

Research Paper

A Social Cognitive Career Theory Approach for Understanding the Career Implications of Caregiving in Academics

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ABSTRACT

Women academics have achieved unprecedented heights, but issues of career development, representation in leadership positions persists because of structural and socio-cultural barriers. There is a growing attention to gender disparities in academics but limited research explains how care burden translates into career barriers through cognitive mechanisms. This study utilizes Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to examine the mediating roles of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and work-family conflict alongside moderating contextual factors as bridges or hurdles in their career advancement. Theory-driven integrative review approach was adopted, the study combines research on gender, career development, and work-family to build a conceptual model. The findings indicate that care responsibilities create a ripple effect: it lowers self-efficacy and creates negative outcome expectations, while increasing work-family conflict. These effects are further reinforced by institutional and structural barriers. By addressing the missing cognitive link, the study extends SCCT and offers a detailed explanation of persistent gender inequalities, mentioning the need for gender-responsive institutional reforms.

Keywords: *Caregiving, Gender, Outcome expectations, Self-efficacy, SCCT, Women, Work-family conflict*

Women's roles naturally belong to the domestic sphere, where caregiving and household responsibilities were socially conceptualized as their primary roles. Feminist economic and sociological researchers argue that this gendered division of work is not limited to cultural norms but there is a structural barrier that prevents women from grabbing the opportunity of leadership and economic independence (Folbre, 2012). Women have made massive strides in the global education sector, especially at the primary and secondary level where they make up 66% women teachers at primary and 54% women teachers at secondary level. However, they continue to hit the "glass ceiling" at leadership positions such as principals, administrators and at senior roles in higher education that clearly show persistent gender gaps at the top positions like in Brazil, Brasilia 75% are male candidates at school leadership positions (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2021). Despite institutional reforms and gender equality programs, evidence suggests that women are still significantly underrepresented in academic leadership positions (Barnacle et al., 2026; Thien

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et al., 2025; Van Veelen & Derks, 2022). This discrepancy highlights a structural paradox: high participation but low progression, commonly understood as the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon within gender and career research (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Traditional explanations for this inequality are the institutional and structural barriers, which include lack of professional guidance for female leaders, biased promotion tracks in addition to male-dominated organizational cultures (Morley, 2013; Blackmore, 2013). However, to truly understand why women’s careers stall, we must understand the interlink between structural barriers and individual cognitive processes, specifically the ‘care burden’ - unequal distribution of unpaid caregiving and domestic responsibilities that continue to critically influence women’s career trajectory (Ferrant., 2014; Folbre, 2012).

Globally, women, across socio-economic backgrounds, spend significantly 289min/day while men spend only 88min/day on unpaid domestic work, whereas for caregiving work women spend 137min/day and men 75 min/day, typically women devote more time than men (ILO, 2018; PIB, 2025). This unequal distribution creates a “double burden” for women while maintaining equilibrium between career and heavy unpaid duties that restrict their ability to engage fully in their career progression (Craig & Mullan, 2011). In the educational context, it is compounded by the ‘emotional labour’ as teaching is viewed as a nurturing profession, where they are often culturally pressured to take on extra supportive and relational tasks apart from job requirements (Cohen & Willemsen, 2022). These invisible and unspoken expectations solidify gendered norms within institutions that increase the chronic stress, workload and a sense of being overwhelmed by competing roles.

Contemporary research demonstrates that despite the massive global presence of women in the teaching profession, a persistent ‘structural paradox’ keeps them out of senior academic leadership positions. This gap is driven by a complex interplay of institutional barriers and the disproportionate burden of care, leading to delayed or constrained leadership trajectories (Cimene & Reilly, 2024; Thien et al., 2025). Although structural factors remain important, cognitive and psychological processes mediate the link between care burden and career outcomes. To explain this, Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) provides a robust framework which mentions a three-way interaction between self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goals, which influences career choices (Lent et al., 1994; Lent et al., 2000).

Studies based on SCCT indicate that caregiving duties not only drain a woman's time but also influence her self-efficacy beliefs that erode professional confidence. Essentially, the persistence pressure of managing the household interferes in demanding leadership roles that feel unmanageable not because of lack of talent, but because of mental and physical requirement for the job sometimes seems out of reach (Bandura, 1997; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Concurrently, women professionals may internalize a pessimistic outlook of outcome expectations, anticipating higher levels of stress, work-family conflict, and professional backlash (Diekmann et al., 2010; Heilman, 2012). These internal perceptions significantly influence the career paths, often deteriorate qualified women from advancement opportunities like promotion, leadership position.

Conflict between work and family life acts as a hurdle, where constant juggling between both the responsibilities creates a strain (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). All these will lead to lower job satisfaction, restricted vertical mobility and lower institutional commitment (Allen

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et al., 2020). Recent studies reinforce that the double burden not only curtails women's access to leadership opportunities but also takes a significant toll on self-efficacy and confidence (Mucheru et al., 2024).

Cognitive and structural barriers are impediments are multifaceted and contingent upon situational variables. Utilizing intersectional SCCT frameworks demonstrate gender inequalities is significantly moderated by overlapping of social stratification such as race, class, caste and cultural norms (Crenshaw, 1989; Lent & Brown, 2019). To illustrate, recent qualitative research on women educational leaders reveal that amalgamation of caregiving responsibilities, institutional bias and societal expectations results in a 'triple burden', where women have to navigate professional roles, domestic and emotional labor (Thien et al., 2025).

Research on gender and leadership is expanding but there remains a lacuna in understanding how care burdens turn into professional obstacles through psychological mechanisms. Some current studies treat care burden as a indirect constraint, without sufficiently examining the mediating role of self-efficacy, work-family conflict and outcome expectations (Wang & Pang, 2017; Yang et al., 2023). Although SCCT has been extensively applied in STEM and vocational settings, it hasn't been sufficiently used to study the women educators leadership trajectories (Folkerts & Brauer, 2026).

This study addresses the gap by exploring Social Cognitive Career framework and integrates care burden, psychological processes and contextual factors to explain women educators career advancement. After exploring the gender studies, career advancement and leadership, offers a detailed and holistic outlook on persistence inequalities of gender.

From this, the study makes three key contributions- First, it extends SCCT by incorporating care burden as a contextual variable that influences cognitive processes. Second, it highlights the moderating role of cognitive mechanisms in translating structural inequalities into career outcomes. Third, it provides a base for developing gender-neutral institutional policies that addresses both cognitive and structural barriers to women's academic leadership advancement

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) was proposed by Robert W. Lent, Steven D. Brown, and Gail Hackett and rooted in Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, SCCT emphasizes individuals shape their career path through interaction between personal, environment and behavioral determinants (Lent et al., 1994). It has three connected components: self efficacy, personal goal, and outcome expectations where self efficacy is the individual's capability to execute a particular task successfully, act as a primary driver to shape career interests, performance, level of persistence (Lent et al., 1994). Goals reflect the deliberate way to make efforts to organize behaviour that will lead to desired professional outcomes (Lent & Brown, 2019). On the other hand, outcome expectations deal with the mental projections we make about rewards of our efforts like work-life balance, financial stability, and social recognition (Lent et al., 1994). These are shaped by life experiences and moderated by contextual supports and barriers like cultural norms, social support, and barriers (Lent & Brown, 2019).

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SCCT and Gender Disparities in career development

SCCT is widely used to explain gender differences in career paths when social pressure and systematic biases limit opportunities. Women have lower self-efficacy in fields dominated by male due to gender stereotype, less role models and limited experiences (Hackett & Betz, 1981; Lent et al., 2000). Helpful for understanding and analyzing how career development takes shapes because of gender expectations. Conventional SCCT have underexplored the care burden and work-family conflict, it is an inter-role conflict in which demands from work and family are mutually incompatible (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). It operates bidirectionally (Khan & Sufyan, 2025; Allen et al., 2020):

- Work-to-family conflict (WIF)
- Family-to-work conflict (FIW)

Rational for the Conceptual Contribution

Extending the scope of SCCT to incorporate work-family conflict (WFC) and institutional constraints as it is not simply a modification but it tackles a vital exploration of framework, fills a crucial gap both in theoretical and practical aspect of career development by:

(i) Moving beyond the individual cognition to structural inequalities

SCCT largely focuses on cognitive-personnel variables such as self efficacy, outcome expectations, while contextual influences are treated as secondary factors (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2019) but these factors are now being recognised as the primary architects. Nonetheless, recent research has suggested that structural inequalities are not just secondary barriers but play a crucial role in molding the career trajectory such as- gender norms, institutional policy, organizational cultures (Byars-Winston & Rogers, 2019; Fouad & Santana, 2017). Without considering structural inequalities, it may over-individualize the career outcomes as personal shortcomings rather than systemic barriers. This is why incorporating institutional barriers as ‘moderating variables’ is vital for SCCT to reflect power structures, inequalities in organization (Lent et al., 2000; Byars-Winston, 2010).

(ii) Neglect of care burden in Educational Profession

While SCCT has been widely applied across domains, it is underutilized in exploring how educators balance high job expectations with invisible caregiving duties especially in academia and education, particularly in post pandemic context (Gabster et al., 2020). Caregiving appears to impact more negatively to career trajectories of women than men. These imbalances create slower promotion rates, publication rates, salary, recognition as they are struggling to balance both (Oleschuk, 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2020). Even so, major traditional career theories overlook caregiving as a central influencing variable, by incorporating WFC into SCCT, the caregiving responsibilities will be acknowledged as a structural barrier to individuals career growth.

(iii) Career Interruption and Stagnation

Key critique of existing SCCT is its limited ability to account for non-linear career paths like interruptions, stalled growth, withdrawal from advancement pathways etc. Research indicates that these disruptions are associated with caregiving and conflicting role demands, especially for women and individuals with caregiving duties (Amy C. Moors et al., 2022; Minello A., 2022), by failing to showcase these disruptions, it ignores the issues of a massive segment of the workforce. Integrating work-family conflict (WFC) into the model serves as an important link in understanding why the career path is non-linear as it is a driver of reduced career satisfaction, organizational commitment and lower progression

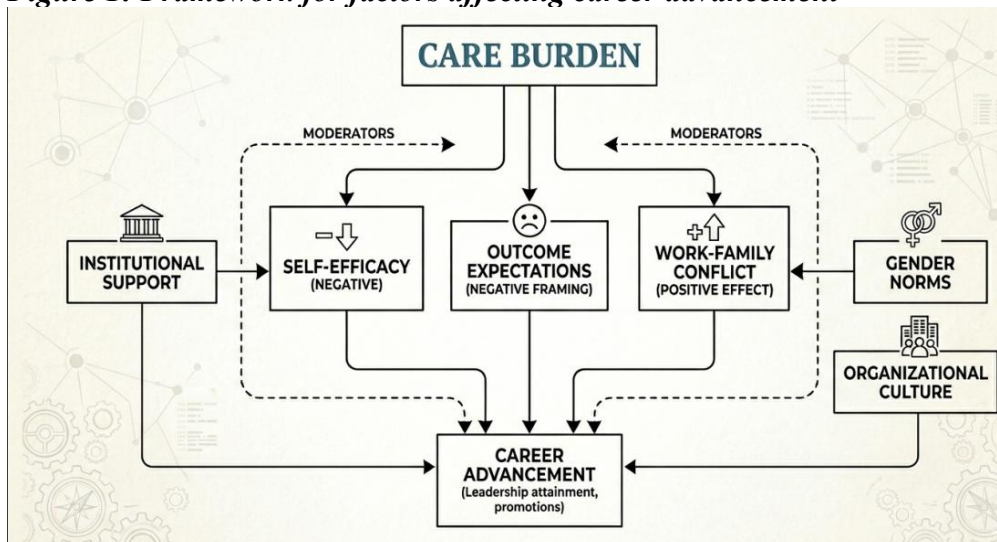
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opportunities (Amstad et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2023; Michel et al., 2011). Treating WFC as a mediator, the framework can explain why even having high self-efficacy might ‘downshift’ their career under real life role pressure (Cinamon, 2006).

(iv) A multi level perspective

Career development has been viewed as a multi level phenomenon, defining it as a dynamic interplay between individual agency and contextual constraints (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT acknowledges contextual influences but it lacks a multi-level integration between individual, interpersonal, and institution (Educational Wave Team, 2025). By integrating this different level: Personal level-self efficacy and outcome expectations, Behavioural level: goals and career actions, Inter-role level: WFC, Institutional level: organizational barriers it effectively bridges gap and advances in a more holistic and system-oriented understanding of career (Lent & Brown, 2019; Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). Integration of different levels makes it really helpful to understand the inequalities.

Figure 1: Framework for factors affecting career advancement



(Google, 20 April 2026)

DISCUSSION

The study acknowledges that care burden is not merely a logistical hurdle but operates through different structural, cognitive, and psychological mechanisms that affect women educators' career paths. By using the SCCT framework, the research indicates how extrinsic barriers are internalized and will navigate the career path.

Key Findings

Low self-efficacy significantly limits women's motivation to pursue leadership roles, following the framework of SCCT, continuous exposure to role overload, reduced chances to engage professionally and scarcity of time erode their self-confidence to lead (Bandura, 1997; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Research also shows that barriers in the form of systemic structure and processes, such as child-rearing duties, affect women's leadership roles despite having similar qualifications (Barnacle et al., 2026; Van Veelen & Derks, 2022).

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Women expect that taking up leadership position will cause work-life conflict, social penalties, and lower quality of life. This kind of negative outcome expectations arise from societal perception of gender-based discrimination discourages women from taking up leadership opportunities (Diekmann et al., 2010; Heilman, 2012; Kennedy & Kray, 2015).

Conflict between work and family life is an important consideration because it converts the obligation of care giving into behaviour and stress levels. This reciprocal interaction between work and family results in vicious cycle of strain, that reduces organizational commitment and job satisfaction and ultimately hindering career progression (Allen et al., 2020; French et al., 2018).

In addition to individual choices, organizational factors such as gender-based expectations, rigidity in organizational structure, and lack of supportive policies have an impact that will be permanent and serves to cement behavioral and cognitive limitations. This creates a interconnected and multi-layered structure of inequality, where both individual cognition and structural constraints interact and reinforce each other, leading to greater inequalities withing careers (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kennedy & Kray, 2015; Ridgeway, 2011). Therefore, it is clear that differences in leadership positions and career advancement of women are not only results of social inequalities but also emerge through psychological and structural processes influences by social inequality.

Implications

This study enhances SCCT by incorporating care burden and WFC as core contextual variables, SCCT had already acknowledged contextual influences, but this study positions care burden that shapes cognitive processes (Lent & Brown, 2019; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). By integrating work-family conflict into SCCT offers a multi-level perspective that connects individual cognition to role demands and institutional constraints, that helps in bridging psychological and sociological approaches of career progression (Raj & Jain, 2025; Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017).

The findings provide actionable insights for organizations to promote gender equity in leadership by institutions that should provide flexible working arrangements that are schedule control, flexitime, and teleworking (Chung & Van der Horst, 2018). Flexibility significantly reduces work-family conflict and improves women's career pathways. Additionally, mentorship and sponsorship programmes play a crucial role in career advancement, they provide social support, role models, and guidance which are important for self-efficacy (Ibarra et al., 2010; Fouad & Santana, 2017).

Gender responsive policies to tackle the gender inequality for which redistribution of care work must be encouraged, includes parental leave for both genders to normalize gender free caregiving roles (ILO, 2018; Ferrant et al., 2014). Expanding access to affordable and accessible care infrastructure can increase women's economic participation (OECD, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2023).

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Conflict of Interest

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