

The Woman Between Career and Motherhood

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Abstract

The women's movement to reposition themselves and claim equal standing with men in society has become tangible due to the abandonment of old habits and perspectives by both sexes - such as the belief that "women should take care of the household and children, while men should provide for the family." However, this movement has faced a significant rise in stereotypes, prejudices, and challenges, with many women reporting high levels of perceived discrimination. To ensure the proper functioning of both spheres - family and career - the concept of balance has been brought into discussion. By avoiding the disadvantages of either area, women can achieve the modern sense of personal fulfillment they seek. However, this requires a reorganization of priorities. The relevance of this topic in the public sphere and in the current context is justified by the growing number of gender stereotypes and their increasingly visible effects on women's lives, as well as by the fact that we are living in a Romania that oscillates between conservative, compliant, and modern attitudes toward gender equality issues. This study aims to analyze the evolution and dynamics of women's perspectives on themselves as both career professionals and mothers. It also seeks to identify the factors contributing to these differing views and how they are influenced, given that the strategy of overloading women with both domestic and professional roles - and the difficulty of maintaining a balance between these domains - are increasingly recognized and discussed phenomena in public discourse.

Keywords: Society; stereotype; balance; overload; status and role.

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1. Assuming Roles - From Engagement to Overburdening

In the traditional view, work and professional life are considered two competing domains, where achievement in one area often has negative consequences on the other. However, contemporary companies embrace a different perspective, placing these two areas in a relationship of collaboration.

The relationship between women's careers and family life has undergone numerous significant changes over the past 30 years due to various factors such as demographic and attitudinal shifts, changes in education levels, and the rising cost of living and daily needs. These changes have increased the need for an additional income in the family.

The rise in expectations and the cost of living drives many individuals to work more, despite their acknowledged and expressed personal needs and responsibilities. (Petrovai, 2006, p.3)

All these factors are in full alignment and are felt - more or less intensely - from one family to another. Whereas traditional families followed the classic pattern of "the man works and the woman raises the children," today both men and women hold important positions in society and are equally dedicated to their careers.

The opportunity for women to be integrated into the labor market alongside men has become the bridge between traditional stereotypes of women's status and modern ones. In this way, women gained autonomy by securing their own resources. As a result, the family group was no longer the sole priority for women, and expectations, demands, and problems up to that point began to be more or less equally shared between partners. The main theory of marriage underlying numerous studies in recent decades is that gender inequality has decreased as a result of the improvement in women's status. (Giele, 2008, p. 393)

A review of the literature on the consequences of changes in traditional roles since the late 20th century highlights that the foundation of this transformation is the process of women's emancipation, which is considered a driving force behind societal evolution. These transformations are explained through the concept of *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (community and society) introduced by F. Tönnies (1887). Based on Tönnies' concepts, a new

explanatory framework for the evolution of the couple is constructed, outlining three types of families: communal, transitional, and societal.

It is noted that the shift from the communal to the transitional family was triggered by men during the industrial revolution, while the emancipation of women laid the groundwork for the emergence of the societal model. Women sought to abandon the old cultural models entrenched in the history of femininity and to reshape their lifestyle and family values. (Ciupercă, 2000, p. 22)

However, this transformation has not been fully analyzed in all its details, nor has it reached a clearly defined conclusion, which has led to fractures wherein the woman finds herself “torn between the need for independence and the desire to cling to old values.” (Niel, 1974, p. 148) Following the analysis of the ideas presented above, it is important to note that the lack of preparation for the emancipation process, the absence of a clear vision regarding its conclusion, and the societal impact it would generate have, in many cases, led to the opposite of the intended outcomes. In environments where conservatism remained strong, this has resulted in imbalances, reinforced stereotypes, and expectations that women should be solely responsible for the household and the upbringing and education of children. With the emergence of the idea of human evolution and the development of increasingly complex societies, many researchers have attempted to define a reference framework for establishing social statuses, often through the phrase: *man – the hunter*. Much of the literature in the first half of the 20th century, especially anthropological texts, has shaped the image of the human male as distinct through activities such as tracking, killing, and consuming animals using tools. In their 1968 work “*The Hunting Hypothesis*”, Washburn & Lancaster argued that hunting required all the behavioral traits associated with masculinity that distinguish humans from other primates. (Fedigan, 1986, p. 26)

Since humans are primarily social beings and conduct all activities through social interaction, they accumulate multiple roles throughout life based on their social statuses. These roles define the behavior expected by society, family, or friends from those who hold a particular status. In other words, statuses and roles can be understood as a person’s “label” and “guarantee,” respectively. Expectations are imposed to such a high degree that failure to fulfill a given role is subject to strong moral sanction. (Mihăilescu, 2003, p. 101)

Gender stereotypes reflect observers’ perceptions of what people do in their daily lives. When it becomes evident that a group of

people performs a certain activity repeatedly, it is likely that the skills and personality traits required for that activity will be associated with that group. One example offered in this context is that of women caring for children. Women are much more visibly represented in this role in society than men; consequently, care, warmth, and attachment are characteristics associated with mothers who look after their children. (Eagly & Steffen, 1984, p. 736)

Supporting this perspective are researchers Hoffman and Hurst, who, in their discussion on the similarity of male and female roles, demonstrate that stereotypes about new and current groups are influenced by the type of work each group performs. They also show that there is a dynamic shift in roles as role distribution changes. The roles of men and women have become increasingly similar as more women have entered the labor force. According to statistics, women's labor force participation increased from 34% to 60% between 1950 and 1998, while men's participation dropped from 86% to 75%. The current global status of women now incorporates both paid work and domestic responsibilities. (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000, p. 1172)

The changes in women's rights in Romanian society have led to a reorganization of role assignments within the family. This new perspective is supported by the accumulation of multiple statuses throughout one's life. An example of this is provided by Ross Macmillan and Ronda Copher, who identify the institution of marriage as a primary generator of roles for both men and women. These family roles can have the effect of delaying professional development or education when they overlap. (Macmillan & Copher, 2005, p. 17)

Throughout history, women have shown more concern for others and for the well-being of those around them than men. It has been assumed that these stereotypical beliefs about both sexes stem from the different social roles they perform. For example, women are less likely to be engaged in paid labor than men and are more likely to be housewives or homemakers. (Eagly & Steffen, 1984, p. 735)

Looking at the history of women's emancipation, we can observe a causal relationship between women's participation in the labor force and the rise or fall of the economy. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution in 1820, women were given the opportunity to work in mills and receive regular wages. In doing so, they gained independence from their families or male counterparts. At that time, however, the American economy was booming - businesses were thriving, and production was increasing, which led to the expansion of factories from rural to urban areas.

Women could no longer easily combine work with managing the household, and this led to two major developments and perspectives: some women chose to remain single longer in order to gain independence, while others left the workforce upon getting married. However, social norms underwent significant changes due to World War I, as women filled most of the jobs left vacant by men. This trend continued even after the war - by that time, 8.3 million women over the age of 15 were working outside the home. (Webb, 2010, p. 2)

The life of the 21st-century woman - which involves more education and fewer children - has shifted the balance of power between spouses, leading to a more balanced state and mindset. In this way, the goals and values of each partner have also evolved. In her work, Giele identifies four significant dimensions in the discourse on changing mentalities: historical and cultural location, social networks and linked lives, agency, and the timing of life events. These four categories are aligned with Glen Elder's life course approach and are referred to as four critical factors in shaping gender roles: sense of identity, type of conjugal relationship, personal motivation, and adaptive style in managing time and resources. (Giele, 2008, p. 395)

The granting of a new status to women has led to a series of effects resulting from their involvement in activities outside the family sphere. Among these is the reduction in the number of children per family, driven by declining fertility - this decline being influenced by the contraceptive methods chosen by women, particularly when the belief takes hold that children may hinder the development of one's professional life. This phenomenon represents a key modern strategy to either reduce the number of children or postpone childbirth until the woman reaches a satisfactory stage in her professional life. (Apostu, 2017, p. 2)

When women chose to become part of the full-time workforce, they often encountered situations where demands became conflicting due to the multiple roles they were expected to fulfill. This is due to the presence of incompatible behavioral expectations, which results in role conflict. Role conflict is likely to cause psychological tension and stress, and in most cases, leads to dysfunctional behavior. (Herman, 1977, p. 319)

Societal expectations regarding women's responsibilities and roles contribute to the tensions between work and family life. Numerous researchers have found that the primary stressor for mothers is not the number of tasks they must complete at home and

at work, but rather the expectations and criticism from those around them. Women who receive support from their spouses feel less - or not at all - that their role in the family sphere is threatened by their pursuit of a career. (Välimäki, Lämsä, Hiillos, 2009, p. 597)

Role conflicts can be divided into two types: between two or more roles held by the same person, or between different demands within the same role. When a clear separation between roles cannot be made and the role conflict is intense, mental conflicts and psychological imbalances may occur, leading to dissatisfaction with life and role overload. These role failures arise when individuals are not adequately prepared, something more likely to happen in dynamic societies with many options and role possibilities. Role failure in the family setting can manifest through divorce, especially when partners fail to recognize that the failure of their marriage is rooted in inadequate preparation for the roles of husband and wife. This failure then affects the children, who are socialized in the same way. In any situation, failure in fulfilling roles leads the individual toward unhappiness. (Mihăilescu, 2003, p. 112)

This phenomenon can also easily be associated with situations in which the assumption of certain roles leads to discrimination and creates obstacles to achieving success and satisfaction. This occurs when society's beliefs about gender roles are challenged because women make career and family choices that go against the traditional norms and stereotypes embedded in the society they belong to. (Perrone, 2009, p. 1)

To begin with, it is necessary to examine the emerging processes related to work-family conflict in organizational and social contexts. There are both higher-level processes that shape individual behavior and influence personal choices, and individual attitudes and behaviors that give rise to broader outcomes. For example, an organizational climate that supports work-life balance is shaped by shared perceptions among members of the organization regarding the value of having employees who benefit from both their time at work and their time with family.

Once these emerging processes are understood, we can uncover the roots of organizational and social behavior, and thus understand how cultures, mentalities, and values of a population are formed and changed. The negotiations that involve work and family roles constitute an intriguing phenomenon regarding the meanings behind work, family, masculinity, and femininity. Boris and Lewis (2006) argued: "Women have always worked; what has changed is the economic, political, and social meaning attached to their

productive and reproductive lives.” (Boris & Lewis, 2006, p. 91, as cited in Bruening & Dixon, 2007, p. 473)

Uncovering these negotiations between work and family across various contexts contributes to a deeper understanding of the changing gender roles, as well as the value and meaning attributed to the often-overlapping domains of work and family. (Bruening & Dixon, 2007, p. 473)

Hall is the researcher who applied the theory of social role conflict and proposed the hypothesis that women are more likely than men to experience internal role conflicts throughout their lives. This is because women’s multiple roles are more likely to be simultaneously important, whereas men’s multiple roles tend to function more sequentially. Simultaneous role demands require prioritization, and from his theory it follows that not only are women more likely to experience multiple role conflicts, but they also face more obstacles in managing these conflicts. This situation generates gender differences in the eyes of employers, who are more likely to choose a man over a woman with the same qualifications. (Hall, 1972 as cited in Herman, 1977, p. 320)

In today’s society, people want to do it all and try to juggle multiple roles in the pursuit of life satisfaction. However, without spending time in ways that align with their values and passions, they fail to reach that desired level of fulfillment. Super theorized the idea that life is composed of many roles that rotate or are constantly replaced due to role overload and its effects. (Super, 1990 as cited in Perrone, Webb & Blalock, 2005, p. 226)

One of the main challenges women face throughout their lives is closely related to the effects of role overload. This overload results from the desire to simultaneously manage work demands, family obligations, and personal time in order to meet both their own needs and those of others. With this assumption of overload come consequences such as the emergence of failures. In an overly packed schedule, unexpected events or deviations from planned activities lead to the postponement, delay, or abandonment of daily tasks, which can be perceived as failures.

The accumulation of such daily failures reduces productivity and, consequently, lowers self-esteem and causes exhaustion. Numerous studies have noted that fatigue and stress accumulated from the workplace negatively affect productivity and the smooth running of family activities. However, women often experience feelings of guilt because they fail to organize everything as society expects them to. This feeling leads to a reassessment of women’s

perspectives and goals in their pursuit of personal fulfillment. (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010, pp. 333 as cited in Apostu, 2017, p. 3)

The career woman must be willing to represent a large group of people, a team, or a company - in other words, to be a leader. This implies professional commitment and the desire to grow. According to public opinion, it is not enough for a woman to simply be a woman in order to achieve professional success. A woman must turn building a career into a career in itself - being prepared for her career - which represents constant and difficult work. (Oatey, 1979, p. 19)

Messner (1992) argued that women actively participate in shaping their own identity "both in terms of how they participate in their own subordination and in how they resist it." (Bruening & Dixon, 2007, p. 473)

Motherhood, as a comprehensive process, changes a woman's priorities and, implicitly, those of the family, to the extent that the physical and psychological efforts manifested in the pre- and postnatal periods affect the mother's sense of autonomy. Consequently, the type of attachment the mother feels toward her child plays an essential role in the decision to return to work, which is then perceived as a reconnection with the outside world. In this context, the socio-psychological function of a career is emphasized, being seen as an essential element of balance in family life. This return to a career and professional life is associated with the possibility of resocialization through the re-establishment of interpersonal relationships. (Apostu, 2017, p. 4)

A woman's attitude toward returning to or continuing a career after childbirth or marriage can either foster family development or lead to marital dissolution. The literature reveals that a significant influence on this decision comes from the woman's level of education or the status associated with her job. Those in less significant or less conventional positions for a woman tend to leave the workforce more easily than those holding high-status positions in society. Another important factor in a woman's decision to return to work is her husband's positive attitude. In families where socioeconomic status is perceived as a joint achievement of the couple, rather than solely a man's success or duty, their income has been shown to double. (Loike, 1992, p. 246)

According to specialized studies, the number of women who have reached high-ranking professional positions over the past 30 years has increased, as has the number of women who have chosen to return to work after having children.

Despite all this, there are still women who choose to remain homemakers even after having held important positions. Researchers associate the moment of childbirth for women with a time of reflection or reassessment of options, during which they often develop a new area of interest. For women in midlife, between the ages of 35 and 50, their career development goals may be influenced by a need for balance or flexibility.

Many of them introduce coaching into their lives, aimed at providing effective support during these major life transitions. Maternity coaching plays an essential role for women who return to work with a dual role. Women have described this transition in various ways, such as “the biggest fundamental change I’ve ever experienced” and “it had a major effect on both my personal and professional life.” Where successful women once managed and maintained a clear separation between home and work, motherhood seems to make it more difficult to separate the effects of one from the other. (J Bussell, 2008, p. 18)

Most studies focus on the tension in women’s lives caused by role overload, marital dissatisfaction, and lack of professional fulfillment. However, this situation is not new to researchers and sociologists. Today, the aim is to identify the likelihood of achieving a state of balance between career and motherhood. In recent years, more results and new perspectives on these tensions have emerged.

A relevant example is the study *Playing All the Roles: Gender and the Work-Family Balancing Act*, which examines feelings related to work-family balance and counters many perspectives on women. It was found that women and men report similar, nearly identical levels of success and types of trade-offs between the two domains. (Milkie & Peltola, 1999, p. 476) A role balance theory is also mentioned, explaining that people who have well-established role systems that they understand and engage in fully tend to have higher levels of well-being. Those who were more balanced in their roles were not the ones who worked fewer hours. They worked the same number of hours as those less balanced but reported lower levels of overload. (Marks & McDermid, 1996 as cited in Milkie & Peltola, 1999, p. 477)

There is, however, a significant number of employed women who enjoy both their roles as mothers and workers equally, but who report higher levels of tension than men because their household responsibilities tend to be greater, leading them to sacrifice more. (Shelton, 1992 as cited in Milkie & Peltola, 1999, p. 478). Employed women manage to balance their professional and family life at the expense of sleep, leisure time, relaxation, or personal fulfillment.

The myth of separate worlds refers to the idea that work and family are distinct domains that can only be understood and studied independently - an idea attributed to Kanter (1977). Today, it is considered that the relationship between work and family is dynamic and reciprocal. While work-related factors influence family life, family concerns also have both positive and negative effects on work life. (Crouter, 1984; Latack, 1984; Near, Rice & Hunt, 1980 as cited in Sullivan, 1992, p. 235)

Roberts and Newton (1987) are two researchers who question the career-life event sequence within the framework of the "glorified dream." They suggest that, unlike men who shape their dreams by focusing on career success, women develop their dreams by embracing both career and family, but tend to reevaluate their priorities at certain points in life. For example, some women prioritize career in their youth and shift attention to marriage and motherhood around the age of 30, while others move from focusing on family to focusing on career. These reevaluations are driven by lifestyle choices and living conditions.

Beyond the sequencing of career or family focus, Hall and Richter (1988) identified gender differences in the transition from work to home, stating that men tend to leave work late and go through a period of relaxation - such as reading a newspaper - before taking on domestic roles. Women, on the other hand, tend to switch abruptly to their home roles and are immediately engaged in family life. In this way, gender differences in career development and daily transitions suggest that women may view succession challenges in a different light. (Sullivan, 1992, p. 236)

For women today, having a job has become a liberating force, and it is assumed that any form of paid employment is preferable to full-time domestic work. However, researchers who sought to determine whether there is a link between life satisfaction, marital status, and professional situation have obtained contradictory results. This is because each category of women (those currently employed, those who were employed, and those who have never worked) is associated with a different set of reciprocal roles between themselves and their partners. These roles are shaped by various factors such as personal preferences, work schedule, number of children, cultural upbringing, etc. (P. Freudiger, 1983, p. 213)

The Gender Barometer conducted in 2018 appeared two decades after the previous one, in a social and political context where gender studies and feminist theories encounter new perspectives and values. It reflects the attitudes and perceptions of Romanian citizens

regarding gender equality and the relationships between women and men. This barometer attempts to clarify the image of gender inequalities and the many challenges that women face in the public sphere. One of the issues addressed is the balance between family life and professional life. These two lifestyle indicators formed the basis of a comparative analysis between women and men. The number of women who feel that workplace activities affect their family life is higher than that of those who feel that family responsibilities negatively impact their productivity at work. (Gender Barometer, 2018, p. 84)

In the specialized literature, five traditional models of perspectives on the balance between work and personal life have been identified. These are: the segmentation model, the spillover model, the compensation model, the instrumental model, and the conflict model.

The segmentation model describes the hypothesis that work and personal life are two distinct areas that do not influence each other. However, today's technological advancements are reshaping this model, treating it as a myth - modern communication tools allow employees to remain constantly connected to their organization, thereby transferring stress, problems, and responsibilities between work and home.

The next two theories - the spillover and compensation models - argue for the interdependence of the two domains. The spillover theory is based on the assumption that although there are physical and temporal boundaries between work, family, and emotions, behaviors in one sphere influence the other positively or negatively - in this case, career and family. The compensation theory posits that individuals in a conjugal relationship or marriage invest differently in each domain to compensate for deficiencies in the other.

The instrumental model focuses on the idea that activities in one sphere serve as motivation for achieving success in the other. Lastly, the conflict model describes the individual as being under pressure from significant responsibilities at both work and home, leading to overload and role congestion.

These theories have limited utility, as they do not allow for explanation, prediction, or resolution of the problems individuals face when trying to find a balance between work and family responsibilities. Moreover, they are particularly limiting because they address only the emotional component (satisfaction, frustration) and do not consider the spatial, temporal, social, and behavioral

connections between work and family. (C. Leovaridis, 2018, p.103)

2. Methodology

The study is based on quantitative research, using the sociological survey method, and the questionnaire as the research instrument. At its core lies the general dilemma regarding how women perceive gender stereotypes in both professional and personal life.

The objectives of the study aim to analyze women's opinions regarding domestic and professional roles, viewed through the lens of either role assumption or role overload.

As for sampling, the research instrument was distributed to women via the Google Forms platform in order to collect the necessary data. The questionnaire was applied online, through various social media groups specifically dedicated to women who are navigating both focal issues of the research: family and career.

The selection criteria are based on the first dimension mentioned earlier, including: age (minimum 18 years old up to 55 years), family background and current family status, education level, and occupation.

According to data from the National Institute of Statistics, TEMPO ONLINE database, regarding the full and effective participation of women and equal opportunities in decision-making positions at all levels of political, economic, and public life - the employment rate by age groups and gender is an important source of analysis for this topic. Analyzing statistics for the 25–34 and 35–54 age groups, women registered an increase of up to 3%, from 66.3% and 70.5% in 2015 to 69.3% and 74.1% in 2023, respectively.

3. Women's Roles - Assumption, Co-participation, or Role Overload

For the interpretation of the results from the current database, the percentage of women who choose to live in consensual unions without marriage, those who get married, those who are not in a relationship at the time of completing the questionnaire, and those who are divorced were analyzed. The values of the first category were the highest, with a percentage of 44.9%, while 18.8% are married, 32.6% are women with cohabitation experience but without a relationship at the time of completing the questionnaire, and 3.6% are women who have gone through a marital failure.

The analysis of the stereotype that creates a dependency relationship between the identity of a fulfilled woman and her condition as a mother shows that approximately 90% of the respondents declared themselves to be in total disagreement with this idea. When considering marital status, the idea of motherhood as a primary condition for a woman's fulfillment is supported by the category of married women, with 7.7% of them believing that being a mother is necessary to feel like a fulfilled woman. These women predominantly view their roles within the domestic environment, unlike unmarried women. In the case of divorced women, this percentage increases to 20%. Due to the emotional discomfort created by loneliness, they feel the need for positive validation as a result of the dissolved marriage. For this reason, having a child provides a sense of fulfillment and belonging. In the real-life situations of these women, which involve loneliness and emotional failure or the absence of all the functions of marriage, the tendency to equate the feeling of fulfillment with being a mother is stronger than for women in non-marital relationships or those without a relationship.

Nevertheless, although 73% of women in the analyzed group primarily assume the roles of child-rearing and education, they do not perceive these responsibilities as belonging exclusively to women. Of the corresponding 102 responses, 80% were provided by women without marital experience, 16.7% by married women, and 2.9% by divorced women. The tendency to disagree with the exclusivity of such roles stems both from a lack of personal experience and from age-related factors, as well as from the desire to build personal autonomy during the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

When extending this concept of role-sharing to domestic activities, the level of involvement and responsibility becomes even lower, at only 31%. By applying the "select cases" function to the 69% of respondents who do not consider it fair to assume domestic tasks alone, discrepancies emerge between declared attitudes and actual behavior. For instance, 38% of these respondents state that they prepare meals themselves, and 34% report handling household cleaning independently.

Women tend to either live in consensual unions without formal marriage or avoid long-term stable relationships (32.6%) until they establish their professional careers. Career investment appears to be an increasingly evident priority for young women, which may render family life during this period a particularly demanding challenge due to the overlapping of multiple roles. Nonetheless, 67.4% of respondents do not express a definitive prioritization between career and family,

instead valuing both forms of fulfillment according to the demands of the moment - be it emotional involvement, the longevity of a conjugal relationship, or a specific stage in their career path.

An analysis of the relationship between the need for professional fulfillment and the desire to establish a family reveals a moderate level of correlation (Pearson correlation = 0.414, sig. = 0.000). Women's priorities are primarily centered on career development, with family formation becoming relevant only after achieving a satisfactory level of professional accomplishment. While marriage is deemed important, the process of defining one's personality and identity is perceived to begin through one's career. This is further substantiated by the fact that 82% of women in this category report contributing equally to the financial planning of their conjugal relationship. Consequently, personal income is regarded by women as a key source of autonomy and a means to ensure equity in managing the family's financial responsibilities.

The previously analyzed aspects once again underscore the necessity of achieving a certain level of career development before engaging in family life. The influence of traditional orientations revealed in this study indicates that some traditionally assigned roles are still assumed by women, and taking on these roles prior to establishing a career can pose a significant obstacle to their professional advancement. Personal balance is essential for women to successfully navigate both spheres - career and family.

According to the analyzed data, individuals without a romantic relationship show the greatest tendency to dedicate their lives to their careers. Specifically, 53.8% of individuals who reported identifying more strongly with career than with couple life are not in a conjugal relationship. This proportion is 38.8% among those in a non-marital partnership and decreases to 15.4% among those who are married.

A share of 16.9% of female respondents perceive the pursuit of a career as a potential risk to relationship stability. However, the majority - 56.6% - believe that the desire for a career poses no threat to the stability of a conjugal relationship. Furthermore, in our sample, 86.9% of respondents believe that being in a couple does not hinder career development.

The concept of balance is initially supported by social institutions. Although visible progress has been made toward achieving gender equality, such advancements remain slow and uneven.

In the current research, women's perspectives on the level of societal gender discrimination confirm the findings previously reported

by the European Council. From a legislative standpoint, 43.6% of women express a neutral level of trust regarding equality of opportunity. Among these, the highest proportion is found among women in non-marital conjugal relationships (50.8%), followed by 29.5% among those without a relationship, 18% among married women, and 1.6% among divorced women.

Furthermore, women perceive their image in Romania as being unfairly appreciated (57.1%) and report experiencing discrimination in the professional sector at a rate of 69.8%, alongside a 70% rate of agreement regarding discrimination within the household sector. These statistics reflect the cognitive dissonance between the values they observed within their own families - promoted by parents, grandparents, or other relatives - and the values promoted in the public sphere regarding the new vision of women's roles. This dissonance generates a feeling of overload among women, stemming from the multiple sacrifices required to achieve the same level of professional recognition as men while simultaneously fulfilling the expectations associated with the roles of mothers and wives.

Regarding the overload caused by assuming domestic responsibilities due to men's investment in their careers, unmarried women recorded the highest level of agreement (66.7%), while the percentage drops to 25% among married women. This finding supports the idea that, following the establishment of a cohabitation relationship, the distribution of domestic tasks between the sexes tends to be more balanced compared to when formal marriage intervenes.

From the perspective of the item stating that "a real man knows how to assume domestic responsibilities," the highest level of total agreement is observed among married women (57%), followed by individuals in consensual non-marital relationships (46.8%). The percentage decreases significantly among individuals without a relationship (37.8%) and among divorced individuals (20%). This suggests that the lack of direct experience with gendered relational dynamics and role-sharing leads to lower expectations regarding male partners' involvement in domestic roles. In other words, men's efforts to contribute equally to the functioning of the partnership are both observed and appreciated by women, contributing to the personal balance they require for fulfillment in both family and professional spheres. Furthermore, when asked whether household tasks within a conjugal relationship should be performed jointly, 82.3% of respondents expressed full agreement.

Regarding the quality of domestic task performance, 28.6% of women believe that men are not sufficiently capable of handling household chores without female coordination. When analyzing this social category by marital status, it appears that 44.1% are women cohabiting with their partners, 26.5% are single women, and 23.5% are married women. The statistically significant proportions for each group reflect the influence of traditional norms among women who do not envision themselves outside these specific domestic responsibilities and who, moreover, derive a primary role in managing domestic tasks to ensure their proper fulfillment.

Nevertheless, 67.7% of these women believe that men should not be expected to perform more than they are capable of. This finding indicates an acknowledgment of certain limits regarding men's capacity to assume domestic responsibilities, even among the category of women who assert that under their coordination, men could perform domestic tasks more effectively. This contrast in responses highlights a particular moment in the evolution of social mentalities, marking a transition from traditionalism toward conjugal modernity.

In the analysis of the modalities of involvement in domestic roles, several differences are observed depending on the employment status of individuals. Regarding household cleaning, private entrepreneurs report that in 50% of cases it is carried out jointly with their partner, while in 28.6% of cases, the tasks are undertaken by the female partner alone. Among employed individuals, cleaning activities are conducted jointly in 47.4% of cases, while in 43.4% they are primarily handled by the female partner. For unemployed individuals, 57.7% declare that cleaning is a shared task, whereas 28.8% report that it is the sole responsibility of the female partner.

With respect to dishwashing, indicators reveal that the involvement of parents/in-laws is approximately three times higher among private entrepreneurs. In this category, only 40% declare dishwashing as a joint responsibility, while the highest rate of joint task-sharing is found among employees. Additionally, among employees, 39.5% state that the wife/partner exclusively manages this responsibility.

A counterintuitive finding emerges regarding the provision of household materials. While among private entrepreneurs the joint construction of the household budget is reported at 40%, among salaried employees it reaches 60.5%. Moreover, employees report a 3.9% contribution from parents/in-laws in this area.

From the perspective of employment priority, the study does not reveal significant differences regarding whether men or women should be prioritized for employment. Thus, 84.5% of respondents believe that there should be no gender-based priority in employment. Considering other variables, it is observed that 10% of respondents marked the obligation for men to seek employment, while only 0.7% indicated a priority for women in finding a job.

4. Assumption of Financial Responsibilities

An analysis of the financial sector and women's perspectives on it reveals that 52.2% of women who are currently in a non-marital conjugal relationship expect men to contribute financially to the household. This view is also shared by 34.8% of women without a relationship. However, the analysis of opinions among women with marital experience shows a significantly lower level of agreement: only 8.7% among married women and 4.3% among divorced women.

Counterintuitively, it appears that in the absence of direct marital or conjugal experience, women tend to align more closely with traditional views that place financial responsibilities predominantly on men. Furthermore, examining the situation of divorced women, it is noteworthy that the percentage of those who agree with the idea that men should be responsible for the household budget drops sharply to 4%.

These findings confirm that women's expectations regarding men's assumption of financial responsibilities tend to decrease as their experience with marriage or divorce increases.

From the perspective of career fulfillment and material income stability, 74.6% of women believe that achieving success in their careers is a primary strategy for no longer depending on a man's income. Among these, 48.9% are in consensual cohabiting relationships, 33.3% are currently without a conjugal relationship, 15.6% are married, and 2.2% are divorced.

From these indicators, it can be inferred that within the culture of marriage, traditional assumptions regarding the mentality of a shared household budget are factors that stimulate less competition for material resources and a reduced desire for security and autonomy in relation to men. On the other hand, new conjugal frameworks no longer embed couples within a specific cultural mentality, which is why partners perceive the importance of the household budget and the distribution of power within the relationship differently.

Although a certain tendency toward dominance within the couple is evident, manifested through strategies of material domination, it is noteworthy that 81% of respondents in this category declare their intention to eventually marry. Additionally, 11.9% state that they opt for non-marital cohabitation.

Although women overwhelmingly declare a desire for material independence, the analysis of the image of femininity reveals that it is no longer defined primarily through the condition of material autonomy, with only 5.7% associating the female condition with material independence. Moreover, women do not appear to be interested in achieving material supremacy within the conjugal relationship; rather, they react against male domination manifested through control of material resources.

As specialists observe, “women have begun to contest unequal gender relations much more vocally in the political sphere and only rarely explicitly within the family” (Bucur & Miroiu, 2018, p.169). This conclusion resonates with Ridgeway’s theory of cultural lag, namely that, in general, gender perceptions do not align with changes in the material conditions of a society, and that the importance and significance of gender roles are much stronger in private life, particularly within the family, where greater resistance to gender equality persists (Ridgeway, 2011).

Considering the two basic concepts - solidarity and individualism - as the dimensions that best define the type of conjugal attitude, the study shows that the well-being within a couple is viewed primarily from an individualistic perspective by 45.8% of respondents. Among these, 19% are married women, 37.9% are women cohabiting with a partner, and 39.7% are women who have experienced cohabitation but are currently not in a relationship. The almost double share of respondents from non-marital categories declaring an individualistic perspective highlights that marriage is more closely associated with a dimension of solidarity, one that fosters a more cohesive and participatory behavior of both partners in couple life.

The analysis of the item “*partners tend to compete regarding career success*” reveals a total and partial disagreement rate of 74.4%. For 20.3% of respondents, the idea of competition in terms of career success is considered valid. Within this category, 48.1% are cohabiting, while 37% are not currently in a conjugal relationship. According to educational level, 59.3% are university graduates, and 29.6% have completed high school or post-secondary education. From the perspective of occupational status, 59.3% are salaried

employees, 33.3% are currently unemployed, and 7.4% are private entrepreneurs.

5. Conclusions

A significant proportion of the research sample demonstrated similar attitudes, based on shared principles and values. In this context, gender and gender equality emerge as relevant themes in the way participants conceptualize the existence of balance in everyday life. Through the administration of this questionnaire, the intention to revolutionize traditional family thinking through the dynamics of gender perception became evident. This dynamic reveals a significant modernization of the image of women, although it continues to be anchored in traditional principles and is influenced by a perceived level of discrimination resulting from role overload.

The main phenomenon observed concerned the attitude toward the notion that one must be a mother to be considered a woman, reaching approximately 90% disagreement among the total respondents. However, notably, 20% of those who had experienced marital failure agreed with the hypothesis. These data suggest that the condition of loneliness generates emotional discomfort and induces a need for dependence on others.

Regarding career investment, there is a visible trend of delayed marriage in order to achieve professional satisfaction. These professional achievements are justified by the desire for independence from the family. Career investment appears to be an increasingly evident priority among young women, which is why family life during this period may be perceived as an overwhelming challenge due to the overload of roles.

In their desire to achieve a sense of equity alongside men, women do not engage in competition for career success with their partners, with 77.4% expressing total or partial disagreement with this item.

Maintaining balance in women's personal lives is essential due to the level of discrimination they experience in the professional sphere (69.8%). This balance is primarily supported by societal structures, yet only 10% of women have full trust in the legislative system regarding equal opportunities in Romania. The largest share, 43.6%, corresponds to respondents who express neither trust nor distrust. A similar percentage of 70% was recorded for the item addressing discrimination in household tasks.

However, it is observable that, in addition to the inequitable public image of women in Romanian society, this high percentage is

also influenced by women's own perceptions of men's potential to handle household responsibilities. Although 82% agree that domestic tasks should be equally divided, 29% consider that their partners are not sufficiently capable of maintaining the household without their coordination. Among these, 44.1% are women cohabiting with a partner, and 23.5% are married women.

A blend between conservative gender role images - especially in the private sphere - and modern attitudes toward partnership in the public sphere is thus evident, particularly among unmarried women. This phenomenon is explained by the lack of alternative visions beyond the traditional values promoted within their own families, as well as by the encouragement of the same type of behavior in their relationships with partners.

There is a strong tendency among women to become increasingly financially autonomous in order to preserve their independence and avoid subordination upon entering marriage. Prior to marital or at least conjugal experience, the influence of traditional generational perspectives is still felt, with the financial responsibility largely placed on the male side of the family. Among women currently in a non-marital conjugal relationship, 52.2% expect the man to bring financial resources into the household, and this view is also supported by 34.8% of those without a conjugal relationship. However, when analyzing the opinions of women with marital experience, the percentage decreases significantly to 8.7% among married women and is halved among divorced women, reaching 4.3%. Thus, women's expectation that men should assume financial responsibility declines as marital or divorce experience increases.

Regarding the research question, a clear answer was obtained due to the high rates - approximately 70% - of total agreement with the items addressing perceived gender discrimination in both the professional sphere and within the household environment. Furthermore, women state that these two dimensions do not influence each other, nor do they compete with their partners for career success or the achievement of a sense of equity. Instead, the pressure is generated by societal imbalance and the influence of traditional visions.

The balance between these two spheres - career and family - is a key concept for reducing the rate of discrimination against women. The extent to which women feel appreciated and integrated under the same conditions as men in the labor market is directly proportional to the level of role overload they experience.

Moreover, the respondents' answers to the questions related to the distribution of roles within the family were useful in confirming the role balance theory proposed by Marks and McDermid. This theory explains that individuals who have well-defined role systems, understand them, and engage with them fully tend to experience higher levels of well-being. Those who demonstrated a more balanced view in discussions regarding status, roles, and the distribution of family responsibilities were not necessarily those who worked fewer hours; rather, they worked the same number of hours as those with less balanced perspectives, yet reported lower levels of overload. Regardless of occupation, no significant differences were observed from this standpoint. Whether they were private entrepreneurs, salaried employees, or women without an income source at the time of completing the questionnaire, respondents equally believed that time and career investment neither hinder nor facilitate the assumption of domestic responsibilities by either party.

Finally, when analyzing the two core concepts of conjugal attitudes - solidarity and individualism - it is observed that well-being within the couple is viewed solely from an individualistic perspective by 45.8% of respondents. This individualism is primarily supported by the two categories of women in non-marital relationships, suggesting that marriage is perceived through the lens of solidarity, fostering a more cohesive and participatory behavior from both partners in the couple's life.

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