

The Double Shift Dilemma: Motherhood, Care Labour, And The Quest For Workplace Equity

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the dual role of working mothers, who are engaged in paid work and simultaneously perform unpaid 'work' in the form of caring, cooking, and household management, and how this unpaid 'work' affects their professional and psychological development. The main research aim is to explore how unpaid caring labour poses an invisible, yet quantifiable, barrier for working mothers in achieving equality at the workplace, and to ask a related, though more applied, research question of how organisations might address such inequalities in practice. The research is underpinned by a mixed-methods approach, whereby quantitative research is conducted using a survey of 450 working mothers, examining time-use, work-life conflict, and perceived career development, and complemented by qualitative research using semi-structured interviews with 25 working mothers, to contextualize the quantitative research and provide insight into the lived experience of working mothers.

The research finds that higher unpaid caring responsibilities correlate with higher work-life conflict and perceived plateauing of career development. Furthermore, two-thirds of the sample reported being 'uninvited' to high-profile assignments due to perceived inflexibility in scheduling demands. The interviews also revealed how, despite organizational policies offering flexible working, working mothers perceive a professional price to be paid for utilizing such policies, or 'flexibility stigma,' and how, in contrast, organisations with effective childcare and scheduling support tend to retain higher numbers of working mothers and exhibit fairer promotion rates for working mothers. Within the context of the literature on gendered labour and organizational inequality, the paper argues that organizational policies, though necessary, are insufficient for organizational change, and what is needed is a shift in organizational culture to normalize caring responsibilities, rather than the implicit penalization of motherhood in professional settings.

Keywords: Career Development; Childcare Support; Gender Inequality; Work-Life Conflict; Workplace Culture