

Work Experiences of Adult Women in Taiwan

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<p>Corresponding Author Yii-Nii Lin, Ph.D.</p> <p>Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, Center for Teacher Education, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan</p> <p>Article History</p> <p>Received: 02 / 03 / 2025</p> <p>Accepted: 24 / 03 / 2025</p> <p>Published: 27 / 03 / 2025</p>	<p>Abstract: This study aims to explore the work experiences of adult women in Taiwan. Data collection and analysis were conducted using semi-structured interviews and a qualitative phenomenological approach, respectively. Twelve female participants, categorized into highly professional (n = 4), moderately professional (n = 4), and labor-intensive occupations (n = 4), took part in the study. The participants' ages ranged from 43 to 62 years (M = 51.25). Five key themes emerged from the analysis: the pursuit of self-development, the influence of familial background, workplace adaptation, social positioning, and intergenerational transmission of work experiences. Taiwanese women demonstrated strong motivation for self-development in their work, while navigating conflicts between family and work responsibilities and interpersonal conflicts at work setting. Through their professional roles, the participants fostered a sense of self-worth and belonging, underscoring their significant contributions to both family and society.</p> <p>Keywords: work experience, adult women, family, career.</p>
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Introduction

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Taiwanese society has experienced substantial social and economic transformations over recent decades, including an increase in female labor force participation and a greater focus on career development. In 2024, Taiwan's female labor force participation rate reached 51.87%, representing a 4.26% rise compared to two decades prior (National Development Council, 2024). However, barriers to achieving equitable employment opportunities persist. Women entering the workforce frequently encounter challenges in balancing familial obligations, including childcare and eldercare. Taiwanese women's career experiences are shaped by the socio-political and economic environment, cultural norms, legal frameworks, and workplace ethics. To provide a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, this study investigates the work experiences of Taiwanese adult women from their own perspectives.

Women's Work and Career Development in Taiwan

Since the 1950s, Taiwanese women have progressively gained political rights and greater workplace equality alongside men. The feminist movement and the expansion of education in the 1970s notably strengthened women's economic independence and fostered career aspirations (Chiu & Huang, 2011). Consequently, women's roles have expanded beyond domestic responsibilities, granting them increased visibility within the workforce. Legislative measures in the 1990s further reduced traditional gender-role constraints, promoting women's active participation in employment and politics (Lu, 2022; Liu, 2005). Access to higher education has facilitated Taiwanese women's entry into specialized fields, enabling them to assume managerial and decision-making roles.

Nevertheless, family obligations remain a substantial impediment to women's professional advancement (Chien & Chen, 2020; Pan, 2005). Prevailing traditional gender norms prioritize men as the primary breadwinners, relegating women to household duties (Lee & Chung, 1996). Lu (2017) argued that Taiwanese families traditionally favor male children, with "sex preference" and "birth order" influencing unequal resource allocation. Many women internalize societal expectations, opting for employment closer to home, pausing careers, or transitioning to homemaking roles. Household responsibilities have been identified as a predominant factor behind women's decisions to exit the labor market (Wang, 2019).

While women increasingly contribute to Taiwan's workforce, many prioritize familial duties when facing conflicts between family and work responsibilities (Lu, 2011). Taiwanese women frequently assume the role of primary caregivers, supporting young children, elderly relatives, or family members with disabilities. These caregiving responsibilities often lead to significant physical and psychological strain, adversely affecting sleep, health, and workplace performance (Lin & Kuo, 2014). Professional women, in particular, struggle to reconcile societal expectations of motherhood with career aspirations (Lee & Chung, 1996).

The literature demonstrates that Taiwanese women face notable challenges in achieving work-family balance. Compared to their male counterparts, women typically bear disproportionate family responsibilities, which impede their career development (Chien & Chen, 2020). Despite these challenges, Taiwanese working women often aspire to excel professionally while fulfilling familial obligations (Chang, 2023). Their career values emphasize

financial stability, job security, interpersonal relationships, and opportunities for advancement (Hsu, 2002).

To adapt to Taiwan's evolving societal and occupational landscape, women require robust support systems. Chang (2011) emphasized that family, educational institutions, and employers play critical roles in encouraging women's professional growth. Similarly, Wu et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of analyzing working mothers' support networks to identify facilitators and barriers to balancing work and family responsibilities. Interviews conducted by Chen (2017) with three working-class women in their fifties revealed that these women had contributed financially to their families from a young age, continuing to balance career and familial demands post-marriage. They employed strategies such as "going with the flow," maintaining flexibility, and focusing on achievable goals.

Wu (2012) explored how a Taiwanese female executive overcame workplace adversities to achieve a senior leadership position. The study underscored the importance of resilience, resource utilization, and career clarity for modern Taiwanese professional women. Similarly, Hsiao (2020) examined the influence of family dynamics and societal expectations on unmarried middle-aged Taiwanese women's career trajectories. Despite attaining higher education, these women prioritized social harmony and familial obligations, adhering to cultural norms and values (Liu & Regehr, 2009). Conforming to traditional expectations, such as caregiving and childbearing, remains integral to societal assessments of female adulthood (Lee, 2009).

Women's Work and Career Development Worldwide

Introduction Career development is a multidimensional process wherein individuals strive to find purpose, autonomy, and a sense of identity in their professional lives, evaluating their choices and contributions along the way (Sharf, 2002). While advancements in education and wages have broadened opportunities for women, societal norms continue to place the primary responsibility for caregiving and child-rearing on married women (Fitzgerald & Weutzman, 1992). This entrenched dynamic often results in greater demands on women compared to men, particularly in terms of child care and familial obligations (Zhao et al., 2011).

Balancing the competing demands of work and family life significantly affects overall well-being, particularly for women, who frequently juggle responsibilities for caregiving—both for children and elderly relatives—alongside their careers (Cavagnis et al., 2023). This article explores the complexities of work-family conflict, the coping strategies employed by women, and the obstacles they face in their pursuit of career success. Women often experience greater difficulty than men in reconciling work and familial obligations, and many women feel overwhelmed and torn between their career aspirations and family responsibilities (Fan et al., 2009).

Kim and Ling (2001) investigated work-family conflict among married Singaporean women entrepreneurs, categorizing conflicts into job-spouse, job-parent, and job-homemaker dimensions. Based on a survey of 102 participants, their study underscored the critical role of spousal support, flexible work arrangements, and comprehensive schooling programs in reducing work-family tensions. Furthermore, the findings highlighted the importance of maintaining robust marital relationships as a key factor in enhancing women's well-being. Similarly, Quimby and

Desantis (2006) observed that most women prioritize and select careers that could facilitate a harmonious balance between work and family life.

Effective coping strategies are essential for women striving to achieve work-life balance. Time management, social support networks, and self-care practices have been identified as critical tools for mitigating work-family conflict (Rashid & Mohammad, 2023). Cavagnis et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of personal (e.g., resilience, self-esteem, locus of control) and relational (e.g., family and workplace support) factors, which serve as protective buffers against the adverse effects of work-family conflict, thereby enhancing women's well-being.

Borna et al. (2022) highlighted three central themes in women's definitions of career success: (1) receiving support, (2) achieving accomplishments, and (3) fostering a sense of belonging. Their research further identified significant barriers to women's career advancement, including work-family imbalance, gender discrimination, and the lack of mentors and role models. Despite these obstacles, many women place significant value on achieving professional success, acknowledging its centrality to their lives.

Women face unique challenges rooted in both societal norms and institutional practices. Contextual barriers, shaped by patriarchal structures, include pressure to conform to caregiving roles, fear of deviating from maternal expectations, and difficulties in achieving work-life balance (Gutierrez, 2016). Organizational barriers include hierarchical leadership styles, gendered power dynamics, the scarcity of female role models in leadership positions, and systemic discrimination. Collectively, these challenges hinder women's career progression and limit opportunities for professional fulfillment (Williams-Nickelson, 2009). In brief, women's career development is profoundly influenced by societal expectations, institutional frameworks, and individual resilience.

Method

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the work experiences of adult women in Taiwan. Phenomenology focuses on capturing the essence of lived experiences, providing insights into the subjective reality of individuals (Osborne, 1994). This method is well-suited to the study's objective of uncovering the multifaceted and contextualized nature of Taiwanese women's work experiences.

Participants

The participants were recruited from a city in Taiwan with a population of approximately 1.86 million. A snowball sampling strategy was utilized, resulting in the recruitment of 12 participants categorized into three occupational groups: professionals ($n = 4$), middle-class workers ($n = 4$), and labor workers ($n = 4$). Their ages ranged from 43 to 62 years, with a mean age of 51.25 years. The participants' roles encompassed diverse professions, including designers, teachers, mid-to-senior corporate managers, administrative assistants, legal clerks, cleaners, and manual laborers. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least ten years of full-time work experience and a willingness to candidly share their career insights and experiences.

Interviewer

The interviews were conducted by a research assistant (RA) pursuing a master's degree in counseling. The RA had completed

coursework in interviewing techniques, qualitative research, counseling, and research methodology, and participated in pilot studies to refine her skills. Efforts were made to foster trust-based relationships with participants and to maintain an open, nonjudgmental stance throughout the interview process.

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. Following each interview, the participant was invited to recommend next candidate for the study. Recruitment continued until 12 participants were interviewed, ensuring data saturation. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Examples of interview prompts included: "Please describe your work experiences," "As a woman in the workforce, what challenges, achievements, or difficulties have you encountered?" and "What are your thoughts and reactions regarding your career journey?"

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the phenomenological methodology outlined by Giorgi and Giorgi (2003). The researcher (1) developed a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon through participants' descriptions, (2) identified significant meaning units within the data, (3) transformed meaning units into psychologically meaningful expressions, and (4) synthesized the transformed units into a general structural description of the phenomenon.

To ensure methodological rigor, strategies recommended by Gibbs (2008) were implemented, such as documenting the analytic steps in detail and maintaining a robust protocol and database, verification processes included cross-checking transcription accuracy, validating codes against the data, and annotating codes and their definitions. Further strategies to enhance the study's credibility followed Creswell and Miller (2000), including: (1) triangulation of data sources to corroborate themes, (2) member checking by presenting themes and findings to participants for validation, (3) employing rich, detailed descriptions to convey findings effectively, (4) reflexivity, with the researcher acknowledging how their background may have influenced interpretations, (5) inclusion of contradictory data to ensure a balanced narrative, and (6) prolonged engagement in the research field for in-depth contextual understanding. Additionally, the study underwent peer debriefing to incorporate external feedback, and an external auditor provided an objective review of the entire research process.

Results

The work experiences of the participants revealed five overarching themes: the pursuit of self-development, the influence of family background and parents, workplace adaptation, social positioning, and the intergenerational transmission of work experiences. These themes are elaborated below, with illustrative excerpts from the participants to provide further insights.

Pursuit of Self-Development

The participants expressed a deep appreciation for opportunities to pursue education and enter the workforce. Over time, their work experiences helped them clarify their motivations and life goals. A common driving force among the participants was the desire to achieve independence and self-reliance. Their motivations and expectations for work differed based on their professional expertise.

Highly skilled participants emphasized the importance of continuous learning and innovation. For instance, one participant, a prominent designer, stated, "I am a well-known designer in my region; I must constantly innovate in my designs." Mid-level professionals focused on meeting managerial expectations and maintaining operational efficiency. As one administrative employee shared, "Administrative work is tedious and requires precision; I strive to meet my supervisor's expectations." In contrast, the participants in labor-intensive roles viewed work primarily as a means of financial stability, with one participant noting, "I work hard every day, keeping the space clean and getting my job done responsibly."

Influence of Family Background and Parents

Traditional Taiwanese societal norms often prioritize male children, leading to the marginalization of women's education and career development. The participants recounted instances where their families favored sons by providing more resources for education and career advancement while assigning household responsibilities to daughters. One participant recalled, "My mother favored my brothers; I had to do housework, while they attended tutoring classes."

Parental expectations for daughters were frequently low. Parents tended to expect the participants to complete their education quickly and enter the workforce to support their families. One participant stated, "My parents wanted me to attend a low-cost school, graduate early, and start earning to help the family." Despite the lack of deliberate nurturing or investment in their educational and career growth, the participants independently pursued employment upon graduation, exploring various occupational fields to discover roles that resonated with their interests and aspirations.

Workplace Adaptation

The participants demonstrated resilience in navigating challenges within dynamic workplace environments. Contract-based employees expressed anxiety about job insecurity and the risk of layoffs, motivating them to prepare for examinations to secure stable positions. Interpersonal relationships were highlighted as critical for maintaining workplace harmony, yet conflicts with colleagues and supervisors posed significant obstacles.

Workplace conflicts often arose from personality differences and varying perspectives, resulting in discomfort and internal struggles for the participants. One participant explained, "I was very upset about the XX incident last time... I'm considering changing companies." Another remarked, "I hope to get along well with my colleagues. If there is interpersonal conflict, I feel uneasy." Coping strategies included enduring difficulties, seeking adjustments, or changing work environments. For example, one participant shared, "After changing supervisors, I realized she was not dedicated... (I) felt very uncomfortable." The participants adopted proactive measures to address workplace issues or distanced themselves from colleagues with conflicting values.

Social Positioning

Despite growing up in families with traditional gender preferences and limited career expectations for daughters, the participants acknowledged the shifting societal landscape and the increasing importance of women's participation in the workforce. Employment was viewed not merely as a source of financial

stability but as a means of contributing to society, fostering personal development, social engagement, gaining a sense of achievement and belonging, and building a social positioning at the work setting as well as in the society. One participant noted, "Having a job is better. Work allows me to interact with society, preventing me from becoming obsolete and giving life more meaning." Similarly, another participant shared, "I identify with my work. It gives me a sense of achievement, helps me establish my place in society, and affirms my work role and capabilities." The participants recognized that their professional roles enabled them to contribute to their communities, affirm their competencies, and establish their social position.

Intergenerational Transmission of Work Experiences

Despite receiving limited support for career development from their own parents, the participants exhibited enthusiasm for fostering career aspirations in the next generation. Married participants with daughters expressed a commitment to supporting their daughters' professional ambitions, while unmarried participants encouraged younger female relatives to enhance their skills and embrace career challenges. One participant shared, "I encourage my daughter to pursue career development, provide resources for her, and support her in showcasing her work abilities." The participants demonstrated an active engagement in providing both emotional and material support to the next generation, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of women's career development and empowerment.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the intricate interplay between family responsibilities and career dedication among Taiwanese working women. Consistent with Chien and Chen (2020), the results demonstrate that Taiwanese women frequently experience conflicts between professional ambitions and familial obligations, exacerbated by disproportionate caregiving duties. These demands often impede women's career progression. Echoing prior studies (Pan, 2005; Liu, 2005), caregiving and child-rearing responsibilities continue to represent implicit constraints, even as women gain increased access to education and employment opportunities. Specifically, the participants noted the dual burden of managing work alongside caring for young children and elderly family members (Chien & Chen, 2020; Lin & Kuo, 2014). Married participants often prioritized traditional familial obligations, including childbearing, caregiving, and duties to their husband's family, over professional advancement (Lee, 2009). These findings parallel the work of Lee and Chung (1996), who identified the tension that exists for working women navigating maternal expectations and career aspirations.

Irrespective of educational background or occupational status, the participants expressed a shared desire to balance familial and work roles. While the participants recognized the importance of their roles as caregivers, they simultaneously exhibited commitment to their occupational and professional growth. Some of the participants modified or reduced their workloads to better accommodate family responsibilities, in line with findings by Wang (1995). Similarly, Lu (2011) observed that Taiwanese women often prioritize family needs when conflicts arise between work and domestic obligations. Married participants, in particular, frequently placed the well-being of their family members ahead of career development (Lu, 2011; Wang, 1995).

The participants adjusted their career trajectories to address work-family conflicts. These findings corroborate earlier research, which suggests that women often resort to part-time or flexible employment to manage familial responsibilities, despite the financial trade-offs involved (Lu, 2011). Chen (2017) further highlighted the financial contributions of women both before and after marriage, noting the diverse strategies employed to balance work and family demands. The study findings align with Hsu (2002), who reported that women emphasize job stability, income, interpersonal relationships, and personal growth when making career decisions. Additionally, the adaptability of the participants in modifying career goals in response to life events reflects findings by Hite and McDonald (2003).

The participants' career aspirations and priorities varied by professional level. Higher-level professionals emphasized skill enhancement and career advancement, while mid-level professionals favored stable roles within supportive environments. Labor workers primarily viewed employment as a means of financial support, prioritizing workplace harmony over professional advancement. Interpersonal relationships emerged as a crucial factor for the participants across all occupational levels, with interpersonal conflicts identified as a key source of dissatisfaction at workplace.

These findings resonate with Lee (2009), who underscored the societal expectation for Taiwanese women to prioritize family care as a reflection of responsibility. Moreover, Liu and Regehr (2009) observed that women employ strategies to maintain familial and workplace harmony, such as conflict avoidance and deference to elder advice. The current study also supports the findings of Quimby and Desantis (2006), who indicated that women often pursue careers enabling a balanced and harmonious life.

Similar with Lu's (2017) notions that traditionally, Taiwanese families favor sons over daughters, and that "sex preference" and "birth order" are the main factors causing unequal resource allocation among different children in the same family. Despite growing up in families that undervalued daughters' career aspirations, the participants overcame constraints to pursue careers reflecting their skills, efforts, persistence, and ambitions. Although their parents only wanted them to work to help share the family finances, the participants worked hard and continued to strive to achieve certain work achievements, gain a sense of belonging, identify with their roles as working women, and determine their social positioning. The results of this study at a certain degree echo the findings addressed by Borna et al. (2022) that themes in women's career success include achieving accomplishments and fostering a sense of belonging. A notable finding was the participants' commitment to fostering career development in the next generation, particularly for young women, as they sought to impart their experiences and provide support to daughters and younger female relatives.

Notably, this study's findings diverge from Hsiao (2020), who posited that women's career development is predominantly shaped by family upbringing and parental expectations. This discrepancy may reflect the personal attributes of the participants, who exhibited self-awareness regarding their career motivations. Additionally, societal changes in Taiwan—such as increased support for women's education and workforce participation—have gradually eroded rigid gender norms (Lu, 2022; Liu, 2005). Wu et al. (2017) also noted that women's workplace participation is increasingly motivated by internal aspirations and expectations.

Although the participants' early career choices were often constrained or undervalued by parents and familial considerations, they demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting the career development of younger women, reflecting a significant societal shift on the career development of women in Taiwan.

Implications

The integration of personal characteristics, family caregiving, and employment presents significant challenges for women, necessitating interventions at individual, organizational, and societal levels. Government policies and societal support mechanisms should enhance women's workforce participation by ensuring equitable job access and promoting balanced caregiving responsibilities. Working women must critically assess their aspirations, societal norms, and familial expectations while developing strategies to harmonize work and domestic roles. Employers and policymakers can facilitate this process through flexible work arrangements, work-life balance policies, and open workplace communication. Addressing the interplay of personal, family, and work factors requires targeted interventions, including policy reforms, workplace accommodations, and robust support systems to mitigate work-family conflict and promote gender equity. Career counselors can assist women in identifying priorities, values, and goals, aligning their work and family roles effectively. Policies promoting shared caregiving responsibilities are essential to fostering gender equality and sustainable workforce participation.

Conclusions

Taiwanese adult women demonstrate resilience and dedication in navigating the dual demands of career and family. The participants in this study actively engaged in their work roles, recognizing the critical importance of employment in fostering social connections, a sense of belonging, social positioning, and self-worth. Employment also served as a means of establishing social identity and contributing to the broader community. Despite challenges related to familial expectations, caregiving responsibilities, and interpersonal conflicts at work setting, the participants actively pursued personal growth, career development while maintaining family harmony. This study underscores the need for comprehensive support mechanisms from families, society, and the government to facilitate women's workforce participation. Gender equality initiatives across familial, educational, and professional contexts are essential to creating an equitable and supportive environment for working women in Taiwan and beyond.

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