

# Role Conflict and Social Shaping of High Family Power Women

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## Abstract:

In today's world, gender inequality remains a pressing global issue. While some scholars have examined the structure of family power and the conflicts women face in both work and family contexts, there is a notable lack of focus on the important subgroup of women with high family power. This oversight highlights the need for more targeted research that addresses the unique experiences and challenges faced by these women. This article explores the pathways through which women with high family power obtain their authority and the challenges they face through case analysis. The research identifies that high family power women experience role conflicts stemming from time constraints, tension, and behavioral expectations, as well as a role paradox arising from resource distribution and cultural norms. Women often maintain high family power by being compelled to relinquish social roles and sacrifice personal interests, which is different from conventional pathways. In response to these issues, the article offers recommendations from three perspectives: societal, familial, and individual.

**Keywords:** Work-family relationship; Role conflict; Family power; Gender inequality.

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the economy and society, the status of women worldwide has improved, and the issue of gender inequality has gradually lessened. However, further efforts are still needed to advance gender inequality issues. According to the 2024 Global Gender Gap Report, none of the 146 economies surveyed has achieved full gender equality. Based on current data from this survey, it is estimated that it will take 134 more years to reach complete gender equality [1].

The family, as a social organization based on marriage and kinship ties, also involves certain biological connections among its members. The status of women in society and within the family is closely interconnected. Women's social behaviors are influenced by their family environment and shaped by cultural labels and institutional arrangements present in society.

Power exists in various forms and can permeate different sectors of society (Foucault, 1975) [2]. Family power is the manifestation of power within the family sphere. Due to its complex nature, there is no

consensus on a clear definition of family power. This paper will adopt the description “the ability of both spouses to influence family decision-making and each other’s behavior based on their own preferences or desires” (J. Ross Eshleman, 1974) [3].

In the conventional sense, family status is typically acquired through social roles and social standing. However, a paradox arises in that the absence of women’s social roles and social status can sometimes lead to an elevation in their family status and identity. The issue of family power has been widely discussed in academic circles, but the research often focuses on women as a whole. Women with high family power, meaning those who have greater authority in family decision-making, form the subject of this paper. These women, who possess certain advantageous resources and face specific societal expectations, represent the focus of this study on their plight and power dynamic.

This paper aims to explore the issue of role conflict among women with high family power, focusing on representative groups and contributing to the theoretical understanding of women’s family power. The analysis and recommendations are based on role theory and provide value for advancing research in fields such as family sociology, gender studies, and family social work.

In today’s rapidly developing and increasingly competitive world, organizations are compelled to enhance efficiency and competitiveness, often at the expense of adequate attention to individuals. Against the backdrop of women’s rising social status, examining the dynamics of women’s family power in relation to their personal and societal roles helps draw attention to the real conditions faced by women with high family power. This, in turn, raises public awareness of gender inequality issues. Furthermore, this research has practical significance in empowering women, alleviating their role conflicts, and enhancing their self-awareness and status within both the family and society.

## 2. Case Description

With the development of the economy and the spread of gender equality concepts, the status of women has been steadily rising, and there is a growing trend of increased family power among women. Women with high family power face heightened tension and pressure between new expectations in the workplace and traditional expectations at home, and this issue deserves greater attention.

Based on the characteristics of conflicts, work-family role conflict can be divided into the following three categories:

### 2.1 Time-Based Conflict

Different roles compete for an individual’s time, making it difficult to meet the expectations of each role. Women already face challenges in the workplace, such as the gender pay gap and barriers to promotion, and for women with high family power, the demands of their work roles require them to invest even more time in order to attain higher professional status. However, their family roles also demand significant time, particularly in caring for family members, especially children. For instance, unexpected overtime at work might prevent participation in family activities, or staying up late to finish work tasks after spending the evening helping children with their homework.

From a work perspective, the length of working hours affects time-based role conflict, and the inflexibility of both work hours and location can exacerbate this conflict (Pleck et al., 1980) [4]. From a family perspective, married women experience more work-family conflict than unmarried women (Herman & Gyllstrom, 1977) [5]. Additionally, the amount of time a husband spends at work influences his involvement in family life, which in turn affects the degree of role conflict experienced by women (Keith & Schafer, 1980) [6].

Some studies in recent years prove that these phenomena still exist and have a further step. It shows that role conflict degree is influenced by children’s age. To be specific, work-life conflict starts to decrease and then stabilizes when children are about 4 to 5 years old (Villajos, 2024) [7]. The results of the questionnaire survey of 518 female university teachers revealed a significant negative relationship between work-family conflict and work engagement, with a direct effect (Su, 2023) [8].

### 2.2 Strain-Based Conflict

When individuals fulfill a particular role, they may experience emotions such as tension, anxiety, or frustration, which can affect their performance in other roles, leading to “strain-based conflict”. This phenomenon is especially pronounced among women with high family power. For example, a family member’s illness may cause difficulties in concentrating on work tasks, or workplace stress can lead to conflicts with family members at home.

From a work perspective, Pleck et al. (1980) found that higher job demands contribute to work-family conflict [9]. Stressful events, such as adjusting to a new job or failing to meet work expectations, can also exacerbate strain-based conflict (Bartolome & Evans, 1980) [10]. From a family perspective, positive family relationships (Kopelman et al., 1983) and supportive partners (Holahan & Gilbert, 1979) can help mitigate role conflict [11,12].

In recent years, regional studies from different countries and areas have further enriched this body of research. Despite the ongoing changes to the status of women in Arab-Palestinian society, women may still express traditional attitudes towards gender roles (Zoabi & Savaya, 2017) [13]. Meanwhile, A research in Portuguese reveals that controlling stress, anxiety and resilience levels is important in coping in the work-family context (Cristina, 2024) [14].

### 2.3 Behavior-Based Conflict

When the behavioral patterns or characteristics required by one role are incompatible with those of another role, and an individual struggles to adjust their behavior accordingly, behavior-based conflict occurs. For instance, women who serve as teachers often need to maintain a serious and authoritative demeanor in the workplace. However, if they exhibit this same assertiveness or rigidity in family interactions, it may lead to increased conflict within the family.

While there is no direct empirical research evaluating behavior-based conflict, Bartolome (1972) noted that some men experience stress from trying to navigate two incompatible expressions or value systems, such as the emotional restraint required at work conflicting with the openness expected by family members [15]. This perspective is further supported by findings from Greiff and Munter (1980), Steiner (1972), and Walker (1976), which bolster the argument for behavior-based role conflict [16, 17, 18]. For women with high family power, these paths that generate behavior-based conflicts hold as well.

Overall, women with high family power continue to face work-family conflict. Role conflicts related to time, strain, and behavior intensify the inequalities experienced by women with significant family authority.

## 3. Analysis on the Problem

### 3.1 How do women get high family power

Western scholars have proposed various theories regarding the structure of family power. According to Blood and Wolfe's "Resource Theory", the relative resources held by spouses—such as money, educational level, and occupational prestige—are key factors influencing power relations within the family. The partner with more resources tends to have greater family power [19].

Subsequent theories have supplemented the Resource Theory. For instance, Rothschild's "Theory of Relative Love and Need" extends the concept of resources to include emotional resources, such as the affection and needs

within the spousal relationship. Rodman's Cultural Norms Theory suggests that the absolute or relative resources an individual holds do not fully account for the power dynamics within a family; rather, women's family power is influenced by the interaction between relative resources and specific cultural norms [20]. For example, families with higher income and education levels are more likely to embrace egalitarian marital norms.

As an extreme form of cultural norms theory, patriarchy posits that the root of inequality in marriage lies in patriarchal ideology. Feminists argue that patriarchal norms play a decisive role in shaping women's family power.

Guided by Western theoretical frameworks, Chinese scholars have conducted more detailed research on women's family power. Using data from the 2006 China General Social Survey's family module, Zhong Zhangbao and You Xin found that long-term financial support from a woman's parents significantly impacts her family power, supporting the hypothesis of resource theory. Li Jingya, drawing on data from the third phase of the China Women's Social Status Survey in Fujian Province, examined the issue from a gender perspective [21]. She argued that due to the influence of traditional social customs and gendered cultural norms, women primarily gain family power through their economic contributions, domestic labor, and the support of their spouse.

From these findings, it can be concluded that when assessing women's family power, two aspects should be considered: the absolute resources women possess within the family system and the relative resource balance between genders, as well as the impact of cultural norms embedded in the social structure. In examining women with high family power, both these dimensions must be analyzed.

From the resource perspective, the relative resources held by each spouse are key factors influencing family power relations. For example, money, education, and occupational prestige. In addition, economic resources from the woman's natal family, personal support networks, and household management skills can also serve as potential resources for women. When a woman contributes more resources to the family than her male counterpart, she becomes the dominant figure in the family's power structure. Besides economic resources, emotional resources—such as emotional dependence in the marital relationship and the male partner's support and companionship—also contribute to a woman's acquisition of high family power.

From the cultural norms perspective, biological attributes differentiate men and women in terms of abilities, thinking patterns, and social roles, while ideology, culture, and values socialize these natural differences. When women have a higher level of education or professional standing, a family's focus on egalitarian values weakens the influ-

ence of resource differentials on power dynamics.

Thus, women's high family power is composed of multiple dimensions. Women with higher education and professional status, stronger kinship and familial economic support, and better marital relationships are more likely to attain high family power.

However, a paradox exists in the reality of family power dynamics. Men can increase their family power through both resource and cultural pathways. Even women with access to these same resources and conditions as men often struggle to attain high family power, as they are frequently required to further sacrifice by giving up social roles to consolidate their family power.

### 3.2 How does the paradox of family power arise

The issue of family power has been a highly discussed topic in academia, but most research has focused on women as a collective. With the development of the economy and the spread of gender equality concepts, women's status has steadily risen, and there is a growing trend of women possessing more family power. Women with high family power face increasing tension and pressure as they navigate the new expectations of the workplace and the traditional expectations of the family. This group deserves more attention.

Compared to the more conventional pathways through which men achieve family power, women often maintain high family power by being compelled to relinquish social roles and sacrifice personal interests. This role paradox is a manifestation of gender inequality, and its causes are worth exploring and addressing.

#### 3.2.1 The Projection of Social Order — Bourdieu's Field Theory

Bourdieu's field theory posits that within social space, there exist multiple autonomous "fields" of varying levels and forms, in which the dominated actors within each field strive to acquire or maintain capital. Family and intimate relationships can be seen as operating within one such field. A key concept in this theory, "habitus," refers to the internalized dispositions and practices shaped by external social structures that guide individual behavior [22]. This theory emphasizes how social expectations shape our actions and focuses on exploring the structure, changes, and effects within a specific field.

Thus, in the fields of work and family power, traditional influences shape subjective constructions, gradually forming gender-based power relations and patterns of family division of labor. Women with high family power face pressures from societal and cultural factors such as ideology, culture, and values. This theory aptly explains the social differentiation between men and women, specifically

the gendered relational model of "male dominance" and "female subordination".

However, this theory rarely addresses the tensions that individuals face across different fields. Bourdieu's model of practice is often confined to a single field, whereas individuals are inevitably influenced by their position and practices in other fields. The gender role conflicts explored in this study exemplify such issues, necessitating support from additional theoretical frameworks.

#### 3.2.2 Conflicts Between Different Roles — Role Theory

Role theory posits that work and family roles are fundamentally distinct social activities, each governed by different behavioral norms and relational logic. Society holds specific behavioral expectations for individuals in particular positions, and everyone must act in accordance with the roles they assume, striving to fulfill the behavior patterns associated with those roles. When individuals face divergent role expectations, they experience pressure and conflict.

Unlike field theory, role theory focuses more broadly on the phenomenon of role conflict, particularly highlighting the sacrifices women make when navigating multiple social roles and the potential psychological pressures and diminished self-awareness that result. Proponents of role theory argue that individuals prioritize their various roles hierarchically, with some roles taking precedence over others.

From a social perspective, societal values and traditional gender division of labor shape role expectations, often prioritizing women's family roles over others. Under these expectations, women are assigned more household responsibilities, requiring greater investment in family tasks, which in turn squeezes the time available for work, intensifying work-family time conflicts. Additionally, these family role expectations can undermine women's sense of individual identity, leading to feelings of anxiety and tension, and exacerbating role conflicts driven by stress.

In essence, role theory illuminates the pressures women face when juggling conflicting social roles, especially when cultural norms demand that their familial responsibilities take precedence, often at the expense of their professional development and personal well-being. These factors exacerbate the role paradox of women with high family power and deepen their plight.

## 4. Suggestion

At the societal level, it is essential to integrate a family perspective and gender-sensitive awareness into mainstream public policy decision-making in order to challenge

traditional gender expectations. Additionally, advocate for the establishment of laws and policies that promote gender equality between men and women. Furthermore, enhancing the maternity insurance system is crucial to ensure that women receive adequate benefits, and have equal opportunities in decision-making and career advancement within the workplace.

Within the family, it is essential to break the rigid traditional gender division of labor and promote the concept of gender equality. Additionally, exploring gender-based power distribution within the household is important for establishing effective communication patterns. This can help create a supportive network for women, fostering a more balanced and equitable family dynamic.

For individual women, redefining personal and structural roles can help alleviate conflicts. By communicating effectively, women can influence others' external expectations of them, aligning these expectations more closely with their own goals. This allows for a reanalysis and adjustment of their role tasks. Such an approach can mitigate the pressures imposed by societal shaping and facilitate a change in how they perceive the demands of the roles they undertake.

Therefore, in order to improve the role dilemma of women with high family power, the role of the system should be played to empower women and make a change.

## 5. Conclusion

This article explores the pathways through which women with high family power obtain their authority and the challenges they face through case analysis. The research identifies that high family power women experience role conflicts stemming from time constraints, tension, and behavioral expectations, as well as a role paradox arising from resource distribution and cultural norms. This disparity contradicts traditional family power structures and exacerbates the gender inequality barriers faced by women with high family power. As these women navigate their roles, the tension between societal expectations and their actual authority can lead to increased challenges in achieving true equality within both the family and the workplace.

This article enhances the focus on women with high family power, contributing to the pursuit of gender equality. By highlighting their unique experiences and challenges, it fosters a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play and encourages the development of strategies to support this important group in achieving greater equity in both family and societal contexts.

However, this study has its limitations. The research on women's role conflicts is somewhat generalized. Future

investigations could consider conducting longitudinal studies to observe the changes in role conflicts faced by women with high family power at key life stages, such as marriage, child-rearing, and career development, and analyze the underlying causes of these changes. This approach would provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics involved and contribute to more effective strategies for supporting these women.

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