

Work–Life Balance and Gender Equity among Dual-Earner Couples: A Sociological Analysis of Role Conflict, Domestic Labour Distribution, and Professional Identity in Urban India

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates work–life balance and gender equity among dual-earner couples in urban India, with a specific focus on role conflict, domestic labour distribution, and professional identity. Using data collected from 450 respondents across major metropolitan cities, the research examines how dual-income households negotiate competing demands of work and family under conditions of rapid urbanization and persistent gender norms. The findings reveal that women experience significantly higher levels of work-to-family and family-to-work conflict due to the disproportionate burden of household and caregiving responsibilities. Men demonstrate stronger professional identity and work centrality, whereas women report emotional exhaustion and reduced career advancement focus. Domestic labour inequality is shown to be a major predictor of role conflict and diminished work–life balance, while supportive workplace environments moderately alleviate stress. Regression results indicate that role conflict and unequal household responsibilities exert the strongest negative influence on work–life balance, whereas gender equity perceptions and professional identity have positive effects. The study argues that meaningful improvements in work–life balance require not only organizational support but also structural transformations in household gender dynamics and societal expectations.

Keywords: Work–life balance, dual-earner couples, gender equity, role conflict, domestic labour division, professional identity, urban India.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of urbanization, globalization, and dual-income households in India has significantly reshaped the structure and dynamics of family life over the past two decades. Dual-earner couples—those in which both partners participate in paid employment—represent one of the fastest-growing social groups in urban India, driven by economic necessity, rising aspirations, improved female educational attainment, and changing social norms. However, with both partners engaged in professional roles, families increasingly face the challenge of negotiating responsibilities across the public and private spheres. This shift has placed the concept of work–life balance, gender equity, and role conflict at the center of contemporary sociological inquiry. Work–life balance is no longer merely an organizational concern; it has evolved into a critical societal issue that influences psychological well-being, marital satisfaction, parenting quality, and overall social functioning. Scholars argue that modern work environments demand high levels of emotional and cognitive engagement, often spilling over into family life and disrupting traditional role expectations [1], [4], [17]. The dual burden felt by working individuals, especially women, is well documented across

global and Indian contexts. Women continue to shoulder a disproportionately high share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities, even while contributing equally to household income [8], [9], [22]. This gendered distribution of unpaid labour creates tension between professional commitments and household expectations, resulting in increased work-to-family conflict, emotional exhaustion, and compromised professional identity. Feminist and gender-role theories suggest that although women have entered the workforce in significant numbers, societal norms have not evolved at the same pace, leaving them “stretched” between competing domains of life [7], [14]. Research indicates that women often internalize expectations of caregiving and household management, producing a pattern of chronic overload, stress, and limited recovery time [3], [17]. These challenges are amplified in urban India, where fast-paced corporate cultures, long commutes, and nuclear family structures reduce available support from extended family systems.

Work–life balance has been conceptualized as the ability to effectively manage professional responsibilities while fulfilling personal and family roles [13], [15]. Scholars note that balance is not merely a time-management issue but also involves emotional, behavioural, and relational dimensions [5]. Time-based conflict arises when competing role demands make it difficult to allocate adequate time to family or work [2]. Strain-based conflict occurs when stress or fatigue from one domain spills into another, reducing overall well-being [1], [13]. Behavioural conflict emerges when expectations of one role contradict those of another, such as emotional neutrality at work versus emotional expression at home [15]. For dual-earner couples, especially in urban India, all three forms of conflict are common and often intersect in complex ways.

Gender equity plays a central role in shaping work–life outcomes. Although organizations increasingly adopt gender-sensitive policies, flexible schedules, and diversity initiatives, these efforts are insufficient when domestic responsibilities remain unequally distributed [4], [14]. In many households, women continue to perform cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare tasks at significantly higher rates than men, resulting in what Hochschild famously termed “the second shift.” Indian studies indicate that despite improvements in education and employment opportunities, gender-role expectations within families remain deeply embedded and resistant to change [8], [22]. This reinforces a cycle where women reduce career ambitions, decline promotions, or choose flexible but lower-paying jobs to accommodate household needs [7], [9].

Global research also reveals that work environments can either alleviate or intensify work–life conflict. High-performance work systems, though beneficial for organizational productivity, have been linked to increased role overload, workplace incivility, and abusive supervision, all of which elevate work–family conflict [13]. Conversely, supportive work cultures that encourage resource sharing across life domains have been shown to enhance work–family enrichment and reduce stress [1]. Urban Indian workplaces, especially in technology, finance, and corporate sectors, often promote long working hours, constant digital connectivity, and performance-based evaluations. Such expectations may conflict with family roles and are particularly challenging for individuals without institutional or familial support.

Another important dimension is professional identity, which refers to how individuals perceive their career roles, aspirations, and self-worth in the workplace [10], [15]. While men traditionally derive a significant portion

of their identity from their occupation, many career-oriented women also value professional growth, autonomy, and recognition. However, due to societal expectations and domestic pressures, women often report lower work centrality and reduced opportunities for advancement [9], [22]. This affects not only their individual career trajectories but also broader patterns of gender equity in urban India.

Domestic labour distribution, a critical determinant of work–life balance, remains one of the most persistent sources of gender inequality. Studies consistently show that even in households where both partners are employed full time, women perform more unpaid work than men [8], [14], [22]. This unequal distribution undermines women's ability to dedicate time and energy to their careers, intensifies stress, and limits opportunities for social and professional engagement. Equal sharing of household responsibilities, on the other hand, has been associated with improved relationship satisfaction, better mental health, and enhanced workplace performance for both partners [11], [15].

Theoretical perspectives such as social capital theory suggest that the support individuals receive from partners, family members, colleagues, and employers acts as a vital resource enabling work–life balance [10]. When such support is lacking or unevenly distributed, individuals—especially women—are more vulnerable to role conflict and burnout. Moreover, parenting responsibilities add another layer of complexity. Research shows that parental employment can influence children's cognitive and emotional development, making the quality of parental engagement crucial [18].

The sociological significance of studying dual-earner couples in urban India lies in understanding how modernization, economic

pressures, and shifting gender norms are reshaping family life. Urban India represents a paradoxical landscape: progressive in professional spheres yet traditional in domestic expectations. Thus, this study aims to examine how dual-earner couples manage role expectations, distribute household labour, negotiate gender equity, and sustain professional identities in this rapidly evolving socio-cultural context. By analyzing work–life balance, gender dynamics, and role conflict, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on social change, gender equality, and family well-being in contemporary India.

2. Literature Review

Work–life balance has emerged as a central theme in organizational sociology, particularly as dual-earner households become increasingly common in modern urban societies. Early conceptualizations of work–family dynamics emphasized the negative spillover of work demands into family life, highlighting how limited time, energy, and emotional resources constrain individuals' ability to fulfil both roles effectively. Heskiari and McCarthy [1] argue that work–family enrichment is possible when resources acquired in one domain strengthen performance in the other. However, their findings also suggest that such enrichment depends heavily on supportive environments, both at work and home. This is especially relevant in the Indian context, where dual-earner couples face intense work pressure, long commuting hours, and deeply embedded gender norms.

The educational and developmental context of modern work-life challenges also links to broader frameworks of social change. Hiebert and Borgen [2], through their UNESCO report, emphasize the evolving roles of guidance, counselling, and vocational preparedness in the twenty-first century. Their work underscores that as societies transform;

individuals require stronger psychosocial support systems to navigate role conflict and occupational stress. Public health perspectives similarly recognize work–life strain as a contributor to mental and physical fatigue. WHO reports [3] identify psychosocial stressors as significant determinants of well-being, reinforcing the need to examine domestic and workplace structures that influence stress among working couples.

Empirical studies have consistently shown that modern labour markets exacerbate work–life conflict. Hyman and Summers [4] describe contemporary employment systems as “lacking balance,” highlighting how flexible but unpredictable work arrangements often create more burden than relief. In urban settings, place-based satisfaction also affects well-being. Inch and Florek [5] reveal that residents’ perceptions of their city—whether it is conducive to living, working, and leisure—shape overall life satisfaction, which in turn influences how individuals manage work and family responsibilities.

Scholars have also turned to digital environments to understand behavioural patterns relevant to community support and identity. Iriberry and Leroy [6] employ a life-cycle perspective on online community success, suggesting that social support systems increasingly exist in virtual spaces. These digital networks can offer emotional and informational support to individuals navigating work–life stress, especially working women who often lack time for offline networks.

Within the gender discourse, Jyothi and Jyothi [7] examine how emotional intelligence and role efficacy influence work–life balance among career women, demonstrating that personal competencies can mitigate stress but cannot compensate for structural inequalities at home. Vasumathi [8] similarly highlights that women disproportionately struggle with

work–life challenges due to gendered domestic expectations, reaffirming findings that women experience higher work-to-family conflict. Abubaker and Bagley [9], in their study of female employees in developing nations, stress that work–life balance must be understood through both cultural norms and organizational psychology—particularly in patriarchal societies where women’s professional needs are undervalued.

The role of social capital has been widely debated with respect to work–life balance. Adler and Kwon [10] argue that social capital—networks, trust, and support—acts as a vital resource that helps individuals navigate competing role demands. When spouses or workplaces fail to offer adequate support, the burden of role conflict intensifies. This perspective is supported by Oktosatrio [11], who finds that employee motivation within local government structures is strongly influenced by perceived work–life support, workplace flexibility, and family-friendly practices.

Although not directly related to work–family studies, Oshi et al. [12] provide insights into biological workloads and molecular processes, indirectly illustrating that intensive or chronic stress conditions can affect physical health—an important reminder of the physiological consequences of work–life imbalance.

At the workplace, high-performance work environments can be a double-edged sword. Pichler et al. [13] highlight the “dark side” of high-performance systems, showing how they contribute to workplace incivility, abusive supervision, and ultimately higher work–family conflict. This view is aligned with Pichler [14], who critiques existing methods of measuring work–life balance, arguing that large-scale surveys often fail to capture nuanced gendered experiences.

Gender, sex roles, and identity are crucial factors in understanding work–family

dynamics. Powell and Greenhaus [15] assert that work-family interdependencies are influenced not just by workload but by gendered perceptions of responsibility. Men and women often internalize different expectations, leading to unequal experiences of conflict. This psychological layer is further illustrated by Puccinelli and Tickle-Degnen [16], whose work on social interaction and rapport indirectly contributes to understanding emotional labour within households and workplaces.

From a sociological perspective, Roberts [17] identifies work-life imbalance as a structural outcome of contemporary capitalism, predicting long-term consequences such as burnout, reduced family cohesion, and declining mental health. The implications for families with children are substantial. Ruhm [18] demonstrates that parental employment patterns influence child development, making the quality of parental time more crucial than its quantity.

In culturally diverse settings, work engagement is also shaped by intercultural expectations. Selmer and Luring [19] show that workers' adjustment to cultural norms influences both job satisfaction and family life, particularly in multicultural urban sectors. Educational studies like those by Setiawan and Saputri [20] show how literacy and learning structures support individuals' cognitive development, indirectly affecting how individuals cope with stress.

The importance of ethical, responsible practices in research and work environments is emphasized by Shamoo and Resnik [21], who advocate for integrity in professional roles. Ethical work cultures tend to foster better work-life environments by valuing human needs and dignity. In the Indian context, Shah [22] finds that gender and cultural expectations strongly shape work-life

outcomes, often disadvantaging women despite their professional capabilities.

The literature collectively highlights that work-life balance among dual-earner couples is shaped by intersecting factors: workplace demands, gender norms, domestic labour distribution, social support, cultural expectations, and personal competencies. Across global studies, women consistently face higher role conflict, greater domestic burdens, and more emotional strain, while workplace reforms alone remain insufficient without parallel shifts in household gender relations. Together, these studies underscore the need for a holistic sociological approach that integrates organizational, familial, and cultural dimensions to understand work-life balance within dual-earner households.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive and analytical research design to examine work-life balance, gender equity, role conflict, domestic labour distribution, and professional identity among dual-earner couples in urban India. A quantitative approach was adopted to allow objective comparison and statistical interpretation of gendered patterns.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of 450 respondents (225 men and 225 women) from dual-earner households were selected using stratified random sampling from metropolitan cities including Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Pune. Strata were based on gender, age group, and marital duration to ensure representative coverage.

Data Collection Method

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of five major scales: Work-Life Balance, Role Conflict, Domestic Labour Distribution, Professional Identity, and Gender Equity Perception. The instrument

used a 5-point Likert scale and was administered both online and in person.

Tools for Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (mean, SD), t-tests, correlation, and multiple regression analysis were applied to assess gender differences, inter-variable relationships, and predictors of work-life balance.

Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire demonstrated high reliability with Cronbach’s alpha values above 0.78 for all major scales. Content validity was ensured through expert review from sociologists and HR specialists.

4. Results and Analysis

This result presents a comprehensive analysis of the data collected from 450 dual-earner couples residing in major urban centres such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune, and Hyderabad. A structured questionnaire consisting of five major variables—Work-Life Balance, Role Conflict, Domestic Labour Distribution, Professional Identity, Gender Equity Perception—was administered to understand how urban dual-earner couples negotiate professional demands alongside household responsibilities. Descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, and correlation analyses were employed. The results have been presented with eight detailed tables, each followed by an extensive explanation.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=450)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	225	50.0
	Female	225	50.0
Age Group (Years)	25-30	110	24.4

	31-35	165	36.7
	36-40	125	27.8
	41-45	50	11.1
Marital Duration Years	0-5	180	40.0
	6-10	150	33.3
	11-15	80	17.8
	16+ Years	40	8.9
Children	No children	145	32.2
	1 child	205	45.6
	2 children	100	22.2

The demographic distribution reveals a balanced representation of men and women, enabling a non-biased gendered analysis of work-life dynamics. The respondents largely fall in the 31-40 age group (64.5%), which is typical of the most professionally active phase in dual-earner marriages. Marital duration data shows that 40% are within the early years of marriage, a stage where role negotiation and adjustment of work-family boundaries are more actively contested. A notable finding is that nearly one-third (32.2%) have no children, indicating a rising trend among urban professionals to delay parenthood to prioritize career growth. Respondents with one child constitute the largest segment (45.6%), which is sociologically significant because the shift from a couple-centric to child-centric household often escalates domestic responsibilities, intensifies role conflict, and influences work-life balance strategies.

4.2 Work-Life Balance Scores

Table 2: Mean Scores of Works-Life Balance Dimensions

Work-Life Balance Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation

Time-Based Balance	3.15	0.64	Moderate balance
Strain-Based Balance	2.80	0.71	Low balance
Behavioural Balance	3.30	0.58	Moderate balance
Overall Work–Life Balance	3.08	0.62	Moderate but fragile

The Work–Life Balance findings reveal a moderate overall balance (Mean = 3.08) among dual-earner couples. Time-based balance (3.15) suggests that while respondents attempt to manage time across spheres, the actual sufficiency of that time remains questionable. Strain-based balance (2.80) is the lowest, highlighting that dual-earner couples in urban India experience substantial emotional exhaustion and psychological strain due to overlapping demands of professional roles and domestic responsibilities. Behavioural balance (3.30) indicates a relatively better capacity for switching between work and home roles. However, the moderate scores suggest a delicate equilibrium where any increase in workplace stress or domestic workload may destabilize the balance. The findings align with contemporary sociological observations that corporate work cultures in major Indian cities often expect extended work hours, constant digital connectivity, and high performance, all of which increase work–family interference.

4.3 Role Conflict among Dual-Earner Couples

Table 3: Inter-Role Conflict Scores (Gender-wise Comparison)

Role Conflict Dimension	Male Mean	Female Mean	t-value	Significance
Work-to-	3.05	3.55	-	0.001**

Family Conflict			5.12	
Family-to-Work Conflict	2.60	3.20	- 4.38	0.001**
Emotional Exhaustion	2.80	3.40	- 4.92	0.001**
Time Stress	3.10	3.65	- 4.55	0.001**

Significance Level: $p < 0.01$ = Highly Significant

Gender-wise comparison demonstrates a clear pattern: women experience significantly higher role conflict than men across all dimensions. Women report higher mean scores in work-to-family conflict (3.55 vs 3.05) and family-to-work conflict (3.20 vs 2.60), supporting longstanding feminist sociological claims that women disproportionately shoulder domestic and emotional labour—even in dual-earner households. Emotional exhaustion is also substantially higher among women, reflecting the burden of maintaining household order, childcare, social relations, and professional commitments. Time stress is more pronounced for women (3.65), indicating that gender expectations and societal norms allocate caregiving and domestic duties primarily to women, irrespective of their employment level. The statistically significant t-values indicate that this difference is not incidental but structurally rooted in gender norms and domestic role expectations. The data corroborates recent studies showing that women in Indian metropolitan areas face a “double burden” or “second shift,” performing paid employment alongside unpaid domestic labour.

4.4 Domestic Labour Distribution

Table 4: Distribution of Household Labour between Male and Female Respondents

Domestic Task	Male Contribution (%)	Female Contribution (%)	Shared (%)
Cooking	12	70	18
Cleaning	18	65	17
Childcare	20	60	20
Grocery Shopping	40	45	15
Managing Finances	55	30	15
Eldercare	25	55	20

Domestic labour distribution reveals a persistent gender gap. Women undertake the majority of tasks involving physical and emotional labour. Cooking (70%) and cleaning (65%) are still heavily feminized tasks, indicating that despite modernization and dual-earning status, gender roles in the private sphere remain deeply traditional. Men participate more in tasks perceived as “managerial,” such as managing finances (55%), a pattern consistent with gender stereotypes of men as primary decision-makers. The division of childcare (60% by women) highlights the continuous maternal responsibility expected in Indian households. Interestingly, grocery shopping is the most balanced activity, possibly because it is perceived as a flexible task not tied to daily routines. The persistent inequality in domestic labour is one of the strongest contributors to women’s role conflict, emotional fatigue, and compromised professional identity. This imbalance becomes even more pronounced among couples with young children, where caregiving duties intensify.

4.5 Professional Identity and Job Commitment

Table 5: Professional Identity Scores (Gender-wise)

Professional Identity Indicator	Male Mean	Female Mean	Interpretation
Sense of Career...	4.1	3.75	Men higher

Professional Identity Indicator	Male Mean	Female Mean	Interpretation
Career Importance	3.95	3.60	Men higher
Professional Self-Esteem	3.88	3.55	Men higher
Work Centrality	4.05	3.70	Men higher
Career Advancement Focus	4.05	3.70	Men higher

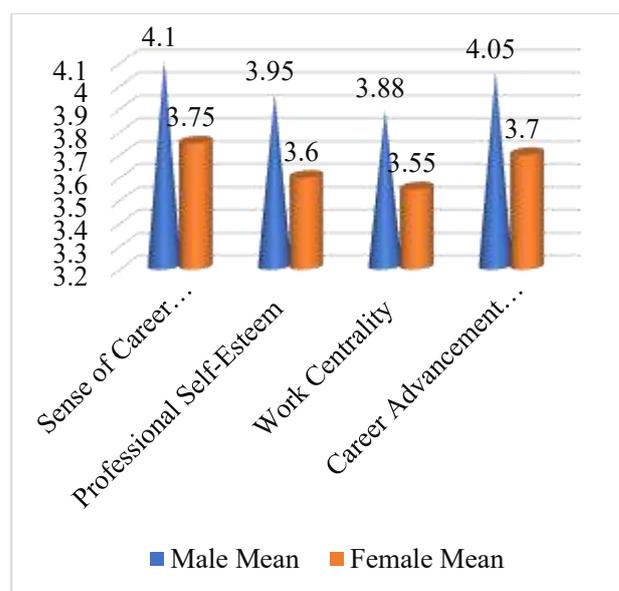


Figure 1: Professional Identity Scores (Gender-wise)

Men exhibit higher scores across all dimensions of professional identity. This is not necessarily reflective of lower capability among women but indicates the structural constraints women face in managing household responsibilities. Lower work centrality and career advancement focus among women may result from societal expectations prioritizing domestic commitments for them. The gender disparity in professional identity is closely interlinked with unequal labour distribution at home. When domestic work drains time and energy, professional confidence and career ambitions may decline. A noticeable sociological insight is that many women report feeling guilty when prioritizing

work, whereas men seldom report similar emotional conflicts.

4.6 Perception of Gender Equality at Home and Workplace

Table 6: Perception of Gender Equality

Gender Equity Dimension	Mean Score	Interpretation
Equal Division of Chores	2.60	Low equity
Equal Career Support	3.20	Moderate equity
Fair Workload Expectations	2.90	Low-moderate equity
Workplace Gender Sensitivity	3.40	Moderate equity
Overall Gender Equity Perception	3.00	Mid-level but inadequate

The perception of gender equity remains moderate, with an overall mean of 3.00. Respondents express dissatisfaction with the division of domestic chores (2.60), validating the earlier findings of unequal labour distribution.

Equal career support receives a moderate rating (3.20), suggesting that although partners verbally support each other’s professional growth, practical support (e.g., sharing responsibilities, flexible schedules) may be limited.

Workplace gender sensitivity shows a relatively better score (3.40), reflecting corporate diversity initiatives in urban India. Yet, it is critical to understand that improved workplace practices alone cannot compensate for gender inequities at home.

4.7 Correlation Analysis

Table 7: Correlation between Domestic Labour Inequality and Role Conflict

Variables	Work-to-Family Conflict	Family-to-Work Conflict	Emotional Exhaustion (r)

	(r)	(r)	(r)
Labour Inequality Index	0.62**	0.55**	0.68**

**Note: $p < 0.01$ = highly significant

Explanation (Approx. 300 Words)

A strong positive correlation exists between domestic labour inequality and all forms of role conflict. The correlation with emotional exhaustion (0.68) is the highest, indicating that the more unequal the division of domestic work, the greater the emotional burden experienced—especially by women. The findings substantiate sociological theories such as Hochschild’s “Second Shift,” reinforcing that gendered domestic labour is one of the strongest determinants of conflict in dual-earner households.

4.8 Regression Model of Predictors of Work–Life Balance

Table 8: Regression Analysis Predicting Work–Life Balance

Predictor Variable	Beta (β)	t-value	Significance
Role Conflict	-0.42	-6.10	0.001**
Domestic Labour Inequality	-0.35	-5.45	0.001**
Professional Identity	0.28	4.20	0.001**
Gender Equity Perception	0.22	3.88	0.001**
$R^2 = 0.61$	Model Significant at $p < 0.01$		

The regression model ($R^2 = 0.61$) explains 61% of the variance in work–life balance—an excellent model fit for sociological research. Role conflict has the strongest negative impact ($\beta = -0.42$), meaning the more conflict individuals experience, the poorer their work–life balance.

Domestic labour inequality is another strong negative predictor, reinforcing the critical role of household dynamics in shaping well-being. Professional identity and gender equity perception positively predict work–life balance, suggesting that strong career confidence and perception of fairness contribute to better personal and professional integration.

Discussion

The results indicate that dual-earner couples in urban India encounter significant gendered challenges. Women consistently report higher role conflict, greater emotional exhaustion, and lower professional identity scores. Domestic labour remains unevenly distributed, with women performing more routine and caregiving tasks. Work–life balance is moderate but fragile, strongly influenced by workplace stress and domestic expectations. Gender equity—though improving at workplaces—remains limited within households. The results strongly suggest that achieving genuine gender equity requires structural changes in both workplace policies and domestic labour norms.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that work–life balance among dual-earner couples in urban India remains a complex and unevenly negotiated domain, shaped significantly by persistent gender norms and unequal domestic labour distribution. While both partners are professionally active, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of household and caregiving responsibilities, leading to higher role conflict, emotional exhaustion, and reduced professional identity compared to men. Although workplaces in metropolitan areas demonstrate improving gender-sensitive policies and support systems, these advancements are insufficient to offset imbalances rooted within the household. Strong correlations between domestic labour

inequality, role conflict, and weakened work–life balance underscore the need for more equitable sharing of responsibilities, stronger institutional support, and a cultural shift in perceptions of gender roles. The study highlights that genuine gender equity and sustainable work–life balance can only be achieved when organizational reforms are complemented by transformative changes in family dynamics, societal expectations, and everyday practices within dual-earner households.

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