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# Exploring African Women's Roles and Experiences as Co-breadwinners and Homemakers: A Work–Family Entanglement Perspective

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# Exploring African Women's Roles and Experiences as Co-breadwinners and Homemakers: A Work–Family Entanglement Perspective


## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper examines how professional African women experience work–family entanglement and the strategies they employ to manage their intertwined roles as co-breadwinners and homemakers. It aims to extend work–family entanglement theory beyond low-income contexts by foregrounding the lived realities of middle-class professional women across multiple African countries.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 29 women across Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Tunisia. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants across diverse industries. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns of entanglement and coping strategies.

**Findings:** The study reveals that work–family entanglement is shaped not only by cultural expectations but also by weak institutional supports, inflexible organisational structures, and patriarchal employment relations. Women reported emotional conflict, embodied stress, and career compromises, as well as several coping strategies adopted to mitigate work–family entanglement issues.

**Practical implications:** The study highlights the inadequacy of employer-driven flexibility without structural supports such as childcare provision, equitable leave, and gender-responsive HR policies. Organisations must address entanglement as a systemic, institutional issue rather than an individual challenge.

**Originality/value:** By centring professional African women's experiences, we reconceptualise work–family entanglement as an employment relations issue shaped by human resource (HR) systems, organisational cultures and weak social infrastructures, rather than an individual boundary-management problem.


**Keywords:** African feminist, Co-breadwinner, Homemaker, Professional African women, Work–Family entanglement

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## Introduction

In Western industrialised societies, the rise of female breadwinners has long complicated traditional divisions of labour, with women increasingly combining economic provision, homemaking, and caregiving responsibilities. Research shows that even when women out-earn their partners, their breadwinning role is often symbolically downplayed to preserve men's provider identities, while women continue to shoulder disproportionate housework and childcare (Chesley, 2017; Sánchez-Mira, 2024). Data from Western countries, such as the UK, indicate that almost one in four households now have a female breadwinner, reflecting structural labour market shifts as well as changing family arrangements (Royal London, 2020). Yet these shifts have not dismantled entrenched gender norms; rather, they have led to new forms of negotiation and tension around household labour and care (Jurczyk et al., 2019).

In many African settings, women are increasingly occupying professional and leadership positions while simultaneously remaining responsible for primary caregiving and homemaking (De Giusti and Kambhampati, 2016; Nnubia et al., 2022). This occurs against a backdrop of persistent gender inequality in labour markets, where women's overall participation remains constrained and their representation sharply declines at senior organisational levels. In Africa, female labour force participation stood at 70.2% in 2023 (AfDB, 2024), while women account for only around 5% of CEOs in Africa (Africa.com, 2023). This dual positioning is therefore not simply a matter of balancing two domains; rather, it reflects a deeper entanglement of economic responsibility, organisational expectations, and culturally embedded gender roles (Nnubia et al., 2022). Despite the growing visibility of African women in managerial and executive roles (African Business, 2023), there remains limited empirical insight into how they experience and negotiate these overlapping responsibilities within workplaces characterised by weak institutional support and gendered employment relations. It is also important to recognise that African professional women's experiences are not entirely different from those of their counterparts in the Global North. Research from Western contexts similarly highlights persistent gendered care burdens and workplace cultures that disadvantage caregivers (Chesley, 2017; Jurczyk et al., 2019). Rather than treating African women's experiences as exceptional, this study situates them within broader global patterns while emphasising how regional, economic, socio-cultural, and demographic-specific factors, such as limited childcare infrastructure, weak human resource management (HRM) systems, and strong kinship obligations, shape their daily realities.

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Theories on work–family balance have long been grounded in Global North contexts, often centred around white-collar, middle-class individuals with access to formal employment benefits and institutional support (Jaga et al., 2024). Frameworks such as boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) and the segmentation–integration continuum (Kossek et al., 2012) rest on assumptions of individual agency and the availability of choice in managing transitions between work and family roles. However, such assumptions may be insufficient for capturing the lived realities of women whose responsibilities are embedded in broader kinship structures, collective expectations, and systemic inequities, and where organisational and state supports are often weak or absent (Jaga et al., 2024). Therefore, this study uses the African context not to claim exceptionalism, but as a vital test case to challenge, refine, and ground existing theories in a different social and institutional reality.

Recent scholarship has introduced the concept of work–family entanglement to reflect the realities of low-income women who experience work and family not as separate domains to be balanced, but as deeply intertwined and shaped by structural constraints (Jaga et al., 2024). This "entanglement" highlights how cultural caregiving expectations, inadequate childcare systems, and inflexible organisational policies blur boundaries in ways that women cannot simply "manage away" (Jaga and Ollier-Malaterre, 2022). Importantly, this framing is not only cultural but institutional, drawing attention to organisational cultures that privilege presenteeism, human resource (HR) policies that inadequately signal support, and fragmented infrastructures, all of which shape how entanglement is lived. Responding to calls for context-sensitive theorisation (Jaga et al., 2024), this study refines how entanglement is conceptualised in professional African contexts, where middle-class women still face overlapping and non-negotiable demands despite their relative resources.

Although work–family scholarship often focuses on wives and mothers, many professional single or divorced African women take on substantial domestic, financial, and kinship responsibilities regardless of marital or parental status (Adisa, Mordi and Akanji, 2021; Mackett, 2023). In some cases, these responsibilities and the concept of black tax (a colloquial term referring to the expectation that financially successful individuals support extended family members) inform some women's decisions to be childfree. In rethinking breadwinning, unmarried women and women without maternal responsibility or dependent children may support extended family members, contribute to household income, and provide intergenerational care, positioning them as co-breadwinners and homemakers outside traditional family structures (Mackett, 2023). Including these women expands the



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conceptualisation of work–family entanglement and reflects the diverse ways African women engage in caregiving and household provision.

This study explores how African women in professional and leadership roles navigate their identities as co-breadwinners and homemakers. Drawing on qualitative interviews with women across four African countries, this study examines how they experience work–family entanglement and the strategies they employ to manage these responsibilities. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do professional African women experience work–family entanglement? (2) What strategies do they use to manage their intertwined responsibilities across the workplace and home?

By focusing on the voices of middle-class professional African women, an often-overlooked group in work–family research, this study contributes to a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of the work–family interface. It challenges the income-based assumptions that restrict the application of work–family entanglement theory (Jaga et al., 2024) and broadens the analytical lens to incorporate cultural and structural realities that persist across social classes. Theoretically, the study repositions work–family entanglement as an employment relations issue, showing how weak HRM system strength, ambiguous organisational signals, and limited state support exacerbate women's dual burdens. Practically, the findings underline the limitations of employer-driven flexibility in contexts with fragile care infrastructures, pointing to the need for gender-responsive organisational and policy interventions. Furthermore, this research adds to the growing body of Global South/African feminist scholarship, which advocates for the decolonisation of knowledge and more equitable representations of women's experiences in management and work (Mekgwe, 2008; Norwood, 2013).

## Conceptualising Work–Family Entanglement in an African Context

Work–family balance, defined as "the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in–and equally satisfied with–his or her work role and family role" (Greenhaus et al., 2003: 513), remains a dominant yet contested ideal that assumes individual agency and symmetrical role engagement, often obscuring the structural and institutional constraints shaping women's lived experiences (Wattis et al., 2013). The concept of work–family entanglement has emerged as a significant counterpoint to dominant frameworks that depict work and family as two distinct and manageable spheres. Traditionally rooted in Global North contexts, work–life/family interface theories such as boundary management (Ashforth et al., 2000) assume that individuals



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have autonomy and resources to create and maintain boundaries. These assumptions obscure how institutional structures, workplace practices, and cultural norms combine to shape experiences of work and family (Gerson, 2004; Jaga et al., 2024). In the African context, particularly among women in professional roles, the concept of entanglement offers a more nuanced lens for understanding the simultaneous, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting demands of paid employment and household responsibilities.

A key limitation of existing literature is its reliance on models grounded in Western experiences. Frameworks such as segmentation–integration (Kossek et al., 2012) and role strain theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) often treat individuals as autonomous agents capable of negotiating demands, while underplaying the ways in which employment relations, organisational systems, and gendered expectations intersect. In many parts of Africa, work–family dynamics are structured not only by cultural scripts such as kinship and patriarchal norms but also by limited organisational support, weak labour protections, and fragile social infrastructure (Frehiwot et al., 2022; Imas and Garcia-Lorenzo, 2022; Adekoya et al., 2024). This convergence of cultural and institutional constraints reveals why mainstream theories often fail to capture African women's lived realities.

Africa's unique financial interdependence and black tax lens have shaped the current state of individual thinking about responsibilities, coupled with individualised community-building prerogatives (Mbalisi et al., 2025). The intersectional scrutiny of race, gender, and socio-cultural identity reveals African realities regarding the division of labour and women's participation in household and extended-family practices (Docka-Filipek and Stone, 2021; Oppong, 2023). Intergenerational dependency within extended family units often creates networked responsibilities that extend beyond biological parenting and marital ties (Evans et al., 2022). Further, rising unemployment rates in Africa exacerbate the dynamics of family productivity, shared income, and social care (ILO, 2016). Ubuntu, a unique African philosophy, deepens the emotional attachment towards duty of care, mutual responsibility, identity and decision-making in work-family relationships (Mbalisi et al., 2025). Together, these socio-cultural dynamics situate caregiving within collective moral economies rather than individual choice.

The notion of work–family entanglement, as developed by Jaga, Stumbitz, and Lambert (2024), highlights that work and family are not neatly divided domains but deeply interwoven spheres shaped by structural constraints, organisational policies, and cultural expectations. Rather than

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assuming that individuals can manage boundaries between work and home, the theory emphasises how employment conditions, care arrangements, and kinship networks interact to reduce women's autonomy (Jaga et al., 2024). While originally centred on low-income women, this framing is highly relevant across income brackets. Middle-class African professionals, for instance, encounter entanglement not only because of cultural caregiving expectations but also because of inadequate workplace support, limited childcare infrastructure, and inflexible organisational practices (Adisa et al., 2016; Waterhouse et al., 2022). A recent study shows that Nigerian middle-class mothers often acquiesce to traditional feminine ideals due to both cultural pressures and workplace penalties for deviating from them (Adekoya et al., 2024). Thus, professional status may reconfigure, rather than remove, the structural embedding of care responsibilities.

Conceptualisations of work–family entanglement should also reflect the responsibilities of women who are not wives or mothers. In many African contexts, unmarried and non-mothering women take on substantial caregiving, financial, and domestic roles supporting parents, assisting extended family, or caring for siblings' children (Adisa, Mordi and Akanji, 2021; Mackett, 2023). These obligations create forms of entanglement that extend beyond conjugal family structures (Lee, 2025). Recognising this diversity prevents narrow, nuclear-family assumptions from shaping entanglement theory.

Placing entanglement within employment relations scholarship adds an important theoretical dimension. From an HRM perspective, system strength, which indicates the distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus of HR practices, shapes how employees interpret organisational priorities (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). In African contexts, weak HRM system strength means that flexible work policies, when present, are inconsistently applied and poorly signalled, leaving women doubtful of managerial support (Adisa et al., 2016). Similarly, signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) highlights how policies communicate values; where signals are ambiguous, HRM policies may be misinterpreted or deemed ineffective. Institutional HRM perspectives further underline how national logics, such as weak childcare systems or reliance on extended kinship, limit both adoption and enforcement of supportive practices (Dancaster and Baird, 2016; Mordi et al., 2025). Together, these lenses connect cultural norms to organisational design, demonstrating how entanglement is reproduced through both institutional gaps and workplace practices.

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African feminist scholarship adds a critical lens by interrogating the structural inequalities underpinning labour systems. It challenges liberal feminist notions of individual "choice" by situating women's agency within patriarchal employment structures and postcolonial labour regimes (Imas and Garcia-Lorenzo, 2022). For example, Zimbabwean women entrepreneurs experience overlapping burdens shaped not just by culture but also by systemic institutional neglect (Imas and Garcia-Lorenzo, 2022). Similarly, Ghanaian women academics during the COVID-19 pandemic employed collective strategies to cope with heightened caregiving, demonstrating resilience in the face of both household and workplace pressures (Frehiwot et al., 2022). These accounts reinforce that entanglement is simultaneously cultural, institutional, and organisational rather than reducible to any single dimension.

A recurring theme in this literature is that flexibility and boundary control, both core to Global North theorising, are luxuries that are inaccessible or limited to many African women. In Ghana, women working remotely during the pandemic reported falling productivity due to increased childcare obligations (Akuoko et al., 2021). In Malawi, professional women constructed "makeshift careers" through serial compromises in the absence of supportive organisational frameworks (Chikapa et al., 2023). While such challenges mirror findings in the Global North (Adisa, Aiyenitaju and Adekoya, 2021), they are heightened in African contexts by weaker institutional infrastructures, gendered employment relations, and entrenched patriarchal norms. Studies in Nigeria show how "gender apartheid" in male-dominated sectors further compounds entanglement, limiting women's upward mobility through discriminatory workplace cultures (Adisa, Gbadamosi and Adekoya, 2021). These insights underscore that flexibility alone cannot resolve entanglement where institutional and organisational supports remain weak.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the fragility of informal support systems and the gendered distribution of unpaid care. In Nigeria and Kenya, women disproportionately carried caregiving burdens during lockdowns, leading to job loss, mental health challenges, and reduced economic participation (Akanji et al., 2023; Mueller et al., 2023). In South Africa, women's unpaid care intensified economic vulnerability and widened gender gaps (Parry and Gordon, 2021). Similar patterns in the Middle East and North Africa revealed sharp declines in women's employment linked to inadequate maternity protection and weak organisational responses (Krafft et al., 2024). These patterns reveal systemic shortcomings rather than individual coping failures.

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The theoretical value of work–family entanglement lies in its recognition of overlapping roles, collective caregiving, and the structural embeddedness of employment practices (Jaga et al., 2024). Stumbitz and Jaga's (2020) concept of "maternal body work" shows how low-income South African mothers rely on informal workplace and community support to manage breastfeeding and employment. Similarly, Stumbitz et al. (2018) reveal that Ghanaian workplaces, both formal and informal, often lack adequate maternity protections, forcing women to navigate work–family entanglement without institutional safeguards. Lewis et al. (2014) further show how SMEs often fail to implement maternity protection policies, shifting responsibility to individual women. These findings emphasise that entanglement is systemic, as it stems from organisational shortcomings and institutional gaps as much as from cultural gender roles.

Ultimately, to conceptualise work–family entanglement in an African context, one must integrate structural, cultural, and institutional dimensions. It is not merely about negotiating personal boundaries but about the interdependence of family life and employment relations within broader socio-political contexts. This lens underscores the need for research and policy that foreground African women's experiences while addressing the institutional practices and employment systems that perpetuate inequality (Tamale, 2008).

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how middle-class African women experience work–family entanglement and what strategies they employ to manage these responsibilities. Rooted in an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), our approach aims to capture the nuanced, subjective realities of women who simultaneously shoulder professional/leadership responsibilities and domestic obligations within often patriarchal and resource-constrained environments. By focusing on the lived experiences of these women, we seek to offer culturally grounded insights that move beyond dominant Global North conceptualisations of work–family dynamics.

We employed purposive sampling to recruit 29 women in senior management roles across four African countries: Nigeria (n = 11), Kenya (n = 8), South Africa (n = 7), and Tunisia (n = 3). We do not claim statistical or region-wide representativeness. Rather, the study's value lies in its exploratory, in-depth examination of how women in these specific contexts experience work-family entanglement. Although these countries differ in their specific institutional arrangements, they share structural features relevant to the study, including limited state-



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supported childcare, reliance on kinship-based care, and organisational cultures shaped by gendered employment relations. This allows the analysis to focus on common mechanisms of entanglement rather than national comparison. Our participants were all middle-income earners and represented a cross-section of industries in both public and private sectors. Given our interest in the ways professional women navigate overlapping familial and professional roles, we specifically sought participants who, in addition to their familial obligations (homemakers and caregivers), actively contribute to household income (co-breadwinners) while also engaging in leadership roles within their organisations. To reach this demographic, we used a mixed recruitment strategy. First, we circulated a call for participants through professional and social networks, including LinkedIn, African women's forums, and WhatsApp groups in which the research team were active members. We then expanded our sample through snowball sampling, asking initial participants to recommend other eligible women in similar roles. While we acknowledge the constraints, including reliance on personal networks and potential lack of representativeness, these approaches allowed us to access a broad and contextually diverse sample while also building trust through peer referrals (Patton, 2015). Table 1 presents an overview of the participants' demographic profiles.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Ethical approval was secured from the appropriate institutional review board, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a virtual format (Zoom and Microsoft Teams), which enabled us to engage women across geographically dispersed settings despite limited funding. As Lobe et al. (2022) have noted, virtual interviews, while sometimes limiting non-verbal observation, offer logistical flexibility and access to otherwise hard-to-reach participants, particularly senior professionals with demanding schedules.

Each interview followed a protocol of open-ended questions designed to elicit reflections on the challenges of navigating both paid work and family obligations, how participants perceived societal expectations, and the strategies they employed to manage or resist these pressures. For instance, our main questions included: Can you describe your experience of combining your domestic/family responsibilities and engaging in paid work to support your family? How do societal expectations around gender roles influence how you manage work and family demands? Have you experienced moments when your work commitments conflicted with your family responsibilities? Are there specific strategies or routines you have developed to manage

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these dual responsibilities effectively? To improve data reliability and credibility, we included follow-up questions such as "Can you give an example?", "What influenced that choice?", "How did you navigate those situations?", and "How did you feel?" allowed for deeper probing into participants' narratives and the contextual factors shaping their decisions.

The interviews were conducted by four female authors, three of whom identified as African women professionals, to reduce gendered power imbalances and encourage open, empathetic dialogue. Each conversation lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. With participant consent, interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were cross-checked by the research team to ensure consistency with participants' original narratives. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities and maintain confidentiality throughout the analysis and write-up.

Based on the exploratory nature of the study, the data analysis process was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedure. Analysis began with familiarisation among three authors who independently reviewed transcripts, recorded initial insights, and exchanged observations using a shared spreadsheet. Initial inductive coding followed, with similar words, phrases, and meanings colour-coded to identify early patterns (e.g. boundary setting, performance scrutiny, spousal and extended family support, motherhood expectations). These first-order codes were then examined for conceptual similarity and clustered into higher-order categories that reflected shared dimensions of experience (e.g. competing work–life domains, cultural expectations, emotional conflict). These categories were subsequently synthesised into two overarching themes (i.e., work–family entanglement experiences and coping strategies), representing how participants described both the conditions they faced and the actions they took. Theme development was reviewed iteratively to ensure coherence and alignment with the research questions. We then held a collaborative analysis meeting involving a fourth author to discuss, refine, and consolidate the thematic structure. Throughout, we moved iteratively between data and theory, drawing on work–family entanglement to inform interpretation. To enhance rigour, we conducted member checking (Birt et al., 2016), which confirmed that the thematic structure resonated with participants' lived experiences. The final analytic structure and illustrative quotations are presented in Appendix 1.

## Findings

The analysis of interview data revealed two overarching themes: *Work-Family Entanglement Experiences* and *Coping Strategies*. The first theme captures how African women in



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professional and leadership roles navigate the overlapping pressures of work and family responsibilities, highlighting the extent to which these spheres are inseparably intertwined rather than distinct. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged: (1) competing work-life domains and professional scrutiny, (2) cultural expectations and gendered roles, and (3) emotional conflict and internalised pressure. These findings illustrate how structural constraints, patriarchal norms, and cultural expectations shape the lived realities of women leaders, often intensifying the strain of combining paid work with caregiving and domestic roles (Jaga et al., 2024; Adekoya et al., 2024). The second theme, *Coping Strategies*, divided into three sub-themes, focuses on how women respond to these entanglements by drawing on (1) personal agency, dynamic prioritisation and strategic adaptation, (2) familial support and external specialised assistance, and (3) the creation of safe emotional spaces. Together, these themes reveal not only the challenges women face as co-breadwinners and homemakers but also the strategies they deploy to sustain their professional and personal lives within complex socio-cultural contexts.

While participants occasionally used the language of "balance" to describe their experiences, our analysis does not treat balance as an achieved or stable state. Rather, such expressions are interpreted as reflecting dominant and familiar discourses that women draw upon, even as their accounts reveal ongoing overlap, simultaneity, and constraint consistent with work–family entanglement.

## Work-Family Entanglement Experiences

### *Competing work-life domains and professional scrutiny*

A dominant feature of participants' narratives was the ongoing struggle to meet the competing demands of leadership/professional responsibilities and family obligations, often under heightened scrutiny from both professional and social spheres. The tension between work and family was experienced as structural and cultural rather than simply a matter of personal choice, reflecting what Jaga et al. (2024) describe as the *entanglement* of overlapping domains shaped by constraints rather than clear separations.

Several women explained how leadership positions directly constrained their ability to support family life. For instance, Esther, an Executive Manager at a Nigerian private firm, noted:

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> *I'm not married, but supporting my family is still challenging. The demands of leadership require long hours and constant availability… so where would I have the time to attend to family matters?*

Esther's account resonates with research showing that women in African contexts navigate professional advancement alongside persistent caregiving expectations (Frehiwot et al., 2022; Adekoya et al., 2024). Similarly, Durah, a Partnerships Manager in a public Kenyan firm, reflected:

> *It was extremely challenging. I travel across the country frequently… I need to provide alternative care for my young children, and that isn't easy... But it [travelling] comes with the role ... you have to juggle family and career.*

This constant negotiation was compounded by external judgements and double standards. Nabila, a Project Manager in a private Tunisian firm, underscored this gendered inequality:

> *Even though I'm single, my family's expectations are quite high for me to be present there for them… I don't think that will be the case if I were a man, because men are always seen as people who should sort out money for the family, while women take care of the children and family.*

Damilola, a CEO in a private Nigerian firm, also described the feeling of being closely evaluated and judged for her perceived commitment to work and family:

> *Even as the owner of my company, I feel pressure to be a "role model" by demonstrating high commitment to work… I've heard employees gossip when I come late or leave early, but they don't understand that I may have worked through the night or need to attend to an important family matter... If I focus on work, I'm judged; if I attend to family, I'm still judged.*

Such scrutiny reflects broader cultural norms that assign domestic primacy to women while framing leadership ambition as deviant (Adisa, Gbadamosi and Adekoya, 2021). Beyond unequal gender expectations, women described being closely monitored and evaluated in ways that questioned their competence, leadership legitimacy, and organisational commitment when family responsibilities became visible. This scrutiny manifested through heightened performance expectations, assumptions of reduced availability, and differential standards compared to male colleagues in similar roles. Consequently, women experienced their professional roles not only as demanding but also as continuously subject to judgment, in which



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deviations from idealised, masculine norms of uninterrupted availability were interpreted as individual shortcomings rather than as outcomes of structural and institutional constraints.

***Cultural expectations and gendered roles***

Much of what shapes women's complex negotiations between work and family domains relates to cultural norms and gendered expectations that often influence women's experiences of entanglement. This aligns with African feminist critiques that liberal models of work-family balance overlook patriarchal and postcolonial legacies constraining women's agency (Tamale, 2008; Imas and Garcia-Lorenzo, 2022). Several women in our sample highlighted how societal expectations about masculinity and femininity, or what constitutes womanhood, influenced their experiences with work–family entanglement. For instance, Lethabo, a Chief Security Officer in a public South African firm, explained:

> *Society wants women to be at home… they feel our roles end in the kitchen… Jobs like mine are often reserved for men, and you don't have business taking leadership roles...*

This reflects what Adisa et al. (2021) term "gender apartheid," where professional spaces are constructed as male domains. Ngozi, a Director and Founder in a private Nigerian firm, added:

> *If you put so much energy into work, how are you going to build a family? This is the type of question that family members or even close colleagues and friends may ask you.*

Winda, an Associate Director in a private Kenyan firm, echoed the importance of motherhood expectations:

> *You hear people say that everything should be about my kids… that I'm supposed to be leaving work by 5 o'clock and cook for my family.*

These narratives demonstrate how women's paid employment and leadership roles are often perceived as incompatible with traditional domestic responsibilities, generating ongoing negotiation and trade-offs rather than complete withdrawal from either domain (Akanji et al., 2023). This aligns with studies showing that African women face heightened childcare expectations alongside limited institutional support, which intensifies rather than resolves work–family tensions (Lewis et al., 2014; Stumbitz et al., 2018).

Some participants explicitly contrasted African contexts with the Global North. For example, Aneska, an Associate Director of a private South African firm, remarked:

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> *Women who come from egalitarian cultural societies have no problem… it does not affect us the same way.*

Aneska's comment reflects differences in institutional support across contexts. Research shows that women in the Global North often manage work–family tensions within stronger institutional frameworks, including formal childcare and regulated flexible work (Mordi et al., 2024). In contrast, studies from Nigeria and Ghana highlight weaker organisational and state support and greater reliance on informal care, intensifying work–family strain for women (Akuoko et al., 2021; Adekoya et al., 2024). This indicates that work–family entanglement is shaped by context-specific institutional and cultural conditions rather than being universal, echoing Connell's (2020) Southern Theory, which highlights the need to theorise from Global South realities absent in mainstream models.

In sum, these findings highlight how cultural expectations of womanhood, motherhood, and domestic responsibility shape women's experiences of work–family entanglement. By this, we refer to normative expectations that women should prioritise family care, emotional availability, and domestic presence, alongside the scrutiny they face when professional commitments are perceived to conflict with these roles. While some women internalised or actively resisted these pressures (as discussed later), the emotional strain evident in their accounts underscores the deep entrenchment of patriarchal norms in shaping women's leadership trajectories.

***Emotional conflict and internalised pressure***

Beyond external scrutiny, participants highlighted the emotional toll of juggling professional responsibilities with family obligations. Feelings of guilt, self-doubt, and exhaustion emerged as central features of entanglement. This mirrors earlier findings that African women's careers are marked by emotional labour both at work and at home, often without institutional recognition (Stumbitz and Jaga, 2020; Adekoya et al., 2025). For example, Nasha, a Senior Manager in a private Nigerian firm, recalled:

> *My son was crying uncontrollably… I was on a critical client call… I didn't feel any empathy, focus was entirely on work, no acknowledgment of what I was juggling.*

Similarly, Durah admitted:

> *My parents, my surviving mother, are suffering. I don't get good time with my kids, but it is just what it is.*



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These accounts highlight both the invisibility of women's dual burdens in professional cultures (Adisa et al., 2021) and the intergenerational caregiving pressures that further entrench entanglement (Akuoko et al., 2021).

The entanglement also manifested physically, as Amina, an HR Director of a public Tunisian firm, explained:

> *Engaging with both responsibilities was heavy mentally and physically... I became more anxious. And I lost weight.*

Omphile, a Business Manager at a private South African firm, also echoed:

> *...you always defer to fulfilling the needs of work and family before you fulfil your needs.*

Such narratives show how structural constraints and cultural valorisation of motherhood combine to produce embodied stress and self-sacrifice (Chikapa et al., 2023; Mordi et al., 2025).

While many internalised these pressures, some engaged in emotional sensemaking as they attempted to reconcile competing demands. For example, Ifeoma, a Director of Operations in a public Nigerian firm, reflected through self-dialogue, asking herself, "*Am I doing meaningful work?*" Similarly, Ngina, a Group Director of a Kenyan NGO, described moments of emotional recalibration, emphasising her ability to "*just pick my family*" when pressures intensified. These accounts reflect ongoing efforts to make sense of entanglement and reclaim emotional balance (Jaga et al., 2024). Yet ambivalence persisted, as Kwamboka, a Senior Manager at a private Kenyan firm, reflected, "*I don't know if I will regret it one day… for now I feel like I am someone who's more work oriented.*" This uncertainty illustrates how entanglement produces not only immediate strain but also enduring anxiety about the long-term consequences of prioritising one sphere over another.

In sum, emotional conflict is a defining feature of work–family entanglement, manifesting in cycles of guilt, physical depletion, and moments of resilience, while leaving women with the persistent shadow of future regret.

## Coping Strategies

### *Personal agency, dynamic prioritisation and strategic adaptation*

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As these women face competing demands across work and family life, alongside heightened professional scrutiny, some rely on personal agency to navigate work–family entanglement. This agency is expressed through deliberate goal alignment, particularly in clarifying how career ambitions can coexist with family responsibilities. For example, Ashanti, an HR Manager at a private Nigerian firm, recalled:

> *...If I need to meet clients outside work hours, I arrange meetings at times that don't clash with family…*

This balancing of goals as both homemakers and co-breadwinners is reinforced through resilience and determination in managing entangled responsibilities. Winda emphasised this resolve when she stated, "*Nothing will stop me and I will overcome every challenge*." Such resilience develops within a broader social context where women are expected to prioritise family roles as wives and mothers. Walta, an HR Manager at a private Kenyan firm, exemplified this in her account:

> *Society often expects women to prioritise being there for their families. However, for someone like me, I don't allow societal norms, expectations, or pressures to influence my choices or define my path.*

This clarity of purpose is further strengthened through dynamic prioritisation, whereby attention to work or family shifts depending on situational demands and life stages. Esther described this adaptive process as follows:

> *Sometimes, I prioritise family. Sometimes, I prioritise work with the support of my family, of course… it depends on where I am in my career… I learned and evolved through it.*

Similarly, Luthando, a Director at a public South African firm, reflected:

> *There was a certain period in my life when my children were very young that I had to work part-time so that I could be with the children and take care of them.*

Beyond active prioritisation, some women exercised agency through strategic accommodation, particularly by adopting selective silence and withdrawal in unsupportive professional or familial spaces. Rather than confronting resistance directly, these women chose to conserve emotional energy and engage selectively with environments that aligned with their values. Esther further explained:

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> *Sometimes I choose not to make a big impact in spaces where I know my views won't be accepted… I also focus on spending time with the kind of family that aligns with my beliefs and values.*

This form of selective silence reflects a calculated strategy of self-preservation, illustrating how agency can be exercised through restraint, boundary-setting, and intentional disengagement. As such, agency under work–family entanglement is not always expressed through visibility or confrontation, but through careful negotiation of where voice and effort are invested.

While some women adopted strategies of accommodation, others exercised agency through overt resistance by explicitly rejecting normative expectations surrounding femininity, caregiving, and self-sacrifice. For example, Eucabeth, a CEO of a private Kenyan firm, asserted:

> *I am a rebel… I know that everyone expects me to be worried about my kids all the time… but my children are not the biggest thing in my life. I am the biggest thing in my life.*

This subversive positioning reflects African feminist calls for self-definition outside patriarchal frames (Norwood, 2013). Other women sought compromise through spousal support or deliberate reprioritisation. For instance, Bisola, a Dean at a public Nigerian university, reframed religious values as balance, while Visola, a Regional Director in a private Kenyan firm, described intentionally carving out family time around demanding travel schedules.

Between prioritisation and building resilience as coping strategies, these middle-class women navigate work–family entanglement through a range of practical strategies, including compartmentalisation, delegation, task batching, and the use of digital technologies. These practices enable them to sustain focus and manage competing demands without fully withdrawing from either domain. As Adaeze, a Chief Marketing and Communications Officer in a private Nigerian firm, explained:

> *…I prioritise, delegate, and remind myself that I can't do everything at once… delegation and technology in the most recent are the ones that have really come to embrace and integrate in my life…*

Similarly, Delize, a Founder and Executive Director of a South African NGO, shared:

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> *Batching similar tasks…If I know I need to do laundry, cook, or run errands, I group them-so I'm not going back and forth unnecessarily...it helps me manage my stress and time better.*

Together, these accounts demonstrate that coping with work–family entanglement involves not a single strategy but a spectrum of agentic responses, ranging from accommodation to resistance, shaped by women's positionality, life stage, and the constraints of their organisational and cultural environments.

***Familial support and external specialised assistance***

In African settings, in the absence or limited availability of strong organisational support systems, familial support is considered a collective obligation and critical safety net that sustains women's dual roles as breadwinners and caregivers (Adekoya et al., 2025). Such support typically comes from mothers, siblings, or spouses who help ease the strain of balancing work and family responsibilities. This reliance on family support is deeply embedded in cultural norms, reflecting the collectivist traditions of the Global South, and particularly Africans, which stand in contrast to the individualistic orientation of the Global North. Strong family ties provide women with valuable support systems, but they also reproduce gender biases that place greater caregiving expectations on women. For instance, Kaya, a Senior Manager at a public South African firm, noted:

> *... I have sisters who are more family-oriented than me, so I can count on them.*

In response to entrenched gender norms, some married professional women proactively negotiate spousal support before or during marriage, ensuring that domestic labour is more evenly shared. Where this remains insufficient, they often turn to external assistance by hiring domestic staff to support household responsibilities. For example, Adaeze explained:

> *...I have been lucky that he [spouse] does appreciate it, but for him to appreciate it, it's a conversation we had to have before we got married, that he needs to understand and appreciate that I'm a career woman*.

Amara, the CEO of a private Nigerian firm, shared similar views:

> *…I do have a very supportive partner. Incredibly supportive…and we also have people around the house who are paid to support us. I have the income to pay for a nanny, a housekeeper, a dog Walker, a chef, a driver, and a gardener*.

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Amara's view on external specialised assistance through paid domestic and care labour was further supported by Ifeoma's account:

> *Balancing domestic responsibilities isn't easy, and it can be quite demanding. To manage effectively, I've employed someone to support me with certain household tasks. This has really helped to reduce the pressure and lighten the load on me. It's a strategy that has worked well for me and has significantly improved my work-life balance.*

Support is not confined to the home. Organisational structures and workplace colleagues who acknowledge women's dual roles can also act as enablers of work–family balance. Employers who provide flexible policies such as remote work, compressed workweeks, and maternity leave create critical buffers for women, particularly those in leadership roles (Idowu et al., 2019). Equally, supportive teams that share responsibilities and offer empathy provide day-to-day relief. This combination of formal and informal workplace support was described by participants:

> *My office set up allowed flexibility…Colleagues knew to say 'go rest'.* (Lateefah, Finance Manager, Private Nigerian Firm)

> *…The strategy is to talk about my family and my other responsibilities in the workspace with work colleagues. So, they're more understanding and more empathetic… if I'm struggling with something, it helps…* (Yasmine, General Manager, Private Tunisian Firm)

In sum, these accounts show that familial networks, spousal alignment, hired assistance, and workplace support all play vital roles in helping African women professionals navigate the entangled demands of work and family life.

***External safe emotional spaces***

Emotional safe spaces provide an environment where individuals can reduce anxiety or stress by connecting with others who share similar experiences or perspectives (Harpalani, 2017). Some women in this study described relying on trusted external actors, particularly family members, close friends, and faith-based communities, as critical sources of emotional support that enabled them to process stress, seek affirmation, and regain emotional balance, often in ways that were unavailable within organisational settings.

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Many participants highlighted their mothers as primary emotional confidants. For example, Amara explained how regular conversations with her mother helped her navigate both professional and family pressures:

> *...I try to call my mom... Like daily calls...and there's no emotional manipulation…I even ask her about things at work if I can't think about them… She's not from the field… But I trust her analytical spirit and way of thinking, so maybe it helps me also think out loud.*

Similarly, other women described confiding in close friends who shared similar life experiences, enabling mutual understanding and emotional validation. These friendships functioned as informal but vital spaces where women could express vulnerability without fear of judgement or professional repercussions. For example, Lethabo exemplified this narrative:

> *I have a few friends that I can confide in and cry out to when needed… As I mentioned before, it's not easy for me to balance work and family, but when you have other friends who share similar experiences, you can always learn from each other.*

Faith-based networks also emerged as important emotional safe spaces, particularly in contexts where religion plays a central social role. Some participants spoke of drawing strength from religious leaders, prayer groups, or religious communities, where they could seek counsel, reassurance, and moral support. These spaces offered not only emotional relief but also a sense of collective belonging that mitigated the isolation associated with managing competing work and family demands:

> *As a single mother, it's difficult for me… I have a Church member who helps pick up my daughter from Sekolo sa Bana (crèche)... She is very much older than I am, so I regard her as an elderly sister because she also advises me.* (Nandi, Founder & CEO, Private South African Firm)

> *At Church, we have what we call "Couples Fellowship", just like we have for those who are single… We share our experiences and listen to the counsel of those who have been married for many many years. This way, you can learn from how other women have dealt with managing family and work.* (Ashanti)

These narratives illustrate that external emotional safe spaces in African contexts are often embedded in relational and communal structures, particularly in the absence of adequate formal support systems. Access to such spaces helped women sustain their professional roles by



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providing emotional containment and perspective, even as structural and cultural constraints remained unchanged. However, reliance on these informal networks also reflects the limited availability of institutional emotional support within workplaces, reinforcing the gendered expectation that women must privately manage the emotional costs of work–family entanglement.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study explored how professional African women experience work–family entanglement and the strategies they adopt to navigate their dual roles as co-breadwinners and homemakers. By focusing on middle-class professional women across multiple African countries, we extend the concept of work–family entanglement (Jaga et al., 2024) beyond its original emphasis on low-income and precarious workers, demonstrating its applicability to women in professional and top managerial roles. Extending work–family entanglement to professional African women reveals an important theoretical distinction from its original grounding in low-income contexts. While low-income women experience entanglement primarily through material precarity and survival-oriented strategies (Jaga et al., 2024), professional women encounter entanglement through role intensification, normative scrutiny, and institutional silence surrounding care. Their organisational status and resources often provide partial buffers but do not translate into autonomy over time, boundaries, or expectations. Instead, entanglement among professional women is sustained through professional norms of presenteeism, gendered leadership ideals, and the moralisation of caregiving. This demonstrates that entanglement persists not despite professional privilege, but often through it.

Our results highlight that entanglement is not merely an outcome of individual time-use choices but reflects structural, institutional, and cultural conditions. Participants described emotional strain, embodied stress, and career compromises stemming from the simultaneous demands of professional leadership and domestic caregiving. Our findings resonate with Adekoya et al.'s (2024) analysis by showing that access to resources does not free professional women from normative expectations of intensive motherhood, but instead reconfigures how these expectations are managed and justified within households and workplaces. Similarly, Chikapa et al. (2023) demonstrate that Malawian women construct "makeshift careers" through serial compromises in response to caregiving and rigid workplace norms. Rather than alleviating work–family entanglement, professional status reconfigures how it is institutionally embedded,

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shifting its expression from material precarity to normative scrutiny, organisational silence around care, and gendered expectations of professional availability.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the work–family interface and employment relations literature by positioning entanglement as not only a cultural or feminist issue but also as an institutional and workplace relations construct. This reframing moves the debate into the core concerns of HRM and employee relations, where the design and signalling of HR practices, system strength, and institutional logics shape employees' lived experiences. Importantly, organisational cultures that privilege presenteeism and masculine career models render women's dual burdens invisible, not necessarily through overt managerial disregard, but through the internalisation of expectations of uninterrupted availability. Participants often subordinated caregiving needs to professional demands, illustrating how organisational norms discipline women's conduct even in the absence of explicit sanction. From an employment relations perspective, these findings point to weak HRM system strength, where organisational signals about flexibility and care remain ambiguous, inconsistently enacted, and reliant on managerial discretion rather than institutionalised policy. In such contexts, flexibility operates less as a formal HRM resource and more as an informal coping mechanism, shaping how women interpret organisational support and legitimacy. Such experiences align with Stumbitz and Jaga's (2020) concept of "maternal body work," where women navigate the embodied labour of caregiving within rigid organisational structures. They also resonate with Lee et al.'s (2011) "entangled strands" model of careers, but extend it by showing how African institutional gaps and patriarchal traditions exacerbate entanglement in ways that Global North models rarely anticipate.

Crucially, the presence of flexibility, collegial support, and individual agency in some cases does not contradict our critique of dominant HRM assumptions; rather, it reveals how women rely on fragile, discretionary, and informal accommodations in the absence of robust institutional support. These forms of flexibility function as short-term coping mechanisms rather than institutional guarantees, mitigating work–family entanglement temporarily without dismantling the structural conditions that produce it. In such contexts, the Global North framing of flexibility as empowerment (Atkinson and Hall, 2009; Stavrou et al., 2015) is difficult to sustain, because flexibility can operate as employer burden-shifting when remote or flexible work intensifies caregiving responsibilities without corresponding workload adjustment. While similar ambivalence around flexibility has been documented in Global North contexts (e.g., Adisa et al., 2022; Xiang et al., 2022; Stadler, 2025), many African women's experiences are



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intensified by weaker institutional supports, fragile childcare systems, and stronger moral expectations of caregiving (Mordi et al., 2023; Jaga et al., 2024).

Our findings also underscore the importance of collectivist traditions in shaping coping strategies. Participants reported reliance on extended kin networks, spousal negotiations, and external domestic staff to mitigate the pressures of entanglement. Familial support was often framed as a collective obligation, reflecting wider African values of solidarity and shared responsibility (De Giusti and Kambhampati, 2016; Jaga et al., 2024). Yet these same cultural norms also reinforced expectations of women as primary caregivers, creating a paradox where support systems alleviate but simultaneously legitimise women's disproportionate burdens. Frehiwot et al. (2022) similarly show how Ghanaian women academics developed collective strategies during COVID-19 to cope with heightened demands, demonstrating both resilience and constraint. Thus, while collectivist norms may provide a buffer absent or limited in the Global North, they do not necessarily dismantle entrenched gender hierarchies. Instead, they highlight the need to understand entanglement as embedded in both cultural and institutional relations.

Another critical insight is the persistence of emotional conflict and internalised pressure. Many participants reported guilt, self-doubt, and anxiety from the impossibility of meeting professional and familial expectations simultaneously. This reflects a form of "emotional entanglement" where structural inequalities are internalised as personal shortcomings. Such dynamics mirror findings in Global North contexts (Blair-Loy, 2005), yet African women's experiences are heightened by weaker institutional supports, fragile childcare systems, and cultural valorisation of women's self-sacrifice (Akuoko et al., 2021; Adekoya et al., 2024). The result is a cycle of exhaustion and resilience, in which women adopt strategies of self-dialogue, boundary-setting, or selective prioritisation, yet remain ambivalent about the long-term consequences for their careers or families. This adds to employment relations scholarship by illustrating how emotional labour extends beyond the workplace into the entangled negotiation of professional and familial identities.

The study also contributes to African feminist scholarship by highlighting the tension between agency and constraint. Women demonstrated resilience by negotiating spousal support, hiring domestic help, or leveraging workplace networks, yet these strategies often entailed reproducing unequal divisions of labour. This echoes Imas and Garcia-Lorenzo's (2022) call for decolonial perspectives that challenge both patriarchal and Eurocentric assumptions about

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women's work. By making this distinction explicit, the study empirically grounds the claim that African women's agency is exercised within structurally constrained conditions rather than through the individualised autonomy often assumed in Global North work–family and careers scholarship, where agency is more commonly framed around choice, boundary control, and institutional support (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al., 2012). In doing so, the study adds to the literature on women's careers in employment relations, which has increasingly examined how discrimination, organisational culture, and institutional bias intersect to limit women's upward mobility (Adisa et al., 2021).

Practically, these findings call for organisations and policymakers to move beyond tokenistic flexibility and implement systemic interventions that directly address women's entanglement. HR departments should formalise on-site or subsidised childcare, extend maternity and paternity protections, and institutionalise safe spaces such as mentoring networks that reduce isolation and emotional strain. Flexible work must be coupled with supportive infrastructure, including clear workload adjustments, predictable scheduling, and shared responsibility norms, rather than shifting care burdens onto women. Policymakers can reinforce these efforts by legislating equitable parental leave and mandating employer contributions to care support, while also incentivising organisations to adopt gender-responsive HR systems (ILO, 2024). At the organisational level, leadership pipelines should be redesigned to prevent presenteeism and long-hours cultures from penalising women who balance dual roles. These measures would not only mitigate burnout and attrition but also advance equity in employment relations by embedding caregiving realities into HRM frameworks.

Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations. First, the sample comprised middle-class women professionals, which limits generalisability to other income groups. While our findings reveal entanglement across class lines, future research should systematically compare experiences across socioeconomic strata to further refine theory. Second, reliance on self-reported interviews may have introduced social desirability bias, particularly in discussing spousal relations or coping strategies. Triangulating with observational or longitudinal data could strengthen validity. Third, while the study spanned multiple African countries, contextual specificities may have been flattened; future work should adopt more country-specific, comparative designs or intersectional approaches to explore how class, ethnicity, and religion intersect with entanglement, as well as to examine how national institutional arrangements shape professional women's experiences.

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Future research could also extend the theoretical framing of entanglement by examining how organisational policies, labour market structures, and state welfare systems mediate women's experiences. Comparative studies between African and Global North contexts could highlight not only differences but also how insights from African collectivist traditions might enrich global work–family debates. Moreover, research could explore men's roles as co-breadwinners and caregivers in African households to understand whether and how shifting masculinities may alter the entanglement dynamic.

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**Table 1: Participants' Demographic Profile**

| Participant names (Pseudonyms) | Age range | Marital status | Number of dependent children | Educational Qualifications | Job role/Sector | Span of control (direct reports) | Top management gender ratio (women:men) | Country |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Esther | 30-40 | Single | 0 | Master's | Executive Manager/Private | 14 | 80:20 | Nigeria |
| Ashanti | 30-40 | Married | 0 | Master's | HR Manager/ Private | 20+ | 50:50 | Nigeria |
| Damilola | 30-40 | Married | 0 | Master's | CEO/Private | 20+ | 55:45 | Nigeria |
| Gasira | 30-40 | Married | 2 | Bachelor's | Head of Human Resources/Private | 10 | 50:50 | Kenya |
| Kwamboka | 30-40 | Married | 1 | Bachelor's | Senior Manager/Private | 13 | 50:50 | Kenya |
| Omphile | 40-50 | Married | 1 | Master's | Business Manager/Private | 5 | 40:60 | South Africa |
| Lethabo | 30-40 | Married | 2 | Master's | Chief Security Officer/Public | 10+ | 20:80 | South Africa |
| Nasha | 30-40 | Married | 1 | Master's | Senior Manager/ Private | 8 | 50:50 | Nigeria |
| Delize | 20-30 | Single | 0 | Bachelor's | Founder and Executive Director/NGO | 14 | 70:30 | South Africa |
| Walta | 30-40 | Married | 3 | Bachelor's | HR Manager/Private | 5 | 35:65 | Kenya |
| Ngozi | 30-40 | Single | 0 | Master's | Founder and Director/Private | 7 | 50:50 | Nigeria |
| Amina | 40-50 | Married | 2 | Master's | HR Director/ Public | 30+ | 40:60 | Tunisia |
| Ifeoma | 40-50 | Married | 3 | Doctorate | Director of Operations/Public | 17 | 40:60 | Nigeria |
| Lateefah | 30-40 | Married | 2 | Master's | Finance Manager/ Private | 15 | 50:50 | Nigeria |
| Luthando | 50-60 | Married | 2 | Master's | Director/Public | 9 | 45:55 | South Africa |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kaya | 40-50 | Married | 2 | Bachelor's | Senior Manager/Public | 13 | 45:55 | South Africa |
| Adaeze | 40-50 | Married | 3 | Master's | Chief Marketing and Communications Officer/Private | 38 | 55:45 | Nigeria |
| Amara | 30-40 | Married | 2 | Master's | CEO/Private | 10+ | 40:60 | Nigeria |
| Durah | 30-40 | Married | 2 | Bachelor's | Partnerships Manager/Public | 10+ | 60:40 | Kenya |
| Olamide | 30-40 | Married | 3 | Bachelor's | Finance Manager/ Private | 6 | 30:70 | Nigeria |
| Ngina | 40-50 | Single | 0 | Master's | Group Director/ NGO | 16 | 60:40 | Kenya |
| Nabila | 30-40 | Single | 0 | Master's | Project Manager & Policy Advocacy Director/Private | 5 | 50:50 | Tunisia |
| Nandi | 20-30 | Single | 1 | Master's | Founder & CEO/ Private | 7 | 60:40 | South Africa |
| Winda | 30-40 | Married | 5 | Master's | Associate Director/Private | 15 | 40:60 | Kenya |
| Visola | 40-50 | Married | 2 | Master's | Regional Director/ Private | 13 | 36:64 | Kenya |
| Aneska | 30-40 | Single | 0 | Master's | Associate Director/Private | 8 | 40:60 | South Africa |
| Bisola | 50-60 | Married | 2 | Doctorate | Dean/Public | 14 | 30:70 | Nigeria |
| Yasmine | 30-40 | Married | 2 | Bachelor's | General Manager/ Private | 9 | 40:60 | Tunisia |
| Eucabeth | 40-50 | Married | 2 | Bachelor's | CEO/Private | 11 | 45:55 | Kenya |

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**Appendix 1: Thematic Table**

| Indicative quotations | First-order Codes | Codes consolidation and conceptual categories | Main themes |
|---|---|---|---|
| "Well, for me, I'm not married… when it comes to supporting my family… it's quite challenging. The demands of leadership make it even harder… we don't prioritise family life as a society." | Leadership demands hinder family support; Judged for ambition; Double standards in evaluation; Unfair comparisons to men; Selective silence; Long hours, travel strain | Competing work–life domains and professional scrutiny | **Work–Family Entanglement Experiences** |
| "If you put so much energy into work, how are you going to build a family? … Home is where I can be still, be myself, and find peace."<br><br>"...society wants women to be at home… They feel our roles end in the kitchen… you don't have business taking leadership roles." | Societal questioning; High emotional toll; Motherhood expectations | Cultural expectations and gendered roles | |
| My parents, my surviving mother is suffering. She doesn't get that much time with me. I don't get good time. Friends, I don't spend as much time as I would like with my kids, but it is just what it is. | Guilt for absence; Feeling torn; Emotional labour at home and work; | Emotional conflict and internalised pressure | |
| "Sometimes, I prioritise family. Sometimes, I prioritise work — with the support of my family, of course… it depends on where I am in my career… I learned and evolved through it."<br><br>"Yes, plenty of times. When it happens, I prioritise, delegate, and remind myself that I can't do everything at once." | Clarity of goals; Boundary-setting; Strong will; Resilience as identity; Dynamic prioritisation based on context; Selective silencing, Resistance, Compartmentalisation; Weekend catch-ups; Delegation; Task batching; Compromise | Personal agency, dynamic prioritisation and strategic adaptation | **Coping Strategies** |
| "If I have to get home late, he understands… he tells me just focus on work… the home front will be taken care of."<br><br>To manage both work and home responsibilities, I have one domestic staff member who helps with cleaning and other household tasks. | Spousal support and alignment; Support from family and friends; Support from work colleagues; hiring domestic staff | Familial support and external specialised assistance | |

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|---|---|---|---|
| “Planning ahead, setting boundaries, and asking for help from friends or close family when needed.” | Help-seeking from other women mentors; Accepting limitations; Spiritual capital | External safe emotional spaces | |

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