



The Impact of Familial Expectations on Career Choices and Identity Formation in Highly Educated Women

Roya. Akbari¹, Aliasghar. Hoseinzadeh^{2*}

¹ Master of Family Counseling, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Allameh Mohaddes Nouri University, Nour, Iran

² Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Islamic Azad University, Amol, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: Hossein.zadeh20@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore the impact of familial expectations on career choices and identity formation among highly educated women in Tehran.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews with 24 highly educated women from Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture diverse perspectives. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring comprehensive thematic coverage. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, facilitated by NVivo software. Four primary themes emerged: familial expectations, career choices, identity formation, and coping mechanisms.

Findings: The results revealed that familial expectations significantly influenced participants' career choices, often delaying entry into the workforce and leading to compromises in professional aspirations. Participants described internal conflicts between societal roles and personal ambitions, which shaped their identity formation. Coping mechanisms included emotional strategies, resistance to traditional norms, and pragmatic adaptations. These findings highlighted the pervasive influence of cultural norms on women's autonomy and professional development.

Conclusion: Familial expectations create significant barriers to career advancement and identity formation for highly educated women in Tehran. These dynamics underscore the need for supportive organizational policies, cultural shifts toward gender equality, and interventions that empower women to navigate these challenges effectively. The study contributes to the literature on gender roles, work-family conflict, and women's professional empowerment, offering actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and organizations.

Keywords: *Familial expectations, career choices, identity formation, highly educated women, qualitative research, work-family conflict.*

1. Introduction

The intersection of familial expectations, career aspirations, and identity formation represents a complex dynamic that significantly influences highly educated women's personal and professional lives. This phenomenon is shaped by deeply ingrained cultural, social, and economic structures, which, as highlighted by multiple scholars, perpetuate gendered norms and expectations. These norms often impose limitations on women's career trajectories and personal development, emphasizing compliance with traditional roles over individual autonomy (Jansen & Kristensen, 2003; Josimovska, 2023).

Familial expectations are deeply rooted in societal norms and have a profound impact on women's career choices and identity development. Studies show that social and familial pressures often dictate the types of careers deemed acceptable for women, shaping their professional trajectories in ways that limit personal agency (Makhanya, 2023; Paola et al., 2022). Kamyab and Hoseinzadeh (2023) emphasized how societal expectations influence women's personal and professional decisions, creating psychological stress that further hinders their progress (Kamyab & Hoseinzadeh, 2023). Similarly, Imam (2023) highlighted the challenges Emirati women face as they navigate career advancement while managing familial and cultural expectations, suggesting that traditional values often act as barriers to their aspirations (Imam, 2023).

Women frequently find themselves torn between meeting family obligations and pursuing professional goals. For example, Jansen, Kant, and Kristensen (2003) discussed the consequences of work-family conflict, noting that women who attempt to balance these competing demands often experience heightened levels of stress (Jansen & Kristensen, 2003). This is exacerbated by the "superwoman syndrome," where women feel compelled to excel in both professional and familial roles (Gregorash et al., 2023).

The impact of familial expectations is particularly pronounced in women's career choices. Families often pressure women into pursuing careers that align with societal norms, prioritizing job stability and perceived prestige over personal passion or interest (Kim, 2020; Yazdanpanah et al., 2019). This dynamic is reinforced by cultural narratives that view women's professional success as secondary to their roles as caregivers and homemakers (Tolani, 2018).

Alok, Banerjee, and Singh (2021) demonstrated that managerial support could mitigate some of the adverse effects of work-family conflict, suggesting that institutional

mechanisms play a crucial role in empowering women to overcome familial pressures (Alok et al., 2021). However, such support is not always accessible, particularly in traditional societies where cultural norms continue to dominate. As highlighted by Mahdizade and Sadrnabavi (2023), these structural barriers disproportionately affect skilled and efficient women, leaving them underutilized in the workforce (Mahdizade & Sadrnabavi, 2023).

Identity formation among highly educated women is intricately tied to the expectations of their families and communities. Women often struggle to reconcile their professional ambitions with societal pressures to conform to traditional roles, leading to a fragmented sense of self (Pieper et al., 2018). Kamyab and Hoseinzadeh (2023) discussed how societal expectations shape women's identities, often prioritizing compliance over self-expression (Kamyab & Hoseinzadeh, 2023).

The glass ceiling phenomenon further compounds this issue, as women in managerial positions often face implicit biases and structural barriers (Josimovska, 2023). Contu (2023) noted that intergroup contact could help mitigate negative attitudes toward women managers, but such progress is slow and uneven. For many women, the path to self-actualization involves a delicate balance between familial loyalty and professional independence (Contu, 2023).

The psychological burden of navigating familial expectations can have long-term consequences on women's mental health and well-being. Makhanya (2023) observed that societal and familial pressures not only limit women's professional opportunities but also create a sense of inadequacy and self-doubt (Makhanya, 2023). Similarly, Sodani et al. (2024) highlighted the role of mindfulness-based interventions in helping women manage job stress, emphasizing the need for holistic approaches to support women in balancing their professional and personal lives (Sodani et al., 2024).

Women's career trajectories are also shaped by external factors such as occupational gender composition, as evidenced by Paola, Dupray, and Moullet's (2022) research. These factors intersect with familial expectations, further complicating women's efforts to advance professionally (Paola et al., 2022). Kavas (2010) noted that highly educated women often experience a post-divorce reassessment of their identities, suggesting that life events can prompt a reevaluation of personal and professional priorities (Kavas, 2010).

In sum, the challenges faced by women in navigating familial expectations and career aspirations, there is limited research focusing specifically on how these dynamics affect highly educated women in Tehran. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of women who must reconcile their professional goals with the expectations of their families and communities.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the impact of familial expectations on career choices and identity formation in highly educated women. The participants were purposefully selected from Tehran, ensuring representation of diverse educational backgrounds, professions, and family dynamics. A total of 24 women were included in the study. Inclusion criteria required participants to hold a higher education degree and to have experienced familial influence on their career decisions. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring that no new themes or patterns emerged.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences. An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives, incorporating open-ended questions to explore familial expectations, career decisions, and identity formation. Interviews were conducted in person or

virtually, depending on the participants' preferences, and were audio-recorded with their consent. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within the data. NVivo software was employed to manage and code the transcribed interviews systematically. The analysis process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and defining and naming themes. Trustworthiness of the analysis was ensured through peer debriefing, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail to document analytical decisions.

3. Findings and Results

The participants in this study consisted of 24 highly educated women from Tehran, representing a diverse range of demographic characteristics. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 45 years, with the majority (14 participants, 58%) falling within the 30–35 age range. Regarding marital status, 16 participants (67%) were married, 6 participants (25%) were single, and 2 participants (8%) were divorced. In terms of educational background, 10 participants (42%) held master's degrees, 8 participants (33%) had bachelor's degrees, and 6 participants (25%) had doctoral degrees. Professionally, the women were engaged in various fields, including education (7 participants, 29%), healthcare (5 participants, 21%), business (4 participants, 17%), and other sectors such as law, arts, and engineering (8 participants, 33%).

Table 1

Categories, Subcategories, and Concepts

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Familial Expectations	Traditional Gender Roles	Cultural norms, "Daughters vs. Sons," Homemaking emphasis, Obedience, Role of honor, Family hierarchy
	Parental Influence on Career Choices	Prestige-oriented parenting, Education prioritization, Intergenerational aspirations, Career-matching
	Conflict Between Autonomy and Expectations	Resentment, Communication gaps, Negotiating decisions, Emotional stress
	Financial Dependency	Economic control, Lack of independence, Education without employment, "Family investments"
2. Career Choices	Emotional Bonds	Guilt trips, Loyalty to family, Emotional blackmail, Fear of letting parents down
	Delayed Career Entry	Postponing decisions, Overqualification, "Dream career deferred," Parental pressures
	Compromise and Mediocrity	Settling in jobs, Fear of risks, "Family-approved careers," No passion in work
	Barriers to High-Powered Positions	Gender imbalance, Fear of failure, Lack of family support, Underutilized degrees
	Nontraditional Career Paths	Rebellion, Entrepreneurship, Negotiating family approval, Role models from media

3. Identity Formation	Conflicted Personal Identity	Split between roles, Emotional dilemmas, Living double lives, Unclear self-perception
	Role of Education in Self-Concept	Empowerment through education, Recognition through degrees, Aspirations beyond traditions
	Influence of Marital Expectations	"Marriage first" narrative, Education as a bargaining chip, Reduced career identity
4. Coping Mechanisms	Social Expectations vs. Self-Awareness	"What will people say?", Independence aspirations, Societal validation, Pursuit of authenticity
	Evolving Personal Identity	Confidence from achievements, Redefining success, Assertiveness, Gradual alignment of roles
	Emotional Coping	Journaling, Therapy, Support groups, Emotional detachment
	Building Support Networks	Peers with shared experiences, Mentors, Online communities, Friends as confidants
	Resistance Strategies	Defying norms, Setting boundaries, Independent living, Asserting independence
	Pragmatic Adaptation	Career-family balance, Strategic compliance, Gradual change, Financial self-reliance

3.1. Familial Expectations

Traditional Gender Roles: Participants frequently discussed how traditional cultural norms shaped their upbringing and career aspirations. One participant shared, "As the eldest daughter, my role was clear—help around the house, focus on family, and leave the ambition to my brothers." Concepts such as "homemaking emphasis," "obedience," and "family hierarchy" highlighted the societal expectations placed on women to prioritize domestic roles over professional ambitions.

Parental Influence on Career Choices: Parents' career expectations often emphasized prestige and stability, with several participants recalling how they were steered toward "family-approved careers." As one interviewee noted, "It wasn't about what I wanted but about what would make my family proud." Open codes such as "prestige-oriented parenting" and "intergenerational aspirations" demonstrated the weight of familial influence on career decision-making.

Conflict Between Autonomy and Expectations: The tension between participants' personal desires and their families' expectations emerged as a recurring theme. One participant described, "I constantly felt torn between pleasing my parents and following my dreams." Subthemes included "communication gaps" and "emotional stress," which underscored the emotional challenges faced by the women.

Financial Dependency: Financial control played a significant role in limiting participants' autonomy. Many women spoke about how their education was seen as an investment by their families, restricting their career choices. One participant commented, "My parents reminded me of the cost of my education every time I wanted to try something unconventional." Concepts such as "economic control" and "lack of independence" were repeatedly mentioned.

Emotional Bonds: Emotional ties to family often complicated career decisions. Participants cited feelings of guilt and loyalty as barriers to asserting independence. "Every time I considered leaving, I would hear my mother's voice saying, 'Don't forget what we've done for you,'" shared one woman. Subthemes included "emotional blackmail" and "fear of letting parents down."

3.2. Career Choices

Delayed Career Entry: Many participants delayed entering the workforce due to familial expectations. One woman explained, "I kept waiting for their approval, and by the time I got it, I felt overqualified and out of touch." Subthemes such as "postponing decisions" and "dream career deferred" captured this phenomenon.

Compromise and Mediocrity: Participants often settled for less ambitious career paths to maintain family harmony. "I took a job I didn't love because it was safe and family-approved," one participant revealed. Concepts such as "settling in jobs" and "fear of risks" were frequently mentioned.

Barriers to High-Powered Positions: Many women discussed challenges in pursuing leadership roles due to societal and familial constraints. "Even when I excelled, my family doubted whether I could handle the pressure," one woman noted. Subthemes included "gender imbalance" and "underutilized degrees."

Nontraditional Career Paths: A minority of participants defied familial expectations and pursued unconventional careers. "I became an entrepreneur, and while it wasn't easy, I eventually earned their respect," one participant shared. Subthemes included "rebellion" and "negotiating family approval."

3.3. Identity Formation

Conflicted Personal Identity: Participants often described a dual identity, trying to reconcile personal ambitions with familial obligations. One woman shared, “I felt like I was living two lives—one for my family and one for myself.” Subthemes included “split between roles” and “emotional dilemmas.”

Role of Education in Self-Concept: Education was a source of empowerment and self-recognition for many participants. “Getting my degree made me realize I could be more than what my family expected,” one participant explained. Subthemes included “empowerment through education” and “aspirations beyond traditions.”

Influence of Marital Expectations: Marriage often influenced how participants viewed their careers and identities. “My parents saw my education as a way to attract a suitable husband, not as a path to a career,” one woman reflected. Subthemes included “marriage first narrative” and “reduced career identity.”

Social Expectations vs. Self-Awareness: Participants frequently grappled with societal pressures. “Everyone around me cared more about what people would say than what I wanted for myself,” one participant lamented. Subthemes included “societal validation” and “pursuit of authenticity.”

Evolving Personal Identity: Over time, many participants found ways to integrate their personal and professional identities. “It took years, but I finally feel like I’m living on my terms,” one woman shared. Subthemes included “confidence from achievements” and “redefining success.”

3.4. Coping Mechanisms

Emotional Coping: Participants employed strategies such as journaling and therapy to navigate their challenges. “Writing down my thoughts helped me make sense of the chaos,” one woman noted. Subthemes included “emotional detachment” and “support groups.”

Building Support Networks: Supportive peers and mentors played a crucial role in participants’ journeys. “Having someone who understood what I was going through made all the difference,” one participant shared. Subthemes included “online communities” and “friends as confidants.”

Resistance Strategies: Some participants actively resisted familial and societal expectations. “I set boundaries and made it clear that my career was non-negotiable,” one woman emphasized. Subthemes included “defying norms” and “asserting independence.”

Pragmatic Adaptation: Others found ways to adapt while maintaining familial harmony. “I complied with some expectations but made space for my ambitions,” one participant explained. Subthemes included “career-family balance” and “financial self-reliance.”

This detailed thematic analysis demonstrates the complexity of familial expectations and their impact on career choices and identity formation, offering a nuanced understanding of the experiences of highly educated women in Tehran.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlighted the profound impact of familial expectations on the career choices and identity formation of highly educated women in Tehran. Four main themes emerged: familial expectations, career choices, identity formation, and coping mechanisms. Participants reported experiencing significant tension between fulfilling family obligations and pursuing personal and professional ambitions. Familial expectations often led to delayed career entry, compromises in career choices, and internal conflicts regarding identity. Women navigated these challenges through a combination of emotional coping, resistance strategies, and pragmatic adaptation.

The theme of familial expectations revealed deeply ingrained cultural norms that prioritize traditional gender roles over individual autonomy. These findings align with Kamyab and Hoseinzadeh’s (2023) exploration of the psychological impacts of social expectations on women’s personal choices, which emphasized the emotional burden women bear in adhering to these norms (Kamyab & Hoseinzadeh, 2023). The emphasis on traditional roles and familial loyalty also mirrors the findings of Imam (2023), who noted that Emirati women managers often faced similar pressures to prioritize family over career advancement (Imam, 2023). This cultural continuity underscores the pervasive nature of patriarchal expectations in conservative societies.

Parental influence on career decisions was another salient subtheme, with participants citing familial pressure to pursue “prestigious” or “safe” careers that aligned with societal norms. This is consistent with Jansen et al. (2003), who identified work-family conflict as a critical factor in shaping women’s career trajectories (Jansen & Kristensen, 2003). Similarly, Kim (2020) found that breadwinner women often faced heightened familial and societal scrutiny, exacerbating their work-family conflicts (Kim, 2020).

Participants' career decisions were significantly shaped by familial expectations, often leading to delayed career entry and compromised aspirations. This finding is supported by Yazdanpanah et al. (2019), who highlighted the influence of women's employment on marital satisfaction and familial dynamics (Yazdanpanah et al., 2019). The theme of compromise and mediocrity, where women settle for less ambitious careers to maintain family harmony, aligns with Tolani's (2018) analysis of Gen X and Gen Y women managers, who face similar dilemmas across generations (Tolani, 2018).

Barriers to leadership and high-powered positions emerged as a critical subtheme. Participants frequently cited a lack of familial support and societal biases as obstacles to their professional advancement. These barriers are well-documented in the literature, with Josimovska (2023) describing the glass ceiling phenomenon as a pervasive challenge for women managers in Europe and beyond (Josimovska, 2023). Paola, Dupray, and Moullet (2022) further demonstrated how occupational gender composition affects women's chances of becoming managers, highlighting systemic inequities that parallel the familial pressures reported by participants in this study (Paola et al., 2022).

The findings revealed significant identity conflicts among participants, with many struggling to reconcile their professional ambitions with societal and familial expectations. These challenges echo Pieper, Uden, and Valk's (2018) study, which found that highly educated Muslim women often experience fragmented identities as they navigate conflicting cultural and professional norms (Pieper et al., 2018). Participants in this study also emphasized the role of education in shaping their self-concept, a finding that aligns with Imam's (2023) exploration of the empowering effects of education on women's identities (Imam, 2023).

Marital expectations were another prominent factor influencing identity formation. Participants reported feeling pressured to prioritize marriage over career advancement, consistent with Makhanya's (2023) findings on the readiness of senior managers to appoint women into leadership roles (Makhanya, 2023). The tension between societal validation and self-awareness highlighted in this study is also reflected in Gregorash et al.'s (2023) discussion of the superwoman syndrome, which underscores the emotional toll of balancing familial and professional expectations (Gregorash et al., 2023).

Participants employed a range of coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges imposed by familial expectations. Emotional coping strategies such as journaling, therapy, and support groups were commonly reported. Sodani et al. (2024) emphasized the effectiveness of mindfulness-based stress reduction in alleviating job-related stress, highlighting the importance of such interventions in supporting women facing similar challenges (Sodani et al., 2024).

Resistance strategies, including setting boundaries and defying traditional norms, were also prevalent among participants. These findings resonate with Alok et al. (2021), who found that managerial support and professional self-efficacy can help women persist in their careers despite work-family conflict (Alok et al., 2021). Pragmatic adaptation, where women strategically balanced familial expectations with personal ambitions, reflects the broader societal context of adaptive resilience (Kamyab & Hoseinzadeh, 2023).

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted exclusively of women from Tehran, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions or cultural contexts. Future research could include participants from diverse geographical and socio-economic backgrounds to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Second, the qualitative nature of the study, while rich in depth, may not capture the full breadth of experiences across a larger population. Quantitative studies could complement these findings by providing statistical validation and broader applicability. Lastly, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of recall bias or social desirability bias, which could influence participants' responses.

Future studies should explore the intersectionality of familial expectations with other factors such as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. This approach would provide a more nuanced understanding of how these variables interact to shape women's career choices and identity formation. Longitudinal studies could also offer valuable insights into the long-term impacts of familial expectations on women's professional trajectories and personal development. Additionally, comparative studies examining the experiences of women in different cultural contexts could shed light on the universality and variability of these challenges, offering a global perspective on the issue.

To address the challenges highlighted in this study, organizations should implement policies and practices that support women in balancing familial and professional responsibilities. Flexible work arrangements, mentorship programs, and leadership training initiatives can empower women to pursue their career ambitions without compromising familial obligations. Educational campaigns aimed at shifting societal perceptions of gender roles could also play a crucial role in fostering greater acceptance of women's professional contributions. Finally, counseling and support services tailored to women navigating familial expectations and career challenges could provide the emotional and practical resources necessary for their success.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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