

# Work or Family? The Multiple Choices, Conflicts and Balances in Contemporary Chinese Women's Social Roles

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**Abstract.** With economic development and the transformation of social structures, the social roles of contemporary Chinese women have undergone a significant shift. This study focuses on the complex social roles of modern Chinese women, particularly in the contexts of choice, conflict, and the integration of work and family duties. In order to fully explore the multiple choices, conflicts, and balancing of social roles among contemporary Chinese women, this study conducted qualitative research by using literature review methods as well as semi-structured interviews with 40 adult women from Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu. The findings reveal that contemporary Chinese women have three predominant types of social roles: career woman, full-time housewife, and a combination of both. The study identifies conflict over time, responsibilities, and the worth of those responsibilities in shifting roles, shaped by the changes brought by the era of economic growth, policies, and social attitudes. Regarding the difficult balancing and choice women face between work and family responsibilities, various stakeholders can take measures to provide support. For instance, governments may introduce childcare subsidies and anti-discrimination legislation, businesses may establish female-friendly workplace policies, family members may help share the burden, and individual women may enhance their capacity for self-adaptation.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Chinese women; social roles; work-family balance.

## 1. Introduction

Modern Chinese women explore new and intricate social roles while juggling career and family obligations. The structural transformation of economic and social structures has a transformative impact on traditional gender roles, leading to greater diversity in the social roles of contemporary women. Extensive research on modern Chinese women's social roles has noted some important changes owing to economic development, social attitude changes, and policy reform. Relevant research has been concentrated on the following three areas. On women's multiple roles, the research emphasized that contemporary Chinese women are assuming different roles as career holders, full-time housewives, and working as housewives while juggling both duties, as well as full-time jobs [1]. The increase in women's professions indicates positive changes towards gender equality and the empowerment of women; however, the glass ceiling and other obstacles remain, especially in rural areas [2]. Regarding role conflicts, studies have shown the temporal, responsibility, and value conflicts these multiple roles bring. Time conflicts occur when the work and family demands compete, and dual-role women experience the "second shift" phenomenon more intensely [3]. Responsibility conflicts appear when the workplace, home, and children roles create deeper psychological distress, often termed the motherhood penalty, and the home career critique [4]. In the balance strategies, researchers have looked into both the organizational and personal approaches to achieving work-family balance. Organizational adjustments, such as subsidized childcare, paid maternity leave, and the fostering of anti-discrimination policies, have been proposed and, in some instances, effectively implemented [5]. Individual approaches are comprised of time management, boundary setting, and mindfulness strategies, which have been proven to mitigate stress and improve overall life satisfaction [3]. These researches indicate that women's social roles are already receiving increasing attention. This research focuses on the multiple social roles of contemporary Chinese women, using systematic literature review and semi-structured interview methods, attempting to thoroughly examine the behaviors and rationales underlying women's efforts to balance work and family responsibilities. Such a combination of methods presents a sustained and comprehensive perspective on the diverse

urban contexts within which women make their choices and offers a solid foundation for empirical studies on the issues.

## 2. Methodology

This study applies a dual-methodological approach of systematic literature review and semi-structured interviews to explore the issue of women's social roles in contemporary China. The framework of the study demonstrates strong validity and reliability within the methodology, which serves as the basis for further examination. The interviews filled the theoretical expanse drawn by the literature review, while in conjunction, these techniques provide for an integrative study on the diverse issues regarding work and family responsibilities of Chinese women. Employing both methods also guarantees the findings are supported both on theoretical as well as empirical grounds, which enhances the overall understanding of the research phenomenon. The processes for employing the methods are as follows.

### 2.1. Literature Research Method

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of research developments relevant to this study's subject matter, this research systematically collected data through the databases of CNKI, Web of Science and JSTOR. CNKI was selected for its comprehensive database Chinese scholarly publications while Web of Science, and JSTOR for their comprehensive databases of high-impact English electronic journals. Boolean operators were used to aggregate keywords such as "Chinese women work and family balance", "gender role change", "female employment policies" and "China" for geographic focus. The search yielded 187 peer-reviewed articles published between 2018-2025 in the journals of inclusion criteria that met the requirements of empirical studies with primary data collection and contribution to gender role theory. Exclusion criteria were non-empirical works, publications before 2018, and studies on Chinese women's social roles.

Thematic analysis used Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: data immersion, code creation, theme identification, theme review, theme clarification, and report writing. Thematic coding was assessed individually using Cohen's kappa coefficient ( $\kappa=0.85$ ) and thematic saturation as an equivalent. All thematic coding was consistent across researchers. Data analysis was done using NVivo 12.0 within a three-stage coding approach: open coding as the first stage where raw themes were generated, axial coding where patterns were identified and classified, and selective coding where integration of the theory was done. This approach was useful in providing rudimentary knowledge of the existing literature on the topic and the research's congruence with the given theoretical constructions.

### 2.2. Interview Method

The interviews in this study were based on purposeful sampling and brought on board 40 women aged between 28 and 52 from three metropolitan cities of China (Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu) with varying economic and urbanization statuses [1]. Shanghai and Beijing were selected due to the high level of urbanization, and Chengdu served as a moderate urbanization case. The participants were divided into three role categories: 16 women with a strong career focus, 12 women who were full-time homemakers, and 12 women who worked in the dual roles as employees and homemakers. Interviews were done in Mandarin based on the stipulated 15 open-ended questions aimed at understanding participants' roles in the family, their problem-solving strategies, and their career life intersections. The interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, were recorded with permission from the participants, and were transcribed in the exact words used. Thematic analysis with the code NVivo 12.0 was done in three phases of coding: raw coding where themes were generated, axial coding where the relationships among the themes were defined.

Ethical protocols include the securing of written informed consent, the anonymization of personal identifiers by assigning pseudonyms, and the provision of psychological support resources after the

interview. Data storage adhered to GDPR standards, employing encryption techniques with limited accessibility to guarantee confidentiality. The mixed-method design allowed methodological triangulation, with qualitative data confirming and enhancing quantitative data, and vice versa. Participants themselves undertook member checking procedures, confirming the themes accurately, while inter-coder reliability checks ensured consistent thematic coding across research peers. This elaborate methodology confirms a deep understanding of the sensitivities of role navigation among Chinese women while maintaining academic standards.

### **3. Diverse Role Choices and Construction among Contemporary Chinese Women**

With the transformation of contemporary Chinese social structures and economic development, the social roles of modern Chinese women demonstrate three relatively typical trends. These three types of social roles are: career women, full-time homemakers, and dual-role individuals.

#### **3.1. Career Women**

Career-focused women represent forty-five percent of the urban female population [6]. Hence, almost half of urban professional women think achieving success through corporate advancement and self-employment is paramount. The workplace's attitudes and behaviors regarding gender, however, do shape identity. Degree holders are much, much educated yet most of them report experiencing the glass ceiling. Certainly true, there are differences by region. Women in the cities of Beijing and Shanghai, for instance, have much higher representation in managerial positions, forty percent, compared to rural areas of the country, which only possess less than twenty percent. Firm structures, including women-focused headhunting, flexible work time, and other managerial supports, nearly one third of women managers achieve these important positions. Earning a living and changing the disturbing social norm of women working behind the curtain are important, while conflicts of work and family and workplace gender discrimination are negative.

#### **3.2. Full-Time Homemakers**

Women who self-identify full-time as and housewives do this predominantly for economic productivity. This is not, however, the whole story. Confucian social theory supports the view that women's primary caring role is the mother. The paradox is that self-decay is less than full social integration and self is the reality for forty percent of these women. The burden of household management and emotional work frequently produces the self-report results of social isolation, which leads to self-report results of social isolation. Advantages include the ability to self-integrate and connect with those in the family and strengthen the familial bonds. The rural full-time mother faces greater financial dependence than urban mothers by 72% [5].

#### **3.3. Dual-Role Individuals**

The data suggests that women in dual roles must balance the "second shift" phenomenon, which is the professional work life with the domestic work life. These women manage their time by utilizing digital calendars and outsourcing domestic work. While 78% are moderately to extremely stressed, 62% feel some sort of multi-identity fulfillment [2]. This multifunctional role reflects the post-reform economy in which 61% of the households required women to work. Each role paradigm exhibits a distinct set of advantages and disadvantages, which illustrate the social cultural conflicts between tradition and modernity.

### **4. Conflicts between the Diverse Roles**

Three dimensions of these role conflicts are well illustrated in the case of Chinese women. Facing multiple social role choices, contemporary Chinese women navigate transitions and hesitations across

different roles, resulting in role conflicts. These conflicts primarily include time conflicts during role transitions, responsibility conflicts based on roles, and value conflicts in role identity.

The temporal conflicts in social role transitions among contemporary Chinese women stem from competing family and societal activity schedules. Women in dual roles say they must work after hours while controlling their children's extra-curricular activities. "Having a 996" work culture adds to this issue. 45% of the women said they must miss family functions to move up in their company. Analysis done with time utilization shows that urban women spend more time with their children as compared to women living in the countryside: 2.5 hours compared to 1.8 hours, but there are a greater number of work demands. In turn, the inability to manage time well results in lack of life satisfaction and an increase in stress. 60% of the women said they suffer from a lack of sleep [3].

Responsibility conflict faced by contemporary Chinese women appears as "motherhood penalties" in the workplace as well as "career criticism" in private life. Research suggests that women with children are more likely to receive a lower salary increment than their childless counterparts, and most of them are criticized by their family for being work focused [4]. Company procedures, such as mandatory overtime, worsen these conflicts, and 40% of women report work-related guilt. The conflict between professional and family obligations creates considerable psychological stress, and 70% report psychological tension over cognitive dissonance.

Value conflict arises from the clash of contemporary feminist norms with rigid traditional gender roles. While most of the population supports gender equality, they believe that women should be the ones to defend the family. This absurdity is exacerbated by the gap between the generations. Younger women aged 25 to 35 are more likely to advocate for egalitarianism, while older women aged 50 and above are more likely to internalize patriarchal norms. This leads to an identity crisis in which 52% of women report diminished self-esteem and 38% claim to suffer from decision-making paralysis [7]. A cross-cultural perspective shows that despite the greater family pressures faced by Chinese women in comparison to their Western counterparts. They demonstrate greater resilience due to strong collectivist support.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Influencing Factors on Contemporary Chinese Women's Diverse Social Role Choices**

Economic modernization increased women's participation in the labor force, but the pay gap which pays women 35% less than their male counterparts still exist. There has been a positive impact from policy changes like the enforcement of paid maternity leave which has increased to 158 days in Shanghai but needs to be enforced more narrowly. Even after laws have been instigated to protect women, archaic societal views continue to prevail, with 40% of rural areas still having son bias. There is a stark contrast in the region gap which has been identified, with Beijing having 78% of dual income families compared to rural Shaanxi with 45% [8]. More individualized elements such as personal ideologies, career framework, and planning abilities also influence the division of labor. Younger women identified that career promotion is of greater value, whereas the older group finds value in the stability of the family.

### **5.2. Maintaining Balance: Pathways for Contemporary Chinese Women in Diverse Social Role Choices**

Given the diverse social role choices available to contemporary Chinese women and the resulting conflicts, this study argues that stakeholders should be mobilized to help contemporary Chinese women achieve a balanced state amid the challenges of multiple roles. Reforms to institutions should include subsidized childcare and more than Sweden's 480 days of paid leave, aggressive anti-discrimination laws on the books, and policies tied to enforcement [9]. There are positive actions such as what ALIBABA and HUAWEI have instigated to their employees which is "Family Care Leave", and remote work options that have contributed to the 35% of the companies that have reported increased retention rates. Research conducted from policies initiated from the Shanghai Pilot Program

has shown that when families practice cooperative inter-generational parenting and egalitarian division of household work, the result is a proportional decreased increase of the women's burden of care of 40% [10]. Self-practice strategies include boundary setting, time-blocking, and mindfulness to control anxiety. Research has shown that women who have digital calendars are less stressed on the onset of their time.

This analysis confirms that systemic change must be combined with individual action to achieve sustainable balance. Coming research should investigate the intersections of region, age, and education to devise granular policies. Moving ahead implies that the state, businesses, households, and everyone must work together to craft spaces that allow Chinese women to freely assume and fully exercise their diverse social roles. Multi-generational research on the evolution of social roles would shed light on the enduring change in society.

## 6. Conclusion

Under the background of economic development and social structural transformation, this study comprehensively outlines the three principal social roles of contemporary Chinese women. That is, career women, full-time housewives, and those who hold both roles. Moreover, these roles differ and create considerable discrepancies regarding time, duties, and attitudes. Network breakage, challenges surrounding the reconciliation of work and family, and the balance of responsibilities primarily affect career women. In the case of housewives, isolation and subordination, due to lack of control over household finances, are mainly concerned. The "second shift" describes the pressure that dual-role individuals manage, which contains both paid and unpaid work. Economic development, policy reforms, social attitudes, and personal beliefs tend to dictate these positions. Systematic solutions, like subsidized childcare and anti-discrimination policies, paired with personal techniques, like boundary setting and time management, will support a more sustainable reconciliation. The support of the state, businesses, family, and the women themselves will determine the degree to which diverse roles will be made available and effective. Due to the limited sample size, this study may be unable to examine the needs and perspectives of contemporary Chinese women on a broader scale. Future research could adopt a cross-regional and cross-cultural comparative approach to analyze women's social roles across different regions and cultural contexts in contemporary society.

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