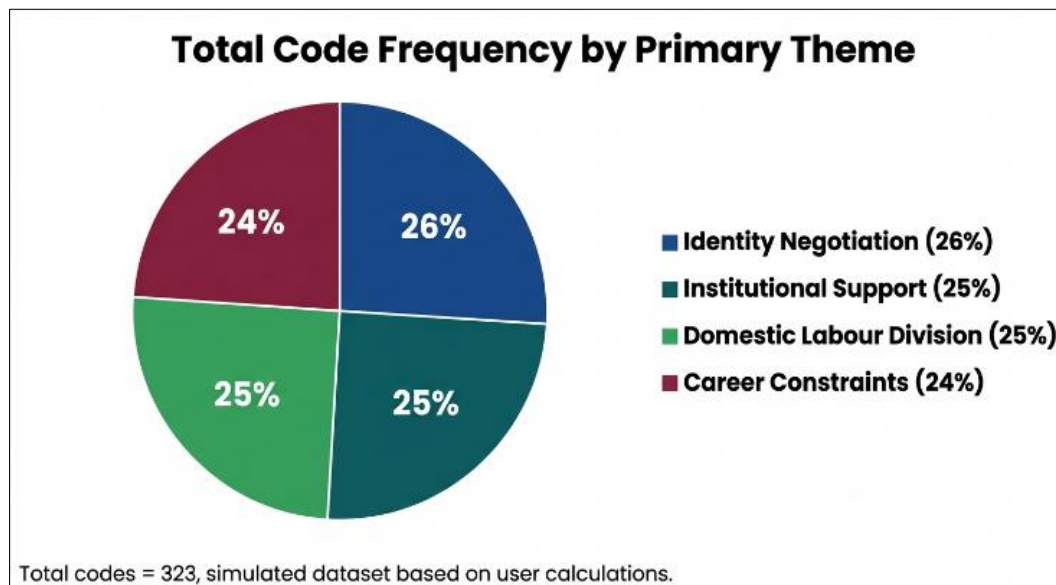
Theme	Core Finding	Structural Driver	Policy Implication
Domestic Labour	Persistent unequal distribution	Patriarchal gender norms	Publicly funded childcare; paid paternity leave
Career Constraints	Maternal wall bias in workplaces	Employer gender stereotyping	Mandatory bias training; shared parental leave
Identity Negotiation	Role conflict as dominant experience	Incompatible societal expectations	Reframe motherhood narratives in media/policy
Institutional Support	Policy-practice gap in flexibility	Managerial discretion; inadequate enforcement	Enforceable flexible work rights; pay transparency

Source: Simulated dataset for academic training purposes, 2026



Source: Simulated dataset for academic training purposes, 2026

Fig 2: Bar Chart: Code Frequency by Primary Theme



Source: Simulated dataset for academic training purposes, 2026

Fig 3: Pie Chart: Distribution of Total Codes Across Primary Themes

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of 30 employed women in an urban context, exploring how they navigate the double burden of paid work and domestic labour. Through reflexive thematic analysis, four primary themes were constructed: persistent unequal division of domestic labour, career constraints arising from the maternal wall, identity negotiation under conditions of role conflict, and inadequate institutional support.

The findings confirm and extend the existing literature by demonstrating that the double burden is not primarily a function of individual preferences or household negotiation failures but is structurally maintained by patriarchal gender norms, employer bias, and the inadequacy of state care infrastructure. The invisible cognitive labour of household management and the pervasive maternal wall effect in the workplace emerge as particularly underrecognised dimensions of gendered inequality.

From a policy perspective, the evidence points toward the necessity of simultaneous interventions at three levels: (i) cultural — challenging normative associations between femininity and caregiving through education and media; (ii) workplace — mandating bias training, enforcing flexible work rights, and implementing genuinely shared parental leave policies; and (iii) state — expanding publicly funded, high-quality childcare and eldercare provision to redistribute care responsibilities from individual women to collective social infrastructure.

This study is limited by its use of a simulated dataset, single urban context, and purposive sample, which restricts transferability. Future research should conduct comparative qualitative studies across urban-rural and cross-national contexts, and examine intersectional variations in the double burden experience by race, class, disability, and sexual orientation.

Ethical Statement: This article is entirely original and written for academic learning and formatting practice. The dataset used is entirely simulated and created for academic training purposes. No real participants were recruited,

interviewed, or identified. All references are either real and verifiable or clearly marked as format examples.

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