Work and Childcare Role Conflicts of Working Mothers Under the Condition of Social Distancing Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic in Vietnam

Lê Đăng Bảo Châu[1]*, Lê Nam Trung Hiếu[2], and Nguyễn Hồng Tiểu Minh[2]

[1] University of Sciences, Hue University, Vietnam
[2] International School of Hue University, Vietnam
* Lê Đăng Bảo Châu, corresponding author. Email: ldbchau@hueuni.edu.vn

Abstract

This study investigates the work and childcare role conflicts among working Vietnamese female laborers during the period of social distancing caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 in Vietnam by employing the theory of work and family conflict as a theoretical framework to figure out the dimensions of strife. By analyzing qualitative data collected from 15 working Vietnamese mothers selected by applying the snowball sampling method, this study shows that the work and childcare role conflicts among Vietnamese women are manifested in three aspects: (1) the lack of time to fulfill expected roles, leading to (2) the state of role strain that is, in turn, considered as the cause of (3) the emergence of inappropriate behaviors with corresponding roles. The findings also reveal that accepting role conflicts as temporary difficulties is one of the solutions for women to overcome hardships during the period of social distancing. In addition, working mothers resolve disputes through their efforts without the demand for reassigning responsibilities in the family to distribute house chores equally to their husbands.

Keywords

COVID-19; social distancing; supportive relationships; women; work and childcare role conflict

Introduction

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) a pandemic on March 11, 2020, it has spread and affected all countries worldwide. Although experiences of COVID-19 outbreaks have varied from country to country, as of now, Vietnam has experienced four COVID-19 waves. The first wave lasted from March to April 2020, with the first case recorded in Ho Chi Minh City; the second wave from July to September 2020; the third wave from January to March 2021; the fourth and most severe wave began in April 2021. In the fourth outbreak, the number of confirmed infections increased sharply, and the spread of COVID-19 viruses was unprecedented, prompting Vietnam to raise the prevention and control of infectious diseases to the highest level of emergency.

At the end of May 2021, in all provinces of Vietnam, especially Ho Chi Minh City and neighboring provinces, the government issued social distancing orders with Directive No. 15/CT-TTg (Prime Minister, 2020a). Afterward, Directive No. 16/CT-TTg (Prime Minister, 2020b) was issued with stricter regulations requesting geographical isolation and safe human-to-human distances to minimize the risk of disease spread to control the soaring COVID-19 cases in Vietnam. The implication of measures to prevent the spread of the diseases, especially social distancing Directives, led to the closure of many large and small businesses. In addition, numerous workers could not travel to their workplaces or had to pause their work, creating a shock to the labor market. Thousands of people lost their jobs, adversely affecting their incomes, especially for informal and casually employed workers (International Labour Organization, 2020). The annual reports from the General Statistics Office (2021a, 2021b) on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor and employment situation showed that COVID-19 made a significant impact on the employment and income of workers, bottoming out the second quarter of 2020 and the third quarter of 2021—the two periods of intense social distancing in Vietnam.

In the context of the employment crisis, female workers were an exception. They represented a large workforce in sectors heavily impacted by the pandemic, such as the services sector. At the time Directive 15 and Directive 16 were issued, still-employed women, depending on the characteristics of their occupations, continued to participate in labor in many different ways: substitute online work for onsite work (such as in cases of teachers or corporate employees who can fulfill their duties online), part-time for full-time (such as in cases of reporters, etc.), working attendance with "five-on-the-spot" (anti-epidemic force in place; onsite command; onsite materials and equipment; medications, onsite biopsies, and onsite duties) requirements for regular attendance such as in cases of manufacturing workers, nurses, and doctors. Especially under Directive 15, many workers and corporate employees did not change their working habits, still going home during the day and working eight hours per day as usual. Meanwhile, schools and child service centers were temporarily closed. It means that the roles in children's care and education were no longer shared between the family, school, and society. It was placed entirely on the family's shoulders. While participating in occupational activities, women also had to accept the additional responsibility of caring for and educating their children under the limitation of time and skills to take over the role of schools and social services for children.

Studies on the impact of COVID-19 on family life during social distancing demonstrated that despite the proportion of men involved in childcare work has increased dramatically, women have still shouldered most of this responsibility when schools are closed (Biroli, 2021; Carlson

et al., 2021; UN Women, 2020a, 2020b). The Fondation des Femmes (2020) reviewed the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for female workers across France. They found that the blockade periods marked the worst of the unequal division of duties between the sexes in the home when schools were forced to close, children had to stay home, and taking care of the children became the sole responsibility of women. Nearly six out of ten women had to spend four hours a day caring for their children, not to mention the time to do other housework. Expectedly, during this period, women became much more anxious than men. As a result, the Fondation des Femmes further found that 34% of surveyed women claimed to have "lived terribly" during the lockdown.

Research on the psychological effects of COVID-19 showed a significant increase in stress and domestic violence during social distancing (Béland et al., 2021; Usta et al., 2021). In Vietnam, studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family life identified that children under the age of 16 were severely affected both physically and mentally due to various causes, such as parents dying due to COVID-19, parents quarantined in public facilities, children themselves are quarantined in public facilities or must stay at home during social distancing, etc. (ILSSA & GIZ, 2020, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). These analyses also highlighted the pressures children endured when schools closed due to social distancing measures such as being kept at home in narrow spaces, lacking interaction, and school and in-person interaction with friends.

In Vietnam, it was estimated that 7.35 million students at all levels from 26 out of 63 provinces and cities had to study online, of which about 1.5 million students needed support with online learning equipment (ILSSA & GIZ, 2020). Online learning brought many difficulties for children, such as needing more equipment for children from poor households, in remote areas, or social protection centers, etc., and limitations in using technology, especially for primary school students. Preschool children were utterly interrupted in learning and connecting with the school, as they had to stay home from school or their parents temporarily sent them to their grandparents or relatives. Moreover, some children had to accompany their parents to high-risk and unsafe workplaces.

Changes in the lives of children required adaptation from both the children and the adults they live with to limit the potential physical and mental impact of social distancing. Likewise, the parents' workload increased significantly, including house cleaning, childcare, playing with children, guiding and supervising children's online learning, etc. Reports by the United Nations Development Programme and UN Women (2020) and UN Women (2020a, 2020b) indicated that COVID-19 placed a great deal of childcare burden on women, especially during school closures. Unlike in Europe and North America, Vietnamese women assumed most of the responsibilities in the family. A study by the International Labour Organization (2020) based on data from the third and fourth Quarterly Labor - Employment Surveys by the General Statistics Office of Vietnam also concluded that during the COVID-19 pandemic, women had to bear a greater burden that can be quantifiable, including the same hours of work as men and more than double the hours of housework.

A report by the Institute of Labour Science and Social Affairs (ILSSA) and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) (2020) demonstrated that women did most of the housework and, therefore, were always busy. For women working at home or outside the home, working while raising children created pressures and role conflicts. Most studies worldwide, including Vietnam, on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for women, are primarily quantitative studies, specifically utilizing statistical data. Therefore, a qualitative study is needed to provide insight into the lived experiences of different working

women toward work and childcare conflicts. The results from this study will provide the required information to understand the challenges women confront during times of stress and help governments and related organizations develop programs and policies on gender equality and gender-based social protection in their emergency assistance.

Theoretical framework

This study employed the theory framework of work and family conflict proposed by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), in which role conflict is a phenomenon that occurs when the pressure caused by requirements from different roles is irreconcilable. According to Greenhaus and Beutell, work and family conflict is "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role" (p. 77). Considering childcare and parenting are the activities in the family, we define the work and childcare conflict as a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and childcare domains are mutually incompatible in some respect.

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) further identified three primary forms of work and family conflict that can be used to examine the work and childcare conflict of working mothers: (1) time-based conflict, (2) strain-based conflict, and (3) behavior-based conflict.

(1) A time-related conflict occurs when "multiple roles may compete for a person's time. Time spent on activities within one role generally cannot be devoted to activities within another role" (p. 77).

(2) "Strain-based conflict exists when strain in one role affects one's performance in another role" (p. 80).

(3) "Behavioral conflict occurs when specific patterns of in-role behavior may be incompatible with expectations regarding behavior in another role" (p. 81).

Following the framework proposed by Greenhaus and Beutell, the analytical framework for this study was developed as follows:

Figure 1: Analytical Framework of Role Conflict Work and Childcare
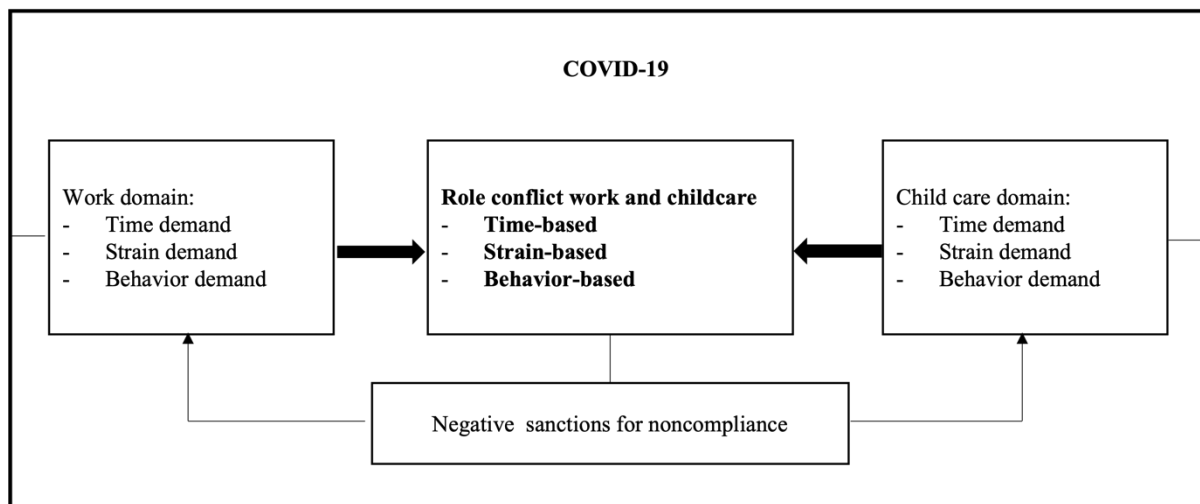
Research method

Study setting and design

According to the literature review, especially the studies on the impact of COVID-19 on childcare, it was discovered that in Vietnam, there is a relationship between childcare time and mothers' work in the context of implementing social distancing due to COVID-19. Based on this confirmation, in July 2021 (during the fourth outbreak in Vietnam), a phenomenological qualitative research design was employed in the provinces and cities which were implementing Directives 15 and 16 on social distancing at the time of the survey (Prime Minister, 2020a, 2020b). Qualitative research can provide an in-depth understanding of the nature of the work and childcare role conflict of working mothers.

Sample size, sampling, and participants

The survey sample was created based on the snowball or chain-referral sampling method (Goodman, 1961), where the first respondent, who fully meets the study criteria, is selected. Following this non-probability sampling technique, interviewees are identified until data saturation is reached. In this study, the first study subject (first interviewee) who met the criteria set forth by the research was chosen from the researchers' Facebook friends list. Specifically, mothers working in occupations requiring varying rates of workplace attendance who have children from kindergarten up to secondary school (ages 1.5 to 14). The first interviewee was identified through the initial screening based on the images and content of the work and childcare role conflict during social distancing posted on their Facebook wall.

In total, 15 interviews were conducted. The interviewees were women of different ages and professions in various provinces, including urban and rural areas. Among the 15 interviewees, nine were 35–40, and six were 45–49 years old. Most had two children, one had three children, and one had four. Eight people were living in Ho Chi Minh City, four in Hue, one in Binh Duong, one in Quang Ngai, and one in Phu Yen. Two people lived in rural areas, and 13 were in urban areas.

Regarding careers, in this study, the interviewees included those who worked online from home (four university lecturers, three business staff, two traders, and one business owner), onsite in shift (one doctor, one television reporter, one worker), and outside full time (two farmers). The education level of the interviewees was mostly university and post-graduate. There were three people with intermediate vocational qualifications. The diversity of age, living place, and occupation of the survey samples helped to reduce the limitation of the snowball sampling method (e.g., the network of the first respondent). Interviewees were contacted by phone to elicit participation and to set up an interview appointment.

The three core questions asked during each interview included:

1. How is your typical day during social distancing?
2. What are your experiences with pressures about time, stress, and behaviors when you have to work and take care of your children during social distancing?
3. How do you manage these pressures? Who supports you in fulfilling the roles?

Data collection and data analysis method

The research ethics and study protocol were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Hue University (ID: DHH2022-01-196). Data were collected by the in-depth interview method. The interview content included two parts: (1) Women's life experiences during social distancing, and (2) How they overcome difficulties and use advantages. Due to the context of the then-ongoing social distancing, the interviews were conducted by phone. Each interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes. Interview information was recorded and then transcribed before being processed by topic. In this study, we used six steps of topic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results and Discussion

Forms and the manifestation of work and childcare role conflicts of working mothers under the condition of social distancing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam

Adopting the work and family conflict theory of Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), this study examined the manifestations of conflict in working women having children aged 1.5–14 years old in three aspects of work and childcare role conflict: (1) time-based conflict, (2) strain-based conflict, and (3) behavior-based conflict)

Time-based work and childcare role conflict

This type of conflict happens when women have to use their time to work so they cannot simultaneously care for their children. This study examines two types of conflict: (1) Time pressure and (2) absence of one of either role.

Time pressure

Being under time pressure was the most noticeable feature in women who had to work and care for their children during social distancing. In our survey sample, this feature was most prominent in women working online from home and onsite. However, time pressure was overwhelming for women who worked from home (online) when they had to simultaneously perform work and childcare roles in one place (at home). Because the women had to fulfill the responsibilities of both roles simultaneously, it was easy for them to fall into a state of stress and pressure. These mothers always had to "make use of all the time" to do different things simultaneously, such as simultaneously working while teaching their children, taking care of their children while seizing chances to work, or constantly switching roles, e.g., taking a break from working to manage children.

Time pressure was also evident in how the women organized their schedules during the day. They woke up earlier and slept later to have enough time to perform both roles. However, women's constant efforts were still insufficient to fulfill both roles well, so they constantly "felt that everything was incomplete." They did not have time to take care of themselves. In other words, they used their own time (for relaxation, exercise, etc.) to deal with the responsibilities of their respective roles.

> *I am waking up earlier in the morning. Whenever I have unfinished assignment reviews, instead of waking up at 5 am, I woke up earlier, at 4 am. I bought myself more time to do the review."*

> (Interviewee No. 1, teacher, 40 years old, 3 children)

> *"In general, take full advantage of all the time left… Actually, each person has only that much energy. There is the same limit of time each day. So, the problem is how do I arrange them in order for me to at the same time do many things which used to be handled separately before. It means I have to distribute energy differently and do many things at the same time."*

> (Interviewee No. 2, teacher, 37 years old, 2 children)

Demand for presence

Women who worked from home also suffered role conflicts when any of the roles they were taking required their presence and, therefore, must be absent from the other. Being in a (work and family) dichotomy, they were often forced to completely separate from one role to be fully present in the other. Specifically, mothers who worked online, under certain circumstances that required their presence to focus on solving problems with work (such as presenting at a meeting, giving an interview, etc.), had to close the door and lock themselves in a closed space for their children not to disturb them.

Role conflict happens when a mother feels completely anxious with their children outside the room. Without adults observing and monitoring the children, the children would either immerse themselves in electronic devices (e.g., television, tablets) or fight each other, both of which required adult intervention. Women felt anxious and pressured in these situations, so the mother's concentration on work roles was interrupted. They were forced to "temporarily turn off the cam, mute the sound for a moment," or "set a reminder clock" to temporarily stop their presence in the work role to solve the problems of the childcare role. This realization

shows that women working from home must be in a continuous present-absent-present circle to perform different roles.

> *"Before that, I had to prepare the meals for the children. The youngest loves to eat Japanese instant noodles, so while I am working online, her siblings can feed her (him?), or they can feed her (him?) with puffs till mum finishes her work so that I can feed her (him?)."*

> (Interviewee No. 1, teacher, 40 years old, mother of 3 children)

> *"When working online, I must schedule my time carefully. After about thirty minutes of my children watching TV, I had to run downstairs to remind them to turn off the TV to do other entertaining activities. I have to control it because if I forget or focus on work, my children will keep watching TV."*

> (In-depth interview, 35 years old, businesswoman, 2 children)

For women who work onsite, role conflict does not happen in the same manner as it does for those who work from home. Their presence in the workplace is mandatory; therefore, they must be completely absent from the caregiving role. Role conflict manifests itself in anxiety and insecurity when one completely entrusts the responsibility of childcare and upbringing to others who, according to them, cannot fulfill the role as perfectly as they expect. The result of this anxiety is their two-fold or three-fold personal efforts after returning home to compensate for the shortfall created by the previous absence.

Strain-based work and childcare role conflict

Caring and educating children in homes instead of in schools was a role that arose during times of social distancing, and it was clear that mothers were not prepared both in terms of skills and attitudes to fulfill this role. Interviewed mothers said that playing with their children was the most stressful activity. They would instead supervise their children's learning because of schools' support available through the system of exercises posted on the website or take care of children with activities such as feeding, bathing, etc. The desire to help children avoid the psychological effects caused by social distancing and avoid excessive use of electronic devices made the mothers continuously try to create active games for children. Playing with children was almost non-stop throughout the day. The game also had to change constantly.

> *"In the morning, my daughter and I exercise together. After that, my daughter takes out the Rubik's Cube, and then rotates it to kill time, and then watches the iPad. Meanwhile, I work and cook. After cooking, I go out to play with the children again, setting up games to play with them. Now I don't know what games I've played, just play whatever I want: Volleyball, basketball, table tennis in the house and the lobby of the apartment building, roller skating in the hallway, just mother and daughter."*

> (Interviewee No. 6, Businesswoman, 49 years old, 1 child)

"After work, I go down to feed the children, and then play games with them until 9:30-10 pm, and then let the children go to bed. The children at home always like (watching) TV, so to prevent my children from using the TV a lot, I have to buy other toys instead, and that means that I have to play with my children more. I bought all kinds of folk games, like the Mandarin Square Capturing board game I used to play during my childhood, for my children to play. Or (other examples are) wooden jigsaw puzzles or Parcheesi for the children to play. I cannot assign my grandparents this activity. I have to play with my kids; I also have to play games with both of my children, games we can think of, such as hide and seek and storytelling, and I also have to buy story books for the children to read more. In the evenings, the school also provides introductory math programs on the school's online network. They are applications of math games for young students. So, I have to sit next to them just to supervise their playing. Until they can play on their own, I let them play on their own. I then play with the younger."

(Interviewee No. 4, 35 years old, businesswoman, 2 children)

Although playing with children must be carried out continuously day and night, mothers confessed that before the pandemic, they had never seemed to be aware of the need to equip themselves with knowledge and skills about creating games and playing with children because there were schools, children's friends, and amusement centers for them. Therefore, when the pandemic came unexpectedly, and the family had to replace the school by creating a recreational environment for children, women became confused and took a lot of time and energy to fulfill their tasks. This situation made it extremely easy for them to become overwhelmed and stressed when performing a caring role.

"In the past, I had little time at home because I was busy with work. Meanwhile, my children were at school during the day, so I lacked the skills to prepare games for them. Actually, my child can play alone or with the next-door neighbors. There is no need for them to play with their mother. However, I sometimes want to create a maternal bond with my kids, so I have to create some games for them. Now I just realize that I have no knowledge and skills for that. If I were to search for them now, it would be very time-consuming."

(Interviewee No. 7, 38 years old, teacher, 2 children)

Caring role stress occurs in both women working from home and working outside. The increasing responsibility of caring for and educating children in the condition that they have to fulfill their traditional work roles puts women in a state of stress and pressure. Once brought into work, these stresses will prevent women from completing it fully or having to set aside part of the work to prioritize taking care of and educating children if possible. The shelved work will inevitably pile up and require resolution at a specific time. This issue, in turn, will cause much strain and eventually backfire on the caring role.

"When the work piles up, I am afraid of not allocating enough time to complete it. My body is also tired from lack of sleep and time to relax."

(Interviewee No. 2, 37 years old, teacher, 2 children)

For the women who have to work outside, the stress and fatigue after working hours also significantly impact the behavior of taking care of their children. This attitude has a strong influence on the performance of the caring role. Efforts to fulfill responsibilities are described as a "sacrifice" that causes women to fall into a state of "don't want to do," "tired," "very tired," and "not happy."

> *"Regarding things I post on Facebook, such as clips of teaching kids to make paper toys, honestly, I'm so tired, and I don't want to do it. But since it is important that I need to pull my children out of the virtual world as much as possible, I have to make sacrifices. But frankly, I'm really tired. I'm not happy. I'm very tired. I'm very tired... Seeing my children playing is lovely, which means I find it lovely when I see the toys having been made, but the whole process is very tiring. My little girl has a lot of ideas; she forces me to follow her. So, I'm very tired. But when I see the results, I feel happy. But the fun isn't even five to ten minutes before she asks me to do something else. I have to shout: Come on, I can't continue anymore."*

(Interviewee No. 3, 49 years old, TV reporter, 2 children)

Expected behavior-based work and childcare conflict

In this study, the conflict between women's work and childcare roles during social distancing occurred when stress or overloading from this role produced unexpected behavior in another. In work, the increasing responsibilities and time pressure made women's attitudes and behaviors different than expected. Especially for those who worked from home, the time pressure, as analyzed above, made them only able to do mandatory work. They would leave behind all the responsibilities that can be put aside and end up stopping in the middle of the work or watching over their kids while working to perform the childcare role. Cutting working hours to care for and educate children was not an expected behavior at work. Lack of energy, fatigue, not having time to relax, or distractions caused by the children's disturbance also affected the mood and behavior of female workers in performing their work roles.

> *"My difficulty is that whatever I do (both work and housework), my children keep swarming around. Especially the older kid. She just likes me to play, talk, and then interact with her. She doesn't want to play alone; she wants me to play with her. I want to focus on being effective when I do my job, but the child is always hanging around, wanting her mother to spend time with her. At times like that, I solve the problem by negotiating with my kid, clearly defining: Right now, mommy has to work so that you can play either alone or with your grandparents. She understands and starts playing by herself, but from time to time, she runs in (to the room) to talk to mommy a little. Then she gets scolded."*

(Interviewee No. 4, 35 years old, businesswoman, 2 children)

> *"I have to work and look after my children at the same time. Sitting next to them, they play, and I work. In general, I have to take advantage of every moment. I only could spend no more than two hours a day on my*

professional work. I just cannot. I cannot work much unless it's during my teaching time."

(Interviewee No. 2, 37 years old, teacher, 2 children)

Regarding caring roles, strain and pressure in addressing roles generated psychological stress for mothers. They acknowledged negative psychological changes and passed these tensions on to their children. Attitudes and behaviors when these moms "get irritated," "scold," and "scream" at children, let them take care of themselves, entrust them entirely to another person, and allowed them to use their phones and tablets. At the same time, their mothers' demanded presence in work roles were unexpected behaviors in the caring role. The consequence of simultaneously dispersing energy for many things caused mothers to become overburdened, negatively change their personalities, fail to control their emotions, scold their children, and transmit stress to the kids.

"I just posted an article on Zalo [a popular social media platform in Vietnam] titled: From a gentle mother to a real child kidnapper (laugh). I just posted it on Zalo. (Laugh) I underwent a lot of psychological changes. I used to be very patient - for example, I calmly explained everything to my kids before playing with them. I rarely scolded my children. I was the type of person who doesn't often scold her children. But I don't know why things have changed from the time I gave birth to my baby, and then the pandemic hit. Of course, it's not as fierce as many mothers. It's not my nature to scold children, but I was influenced…. While I lock the door of the room to work, I leave the two older kids to look after the youngest baby. When the baby is willing to play, they play with their sibling. When she refuses to cooperate, they play some nursery songs on YouTube for her to watch. There are times when I have to both work in the room and hear my kids fighting, screaming, and crying outside."

(Interviewee No. 1, teacher, 40 years old, 3 children)

"I don't know if I'm doing it right or wrong; sometimes I scream, and then I cry. My mentality also affects my children a lot. On Ken's (my oldest child) birthday, I gave him freedom. I didn't force him to do this or that. My mind was also happy then. That night, he said this and got a mother like me to shed tears. He said while crying: "Mom, if I am this joyful every day like today, I am incredibly happy. I don't like you to frown." I can clearly see that the pressures are on me, and my psychological pressures put tension on him."

(Interviewee No. 3, 49 years old, TV reporter, 2 children)

The results of our qualitative study further clarified the manifestations of behaviors considered as a consequence of psychological impacts from the COVID pandemic during the time of social distancing described in previous quantitative research in Vietnam and around the world (Grover et al., 2020; Le et al., 2020). It can be seen that women were exposed to overburden and role conflict, whether working from home or working at their workplace, with the responsibility of replacing school education during social distancing. Their lives did not have a favorably orderly arrangement, but they were always on the move, switching from one role to another or performing both simultaneously. They had to work faster, with more

responsibility, constantly trying, making efforts, living under time pressure, and fulfilling obligations. They even failed to believe they must deal with many such responsibilities in one day. One woman with three children who worked from home said:

> "Sometimes I don't even know where the energy comes from that I can manage everything… I don't know how I can overcome it either. Now that I think about it, women are really like superheroes."

<div align="right">(Interviewee No. 1, 40 years old, teacher, 2 children)</div>

Gender-based roles and responsibilities in Vietnamese families and portraits of facilitators in resolution to women's work and childcare role conflicts

It was apparent that the presence or absence of facilitators dramatically affected a woman's ability to resolve role conflicts. In our interviews, husbands also went to work during social distancing. They hardly had any changes in scheduling or increases in family responsibilities and therefore did not suffer from work and childcare role conflicts like women.

> "His company is still working as normal, not taking any days off, so he can't help with anything. When he gets home, it's dinner time. After eating, he looks after the children while I do a tidy-up. When I have too much work to do, he helps me get the kids to sleep if they are willing to cooperate."

<div align="right">(Interviewee No. 1, 40 years old, teacher, 2 children)</div>

> "Just like any other day, my husband works all day, so if I have any work to do at night, he helps me remind our oldest child to study or play with the younger one for a while so that I can focus on my professional work."

<div align="right">(Interviewee No. 2, 37 years old, teacher, 2 children)</div>

> "My husband currently works every two weeks. During his off-duty weeks, he supports me in taking care of the kids. For example, when I'm busy with an online meeting, if he's at home, I'll let him look after the children. If he goes to work, he'll come back home in the evening as scheduled. Evening is like every normal day. He rarely spends time playing with the kids. For instance, after dinner, the two kids and I often close the door to our room to play with toys, teddy bears, and basically everything. Whenever I'm tired, I'll take the child down to their father for a while. Because the grandparents already help with the childcare job during the day, they need to rest at night. I think I'm too busy with work during the day, so when I don't have to work at night, I spend time playing with my kids. When I am too tired to play, I will assign the job to my husband (laugh)."

<div align="right">(Interviewee No. 4, 35 years old, businesswoman, 2 children)</div>

> *"My husband works far away, so he can't help me with anything. Only in the evening he can make a call to talk to me and the kids. Usually, he comes back home on weekends. But like me, he doesn't know how to set up games to play with the children."*

(Interviewee No. 7, 38 years old, teacher, 2 children)

According to David (1998), the roles and responsibilities attributed by society to each of the sexes affected their behavior and attitudes that guided their progress within the couple and in social life. In Vietnamese society, Confucianism has greatly influenced gender relations and continues to do so till the present. Men represent the type of people who are free, active, and strong. Although men see their responsibility towards the family, they are engaged within the family differently than women. In contrast, women represent limitation, passivity, and weakness. As a wife, a woman becomes the master of the house and the servant of their children. They are then appreciated for the order they bring to the home and the role model they provide for their children. In each condition, their different roles translate into additional responsibilities and obligations, and fulfilling these obligations helps the woman to gain the trust of their family and community. A woman must, therefore, fulfill their "natural duty" as a wife and a mother. This sacred function requires them to carry out household chores, educate children, and manage and care for their husbands and children.

It is clear that given the socially attributed roles and responsibilities in the interviewed families, husbands had little change in their schedules. The extra family responsibilities they took on during social distancing were simply "taking care of the kids for a short while" when the wives were busy with another urgent job or were "too tired" and needed a break. There was a noticeably clear division of labor in the Vietnamese family, where the man is considered the "breadwinner" and enjoys the privilege of the "breadwinner" position of the family. As in the following interview, the wife clearly distinguished between housework as "women's work" and "men's work." The husband, in this case, "refuses" to do, "doesn't touch" the housework, and continues to sit calmly and drink coffee while their wife is overwhelmed with housekeeping. However, when it came to "men's work," they did not refuse:

> *"He is of no help. During the last social distancing period, I let the maid return to her home and take a few days off. My husband was a close contact with COVID since there was a new COVID case at his hospital (his workplace), so he just stayed at home. It is not in his nature to do household chores, and his job takes all his time, so I do whatever I can do. If there is anything I cannot do, I just quit. He never takes a glance at the housework... He is just in charge of men's work, like repairing broken fans, TVs, broken sockets, and so on. I don't care. As for shopping, cooking, and cleaning, I take care of everything. He is not willing to clean the house, nor is he happy to take out the trash… I really have my hands full while he still sits and sips some coffee like nothing happens."*

(Interviewee No. 3, 49 years old, TV reporter, 2 children)

Our results are similar to other studies on gender inequality in work and care for family members during social distancing in different countries. It can be said that the pandemic has shed light on gender inequalities in the pre-existing care crisis. Farré et al. (2020) and Collins et al. (2021) indicated that women were at a higher risk than men of losing their jobs and were responsible for most of the housework and childcare when schools were closed. The cognitive

level of work of each gender also explained the impact level of COVID-19 on both genders in question.

Czymara et al. (2020) provided evidence of the strong impact of COVID-19 on gender relations in Germany due to the increasing need for care as schools and kindergartens are closed down. According to the study, there were significant gender differences: women are more worried about taking care of children, while men are more worried about paid work and the economy. This study showed that the COVID-19 pandemic affected women more heavily than men, not only at the physical level of work (e.g., women are reducing more paid work hours than men, but also through increasing the division regarding the cognitive level of work (e.g., women are more worried about childcare work while men are about paid work).

Gender theories explain the concept of perceived gender responsibility by showing gender in the interactions, thoughts, and daily actions of each gender. According to Goffman (1977), in all societies, initial sex-class placement was the beginning of a sustained sorting process whereby members of the two classes are subject to differential socialization. From the start, persons sorted into the male class and those sorted into the other are given a different treatment, acquire different experiences, enjoy, and suffer different expectations. This perspective can help explain women's voluntary acceptance of new responsibilities during times of social distancing in the interviews we conducted, as they hardly required a redistribution of responsibility for caring for and educating children and housework from their husbands. All women interviewed said there was no conflict related to housework with their husbands during this time, even though they were under overwhelming stress. Fulfilling caregiving responsibilities is how women express their gender in thinking and acting following societal expectations. They strive to fulfill their gender roles with a self-motivating attitude: Social distancing will end, children will go to school, and they will return to everyday life. It was noted that almost all of the women who responded to the interview did not complain about their husbands.

> *"Mentally, I encourage myself: The pandemic will soon be over, and my children will go back to school. I have to keep trying."*

> (Interviewee No. 2, 37 years old, teacher, 2 children)

> *"I also think that social distancing will be eventually relaxed at most in two or three months. I just need to be allowed to go to work; it will be much better… Being back to work, I will regain my energy… At work, I can work and listen to music at the same time so that I can chill out. When I go to work, I feel more comfortable than when I'm at home."*

> (Interviewee No. 3, 49 years old, TV reporter, 2 children)

Still, within the logic of socially ascribed gender responsibility and the level of awareness of each gender's responsibility, the information obtained from our interviews suggests the presence of another woman in the family who supports mothers in caring for and teaching children. Those are paternal grandmothers, maternal grandmothers, and great-aunts in three-generation families. The jobs these grandmothers could take on for their daughters, daughters-in-law, and nieces during social distancing were taking care of the children and feeding them. However, these second women only provided daytime support and could not replace the mothers teaching the children to learn or play with them.

Couples show that today's three-generational families still retain the virtue of filial piety of Vietnamese people. Accordingly, children have to treat their parents with honor and respect, but for children to do so, parents have to be kind-hearted, loving, and responsible to their children. Nguyen (2008) and Le (2006) found a two-way interaction between the old and young generations and vice versa. In three-generation families, generations know how to rely on each other and help each other such as grandparents helping their children in taking care and teaching their grandkids and providing the descendants with business experience, communication, and interpersonal skills ("kindness"); the grandparents are taken care of when they are sick by the latter generations ("filial piety").

"My mother (the kids' maternal grandmother) takes care of my oldest son for breakfast. Then 7:00–7:30, she wakes up the younger baby. After feeding the baby, I ask my mom to take care of the kid, and then I focus on my work. At lunchtime, I let my mother feed my son, and I take care of the baby. Their father is still at work and does not come home at lunch. My older child does not take a nap, so he plays in his grandmother's room during noon. I have to let him play on the phone and watch TV then. Around 4 o'clock, when it is less sunny, I take him out to practice cycling and ask the grandmother to look after the baby."

(Interviewee No. 2, 37 years old, teacher, 2 children)

"Since the epidemic, the kids' paternal grandparents (my parents-in-law) have been staying with us to help my family (for two months so far). They are on the first floor, and we are on the second floor – After feeding my children in the morning, I send them to their grandparents to look after them downstairs, while I have to stay on the second floor to work. My mother-in-law also helps with preparing lunch. During the day, I ask my father-in-law to teach the oldest kid (seven years old) to practice writing and reading."

(Interviewee No. 4, 35 years old, businesswoman, 2 children)

"My family is staying with my aunt, so we ask her to look after the kids when we go to work in the morning. It is such a blessing when we have her. She also helps me with cooking and doing laundry."

(Interviewee No. 5, office worker, 33 years old, 2 children)

"My mother is over seventy years old; she was born in 1950, her health is not too good, but she still supports me with many things, such as going to the market, cooking, washing dishes, and doing laundry. Most of the housework is done by her. Then take care of the kid again. When she wakes up in the morning, she feeds her. I just bathed it and put it to sleep. I look after the children when she does housework and cooks. In the evening, I look after the children for her to cook. But at night, I take care of both of them because Grandma has taken care of my kids all day. In the evening, let her rest and do the things she likes."

(Interviewee No. 7, 38 years old, teacher, 2 children)

Conclusion

Aiming to understand work and childcare role conflicts of working mothers under the condition of social distancing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam, based on the theory framework identified by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), this study demonstrated specific manifestations of these conflicts in all three aspects: time-based, strain-based and expected behavior-based.

In the context of social distancing, when schools were closed, and children were at home, women took on most of the childcare and upbringing responsibilities instead of schools while their working duties still needed to be improved. "Playing with children" was considered by the interviewed women as the responsibility that took up most of their time and energy. This activity attracted attention and contributions from the women. However, the responsibility put the most pressure on the women when they lacked the necessary knowledge and skills.

On the other hand, neither did the women have the habit nor did they exercise this activity. With these added responsibilities, women fell into a state of stress. They confronted role conflict, which manifests in the lack of time to fulfill roles, the stress of role performance, and unexpected behaviors for each role being played. However, these women accepted it as a short-term difficulty they had to overcome. Vietnamese women tend to make personal efforts instead of negotiating a redistribution of family responsibilities with men to resolve the conflict between the work and childcare roles. With this attitude, women's role conflict is not recognized or under-recognized by others, leading to the lack of support and absence of awareness about an official, equal redistribution of responsibilities within their families to avoid negative psychological impacts in case the social distancing period becomes more prolonged, going beyond the point that women can bear.

Acknowledgments

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