Caught in the Middle: A Conceptual Framework for the Antecedents and Outcomes of Work-Family Guilt in Working Mothers from the Perspective of Gender Roles

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Abstract: Although there has been progress in achieving gender equality, working mothers continue to encounter significant challenges balancing work and family roles, leading to work-family conflict (WFC) and subsequent feelings of guilt regarding WFC. Work-family guilt (WFG) is an emotional response to imbalances that arise from the demands of both work and family responsibilities. This study aims to develop a conceptual framework for the antecedents and outcomes of WFG among working mothers, addressing the gap in research regarding their guilt experiences. Drawing on the prior studies, this paper proposes that societal, organizational, and individual factors will interact, leading to WFC and subsequently causing WFG, which in turn results in some undesirable consequences in societal, organizational, and individual domains. Among the existing research on WFC, this study stands out for its comprehensive review of the determiners and consequences of WFG from a gender role perspective. The suggested framework seeks to provide guidance to working mothers, policymakers, managers, and human resource experts on reducing WFG among working mothers, thus enhancing their overall well-being and productivity. This study explores WFG from a gender standpoint, highlighting the significance of employing gender-sensitive strategies for addressing challenges at both individual, organizational, and societal levels.

Keywords: Work to Family Conflict, Work-Family Guilt, Working Mothers, Gender Roles

1. Introduction

Studies from nearly twenty years ago revealed that employed individuals spent more time at the workplace compared to the previous century (Sutton & Noe, 2005). Although contemporary practices such as remote and hybrid work have decreased physical workplace time, there has not been a significant reduction in mental workload. Additionally, the increasing pace of life in modern societies also makes it challenging for employees to balance their work and family roles, particularly for working mothers, because despite their growing participation in the workforce, they still have more domestic responsibilities compared to men (Zhang et al., 2020). Women express a higher number of issues with the distribution of job responsibilities compared to men, suggesting an increasing disparity between genders in this domain (Cleveland et al., 2015). The disparity between work and family roles leads to work-family conflict (WFC), described as an interrole conflict where work and family role pressures are mutually conflicting. WFC results in a negative emotion known as work-to-family guilt (WFG) in working mothers (McElwain et al., 2005).

Although sociology researchers have shown interest in the WFG, there have been limited studies on the experiences of guilt among working mothers (Korabik, 2015; Maclean et al., 2021). WFG refers to *"a measure of the intensity of feelings an individual has when he/she is unable to fulfill incompatible roles to the best of his/her potential"* (McElwain, 2008: 22). According to Aoyagi and Munro (2024), women have a much higher average level of guilt and feel more guilty about neglecting their family responsibilities. WFG negatively affects job performance and life satisfaction (Gomez-Ortiz & Roldan-Barrios, 2021; Zhang et al., 2019). Also, work-induced stress and anxiety could negatively impact personal life, leading to adjustment difficulties and mood problems in employees' children, as well as reducing quality family time, which could cause household tension (Maclean et al., 2021). Since WFC is defined as an *"inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respects"* (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985: 77), it could not be examined independently from gender roles.

Although there has been progress in gender equality in many countries and labor markets, the issue of WFC continues to be recognized as influenced by gender (Young & Schieman, 2018). Despite the growth in our understanding of work and family domains, there is still insufficient evidence regarding the potential variations in these dynamics based on gender. Hence, this study aims to provide a conceptual framework outlining the antecedents and outcomes of WFG among working mothers. This study seeks to answer the following question: "*What are the antecedents and consequences of WFG for working mothers at the societal, organizational, and individual levels?*" To achieve this purpose, the literature on guilt among working mothers was evaluated. The review contributed to building a framework that proposed that WFG was determined by social, organizational, and individual factors. This model was designed to serve as a guide, particularly for decision-makers such as legislators, organizational leaders, and HR experts, as well as supportive individuals involved in the lives of working mothers, in reducing their levels of WFG.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Work-family guilt

When faced with simultaneous demands, employees must choose between work and family (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003). Typically, this choice prioritizes work-related obligations, yet challenges persist in meeting familial expectations (Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Thus, shortcomings in fulfilling work-related responsibilities could engender a spectrum of emotions, including guilt, because they could potentially hinder fulfilling familial needs. Tangney (1995) views guilt as a reaction to remorse stemming from a conscience violation. The emergence of guilt is believed to be contingent upon a discrepancy. When an individual's conduct or belief contradicts their values, it creates cognitive dissonance at the cognitive level, resulting in the experience of guilt (Festinger, 1957). Oatley and Jenkins (1992) recognize guilt as an emotion or emotional state that arises in response to a specific event. From this perspective, the role conflict between the work and life domains encompasses potential events that could cause a feeling of guilt. The emotion known as *"work guilt"* or *"work-induced guilt"* arises when work-related demands intrude into the family domain. Hochwarter et al. (2007:126) conceptualized the notion of *"work-induced guilt"* as *"an emotional reaction arising from the interference of one's job activities in the family domain."* Additionally, Botsford Morgan and King (2012: 686) conceptualize WFG as "*an emotion that could occur when one's behavior violates the norms of how one believes they should balance the demands of work and family responsibilities and adversely affects an individual."* Research has indicated that work-related guilt consists of two distinct dimensions: work-to-family guilt, which refers to feeling guilty because work responsibilities interfere with family obligations, and family-to-work guilt, which refers to feeling guilty because family responsibilities interfere with work obligations (Korabik, 2015:142).

WFG typically arises from the necessity to choose between work and family domains, and this choice often leans towards the work domain or the failure to balance work and family roles. Additionally, WFG guilt stems from the perceived inability to effectively meet expected gender role beliefs (Livingston & Judge, 2008). Maclelan et al. (2021) aimed to reveal the determinants of WFG, uncovering that mothers experiencing high levels of WFC and perceiving themselves as deviating significantly from the societal construct of an *"ideal mother"* reported heightened levels of guilt. This observation underscores the societal pressure to conform to the archetype of the *"ideal mother."* Consequently, the concept of *"intensive motherhood"* emphasizes the profoundly child-centric nature of maternal roles, characterized by emotional immersion, intensive caregiving, non-stop physical availability, and consistent personal sacrifice for the welfare of the child (Hays, 1996). Empirical investigations have revealed instances where people label working mothers with inhumane descriptors such as *"cold"* or *"selfish"* and view them as inadequate caregivers (Shpancer et al., 2006). Nonetheless, studies also reveal positive spillover effects from work into the family domain, counterbalancing these negative portrayals. Indeed, specific

studies on working mothers have illuminated how a professional career facilitates effective time management and enhances psychological resilience (Aartnzen et al., 2019). Thus, societal biases fail to reflect individual realities accurately. Nevertheless, social expectations could exert a significant influence in fostering WFG in women. For instance, the organizational demand for women to represent the archetype of a *"good worker"* could be sufficiently intense to detract from their maternal duties. Such circumstances engender a dilemma for the working woman, contributing to the phenomenon known as WFC, which involves *"work-interfering-with-family"* and *"family-interfering-with-work"* conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Consequently, an identity crisis emerges in working mothers characterized by self-discrepancy. Navigating the delicate balance between fulfilling maternal and professional roles necessitates the development of coping strategies.

Livingston and Judge (2008) revealed that family-to-work conflict played a pivotal role in predicting feelings of guilt. They further noted that the links between work-to-family conflict and experiences of guilt were contingent upon individuals' gender-role orientations. Similarly, Martinez et al. (2011) discovered that employed mothers often grappled with guilt when confronted with the necessity of delegating parental duties to others or perceiving a deficiency in their ability to provide sufficient attention to their children. Hochwarter et al. (2007) proposed that effective resource management could decrease levels of work-induced guilt. From a resource management perspective, they argue that individuals who utilize various family or social resources to cope with challenging work-related circumstances could reduce their levels of work guilt. While numerous studies suggest that effective resource utilization leads to positive outcomes in achieving work-life balance, research on which actors should provide these resources or how individuals should decide on resource management remains limited.

Botsford Morgan and King (2012) propose that WFG could influence women's attitudes and behaviors, leading to actions driven by emotions and judgments regarding work or personal situations. Also, guilt-induced WFC could impact some individual outcomes, as they attribute guilt to the conflicting domain and experience emotional exhaustion, which leads to performance issues at work (Zheng et al., 2021). Moreover, research on guilt indicates that it correlates with depression and anxiety, triggering individuals to engage in self-detrimental behaviors (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Furthermore, Borelli et al. (2017a) suggest that WFG could encourage parents to adopt permissive parenting styles, which could lead to negative behavior patterns in children and potentially increase sociological issues.

2.2. Gender roles and work-family guilt

According to Federici (2000), the burden of housework imposed on women has been rooted to the extent that it is considered a natural part of their physique and personality. Federici argues that this normalization, along with the unwaged nature of housework, is a fundamental reason why housework is often not regarded as actual labor. Furthermore, Federici claims that the persistence of this issue, despite years of socialization, education, and exposure to societal norms, indicates an underlying problem in the current situation. Today, in countries where traditional gender roles are predominant, such as India, Türkiye, and Mexico, studies indicate that women's role in domestic work is greater compared to men. However, among working couples, the division of labor can also be distributed according to their respective skills (Nisic & Trübner, 2024). Nevertheless, even in such cases, men's perceptions and characteristics tend to dominate in the distribution of household chores.

Hartmann (1979) argued that Marxism overlooks gender roles when analyzing the position of women in capitalist societies at the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism. According to Hartmann, the role of women in society, similar to that of men, is examined in the context of the worker's relationship with capital. Studies focusing on housework have indicated that it benefits capitalism by generating surplus value. However, women's participation in the workforce has different impacts on both employment and family spheres. Boer (1977) suggested nearly fifty years ago that economic necessity and the need to

distance themselves from household responsibilities drove women's motivations for working. According to this perspective, women could work not solely out of personal desire but to earn money, achieve economic independence, or spend time in an environment outside the home. The need for isolation from the home indicates a necessity for women to relieve themselves from household strain, which is linked to unhappiness and depressive symptoms (Golding, 1990).

Despite the widespread societal desire for gender equality, gender stereotypes continue to have a significant impact on human behavior (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Gender role ideology is commonly seen to exist on a continuum that spans from traditional to egalitarian (nontraditional) perspectives. (Gibbons et al., 1997). According to gender role ideology, individual beliefs about gender roles fall on a continuum, with traditional ideas supporting traditional gender roles and expectations and egalitarian ideas promoting equal and flexible roles for both genders. Disparities in gender roles are the root cause of inequality, resulting in women being significantly disadvantaged both in domestic and professional settings (Budig, 2004). According to Cleveland et al. (2015), a possible explanation is that women are capable of working extended hours in work environments but are unable to perform since they shoulder a disproportionate burden of household responsibilities.

Working mothers frequently find themselves managing the tension between social and organizational norms. How society views working mothers' inability to perform their primary parenting responsibilities could result in society-wide unfavorable opinions about women who work (Borelli et al., 2017a). For instance, a mother with a newborn who chooses not to take maternity leave is often perceived as a less capable mother compared to her counterparts who take leave. Conversely, those who do take leave are usually viewed as less competent professionals within their organization (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017). On the other hand, when an employee becomes a mother, there is a notable increase in household responsibilities, including cleaning, laundry, and meal preparation. Moreover, the domestic workload continues to increase with the addition of each new child to the family (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004).

Traditional gender ideologies impose on individuals the notion that the man is the primary breadwinner, providing income to the household. For instance, the Turkish cultural expression *"the female bird builds the nest"* implies the woman's main responsibility for household chores. When home and work are considered separate domains, traditional perspectives suggest that the man dominates the work domain while the woman dominates the home domain. This division could hinder both parties from succeeding in the other's domain, and if either party perceives this as unjust, marital conflict could arise (Prince-Cooke, 2006). On the other hand, women who adhere to an egalitarian gender role ideology tend to prioritize their work experiences, which could lead to a higher WFC (Rajadhyaksha et al., 2015). Additionally, societal beliefs, such as the expectation for women to be nurturing and compassionate and for men to be serious and assertive, also influence the distribution of roles in both work and home domains (Eagly et al., 2000). Similarly, studies have found that the more women and men internalize the perception of women as the primary caregiver and men as the breadwinner, the more likely women are to experience emotions along the gender-stereotypical continuum (Aarntzen et al., 2020). For instance, a study examining mothers who worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that women with children utilized their work breaks to attend to household tasks (Elmas-Atay & Gerçek, 2021). Consequently, it is not uncommon for working women, particularly those telecommuting, to allocate their non-computer time to activities such as laundry, meal preparation, housekeeping, and responding to family needs. Aarntzen et al. (2022) emphasize that WFG is a specific issue that affects women more than men, underlining the interdependence of this phenomena with gender dynamics.

The concept of WFG guilt has been explored in various cultural contexts. For instance, mothers employed in the United States of America demonstrate more noticeable instances of WFG in their

narratives of work-family interactions. (Borelli et al., 2017b). Moreover, Japan is one of the countries where women shoulder domestic burdens predominantly. Aoyagi and Munro (2024) suggest that regulations limiting overtime and restrictive transfers in full-time jobs would benefit both women and men in achieving work-life balance. According to the authors, gender remains a problematic factor in work-life trade-offs, implying that choices between work and life domains vary by gender. Similarly, in China, a conflict exists between work and family values, with a tendency to prioritize work due to its role in generating family wealth (Zhang et al., 2014). In Türkiye, mothers typically assume the primary caregiver role, such as providing support to their spouse, children, and grandparents and maintaining family cohesion and a pleasant environment (Ataca, 2009). WFG among Turkish mothers has been linked to various adverse outcomes, including inflexible time arrangements, depression, and lower life satisfaction (Aycan & Eskin, 2005). Also, Turkish employees experience guilt when they perceive themselves as failing to attend to and create favorable family environments (Uysal Irak et al., 2020).

3. Method

This study is important as it addresses the limited amount of studies on the topic of WFG experienced by working mothers. Unlike systematic reviews, overviews avoid a strictly systematic approach, instead synthesizing key findings from significant literature on the subject (Grant & Booth, 2009). The present study uses a conceptual overview approach to construct a theoretical framework clarifying the antecedents of work-to-family guilt among working mothers. A preliminary exploration of Web of Science, a prominent scholarly database, revealed a shortage of studies employing terms such as "work guilt" or "work-family guilt" in their titles or abstracts. Furthermore, the concept of work-family guilt is still in the developmental stage, with no consensus on terminology.
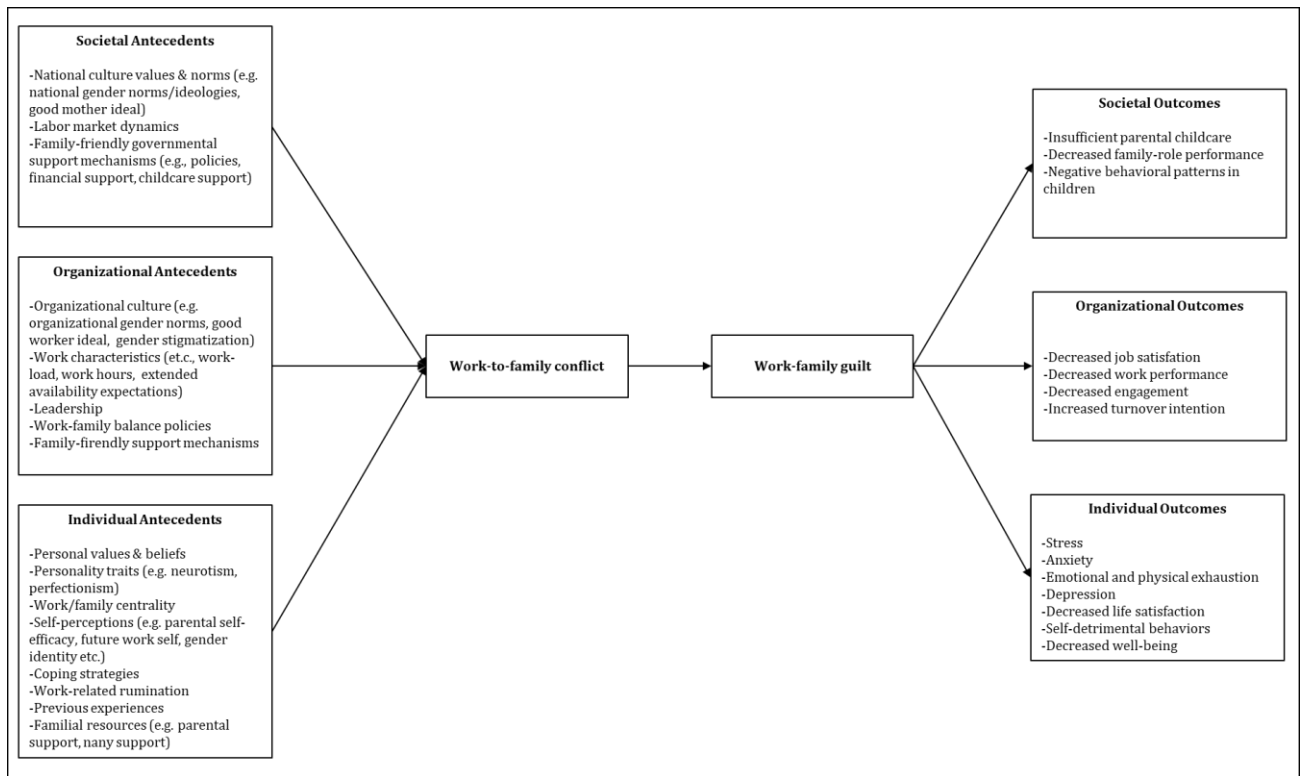
3. 1. Development of a conceptual framework

To comprehend WFG, three distinct focal points require examination: firstly, the theories employed to clarify the antecedents and consequences of WFG; secondly, the gender ideologies utilized to explain the divergent manifestations of WFG in women; and thirdly, theories specific to the work-family interface. Previous studies have used a variety of theories to explain WFG. Attribution theory has been used to explain how WFG develops. According to this theory, specific experiences shape emotions and subsequently influence behaviors (O'Shea et al., 2021). Individuals could attribute blame to specific events that provoke unpleasant emotions, and regulating these emotions could exhaust them, impacting their actions (Zhang et al., 2020).

One of the most common theories used to explain work-family interference is the WFC framework. WFC refers to the conflict that arises when the expectations of one domain, such as family or work, are inconsistent with the demands of another domain (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Moreover, role theory suggests that individuals are anticipated to display a social role that includes a set of expectations, behaviors, and obligations associated with a particular social position or status (Eagly & Wood, 2012). From a gender perspective, the gender role approach posits that the behavior of individual men and women reflects the societal definitions of masculinity and femininity, including associated behaviors, expectations, and roles (O'Neil, 1981). Thus, to build a conceptual framework to understand WFG among working mothers, this study adopts and integrates attribution theory, work-family conflict theory, and gender role theory.

Figure 1

A conceptual Framework for Work-To-Family Guilt in Working Mothers

Societal Antecedents
-National culture values & norms (e.g. national gender norms/ideologies, good mother ideal)
-Labor market dynamics
-Family-friendly governmental support mechanisms (e.g., policies, financial support, childcare support)

Organizational Antecedents
-Organizational culture (e.g. organizational gender norms, good worker ideal, gender stigmatization)
-Work characteristics (et.c., work-load, work hours, extended availability expectations)
-Leadership
-Work-family balance policies
-Family-firendly support mechanisms

Individual Antecedents
-Personal values & beliefs
-Personality traits (e.g. neurotism, perfectionism)
-Work/family centrality
-Self-perceptions (e.g. parental self-efficacy, future work self, gender identity etc.)
-Coping strategies
-Work-related rumination
-Previous experiences
-Familial resources (e.g. parental support, nany support)

Work-to-family conflict

Work-family guilt

Societal Outcomes
-Insufficient parental childcare
-Decreased family-role performance
-Negative behavioral patterns in children

Organizational Outcomes
-Decreased job satisfaction
-Decreased work performance
-Decreased engagement
-Increased turnover intention

Individual Outcomes
-Stress
-Anxiety
-Emotional and physical exhaustion
-Depression
-Decreased life satisfaction
-Self-detrimental behaviors
-Decreased well-being

Note: Developed by the author based on the literature review.

Figure 1 presents the social, organizational, and individual factors that contribute to the emergence of WFG. These factors, including social gender ideologies, organizational gender ideologies, and individual gender perceptions, among others, interact dynamically. Interference forces an individual to make a challenging decision between work and family obligations. If this choice harms the family domain, WFC will emerge. This conflict is a result of the complex interplay between social, organizational, and individual factors. Therefore, the current model proposes that work-to-family conflict influences work-family guilt (Aarntzen et al., 2022; Chen & Cheng, 2023; Gois et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2020; Zheng et al. 2020).

The antecedents of WFG are addressed at three levels: social, organizational, and individual. National culture plays a pivotal role, as it dictates gender norms and ideologies, often reinforcing the notion of the *"good mother"* ideal, which leads to guilt among working mothers who try to balance work and family responsibilities. Additionally, labor market dynamics, characterized by competitive environments and demands for productivity, intensify feelings of guilt, as financial factors often force some mothers to participate in the workforce. The availability and effectiveness of family-friendly governmental support mechanisms, such as government policies, financial aid, and childcare support, could impact the level of guilt experienced by working mothers. On the organizational level, the experience of WFG among working mothers is related to organizational culture, work characteristics, leadership, and the presence of work-family balance policies and family-friendly support mechanisms. Aycan and Eskin (2005) suggested that women in Türkiye experience less work-induced guilt when they receive more emotional support from their partner and supervisor. Similarly, Uysal Irak et al. (2020) founded similar findings among working women in Türkiye. Furthermore, the amount of time spent at work could indicate the level of guilt experienced because work interfered with family obligations. Individuals who dedicate more hours to their work are more prone to experiencing feelings of guilt when their work responsibilities interfere with their time with their family (Gomez-Ortiz & Rolden Barrios, 2021).

Studies on the individual antecedents of WFG are limited (Gomez-Ortiz & Rolden Barrios, 2021). In this context, the study identifies factors such as personality (e.g., neuritsm) (Foucreault et al., 2023), work/family centrality, and work-related rumination as individual antecedents. Additionally, it was anticipated that identity would also be a determiner, as a mother who adheres to traditional gender ideologies could align herself more with the maternal identity, whereas another woman in the workforce could embrace her career identity more (Gibbons et al., 1997). Moreover, variables such as the mother's age, the number and ages of her children, and the available resources are significant considerations. For instance, a young mother with a toddler could experience heightened WFG guilt due to perceived demands from her child. Conversely, a mother with older children could allocate more time to her professional pursuits as her children become more independent. In line with this assumption, Maclean et al. (2021) reported that younger mothers reported more guilt than older ones. Nonetheless, these assumptions require empirical investigation in future studies. Additionally, support structures facilitating childcare, such as familial assistance, professional caregiver aid, and onsite daycare facilities, could influence the levels of WFG experienced by mothers.

The societal consequences of WFG among working mothers include insufficient parental childcare, decreased family role performance, and the emergence of negative behavioral patterns in children. Prior research indicated that WFG negatively affects effective parenting (Gois et al., 2023) and family-role performance (Chen & Cheng, 2023; Liu et al., 2021). The broader societal impact of the adverse effects of WFG on children's developmental trajectories is considerable. The organizational outcomes of WFG include decreased job satisfaction, diminished work performance, lower levels of engagement, and an increased intention to turnover. Studies have found that WFG negatively impacts job satisfaction (Hochwarter et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2019), work performance (Chen & Cheng, 2023), and anti-social work behaviors (Botsford Morgen & King, 2012). Moreover, WFG negatively impacts individual-level life satisfaction (Gómez-Ortiz & Roldán-Barrios, 2021), emotional exhaustion (Peltokorpi, 2022), and well-being (Aarntzen et al., 2019). Furthermore, this model suggests that guilt, often associated with stress and anxiety, could also lead to depression. Indeed, some studies have shown that experiencing WFC among working mothers leads to depression (Wang & Peng, 2017).

4. Discussion

A more equitable society for women could be established by addressing societal challenges related to gender, work, family, and community. This study aims to shed light on the concept of WFG, which poses a barrier for working women balancing work and family, by examining its antecedents and outcomes. Also, this study considers the antecedents and consequences of WFG at social, organizational, and individual levels from a gender role perspective. The emphasis on gender roles stems from the fact that work-to-family conflict, which causes WFG (McElwain et al., 2005), is primarily characterized as a conflict between societal expectations of different roles. Moreover, gender norms have a significant role in determining the status of women in the workforce. The concept posits that work-to-family conflict emerges from an interaction of societal, organizational, and personal factors. This conflict, followed by WFG, has adverse consequences for society, diverse commercial and public entities, and individuals.

Role conflict arises when individuals face conflicting demands and expectations regarding a specific role. Fulfilling one set of role pressures hinders the fulfillment of others, leading to inconsistencies (Kahn et al., 1964). For women, the most significant area of role conflict is influenced by national cultural values, gender norms, and the *"good mother"* ideology, which affects both organizational and individual levels (Minnotte et al., 2010). These factors also influence the cultural gender norms within organizations, creating a culture that promotes the assumption that women should prioritize family obligations and are consequently unable to meet the expectations of being the *"ideal worker"* (Kelly et al., 2010). Furthermore, at the social level, labor market dynamics, such as women's employment in less skilled jobs, career barriers, or wage inequality, interfere with women's participation in the workforce or

reduce career satisfaction even if they do (Clark & Bower, 2016; Watts et al., 2015). In addition, the inadequacy of government regulations regarding maternal leave or financial support for working mothers could also intensify role conflicts.

Several variables within the organizational context contribute to role conflict, including the workload faced by working mothers, the length of working hours, their demand for overtime, the attitudes of supervisors towards them, and the existence of family-friendly policies within the organization (Ilies et al., 2007; Samad et al., 2015). Research has demonstrated that leaders are vital in empathizing with working mothers and promoting fair access to family-friendly policies (Liu et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the influence of flexible and part-time employment on WFG experience yields conflicting findings. Theoretically, flexible and part-time work arrangements could help working mothers balance their home and family responsibilities. Nonetheless, some studies have indicated that flexible working or working from home could blur the boundaries between home and family, intensifying role conflict (Elmas-Atay & Gerçek, 2021). In other words, while it is known that working hours and the location of work affect the levels of WFG among working mothers, further research is needed to understand the other factors that influence whether this effect is positive or negative. With part-time or flexible working models, women may be deprived of the social security and promotion rights afforded to full-time employees. Therefore, it is difficult to say that part-time or flexible work is a definitive solution for eliminating WFG, as the benefits of these arrangements for working mothers will vary depending on the context.

Since role conflict emerges at the cognitive level, personal factors such as values, beliefs, personality traits, individual tendencies, and self-perceptions are critical. In a society where traditional gender roles are predominant, a woman could uphold more egalitarian values on a personal level, potentially leading to role conflict. Similarly, a woman with egalitarian values could prioritize work centrality, whereas a more traditional woman could lean towards being family-centric, leading to a clash between work and family domains (Lyness & Judiesch, 2014). For instance, when faced with the dilemma of attending an important business meeting or her child's theater performance, a working mother must weigh her options. In such instances, the resources available to the working mother become crucial. These could include coping strategies and support from spouses and relatives. For instance, taking on household responsibilities from a family member or receiving support from colleagues at work could help alleviate the severity of the conflict.

Traditional gender roles dictate that household chores are considered the responsibility of women (Cleveland et al., 2015). Housework includes cooking, laundry, dishwashing, minor repairs, sewing, daily cleaning, and attending to the essential needs of children and older adults (Spitze, 1999). However, the effects of household chores extend beyond the domestic sphere, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, into the work domain. Consequently, the boundaries between work and family life are often quite blurred for working mothers (Bölingen et al., 2023). WFG extends beyond the individual and organizational levels, with implications for society. This study proposes a model that suggests WFG could lead to adverse outcomes in women, such as stress, anxiety, fatigue, depression, and self-detrimental behaviors (Wang & Peng, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). At the individual level, these outcomes often manifest as working mothers struggling to balance their work and family demands, resulting in dilemmas and the desire to reduce working hours or leave their jobs in response to the psychological and physiological consequences of this dilemma.

WFG could lead to insufficient parental childcare in the family domain, while some studies suggest that WFC could result in negative behaviors in children. According to attachment theory, the strain arising from WFC undermines the bond between mother and child, potentially leading to issues in children who fail to form healthy attachments (e.g., Vieira et al., 2012). In other words, the caregiving tasks undertaken by working mothers about childcare result from the transfer of women's labor to the

societal sphere. For instance, Hongbo et al. (2020) found that job insecurity decreases parent-child attachment through the mediating effect of WFC. Properly addressing children's psychological and physiological needs fosters their growth into individuals who positively contribute to society's future well-being. From this standpoint, the relationship between women's participation in employment and societal sustainability holds profound importance. Given that heightened levels of WFG among working mothers could lead to significant challenges for the mothers themselves, their families, the organizations they are affiliated with, and their communities, it becomes apparent that comprehensive studies on this phenomenon are imperative. Consequently, this study offers theoretical and practical insights and provides effective recommendations to address these issues.

4.1. Theoretical implications

The study employs attribution theory, work-family conflict theory, and gender role theory to comprehend the WFG experienced by working mothers. Attribution theory addresses how people attribute explanations to their activities, providing insight into the cognitive processes that underlie feelings of guilt. WFC theory explores the overlap between work and family spheres, explaining how conflicting obligations lead to feelings of guilt. Moreover, gender role theory acknowledges that cultural expectations around gender roles have a significant impact on how working mothers perceive guilt. The gender role approach acknowledges the impact of gender on guilt, which is a result of the cultural expectations that encompass the dual roles of women as caregivers and workers. The objective of the study is to explain the underlying factors and consequences of WFG by identifying its antecedents and outcomes. This approach offers a framework in which the experience of WFG is influenced by specific gender norms and conflicting demands. An understanding of these aspects could offer valuable information for the development of interventions and support systems that customize to the unique challenges that working mothers encounter. Additionally, investigating the consequences of WFG provides a perspective on its impact on working mothers and their children. The conceptual framework provides academics, practitioners, and policymakers with valuable insights that are intended to improve work-life balance and reduce work-family conflict by examining the causes, antecedents, and outcomes of WFG.

4.2. Practical implications

General recommendations regarding WFG are often made regarding organizations' need to implement measures to reduce WFC. However, flexible working arrangements could have both positive and negative effects. This is because providing flexibility to women also increases work-home interference by preventing them from distancing themselves from their work. Assuming that the impact of remote working arrangements would always be positive is challenging due to the blurred boundaries between work and family resulting from technology use. Additionally, flexible work arrangements vary depending on age, job characteristics, and similar considerations. For instance, according to Barnett and Gareis (2002), the positive impact of part-time work on work-life balance depends on the individual's control over both domains. Therefore, detailed qualitative research could be carried out to determine which general recommendations are practical. Moreover, organizations should inquire into how they could facilitate the lives of working mothers through one-on-one discussions rather than surveys. Such inquiries will enhance employees' loyalty and commitment to the organization and foster a deeper understanding of their needs. Hence, it is essential to foster a dialogue between managers and employees regarding working mothers' family aspirations (Chen et al., 2024).

Some scholars advocate for a resource management approach when crafting work-life balance strategies. This approach underscores the finite nature of workplace resources and the pivotal role of managers in their equitable allocation. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that it is not feasible to have a universal method for obtaining resources considering the various needs of employees. For instance, the requirements of a married employee differ significantly from those of a single employee.

This highlights the role of managers in understanding and addressing the diverse needs of different employee groups, as well as making them feel valued and integral to the process. Cleaveland et al. (2015) posited that coworkers' value systems influence each other's decisions regarding work-life balance. For instance, a supervisor who is also a working mother could demonstrate greater understanding towards a subordinate needing time off due to a sick child. This scenario emphasizes the concept of work-life backlash, as it is not uncommon for unmarried employees to express discomfort with the flexibility afforded to colleagues seeking time off for significant events involving their children, such as illness or graduation, thereby posing a notable challenge in effectively managing such dynamics.

Various strategies could be implemented by organizations to manage WFG among working mothers. Singe et al. (2022) discovered that creating supportive working settings, fostering disengagement from job responsibilities, and promoting shared life experiences among colleagues and managers are helpful strategies for handling feelings of guilt. Hence, organizations should prioritize recruiting and training middle and front-line managers with a strong understanding of work-life balance principles (Liu et al., 2015). Since managers are the primary actors who implement organizational practices that help employees manage their work and family lives, it is recommended that they receive formal training on work-family balance issues. These training programs should focus on developing skills such as active listening, empathy towards work-family needs, considering family obstacles when assigning duties, and helping employees discover and resolve family-related problems (Crain & Stevens, 2018). This leadership style could be defined as *"family-friendly leadership,"* and more investigation could be carried out on this topic.

4.3. Limitations and future research directions

This study contributes to the literature on women's studies by addressing the determinants and outcomes of work-family guilt from the perspective of gender roles, particularly focusing on working mothers. However, the study has some limitations. The proposed model is based on existing studies referenced in this article and examined through an overview approach. Conducting systematic reviews or meta-analyses would yield more valid results than an overview approach. This study's proposed framework incorporates perspectives on gender roles and WFC. The current model suggests that WFC causes WFG. However, further research on aspects such as organizational culture or social support, which the proposed model ignores, could mediate this relationship. Additionally, research is recommended on variables with moderating potential, such as personality traits, family characteristics, culture, and job type, regarding the impact of WFC on WFG. Furthermore, future research could explore the relationships between WFG and outcomes such as job commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and innovative behaviors. For instance, feelings of guilt could result in radical solutions as a coping strategy among mothers. Since this study focuses on working mothers, future investigations could examine guilt levels in fathers. Additionally, longitudinal studies are recommended to observe the effects of WFG in familial and social contexts, as proposed in the model. Despite its limitations, this study serves as an initial effort to understand the antecedents and outcomes of WFG in working mothers and is expected to provide valuable insights for future researchers.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of WFG, which gained attention in sociology research, has recently received more attention in psychology research, specifically in relation to working mothers (Maclean et al., 2021). The relationship between guilt and work, as well as its subsequent inclusion in work-family studies, originated in the early 2000s (Hochwater et al., 2007). Given that WFC is an important cause of job-related stress, the growing popularity of technology tools in the workplace may weaken the separation between work and family domains, thereby intensifying the issue of work-family conflict in the future (Williams et al., 2016). While guilt is commonly linked to work, it could be said that conflicts between work and family roles impact not just the individual level but also the public sphere through the family,

which functions as a social unit of analysis (Aoyagi & Munro, 2024). Research indicates that managers could have a role in helping employees achieve a balance between work and family responsibilities (Liu et al., 2015). It is also argued that the experience of guilt could function as a motivator and lead to an increase in organizational citizenship behaviors (Botsford Morgan & King, 2012). Nevertheless, there is a need for empirical studies to investigate the societal consequences of WFG, particularly in relation to working mothers, rather than only focusing on its impact on organizations.

The aim of this study is to provide fundamental insights into the emergence of WFG among working mothers and its outcomes at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. This study's overview and proposed conceptual framework emphasize the significant concern of WFG for working mothers, underscoring the importance of raising awareness about WFG in both their personal lives and their workplaces. This study aims to improve the awareness of working mothers facing WFG. Additionally, it is recommended that managers and human resources professionals in organizations with working mothers organize training programs for managers and leaders to effectively manage WFG and develop policies. The interventions will differ for each organization. In addition, involving working mothers in these procedures will help avoid the adoption of generic and superficial family-friendly approaches that are ultimately ineffective. The model provided in this study shows that WFG is not just an individual concern but also a widespread problem with broader societal consequences. Particularly in societies where traditional gender roles dominate, there is a need to develop training, policies, and laws to reduce the role pressures on working mothers and to ensure the more effective upbringing of future generations. Inadequate management of WFG could result in stress, anxiety, emotional and physical fatigue, and depression in working mothers. This can also impair the quality of their social interactions in public settings, consequently impacting their own well-being and the well-being of society. It is hoped that this study will provide a fundamental perspective for countries seeking healthy citizens and generations by considering the phenomenon of WFG from the perspective of working mothers.

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