

A Case Reflection on the Cross-Organizational Promotion Process of Professional Women in the Motherhood Penalty: From the Perspective of Actors and Their Rationality

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Abstract

This paper examines the cross-organizational promotion process of professional women facing the motherhood penalty through the case analysis of Xiao Fang, a rural female teacher. Despite the dual pressures of family and career, Xiao Fang successfully overcame workplace gender bias and the motherhood penalty by establishing strong workplace networks and leveraging "discretionary space" for cross-organizational career development. From the perspective of actors and their rationality, the study analyzes how Xiao Fang used discourse and action to deal with conflicts with superiors and exclusion by colleagues, and how she achieved promotion within a professional institution that is legally compliant but implicitly punitive to motherhood. The findings provide insights into the challenges and coping strategies of professional women in the dilemma of motherhood.

Keywords

Professional women, motherhood penalty, cross-organizational promotion process.

1. Research Background

With the advancement of modernization, the traditional gendered division of labor, where men are responsible for work outside the home and women for domestic chores, has gradually faded. Women now bear the dual responsibilities of employment and childcare. For career-oriented women, reconciling the conflicts between work and family has become an inescapable challenge. Existing studies have shown that the costs of childbearing are widespread [1,2,3]. Women often lose working hours, salary benefits, and promotion opportunities due to their childcare and family responsibilities. Some scholars have proposed the mechanism of the "gender-motherhood double tax" [4], and the motherhood penalty has become an important issue in the fields of family and gender studies.

Xiao Fang is one of the interviewees whom the author met during the interviews on the theme of women's organizational dilemmas in 2024. In the eyes of the general public, as a female teacher working in a nine-year integrated school, she has a mother-friendly job. Her career is relatively stable, and she has more time to take care of her family and raise her children in the winter and summer vacations. Indeed, Xiao Fang has not experienced career interruptions or pay cuts due to childbirth and family matters. However, her identities as a "woman" and a "mother" have still posed significant barriers to her career advancement. During the interview, Xiao Fang mentioned that in her workplace, male teachers generally contribute less to family affairs and often take on more important work tasks. As a result, they are more likely to be considered for promotions. In contrast, most female teachers devote a significant amount of their time and energy to their families and tend to be more "laissez-faire" or less aggressive in pursuing career advancement.

In Xiao Fang's case, we can see the life course of working women in balancing family care and career goal achievement: While pursuing their career goals, they also need to take care of their bodies during pregnancy and cope with the high demands of time and energy required for postpartum childcare. Unlike individual entrepreneurs, schools where primary and secondary school teachers work are less affected by market fluctuations, and their careers are relatively stable. Moreover, middle schools do not have the research pressure that universities face [5]. Why is the motherhood penalty still inevitable in this situation? In the work of Xiao Fang, how should professional institutions maintain legality within the scope of the law but implicit motherhood penalty? How does she use discourse and action to deal with conflicts, achieving cross-organizational promotion? The interactions are subtle and intricate, thus endowing the case with richness and complexity in content. In light of this, this paper will take Xiao Fang as a case example to analyze how working women, facing the dilemma of motherhood, deal with conflicts with colleagues, achieve cross-organizational promotions, and further explore the strategic behavioral choices in the interaction between professional organizations and female employees.

2. Motherhood Penalty: Current Status and Research

Women's employment is a principal avenue of women social participation, and the status of women's career development is an important indicator for measuring the level of gender equality in society. In the trajectory of women's career development, events related to motherhood, such as marriage, childbirth, and caregiving, have become important factors affecting women's career development. The prime childbearing years for women often overlap with the critical periods of their career development, creating a notable tension between childbearing and career progression.

Against the backdrop of significant changes in national population policies, social structures, and macro institutions, the balance between work and family for women has also changed. In 1980, China implemented the one-child policy, and urban women of childbearing age generally shifted to having only one child. The shortened time and cycle they spent on childbirth and caregiving have, to some extent, promoted their career development.

At the same time, the responsibility of childcare has become increasingly domesticated and refined, with more and more families investing. During the planned economy period, China adopted a unit-based social welfare system integrating production and daily life in urban areas [6], where work units provided living benefits such as canteens, nurseries, and hospitals, and the daily care of children was mostly accomplished by the childcare services of the units. However, the deepening of market-oriented reforms has altered the original relationships among the state, work units, and individuals. Childcare labor has gradually shifted from the public sphere to the private sphere, and public services related to childcare have been progressively reduced [7]. At the same time, expectations for mothers' investment in raising children are increasing. Mothers often need to make long-term and comprehensive plans for their children's growth, which requires more time and energy than before [8,9,10]. The combined effect of these two aspects has intensified the conflict between work and family for mothers, making women's career development more susceptible to setbacks and exacerbating the motherhood penalty.

Currently, both Chinese domestic and international scholars have advanced research on the motherhood penalty in the following areas. Some scholars have focused on the pathways and consequences through which motherhood affects women's occupational status. Studies have shown that childbirth can lead to unfair treatment of women in the recruitment process, a decline in wage rates, employment interruptions, or a shift to part-time work [11,12,13,14]. A Chinese study found that women's labor participation rates and working hours significantly

decreased in the 0-3 years following the birth of their first child, with no significant difference compared to before childbirth after 4 years of having the first child; women with higher education levels experienced smaller losses in labor supply [15]. Other scholars have taken a dynamic approach to measuring and found that the cumulative duration of career and educational interruptions determines the differences in motherhood penalties within the female population [16]. For example, women with higher education and positions tend to experience greater motherhood penalties [17,18]. From 1989 to 2015, the motherhood penalty in China has been continuously exacerbated. The impact of childbirth on women's wage rates has intensified, the long-term effects of the motherhood penalty have rapidly worsened, and the differences in motherhood penalties among women of different educational levels have gradually narrowed [19]. The cause of women's human capital depreciation is career interruption, and childbirth also affects mothers' employment patterns. As the primary caregivers for children, women who have given birth generally tend to choose low-wage, high-flexibility "mother-friendly" occupations. This downward occupational mobility not only perpetuates the long-term occupational penalty of childbirth for women but also reinforces the existing gender segregation in the labor market.

The discrimination against women by employers due to their motherhood status persists throughout their entire career, compounded by the negative effects of childbirth and child-rearing, which in turn impacts the career development of women who have given birth [20]. With the changes in Chinese population policies such as the "universal two-child" and "three-child" policies, the increase in the number of children may further exacerbate the negative impact of childbirth on women's career development [21,22]. In the absence of adequate social support, childbirth has a negative impact on income, training, promotion, and employment opportunities, thereby reducing women's willingness to have children [23,24]. A study comparing the extent of motherhood penalties in six European countries shows that there is a negative correlation between national family policy support and maternal wage penalties. The United Kingdom and West Germany have the lowest support for working women, and thus the highest motherhood penalties [25].

Facing the current situation in China, many scholars have advocated for policy-based solutions to alleviate maternal stress and free women from the dilemma of motherhood, fundamentally eliminating the "caregiver penalty" [26]. When population policies are introduced to stimulate childbirth, it is crucial to pay attention to women's development. [27] In the process of constructing a comprehensive policy system, it is essential to enhance the support of social public services for women's employment, childbearing and rearing practices, thereby increasing women's and families' willingness to have children. This involves creating a social atmosphere that respects childbirth and fosters a family-friendly environment, enhancing the sense of happiness that women and families derive from having children.

The French anthropologist, Desjeux, based on the "perspective theory," pointed out that for the same social phenomenon, researchers can choose different perspectives for study [28]. Under different perspectives, the facts observed and the conclusions drawn by researchers are different. As the perspective changes, the reference points, the form of things, and the methods of observing things will all change, because the description of reality will be very different. The perspective switching method distinguishes three major observation perspectives: the macro-social perspective, the micro-social perspective, and the individual micro perspective.

Past research on motherhood penalties has predominantly adopted a macro-social perspective, analyzing the outcomes of motherhood penalties through social systems and labor environments. As Desjeux noted, this is the broadest perspective, used to observe regularities, major trends, social groups, and value systems. In this perspective, individuals are almost invisible. However, the current study is an empirical one, presenting motherhood penalties from a micro-social perspective. This perspective is narrower than the macro-social one and is

used to observe social members in interaction. Interactions can occur within institutions, enterprises, and behavioral systems, or at a very micro level, such as in daily etiquette. From this perspective, actors are situated in a social game composed of symbols, materials, and interpersonal relationships.

Some scholars have attempted to explain the motherhood penalty dilemmas experienced by women during pregnancy and postpartum child-rearing from the micro-social situation perspective[29]. The motherhood penalty for career women is not a static outcome but a dynamic practice process demonstrated by different actors through interactions in multiple contexts. In these interactions, actors make strategic behavioral choices based on the power they possess. This study will continue to adopt the micro-social situation perspective, focusing on the subjective feelings and experiences of career women, and analyzing how Xiao Fang practices to seize career development opportunities under the motherhood dilemma. This is also the research perspective of behavioral organizational theory, whose core is to demonstrate the rational strategies of actors in specific organizational systems.

3. Behavioral Organizational Theory: Strategic Choices in Specific Action Systems

The study of modern organizations originated from Max Weber's "bureaucracy" theory. Subsequently, the British and American sociological communities have conducted a large amount of research on this topic. In the 1950s and 1960s, the French school of organizational sociology, represented by Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg, conducted in-depth research on organizational phenomena. The core of organizational analysis is to study specific action systems in relation to power and rules, with an emphasis on the context of actions and the strategies of actors. The fundamental assumption of behavioral organizational theory is that individuals' behavior at work is never entirely constrained. Individuals who pursue rational decisions to achieve their personal goals are free actors. Individuals within organizations possess dual goals—organizational and personal—yet the latter is frequently sidelined in traditional rational decision-making models.

3.1. The Core of Organizational Research: Starting from Uncertainty

Crozier analyzed two specific cases in his book *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*: a Parisian accounting firm and a French industrial monopoly. The cases illustrate that power within organizations does not necessarily reside in the personal authority of formal positions, but rather exists within informal relationships. Each group attempts to control the uncertainties within the organization, using them as bargaining chips or leverage against other groups to expand their own power. In collective action, people are interdependent. Power relations are the fundamental relations between individuals and are also the most universal form of relationship among actors. Crozier emphasizes a "strategy analysis approach" centered on power. This approach examines the action strategies of individuals, their behavioral choices, and the equilibrium states resulting from the interactions of different behaviors in various contexts within collective action. It is a method for analyzing the logic of actors' actions in different situations[30].

3.2. Action Strategies in Specific Action Systems: Conflictual Cooperation

In addition to power, Friedberg explicitly incorporates rules as a core element in organizational analysis[31]. The analysis of power directly involves the rational actions of actors, while the introduction of rules is aimed at analyzing the specific mechanisms that provide conditions for the power struggle between actors[32]. Therefore, before discussing rules, it is essential to clarify the purpose for which they are established. The French school of organizational sociology, represented by Michel Crozier, posits that "there is rational calculation in every

aspect of human emotions, and there are emotional constraints and limitations in all decisions, even the most technocratic ones.” Therefore, the actions of organizational members are not reflexive responses but rather behaviors with “bounded rationality” entangled in rationality and emotion. Bounded rationality creates a significant amount of uncertainty in the interactions between actors, which provides the conditions for negotiation and bargaining. Each individual attempts to control the uncertainties in others' actions to enhance their own power.[33]To ensure its continued existence, an organization requires rules to constrain and coordinate the actions of its members. The primary rationale for establishing rules is to enable superiors to limit the uncertainties in the actions of their subordinates and to control the power that subordinates may gain by exploiting these uncertainties.

Friedberg introduced the concept of the “specific action system,” which reflects the process of constructing a field of action, emphasizing both the actions of the actors and the rules of the game. This action system is established on the basis of a set of rules of the game, with actors engaging in strategic behavioral choices through negotiation. However, the order established by actors possesses local and temporary characteristics, as they continuously exploit and modify the rules to maintain or secure greater benefits for themselves. Thus, within the theoretical framework of the French school of organizational sociology, the emphasis lies on how actions are carried out within organizations and how relationships between actions are constructed.

3.3. Motherhood Penalty and Organizational Sociology

The case of Xiao Fang has two particularities: 1. Despite the fact that her job is considered a “safe and secure” position and a female-friendly occupation in the eyes of the public, why is she still unable to avoid the motherhood penalty? 2. Confronted with the more complex promotion patterns within the system, how did Xiao Fang, who was trapped in the motherhood penalty dilemma, achieve her goal of cross-organizational promotion? The actor and rationality perspective, as well as the analytical methods of organizational sociology, can help us situate mothers within specific work contexts. By focusing on her interactions with other organizational groups as a grassroots teacher, it reveals the multiple game patterns arising from gender and motherhood issues, and the interactive strategies of relevant actors. Specifically, although China's laws mandate equal pay for equal work between men and women and guarantee equal employment opportunities, and despite legal protections for women's maternity and other motherhood-related activities, female employees are still less likely to be prioritized for promotion compared to male counterparts, even when the competition is on equal footing or slightly inferior. Superior leaders view women's potential motherhood commitments as risks. These risks affect organizational management and development. At the same time, Xiao Fang's strong work ethic is seen as “overly competitive and unconventional” by her colleagues in the traditionally-minded rural environment. Grassroots women attempt to strategically advocate for themselves. They strive to maintain a stable balance between family and work. In doing so, they try to secure more resources to achieve their career goals. The interactive process of external pressure—and strategic response—forms the dynamic practice through which Xiao Fang addresses her career predicament. Thus, the motherhood penalty dilemma, as the research question of this paper, encompasses two aspects: on the one hand, it involves external pressures from organizational leaders and colleagues; on the other hand, it concerns how individuals utilize the resources of “discretionary space” to take strategic actions. The ultimate goal is to attempt to summarize feasible suggestions for career women to cope with the motherhood penalty dilemma.

4. A Case Analysis of a Rural Female Teacher's Cross-organizational Promotion in the Context of Motherhood Penalty

This paper selects Xiao Fang as the subject of case study. Her experience reflects the collective dilemmas and coping strategies faced by career women, making her a representative example for analyzing the motherhood penalty encountered by professional women. A good case is definitely not confined to a specific time and place. It either bears profound historical imprints or reflects the temperament of the current era.[34] From the perspective of the basic situation of the research subject, Xiao Fang is a public institution employee, namely a primary school teacher. The school she works at is a nine-year integrated public school. The school in question, a nine-year integrated public institution, was initially established as a primary school in 1935. In 2018, it amalgamated with a junior high school, thereby constituting a unified nine-year integrated school. The school's leadership is predominantly male, while the majority of grassroots staff are female, comprising three-quarters of the total faculty and staff. This year, Xiao Fang is 48 years old and has two children. To protect the privacy of the interviewee, the author has anonymized all key place names and personal names involved in the study; "Xiao Fang" is a pseudonym for the interviewee.

In this section, we will employ the concept of "uncertainty" from French organizational sociology to elucidate the underlying reasons influencing career advancement. The "uncertainty" in this case study will exert a pivotal impact on both administrative and professional title promotions of employees. Subsequently, we will analyze how leaders and colleagues exert pressure on women's career advancement under different circumstances, and how women exercise their agency and strategic thinking to leverage the dynamic practice process of action resources. The specific aspects of pressure exerted by the leadership, the behavioral logic behind such pressure, and the strategies employed by women to cope with this pressure are the key issues that this section aims to address.

4.1. Strategic Points for Controlling Uncertainty: Dual-Channel Promotion in Professional and Administrative Tracks

Crozier pointed out that in the process of interaction among actors within organizations, each group strives to control the strategic points constituted by uncertainty. Their success in the power struggle depends on their ability to control these strategic points. In Xiaofang's school, stable and high-quality teaching outcomes are an important prerequisite for professional title promotion. However, to achieve administrative promotion, such as from a regular teacher to positions like the head of teaching research, the head of the Young Pioneers, or a vice principal, it is not only necessary to have basic teaching abilities and achievements but also crucial to successfully complete additional tasks assigned by the school leaders beyond regular teaching duties. For example, as the person in charge, successfully completing the activities assigned by the education bureau to various schools and obtaining recognition from leaders for organizational and management capabilities. These are the necessary evaluation factors for administrative promotion and also the uncertainty that teachers possess beyond their professional competencies.

4.1.1. Uncertainty Influences Professional Title Promotion

During the pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding period, women's absences due to physical reasons may introduce uncertainty into teaching, potentially compromising the quality of instruction. At the same time, the functional authority derived from administrative rank that principals and teaching directors possess does not necessarily have a direct impact on the work arrangements of teachers. However, when they control the assessment of grassroots teachers and the professional title review, they hold the uncertainty related to teachers' promotion due to their functional authority. The leadership uses various means to exert pressure, attempting

to control the changes in teaching quality brought about by teachers' changes and absences. During the period of fulfilling maternal duties, women are not entirely passive in accepting pressure. They can exercise their agency and strategic thinking to create opportunities for themselves, trying to control the uncertainty brought to assessment and professional title review by their own childbirth and child-rearing, thereby achieving the goal of coping with pressure.

When Xiaofang experiences physical discomfort during pregnancy and has to take several months of personal leave instead of sick leave, it will affect her attendance-related metrics in the professional title evaluation process. Moreover, if her physical discomfort, lack of energy, or suboptimal work performance during pregnancy negatively impacts student evaluations or exam results, it will affect her professional title points. Xiaofang is concerned that if her attendance-related leave causes difficulties in the leaders' work arrangements, they may assign her less desirable tasks in future work, and ultimately, poor job performance will still affect her professional title.

4.1.2. Uncertainty Influences Administrative Promotion

Typically, we understand that teachers' promotion refers to professional title promotion, but there is also administrative promotion. Regular teachers can achieve administrative promotion through positions such as head of the teaching and research group, Young Pioneers counselor, director, vice principal, and principal. Initially, Xiaofang received high recognition from the higher-ups at the education bureau during the school's "Civilized Campus Creation" initiative, demonstrating her excellent administrative and organizational capabilities. Subsequently, Xiaofang was also in charge of a series of other activities assigned by the leadership, all of which achieved satisfactory results. These experiences led Xiaofang to consider the possibility of administrative promotion. Despite the additional costs associated with pregnancy, childcare, and physical discomfort that Xiaofang incurred compared to her male colleagues, her diligent efforts ultimately yielded commendable outcomes in her professional title promotion. However, in terms of administrative positions, Xiaofang has successively experienced three educational system units. Unlike the relatively objective criteria for professional title evaluation, there is no such standardized assessment for administrative promotion within the education system. In addition to capability and seniority, personal relationships between superiors and subordinates also influence the superiors' recognition and inclination. These selection factors beyond objective indicators constitute the uncertainty in administrative promotion.

4.2. Strategic Practices of Female Actors Under Maternal Penalty

4.2.1. Strategy One: Construction of Strong Workplace Social Networks

During her pregnancy and postpartum recovery period, Xiaofang faced the dual challenges of physical discomfort and work management. In order to maintain high standards of teaching quality and class management, she relied on mutual assistance and cooperation with her colleagues.

This type of cooperative relationship based on the principle of reciprocity not only helped Xiaofang maintain her work performance during pregnancy but also provided support for her professional title evaluation. During the pregnancy and postpartum recovery period, female teachers often require additional work support to maintain the standards of teaching quality and class management. Against this backdrop, cooperative relationships based on the principle of reciprocity are particularly important. Such cooperative relationships not only provide necessary work support during pregnancy but also play a positive role at critical junctures of professional title evaluation. When confronted with the dilemmas of motherhood, Xiaofang coped with the dual pressures of work and family by establishing cooperative relationships based on the principle of reciprocity.

"When I was pregnant with my first child, I had severe morning sickness. Being both the head teacher of class and responsible for teaching was definitely more challenging than usual. If the class performance and management weren't up to par, it would affect my annual promotion evaluation. So, our Chinese teacher helped me with some of the class management duties. She and I have a great relationship; we're close colleagues, almost like best friends. But of course, she didn't do it for free. When she was going for her mid-level promotion, I had helped her a lot too. It's all about mutual support, right?" (Xiangfang, personal communication, October 30, 2024)

By building close personal relationships with colleagues, an informal support network is formed. This network is especially important during pregnancy and postpartum recovery. It is based on past mutual help and the expectation of future support, creating a stable support system. This network helps reduce work interruptions and career obstacles caused by childbirth, and it also provides extra channels for communication and collaboration within the organization.

4.2.2. Strategy Two: Leverage "Discretionary Space" to Achieve Cross-Organizational Career Development

Xiao Fang works at a rural town school where female teachers make up more than half of the staff, yet all the leadership positions are held by men. In this rural community, it is common for women to work, but traditional social norms still dictate that women should primarily take on family responsibilities. Their work is seen as merely decorative or supplementary to the household income, rather than a pursuit of career advancement or financial independence. Compared to her female colleagues, Xiao Fang's ambitious and outstanding work performance makes her somewhat of an outlier. Instead of receiving genuine recognition from the leadership, she faces misunderstanding and even ostracism from some of her female colleagues. From this, we can observe a form of gender bias within organizational culture. In Xiao Fang's rural town school, the gender composition of the leadership and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles create systemic barriers to women's career development. The cultural context that expects women to prioritize family responsibilities over career success not only diminishes the power and influence of female agents but also restricts their development opportunities within the organization. Gender bias leads to the underestimation of women's status and contributions, thereby affecting their career advancement and promotion opportunities. Moreover, the school leaders exploit Xiao Fang's desire for promotion and her work capabilities through implicit pressure, which, in the author's view, is akin to a form of "punishment for role transgression."

"Even some veteran teachers say that young teachers, with less seniority, shouldn't always take up the spots. But I believe my abilities should speak for themselves! In our rural town school, there are many 'old-timers,' especially among the veteran teachers, who actually do a rather lackluster job in teaching. They can't produce any substantial materials and just rely on their seniority and personal relationships with the school leaders to get promoted. Back in 2003, I became the Young Pioneers counselor. With these new roles, I had to handle a lot more administrative and organizational tasks, which left me less time to be a class teacher and also reduced my focus on teaching. At that time, I thought the leadership valued me, and I was very motivated. But later, I realized I had fallen into a 'trap' set by the leaders and my colleagues." (Xiangfang, personal communication, October 30, 2024)

After Xiao Fang shifted her focus to administrative work, the slots for professional title evaluation were tilted in favor of other colleagues. However, her promised administrative promotion seemed to be an empty promise from her superiors.

"After ten years as the Young Pioneers counselor, I became nothing more than a workhorse for the school leaders. On the surface, they seemed to trust me with important tasks, but behind my back, they told other colleagues that I was too ambitious. 'Why does an older woman always

want to make progress?' they would say. I felt like I had six arms, juggling family and school responsibilities with all my might, yet it only led to more frustration. After dedicating fifteen years to the school, I sometimes felt caught between a rock and a hard place." (Xiangfang, personal communication, October 30, 2024)

During the ten years that Xiao Fang served as the Young Pioneers counselor, she was in charge of several school-level activities that were subject to inspection by higher authorities. Through multiple interactions with the district's inspection leaders, Xiao Fang's outstanding leadership skills and diligent work attitude gradually earned the appreciation of several district leaders who were in charge of overseeing the schools. She seized the opportunity and, at an appropriate time, expressed to the district leaders her desire to be temporarily transferred to the district education office for further training and experience. In 2012, a staff member at the district's central school retired, and another was transferred, creating a need for additional personnel. The district leadership decided to temporarily transfer Xiao Fang to the district education office to fill the position. However, her employee records remained with her original school.

"The top leader in my school personally nominated me to work at the district education office. Later, when he visited activities at my original school, he praised me in front of my colleagues, saying that I was a capable and diligent comrade." (Xiangfang, personal communication, October 30, 2024)

In 2014, the District Education Office held a public competition for positions. Xiao Fang competed openly with candidates from other schools. With the advantage of her two years of experience and connections at the District Education Office, she successfully passed the assessment and became an official staff member there. In 2019, Xiao Fang was promoted to Deputy Director of a division office. In 2021, when a principal position became vacant at one of the schools in the district, Xiao Fang was transferred from the central school to serve as the principal. At that time, among the 13 schools in the district, she was the only female principal.

In her administrative promotion experience, the author observes three types of "discretionary space." These include not only personal connections and work experience but also the ability to engage in strategic actions within the organization. Firstly, during her tenure as the Young Pioneers counselor, Xiao Fang faced suppression from her school leaders. However, her interactions with the district leaders helped her establish valuable personal connections. These connections not only provided her with information on job vacancies in the target units but also offered opportunities for internal support and recommendations. This informational advantage and relational network constituted her "discretionary space," enabling her to gain a favorable position in the organizational personnel changes. Secondly, during Xiao Fang's transition to becoming a formal staff member at the District Education Office, the work experience and informal relational networks she built during her temporary assignment became another form of "discretionary space." These experiences gave her an edge over other competitors in the application process and facilitated informal communication and collaboration within the organization. Additionally, by proactively expressing her desire for a temporary transfer and actively showcasing her abilities and experiences during the competition, Xiao Fang demonstrated her capacity for strategic action within the organization. Her actions were not merely compliance with organizational rules but also proactive efforts to seek and exploit opportunities within the scope allowed by the rules. These "discretionary spaces" enabled her to identify and utilize opportunities beyond the prescribed framework of the organization, ultimately achieving cross-organizational career development and promotion.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Drawing on an in-depth case study of Xiao Fang, this paper elucidates the intricate process through which career-oriented women navigate cross-organizational advancement while

confronting maternal challenges. Xiao Fang's trajectory illustrates how professional women can strategically exploit limited "discretionary spaces" to foster career progression, despite the constraints imposed by the intersecting roles of motherhood and gender expectations. Her case reflects how professional women navigate the dual demands of career aspirations and family responsibilities while confronting workplace challenges. And the case highlights the strategic actions employed within and across organizational boundaries to overcome barriers. Despite traditional gender role expectations and workplace gender biases, she successfully achieved cross-organizational promotion by building strong relational networks, accumulating work experience, and strategically leveraging resources and opportunities both within and beyond the organization. Her success not only earned her professional recognition but also provides valuable insights and inspiration for other career-oriented women.

5.1. Leveraging "Discretionary Spaces" to Accumulate Resources and Flexibly Navigate Organizational Rules

Within the framework of organizational behavior, an individual's "discretionary space" refers to the strategic room for maneuver that remains available despite the constraints imposed by organizational structure and rules. In Xiao Fang's case, her interactions with district leaders enabled her to accumulate crucial social connections, exemplifying the effective utilization of "discretionary space." Professional women should proactively build relationships with superiors and external stakeholders, using these connections as leverage for career advancement. These relationships play a crucial role in resource allocation, information acquisition, and decision-making processes. Meanwhile, professional women need to deeply understand and flexibly apply organizational rules to protect their rights, especially when facing motherhood penalties. By accurately grasping organizational policies and procedures, they can better navigate their career paths and avoid potential career risks.

5.2. Exercising Agency by Proactively Communicating Intentions to the Organization

Xiao Fang demonstrated her agency by proactively expressing her desire for a temporary transfer to the district leadership. This strategy not only opened up new developmental opportunities for her but also exemplified the importance of individual initiative within an organizational context. Professional women should be courageous in articulating their career goals and engaging in active communication with their organizations to secure more opportunities and resources for development. Simultaneously, they need to find a balance between work and family by negotiating flexible work arrangements with their organizations, thereby achieving harmony between career advancement and family responsibilities. The exercise of such agency requires professional women to have a clear career plan as well as effective communication and negotiation skills.

5.3. Seeking Diverse Experiences and Developing Strong Competencies within the Organization

By serving in administrative roles such as the Young Pioneers counselor, Xiao Fang accumulated valuable management experience, which laid a solid foundation for her subsequent career advancement. Professional women should actively seek diverse work experiences, which not only enhance their professional skills but also increase their adaptability and competitiveness within organizations. Diverse work experiences enable women to build comprehensive professional competencies, including leadership, project management, and cross-departmental collaboration—skills that are essential in modern organizations. Moreover, strong work capabilities are crucial for professional women to maintain their career competitiveness when facing motherhood penalties.

5.4. Establishing and Maintaining Support Networks through Formal and Informal Relationships

The cooperative relationships that Xiao Fang established with her colleagues, based on the principle of reciprocity, constituted an important support network for her when facing motherhood-related challenges. Professional women should value the establishment and maintenance of such support networks, whether they are formal working relationships or informal social connections. These networks not only provide information and resources for career development but also offer emotional support when facing work and family pressures. Professional women can expand their professional networks while cultivating relationships based on mutual trust and assistance in daily work interactions. The establishment and maintenance of these networks are crucial for the survival and development of professional women within organizations.

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