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The Endless Loop: Work, Care, and the Illusion of Balance in the Lives of Female
Civil Society Workers in Northern Vietnam

A qualitative case study on the factors of stress and coping strategies

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Abstract

Vietnam bietet eine eindrucksvolle Grundlage für die Untersuchung der Gleichstellung der Geschlechter. Hier stehen formelle Verpflichtungen zur Gleichstellung der Geschlechter im Gegensatz zu tief verwurzelten patriarchalischen Praktiken. Dies zeigt sich besonders deutlich am Arbeitsplatz: Frauen müssen hier den beruflichen Anforderungen gerecht werden und gleichzeitig den Großteil der Haus- und Care-Arbeit übernehmen. Zivilgesellschaftliche Organisationen (CSO), obwohl sie oft selbst für soziale Gerechtigkeit und Geschlechtergleichstellung eintreten, bilden hier keine Ausnahme. Diese Studie untersucht anhand des Konzepts von Work-Life-Balance (WLB) die Erfahrungen von Frauen, die im zivilgesellschaftlichen Sektor (CSS) im Norden Vietnams arbeiten, im Umgang mit den widersprüchlichen Anforderungen von Beruf und Privatleben. Aus einer postkolonialen feministischen Perspektive reflektiert diese Studie kritisch die eurozentrischen und neoliberalen Annahmen, die dem WLB-Konzept zugrunde liegen.

Diese Studie wurde in Form einer qualitativen Fallstudie durchgeführt. Zur Erhebung empirischer Daten wurden zehn halbstrukturierte Interviews mit Frauen durchgeführt, die in zivilgesellschaftlichen Organisationen im Großraum Hanoi arbeiten. Als zentraler Ansatz für die Entwicklung des Forschungsdesigns wurde *reflexive thematische Analyse* (TA) angewandt. Die *reflexive* TA wurde verwendet, um Stressfaktoren, (Bewältigungs-)Strategien sowie strukturelle und kulturelle Bedingungen zu identifizieren, die die WLB der Frauen beeinflussen.

Die Ergebnisse dieser Studie verweisen auf eine doppelte Belastung für Frauen, die sowohl einer bezahlten Arbeit als auch unbezahlter Care-Arbeit nachgehen. Obwohl sinnstiftende Arbeit als Quelle von Motivation und Energie dienen kann, erhöht das moralisch aufgeladene Umfeld von zivilgesellschaftlichen Organisationen die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass für weibliche Arbeitnehmerinnen die Grenzen zwischen Berufs- und Privatleben verschwimmen. Die Frauen in dieser Studie berichteten von einem stark verinnerlichten Druck, soziale Erwartungen und organisatorische Anforderungen zu erfüllen. Diese geschlechtsspezifischen Schwierigkeiten werden durch organisatorische Hierarchien, die politische und wirtschaftliche Unsicherheit des zivilgesellschaftlichen Sektors und durch Geschlechternormen verschärft. Um Belastungen zu bewältigen, wandten die Frauen individuelle Strategien wie Selbstfürsorge-Routinen, das Setzen von Grenzen oder persönliche soziale Unterstützungsnetzwerke an.

Diese Studie leistet einen Beitrag zur Diskussion über die Ambivalenz des Resilienz-Diskurses: Während Engagement und die Resilienz vielen Frauen das Arbeit ermöglicht, stabilisieren die

individuellen Bewältigungsstrategien auch die strukturelle Ungleichheit, indem sie die Kämpfe der Frauen entpolitisieren und letztlich die Marginalisierten, die weniger Privilegierten und die Armen zurücklassen. Diese Forschung kritisiert die Darstellung von WLB als neutrales und individuelles Thema des Zeitmanagements, ein Narrativ welcher neoliberale Diskurse unterstützt, und fordert eine Neudefinition von WLB als politisches, geschlechtsspezifisches und situationsabhängiges Problem. Die Ergebnisse unterstreichen die Notwendigkeit struktureller Interventionen und kontextsensitiver Maßnahmen.

Abstract in English

Vietnam constitutes a compelling case for analysing gender equality, where formal commitments to gender equality contrast with deeply embedded patriarchal practices. This is especially apparent at the workplace, where women try to keep up with job demands whilst remaining majorly responsible for the domestic labor and care work. The workplace environment of civil-society organisations (CSO), although they often promote social justice and gender equality themselves, are no exception to this. This research uses the concept of work-life balance (WLB) to examine the experiences of women working in the civil society sector (CSS) in northern Vietnam in dealing with the conflicting responsibilities of work and private life. Using a postcolonial-feminist theoretical perspective this study furthermore critically reflects on Eurocentric and neoliberal assumptions embedded in the WLB concept.

This research was conducted in the form of a qualitative case study. To collect empirical data ten semi-structured interviews with women working in civil-society organisations in Hanoi were carried out. *Reflexive Thematic Analysis* (TA) was used as the central approach in developing the research design. *Reflexive* TA was used to identify factors of stress, (coping) strategies and structural and cultural conditions influencing the WLB of the women.

The findings of this study indicate a dual burden for women who perform paid work and care work. Although meaningful work can act as a source of motivation and energy, the morally charged and purpose-driven environment of CSO increases the likelihood of female workers to experience dissolving boundaries between professional and private life. The women in this study reported strong internalized pressure to fulfil social expectations and organisational demands. These gendered challenges are reinforced through organisational hierarchies, the political and economic precariousness of the CSS and persisting gender norms. To manage this burden the women used individualized strategies like self-care routines, boundary setting or personal social support networks.

This study contributes to the discussion about the ambivalence of the resilience discourse: Whilst the engagement and resilience of females enable many to work, the individualized strategies arguably stabilize structural inequality through depoliticising women's struggles and ultimately leave behind the marginalized, the less privileged and the poor. This research criticizes the framing of WLB, in the spirit of neoliberal discourses, as a neutral and individual issue of time management and calls for a reframing of WLB as a political, gendered and situational issue. The findings highlight the need for structural interventions and context-sensitive policies.

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Note on the Use of Digital Tools

Parts of this thesis were originally written in German and subsequently translated into English using the translation software DeepL.com. In addition, I employed ChatGPT as a writing assistant in two specific ways: (1) to refine stylistic and grammatical aspects of the text, and (2) to improve the clarity and flow of argumentation. The use of these digital tools was limited to language-related support. All academic content, conceptual reasoning, and analytical interpretations presented in this thesis are entirely my own.

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List of abbreviations

CSO	Civil-society organisations
EU	European Union
FWE	Family-work enrichment
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
IT	Intersectionality Theory
LNGO	Local non-governmental organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SSI	Semi-structured interviews
TA	Thematic Analysis
UN	United Nations
WFC	Work-family conflict
WLB	Work-life balance
WLC	Work-life conflict

Weekends come. I'd like to relax
But he's tired of work and needs to crash.
So take care of everything, would you dear?
While he is watching TV and drinks lots of beer.
At last I'm through – I'm finally done.
So good night, I have to run.
And hit the pillow and dream a dream
Of the 18 percent who help to clean.

(Poem by Shawn Dickinson Finley; cited in Hochschild & Machung 1997: 277)

1. Introduction

I want to begin this research paper by telling the story of a woman I spent a significant amount of time with during my first weeks in Vietnam — a woman who left a lasting impression on me. Between October and December, I worked for an organization in northern Vietnam that was run by an immensely passionate and ambitious woman named Huong.

Huong, a trained English teacher, had returned to her hometown village and founded a private English tutoring school. She borrowed money from her parents and bought a house, where she converted the front rooms into classrooms and lived in the back with her husband and two daughters. The tutoring institute operated during the evenings and on weekends. Huong shared teaching responsibilities with one other female colleague, which meant teaching from 3:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. on weekdays and from 9:00 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. on weekends (with a lunch break). In addition to running the school, she also worked as an English teacher at local public schools to cover her expenses.

Huong took Sundays off, whenever she could, to spend time solely with her daughters. Every other minute of her seven-day week was divided between work and family. In our conversations, she told me how she had come to realize that she needed to do something just for herself in order to remain strong, for her children, her husband, and her business. Since she couldn't find time during the day, she started waking up at 3:30 a.m. twice a week to attend a 4 a.m. dance class. I was stunned when she told me this; I couldn't imagine voluntarily waking up so early. But she explained that this was the only time she had for herself, since she needed to be back by 7 a.m. to get her girls ready for school.



Figure 1: Extra Tutoring Institute, Northern Vietnam

Huong was fiercely proud of her work. She often told me with pride that she had repaid her parents the loan for the house within the first year of opening the school. She was fortunate to have an unmarried older cousin who looked after her daughters while she worked. Huong was the kind of woman who seemed to hold everything together. She was the comforting parent her girls turned to, the respected boss running the school, and a community leader who organized

local events in her hometown. She often jokingly referred to herself as “superwoman”, a woman who did it all.

Watching her daily life as the matriarch she was, I couldn’t help but wonder: What did her husband do? If she paid for the house and held two jobs, how much did he contribute financially? If the children were either in school, with the cousin, or clinging to her leg, how much of their care did he take on? If she was the breadwinner and caretaker, businesswoman and mother, working 18 hours a day, seven days a week, how busy could he have been?

I was, unfortunately, too polite to ask. I never found out if he too woke up before dawn just to have a moment to himself. The only thing I knew for certain was that he kept birds. While Huong and I were working in the school, he would occasionally appear to check on the caged birds he kept outside the classrooms.

1.1. Context

Research on work-life balance (WLB), particularly concerning women in the workforce, is well established in academic discourse and has increasingly evolved into a critical area of study addressing gender equality and social justice. Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) reflects a global consensus that achieving gender equality is not only a key element of the United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030 but also constitutes a “wicked problem” (Eden & Wagstaff, 2019: 30) in the context of development. Gender equality is defined as “women and men enjoying the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including economic participation and decision-making [...]” (UNCTAD, 2016: 31). Nevertheless, women continue to face significant disadvantages and inequalities in the workforce. Beyond direct discrimination, factors such as the undervaluation of women’s work, labor market segregation, and gender stereotyping contribute to persistent disparities. Among these, challenges in balancing work and private life remain a central barrier to workplace equality (UNCTAD, 2014: 4).

One key reason for the unequal burden of work-life conflict between men and women is the gendered distribution of care work and household tasks. Women globally still carry out the majority of unpaid domestic work (Vashisht et al., 2024: 2). Reinforced by gender role expectations and conservative gender stereotypes, women are expected to be the primary caregivers, leaving them in a continuous dilemma between fulfilling societal expectations in the private sphere and meeting the demands of their workplace. The demand to “take care” reaches beyond the borders of the household and extends into many areas of social and professional life. This results in a double burden that can reduce job satisfaction, harm physical

and mental health, undermine professional careers, and negatively affect overall wellbeing (Shaikh et al., 2019: 53–54; Vashisht et al., 2024: 2).

There is already a substantial body of research exploring women's experiences with WLB and the challenges connected to it (Lekchiri & Eversole, 2020; Noronha & Aithal, 2020; Akanji et al., 2020). However, the experiences of women working in civil society organisations (CSOs) remain under-researched. This is surprising, given that the CSO sector often engages with gender equality rhetorically or programmatically yet rarely reflects on its own internal gendered dynamics. Research into the stress factors and conflicts experienced by women in CSOs is crucial, as it can reveal how ideals of social justice may co-exist with organisational cultures that reproduce gendered burdens.

Many people who choose to work in the civil society sector are intrinsically motivated by their moral values, which often leads to the acceptance of lower salaries, heavy workloads, or irregular hours (Dee et al., 2020: 230–232). The close entanglement of personal values and professional identity results in a synthesis rather than a separation of work and life. This non-separation, while potentially meaningful, can lead to chronic overwork, emotional exhaustion, and unintended spillovers into private life (Dee et al., 2020: 236–238). Since CSO workers are often portrayed as highly committed and self-sacrificing, they are frequently caught in a dilemma between external role expectations and internalised ideals of dedication (Dee et al., 2020: 233). As such, it is unsurprising that the perceived experience of WLB among CSO workers is often low (Mengistu & Bedada, 2021: 10). These circumstances stress the importance of further investigating the WLB of women in this sector, not only to document stress and coping strategies, but also to interrogate the deeper cultural and institutional structures that shape these dynamics.

When researching WLB through a gender-sensitive lens, Vietnam offers a distinctive context. As one of the first countries to formally commit to gender equality in national politics, Vietnam has passed various gender-sensitive laws and boasts one of the world's highest rates of female labour force participation. Vietnamese women contribute approximately 45% of the country's labour income (UN Women, 2021: 99), and gender equality is regularly emphasised in official rhetoric (Hien & Tuan, 2022: 157; Anh, 2022: 48). However, despite this formal progress, traditional gender roles rooted in Confucian cultural values remain deeply embedded in society. These norms continue to influence women's daily lives, particularly the expectation to prioritise family welfare, manage all domestic affairs, and embody self-sacrifice (Schuler et al., 2006: 385–386). In CSOs in Vietnam, these traditional roles intersect with gender-progressive

organisational missions, creating a unique context in which structural expectations, cultural norms, and internalised ideals of care converge.

To critically examine these tensions, this study is informed by postcolonial feminist theory, which challenges universalist assumptions about gender, labour, and empowerment (Rather, 2023: 272-275). This perspective recognises that dominant discourses of WLB, often rooted in Western, individualised, and managerial logics, are insufficient for capturing the lived realities of women in contexts shaped by different histories, economies, and cultural scripts. Postcolonial feminism foregrounds the intersection of gender with colonial legacies, local traditions, and global development discourses. It emphasises the importance of contextualising women's experiences within the social and institutional structures that shape them and warns against depoliticising care and labour struggles through overly individualistic narratives of choice or resilience (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012: 574-575).

This research examines the lived experiences of women working in Vietnamese CSOs, focusing on how they experience and manage WLB. It investigates the stress factors that shape their daily realities, the strategies they employ to cope, and the broader cultural and organisational conditions under which these processes unfold. Rather than assuming WLB as a neutral goal or a technical issue of time management, this study asks: What does “balance” mean in a context where imbalance is systemically embedded? Who is expected to cope, and at what cost?

By drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, this thesis seeks to amplify the voices of women whose labour is often taken for granted, whose boundaries are constantly stretched, and whose emotional struggles are frequently rendered invisible. It moves beyond individualised narratives of stress and resilience, and instead aims to uncover the structural, cultural, and ideological forces that shape the possibilities and limits of WLB in the Vietnamese CSO sector. In doing so, it contributes not only to closing an empirical gap in the literature, but also to reframing WLB as a deeply political and culturally embedded issue.

1.2. Aim of the Research

This research aims to explore how females working in CSOs in Vietnam experience and manage WLB. Additionally, this thesis tries to shed light on the specific factors of stress that these women face while navigating their personal and professional lives and the coping strategies they employ to overcome conflicts or difficulties. By examining the critical intersection of personal affairs, demands of the workplace and social expectations that produce conflict for working women, this study aims to draw attention to potential shortcomings in governmental

and corporate efforts regarding the support of female workers and can hence be used as a base for the development of further measurement and policies to assure equal opportunities for women.

The main research question of this thesis is the following:

1. How do women working in CSOs in Vietnam experience and manage WLB?

This main question is accompanied by the two following sub-questions:

1. Are there specific stress factors impacting the WLB of these women?
2. What (coping) strategies do these women employ to manage their WLB?

1.3. Significance of the Research

This research can be seen as a significant contribution to academic research through multiple dimensions. Firstly, by investigating WLB of women working in civil-society organisations this research adds to the very sparsely existing research that has been conducted about the topic so far. Although researching WLB of women has become increasingly popular there are still significant gaps in the research about the civil society sector. By tracing existing dynamics in the experience and management of WLB of women working CSOs this research can name the specific stressors and explore potential coping strategies.

Secondly, the research sets out to portrait the overlapping of societal gender norms and corporate workplace demands. Especially when applying this to the cultural context of Vietnam this study emphasizes persisting traditional gender ideologies and the ways through which these negatively affect women. To further add to the research about the gendered experience of people in the workplace does not only give us an understanding of the intersectionality of discrimination and individual needs but also contributes to shed light on the multidimensionality of oppression that minders the rights and opportunities of females globally.

And lastly, through applying qualitative methods to research the experiences of individuals this study can broaden the knowledge about those factors that add to the stress and the pressure that working women must go through. Together with showcasing the unique adaptation strategies that the individuals choose to cope with these burdens, the findings of this research can provide an inspiration or a base for the development of more nuanced designed policies and support measurements.

1.4. Research Design

This study aims to follow a feminist epistemological approach to empirical qualitative research. This approach was chosen because this perspective highlights the lived experiences of women as well as focuses on the deconstruction of gender-specific power relations and norms. These orientations allow for a critical analysis of the daily struggles of women to balance their paid work and private lives whilst continuously contextualizing the structural and cultural conditions. Feminist theories furthermore stress the importance of giving women a voice in the research process (Harding, 1987: 161-165). With subjectivity, relationality and reflexivity as the main scientific quality criteria, this study tries to make the research process more collaborative and inclusive.

For the data collection, it was decided to use qualitative methods. Qualitative research in general is especially well suited for research interests that focus on meaning, subjective experience and social realities (Braun & Clark, 2022: 119-221). They aim to create more nuanced understandings of complex phenomena, like the WLB of women in the cultural and institutional context of Vietnam is.

For the data collection process, semi-structured interviews were conducted. This method offers a flexible format, which allows for personal storytelling while simultaneously keeping consistent with a thematic structure. Participants were allowed to share about and reflect on their experiences on their own terms, which allowed the interviewees to set the focus on themes that were important for themselves (Adams, 2015: 493). The interview guideline consisted of open questions, asking about the women's opinion on and experience with stress, coping strategies, care work, gender norms and workplace dynamics regarding their professional and private lives.

The participants were chosen through purposeful sampling. Here, the aim was to select those participants who were identifying as women and were working in the civil society sector in northern Vietnam. This sampling-strategy was rather open in its nature, which allowed for a landscape of multiple different demographics and backgrounds and produced a diversity of perspectives. Before any data collection, ethical considerations were held and all participants were asked for their voluntary consent.

The entire research inquiry, from theoretical thinking, data collection to data analysis was guided by the principles of *reflexive Thematic Analysis* (TA) of Braun and Clark (2022). The analysis process was structured according to the six-phase-model of the authors. This method

was chosen because of its flexibility and compatibility with feminist research principles, like being able to combine the identification of patterns of meaning with the focus on individual voices and the process of knowledge-production itself (Braun & Clark, 2022: 3-8). The analysis was conducted in a reflexive manner, where positionality of the researcher and the construction of knowledge were kept in mind.

The combination of feminist epistemology and qualitative methodology allowed to go beyond the superficial description of work-life-conflicts. It made structural containments, cultural expectations and personal strategies visible which were embedded in the daily struggles for WLB of women working in CSO in Vietnam. This approach acknowledges the agency of the interview participants and puts their voices in the centre of knowledge production. This research design aligns with the superordinate aim of this study to contribute situated, equality-orientated and gender-specific understandings about work and life.

1.5. Overview of the Research

This research paper is structured in seven main chapters which aim to critically reflect the life realities of women working in CSO in Vietnam while investigating WLB and the ways these women cope with struggles.

Chapter one introduces the research topic, the research aims and relevance and connects the research inquiry to superordinate debates about gender, care work and civil society. Furthermore, the theoretical and methodological approach of the study are presented, including the post-colonial feminist perspective and the qualitative case-study design.

In chapter two the concept of WLB will be critically examined. First, it will be started with a conceptional and historical overview of WLB while simultaneously investigating ideological assumptions of the concept guided by the feminist and post-colonial critique. The chapter questions Eurocentric and gender-blind framings within the WLB-discourse and develops a culture-sensitive and theoretically embedded understanding of the term. The chapter closes with an illustration of the most important determinants of WLB on an individual, organisational and socio-cultural level.

Chapter three will provide the methodological frame of the research inquiry. It discusses the feminist epistemology and the qualitative methodology that guided this research, as well as elaborates on the case study research design, the data collection process as well as details the field trip to Hanoi. Furthermore, the chapter explains in which ways *reflexive TA* has shaped

the process of this research. To finish this chapter the ethical considerations, the positionality of the researcher and the limitations of the study were demonstrated.

Chapter four investigates the context of civil society in Vietnam. It draws a short historic overview over the development and political constraints of CSO in the context of the socialist regime and explores the function of the sector in promoting gender equality. The chapter closes with the paradox of gender-progressive state missions and the informal gender-specific workplace dynamics within the civil society sector.

Chapter five looks into the status quo of women in the Vietnamese workforce from a culture-historic perspective. It discusses the changes in gender norms in their development from the age of Confucianism all the way to the period of post-socialist modernisation and reflects how these cultural norms influence the expectations towards women in their private and professional lives to this day.

The next chapter, chapter six presents the findings of the empirical research. Based on the thematic analysis of ten semi-structured interviews within the findings-chapter three superordinate themes were identified: 1. The Experience of Competing Responsibilities; 2. Strategies and Resources of Coping; and 3. Structural and Cultural Conditions. Every theme is

Chapter seven finishes the research with a critical discussion of the findings against the backdrop of the theoretical framework. It circles back to the main research questions and reflects about the contributions and limitations of the research, as well as opens the discussion on possible future research topics to continue the inquiry. The research paper finishes with the call for a comprehensive framing of WLB as a culturally situated, gender-specific and politically controversial issue.

2. Work-life Balance

2.1. Introduction

The term WLB has its origin way back in the 18th century, but especially since the late 20th century has gained increased popularity (Joshi, 2024: 11). In the academic world, more and more studies emerge that try to investigate the correlation between so-called WLB and the performance and wellbeing of employees as well as the performance of organisations (Akanji et al., 2020; Dee et al., 2020; Greenhaus et al., 2003). This gain in interest can be related to technological and demographic changes in the structures of global labor markets, with the influx

of working women and the simultaneous increase in dual-earner households being one of the major causes (Muthu et al., 2015: 114; Joshi, 2024: 11).

Many studies claim that a good WLB can have positive effects on employees' wellbeing as well as on overall organisational performance. For example, employees that experience better WLB are generally believed to have higher job satisfaction, which consequently leads to better performance and productivity (Badaruddin et al., 2024: 420–421). In contrast, poor WLB is associated with heightened stress, burnout, depression, and anxiety. On an organisational level, this individual suffering may translate into lower morale, absenteeism, and declining productivity (Verma, 2022: 7–8). To describe these adverse experiences, academic literature uses a variety of overlapping terms such as *work-life conflict* (WLC) (Skinner & Pocock, 2008: 303), *work-family conflict* (WFC) (Akanji et al., 2020: 1), or *work-life interference* (Bozzon et al., 2017: 2).

However, despite its widespread use, the concept of WLB remains contested. Feminist scholars have long criticised WLB for its gender-blind assumptions and for framing structural inequalities as matters of individual responsibility (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005: 147; Lewis & Beauregard, 2018: 2-4). Particularly from feminist, intersectional, and post-colonial perspectives, the WLB discourse is seen to reinforce a normative ideal of productivity and balance that privileges certain (often white, middle-class, male) experiences, while obscuring others, such as the burdens of unpaid care work or systemic discrimination (Lewis & Humber, 2010: 241-243). Still, the concept continues to be widely used in institutional, political, and legal frameworks, particularly in EU policies that promote “a better WLB for parents and carers” as part of gender equality and economic competitiveness strategies (European Commission, 2023). In the context of this thesis, using the concept of WLB can be justified, not as a universal model, but rather as an entry point for critical engagement with the lived realities of women in Vietnam's civil society sector.

This chapter therefore sets out to engage critically with the concept of WLB. After reviewing its historical development, diverse meanings in academic literature and the key factors that influence WLB (including individual, organisational, and socio-cultural dimensions), this chapter will turn to key critiques from feminist and post-colonial scholars. Despite its conceptual vagueness, WLB continues to shape how gendered labor realities are framed and addressed in both research and policy. Thus, this framework chapter aims to develop a nuanced

and context-sensitive understanding of WLB that is attentive to structural inequalities, cultural difference, and the persistence of colonial logics.

2.2. Deconstructing the Concept of WLB

To critically examine the cultural, ideological and gendered assumptions underlying WLB theory, it is first necessary to unpack the concept itself. The following section turns to a conceptual analysis, tracing the multiple and often conflicting definitions that have shaped its use in academic and policy contexts. Research about WLB is manifold and so are the concepts and theories that were built to describe its nature, its components and processes. Lewis & Beauregard (2018) have argued that the frequent use of ‘WLB’ in literature is based on the multitude of different meanings associated with the term. The authors argue that WLB can refer to a social practice that constitutes a social construct or it can refer to a superordinate discourse. In some cases, WLB can refer to the individual experience and in some it refers to workplace policies and practices (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018: 1-2).

To begin the conceptualisation of WLB we shall start with a literature review. This revealed that an array of scholars has proposed different definitions of the term itself. So even though the concept gets widely applied to empirical research there seems to be a lack of a clear definition and an agreed understanding of WLB in theory (Kalliath & Brough, 2008: 326). To presume further, the following will give a short overview over a selection of definitions of WLB found in academic literature, an analysis of the different variables within the concept before presuming on to frame processes and dynamics connected to the balancing of work and nonwork.

Grzywacz & Carlson (2007) in their effort to conceptualize work-family balance have defined WLB as the “accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his or her role-related partners in the work and family domains” (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007: 455). Clark (2000) defined WLB “as satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict” (Clark, 2000: 751). Greenhaus et al. (2003) describe WLB as “the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in—and equally satisfied with—his or her work role and family role” (Greenhaus et al., 2003: 513).

Kalliath & Brough (2008) who noted the missing of a consensual definition evaluated a variety of existing conceptualisations to try to pin down their common grounds. The scholars identified two commonly agreed upon understandings: First, they argue that in literature the emphasis is

mostly put on the “perceptions of good balance “(Kalliath & Brough, 2008: 326) by individuals. And secondly, this perception of WLB is not fixed but much rather changes over time as an adaptive response to specific life events. Through these two findings they continue to formulate the following definition of WLB: “Work–life balance is the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual’s current life priorities.” (Kalliath & Brough, 2008: 326). This perspective of perception suggests that an individual will experience all external factors through a filter of subjective social values (Guest, 2002: 259). In other words, if one experiences ‘long working hours’ to be ‘long’ depends on his or her beliefs of what amount of working-time per day is appropriate.

Derived from this perspective the research about WLB seems to be unambiguously qualitative in its nature. Although I support the validity of the assumption of subjectiveness of balance I would argue that the representation of WLB solely as a matter of perspective also holds dangers: Just because someone is not aware of their work-life imbalance does still really mean there is WLB? But weighing responsibilities of WLB on the shoulders of the individuals alone negates broader systemic contexts. Guest (2002) raised a strong counterargument by stating: “It is possible that those in work do not perceive a problem but that schoolteachers, aware that children are not being encouraged by busy parents to complete homework, do believe that the problem exists. So too may welfare workers, aware of the growth of alcohol and drug abuse as a way of coping with the pressures of demands at home and at work.” (Guest, 2002: 267). Any analysis of WLB that aims to lay the base for the developing of supportive policies needs therefore to step further than the subjective perspective alone and integrate objective indicators.

When reflecting on the definitions just mentioned we notice that the term itself already indicates two assumptions. First, there are different domains that exist separate from each other: the private and the professional domain; or work and nonwork. By constructing work and life as opposing areas we postulate that these two domains are defined as not only different in time and space but also different in quality. The latter could apply to differences in norms about behaviours or the right manner, used language, norms and so on (Clark, 2000: 751). Clark (2000) asserted that the special and temporal separation of work and home during the industrial revolution caused the contrast of domains today. The relocation of the workplace resulted in the creation of an organisational culture of workplaces that differs from the family culture (Clark, 2000: 753-755).

In literature work gets predominantly described as such activities that are economically productive, therefore have a financial outcome. This indicates that all activities that are not

getting paid by a third party are in conclusion part of private life. Broken down to simple terms, ‘work’ is paid employment (Guest, 2002: 261; Clark, 2000: 748) and life or family-life therefore is suggested to be anything other than the paid employment. Clark (2002) further defines ‘life’ as anything that “satisfied the ends of attaining close relationships and personal happiness” (Clark, 2000: 753).

However, these definitions seem over-simplified and can be broken down further. For example, to quantify working time as paid employment hours becomes questionable for people who either travel a long time to commute to their workplace every day or for people who either live at their workplace (like hoteliers) or work from home (like home production). Similarly, nonwork-time can be further diversified. The assumption that nonwork can be synonym to family-life (Clark, 2000: 753) is arguably a gross reduction of the multiple areas of “the rest of life” that exist (Guest, 2002: 262). Besides family responsibilities individuals also have their disposal of free time or leisure time that they spend non-family related. Another area that makes the separation of work and life difficult is any activity outside the actual working hours that are still spent on work-related activities (Guest, 2002: 262). One could think about further educational activities or even networking meetups with work relations. All in all, it seems questionable whether defining ‘working life’ and ‘private life’ in an all-encompassing way, in view of the complex realities of human beings, is not fundamentally a doomed endeavour (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018: 2-4).

Furthermore, the perception of separated areas of work and life can be challenged. In a study conducted by Dee et al. (2020) about the experience of WLB among nongovernment workers the scholars discovered that their research objects perceived work and family not as opposing areas, but they synthesize the two roles and thus generating a new, integrated role that combines aspects of family and work spheres. The authors called for the term of *work-life synthesis* (WLS) over the term of WLB, implying that a separation of the two domains is less adequate for the sectors in which workers experience a large identification with their jobs – where “work is life” and workers are “living one’s calling” (Dee et al., 2020: 236). The interviewees reported that they didn’t differentiate between work and life but rather see both domains as life itself (Dee et al., 2020: 236).

Reflecting on the points presented above I suggest an understanding of work as anything that is intended to have an economically productive outcome, meaning that is resulting in financial compensation or in the fulfilment of commitments towards an external entity that further improve economic productivity. Life on the other hand is any hours spent on either performing

care work or other reproductive activities and/ or any time without any commitments to others (leisure time) (Guest, 2002: 263). I argue that this differentiation within the domain of life is critical from a feminist standpoint. The term of WLB already bears the danger of assuming that anything outside of work is non-work, or equal to leisure time, thereby denying that unpaid care work should be considered work, too. This point will be further discussed in the following chapters.

The second assumption resulting from the WLB-term can be found in the idea of ‘balance’. By theoretically assuming that there is a state of balance this conversely means that there can be states of imbalance or so to say conflict, between work and life, commonly referred to either as work-life conflict (WLC) (Skinner & Pocock, 2008: 303) or work-family conflict (WFC) (Xu, 2009: 229). From this we already detect that the concept of WLB is based on the idea of the existence of two dichotomies: work and life as well as balance or imbalance.

Arguably one of the most problematic aspects within the WLB terminology is the concept of balance. The concept of 'balance' implies a measurable equilibrium between fixed domains. Yet, it disregards the structural inequalities that make this balance unattainable for many. The idea also positions failure to balance as personal rather than systemic. Feminist and intersectional critiques argue that this model implicitly blames individuals, mostly women, for structural failings in care provision, workplace design, and social expectations.

2.3. The Eurocentric and Gendered Nature of WLB

While the concept of WLB continues to be used in academic, political, and cultural contexts around the globe, its theoretical underpinnings and practical applications are far from neutral. As the previous section has shown, WLB is frequently framed as an individual challenge with implications for productivity and well-being. However, to understand how this discourse has evolved, and whose interests it serves, it is crucial to explore its ideological foundations. The following chapter therefore turns to a critical examination of the Eurocentric and gendered assumptions embedded in dominant WLB narratives, beginning with its alignment with neoliberal logics that shift responsibility for well-being away from structural institutions and onto individuals.

2.3.1. Work-Life Balance as Neoliberal Discourse

One of the most pervasive ideological frameworks underpinning these narratives is neoliberalism. Its influence becomes particularly visible in how WLB is framed not as a structural or societal issue, but as a matter of individual responsibility and self-management.

The researcher Suzan Lewis has been a pioneer in researching WLB and has through her numerous publications over decades significantly contributed to the knowledge about the relationship between WLB and gender equality (Rajan-Rankin, 2016: 229). In one article by Suzan Lewis & T. Alexandra Beauregard (2018) the authors argue that WLB as a concept moves the responsibility for the compatibility of work and private life as well as employees' wellbeing to the individual level and away from the state level; The authors argue that the WLB discourse serves a neoliberal agenda that depoliticises work-life conflicts by distracting from higher-level mechanisms of governments and its structures that fail or refuse to assume their duty of care for the population by making WLB an individual or organisational matter (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018: 2-4).

Steve Fleetwood (2007) supports this problematic depiction of WLB as part of the of itself *neoliberalism*, the latest form of capitalism (Fleetwood, 2007: 388). Fleetwood (2007) substantiates this by pointing out the similarities between WLB and neoliberal discourse: *Neoliberalism* as a political project initiates the withdrawal of the state out of the welfare system, leaving the individuals to organize childcare and elderly care on their own terms. This opens up the freedom for individuals to decide about their own ways of e.g. nursing their children or about their own WLB. Key actors of welfare systems are now businesses, private institutions and individuals. Whilst the idea of giving employees freedom of choice may sound promising, it ultimately serves to reinforce the dependence of individuals to private institutions, hence increasing the power of the market economy and strengthening the mechanisms of capital accumulation of economic elites. Therefore strong allegations against neoliberal strategies can be drawn that claim the repressive nature and harmfulness of neoliberal state systems towards the working class (Fleetwood, 2007: 391-392). "The law recognizes the needs of business, not the needs of the family, as paramount and hence loads the right to request and the duty to consider in favour of business, while maintaining a veneer of symmetry." Fleetwood argues (Fleetwood, 2007: 397).

The neoliberal shift of responsibility for welfare systems to the private sphere is accompanied by the perspective that everyone is the architect of their own fortune. The state is retreating

whilst responsibilities move to the individual. The fact that women working in the economy will always experience stress, dissatisfaction and struggle is not solely due to the fact that they have to bear the weight of this unpaid but necessary care work when they come home from work. From a post-colonial feminist standpoint, we need to as well problematize the structures of organisations; so, the conditions women face whilst being at work. Joan Acker (1990) famously theorized the concept that the author called “Theory of Gendered Organisations” (Acker, 1990: 1). She argues that organisations are not gender-neutral but are shaped to fit the needs of the allegedly “universal worker” (Acker, 1990: 150) who is in reality based on the male norm. These organisational hierarchies will consequently advantage men whilst marginalizing women (Acker, 1990: 139-151). In a system that is not designed for female needs, women will always struggle.

But the personal struggle of women to succeed in their careers is not the only issue that needs to be addressed when discussing the connections between WLB, neoliberalism and female emancipation. If we overlook these structurally embedded drivers of inequality, feminist calls for the integration of women in the economy and labour markets will lead to problematic consequences. In Nancy Fraser's influential work ‘Fortunes of Feminism’ (2013) the author describes the historical evolution of struggles of feminism in relation to phases of capitalism and provides an important lens to understand the contradiction within the ideology of neoliberalism, a late form of capitalism. It can be argued that the conceptualisation of WLB mirrors broader transformations between capitalism and feminism. As Fraser (2013) argues, neoliberalism and its promotion of ideas of individual freedom has misused discourses about citizen empowerment and social justice the retreat of the state from its welfare responsibility while simultaneously legitimizing privatisation and marketisation (Fraser, 2013: 222).

According to the author claims of second-wave feminism, which originally went out to critique male-breadwinner models, unintentionally coopted with neoliberalism and its flexibilization of the labour markets. Fraser calls this development a “dangerous liaison” (Fraser, 2013: 14) in which feminist goals are instrumentalised in support of market expansion. While the problematisation of the exclusion of women from labour markets through models like the family wage once were central claims of feminism, it contributed to an idealized view of the “two-earner family” (Fraser, 2013: 15).

But why do we need to problematize this shift? In an interview with *The New York Times*, that carries the title ‘A Feminism Where ‘Lean In’ Means Leaning On Others’, Fraser states that she believes contemporary mainstream feminism to be insufficient to achieve real justice since

it mainly targets the interests of educated, middle-class women. Since this turn also required women to have an income to make a living for the family, Fraser claims that this turn has not led to increased financial stability and equality for all. On the contrary, in the process of exporting manufacturing to the Global South through globalization it can be said that globally real wages have declined whilst working hours are increasing (Gutting & Fraser, 2015). “The feminist critique of the family wage, once directed against capitalism’s devaluation of caregiving, now serves to intensify capitalism’s valorisation of waged labour.”, Fraser summarizes (Gutting & Fraser, 2015).

According to Fraser this mainstream form of feminism primarily targets the desire of a small group of elite women that were already set up to succeed in the male-dominated capitalist system. For those women, to be able to make a career of their own, to “break the glass ceiling” (Gutting & Fraser, 2015) within the existing corporate structures, is only made possible by outsourcing their unpaid care work to mostly low-waged, usually racialised and/or precarious immigrant female workers. Nancy Fraser therefore critiques mainstream feminism for having adopted a limited, market-driven understanding of equality that cooperates with the neoliberal capitalist ideology, promoting individual success instead of collective emancipation and system change (Gutting & Fraser, 2015).

If contemporary feminism misses out on challenging superior systems of exploitation of marginalized groups, then this will ultimately reinforce predatory economic structures that were designed to benefit a few at the costs of many. By framing female market participation as women’s empowerment, neoliberalism is trying to give itself a progressive façade. This is providing capitalists a moral alibi that further hinders the fight for global justice and equality (Gutting & Fraser, 2015). To work towards true feminist emancipation and gender equality, we must look beyond the sporadic success of a few women, but it should be an imperative to address structural systems of injustice across race, class and global divides.

2.3.2. Gendered Assumptions and the 'Second Shift'

Beyond its alignment with neoliberalism, the WLB discourse also rests on gendered assumptions that obscure the unequal distribution of unpaid labour. These assumptions become particularly evident when examining the persistent division of responsibilities within the household, a dynamic that feminist scholars have long problematised.

In 1989, Ariel R. Hochschild in collaboration with Anne Machung first published the book “The Second Shift: working parents and the revolution at home”; from which title the term

“second shift” should quickly be coined after to describe the way employed women do not have or barely have access to leisure time since they need to spend their time outside their professional work with domestic- and care-work. “Just as there is a wage gap between men and women in the workplace, there is a “leisure gap” between them at home. Most women work one shift at the office or factory and a “second shift” at home.” (Hochschild & Machung, 1997: 4). The authors argue that their studies’ results indicated that women have to “juggle three spheres – job, children and housework – while most men only juggle two – job and children.” (Hochschild & Machung, 1997: 9). From this we can draw two key claims on gender inequality by the authors: first, the workload within the domestic realm is disproportionately higher for women than for men. Hochschild & Machung (1997) famously postulated that through the amount of extra domestic duties compared to men “they worked an extra month of twenty-four-hour days a year.” (Hochschild & Machung, 1997: 3); and second, women are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and suffering through the constant feeling of time pressure and lack of time (Milkie et al., 2009: 490).

Research about WLB can still be regarded as highly important especially in the context of gender equality. Research has shown that especially women struggle most with achieving WLB due to their dual roles and responsibilities resulting from persisting heteronormative gender stereotypes which are now colliding with the neoliberal development of labour-markets that showcase a strong increase in dual-earner households (Rosa, 2022: 2). Especially over the last century we can trace the trend of more and more women entering the labor markets. More and more women step over their traditional roles as mothers and home-carers and enter jobs side by side with their male counterparts. Problematic about this development is that we can see a strong increase in women taking up traditionally male roles (e.g. being a breadwinner) but we do not see the same development with men. The rate of men integrating in domestic tasks and care work is significantly lower than the integration of females in the labor market (Yavorsky et al., 2015: 662, Eagly & Wood, 2012: 470-471). This leads to women having to carry two responsibilities on their shoulder: to be breadwinner and home-carer. This has resulted in an immense number of duties and pressures that affect working women worldwide, creating high amounts of stress (Deshmukh, 2018: 134-135). Studies have given reason to worry that this stress is not only negatively affecting women’s careers and performance but also is actually harming the physical and mental health of women (Deshmukh, 2018: 135, Hochschild & Machung, 1997: 9;).

2.3.3. Intersectionality Theory

While the concept of the theory of Hochschild & Machung (1997) about the “second shift” (Hochschild & Machung 1997: 4) reveals how gender shapes the unequal distribution of labour, it does not fully capture how other axes of identity, such as class, race, or ethnicity, further differentiate women’s experiences. To account for these overlapping and compounding structures of inequality, this research draws on *Intersectionality Theory* as a necessary analytical lens.

This research is investigating the ways in which “Vietnamese women” experience WLB whilst working in the CSO sector. There are two points that need to be further discussed about this: Firstly, as seen above, this research supports a framework that differentiates between the biological category of sex and the socio-cultural constructed category of gender. If this research is mentioning “women” or “females” it refers to the social construct of gender with all its historically evolved and culturally reproduced stereotypes and norms regarding men and women. Secondly, this research acknowledges that the categories of gender in themselves are not homogenous. The experiences of women can differ significantly depending on additional social categories like race, ethnicity, class, age, and so on. The lived reality of individuals in society is shaped by a multitude of social categories that intersect.

A theory that addresses the importance of acknowledging these overlapping categories when researching inequality is the *Intersectionality Theory* (IT). The IT was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. In her famous study on black female factory workers Crenshaw noted that individuals embody multiple different identities simultaneously (e.g. race, class, gender, and so on). The author stated the importance of acknowledging these intersectional identities in the context of feminist research and research about racial discrimination. If we only use one single social category as the variable (e.g. gender) for research about inequality, we are running the risk of concealing other dimensions of discrimination that affect the individuals. Crenshaw famously unveiled the difference in the experience of discrimination of black women in comparison to the experiences of black men and of white women (Crenshaw, 1989: 139-141). Peoples’ lives are shaped by their multilayered identities.

This research proposes that any efforts made towards the goal of gender equality necessarily need to address intersectionality as a lens for its empirical research. Intersectionality as a theory recognizes that social categories (like race, class, gender, and so on) all influence the ways in which individuals experience privilege or oppression in their daily lives. *UN Women* (2021)

identified eight dimensions that constitute different identities: education, religion, gender & sexual orientation, poverty status, race, indigeneity, geographical location and disability (UN Women, 2021: 8). According to the “Intersectionality resource guide and toolkit” of *UN Women* (2021) “Understanding the importance of intersectionality will lead us to ask ourselves who is left behind, why and under what circumstances. [...] Failure to examine these elements risks undermining the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the perpetuation of intersectional inequalities” (UN Women, 2021: 9).

2.3.4. Post-Colonial Feminist Theory

While intersectionality offers a powerful framework to understand the interplay of multiple social identities, it must be complemented by a critical reflection on global power dynamics and the legacy of colonialism in feminist thought. Post-colonial feminist theory builds on this by challenging the universalisation of Western feminist perspectives and foregrounding the situated experiences of women in formerly colonised societies.

Key contributions of this perspective lie in the critique of the construction of ‘non-western women’ as a homogenous group within common Western Feminist Literature. The publications of the author Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak need to be named in this context due to their impact on the discourse. Both authors famously critiqued western feminist literature for homogenising the “third world” and the “third world woman”, which often leads to an overlooking of context-specific struggles of women in non-western cultures. This results in a double oppression of women in non-western countries: through patriarchal and colonial systems (Mills et al., 1998: 106).

Picking up on the core understandings of this perspective together with the insights of *Intersectionality Theory*, this thesis supports the standpoint that although the experience of women in post-colonial societies can in many ways differ significantly from those in Western counterparts, feminist research needs to stay aware and inclusive towards the diversity of different lived experiences of women everywhere. And, To put it into the words of Sara Mills (1998): “perhaps the most important area in which post-colonial feminism can develop is in the theorising of difference, where by women can speak across national and cultural barriers, not to assume that their contexts or concerns are the same, but rather to develop a set of theoretical principles of 'translation', so that alliances can be formed in spite of, and perhaps (paradoxically) because of, differences in power and differences in culture” (Mills et al., 1998: 109).

2.3.5. Decolonizing WLB Theory

Before leaving the realm of critical contemplations regarding WLB theory there is one last issue that should be addressed: Most of the theories and frameworks that have been discussed so far to explain WLB, gender roles, and so on, have their origin in western academia. So why is it even important to note from which cultural context an academic theory arose?

This research supports a standpoint that argues that western academia dominates global debates, which ultimately perpetuates a colonial power dynamic in which western ideas and belief systems out rule non-western perceptions and ultimately lead to a continuous marginalization of non-western (academic) knowledge production and cultures. By doing so, this research aims to raise awareness to the *coloniality of knowledge* which is part of the wider debate on decolonialisation of research and academia (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021: 1). Coloniality as a concept rejects the myth of a ‘post’-colonial world by drawing attention to “all those colonial systems of oppression and exploitation that have survived formal ‘decolonization’” (Mantz, 2019: 1363), showing how these racist systems are still at the core of “contemporary processes of development, globalization, nation-state building, policing and surveillance tactics, global inequalities, extractivism, neo-fascism, and various forms of social, political and economic control” (Mantz, 2019: 1363). To quote Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021): “At this moment of our historical trajectory, it is a moral imperative to embrace decolonizing approaches when working with colonized groups on what some have described as “stolen land.” No one from the academy, even if they are members of non-white communities, is automatically exempt from perpetuating privileged, Western centric, colonial ideas” (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021: 6).

Against the backdrop of the scientific world this idea of coloniality translates to the ways in which western knowledge production gets detached from its regional context and claims a false sense of universality. This process is also known under the term Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism does not refer to the geographical location but addresses how non-European beliefs are getting concealed and devalued (Ziegler, 2022: 13). The decolonial researchers M. Tlostanova and W. D. Mignolo (2020) have described this process of the coloniality of knowledge as the “operation of hiding the provincial western European context and origins of knowledge production under false universalist and ethnocentric pretences” (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2020).

It is important to reflect on Eurocentric views that lie within the concept of WLB, not only to be sensitive for colonial continuities but also since one may otherwise overlook unique challenges that arise in non-European cultures or draw on false assumptions. Many academics

have perceived WLB to be Eurocentric primarily due to its origin and the discourse surrounding it and consequently researchers have made efforts to adapt the concept to non-western societies (Rosa, 2022; Chandra, 2023; Akanji et al. 2020).

In a study conducted by V. Chandra (2012) the researcher aims to compare the differences in eastern and western perspectives on WLB. The findings of the study show that in the Asian cultural context the issue of WLB is viewed almost identical with gender issues. While contemporary European research is framing WLB as an issue that affects both genders equally, the Asian perception understands it as a “women issue[s]” (Chandra, 2012: 1055). Furthermore, the findings are hinting that the application and practice of WLB policies (like family-friendly policies) seem to be more theory than practice in Asia, compared to Europe (Chandra 2012: 1055).

Akanji et al. (2020) in their qualitative research on the experience of WLB of female professionals in a “developing country context” (Akanji et al., 2020: 1) set out to prove applicability of findings from contemporary (Eurocentric) work-life research on female doctors in Nigeria. The authors argue that to identify stressors of WLB it is critical to address wider contextual factors, but most WLB literature oversimplifies cultural elements and fails to address these “macro context-specifics (e.g. patriarchal proclivities and task-pay disparity)” (Akanji et al., 2020: 11). This aligns with R. Rosas (2022) proposition, that it is necessary, when comprehensively researching WLB of females, to look into the complex intersectional identities of these women and how the different roles (as a worker, as a mother, as a member of society, and so on) create unique challenges for the individuals (Rosa, 2022: 13).

Reflecting on WLB theory, we can see that the acknowledgment of Eurocentric assumptions of the concepts is highly important from a decolonial standpoint. The core concepts that the most commonly used theories deal with are rooted in western-centric social norms which most intellectuals fail to address. Especially in the context of a concept that is as vague and unambiguous as the WLB-theory, the way we interpret findings is key. To judge if WLB is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ we inevitably must first determine what working conditions are socially considered desirable. The ways in which we understand and manage ‘work’ and ‘life’ on a personal, organisational and societal level are highly dependent on cultural norms. The ways in which an individual experiences working conditions as satisfying or unsatisfying depend on what people think is ‘normal’ and therefore acceptable. To research WLB in a decolonial and culture-sensitive way, the researcher needs to be open to unveil and potentially question Eurocentrism within the theoretical assumptions about gender, economy and society.

2.4. A Gendered Perspective on Work-Life Balance: Practice and Policies

While the previous chapters have exposed the conceptual and ideological foundations of WLB, it is equally important to examine how these ideas materialise in everyday practices and institutional policies. From a feminist perspective, WLB must be understood not only as a theoretical construct but as a gendered practice, one that often reproduces traditional divisions of labour under the guise of neutrality (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018: 4). These gendered dimensions become particularly visible in the terminology used within academic and policy contexts. I argue that the widespread use of *work-family balance* alongside or instead of WLB is more than a semantic choice: it reflects and reinforces the normative assumption that the primary non-work responsibility, particularly for women, is the family. As this section will demonstrate, such linguistic framing narrows the scope of WLB and risks obscuring the diverse realities and multiple roles that shape women's lives beyond paid employment and caregiving (Rosa, 2022; Joseph & Sebastian, 2019).

As the concept 'work-family balance' developed to be more popular in the late 20th century and researchers would dominantly refer to it as work-family balance. Most research focused on the balance between work and family responsibilities. It can be argued that to limit the sphere of private life to solely referring to family responsibilities will ultimately “narrow the scope of WLB research” (Joseph & Sebastian, 2019: 54). Since this research is specifically trying to capture the experience of work-nonwork balance of women, I would firstly argue that researching exclusively the interrelationship between family- and work-life may overlook the diverse and complex areas of a female reality. To portray only the areas of work and family affairs conversely denies the importance and the influence of other aspects of female lives on wellbeing, job performance and so on. Or to put it into the words of Joseph & Sebastian (2019): “work-life balance is a construct which is wider than work-family balance construct as the former construct is not only capable of explaining whole amount of variance that the work-family construct can explain but also can explain the variance in the dependent variable (work domain, family domain and personal life domain) beyond work-family balance construct can explain.” (Joseph & Sebastian, 2019: 63).

When we move away from academic literature alone and observe in which contexts of political discussions the concept of work-family or WLB was picked up on we can argue the following: Political agendas and national politics that addressed WLB in the past almost exclusively used this term in a context of family friendly policies. Studies show that in many countries of Europe, the US but also Japan, historically policies to improve WLB were most likely intended as

measurements against failing birth rates. Therefore WLB issues and their improvement measurements (like maternity leave and childcare) were only applicable to women (Ishida, 2020: 24; Guest, 2002: 256). The author Ishida (2020) has strictly criticized this interpretation of the concept since it inherently includes the idea of sexual division of work. The author argues: “A WLB policy change should make it possible for individuals to work and live with respect. Therefore, the sexual division of work must be dispelled for both sexes to participate in both work and life as they wish.” (Ishida, 2020: 24). In other words, if the goal of a study is to research the WLB of women in the context of the reflection of gender inequality then one needs to dispel any connotation of the assumption of gender neutrality when it comes to WLB political agenda or workplace policies. WLB as a measurement is not gender neutral, since women observably make more use of WLB-policies whilst accepting the stagnation in or limitation of their own careers (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018: 4). Supporting female workers to be equal in their ability to achieve WLB should translate to giving women simultaneously the ability to define the sphere of life on their own terms. To research WLB in a gender-sensitive way we must explicitly address and exclude underlying gender ideologies that will otherwise be reproduced (Rosa, 2022:12).

Continuing this criticism over underlying gender role expectations I want to pick up the topic of defining ‘life’ in WLB concepts. Even if we are choosing to refer to work- and family-life to be the two opposing domains, we still need to use the terms of ‘work’ and ‘life’ and their interpretations with caution. Circling back to the finding that in common literature ‘work’ is translated to paid employment (Guest, 2002: 261; Clark, 2000: 748) this conversely leaves unpaid activities to appear as nonwork. This observation is a central point of critique of feminist economists who have argued for years that the depiction of care work or household work is being devalued by the capitalist economy because the understanding of the word itself solely reflects patriarchal interpretations of what can be considered as work or productive (Folbre, 2001: xi-xii). I argue therefore that using terms like ‘non-work’ or ‘life’, which implicate leisure time, bear the danger of negating the additional but unpaid care- and domestic-work responsibilities of many women that Hochschild rightfully called “the second shift” (Hochschild & Machung, 1997: 4).

2.5. Determinant of Work-Life Balance

Having examined how WLB is shaped by gendered assumptions and policy approaches, it is now important to take a closer look at the concrete factors that influence individuals’ experiences of WLB. The following section outlines key determinants across personal,

organisational, and socio-cultural levels that interact to shape work-life dynamics in everyday life.

Work-life balance can be affected by a variety of factors in a positive or in a negative way. Factors that influence and change the dynamics of WLB furthermore take place in different spheres: the individual level, the organisational structures of the workplace and the socio-cultural context (as seen in figure 2). Understanding the determinant factors is crucial to develop effective instruments to improve employees WLB.

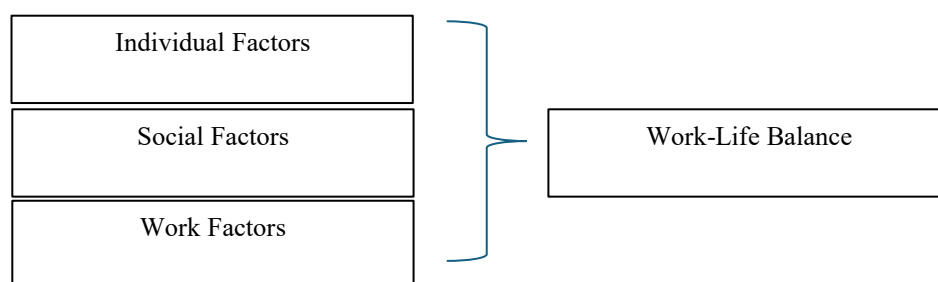


Figure 2: Conceptual Model of the Factors Affecting Work-Life Balance (Joshi 2024: 17)

The researcher Graham Staines also supports this division in his impressive 1980 study, in which he divided the factors that influence the relationship between work and non-work, and consequently WLB, into work-to-non-work effects (or work factors), non-work-to-work effects (or social factors) and effects of third factors such as personality types (or individual factors) (Staines, 1980: 122-124).

Of course, the factors that can influence a person’s experience of WLB are diverse. The overview of determinants presented below is not claiming to be absolute and complete but is rather representing a selection of factors which are mentioned most frequently in the literature and can therefore be regarded as the most relevant factors.

Starting off with ‘work factors’ or organizational factors: Traditionally one determinant that has a long history in work-life-balance-research is workplace policies. Workplace policies effectively shape the direct working conditions and circumstances of employees and consequently highly influence factors like number and flexibility of working hours, the possibility for remote work or part-time employment and the degree of autonomy given to employees (Shaikh & Chandio, 2024: 478-479). In a study conducted by Shaikh and Chandio (2024), the researchers have supported propositions that organizational factors like “opportunities for job advancement, informal feedback, childcare facilities, generous leave policies, sabbaticals, and extra time off for leisure activities” (Shaikh & Chandio, 2024: 479)

can positively affect WLB while “job ambiguity, inflexible and lengthy work hours, and task overload” (Shaikh & Chandio, 2024: 479) were named as the main factors for a decrease of WLB.

Within the realm of organisational factors ‘supportive workplace culture’ can be regarded as highly fruitful. Studies have shown that a family-friendly workplace culture (Ten Brummelhuis & Van Der Lippe, 2010: 188; Ko, 2022: 339) as well as supportive coworker relationships can positively influence employee’s WLB (Bradley et al., 2023: 320). In this context especially the behaviours of supervisors or the general management department of organisations play a particularly important role (Vaziri et al., 2022: 677; Ten Brummelhuis & Van Der Lippe, 2010: 188). According to Clark’s (2000) *work-family border theory* management practices can strongly influence WLB through the accelerated power that managers and supervisors, in their role as border-keepers, have over the circumstances of their employees (Clark, 2000: 763).

Next, we shall address individual factors that affect WLB. The way the personal life is shaped certainly influences WLB. People who are living in single households can experience family or domestic responsibilities different in quantity and quality compared to someone who is living with family (Ten Brummelhuis & Van Der Lippe, 2010: 187). A person without care responsibilities for others (like children or elderly people) is most likely to spend less time on domestic tasks per week compared to e.g. a parental figure (Ten Brummelhuis & Van Der Lippe, 2010: 189). Within family constellations women are most likely to take most of the weight of responsibilities connected to care work. This increase in family responsibilities leaves them unable to attain a productive WLB (Eagly & Wood, 2012: 471; Shaikh et al., 2019: 53-54; Vashisht et al., 2024: 2). In a study by Berniell et al. (2022) the authors identified motherhood as one of the main reasons that women decide to leave full-time employment and change to part-time jobs or self-employment. Although this often causes lesser pay and worse career prospects, they do so to be able to take care of their families (Berniell et al., 2022: 24-25). A substantial number of studies address the negative effect of unpaid care work for the WLB of females (Berniell et al., 2022: 24-25; Eagly & Wood, 2012: 471; Carmichael et al., 2008: 32-33). Conversely, research has found positive effects of family on WLB, too. This is also known as family-work enrichment (FWE). Studies have shown that a work-supportive family can have a positive impact on improved task performance (Tang et al., 2017: 763; Vaziri et al., 2022: 675). Therefore family support or the lack of such can be regarded as very influential.

Other determinants within the category of individual factors are happening on the character level of the individual. Many studies have found evidence that different characteristics or different mental or psychological skills of people can shape their experiences of WLB. For example, in a study conducted by Shaikh et al. (2023) the researchers were able to prove a positive connection between time management skills and WLB. According to the research, certain behavioural techniques are more successful for achieving a healthy WLB: the ability to set one's own goals and priorities is one example in this context (Shaikh et al., 2023: 127-128).

Another study conducted by Vaziri et al. (2022) tried to find evidence for a correlation between the personal characteristics like 'psychological capital', 'extraversion' and 'neuroticism' and WLB. On the one hand, they found a correlation between 'neuroticism', a character trait that is connected to feeling tense, anxious and insecure, and the decrease of WLB. On the other hand, the 'psychological capital' or a capacity to feel hopeful, optimistic, to be self-efficient and resilient as well as an extroverted personality showed to have a relationship with an improved WLB (Vaziri et al., 2022: 677).

The authors Dee et al. (2020) proposed further behavioural techniques, like the ability to express individual values and passions as well as the knowledge to apply self-care and be self-aware, to be enablers of a positive WLB-experience (Dee et al., 2020: 240). As this selection of personality-factors presented above shows, the experience of WLB can be highly subjective and significantly depending on the individual ways through which a person interprets and handles their circumstances.

Finally, the last set of determinants can be summarized under this umbrella term of 'contextual factors'. Contextual factors are not easily demarcated from a variety of the factors that have already been discussed. In other words, many of the arguments mentioned above have their roots within the culture of the society itself. Using the words of F. Enekw (2024): "Culture is a complex system encompassing beliefs, values, traditions, and practices that define groups of people. It acts as a lens through which individuals perceive the world and interact with others." (Enekw, 2024: 2). For example, the mental weight of perceived expectations (societal expectations or expectations towards oneself) can be traced back to have its origin in cultural norms, rules and stereotypes.

Among others, cultures possess historically evolved systems of gender role expectations. Most of them worldwide affect women negatively in the context of WLB, making them experience disadvantages through the double burden of working in the economy whilst feeling responsibly

for care work at the same time (Eagly & Wood, 2012: 471; Shaikh et al., 2019: 53-54; Vashisht et al., 2024: 2). There are certainly many more ‘social categories’ or cultural systems of norms and expectations that shape and influence the experiences of individuals that live inside the culture. To demonstrate how unique differences within cultures cause different outcomes in the context of WLB we can e.g. compare different global locations/ cultures. As an example, the author V. Chandra (2012) showed in their study that gender ideologies that people adopt through the process of cultural socialization differ significantly between Asian and European countries and this consequently notably changes the experience of WLB of individuals (Chandra, 2012: 1044-1046).

As portrayed in these research findings, social roles, which lead to societal expectations, strongly influence the experience of WLB. A theory that explains the creation and the effects of these expectations through the formation of shared social roles is the *Social Role Theory*. This perspective is of high significance for this research. It implies that we must not only note the implications of inter-cultural differences within contextual factors of WLB but, equally as important, we must pay attention to gender differences within these contextual settings. Fully understanding the experience of WLB of women can only happen when we examine the different social roles women are regularly up taking mainly due to shared social expectations created by gender stereotypes.

2.6. Conclusion

This chapter analysed and deconstructed the controversial and ambiguous concept of WLB. To do so, the historical development of the term was examined, ideological assumptions in WLB discourses were explored, and the resulting practical implications were presented. Although WLB is often framed as gender-neutral and universal, this chapter showed that the concept has deep roots in Eurocentric, gendered, and neoliberal assumptions. Not only is WLB not a neutral or value-free concept, but it also often functions as an argumentative tool in contemporary discourses to transfer structural responsibility for welfare systems and well-being to the individual. This reinforces existing patterns of inequality and obscures the diversity of life realities of all those affected by this dynamic.

From a feminist perspective, the WLB discourse must be criticised on several grounds. Female academics have pointed out that the burden of unpaid care work is not adequately addressed and that global inequality is exacerbated under the guise of female empowerment. This not only reproduces traditional gender roles but also reinforces systems of exploitation of marginalised

groups. The portrayal of “balance” as an individual task is particularly problematic, as it denies systematic discrimination and legitimises inequality. The inclusion of intersectional theory revealed the complexity of the interaction between gender and other social categories such as race, class, age, etc., all of which contribute to differentiated experiences of (in)equality. In this context, post-colonial feminist theory served as a central perspective for the deconstruction of the WLB concept. Furthermore, the demand for a decolonisation of knowledge production added an important layer to the representation of Western-centred WLB models. Conventional WLB theories often overlook cultural particularities and power hierarchies rooted in colonial history.

Finally, this chapter analyses the factors that influence the experience of WLB. These were presented within three interconnected levels: individual, organisational and socio-cultural. These factors interact in complex ways and are strongly influenced by workplace culture, personal circumstances and socially constructed gender roles. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing a nuanced and contextualised understanding of WLB that goes beyond individual solutions and instead emphasises structural, cultural and intersectional approaches.

By analysing and deconstructing the ideological, theoretical and empirical dimensions of WLB, this chapter can serve as a conceptual basis and framework for the following empirical research. At the heart of the perspective taken by this study is the call for a de-essentialised, feminist and decolonial orientation of the understanding of WLB, which rejects a representation of the concept as a universal good and instead emphasises its context-dependence and problematic nature. WLB as discourse and practice must be adapted with caution in order to do justice to the realities of women working in the civil society sector in Vietnam.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological strategy that was used to answer the research objective (chapter 1). The chapter can be divided into three thematic units: The first unit will start off by exploring the epistemological considerations and introduce feminist and qualitative methodology. In the second section, the research design will be described. Meanwhile the means of the data collection, the methods and the data analyses shall also be outlined and explained. The last part is devoted to personal reflections and ethical considerations as well as the limitations of the research.

Depending on the type and orientation of the research objective, the type of research and thus also the type of methodology to be selected varies. This research can be defined as *qualitative empirical social science research* that has a *descriptive* and *applied* research approach. This definition is important for researchers in order to guide their methodological considerations and consequently to narrow down the research techniques appropriate for their research. Methodology is the scientific process of identifying but also justifying the ways we conduct the research and produce knowledge; or in simple terms: “studying how research is done scientifically” (Kothari, 2004: 8). The importance of a comprehensively designed research methodology lies in its multiple dimensions, since it not only paves the way for the implantation of methods, but it reflects the relationship between “self-conscious reflections on epistemological assumptions, ontological perspective, ethical responsibilities, and method choices” (Krystalli, 2022: 34).

3.2. Feminist Epistemology and Qualitative Methods

One of the dimensions of methodological consideration, as mentioned above, is epistemology. Epistemology generally can be understood as “an understanding of knowledge – of how we can know’ what we know” (Krystalli, 2022: 34). Within any research process we need to acknowledge that the aim of the research, the production of knowledge, inherently carries a philosophical understanding of what we think knowledge is. Epistemology therefore is a philosophical inquirer that answers these questions like: who can know something? What is knowledge and how can we recognize it? (Harding, 1998: 162).

In literature, we can identify different types of epistemologies within academic research; feminist epistemology being one of them. When conducting feminist research, it is not enough to just formulate feminist research questions (Krystalli, 2022: 37). Feminist research and methodology need epistemological contemplation. The feminist social science researcher Saeidzadeh (2023) states that the concept of “situated knowledge” (Saeidzadeh, 2023: 188) is central in feminist epistemology. Contrary to ‘traditional’ knowledge production with its claimed neutrality or objectivity this understanding of epistemology not only reflects upon but puts the emphasis on the unique positionality of the researcher. In this sense, knowledge can never be completely disconnected from the social context of the one who produced it. To use Saeidzadeh (2023) words: “Feminist epistemologies focus on how the social location of an individual affects everyday life experiences, and how social structures are based on factors such

as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, age, place and socioeconomic status. These factors are imbued with power which ultimately results in situated knowledge.” (Saeidzadeh, 2023: 188).

The core element of feminist epistemology is institutionalized, asymmetrical power relations (Krystalli, 2022: 40-41) and the ways in which they produce knowledge and reproduce themselves from this knowledge production. The oppression of women and other marginalized groups as a consequence of exclusive, male-dominated knowledge production is a key point of the feminist critique on traditional research science (Saeidzadeh, 2023: 187-188). When we review literature, we find that there is not just one singular feminist method that single-handedly applies these epistemological contemplations (Krystalli, 2022: 37; Harding, 1998: 163-164). It is not necessary to adjust existing research methods but rather add self-reflexivity and the presentation of one’s own positionality as a crucial part to the methodology (Krystalli, 2022: 39; Harding, 1998: 164). “That is, the class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviours of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint”, so Harding (Harding, 1998: 164).

To be able to explore the diverse ways in which women working in NGOs in Vietnam experience and cope with stress in the context of WLB with the lens of feminist methodology, qualitative research methods were chosen. Because of the proximity between feminist epistemology and the political practice of challenging the hegemony of patriarchy, feminist researchers often consciously base their theory production on the reality of lived experiences of women and therefore commonly choose a qualitative research approach (Saeidzadeh, 2023: 188).

So, what is qualitative research and its methods? Though maybe often portrayed solely as the opposite to quantitative research, in fact, a qualitative approach is not primarily characterized by an absolute rejection of any quantifications or statistical evaluations, but rather by an openness in the research process. Qualitative research attempts limit previously developed theoretical assumptions and expectations and tries to design the process as open as possible in order to be able to explore the unknown. Methods chosen by scientists to do so are e.g. unstructured or less structured observations, qualitative interviews or document analyses (Hopf, 2016: 16-17). This inductive research strategy gives the possibility to search for new theories rather than just testing existing knowledge and is best suitable for less explored fields of research (Kelle, 2008: 52-53), for capturing constructed social reality and cultural meaning and fit with an interpretative and critical research approach. Qualitative research can be further characterized by a focus on interactions and processes, the importance put on values and

meaning, its situational constraints (few objects, case study) and a participatory approach (Mikkelsen, 2005: 142).

A qualitative methodology is best suitable for the research aim as described in chapter 1 because it allows an in-depth exploration of issues regarding WLB of female CSO workers in Vietnam. The lived experiences of women and the complex social phenomena that they are connected to are less likely to be captured by numerical data. Furthermore, this qualitative approach allows for deeper contextualisation of issues which reflects the central orientation towards context and situated knowledge (Braun & Clark, 2022: 119-221). The open nature of the inquiries provides the flexibility to adjust elements of the methods (like the interview questions) in a response to information that was gained from the research objects themselves, allowing them to participate and giving them a voice in the research.

For this qualitative research it was decided to conduct a case study. Case studies are appropriate to investigate the “complex, situated, problematic relationships” (Stake & Visse, 2023: 87) surrounding specific issues of a particular group and to deepen the understanding of that one specific case. Case studies can vary in size of the research scope and type (*intrinsic* case study, *instrumental* case study, *collective* case study) but most commonly share the use of narrative and descriptive methods (interviews, observation, document analysis) with the intent to create thick, rich, experiential data (Yazan, 2025: 149; Stake & Visse, 2023: 86-88) that showcases phenomena as they naturally occur. According to Sharan Merriam’s (1998) definition a case is “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (Merriam, 1998: 27 cited in Yazan, 2015: 148). The study of such a case will therefore focus on the description and understanding of characteristics of a separable unit (Yazar, 2015: 148).

A case study was chosen to answer the research questions of this thesis with the intention to portrait the unique socio-cultural context of NGOs in Vietnam and to detect the specific challenges that women in this sector face. Since the concept of WLB is multidimensional and often subjective, a case study is the best choice to investigate these complex social phenomena. The proximity to reality of the research results also makes it easier to transfer the findings into organizational and political practice.

3.3. Research Design

This study follows a qualitative feminist approach to research design in the form of a case study. The focus of the research lies on the lived experiences of women working in CSOs and on how they experience WLB and negotiate between competing responsibilities. Conducting a case

study allows for the strong orientation towards in-depth and contextually grounded exploration of the issue. Choosing this type of research design seemed suitable for the unique political and socio-economic setting in which the data collection took place whilst still allowing for intersectional variables like gender roles, cultural expectations and organisational dynamics to influence the data collection and the findings.

The research design was majorly influenced by the question on how to best answer feminist research. What is meant here is not solely research that focuses on participants of the female gender but an empirical inquiry that operates in a participative, dialogical way and stays critical of power dynamics (Saeidzadeh, 2023: 188). In feminist literature it has been stressed that research should focus on listening and shedding light on everyday life-stories (of women) to capture diversity and situatedness (Smart, 2009: 295) and valuing to acknowledgement of complexity higher than the strive for statistical generalisability (Braun& Clark, 2022: 143).

The focus of the research design lies on positionality, subjectivity and reflexivity. These quality criteria were integral for the process of knowledge production to be able to create findings that are strongly contextual. Rather than trying to imply generalisability, this research aims to achieve transferability through providing deeply contextualized descriptions and analysis that allow readers to develop their own opinion on the matter and to transfer the take-aways to their own settings (Braun& Clark, 2022: 143).

This study aims to actively avoid binary distinctions between the researcher and the research subjects by trying to design the methodology as participatory as possible. The women who contributed to this research by telling their stories should not be framed as objects of interest, but they are the main co-creators of this study. Furthermore, did I try to acknowledge my own positionality, my own bias, privilege and my own cultural background as a European to also recognize my own influence, as the researcher, on the research findings. To increase reflexivity, I kept a field diary to reflect on my positionality, my emotional reactions and power relations during my field trip to Hanoi.

The area of Hanoi in the North of Vietnam was chosen as a field because of academic and personal reasons. Academically I had been studying the national context of Vietnam for some years before I started my research inquiry because of its complex and unique socio-historical context. Vietnam's historical entanglement between its post-socialist transformation, prevailing structures of gendered care work and a newly globalized development discourse made the country into a perfect scientific field to study the status quo of women in the workforce.

Personally, I wanted to spend time in the area that would later serve as my research field before my data collection to be able to gather first insights into the context as a base for developing my research design. Since I found a possibility to work in an organisation in the North of Vietnam, it reinforced my decision to specify the area of Hanoi as my research field. Through my time in Vietnam before my actual data collection started, I was able to meet my first contacts in an informal manner, who would later serve as my main gatekeepers and help to connect me with the interview participants.

3.4. Data Collection

For the empirical data collection, it was chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews (SSI) as the main method of primary data collection. According to Adams (2015) SSI usually consists of a combination of structured and unstructured questions that allow for flexibility within the interview while still being able to stick to predetermined themes and topics (Adams, 2015: 493). SSI was chosen because it allowed me to keep my thematic prompts as a guide whilst not sacrificing the participants control over their own narratives. Flexibility during the interviews was highly important to me to enable the participants to set their own focus on what topics appeared most important to them.

In total ten interviews with women working in CSOs in the area of Hanoi were conducted between February 2025 and April 2025. Most interviews were between 40 and 90 minutes in length. They were mostly held in the participants office or in a café and all of them were audio recorded.

The interviewees were recruited through a mix of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. The first contacts I created purposefully by contacting CSO that had a thematic link to gender, development or social justice. To increase the data, I followed the recommendations of the earlier participants who wanted to connect me to their colleagues or peers who they thought would be interested in supporting my research. Here I switched to snowball sampling by letting the participants influence my sampling strategy themselves. The superordinate criteria I stuck to for sampling were the following. I chose interview partners:

- Who identified as women
- Who were working in CSO in the area of Hanoi
- Who had at least 1 year of work experience in the sector.

All interviewees agreed to participate voluntarily as well as agreed to being audio recorded before the interview itself. I put attention on keeping the participants anonymous, to ensure confidentiality and ethical considerations. All names of individuals or organisations have been anonymised in the transcript as well as in the final thesis.

As recommended for semi-structured interviews (Adams, 2015: 493), I created an interview guideline which questions were designed to be as open as possible while still covering all the important themes within my research interest. To develop this guideline, I started off looking at my research design and research paper thus far and writing down all the questions that came to my mind. From this first draft I tried to form overall themes. I ended up forming four themes which I then turned into the five open questions that I pursue to use in my interviews. I kept in mind that I would change the questions in the course of conducting the interview if I felt the need. As it turned out, I didn't feel it necessary to change the guiding questions, but I adapted the inquiry questions that I used to go deeper into specific topics.

Table 1: Overview of Research Questions

Number	Guiding Question	Follow-Up Question
#1	Can you tell me about your experiences working in the civil society sector? What led you to start working in this field?	Can you share a specific moment that made you realize this work is meaningful to you?
#2	What has your experience been like juggling work and personal life responsibilities?	- Is someone helping you with the housework? - Who cares for your children while you are at work? Who picks them up after school? - When do you have the time to buy the groceries/ do the cooking?

#3	• How do you divide your time between work and personal life?	• Do you feel like you have a clear separation between the two? Why/ why not?
#4	• Can you talk about any moments when your work felt particularly challenging?	• What helped you get through it?
#5	• What are the most challenging aspects of your job as an CSO-worker?	• Do you feel like female NGO workers talk openly about stress and challenging moments? Why or why not?
#6	• How do you feel about the support you receive from others—like family, friends, or colleagues? Has it been helpful to you?	• Whose support helps you the most in your daily life?
#7	• If you could change one thing about how organisations support female workers, what would it be?	
#8	• Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences in this role?	

After each interview I captured my memories in my research diary. I included memories about body language, first impressions, emotional reactions or contextual information that happened outside the audio recording. These memory protocols were included in the analysis later on to increase the reflexive character of my research process. I acknowledged that my role as a European researcher is never neutral. Although most interview participants were very open and welcoming, I sensed some degree of polite distance in the answers of some of the interviews, especially in the beginning of the conversation. In other cases, I felt like the situation of

interviewing the women at their workplace may influence their answers in a way that they maybe felt less comfortable to talk about negative aspects of their work whilst still being at work. Whenever I felt like the answers were given in a rather general or superficial way I tried to counteract this by sharing my own experiences and shifting the interview into the direction of an informal conversation on eyelevel whilst always highlighting the confidentiality of what has been said.

To be able go into further detail on my recruitment process and sampling, I would like to draw a more complete picture of my situation during and before the data collection phase by giving further information about my field trip to Vietnam in the following chapter.

3.4.1. Field Trip to Hanoi, Vietnam: Reflection on the Sampling and Data Collection

Before going into further detail about my sampling and data collection process, I would like to explain the backdrop of my empirical research which is my field trip to Vietnam. To explain the timeline, I would first like to go into the sequence of events of my research project within my master's degree and the semester times. I started to concretize the topic of my master's thesis at the beginning of the winter semester 2024/25. After some literature research and back and forth consideration, I was then able to narrow down the approximate field of research around the end of September. As soon as I knew that the “what” in my research question would be female CSO workers in Vietnam and that the “how” would be implemented through the qualitative method of research interviews, I started planning my research stay in Vietnam.

It quickly became clear to me that a physical presence of myself in the research field was essential. I had been studying Vietnam and gender equality in Vietnam academically for more than a year and a half. However, all my knowledge of the region to date has been based on secondary data, theories and descriptions. Out of respect for the sensitivity and humility that researchers should always bring to foreign cultures, it seemed ethically impossible to research a country and a culture that I had never been to myself. On the one hand, accessing the research field on site is generally more natural than trying to do the same online. But on the other hand, I also consider the subliminal, subjective observations that a researcher inevitably receives as soon as he or she moves around the research field as a participant to be indispensable for the interpretative analysis that will be carried out later. “Being there” and “being part of” the research field can help to reveal nuances of social interaction to the researcher through their

intuition, their senses and evoke new perspectives or questions; and which may go unnoticed in texts and theories.

To be able to maximise the potential of this phase of “feeling my way” into the research field, I decided to take up a volunteer position as an English teacher in a non-profit tutoring institute in the north of Vietnam between October and January. I used these first months in the country to familiarize myself with the research field through extensive literature research and also to talk to people, ask questions, observe and listen. During this first, informal phase of the data collection process, I kept a research journal in which I noted not only my observations of the surroundings, but also what I observed about myself in the research field. This practice was inspired by the recommendations of the researchers Braun & Clark (2022) and served to put reflexivity at the core of my research and data collection process right from the start.

As soon as I had secured the timing of my stay in Vietnam, I began the recruitment for my sampling by contacting CSOs in North Vietnam. My decision to primarily use CSOs in Hanoi as research subjects was due to me being on the ground in North Vietnam. I realized that researching the whole of Vietnam, or even research covering both urban regions of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, was beyond the scope of this thesis. Since I was still convinced at this point that I wanted to conduct all interviews in presence, I decided to limit the data collection regionally to CSOs in Hanoi to ensure a maximum of comparability.

I contacted CSOs in Hanoi via email. Since it was difficult for me to estimate the accessibility of the research field, I decided to contact CSOs that had offices in Hanoi in order to maximize my chances of finding interview participants. Within the category of ‘CSO’ there were different types of organisations that I ended up in my empirical research through their employees. First, I interviewed six members of LNGO in Hanoi and two women working in LNGOs outside of Hanoi. Second, I interviewed 2 employees of INGOS.

In the months between October and December, I was in contact with four people from four different CSOs. I tried to schedule the interviews with all of them for the period from January 2025. However, it should be mentioned at this point that Tết Nguyên Đán, the Lunar New Year, is celebrated in Vietnam on January 29, 2025. This is one of the most important holidays of the year and for many Vietnamese it is the only time of the year when they take a longer vacation. Often this vacation begins several days to a week before the New Year. Several of the CSOs I was in contact with pointed out that the weeks leading up to the holiday are particularly hectic

for the organizations. For this reason, I decided to postpone the interviews until after the Tết festival in order to respect the cultural significance of this time of year.

I then conducted the first five interviews in February 2025. The interviewees were all employees of the same CSO. I was introduced to them through the director of the CSO, who I was emailing beforehand. The next two interview participants I was able to contact directly by e-mail and was thus able to arrange the interview dates with them myself. Three further interview participants were referred to me by one of the earlier participants.

The process of finding research participants turned out to be the most difficult. First, many of the CSOs that I contacted in the first place didn't reply to me at all. And even with the one who did not, all the correspondence did lead to actual interviews. Like so often in qualitative research, potential participants may lack willingness to give their leisure time to the support of scientific inquiry. With my research though, the language barrier could have been an additional factor that could have stopped people from wanting to participate. Being an outsider in Vietnam, with no gatekeepers that could have opened the door to the field, I had to spend a significant amount of time on trying to establish the first contacts.

3.5. Data Analysis Method

An analysis method had to be selected for the data recorded in the empirical part of this thesis. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) according to Braun & Clarke (2022) was chosen, “a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset” (Braun & Clark, 2022: 4). At the centre of the analysis is the definition of patterns of meaning (so-called 'themes'), which are developed from the reports of the interviewees, and the weaving together of those themes into an interpretive story to answer the research question. The compatibility of the basic perspectives of Braun & Clark's (2022) method, such as the focus on subjectivity within the research process (Braun & Clark, 2022: 12) and on the reflexivity of the researcher in the research process (Braun & Clark, 2022: 13), with the principles of feminist epistemology reinforced the decision to choose this method of analysis.

In line with feminist epistemology, reflexive TA also emphasizes the importance of respecting the positionality and recognizing the subjectivity of the researcher in the research process and thus their active influence on the research results (Braun & Clark, 2022: 8). “Themes do not passively 'emerge' from data but are actively produced by the researcher through their systematic engagement with, and all they bring to, the dataset”, according to Braun & Clark (Braun & Clark, 2022: 8). This analytical approach was chosen to identify nuanced patterns of

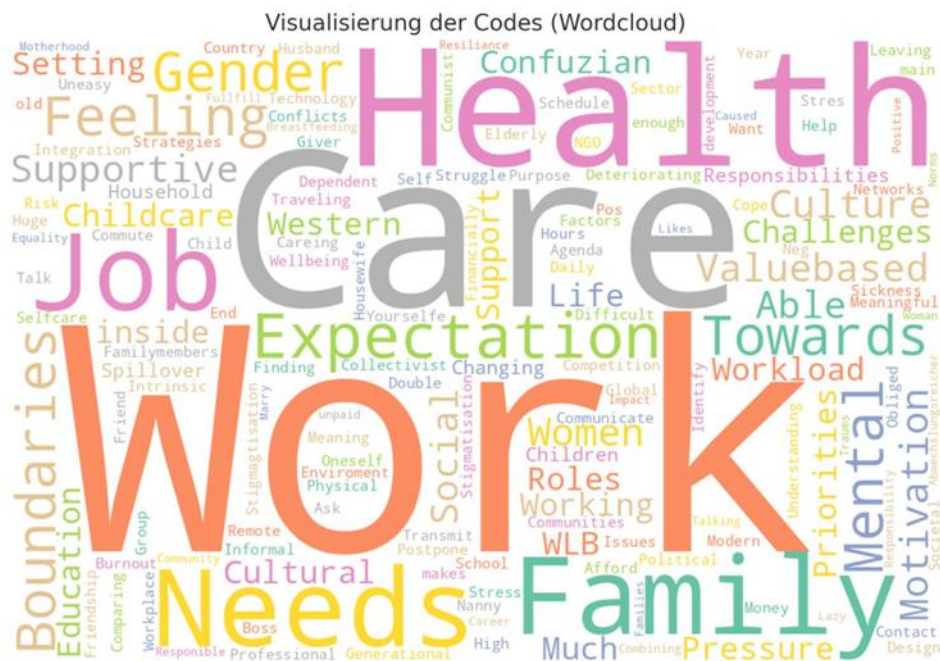
meanings from the data in an explorative manner. The focus lies on the lived experience of the participants, trying to highlight the women's voices, whilst reflecting on my own positionality and the influence that I, as the researcher, take on the analysis and the findings.

3.5.1. Application of the Six Phases to the Analysis Process

The process of reflexive TA according to Braun & Clark consists of 6 phases. The authors state that these phases are designed in such a way that they assist the researchers in learning and applying a reflexive approach to TA. Accordingly, the phased approach is primarily addressed to novices, whereas more experienced TA researchers can interact more with the process themselves (Braun & Clark, 2022: 37). In the following section, my analytical approach, organized according to the six phases of reflexive TA according to Braun & Clark (2022), will be explained in detail:

1. *Familiarisation With the Dataset*

After the interviews, the audio records were transcribed and uploaded into the MAXQDA software. Next, I re-read the transcript whilst parallel listening to the audio records. During this step I paraphrased any initial impressions directly in MAXQDA and made analytics notes on tone, emphasis, implicit meanings, and so on. The purpose of this phase for me lay on getting to know the data and realizing my own reaction to the data whilst trying to capture my own assumptions about the data during the re-reading and re-listening. I exported the notes on my impressions and used a word cloud to visualize my entry point into my process of familiarisation with the data set.



I already started the decision-making process. When trying to define the themes I asked myself: “How can I showcase complexity without losing coherence?”

4. *Developing and Reviewing Themes*

Once I was satisfied with my initial themes that I had now created I took my data-excerpt that connected to each theme and reviewed them critically. I aimed to assess the following:

- “Does this theme relate to my research questions?”
- “Do the included quotes convey the same meaning?”
- “Do the themes overlap?”
- “Are the themes too broad or too narrow?”

When starting into this phase I was working with six initial themes. After revising and reviewing my themes and my data I ended up reducing these themes to three in total. This process of rethinking and changing my themes was rather time consuming and I had to go back and forth a lot. I made sure that whenever I felt like coming to an end with theme development, I would discuss my themes with a peer or with my supervisor. Talking through my ways of thinking with others and receiving feedback supported me in detecting blind spots in my argumentation and helped me further concretize my themes.

5. *Refining, Defining and Naming Themes*

Now that I felt comfortable with the themes that I had developed, I went back to the data set and checked on the accuracy of the themes once more. Once my themes felt finalized, I was now able to continue the analysis by writing a short summary about each theme, trying to capture its core essence. Two questions that I was keeping in mind in this process were: “How does each theme answer my research question?” and “What conceptual insights does the theme offer?”. Next, I continued to define names for the themes. The focus here for me was to capture the narratives as well as the critical relevance of the theme.

6. *Writing Up*

Writing down the results of the TA is more than just a summary of the analysis. In the method of the authors Braun & Clark (2022), writing up takes an important role in the analysis and is therefore itself part of the analytical process. The writing of the TA refers to the entire research work: introduction, theoretical background and context, methods section and discussion (Braun & Clark 2022: 117-122). In this last phase I not only wrote down my analysis and findings but

revisited chapters that I had written previously. To check on the thesis from start to finish whilst finalising the findings can be an essential step in creating the research report for a reflexive TA. To use the words of Braun & Clark (2022): “You can't fully set the scene until you know what the scene is!” (Braun & Clark 2022: 121).

Writing up the analysis further helped me to create a better structure for my themes. Here I was also able to add nuance, if necessary, and work out the most important quotes, while re-reading the quotes. I took my time here to revisit my assumptions; writing my research report really showed me blind spots in my line of argumentation.

3.5.2. Reflection on the Process

Reflecting on my experience with reflexive TA, I realize that this research approach served as way more than just a method to organize data: it challenged me to continuously reflect about myself. At times I caught myself drawing assumptions based on my own emotional response to the data. Especially with topics regarding burn-out, internalized gender roles or motherly sacrifice, I caught myself wanting to make themes disproportionately big to satisfy my own feeling of justice and morality. I had to navigate my own immersion in my data and its richness of the narratives it included. Some quotes resonated deeply with my own lived experience as a woman and challenged my interpretation process to always reconsider my own positionality, as an emotional ally in some sense though as an outsider in another.

MAXQDA was incredibly helpful for managing the volume of the data and with supporting visual thinking. The manual engagement with the data through color-coding and writing notes supported my process of identifying initial themes. Tools like the word cloud supported me to detect initial impressions since I am a visual thinker.

All in all, this chapter showed a brief overview of my reflexive TA process. With this I tried to illustrate not just the technical procedure itself but showcase my reflective, subjective and sometimes emotional process of making meaning of my qualitative data.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

To ensure that ethical concerns were properly implemented in the data collection process, the following steps were considered and implemented: First, the interview requests were accompanied by a letter of introduction and a consent form. These two documents provided an overview of the content and objectives of the research work, the process of the potential face-to-face interview and the data protection guidelines. The participants were also informed that

the information they provided would be used in the research and published in the research report. Regarding data protection, it was explained that both the names of the participants and the names of the organization would be anonymized in the research work. It was expressly pointed out in this advance consent agreement that participation in the interviews was completely voluntary and that the participants could withdraw their consent to participate at any time. Almost all participants signed the consent form in advance; some signed the agreement immediately before the interview.

In the second step, the conduct of the interviews, all research participants were explicitly asked again whether they agreed to a tape recording of the interview. All participants agreed to a tape recording of their interview. All participants were offered the option of reading over the transcript of these recordings afterwards to check the accuracy of the answers they had recorded. None of the interviewees made use of this offer.

In the third step of the coding and data analysis, all interviews were then anonymized with pseudonyms. All data, such as the audio recordings, survey sheets and interview transcripts, were stored in a secure location after data collection. All interview participants were informed that they could access their recorded data at any time if required.

3.7. Positionality of the Researcher

With any social science research, but especially in the context of case study research where the researcher is a key instrument in the process of data collection and analysis, it is crucial to reflect upon the networks and context that the scientist comes from and connection that the researcher has towards the research field. This can be done by laying open one's own positionality. Positionality explores the own standpoint a researcher has towards the research and aims to reflect therefore how the researcher influences the research (Cooper et al. 2024: 3).

I, as the researcher in this research, am not objective or neutral. My academic background in geography and development studies influences me in my theoretical assumptions but also within my practical approach to the topic. Not only do my studies of socio-critical theories and perspectives give me a potential bias, especially in terms of gender inequality; as a woman, I also bring my own experiences of the negative effects of gender norms and am personally affected by the problem of WLB for working women. My own professional career in the civil society sector in Austria adds to these personal experiences, which overlap with the research focus. I must be aware that my academic training has shaped me. Because I was primarily

trained to question critically, I now perhaps tend to problematize a lot of things. This is not fundamentally wrong, but I must always remember the subjectivity of my own evaluations.

Insider knowledge of the experiences of women working in CSOs can help me on many levels to approach empirical research with empathy and understanding, but I must be particularly careful not to project my own experiences in Germany or Austria onto the perceptions of women in Vietnam. In order to minimize the various forms of bias, I adhered to a strategy of critical self-reflection during the literature-based and empirical research. To minimize bias in the data analysis and presentation of results, I decided to work with direct quotes from the participants to foreground their voices themselves. Furthermore, I focused on the question of what alternative approaches to interpretation there could have been in addition to the ones I chose.

At this point, I would also like to address the cultural and social distance that I, as a German, have to the research field in Vietnam. I am not Vietnamese, and my research stay in Vietnam was my first time on the ground in Vietnam. As a researcher from a different culture, I must understand that barriers to accessing the research field could arise due to a lack of trust on the part of the people. Researching in a foreign cultural context is a balancing act between the danger of imposing assumptions from one's own culture on others and thereby overlooking the true meanings, and the opportunity to view social structures from an analytical distance through an outside perspective.

And first and foremost, this is about respect and equality. In social research in general, which is about researching personal experiences, but especially in a foreign cultural context, in which the power asymmetry between the researcher and the researched also has to take into account the power hierarchy between, for example, the Global North and the Global South, it is essential that researchers are aware of the ways in which they may exercise dominance in situations. This dominance due to different social categories (such as race, class, gender, etc.) can potentially even lead to answers being given in an adapted rather than authentic way in the interview context. My aim during the empirical research was always to convey to the interviewees that I was not the only one doing research on them, but that they were invited to take agency over the research results, to make the research their research and thus to be part of the process.

3.8. Limitations of the Study

As in any research methodology, the choice to conduct a qualitative case study brings along its unique limitations. It can be argued that the case study, even more than other qualitative

research methods, poses particular problems in terms of the generalizability of its research findings. If one wants to infer 'from one to the whole', it is debatable to what extent such a transfer is justifiable (Merriam, 2009: 51-52). However, such criticisms about inadequate validity, reliability or generalizability miss the point of the case study. Because the case study makes no claim to absolute universality of its results, it emphasizes diversity and difference at all levels. The case study does not aim to simplify but emphasizes that there are no simple answers (Merriam, 2009: 53).

A central limitation of the case study is the researcher himself. Due to the great influence that the researcher exerts in his function as an instrument of data collection, in combination with limited specifications or guidelines, the researcher himself must ultimately take responsibility for the quality of the data and data analysis through his sensitivity and integrity. The researcher must always be aware of the presence and danger of bias and should therefore reflect strongly on ethical concerns in the research process (Merriam, 2009: 52).

Besides the limitations of qualitative research that could be found in literature I witnessed a variety of research limitations that happened during the process of data collection. First and foremost, I need to address limitations that occurred through the (in)accessibility to the field. As a master student who organized this fieldtrip entirely on my own, I had no local contacts or superordinate organisation to support me with my data collection process. With no gatekeepers onsite I had to spend a significant amount of time to establish my first contact. The speed of establishing interviews increases considerably with the first contact. But still, the landscape of participants remained scarce. Therefore, choosing participants on the base of a particular characteristic was traded in for achieving an appropriate number of interviews. Since the dates for a field trip to an area that is not near the place of my permanent residency were fixed in advance, time became a major limitation in my data collection process. In the scheduling of interviews, I was less flexible, and I cannot exclude the likeness that some interviews potentially did not happen because the timing was not right.

Another limitation of the data collection process was technology: The recording device that was used for the interviews did not work in one of the ten interviews. The participant was sitting too far away from the device or/and the microphone potentially was covered. That mixed with a participant whose English was quite limited made it almost impossible to generate a sensible interview transcript. The information from this interview was used as much as possible but I must say that most of the answers were unidentifiable in the transcription processes.

Conducting semi-structured interviews is a craft that should be trained and perfected through time. As a master student, I do not bring years of experience with qualitative methods to the table since I have only conducted a handful of empirical research myself. I tried to prepare myself for the interview situation as much as possible, but any preparation cannot fully simulate the excitement of sitting face to face with the participants. Reflecting on my own achievements, I would have to notice that my confidence in asking questions and deepening the interview increased during the interview conduction. Therefore, some of the first interviews I would in hindsight wish that I would have gone further into the topics but my focus on being polite and/or not overstepping the frame as a cultural outsider and guest of a country made me apprehensive to assume or draw conclusions during the interviews themselves.

3.9. Conclusion

This chapter addressed the methodological decisions that were undertaken in the process of developing and conducting this thesis' research. At the base of the entire research process lies the orientation towards feminist epistemology and with this an acknowledgment of subjectivity, reflexivity and critical reflection of power dynamics.

In line with claims of feminist epistemology it was decided to conduct a qualitative case study. This allowed for a deep contextualisation of the unique experiences of the Vietnamese women working in CSOs that were interviewed in this process. To be present in the research field appeared to be essential to create the necessary understanding of not only the cultural context but also to develop a sense of sensibility, immersing myself in the situation and conducting my research on eye level with my research participants. My field trip to Hanoi, Vietnam became the ethical imperative of my data collection process. The trip and its outcomes were enriched by the collection of primary data through the participatory observations and informal conversations that I was able to gather in my day-to-day life in Vietnam which helped me immensely to set the scene for my analysis. I accompanied this with a continual self-reflection that I wrote down in a research journal. This kept me reminded to critically confront myself with my role as a researcher in my research process as well as the effect of my own positionality. Throughout this journal and the entire paper of this thesis I tried to ensure transparency as my highest quality criteria.

My sampling and data collection process did face difficulties. The recruitment of interview participants turned out to be challenging due to the existing language barrier, missing gatekeepers to the field and limited accessibility to the organisations themselves. These

limitations were counteracted by perseverance, networking and sensibility as much as possible. At every stage of this research, concerns about ethical responsibility were taken into account. This was evident e.g. in the anonymization and the transparent information about the research of the participants. The voluntary nature of the participation was consequently complied to and communicated.

As a method for data collection semi-structured interviews were chosen. This method offered a mix of structured and explorative procedures. The methodology as a whole was mainly inspired by the recommendations of the authors Braun & Clark who coined the reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (2022). TA was not only used as a data analysis method, but the application of TA to the procedure influenced every step of the research. This method is highly applicable to feminist epistemology since context and reflexive subjectivity are core concepts. To support the data analysis process the software MAXQDA was used. The software was very helpful with improving systematic coding, creation of themes and general increase of transparency and structure.

4. The Civil-Society Sector of Vietnam

4.1. Introduction

Before we can move further into the empirical research on WLB of women working in CSO in Vietnam, it is critical to understand the unique context and nature of the Vietnamese civil society organisations. When looking at the structure of Vietnamese CSOs, the country is a special case. Some scholars argue that from a conceptual and/or legal standpoint the CSO-landscape of Vietnam does not match a traditional understanding of such organisations (Lux & Straussman, 2004: 173-174; Gray, 1999: 693-694). To comprehend this, we first need to investigate the conventional definition of CSOs.

When we talk about CSOs in general scientific or political discourse, this can be understood as a collective term for an array of different types of organizations that all share certain characteristics. CSOs are commonly defined as non-profit institutions that operate independently from the state. They are usually made up of citizens who work together voluntarily to address or solve issues and problems of communities or public interest (Khanky, 2022: 25; Gray, 2003: 111-112). Amongst other aims, their task-oriented operations usually serve to deliver services, build capacities or advocate for community interests (Riboldi, 2024: 207-212). They work towards identifying problems and proposing solutions, as well as act as a critical authority against controversial policies (Akinsolu & Raji, 2019: 8). Bui (2013)

summarizes four main assumptions about CSO that are popularised in the West and amongst western donors: Firstly, the organisations are structurally autonomous from the state. Second and third, civil society and its organisations are contributing to the state and to democracy, therefore supporting the effectiveness and stability of the government. And fourth, there is a reciprocal relationship between the capitalist market and civil society (Bui, 2013: 78-79). From this we can derive the popular approach to civil society which views it as a third sector next to the state and the market (Riboldi, 2024: 198; Akinsolu & Raji, 2019: 8).

This is a good place to talk about the choice of terminology itself. For the formulation of this research report, it was decided to use the term CSO. In this context of the organisations that were used for the data collection of the empirical part of this research, it would also have been possible to speak of NGOs. In general, the horizon of names for the various types of institutionalized civil society organization is broad. NGO and CSO are often used almost synonymously. However, it can be argued that the two terms differ in their semantics. While NGOs are a part of CSOs, the CSO term implies a reference to a broad spectrum of welfare and community-oriented organizations and their strong connection to civil society itself (Akinsolu & Raji, 2019: 8). Documents and publications of organizations such as the OECD (2010) or the UNDP (2001) also use the CSO term. According to the OECD: “CSOs can be defined to include all non-market and non-state organisations outside of the family in which people organise themselves to pursue shared interests in the public domain. They cover a wide range of organisations that include membership-based CSOs, cause-based CSOs and service-oriented CSOs.” (OECD 2010: 26).

Engaging CSOs in policy making and practice has been increasing in recent years. The trend goes towards framing CSOs as critical actors in communicating needs of individuals and communities to governments, making them vital in achieving sustainable development for local stakeholders (UNDP, 2001: 1; Akinsolu & Raji, 2019: 8-9; Banks, 2021: 671-672). Regarding sustainable development, CSOs bear the potential to contribute to gender equality. Through their ability to actively influence policymaking, CSOs can bring the needs of women at all levels into the decision-making process on gender equality policies (Adeogun, 2019: 203-204).

In the following section, we will first examine the extent to which the Western definition of the term ‘CSO’ can be applied to the structures of Vietnamese CSOs. Subsequently, the potential of CSOs to contribute positively to gender equality will be explored theoretically. Finally, these two points will be linked in a critical reflection on the extent to which this gender equality potential can be realized in the socio-political context of Vietnamese civil society.

4.2. CSOs in the sociopolitical context of Vietnam

To understand the status-quo of CSOs in Vietnam it can be useful to investigate the history of origin and its development in the socio-political context which it has taken place in. Many academics trace the (official) emergence of CSO in Vietnam back to the economic reforms of the *Doi Moi* (Gray, 1999: 696-698; Salemink, 2006: 101-102). During that time the war-torn Vietnam was conscious of the danger of political crisis and uproar of a population that suffered under poverty and economic stagnation, as this had just happened in socialist Eastern Europe (Gray, 1999: 697-698). The Vietnamese government decided to move beyond the socialist ideal of the central planning model and adopt “market-oriented socialist economy under state guidance” – also known as *Doi Moi* (Renovation)” (Beresford, 2008: 221).

With the reforms of *Doi Moi* in the 1980s came the integration of Vietnam in the global economy and with that economic growth and rapid multiplication of (market) institutions (Salemink, 2006: 101-102). Before the opening of the country, the landscape of socio-political organisations could be categorized into three groups: mass organisations, religious and cultural bodies and professional societies. All of these were subordinate to the communist party and were dependent on their existence on permission and registration by the government. The reduction of government measures is particularly evident in the administrative consolidation and decentralization of offices. This withdrawal of the state from areas of public life can be linked to the emergence of local NGOs in Vietnam (Gray, 1999: 698).

In the early days of the civil society sector in Vietnam, international NGOs (INGOs) outweighed local initiatives in terms of quantity and quality. According to Salemink (2006) “hundreds of international NGOs (INGOs) poured into Vietnam in order to absolve their sense of guilt about war and to put right what had been wrong.” (Salemink, 2006: 102). For many INGOs the obligation was to support local initiatives in an effort to support the emergency of a civil society. These premises lead to a heightened demand for CSOs and domestic NGOs. Though in Vietnam there is technically no such thing as an autonomous civil society sector, since all agencies stay in one way or another under the control of the communist government (Salemink, 2006: 101-104). Salemink (2006) goes so claiming “In Vietnam ‘civil society’ is clearly part of a foreign agenda” (Salemink, 2006: 105). However, it can be said that there has been a strong increase in local NGOs (LNGOs) since the 1990s, at least in formal terms. Many academics question the validity of these ‘NGOs’ of that time. Gray (1999) argues that the Vietnamese government consciously reframed already existing scientific and technical institutions as ‘NGOs’, knowing that by doing so the organisations could attract foreign

financial resources and would therefore not need further funding by the government. Gray elaborates: “It may be that, in many cases, the switch to ‘NGO status’ was an entirely practical decision, with little or no change in the motivation, methods or personnel of the new groups.” (Gray, 1999: 698). The void that was created through the retreat of the state from the delivery of many social services was filled by a multitude of foreign donors, e.g. the UN, the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank (Salemink, 2006: 106). Whilst being interested in attracting foreign donors, the government still expected all overseas development agencies to formally register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as it was expected that all financial and technical assistance should run through government channels into government agencies, from which the resources should trickle-down to local initiatives and the population in need (Lux & Straussman, 2004: 176).

It should be noted that in the phase of the early emergence of CSOs, NGOs and other development initiatives had to fear the threat of being closed or not being granted the registration to open up in the first place, in case their alliance with the communist party wasn’t clearly given. Hence most NGOs at that time were opened by well-connected people who e.g. had worked previously in government positions, making the organisations somewhat elitist. This preference of well-educated or -connected staff surely widens the gap between Vietnamese intellectuals and the lower class (Gray, 1999: 709). Apart from this, networking between CSOs also appeared to be a thorn in the side of the government, the same applied to excessive attention from foreign donors. Although the number of Vietnamese CSOs kept on the rise during the 1990s, government restraints and a forced closeness to the state's ideology remained the order of the day (Gray, 1999: 711-712).

The introduction and spread of the internet since 1997 have had an impact on the development of CSOs. The greater reach of information on issues such as freedom creates a better-informed population or leads to greater participation and engagement of the public and subsequently contributes to a further reduction of state control. Together with the Internet and the increasing economic successes since the millennium, demands in social networks for more progressive freedoms, such as freedom of assembly or the freedom to participate in public life, have grown (Bui, 2013: 81). Not least since Vietnam's increasing connection to the rest of the world through digitalization, it is worth questioning whether the theoretical assumptions about a completely state-controlled society are still up to date. However, the nature of the Vietnamese CSOs remain characterised by an existing relationship, which can be described through a corporatist model. Even though some scholars postulate the increasing agency and independence of the

organisations, civil society in general terms remains in control of the government (Bui, 2013: 81).

When we are looking for evidence of civil society in Vietnam, it seems like we need to abandon our dichotomous ideas of state and civil society. In western academia we are accustomed to using a model of three sectors that are inherently separate entities (Riboldi, 2024: 198; Akinsolu & Raji, 2019: 8). However, this conventional approach refers to liberal democracies. In the Western hemisphere, the assumption is that civil society within authoritarian systems must be highly repressive in nature (Bui, 2013: 82). This just does not apply in the socialist state of Vietnam. Many organisations, like educational institutions, can neither be fully identified as ‘state’ nor exclusively as ‘society’ (Gray, 1999: 697). The question here remains, should Vietnamese CSOs not be accredited legitimacy because they are to some extent, or another intermingled with the state?

This question is multifaceted and complex to answer. So, it can be said that the boundaries between state and civil society in Vietnam are unclear. CSOs operate in a unique socio-political environment that is difficult to equate with Western liberal democracies. The relationship between state and society is characterized by dynamic processes of cooperation and resistance. Although the dependent relationship of CSOs with the state may call into question the legitimacy of the organizations, it is important to note the strategic advantage that once-resident organizations derive from this proximity. By cooperating with the state, for example, resources can be acquired, and influence can be exerted on policy (Vu, 2019: 437). Vu (2019) argues: “Since state authority under authoritarianism remains strong and resilient in the face of a strengthening civil society, being embedded in the state is critical because it offers some guarded room for manoeuvre for civil society groups to achieve collective goals.” (Vu, 2019: 437). The author continues to challenge back-or-white understandings of civil society within authoritarian systems by critiquing that these conventional approaches “downplay the dynamic and political significance of NGO-led activism” (Vu, 2019: 437).

This is not to dismiss critical dissenting voices that point out that the mandatory cooperation of Vietnamese CSOs with the state creates strategic limitations on the one hand and that the hierarchical structure of CSOs reflects authoritarian tendencies that strongly question their democratic potential on the other (Wischermann & Dang 2016:69-71; Wischermann et al., 2015:28). But it is also important to highlight how some NGOs and faith communities have been able to assert themselves against state control in areas such as gender norms (Wischermann

& Dang, 2016: 75). This in particular can be seen as an argument for the legitimacy of Vietnamese CSOs.

4.3. The role of CSOs for implementing gender equality

CSOs can contribute to gender justice in a number of ways. These include their function in initiating political change, mobilizing resources and making visible specific difficulties that women face daily. The organizations are often seen as mediators between grassroots movements and policy institutions (UNDP, 2001: 3), which could be said to pave the way for positive developments towards gender justice. The links between CSOs and gender justice are diverse, but the following case studies illustrate their potential.

CSOs' proximity to marginalized groups makes them an important factor in women's advocacy and gender justice. Proponents of this view claim that the organizations are able to mobilize resources and advocacy for the fight for gender justice, especially because they can influence the development of governance frameworks of states that promote gender justice (Caymuna, 2024: 135). In a study conducted by Adeogun (2019), the researcher explored the influence of CSOs on policies on gender equality in South Africa and Nigeria. The findings implied a notable influence on policy making of CSO with a focus on women's rights (such as women's organisations). In the case of South Africa, it was found that the organisations were able to create visibility for gender issues, acting as the voice of women and therefore advocated for their rights and needs. The study identifies the factors that are important for the effectiveness of CSOs in terms of gender equality. Factors such as integration into strong networks, better funding systems and robust legal frameworks all contribute to CSOs' ability to increase their positive impact on gender equality (Adeogun, 2019: 211-212).

In another study by Karje and Kulkarni (2020) on the role of a civil society organisation in women empowerment in India, the authors concluded that the CSO in question was pivotal in advocating for women's empowerment. They argued that CSOs are a favourable entity to observe people's needs which enables the identification of issues and the proposition of solutions. By providing women with a platform for their needs, the CSOs have made significant progress towards integrating women in gender policymaking and letting them therefore partake in the development process. Furthermore, the organisation did not only observe and articulate issues but monitor the progress on the part of the state towards set goals, which improves the accountability and responsiveness of the government. Additionally, the authors claim that one of the least recognized roles of CSOs for gender equality is their ability to showcase "innovative

approaches towards development-related issues” (Karje & Kulkarni, 2020: 242). By creating and testing alternative sustainable development strategies, CSOs can serve as models for larger-scale governmental policies on gender equality (Karje & Kulkarni, 2020: 242).

Apart from advocacy and influence on policymaking, some CSOs have taken direct action to improve gender equality through entrepreneurship development of women. CSOs can contribute to the economic empowerment of women by helping them to achieve equal economic opportunities and social inclusion. In a study of Veena et al. (2020) the authors conducted an impact assessment of CSOs interventions for women’s empowerment on a small and medium scale enterprise development. The findings showed that the interventions were able to help the women gain more self-confidence in entrepreneurial activities, with successfully dealing with finances and with networking skills (Veena et al., 2020: 307-312).

Even if the efforts of CSOs can be seen as positive in many cases, this is not necessarily the result. The effectiveness of CSO strategies for gender equality remains dependent on financial resources (Kaskinen & Ranta, 2023: 1600-1601), political resistance (Adeogun, 2019: 211-212) or cultural barriers (Veena et al., 2020: 313) and will therefore not in every socio-cultural context unfold the same potential. In a study by Teerawichitchainan et al. (2008), the authors claim that even in Vietnam, where gender justice is an explicit part of the political agenda itself, the introduction and dissemination of INGOs and LNGOs was able to add a positive contribution to raising awareness about gender issues and the dissemination of gender mainstreaming (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2008: 8-9).

4.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the nature of the CSO landscape in Vietnam differs from Western definitions of CSOs. This is mainly because the state exercises strong control and restrictions on civil society (Wischermann, 2013: 19-20). As a result, civil society has only limited autonomy and CSOs are closely linked to the government. This results in political and legal challenges for Vietnamese CSOs, such as the strong dependence on international funding and the restrictions imposed by state regulation (particularly in relation to crisis issues) (Gray, 1999: 710).

Despite this, Vietnamese CSOs repeatedly manage to assert themselves against state oppression and assert their own interests (Wischermann et al., 2015: 27). In some respects, proximity to the state can also be beneficial to the interests of NGOs, as it allows them to obtain financial resources and participate in policymaking (Vu, 2019: 437).

Using the examples of other countries that have been taken up in this chapter as case studies, we see the potential of CSOs for improving gender equality. The literature review showed that CSOs can bring women's interests and needs into the policy-making debate and support women's empowerment through direct assistance at a low-threshold level (Caymuna, 2024: 121). However, the literature review also showed that the efficacy and effectiveness of CSO interventions remain highly dependent on socio-cultural and political conditions (Adeogun, 2019: 212; Kaskinen & Ranta, 2023: 1601). The availability of financial resources, the legal framework and the social acceptance of CSOs can prove to be strong limiting factors.

To outline the potential of Vietnamese CSOs for gender equality, it can be said that CSOs in Vietnam act as a bridge between state institutions and marginalized groups (such as women). They offer the opportunity to make gender-specific problems visible and to represent the interests of women in policymaking. At this point, CSOs have the potential to contribute to greater gender equality through their advocacy, networking and resource generation. However, their work is still limited by state control and hierarchical structures. The success of CSOs therefore depends heavily on their ability to achieve the best possible outcomes within the confines of the political system.

5. Women in the Vietnamese Workforce – about Gender Equality in Vietnam

5.1. Introduction

Vietnam can soon look back on almost 100 years of history in the political advancement of women. Equality between men and women was officially declared a political goal as early as 1930 (Hien & Tuan, 2022: 157). In this regard, several political measures in the past can be found that are intended to strengthen the position of Vietnamese women. The Vietnamese authors Vu Thi Hien and Ngo Minh Tuan (2022) noted in this context: “*The Vietnamese Constitution of all periods has affirmed the principle of gender equality, as a strong commitment of the whole political system to promoting gender equality in Vietnam.*” (Hien & Tuan 2022: 157). Considering the length of this period in which the Vietnamese government has publicly committed to such goals it seems relevant to examine: Have gender-related measures contributed to improvements for women?

If we take a closer look at the real-life circumstances in Vietnam today, we recognise that inequality is still an everyday reality for Vietnamese women. If we look at the data about gender-based violence as well as sex-selection based on gender, we will find that these measures have their limitations. E.g. Vietnam to this day has the 3rd highest imbalance in the sex ratio at birth after China and India (Hien & Tuan, 2022: 158). We can see from this that although legal frameworks appear to be progressive, deep-rooted drivers of inequality must persist in the culture and society that hinder a holistic achievement of gender equality. To understand the processes in Vietnam, we shall now investigate the historical phases of gender role construction to lay a foundation to understand the complex interactions between ideologies and a multi-layered moral system that all exist simultaneously in Vietnam today.

Gender role construction describes the process by which specific attributes are assigned to different genders by society. "Gender" is therefore not a natural category, but "is a human product that depends on everyone constantly 'doing gender'" (West & Zimmerman, 1987 cited in Lorber, 1995: 318). The attributes ascribed construct the gender through so-called "gender markers" such as names, clothing, etc. As a social institution, the category of gender becomes more instrumental in order to distribute different rights and duties and to differentiate between different social positions, and the process of gender construction constantly redefines how "woman" or "man" is socially defined. (Lorber, 1995: 318-320). Understanding this instrumental character of gender roles will allow us to understand the significant influence that such social constructs take on the lived experience of women in their everyday work environment.

5.2. Gender roles during Confucianism

To understand the Vietnamese perception of gender roles we need to trace back the history of different ideologies that influence it until today. Namely, there are two larger-scale cultural ideologies that historically shaped Vietnamese society until modern days: Confucianism and socialism.

Confucianism is a cultural philosophy with its roots of origin in China which strongly influences many countries of Asia since centuries. Some scholars propose that the philosophy in its beginnings aimed to structure beliefs about human nature in a way that would make a people live together peacefully, create order and consensus (Xu et al., 2021: 2). The depictions of different virtues for different groups within a society served to create a system of hierarchical authority, paternalism and collectivism that allocate specific roles to different groups of people.

Conventionally, Confucian nations are also referred to as collectivist-oriented, which entails a heavy prioritisation of the family or the community over the individual. The central elements of Confucianism are communalism, filial piety and traditional gender roles. In the investigation of traditional gender roles in Vietnam, the latter is of importance. Confucianism carries a set of traditional gender roles that expect a specific standard of femininity and masculinity, within which the focus lies and the fulfilment of reproduction duties and marriage (Xu et al., 2021: 2).

Until this day cultural expectations towards women in Vietnam are held to very high standards. Many of these can be traced back to the cultural construction of women in Confucianism in which women are seen as “the moral backbone of the family and society” (Duong et al. 2024: 894). Women are expected to be hard-working, constantly improve themselves and always prioritize the family and the nation. The female identity is strongly associated with the home and family duties, making women feel responsible for domestic and reproductive tasks (Schuler et al., 2006: 385). According to Confucian morality a central characteristic of a woman should always show her obedience and submissiveness to her father, husband, or eldest son, which is also called the “three obedience” (Schuler et al. 2006: 386; Duong et al. 2024: 893). This can be understood as a direct testimony to the patriarchal nature of the Confucian philosophy. In Vietnam the application of the philosophical values is less stringent compared to other Confucian countries, which can be seen in examples like the fact that women in pre-colonial Vietnam were obliged to inherit land or widows were not seen as subordinate to their sons but act as the matriarchal leader of the family (Teerawichitchainan et al. 2008: 8).

5.3. Gender roles since the rise of socialism

However, Vietnam's cultural-political situation did not stagnate at these traditional social systems. Though culturally being influenced by Confucian heritage, politically Vietnam adopted the communist ideology during the 20th century.

The current position of women in Vietnam and their (at least legislative) equality was largely influenced by legislation passed by the Communist Party. The party members were keen to eradicate Confucian values, and this included the idea of women's domestic duty (Teerawichitchainan et al. 2008: 8). Especially in the socialist phase after 1946, the so-called "women's liberation" (Schuler et al., 2006: 386) was an important factor that emancipated women and promoted their participation in politics and social life. As already discussed, the Vietnamese state declared itself in favour of equal rights for men and women as early as 1930 which was the founding year of the Communist Party of Vietnam. For communism according

to Marx and Engels as well as for Leninism, the liberation of all people, including the liberation of women, is a central concern (Van, 2022: 354). Very few other countries have made comparable efforts to establish gender equality through legislative measures and social programs like Vietnam (Schuler et al., 2006: 384).

Historically, the strong efforts to achieve equal rights for women had various functions. During the French colonial period for example, it served the attempt to mobilize women for the resistance struggles (Hoang, 2020: 299). During the decades of wars that followed, the economic inclusion of women was essential to free men for military service (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2008: 5-6). Ho Chi Minh, the socialist revolutionary and later head of state of Vietnam, referred to the “three responsibilities” for women: they should look after the family, care for the country by working in agriculture and industry and, if necessary, defend the country as soldiers. This goes to show that the ideal socialist woman was equally responsible for the domestic and the public sphere (Su, 2024: 8). What at first sounds like equality turns out to be a double burden for women. Unfortunately, the integration of women into the labor market (as in many other parts of the world) has not been accompanied by the simultaneous integration of men into domestic duties.

5.4. Status quo of women after the economic reform

Research has shown that gender roles are continuously changing, not only since the communist revolution but also since the Doi Moi. More and more women are working in jobs that may not be typical for their gender, taking greater part in decision-making processes and increasing their economic independence (Duong et al., 2024: 893-894).

According to the Vietnamese author Vu Hong Van (2022), Vietnam has placed significant emphasis on gender equality as a fundamental component of its societal framework (Van, 2022: 356). The 2013 constitution explicitly declares equal rights for male and female citizens in all aspects of social life, making gender equality a special priority. Article 26 of the Constitution emphasizes the state's commitment to ensuring equal rights and opportunities for both genders while strictly prohibiting gender discrimination. The 2006 Law on Gender Equality further reinforces the concept, defining gender equality as granting men and women equal positions, roles, and opportunities for community development. The author continues to state that the policies are designed to extend gender equality across politics, economy, culture, society, and family, facilitating conditions for men and women to maximize their potential and participate equally in the development process. These policies also extend support to mothers during

pregnancy and childbirth, as well as encouraging shared responsibilities in household chores. Allegedly the government actively promotes the eradication of customs hindering gender equality and encourages participation in gender equality activities, especially in remote areas and those facing socio-economic challenges (Van, 2022: 356).

In another scientific article written by the Vietnamese authors Vu Thi Hien and Ngo Minh Tuan (2022) it is claimed that Vietnam would demonstrate its' strong commitment to gender equality through a series of laws and legal documents that elaborate on constitutional provisions safeguarding women's rights (Hien & Tuan, 2022: 169). Notable enactments include Civil Code (2015), Law on domestic violence prevention and control (2007), Law on marriage and family (2014), Law on promulgation of legal documents (2015), Law on Election of National Assembly deputies and People's Council deputies (2015), Law on Children (2016), and the very significant Law on Gender Equality (2006) (Anh, 2022: 48). Additionally, the government endorsed Decision No. 2351/QĐ-TTg on December 24, 2010, approving the *National Strategy on Gender Equality for 2011-2020*. "The Strategy has the following general objectives: By 2020, basically, ensure substantive equality between men and women in terms of opportunities, participation, and enjoyment in political, economic, cultural and social fields, contributing to developing rapid and sustainable development of the country" (Hien & Tuan, 2022: 160). Following on from the 2011-2020 strategy, *The National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2021- 2030 period* is already being implemented (Anh, 2022: 48).

Table 2: Excerpt from the National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2021- 2030 period (Anh 2022: 47-53)

Focus Area	Targets
Workforce Participation	Increasing the proportion of female wage workers to 50% by 2025 and about 60% by 2030
Women's Healthcare	The adolescent fertility rate will decrease from 23 births/1,000 women to 18/1,000 by 2025 and less than 18/1,000 by 2030
Education	The percentage of female masters in the total number of people with master's degrees will reach no less than 50% from 2025 onwards. The proportion of female doctoral students in the total number of people with doctoral degrees will reach 30% by 2025
Leadership in State Agencies	Ensure women hold >75% of leadership roles in state management agencies and local governments by 2030
Unpaid Housework	Reducing the average ratio of unpaid housework and care work for women compared to men to 1.7 times by 2025
Public Awareness	Strive to achieve a rate of 60% by 2025 and 80% by 2030 of the population who have access to basic knowledge on gender equality.
Support Services	By 2025, 80% and by 2030, 90% of identified domestic and gender-based violence victims can get access to at least one of the basic support services

According to Van (2022) Vietnam is regarded as one of the countries that has been able “to close the gender gap the fastest over the past 20 years” (Van, 2022: 356). He is calling the implemented policies a “breakthroughs in awareness and action, from the aspects of law, and policy to practice” (Van, 2022: 356). The authors Hien and Tuan (2022) also conclude that the political framework regarding gender equality allegedly “has achieved remarkable results” (Hien & Tuan, 2022: 161).

This description can also be found in other sources from the international community. The *Country Gender Equality Profile Viet Nam 2021*, published by *UN Women* (2021), states: "Viet Nam enjoys a positive reputation as a country where women are formally equal before the law, have comparatively high labour force participation and access to economic opportunities, and are achieving increasingly better health status and higher educational attainment" (UN Women, 2021: 19). While Vietnam has ascertainably taken actions within legal frameworks and policies, we will now take a closer look at the life circumstances of Vietnamese women to check the current status of gender equality in domestic life in Vietnam.

It should be made clear that a holistic examination and presentation of gender equality among Vietnamese women requires the consideration of multiple sectors and spheres. In the 2021 *UN Women* report just mentioned, gender equality is analysed using the following categories, for example: Equality in Human Development, Equality in Economy, Equality in Leadership and Management, Equality in Safety and Security, Equality in Social Life and Protection, Equality in Developing Viet Nam and Equality in the Future Decade (UN Women, 2021: 10-11). As a holistic description of the current situation is beyond the scope of this paper, the following will focus on women's equality in domestic life and in the economic sphere.

According to the research results of the *Country Gender Equality Profile Report* (2021) in the category "Equality in social development and family life" the pursuit of gender equality in social development and family life in Vietnam grapples with various challenges. The skewed sex ratio at birth, with 111.5 boys born for every 100 girls, showcases the persisting issue of son preference and sex-selective abortion (UN Women, 2021: 23). While Vietnamese women, with a life expectancy of 76.3 years, outlive the global average, and also overtake Vietnamese men's life expectancy with an almost five-year gender gap, they contend with vulnerabilities. Economic disadvantages, stemming from gender wage gaps and earning gaps for females as well as the 5-year difference in retirement age, contribute to making women more vulnerable to poverty especially in their old age (UN Women, 2021: 23).

Cultural expectations also play a significant role, as the belief in women's "heavenly duty" (UN Women, 2021: 23) to give birth and care for children perpetuates gender disparities in unpaid care responsibilities. This, in turn, affects women's career trajectories and leadership roles. Women with disabilities face additional hurdles, experiencing lower access to education, vocational training, and higher rates of physical and sexual violence. Despite progress in education, women's representation in tertiary education as well as in leadership positions remains disproportionately low (UN Women, 2021: 24).

To understand economic inequality from a feminist perspective it is worthwhile to reflect upon the domestic division of labor between men and women. The aim of the socialist state to reach absolute gender equality legally extends into the domestic sphere. The scientists Knodel et al. noted in this regard: "The goal of equalizing relations between men and women extended into family life. For example, the constitution stated that husbands and wives have the same responsibilities within the family. Campaigns were launched to educate people about equality in marriage, the labor market, and in balancing home and work responsibilities, including sharing housework." (Knodel et al., 2005: 72).

Studies show that Vietnamese women to this day carry out the majority of unpaid domestic care work. Although the rate of male involvement in the household is slowly increasing, we should take a closer look at the specific tasks that this refers to. For instance, the amount of daily, repetitive and labour-intensive domestic chores taken over by women still heavily outweigh the amount carried out by men with little to no increase in the rate. Conversely male participation in the domestic realm increased in matters like budgeting which could be critically interpreted as a want to enlarge control over the family (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2008: 2).

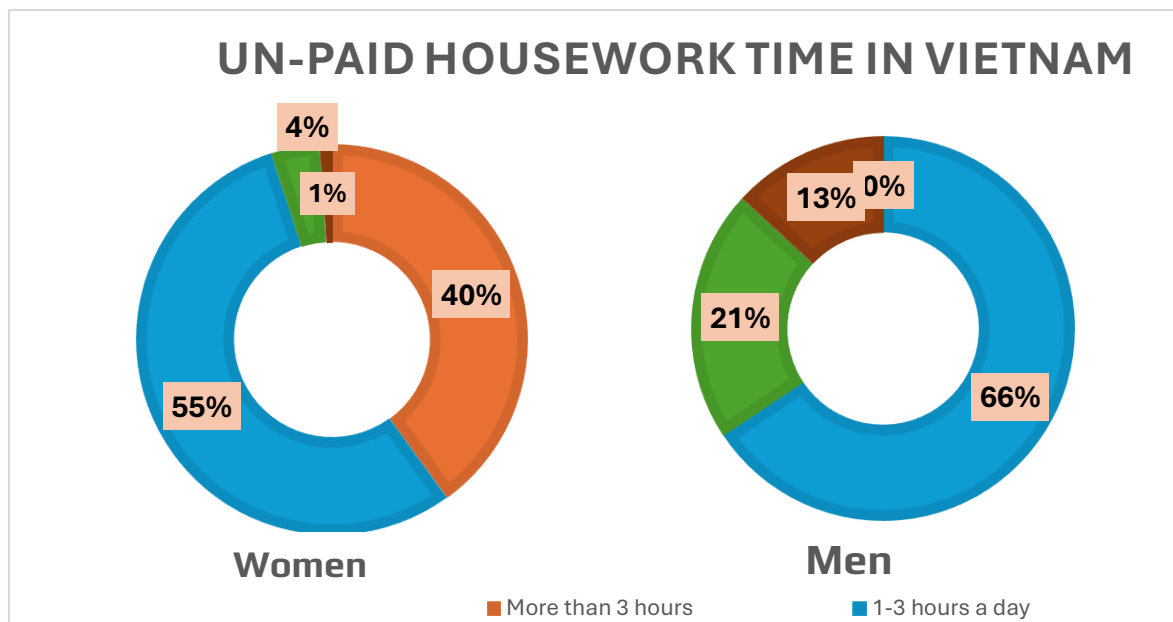


Figure 4: Un-Paid Housework Time in Vietnam (Source: Indochina Research 2023)

In a study Nguyet (2024) on gender discrimination against women at the workplace in Vietnam, the researcher cites the societal expectation for women to carry a disproportionate amount of domestic work as a major trigger for negative effects on their careers (Nguyet, 2024: 2008). According to the research results, women also struggle with their chances of success in the workplace during motherhood. Lack of sufficient maternity leave, for example, and the stigmatization of time off for mothering duties, can lead to women having to choose between their (socially imposed) role as a mother and career advancement (Nguyet, 2024: 2010-2011). This fact is reflected in the workforce participation rate: at 75.4%, the rate for men in Vietnam is visibly higher than that of women at 62.7% (Van Anh, 2023: 64). Additionally, the stigmatization of women, the lack of gender-specific measures and the lack of support are also reflected in the underrepresentation of women in leadership and management positions (Bac et al., 2024: 3644). However, to put this into perspective, it is worth mentioning that the Vietnamese female workforce participation rate still lies significantly over the global rate as well as the rate for the Asian Pacific region (Joyce et al., 2023: 60).

There is one more aspect of inequality that shall be addressed. It is crucial to note that violence against women persists, with high rates of intimate partner violence and sexual harassment. For instance, a national study in 2019 revealed that two in three married women had experienced violence by their husbands/partners (UN Women, 2021: 24). What is especially important to note about this tragic statistic is that from these victims a shocking majority of 90,4% did not seek help (UN Women, 2021: 24). Conclusions about underlying gender norms can be drawn from these figures. One possible explanation would be that women would rather protect the

honour of the family and obey the patriarchal culture by not speaking up against their partners (Nguyen, 2012: 48; Huong, 2024: 15). Another possibility is that the social networks within which the victims find themselves do not provide a support system for these women. This could point to patriarchally structured institutions and systems that do not provide resources to support women, but also to misogynist social norms (Huong, 2024: 33-34).

5.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that although much has been done for gender equality in Vietnam, political commitment alone is not enough to fully counteract the persistent gender inequality completely. The legislative framework is a step in the right direction but faces cultural and social obstacles.

Vietnamese society remains culturally influenced by Confucianist morality, which traditional gender roles ascribe submissiveness and housework to women (Schuler et al., 2006: 386). The subsequent period of socialism has emancipated women politically and emancipated women politically and in terms of the labor market but did not relieve them of the burden of unpaid care work (Knodel et al., 2005: 72). Some voices claim that women have to bear the double burden of responsibility for work and family (Su, 2024: 8).

The socialist construction of women as equal and politically active overlapped with the previously valid image of women from the Confucian moral code. The state of women's equality in Vietnam can be interpreted as the intersection of socialist concepts of gender equality on the one hand and the Confucian social norm of gender hierarchy on the other (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2008: 20). This fusion of contradictory basic beliefs can be found at all levels of social life in Vietnam. Although the legislative emancipation of women has brought many improvements and achievements, the social conviction that women are solely responsible for the household and family life limits the final equality of men and women (Schuler et al., 2006: 384-385).

While observing the state of gender equality in Vietnam today it can be noted that there has been significant progress made in the areas of e.g. education and workforce participation (UN Women, 2021: 19). Significant areas of gender inequality persist as seen in indicators like the uneven distribution of unpaid care-work (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2008: 20), gender pay gaps or the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. Additionally, gender-based violence against women remains a concerning issue and it can be criticized that this tragic form of inequality remains socially tolerated (UN Women, 2021: 19).

It appears obvious that there is a need for societal transformation to overcome the ancient, patriarchal order that categorically disadvantages women. Future implications could also include an improved support system for women in the workforce, especially in the context of mothers and other women with care-responsibilities. Public visibility and awareness of the problems of gender inequality could be steps in the direction of sustainable change.

6. Findings and Data Analyses

6.1. Introduction

This study aimed to investigate how Vietnamese women working in the civil society sector experience WLB, what their daily factors of stress are and the ways they learned to cope with them. In this chapter the findings of the research will be presented. Through *Thematic Analysis* of ten transcripts of the conducted semi-structured interviews, three main themes could be identified:

1. Experience of Competing Responsibilities
2. Strategies and Resources of Coping
3. Structural and Cultural Conditions

When working with the transcripts, one cannot expect the themes to just emerge from what has been said. To work out the themes was a tedious process that included reviewing and re-reviewing. I was working with questions to check myself and my theme-development. In the table below I want to give an overview over the themes, their meaning and the questions that directed my inquiry.

Table 3: The Three Main Themes of the Thematic Analysis

Theme	Focus	Analytical Perspective	Central Question(s)
Theme 1: Experience of Competing Responsibilities	Work-Care Conflict; Boundary Erosion; Social Expectations & Internalisation	Analytical Level: Experience of Struggle	How do women experience and navigate the struggle of fulfilling multiple conflicting responsibilities?
Theme 2: Strategies and Resources of Coping	Intrinsic Motivation; Boundary Setting; Support Systems & Self-Development	Analytical Level: Action, Strategies and Resources	What coping strategies and resources do women draw upon to manage work-life challenges? and how do these practices reflect their agency, values, and limits?
Theme 3: Structural and Cultural Conditions	Workplace Structure; Sectoral Constraints; Cultural Norms	Analytical Level: Cultural and	How do organisational, political, and cultural structures shape the

		Organisational Context	possibilities and limitations of WLB for women?
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6.2. Experience of Competing Responsibilities

Going into the semi-structured interviews, I was looking for the ways women experience the daily balancing of simultaneous and conflicting responsibilities, like paid and unpaid work, work tasks and home duties, family life and career. I led the empirical inquiry with the assumption that every woman would have these competing interests or conflicting responsibilities in her life. After I let the interview participants tell me about the position they hold at work and about their families and living situations, I asked them specifically: “When thinking about these different areas of your life, how is your experience currently balancing these multiple roles and responsibilities? And can you talk about any moments where this felt particularly challenging?”. And sure, as I had expected, they all had their stories.

6.2.1. The Dual Burden of Care Work and Work

I interviewed ten women of which eight had already had children. When asking these mothers about different areas of their lives and about competing responsibilities, they told me about the struggles of their everyday lives, of balancing their paid jobs and the unpaid care work they need to perform at home. They told stories of personal sacrifice, structural constraints, and the emotional and physical toll this took on them.

One of the interview participants, whose children were already in university, told me about her perception of her female co-workers and their “work after work”:

“I see with my college, they are quite busy and they rush to, you know, after working hours. They, you know, they fly to the house and taking care of; like picking the children up, cooking. Yeah. And after cooking, they have to, you know, taking care for, for the children like the homework.”

The domestic and care responsibilities that add an additional list of tasks to the working day of working mothers. It can be argued that due to responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, helping with homework and so on mothers are never really “off work” even after leaving the formal job. But how do women experience the simultaneous responsibility of paid work and unpaid care work, and how does this “second shift” impact their lives?

In one interview a woman explicitly stated that, in her opinion, family time was not resting or relaxation time. On the contrary:

“I don't advise people reduce the working time and spend much time for family because you know, it's like how to say, I forgot the word, but it doesn't change because you still under the pressure of the work in another way, in another form.”

All the workload of the daily care work for her is just “work in another way, in another form”. This lack of leisure time is problematic in many ways. I want to highlight especially the physical and mental burden that these never-ending workdays cause for working mothers who are the main caregivers.

One significant consequence of being the main caregiver of children and therefore being on constant duty to fulfil what Hochschild & Machung (1989) refer to as the “second shift” of work, was the erosion of recovery time due to the overlap of workload and working hours of their paid jobs with their childcare responsibilities. Several women told me about how resting time was the first thing they sacrificed to be able to fulfil employment and family requirements.

One of the participants told me about how she had to use her lunch breaks from work to drive home and breastfeed her child which led to her undereating and even losing weight:

“So many times it was basically just enough to give them like breastfeed them and even didn't have the time for me to eat something. So it's like continuously like that for many years. So it was too much. I lost many kilos so and also I had to work.”

This showcases an especially taxing case of a woman that is willing to rather malnutrition herself then slowing down at work or neglecting her nurturing role as a mother. This example highlights how women's health and bodies are at risk in a workplace environment that doesn't grant additional breaks for working mothers that need to care for children. Mothers who do not possess enough time, to fulfil responsibilities and to rest, can experience serious health consequences like exhaustion and weight loss.

Another mother told me about how she started waking up in the middle of the night to be able to get some work done before her son awakes.

“And then I wake up around 2:00 in the morning where I can actually, you know, quietly think and process my work because it's more about the more effective.”

For this woman the time between 2am and 7am (the time her son wakes up) was the only time that she can work concentrated and without distractions. This shows how the “second shift” extends beyond the hours after formal work into the time that should be reserved for sleeping

(e.g. before dawn). Waking up earlier and earlier can be interpreted as a quiet strategy of survival, really highlighting the conflict in timelines of work and care work.

Another participant told me about how she even in the first weeks after the baby was born used resting time to squeeze in some work:

“So usually when the baby sleep, you should sleep. But I cannot really do that fully, but I use 50 or 60% of the time to work. So to try to manage the different project, because my staff depend on me at the time.”

She told me as well that she went back to work only one month post-partum. This chronic lack of time of new mothers goes beyond “being busy”. Mothers try to spread their days as long as possible, to get as much done as possible and pay for this with their emotional and physical wellbeing. This quote also goes to show that new mothers working in the civil society sector feel not only responsible to take care of their children but also to take care of the people and projects they are working with.

6.2.2. No Boundaries Between Work and Life

A reoccurring topic in the interviews was the experience of a blurring of lines between what the women experienced as “their work” and “their life”. In many cases the women experienced their jobs in the civil society sector as more than a job: for many it was a life purpose and connected them to their sense of personal identity.

One of the women I interviewed expressed this emotionally charged meaning she assigned to her work and the sense of purpose she drew from it:

“What makes you wake up in the morning? Like you want to wake up, you want to get our bed in the morning. [...] So, I look at each of them and I ask myself, OK, when I wake up this morning, like is it the motivation for me to wake up?”

However, this sense of purpose and identity with your work can be a double ended sword. For some this intrinsic motivation to work can lead to an overstepping of one’s own boundaries and to self-exploitation. What results from these eroded boundaries between work and life can be the following: The feeling of being responsible for work doesn’t end when the formal workday ends.

In some cases, the experienced pressure to work doesn’t have to be caused by external factors. One of the interview participants reflects on this internalized commitment to the NGO work:

“I think most of the people who are working with the with the NGO, they had passionate with the job. [...] So, they always spend more time for the work in compared with the requirement from the organization.”

Another one expressed the lack of a clear separation between work and life:

“But yeah, I know the boundary in the civil society work and or in the NGO world is not really like a boundary as in the business work.”

This erosion of boundaries is both due to the structures of the work and the internal commitment of the workers to the work. One interviewee acknowledges that the reason for her working overtime (even while she is at home) is not just caused by the actual job requirements but also by her passion for her job.

“I not only travel a lot, I also work at home sometime. Yeah, because of the requirement, the work requirement and another reason is because I really like my work. So, the boundaries, I didn't set the boundaries. I didn't set the boundaries between the work and my private life, my family life.”

Closely tied to this is the moral and emotional responsibility that comes with working in care-oriented organisations. The women are not just completing tasks — they are committed to people. One participant described her inability to disconnect, even technically:

“I cannot let my phone be run out of battery because we worry; and we scare us.”

The interviewed woman felt like it was her duty to be on call 24/7 or because she felt responsible for the wellbeing of the vulnerable communities that she was working with.

Though this strong sense of being responsible extends beyond clients and projects. Another participant told me about how she doesn't take time off from work to be able to cover for co-workers who needed to take time off to care for their children.

But frankly, I hardly asked for support because I don't use all of my leave. I, I hardly use the leave only of the year I we have until now, we have 22 or 23 days off, but I hardly use much, just some day per year. And most of the time I support my colleagues because they have the small children to take care.

In this example the woman sacrifices for own resting time not to care for her children or just her projects, but to care for her co-workers. This goes to show the multifaceted dimensions that women take over care-responsibilities in society.

This constant need to do more in a profession where the work never ends can lead to severe outcomes. One participant told me about her experience of ignoring her own boundaries and the consequences she had to deal with:

“I actually couldn't do that until I kind of collapse. I got depression as well and I got anxiety disorder”

In this quote we can see that for the interviewee drawing boundaries and prioritizing herself wasn't normal or natural but was something that she had to learn to do only after being stopped by burnout and depression.

The result is a self-perpetuating cycle of overwork, where care for others consistently overrides care for the self. Rest and recovery are not denied by employers but quietly abandoned by the women themselves — a pattern that renders WLB unattainable not due to explicit coercion, but because of invisible ideals.

6.2.3. External Expectations and Internalised Pressure

The double pressure to be responsible for work and care-work is not only a product by the women's own moral standards but, in many cases, gets reproduced by their close family members. This external expectation of their mothers, in-laws and husbands to care for the family and be emotionally available at all times reinforces the internalized pressure to care for others.

Several women, who at times had to prioritize work over family, described tensions with their partners, who struggled to understand their professional commitments. One woman shared:

“My husband was very angry about that. And he said that you need the time for rest, not travel so much. But it's very difficult because all the agenda was fixed.”

The same woman continued to tell me how she felt the need to comfort, even apologize to her husband for taking on a lot of work at her job:

“I [...] try to behave very smoothly, but didn't make any angry, more angry with him and buy more present for the children. And I also promise a very long holiday with family after maybe after January.”

These apologies illustrate a feeling of guilt which shows how women internalise the expectation to not only be caregivers but also emotional regulators within their families — soothing tensions that arise when their professional roles disrupt normative gender roles at home.

These conflicting responsibilities and internalized expectations result in an internal conflict: On the one hand the women feel obliged to their professional work due to their moral commitment to the job and on the other they may feel guilty to do so because this professional ambition clashes with the societal gender norm they were raised to fulfil. In another part of the interview the same woman told me how she preferred to work more when her husband was not at home:

“my husband is on his fieldtrip [...] so I let myself free to work more in the evening. Yeah, I don't feel like it's like a pressure for me to work in the evening. I just like that. But if he is at home, we spend nearly all the all the evening time together.”

This illustrates how women are not simply managing time and duties; they are managing how their ambition is perceived, especially in heteronormative partnerships. This speaks to a gendered double bind: being accountable professionals in the public sphere, while also expected to fulfil emotional and relational obligations in the private sphere, a dynamic that adds further emotional strain and complicates boundary-setting. What becomes evident is that the emotional management of their partners is added to the emotional labour of their jobs.

There were many moments in my interviews where I could sense the deeply rooted belief that it's the woman's duty to care for family life. One participant told me about, how she “has to do this”, when telling me about her feeling of being responsible: not only for her and her husband but also for her parents and parents-in-law:

“However, the things from, you know, from me to my husband's family, still I have to do this. I still have to take care of the families.”

The expectation to embody the perfect feminine does not only connect to a woman's role as a mother but addresses her general societal role, which is to please and comfort. Another fascinating statement from a different woman reflects this while showing how these gender norms become one's own standards:

“I think I have to be pretty at the same time, you know, like good in the career at the same time, earning good money at the same time. Yeah. Being independent and sweet at the same time.”

Here, this woman in her mid-20s reflects her desire to fit into heteronormative expectations of a woman to be “pretty” and “sweet” whilst also wanting to be successful at her job. It's a snapshot of neoliberal femininity: the pressure to be effortlessly successful, emotionally intelligent, attractive, competent, and soft – all simultaneously. Importantly, this ideal isn't just externally imposed; it's spoken from within: “I think I have to...”.

This reveals the multidimensional pressures women internalise in navigating their identities. Rather than being asked to “choose” between career, beauty, or emotional availability, women feel compelled to embody all of them simultaneously, and seamlessly.

6.2.4. Conclusion

Through the observation of the dual responsibilities that the women working in the civil society sector in Vietnam face, it becomes apparent that the conflicts and burdens that they experience consequently are highly gendered. For most, the boundaries between paid work and unpaid care are not only blurred, they are often non-existent.

Whether through night-time work, skipped meals, or managing the feelings of others, their stories show how the pursuit of purpose in professional life is frequently undermined by structural expectations in private life.

The so-called “second shift” not only is a matter of time, but of identity. The narratives illustrate how external expectations shape internalised pressure, producing a gendered double bind: women are expected to be dedicated professionals and tireless caregivers, often simultaneously and without visible support. The result is an exhausting balancing act, one that requires not only emotional labour at work and home but also constant emotional negotiation of their right to exist beyond the domestic script.

6.3. Strategies and Resources of Coping

A second central point of my inquiry when designing my interview guideline was to figure out if there was struggle with WLB and if so, which coping strategies or resources the women used to deal with the stress and conflict. After I asked about moments and phases of their lives that they remembered as especially challenging to manage, I continued asking about the ways they went about the issues and how they solved them. I also asked about support networks, like in

the workplace, of family and friends and questioned them about which of these resources helped them significantly. With some, whose most challenging times were already in the past, I wanted to know further which of the strategies and resources they would in hindsight name as the most effective to help them cope with stress and overload.

6.3.1. Purposeful Work as Motivation

In the previous section I have already addressed the ambivalent nature of working in a purpose-driven job like workers in the civil society sector often do. I have outlined the strains and conflict that this intrinsic motivation can self-inflict on the women. Whilst the moral commitment to work can make the workers disregard their own needs to serve others, the motivation that the women get in their everyday lives through finding meaning in their jobs can also be interpreted as a driving force of energy to perform better and as a coping strategy to be able to deal with work overload. The sense of meaning can serve as a vital source of psychological resilience in the context of structural constraints.

Several interviewees described how the sense of doing something meaningful provided them with energy and helped them persist, even in moments of fatigue. One woman explained:

“now I feel like I'm tired sometime, but I still have motivation to do it.”

Another echoed this sense of clarity in what gives them motivation by stating:

“I engage in the NGO world because it is a not-for-profit organization. And because I really like my work. I really want to use what I learned from the university to the current work. So I think that the very important point, keeping me working for NGO.”

For many women, this goes beyond motivation; it touches on identity. The boundaries between professional function and personal self are often blurred. One participant reflected:

“so it's really for me, a woman and a mother, a wife, a community leader and an environmental activist. I can combine the perspective of all of those roles and see that, OK, this is what if I have 24 hours in my life every day. This is what I'm going to do.”

In many cases the decision to work in the civil society sector was a clear departure from the economic or profit-orientated sector. One participant reflects on this decision:

“I want that or what I do what also like brings meaning, like meaningful values for others. I want to help others so that's why I realized that economic is not the suitable

path for me because everything, whatever I work for the company, the ending goal is profit.”

This statement goes to show that the civil society workers chose a job that brings them ethical gain over purely financial gain. By doing so they choose a profession that reflects their moral values.

Another participant reflects on her inspiration to choose CS-work and how this sets her apart from others that work in market economy professions:

“I think, compared to my friends, I have the volunteerism spirit, like higher volunteerism spirit. So I want that or what I do what also like brings meaning, like meaningful values for others.”

These narratives position the civil society sector as an alternative space — a counter-model to the dominant work cultures defined by productivity, hierarchy, and self-interest. In this sense, the work itself becomes not only a job or a strategy of coping, but also a form of resistance and a statement of belief.

Many described that by doing a job that reflects their own values, they get a sense of joy. One interviewee describes:

“I just think that it is a very meaningful and impactful job for us. [...] So that's also made us very happy and proud, and also the meaning about work as well.”

What is relevant here as well is the description of them feeling “proud”. Doing something to fulfil your own purpose and that creates value can give the workers a sense of empowerment which can serve as a significant source for resilience.

Another not-for-profit worker shared with me about her motivation to work and her resilience in the face of even extreme personal constraints:

“Sometime people call me Superwoman for everything that I want to do and I need to do, I could do, but definitely not effortless. There's a lot of efforts to manage yourself, to stay with your commitment.”

Here it becomes really apparent that her intrinsic motivation, the meaning that she finds in her work, gives her that sense of empowerment. While this chapter highlights how working in a meaningful job can serve as a source of energy and foster endurance to keep going, I still want

to point out that this can be a fine line, because the need to “do it all” can seduce to self-sacrifice and, ultimately, harm.

Yet, as the following chapters will explore, this value-driven work ethic, while deeply fulfilling, is not without its costs. The very qualities that render civil society work meaningful also make it difficult to step away from, reinforcing patterns of overcommitment and emotional labour.

6.3.2. Boundaries and Self-Care as an Active Practice

While knowing what gets you up in the morning can help you to stay happy and motivated, it alone does not necessarily serve to be healthy in the long run. As much motivation a sense of purpose at work can provide, it is not useful in the context of resting and recharging. Across the interviews, the ability to set boundaries and practice self-care emerged as a vital, learned strategy in dealing with the ongoing pressure of reconciling work and family life. Rather than being intuitive or automatic, self-care was described by many participants as a hard-won insight, a skill that had to be consciously developed and maintained.

A reoccurring theme in the interviews was a kind of turning point in the women’s lives where they realized that self-care is not optional or neglectable but essential. One participant explained:

“before I thought that, you know, my time is for family and my times is for work. And after working hours, all of my time is for family [...]. So, love yourself more, even women because the children don't have you for one hour. They don't die.”

This statement illustrates this moment of change of perspective. Most of the participants could recall a time where they did not feel allowed to prioritize themselves over other responsibilities and how they had to teach themselves how to actively practice self-care.

The interviews gave many examples of the drastic consequences that can occur if there is no sense of self-care and no time for resting and recharging. One interviewee recalled on her severe physical health decline as a result of missing boundaries between herself and others:

“So many times it was basically just enough to give them like breastfeed them and even didn't have the time for me to eat something. [...] I lost many kilos”

This quote is a striking example of how caring for one’s own mental and physical health is vital for being able to care for others.

Each woman had a unique experience on how they learned to prioritize their own wellbeing, but many told me about a mental or physical collapse as their final wake-up call that was essential for them to finally realize the necessity. One interviewee explained:

“I actually couldn't do that until I kind of collapse. I got depression as well and I got anxiety disorder.”

It was striking how many women explained to me that the awareness of self-care was not natural to them, about how they didn't feel it would be actable behaviour to ask for help themselves, rest or acknowledge their own needs. What emerges here is a pattern: boundary-setting is not something these women were raised or trained to do, it was something they had to learn the hard way. The pressures of care, both at work and at home, had long eclipsed their own needs.

One interviewee stressed the significance of socialisation and of the way one was raised:

“We just don't speak about what we feel inside. [...] It's never be taken into account in my generation [...] to be able to name the feelings, address the feeling. But that kind of thought or mindset never be in in my parent generation.”

For the women that were able to empower themselves to be strong enough to establish priorities for their own wellbeing, setting boundaries and self-care became powerful tools. Several women began to prioritise activities that brought them joy or allowed them to be alone, even briefly. One participant described how she started to make space for hobbies, solitude, and rest:

“before I never gone to cafe alone. I never go to the cinema alone. But now I have, I did it! [...] Maybe I informed my husband that, so today this time from this to this, I have my Zumba class. So don't contact me.”

Another one reflects on the same topic:

“in the weekend. I can have a time in the day just with myself. And then I will either watch movies. I will go to a cafe and then put on music and then write, like journaling. Yeah. So it's a kind of meditation that helped me a lot”

In these narratives we can see how the women are reclaiming their power over their lives through many small activities and simple acts of self-love in their everyday lives. While a busy working mother may not have the time every day of the week to take this time for hobbies and interests, it seemed that those women who generally understood the importance of their own

wellbeing and showed up for themselves whenever they could, even if it was only once per week, seemed happier and more content.

A specific form of self-care that was named often was exercising to improve physical health and fitness. One participant shared:

“Recently I found that we also need like to strengthen our physical health [...]. And so I also allocate the time, the certain time for the physical exercise, especially running or doing the exercise [...] by that way I have more energy to deal with also the family issue and also with the work issue.”

It can be argued that practices of selective prioritisation can be a very effective response to work-overload and can be emotional. This required a conscious process of self-reflection and boundary drawing. One participant shared:

“I list all the work I’m doing [...] and I ask myself, OK, when I wake up this morning, like is it the motivation for me to wake up? If it's really a no I will drop it.”

Others similarly articulated how they use personal values as a compass for decision-making:

“So that's when I knew that I have to drop a few things so that I could focus on what is the most important. [...] I focus more on myself and what I want instead of for example, if I do this because I want people to, to value me because I do this”

Such strategies reflect a high degree of self-awareness and intentionality. The participants were not simply working harder but working more selectively. It can be argued that this ability to make good decisions for oneself goes hand in hand with self-development or learning about one’s own needs. One participant highlighted this:

“I think it's really important to understand yourself and manage yourself [...] It come a lot with the personal skills of understanding what you want, prioritizing time management and work.”

It is one part to be able to identify one's own needs, but it is another to be able to communicate these personal boundaries with your surroundings. Many women told me that for them it was easier to communicate needs with their husband than it was with their boss at work. One interviewee recalled:

“So talking with him [the husband] is more easier than the boss, even though that my director is very, very nice person, nice woman, I think yeah, but sometime because she also a work lover.”

It can be difficult to communicate needs and boundaries at the workplace for multiple reasons. One significant one is the fear of appearing less competent to the employers which could possibly harm one's own career. One woman elaborated on the difficulty to communicate with their boss:

“we're afraid of talking with the managers or the boss. Like I'm feel overwhelmed, I'm feel stressed, I'm feel burned out. So, so maybe they're afraid that the boss or maybe the managers will think that you are not be able to work, they might lose the job.”

This quote captures the emotional risks associated with admitting vulnerability in the workplace. Even in mission-driven organisations, where care and empathy are central to the work, there exists a fear that revealing burnout could be seen as incompetence.

However, in many interviews it became apparent that communicating boundaries became unavoidable. Participants reported that without actively asserting limits, they were continuously assigned more responsibilities. As one woman put it:

“For the people [...] who hardly say no with the boss. So if you don't set the boundary or you hardly deny the work with the other duty given by the boss. So the more work you will have, yeah.”

Another shared a similar experience:

“Because I found that even if you still say yes all the time, maybe the boss thought that you was all ready for everything and you had free time for work. So they still like apply more work for you. But yeah, when you set the boundary, you agree with like some rules with the boss and also the college.”

All these narratives support the normalization of work-overload in the civil society sector. It also shows that it is up to the employees themselves to protect themselves. This is very problematic since it can be assumed that not every person has the emotional strength to say no, to draw the line and to communicate their needs. This coping strategy against work-related stress seems to be exclusively available for those women who have tools and resources for self-

empowerment and self-determination which strengthen and support them against societal expectations and organisational structures.

For women in financially precarious situations or in caregiver roles with no support (like single mothers) boundary setting and self-care practices are most likely less available. When it comes to drawing lines, structural inequality can mean that some women cannot afford to say no. This exposes the limits of boundary-setting as a privileged form of agency, rather than a universally applicable solution.

While many women in the study shared inspiring examples of how boundary-setting and self-care practices supported their mental health, these practices must be understood in context. The ability to set boundaries is deeply shaped by structural inequalities, gender norms, and organisational culture. What is often presented as a personal strategy for resilience can, in fact, be a symptom of systemic failure to care for workers. Boundary-setting should not be seen as a substitute for collective care structures, but as one tool among many in the pursuit of sustainable, just working conditions.

6.3.3. Social Support Systems and Resources for Resilience

As already addressed in the previous chapter, the ability to set boundaries and manage work-life-conflicts is rarely achieved single-handedly, but very much so dependent on different stakeholders. The interviews indicated that social support systems, like their husbands or relatives all the way to co-workers and close friends, are crucial for women to balance contradictory responsibilities. There are various coping mechanisms through which women use these support systems in the form of social networks and other resources to cope with their everyday lives.

One central stakeholder within the landscape of supporting units were, for many interviewees, the husbands. Especially life partners, who actively participated in domestic work or provided emotional support seemed to take a positive influence on the women's experience of WLB. One of the participants, who was required to not travel a lot for work, told me about the support she needs from her husband and her family regarding the childcare duties of her children:

“I still travel a lot. [...] I have to share so many thing with the family, especially my husband, because you know that after the marriage see he understand my work.”

Although the social support network around here enables her to focus on her work and to fulfil the job requirements like traveling, being dependent on other people to carry out one's duties comes with constant negotiations. The same women continued to share with me:

"I will inform him [the husband] that I need to work tonight or I have a meeting tonight. [...] So I asked for his understanding."

This statement reflects the deeply internalized division of labor between the genders. It is not to say that it is per se wrong to let the partner feel included into the structuring of one's own timelines by asking for consent. But I want to argue that it is much more likely for women to ask their husbands for support with domestic tasks and childcare because societally these tasks should be performed by her. In the quote above the woman asks her husband for "his help" with "her duties" which completely ignores that this most likely are his children and his household too, so these should be his duties, too.

In other cases, the women reported that their help from their husbands with household tasks was more established. One participant told me about how her and her husband organised their daily domestic duties:

"He go to the market and buy food and he cook. So like I think that we are responsible to share the housework. [...]. So if we have a free time, I do cooking, if I have free time, I do washing, something like that. But if I'm busy and if he has time, he would do."

Another woman told me how her husband would not only give her emotional support but also be able to support her with work-related tasks, like paperwork:

"It's so lucky that I have my husband and he can [have] empathy for my for my jobs. And even he can support [...] He's taking care of the process, the paper of the document."

Another woman echoed this, addressing the importance of emotional support by her husband:

"But my husband is my best friend. [...] I just know that the huge support, the main support is from him."

Right after husbands, close friends were next mentioned as a source of emotional support and compensation for negative emotions. In more three out of the ten interviews the participants told me that their close friends even work at the same organisation. One woman shared:

“I have four very close friends, so two of them work at the same organization. [...] we often have a coffee time together. So that's the way we like balance work and life.”

In some cases, it can be a benefit to have an emotional support system at work by being friends with your colleagues because you can share about work issues. In other cases, it may also be good to seek your emotional support and stress relief outside of work:

“So I will just share with them [her friends] to like to release the the stress.”

Another participant tells about a similar experience:

“I and my friend usually have a meeting at coffee shops [...] We always share about the job, share about the life [...]. And they make me to less the pressure in our life and in the work. And when I feel stressed I usually share with them and they usually give me the advice”

Furthermore, multiple interviewees highlighted the importance of the support from the extended family, especially in the time period after childbirth. One woman recalled:

“I think it depends on the supporting network that you have. So it would decide how hard it is. So, for example, for me, my mother-in-law at that time, she was young, and she could help me to take care the baby all the time except the night.”

In Vietnam it is very common for the parents-in-law to move in with parents with a newborn child. In some cases, they will stay living in a multigenerational household, in other cases the in-laws will stay for a few months or the first view years after childbirth. This was explained to me by one participant:

“In Vietnam, we do live with our, like the child, live with the grandparents. [...] when I give birth my own mother and my mother-in-law also stay with us. [...] I cannot have like enough time to do it all. So they help.”

Having the support of the women's parents(-in-law) seemed to be an established system to enable mothers to go back to work as soon as possible. One woman told me about her experience:

“I received much support from my parents-in-law. They take care the whole family and my mother-in-law, she cooked for the whole family. She take care of the children.”

In none of my interviews I heard about a father staying home to do the childcare after a baby is born. One woman explained me why it is crucial to have close relatives come and support a woman with the childcare duties:

This conversely means that women and their ability to work depends on the support system of relatives that they have around them. The prerequisite for childcare is therefore parents who are healthy, willing, and geographically close to the new mother. This illustrates the deep structural inequality between women resulting in professional participation being a privilege, not a right for mothers. One interviewee witnessed, what happens when you can't rely on parents-in-law or other relatives for the childcare:

“In many cases with my friends or my colleague, if they don't have anybody to take care of children. So sometimes they have to quit the job for one year until they can send the children to the to the kindergarten.”

The only alternative for women who do not have access to such support networks lies in financial compensation for it: by paying for childcare. One of my interview partners shared with me about how her relatives lived too far away to do the childcare for her, so she had to hire a nanny:

“My parents are from my hometown. So they are not just like near here to help me here and then so sometimes they came here but they were old. So I was having a nanny to take care of my children when I was working.”

Another interviewee supported this point of view, that hiring a nanny is essential to compensate for a lack of family support because the existing institutional structures in northern Vietnam for childcare of toddlers and babies are not sufficient:

“We have the kindergarten. [...] people often think that the children is too small to be away with mother. So they try to avoid that situation by like a hiring a woman. So many family, they prefer to hire like an old woman to take care of the baby or the mother, spend at least one years with the baby”

In sum, the availability of supportive networks greatly influences the extent to which women can sustain demanding professional and private roles. Whether through co-parenting, intergenerational caregiving or emotional support by friends, these relational ecosystems function as essential buffers against the pressures of work-life imbalance.

6.3.4. Conclusion

When examining the main topics that were named in the interviews regarding strategies to cope with stress and work-overload, what becomes strikingly obvious is that all of these strategies are shifted onto the responsibility of the individual, on their availability of financial resources and of their supporting social networks. The overemphasis of individual coping strategies in the interviews led to the impression of a lack of institutionalised support structures for the women, especially for the mothers, that would enable them to do their work in a healthy and sustainable way.

From the interviews it seemed like achieving comprehensive WLB is impossible for women since the superordinate structures they are working under seem to exclude their needs, turning their daily balance of conflicting responsibilities into a constant struggle. Rather than addressing the issue on a larger scale the participants seem to carry the weight of these structural disadvantages entirely on their own shoulders by trying to compensate for these systematic failures through individual adaptations and strategies.

While many of the coping strategies felt empowering to the women in question, it also aligns with neoliberal logics of individual responsibility: the idea that each person must manage their own well-being, time, and productivity, regardless of external pressures. This shifts attention away from structural causes of burnout, such as understaffing, lacking social systems, excessive workloads, chronic underfunding or insufficient government support, and instead puts the onus on women to "fix themselves."

6.4. Structural and Cultural Conditions

While the previous chapters have highlighted individual struggle and strategies while only brushing over the larger-scale structures that cause women's draw upon to navigate work-life conflicts, these efforts do not occur in a vacuum. They are embedded within broader organisational and cultural contexts that either enable or constrain women's ability to manage competing responsibilities. From my interviews I was able to investigate these issues from multiple angles.

6.4.1. Organisational Structures and Institutions

Many points of argument that were mentioned in this analysis so far have already grazed upon superordinate structures and systems that influence the experience of WLB of women working in the civil society sector in northern Vietnam, but the general focus thus far lay showcasing

personal experience and subjectivity. Now I want to shift the analytical focus to the actual structural conditions of organisations and institutions and how they enable or hinder women in their daily juggle of responsibilities.

In this context, one topic that occurred quite frequently in the interview process was the issue of the daily commute to work. Especially in the city of Hanoi, the daily drive to work, which typically for Vietnam is via motorbike, can be source of psychological and physical strain:

“I know people who drive like an hour. [...] But it of course it's create a stress, especially when there's much traffic [...] And especially summer in traffic like 38-40 Celsius degree and then in the traffic.”

Commuting to work in the city is a very different experience then it is maybe elsewhere. The public transportation system of Hanoi has not been able to keep up with the demands of the quickly growing city, making individualized transport the more attractive option to its inhabitants (Hansen 2017: 631). The main medium of transportation is the motorbike. The city is home to an astonishing amount of estimated 5.6 million motorbikes, or 2.5 motorbikes per household, which are clogging the streets in massive traffic jams on a daily basis (Kieu et al. 2024: 1). Besides the likelihood of accidents also the inhalation of gasoline-polluted air as well as the mental stress of these huge crowds can be a significant harm for the health of women who have to drive not only to work but also their children to school. One interviewee recalled:

“So from that time, only me with my daughter. So every day I take her. I took her to school with the motorbike.”

These infrastructural hazards affect women in particular since they are most likely the ones who have to drive the extra mile, not only to work but also to pick up and drop off the children at school and so on. Commuting itself becomes not a neutral transition between the two domains of work and private life, but it becomes itself an arena of gendered work and disadvantages. Many interviewees shared this experience. Another one reported:

“The organization that I work for was in the city center, so like the other end of the city. So it used to take me at least an hour one way. So for one day is 2 hours travelling like lots of traffic and so breathing all the polluted things.”

Another form of transit that can be very common in the civil society and NGO sector is traveling. Especially for mothers with children the work requirement for longer travels is in itself contradictory to the gender norm expectations of women to be the main caregivers for

their children, leading to the gradual exclusion of women out of certain professional positions. One participant told me about how she had to leave her job for this reason:

“I had to travel a lot [...] Sometimes it takes me like one month continuously and it was too much for a mother with two young kids at that time.”

In many cases the women who were working remotely praised the increased flexibility that they received through working from home and the relief of not having to do the daily commute. One woman shared:

“If we work from home, we have a more time. We can save the time with transportation and we can reduce the risk in in transportation.”

But there are two sides to the flexibility of work environments. If working becomes not limited by time and space but can be done any time from anywhere, the borders between work and private life erode quickly. One mother told me about her work routine:

“I really work flexibly. [...] I wake up around 2:00 in the morning where I can actually, you know, quietly think and process my work because it's [...] more effective that you wake up.”

This 2am-work-routine should not be misunderstood as a form of agency and self-regulation but is the last resort for the woman to be able to combine her unpaid care responsibilities with the professional requirements that she has to deliver. Though flexibility of work in the short run can help mothers on their quest to fulfil all their conflicting duties, ultimately it is an indicator for the silenced acceptance of the systematic neglect of the needs of women.

Furthermore, workplace culture can add to this issue. One interviewees statement about her boss illustrates this internalization of the norms of work-overtime-culture:

“the boss[...] she also a work lover, I think, addicted to working. So, it depends on how urgent it is [...] I adjust based on the on the need of the work and also based on my priorities at that time.”

We can read from this report that her workplace culture doesn't promote clear boundaries. On an institutional level there seems to be no protective measures in place, the employees have to deal with the expectation that the work needs to be done, no matter the conditions.

Conversely, employees working in a supportive workplace environment and work culture can have a very different experience. One interviewee who dealt with depression in the past shared:

“So my boss is like allow me to take several days off and go from home and stuff and ask other people to take care of my tasks so that I could focus more on recovery. And also my college is also very helpful.”

This quote illustrates how effective a supportive and employee-orientated workplace culture can be, especially for people who are dealing with mental health issues. However, such reports were rather rare in my interviews which leads me to assume that such systemic support structures cannot be regarded as the norm.

In the previous chapters we have already discussed how some women after childbirth leave their employment after childbirth if they have no relatives or financial resources to manage the childcare labor of the newborn baby. But even for mothers with older children the timeline issues do not end.

“My working hours before is from 9:00 to 5:30. But my child is ending school at 4:30, so it was means one hours, who take care of them? So yeah, we have to put her into the clubs like dancing, piano clubs like this, chess clubs.”

This reflects the lacking governmental structures for childcare. Women have to bridge the gap between the end of school for the children and the end of their workday by coming up with an alternative entertainment program (like music or sport clubs) consisting of financially costly and/ or organisationally complex activities. This furthers the structural disadvantage of women's access to meaningful work.

Emerging from these narratives is not only a critique on unfortunate schedules and huge workloads but on the symptoms of organisational and societal structures which are orientated towards the assumption that all workers are free of other responsibilities, which therefore continuously disadvantages mothers who have to perform care work on top of their work. For the women in this study, navigating such environments demands constant adaptation, self-sacrifice, and time-stretching. Flexibility, when it exists, often functions as compensation for institutional absence rather than as an integrated, gender-sensitive policy.

6.4.2. Political and Economic Constraints

WLB is not only determined by individual choices of workers or by the arrangements between employees and employers. Rather it is deeply rooted in larger-scale economic and political structures that shape the civil society sector and consequently CSO. Women working in this field navigate a professional landscape marked by low salaries, unstable project funding, externally imposed bureaucracies, and gendered state policies. These restraints not only limit women in their ability to make good choices but it forces the gender imbalance of the burden of unpaid care work.

In more than one case the interviewees talked about salary and the ways that money influences their relationship to work. One woman in her mid-20s explained:

“The one reason that I need to work for two jobs is also about the income that one jobs does not like really enough for me to make ends meet.”

Her experience of trying to make a living in Hanoi and working in the civil society sector is shaped by high workload, long working hours and a feeling of lacking in resources. Although she is relying on two jobs to reach financial stability, she has to additionally negotiate her workload with her family:

“[If] I will make more money in one hour, so the average income will become higher. So maybe my life is easier and then I can get more time for my family and also for other, you know, activities because sometimes my parents also complain a lot about me not really dedicated to the family work.”

Here, the interviewee is caught between the need to financially self-sustain and the expectations of her family. This can be seen as a symptom of a structural contradiction: On the one hand the civil society sector is reliant on committed workers but on the other hand the salaries may be not enough to keep their commitment in a sustainable way.

This contradiction is even stronger for women with children. Another woman reflects ways that income is related to the ability to combine work and care work in a sustainable manner:

“I don't have any much challenge because my income is, is somehow OK [...] And for the woman who have more than one children [...]. The problem with the children and also the income is not enough. Then I think, they got problem balancing the work and the housework.”

Her observation indicates that economic security, sustainable work practices and family-stability are not a given, dependent on an array of factors and are a privilege to some. Despite the economic and political difficulties of the sector many women will decide to stay in the field no matter what. A degree of job scarcity will increase the level of tolerance for unfortunate work conditions. On interviewee e.g. shared:

“And you know that the situation, the working situation now in Vietnam is very hard. I find it difficult to find a very interesting work like this.”

Another statement of another woman indicates this job-scarcity:

“I think it's getting more popular that people decide to travel far to do what they would like to do, to do the job they like or the job that support their income.”

In a situation where there are not enough jobs that are emotionally satisfying and/ or provide enough income, the value-driven civil society workers will silently accept bad working conditions. In these cases, idealism turns out to be a double-edged sword: While prevailing commitment and motivation, it can simultaneously lead to self-exploitation.

Sociopolitical structures enforce the socioeconomical pressure the women are under by making them systematically responsible for the unpaid childcare work:

“Because they let the mother have six months off for the maternity leave, but for the husband they have only seven days max. [...] So I think from the from the policy point of view, it's not equal.”

With the non-existent policies for paternity leave mothers have no other option but to take up the role of the main caregiver with all the career disadvantages that this entails.

These structural disadvantages get additionally complicated through the ways that those CSO have to operate that are externally regulated or depend on foreign funding. Several participants described how international donors or third-party administrative agencies imposed additional layers of bureaucracy, often increasing their workload without corresponding compensation or strategic alignment. One interviewee shared:

“Yeah, we had to try one. That's from January, but they create more workload for me.”

Another one shared about her organisation's struggles:

“And it also take time and effort to adapt of the some rules and some documentaries that we have to follow up [...] now we have some project, but what if the project ends and, and we cannot earn some other projects [...] before to gain that fund is also is working time with us and [...] we have to pay ourselves.”

Such narratives shed light on the colonial continuities and postcolonial dependencies that continue to shape civil society work in Vietnam. Organisational autonomy is limited by the conditions set by donors, while employees absorb the resulting stress. These external impositions blur the boundaries between project coordination, reporting, and care work, making WLB for women even more elusive.

All in all, these reports show how the political and economic restraints shape the lived reality of female civil society workers in Vietnam. They are apparent in their daily timelines, in their emotional landscapes, their relationships and their understanding of normality. The interaction of structural insecurity and personal strategies of resilience highlights the importance of framing WLB not as an individual or organisational issue but as a question of systemic gender equality.

6.4.3. Gender Norms and Cultural Stigmatisation

While organisational policies and polit-economic conditions are strong constraints to the WLB-experience of women, they do not exist in a cultural vacuum. Cultural norms and gendered expectations set the scene for societal negotiation about gender roles and acceptable behaviour. The following section explores the cultural norms and patterns of stigmatisations and the ways they influence the destiny of working women.

The societal expectation for women to assume the primary caregiving role is not only enforced through intimate relationships but is also institutionally reproduced. One interviewee gave a concrete example of how gender roles persist in school–family dynamics:

“We are more challenged about how to take care of our children, well, how to care for their education like if they are doing their homework, the finish the work at the school. the teacher will be calling us because of this.”

Here, it is assumed, even by educational professionals, that mothers, not fathers, are the default point of contact and responsibility when it comes to children's academic performance and wellbeing. This everyday example reflects a much broader cultural script in which women are constructed as natural caregivers, even when they also hold full-time jobs.

The gender expectations of women being caregivers are deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture history. One participant explained how the country's history and traditions continue to shape the lives of women over generations:

“We were born in that kind of situation that always teach us about resilience, right? I say like our parent generation got it all from the world, from the poverty, from the famine, right from the, the big transition of the economy when Vietnam opened up”

The question of how much a person can endure is not only an individual decision but is connected to the societal expectation of resilience which is a result of generational trauma. The heritage of economical and humanitarian crises promotes a culture of self-sacrifice and endurance of suffering. This strongly influences the ways, especially women, deal with their personal issues and the cultural expectations that are targeted towards them.

In many moments during the interviews, you could detect the pressure for women to adapt to heteronormative gender roles. For example, one interviewee mentioned:

“And he also want me to stay at home more because like I said, he feel very boring and upset if I travel a lot”

This quote shows how her husband is dissatisfied with her because she neglects “her duty” to care for the wellbeing of the family, and him, because she is working. His dissatisfaction is not framed as a general relationship issue that concerns both but rather as her own failure. What gets implied here is that women's responsibility is to provide emotional support to the family members, in the form of conversations, company and care.

In the context of the extended family and the cultural rituals and holidays that are celebrated, women are made responsible to ensure that everything runs smoothly. One participant shared:

“So I like during the Lunar New year I don't have any time to relax. Like taking care of her, taking care of my father as well. And like, because the lunar year, so lots of relatives coming to the house just to visit us. And so lots of work, yeah, at home.”

During holidays that are supposedly a time off, women have to work extra hard to ensure that everything is prepared for the festivities: cleaning, cooking, entertaining the relatives, performing rituals, looking after the children, and maintaining harmony.

Another participant shared a similar story:

“he [the husband] can share with me some workloads. However, the things from, you know, from me to my husband's family, still I have to do this. I still have to take care of the families.”

What comes apparent here is the expectations of parents and parents-in-law that put pressure on women to tackle all the domestic work and care work. The continuation of matrilinear responsibilities inside the patriarchal family structures shows how gendered expectations are culturally rooted.

At the same time, the women reflect on the slow changes within culture and gender norms. One interviewee shared her experience:

“Before my parents-in-law is quite struck uncomfortable when they see my husband is going to the kitchens and washing the dishes. But now even, you know, after meal, I and my parents-in-law can drink some water together and, and he is clean the things.”

This illustrates how gender norms are changing slowly but surely. However, the fact that such dynamics are still regarded as extraordinary reflects how far off a way it still is to reach gender equality inside the household.

Alongside the conservative gender roles that burden women with the domestic and care work, patterns of cultural stigmatisation of mental health and suffering can furthermore exacerbate the struggle of women to overcome challenges. One interviewee reflects:

“the Vietnamese word for that, you know, mental health, it still be stigma. So, everyone is afraid of this scale. This even is just mental health.”

The interviewee draws attention to the deep-rooted stigma surrounding mental health in Vietnamese society, which is embedded even at the linguistic level. The term commonly used to translate "mental health" evokes fear and misunderstanding, thereby reinforcing avoidance and resistance.

Another participant shared this experience with the topic of mental health:

“mental health is something like getting more and more concerns from the Vietnamese people, but many of them are still think a bit as some like sickness. They have the discrimination towards the mental health.”

This cultural silence on mental health struggles can be especially problematic for mothers. One participant shared with me about her experience with being able to talk about her own suffering:

“Even like with my own mother sometimes. I don't really feel that right because culturally that mindset is that it's supposed to be mine, not others. [...] I know that the depression after birth and everything is so can be very harmful”

This quote highlights how cultural and familial expectations around strength, silence, and self-reliance are internalised by women to the point where even expressing vulnerability to one's own mother feels wrong. The speaker identifies how these inherited mindsets can isolate women during critical periods such as postpartum, where support is most needed.

One of the women I interviewed founded a NGO that supports people who struggle with mental health issues because this issue is still societally marginalized. She told me:

“Because after more than 10 years working in an NGO, I realized that the mental health is really important for the client or even for the staff and also for the managers. Because when you're strong about body and mind, you can have energies to taking care others.”

From her perspective we can draw that especially for people working in the civil society sector the awareness of mental health and the ability to address it in a healthy way is crucial. Although the CSO-workers would benefit from improving their own wellbeing to then be able to pour more into their work, this is not made easy by the cultural stigmatisation of vulnerability. Another interviewee shared:

“In Vietnamese cultures, sometime it's not nice. Like people really hesitant to ask for something. They think that's not good of themselves and that is relying on like, so dependent on the others.”

This illustrates how cultural norms in Vietnam discourage the open expression of vulnerability and reinforce a stigma around mental health. Asking for help is often perceived as weakness or dependency, which can prevent women from seeking necessary support.

Most of my interview partners shared a similar opinion or similar experiences. One woman told me:

“Especially in Vietnam, we are not taught to think independently. It's not in the school system, it's not in the family value. We are told what to do, right? So, it's really the key struggle for most of the people. I have to say that I struggling myself as a teenage and

adolescent trying to find that part myself [...] like for example, in Vietnamese family culture, we don't really say what we think or what we feel."

This is a very significant quote that captures how emotional expression, especially in Vietnamese family culture, is often non-verbal or even suppressed. Indirect, this is making identity development and emotional clarity particularly challenging for women. It underlines the theme that gendered cultural expectations do not only shape women's external roles but also inhibit the development and articulation of their inner lives. This can be severely problematic especially for women who experience depression or are suffering under extreme workload or external pressure.

6.4.4. Conclusion

The women I interviewed shared with me very personal experiences about their struggles with WLB. This chapter puts all these stories into the context of larger-scale systemic factors.

Inflexible organisational schedules, precarious financial conditions and burdening gendered expectations, the women are facing continuous pressures that are deeply rooted in social, political, economic and cultural structures. All these struggles are additionally exacerbated by a linguistic gap in the language about mental health that reflects a deeper societal discomfort with emotional vulnerability. This makes expressions of vulnerability appear deviant or shameful.

These conditions are not uniformly distributed, they intersect with individual biographies, class position, and family structures, but they collectively highlight that gendered labour and emotional burdens are reinforced by both organisational practices and cultural expectations. As such, achieving WLB requires more than individual strategies; it calls for structural change and cultural transformation.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

7.1. Introduction and Summary of Results

This research aimed to investigate how women in the civil society sector in North Vietnam experience WLB. Through a reflexive thematic analysis (TA) of ten qualitative, semi-structured Interviews it was possible to identify three superordinate themes, which could be further divided into subthemes.

The first theme was titled: “Experience of Competing Responsibilities”. The theme explored the ways through which women handle and struggle with the consistent and tiring double burden of combining paid work and unpaid care work. Within the interviews multiple participants shared how their dual responsibilities continuously overlap, which increasingly led to a reduction of relaxation time and leisure time for the women. These blurred lines between ‘work’ and ‘life’, combined with internalized cultural expectations to be caring and self-sacrificing, led to guilt, exhaustion and, in some cases, mental health issues. The passion that the civil society workers experienced did increase their motivation to work and gave the women a sense of purpose, but simultaneously promoted work-overload and self-exploitation, especially in the cases which were lacking institutional support.

The second theme, “Strategies and Resources of Coping”, focused on the diverse strategies the women utilized to actively fight exhaustion and struggles. Whilst many participants tried to actively draw motivation and drive from their value-based commitment to their work, others set purposefully boundaries to practice selfcare and protect their own wellbeing. Social support systems, like romantic partners, the extended family and close friends, showed to be an important buffer to avert stress. The ability to effectively deal with stress in a non-destructive way strongly depended on the financial resources, the access to childcare or from the supportive relationships of the individual. The data shows that coping strategies were commonly framed as personal responsibility, which highlights the shift of the burden of care responsibility from the public into the individual sphere.

The third and final theme, named “Structural and Cultural Conditions”, investigated the organisational, economic and cultural context which the experiences of the women were embedded in. Inflexible working hours, long commutes to work on a motorbike, low wages and financial instability complicated the daily juggle of responsibility further. Conservative gender norms and the widespread stigmatisation of mental health made it increasingly difficult for the women to express their needs, seek help or ask for support. In many cases, the lack of institutionalized childcare services was societally made invisible through the flexibilization of work in combination with the belief that women should compensate for these systemic failures through their own actions.

In summary the themes demonstrated that for the Vietnamese female civil society workers WLB was not a question of “balance” between two separated spheres but rather a daily negotiation of overlapping and competing individual, organisational and cultural constraints. In many cases, this went so far that it can be argued that balance between two poles remains

unattainable for women, as they have to often compensate for the fulfilment of one responsibility by making sacrifices in other areas. Although many participants were exceptionally well adapted to their challenging situations through the creation of unique coping strategies, the findings of this analysis indicate that WLB remains in the majority of cases unattainable, especially whenever collective support and systemic changes was lacking.

7.2. Interpretation of Results

The findings of this study illustrate how the WLB experiences of women working in Vietnamese CSOs are shaped by a complex interplay of individual motivation, organisational structures, and sociocultural norms. While participants described creative strategies of coping, the deeper analysis reveals that these efforts often mask a broader structural failure. This section critically interprets the findings in light of existing literature, feminist theory, and postcolonial perspectives.

7.2.1. Reinforcing the Gendered Nature of Work-Life Balance

One of the topics addressed the difficulties women face every day in dealing with conflicting responsibilities. This topic supports feminist research that points out that work-life balance is not neutral or gender-blind, but rather a gendered challenge.

Consistent with Hochschild's theory of the 'second shift,' the research results of this study also show the burden of unpaid care work that women have to bear in addition to the expectations of their everyday working lives (Hochschild & Machung, 1997: 3-9). The women interviewed talked about how they neglected meals, skipped sleep, put their own health on the back burner and ultimately felt emotionally and physically exhausted, all in order to meet the pressure of different role expectations. This confirms global patterns of unequal distribution of work between the sexes, which have also been pointed out by other feminist studies (Eagly & Wood, 2012: 470-471, Yavorsky et al., 2015: 662; Shaikh et al., 2019: 53-54; etc.).

The emotional and moral burden of women having to bear the main responsibility for care work in the Vietnamese context is consistent with the findings of comparable studies, such as that by the author Huong (2009), who pointed out that the overlap of difficult-to-reconcile work and family responsibilities of female entrepreneurs in Vietnam not only results in negative emotional consequences for women, but also has a negative impact on the success of their business ventures (Huong, 2009: 33). The study by Duong et al. (2020) also shows that women employed in multinational companies have great difficulty establishing a positive WLB due to

the combination of high job stress, conflicting role expectations and insufficient workplace support (Duong et al., 2020: 747-748).

This shows how women are constantly torn between social expectations, personal ideals and professional commitments. The attempt to reconcile these contradictions and perform well both at work and in their private lives leads to constant tension, fatigue and feelings of guilt. The interpretation of the research results of this study is intended to be more than just a description of external stress factors; rather, it should refer to the internalised gender role expectations that weigh heavily on women.

The interview participants did not frame their sacrifice as forced, but as an act of love and fulfilment of their own mission. The women not only wanted to live up to the goals of their organisations but also tried to please their partners and maintain harmony within the family. Suppressed vulnerability appears here as an impactful but invisible form of work.

In line with earlier studies by Thu (2023) and Shaikh et al. (2019), this work also shows that the gendered burden of care persists even in socially progressive organisations such as NGOs and sectors such as the civil society sector. The results of the studies by Thu (2023), which examined the context of NGOs in Myanmar, and by Shaikh et al. (2019), which researched women in NGOs in Pakistan, also show that the gendered burden of care exists across nations.

Unlike the studies by Thu (2023) and Shaikh et al. (2019), this work explored the context of Vietnam, which has additional peculiarities due to cultural and historical factors. Confucian ideals of female domesticity, care and self-sacrifice are deeply embedded in Vietnamese culture. In line with further literature, e.g. Schuler et al. (2006), with their work on the construction of gender in Vietnam, or Duong et al. (2020), whose study reports on the effects of role expectations on WLB, among other things, this study also shows that even for highly educated and professional women, self-induced self-sacrifice persists, legitimised by a cultural embedding in conservative ideals of femininity and moral obligation.

The interpretation of the research results confirms that WLB is shaped by structural and gendered inequality. Gender roles also produce a sense of responsibility and duty for women on cultural and emotional dimensions. Social expectations are culturally reproduced and, as the research results show, actively lived, justified and normalised.

7.2.2. The Ambivalence of Purpose-Driven Work

This thesis was researching the WLB of female CSO-workers. One of the most reoccurring themes in the interviews was the strong commitment to work. The women shared about their intrinsic motivation for their jobs and about their moral commitment they experienced. For many their employment was more than just paid jobs, they experienced their profession as a “calling” and purpose. The women reported on the meaning they found in their tasks and responsibilities, about how it challenges them to personal growth and many stories implicated the strong sense of identity that connected the civil society workers to their profession. From the data it could be interpreted that some of the important values in the sector are justice, a sense for community and an inclination to care. These findings are consistent with the work of Dee et al. (2020) who found in their research on the WLB of civil society workers on the Philippines that many employees of the CSO did not draw a line between private and professional roles but entered a sort of work-life synthesis where both domains merged into one and created a combined identity (Dee et al., 2020: 230).

The employees in these scenarios did not have to be externally forced to go to extreme lengths for their work but their morality intrinsically drives them to sacrifice even their own wellbeing for the greater good. Morality and self-identity, though serving as a resource of energy and endurance, also often result in a lack of boundaries, neglect of physical rest and, in some cases, the deterioration of emotional and physical well-being. For example, one woman shared proudly how she developed a strategy to combine her work with her maternal duties: She began waking up at 2am, starting her day in the middle of the night, to be able to finish work before her son awakes. Through the way that she was explaining her strategy, she was framing it as a method for resilience and as an expression of her discipline, which she was seemingly proud of. This illustrates the extent to which self-sacrificing was normalized for her. Like in this example, structural work overload commonly will be reinterpreted into a personal virtue.

These results mirror the feminist critique of the neoliberal empowerment discourse that advertises personal success and individual career advancement. As called out by Nancy Fraser (2015), the strategic cover-up of systematic exploitation by framing women’s professional ascent as a sufficient tool for establishing gender equality gives neoliberal work-ideologies a progressive face-lift (Fraser & Gutting, 2015). The findings of this study showcase how female market participation doesn’t solve the issue of systemic discrimination of women and gendered division of labour but creates a double burden for females to manage competing role expectations.

These findings correspond with a study of Trinh (2022) about the moral values of female NGO workers in Vietnam. In this article Trinh argues that women working in the sector “present an idea of a moral middle-class that conforms to the neoliberal criteria of self-reliance and self-optimisation within the economic segment” (Trinh, 2022: 104). This study supports a moral personhood of women working in CSO that idealises self-discipline, humility and selfless service. Women of the sector perform these qualities whilst embodying care in the professional and private domain. The findings of this study strongly suggest that the expectation to fit the mould of an ideal civil society worker exists but is not matched by supporting measurements from institutions like mental health services, sustainable workloads, and so on. The dominant moral framing appears to be “to push thorough”, to be resilient at any cost.

This critical depiction of purpose-driven work does not ignore the emotional value of a moral alignment of personal ideals with a job. Finding purpose in a job can give individuals strength, make them feel proud and fulfilled and serve as a sense of self and connection. But this intrinsic motivation to work is a double-edged sword, oftentimes blurring the boundaries between work and life. The findings of this study show that passion and precarity coexist for women working in CSO. This becomes evident in how participants find it difficult to say no, rarely ask for help, or struggle to set boundaries without feeling guilty. The female workers find themselves caught in a moral dilemma: Either they are letting down the communities and welfare-projects they are working for, or they accept the self-destructive cycle of exhaustion and work overload. A loose-loose-situation for the women in question. Consistent with the findings of Trinh (2022), the internal contradictions between moral empowerment and emotional ties were apparent. This individualized struggle between contradictory forces lies embedded in the institutional acceptance of self-sacrifice within the civil society sector (as seen in figure 5).

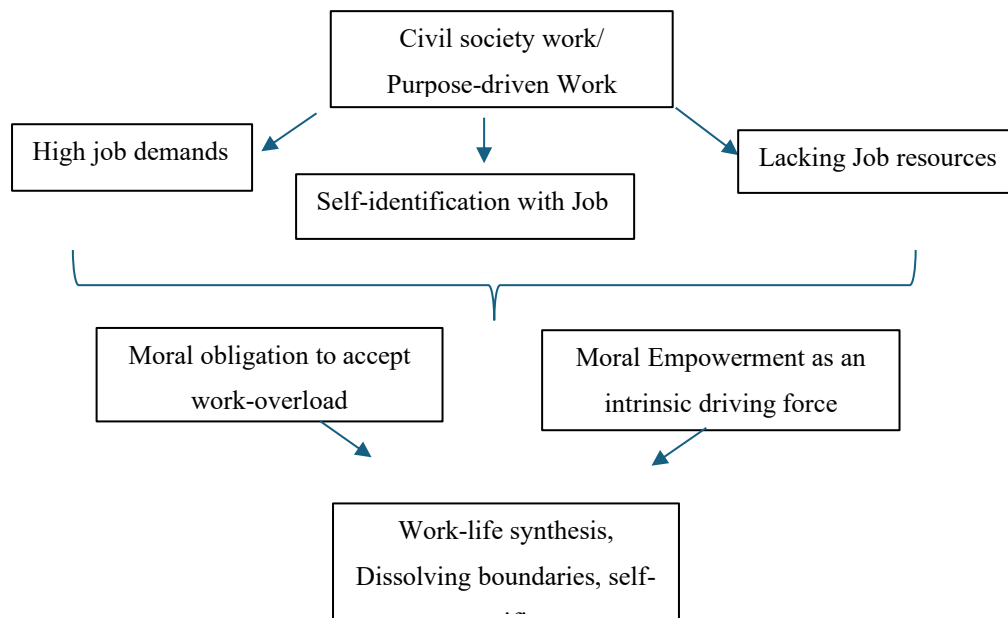


Figure 5: Ambivalent Effects of Purpose-Driven Work

To conclude, this theme has shown that purposeful work can serve as a source of identity and motivation. Because of the lack of institutional support measures to help workers manage their responsibilities, this moral obligation often results in the structural vulnerability of women, who are pushed to accept huge workloads whilst upholding care responsibilities. This study wants to call out the organisational silence surrounding the need for more care for caregivers.

7.2.3. Individualised Coping and Neoliberal Discourses about Resilience

The findings of this research showcase a range of individual coping strategies for managing stress and work overload, like waking up before dawn, making space for alone time, spending time with friends or self-care as well as care of one's physical health through exercising. In many moments during the interviews, these individual strategies were framed as an achievement, as personal growth and as a sign of emotional intelligence. Many of the women were proud to have found ways to take care of themselves. Although useful in the short term to eliminate struggles, this dominant narrative of self-care must be critically examined. Ward (2015) rightfully addressed concerns about the contemporary understanding of self-care and the ways it integrates into neoliberal objectives. Though mostly embodied on a personal level, the author claims that self-care indeed possesses a political dimension since the promotion of personal solutions for struggles by policy makers ultimately “dismantle public welfare resources and shift responsibility for care onto individual citizens” (Ward, 2015: 45). The author captures this dynamic by labelling this shift “from ‘voice’ to ‘choice’” (Ward, 2015: 55), a development that eliminates collective action and acts of solidarity which is most harmful for

groups that already struggle because of marginalisation and structural vulnerabilities (Ward, 2015: 55).

This also reflects broader feminist critiques of the neoliberal framing of WLB and care that was addressed by scholars like Fleetwood (2007) and Lewis & Beauregard (2018). These scholars have contributed a substantial amount of research about the connection between WLB-discourses and the logic of neoliberalism. Fleetwood (2007) drew attention to the dynamics of a retreat of states out of welfare responsibilities and the consequential deterioration of structural organisation of care work that can be interpreted as a neoliberal shift. Employees are called to manage themselves, turning care work very much into individual duty and burden (Fleetwood, 2007: 391-393). WLB-discourses align with these dissolving structural or institutional solutions for care work, framing care and wellbeing as an individual choice and responsibilities. This shift disproportionally influences the female experience of WLB. Women continue to carry the majority of unpaid care work and therefore first experience the consequences of lacking organisational or governmental support with these care responsibilities (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018: 2-3). If WLB is framed as an individual achievement it is therefore highly dependent on personal resources (financial or emotional resources, social support) and can vary greatly across different global, national and organisational contexts (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018: 7-13). If organisational and institutional support is lacking women will have no choice but to build strategies of resilience in the face of competing responsibilities. In this neoliberal framework about work, wellbeing and structural support, WLB becomes less of a shared right for all but an individualized issue of personal performance (as seen in figure 6).

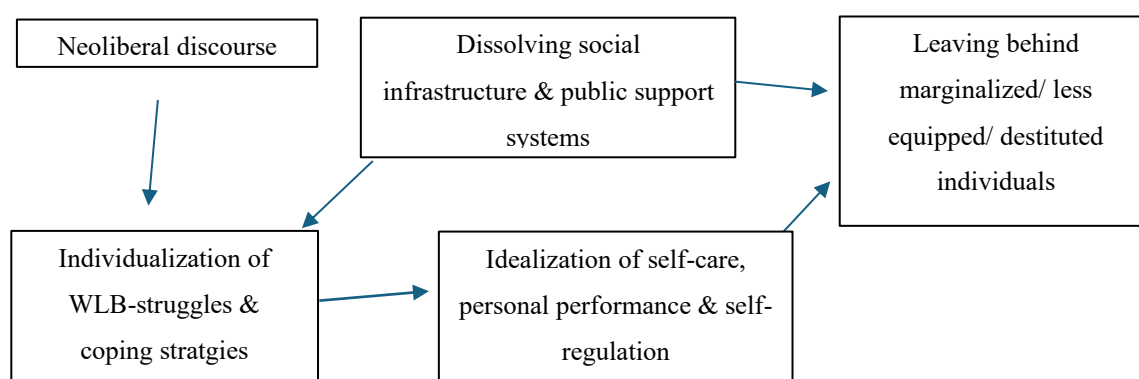


Figure 6: Impact of Neoliberal Discourse on Institutions and Individuals

The data of this study made neoliberal logics about work and care visible: Women reported about how self-care for them functioned as a last resort of survival and resilience. For many, it took a crisis and mental breakdown (burnout, depression, anxiety, illness) for them to allow themselves for the first time to set boundaries and priorities for their own wellbeing and health.

But even in the moments of complete despair, exhaustion and work overload, the strategies that the women applied remained highly individualized. Such strategies mentioned in the interviews included, for example, negotiations with partners, meditation, yoga, exercise, time with friends or waking up earlier and earlier. The answers rarely addressed institutional interventions like gender-responsive workplace culture or in-house mental health support.

These findings align closely with what Nancy Fraser (2017) calls the “crisis of care” (Fraser, 2017: 21) in her book with the title “Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression”. As visible in the data of this study, the highly individualized solutions for systemic failures correspond strongly with Fraser's critique on “progressive” neoliberal discourses surrounding emancipation that are reframed to join in with marketization and ultimately undermine social protection (Fraser, 2017: 33-34). Consistent with the findings, Fraser speaks about a border “social-reproductive contradiction of capitalism” (Fraser, 2017: 22) in which (self)care becomes socially legitimised only under extreme duress and therefore devalued, disavowed and externalized (Fraser, 2017: 24-25). Fraser explains that this is the product of corporate and state disinvestment in social welfare (Fraser, 2017: 32) which is stringent with the invisibility of institutional support in the data of this study.

The findings illustrated how coping strategies for competing responsibilities are shaped by marital status, as well as social and financial capital. Women who experienced less conflict within their work-life-relationship often had supportive partners, higher incomes and usually got support with childcare by the social support network around them. Others that did not have all these resources at their demand shared different experiences: For single mothers, women without support of their husbands with domestic tasks, for women with less income or who were socially isolated, WLB turned out to be a constant struggle. These findings are consistent with studies by Lewis & Humbert (2010) and Sundaresan (2014) arguing that WLB and WLB-policies only benefit a certain and oftentimes already privileged group of women. As Lewis & Humbert (2010) noted, WLB policies are frequently designed with underlying gendered assumptions, which favour women who fit traditional roles, such as mothers, while marginalizing others (Lewis & Humber, 2010: 241-243). Sundaresan (2014) findings also support this conclusion by showcasing that WLB for women in less fortunate socio-economic positions were worse than for those who received family support or had access to more flexible work schedules (Sundaresan, 2014: 100).

As mentioned by Lewis & Beauregard (2018), the experience WLB of women is highly shaped by the global, national and organisational context that it is situated in (Lewis & Beauregard,

2018: 7-13). This became apparent in this study that showcased the unique context of Vietnam in which Confucian cultural norms intersect with globalised workplace models, leading to hybridised conditions of stress. The assumption that cultural norms influence the experience of WLB is supported through earlier work of Lien & Hung (2023) that examined WLB of Vietnamese remote workers. The authors argue for a positive impact of traditional Vietnamese values like collectivism, family-centrism, community orientation, work ethic or resilience on the worker's experience within contemporary workplaces (Lien & Hung, 2023: 265-276). The finding of this study indicated that many women viewed remote work and the flexibilization of their workplace as a positive shift that helped them combine their professional and domestic duties. This aligns with previous studies like Glass (2023) who addressed "the rapid rise of remote work among white collar workers" (Glass, 2023: 1009).

However, Glass (2024) does emphasize that while many women appreciate remote work for helping balance professional and domestic responsibilities, its effectiveness is fundamentally tied to structural and spatial conditions provided by employers (Glass, 2023: 1009). Remote work seems to be idealised as the solution for WLB-issues. For women the flexibilization of their workplace further blurred the lines between work and private life: They are now always available, for their professional work and unpaid care work (Hertz et al., 2021: 2039-2041). The findings suggest how these issues interact with the nature of civil society work: personal values, passion and a sense of purpose furthers the likeliness of CSO-workers to have a heightened moral commitment to their work whilst masking lacking institutional support. In many cases, the women in this study reflected about how their identity is connected to the organisation's spirit. They often felt the moral obligation to remain productive and emotionally present. Especially when working with vulnerable communities, the women reported that they felt like the work never ends and they could never do enough. This internalized pressure to keep going until exhaustion could be referred to as a sort of "care trap": The more you care the more you will be able to stop.

The findings of this study reinforce the importance of postcolonial feminist perspectives that critique the mainstream WLB literature for its westernized and gendered assumptions that frame balancing of work and life obligation as a technical and personal challenge. This logic implies that individuals just have to optimize their schedules, work on their self-development and become more resilient to be able to combine the competing responsibilities of professional work and unpaid care work effortlessly. Though for the women who participated in this research, WLB was not just a timing issue: From the findings of this study, we can conclude that WLB

is a matter of moral worth, of gender identity and of social legitimacy. Researching the stress and coping strategies that female CSO-workers apply to be able to survive through their daily struggles highlighted that the experience of WLB is strongly influenced by the economic conditions, Confucian family roles, by the socialist ideals on working women and the culture of normalisation of self-sacrifice in the civil society sector. All these factors merge in a unique way, creating far-reaching consequences: Women within this context have no room for imperfection or vulnerability. They have to perform, privately and professionally. They must be economically productive whilst remaining caring, be strong for others and are not allowed to let anyone down.

However, this research supports a standpoint by Mohanty (1984) and Spivak (1993), that is framing women neither as passive victims of their circumstances nor as heroic jugglers of competing tasks. In line with post-colonial feminist scholars (Mohanty, 1984: 337; Spivak 1993: 83), this research tries to highlight that every woman's experience is situated and contextual. Their life realities are shaped by overlapping dimensions of power, history and structural conditions. Her struggles and worries are not personal, they are political. Her coping is not solely a sign of resilience but of structural neglect. She can never achieve true "balance" but will find herself in a precarious cycle of self-management that was made necessary by the absence of collective solutions for issues surrounding care, work and gender equality.

Therefore, this study argues that popular language about "coping" and "resilience" should be viewed critically. Though individual strategies of coping do matter for the individual woman, helping them to survive, this should not be mistaken as social justice. This thesis calls for a reconstruction of those environments that make resilience of women necessary in the first place. We need to move from coping to care, from survival to sustainability and from individual fixes to structural change.

7.2.4. The Cultural Construction of Care and Silence

Arguably the most powerful contribution of this study is its insight into the cultural norms that influence and regulate the ways women express or suppress emotional distress, stress and vulnerability. The findings imply that women have difficulties articulating their emotional needs, especially about exhaustions, anxiety and burnout. One participant for example described how she found it difficult to open up even to her own mother about her feeling overwhelmed with her care responsibilities as a mother. This indicates deeply engraved shame of the women who experience mental health struggles which can lead to a reluctance of the

affected individuals to seek (professional) help and consequently results into the normalisation of silenced suffering.

These findings can be interpreted as a cultural climate that fosters the invisibility of emotional or mental struggles of women. This conclusion is aligning with the findings of a study by Thi et al. (2024) in which the researchers tried to identify the influence of mental health stigmata on the decision of pregnant women to seek support with mental health issues. “Self-stigma contributed to fear of acknowledging mental health conditions, possibly leading to shame, avoidance of sharing information, and delays in seeking healthcare, with only the severely ill coming to psychiatric hospitals”, so the authors (Thi et al., 2024: 9).

The findings support a gendered and relational lens to the phenomenon of cultural silencing of personal struggles with mental health. Women experience the internalized expectation to silence their own needs whilst simultaneously being required to regulate the emotions of others, like keeping the harmony of the family, within the workplace, and so on. This can be interpreted as a double burden of emotional labour: Women are expected to manage their own mental health whilst managing others wellbeing and maintaining a good emotional climate for everyone else. The data confirms the conclusion drawn by Herrero-Arias et al. (2021) in their study about the strategies female intimate-partnership-violence-survivors apply to cope with abuse. Their findings highlight the gendered dynamics of emotional silence and strategic self-suppression as a reaction to patriarchal constraints in Vietnam (Herrero-Arias et al., 2021: 6-7). In the study the authors argue that women would remain silent about domestic abuse to be able to maintain their children’s wellbeing (emotional, physical, social). According to Herrero-Arias et al. (2021) this silencing of suffering gets reinforced intergenerationally, since younger women will be reminded of the importance of family honour and their duty to keep the family’s harmony (Herrero-Arias et al., 2021: 6-7). This shows how patterns of self-sacrifice and silent suffering of women go beyond a personal choice but are a societally reproduced and gendered expectation.

Furthermore, these findings further highlight the Vietnamese gender norm for women to be the main care giver and to feel responsible for the wellbeing of the family. These norms are not only embedded in cultural beliefs and reproduced in public discourses but also, they are continuously reinforced by institutionalized practices. An example in the data showed how schoolteachers would call specifically the mothers about issues regarding their children at school. This not only goes to show how mothers are viewed as the main contact person for anything regarding childcare but will consequently lead to mothers worrying more about the

children. Concerns, emotional attentiveness and the act of caring become naturalized to be womanhood itself. This institutionalized gender bias makes women responsible for care work on default. The findings of the study showed evidence that even for households in which the fathers participated in the domestic work, mothers still remained primarily responsible for communication, emotional labour and childcare.

Consistent with the findings of the studies by Schuler et al. (2000) and Duong et al. (2024), the data of this study confirms that Confucian family norms still are prevailing in the societal structures of Vietnam. Despite the state's progressive gender policies, many women will still try to fulfil ideals of motherly self-sacrifice, filial piety and moral duty (Duong et al.; 2024: 9; Schuler et al., 2000: 385-386).

What is important to note here is that the interplay between care and silence is not simply cultural but a direct consequence of structural conditions. Reinforcing the findings of Trinh (2020), this study argues that conservative Confucian values for women like sacrifice and selfless service uniquely corroborate with the work requirements of the often under-resourced but highly morally charged civil society sector (Trinh, 2020: 110). The findings of this study echo the conclusion by Trinh (2020) who highlights that the naturalisation of domestic values in the realm of civil society work contributes to internalization of traditional gender roles, like the division of labor and the subordinate status of women (Trinh, 2020: 110). Additionally, in working environments that are structurally under-resourced there is hardly any space to speak about fatigue and burn-out. The internalized reluctance of women to ask for help further hinders the seeking for help of female civil society workers. The data has shown that some women feared to appear incompetent, weak or unprofessional if they would acknowledge over-work or exhaustion. In this context, burn-out becomes morally framed as dedication, silence reframed as strength. Women and their gendered struggles find themselves without language, space or legitimacy to articulate their needs which can lead to emotional isolation and harm.

The findings of this research show that care has not only a relational dimension but is structurally gendered and politically productive. Women's emotional labour remains societally normalized, but silent and invisible. They are pushed in a direction to provide the ground for households, organisations and societies, essentially holding together everything at the emotional core. Women's care work remains uncounted, unpaid and under-valued. With these findings this study extends the WLB-discourse and includes the cultural logic of emotional silence. This study argues that the absence of complaint is not signifying balance. Rather the silence about suffering is signifying impossibility.

7.3. Contribution of the Study

This research provides several contributions to the academic and practical understanding of WLB of women working in the civil society sector in Vietnam. This is evident especially in its empirical depth, its theoretical perspective and methodological approach.

On the empirical level this thesis gives a rare and context specific insight in the experience of WLB of women who are working in CSO in the area of Hanoi, Vietnam. Thus far in research literature the number of studies conducted about this group were very scarce, on a global as well as on a local level. Previous research on the WLB of Vietnamese females had focused on corporate companies (Nguyen et al., 2023) or on women in higher education (Huyen-Nguyena & Wang, 2023) but it was missed so far to investigate the dynamics of the civil society sector, with its unique intersection of personal values, resource scarcity and the strong commitment to a mission. Through giving voice to women in this insufficiently researched sector it was possible to detect the emotional, relational and identity-driven complexity of conflicts that female workers experience between their “work” and “life”. By portraying these stories of actual lived realities, which go beyond the political and scientific discourse, this thesis moves those experiences into the centre that frequently remain marginalized.

From a theoretical perspective this study questions persisting hegemonial, western concepts about WLB by looking at it through a post-colonial feminist lens. Through the theoretical dissection of the concepts, this research criticises all those standardized understanding and generalized usage of WLB, which frame WLB as an individualized and a-political issue. Instead, the findings of this thesis illustrated the structural, cultural and gender-specific forces that influence the ability of women to manage the competing responsibilities of professional work and unpaid care work. This study introduces the notion of WLB as a “structural impossibility”, a situation in which systemic contradictions between economically precarious working conditions, unpaid care work and cultural gender norms make WLB unachievable.

Furthermore, this research offers a critical view on resilience and intrinsic motivation. The findings demonstrate that these can not only be a source of empowerment but of self-exploitation at the same time. By doing so this thesis adds to the existing feminist critique on neoliberal structures of global work- and care-work discourses.

Methodologically, this study proves the value of using reflexive thematic analysis for feminist qualitative research. Here, the small-sized case study and its in-depth interviews can enable transferability of the insights on gender-specific experiences, especially when the researcher is

aware of their own positionality and the socio-political embeddedness of the knowledge production itself. Through the combination of analytical strength and critical reflexivity this methodological approach was able to investigate not only the ways in which women work around constraints but also the structural barriers and other forms of discrimination that create these struggles in the first place.

Together, these contributions advance both the scholarly and practical discourse on work-life balance by calling attention to the limitations of individualised solutions and the urgent need for structural, cultural, and organisational transformation.

7.4. Limitations of the Study

Like all qualitative research, this research too must face certain limitations that need to be considered to be able to put the findings into the right context and to ensure transparency about the discoveries. The limitations regard the sample size, the methodical conduction and the language and positionality of the researcher.

First, this study used a small sample size, with ten semi-structure interviews in total. All the participants were self-identifying women, working in CSO around Hanoi, North Vietnam. This sample allowed for a deep and detailed investigation of the personal experiences of these women. It should be noted that this sample size was never meant to provide findings that can be generalized. While the experiences of the women inside the borders of the sample were illustrated in much detail, the sample excludes the experiences of other women that, e.g., live in other parts of Vietnam. Additionally, it can be argued that the sample portrayed primarily women with a middle-class habitus with a university education and who talked English fluently. It can be argued that this sample excluded the perspectives of women from a less privileged, less educated background. This makes the final conclusions complex, but contextual and not universally representative.

Secondly, it should be noted that the method of semi-structured interviews creates data in which not all themes and topics are discussed equally since the participants individually influence that course of the interview. Therefore, some of the interviews were more nuanced and longer in duration than others. Especially regarding the topics of mental health, personal conflict or family dynamics the reports differed significantly. These irregularities are a classic characteristic of qualitative research and impact the comprehensiveness of the thematic landscape.

The next limitation of this research that shall be addressed is language. All the interviews were conducted as well as this study written in English, which is neither the researchers nor the interview participants' first language. Although the participants seemed to communicate comfortably in English, the participants in some cases made grammar or vocabulary mistakes and certain words and phrases needed to be changed in hindsight to capture the actual meaning of what was being said. This opens up the possibility that some of the meaning was being misinterpreted or lost in translation. Especially regarding contextual emotional or cultural experiences, the discussion might lose in quality if there is no shared understanding of cultural language.

Next, a difficulty that arose during the data collection phase and that needs to be addressed as a limitation was a difficulty during the interview recording. All interviews were recorded using a recording device. These recordings were essential to produce the interview transcripts from which then served as the base for the analysis. In one case the interview audio recording was damaged since there seemed to have been issues with the microphone. This interview still was transcribed but most of the content could not be rescued. Since this one interview ended up consisting only of a few recognizable sentences the final amount of interview transcripts used for this analysis were nine. This reduction of interviews did not reduce the density of the thematic saturation, but it did hinder the diversity of different voices that are portrayed in the data.

Finally, I want to address my own positionality as a researcher as a limitation of this study. As an Austrian student, educated in Western academia and with personal experiences in the Vietnamese civil society sector, the interpretation of my data undeniably took place against the backdrop of my experiences, most likely influencing the assumptions and dynamics that evolved. Though continuous reflexivity in the research was practiced, a critical reflection of feminist theory had taken place, and transparency was kept in the centre of the analysis process, all to minimize the risk of bias, the relationship between the researcher and the participants, the dynamics between insiders and outsiders of a field and the specifics of intercultural research stay relevant for this study.

Although all these limitations need to be considered in the context of the findings of this study, The study and its findings hold their ground through their sincere commitment to reflexive thematic analysis and feminist epistemology, and are marked by credibility, depth, and transferability. This research highlights the importance of situated knowledge to create

differentiated understandings of social realities and to contribute not only to the scientific discourse but also to daily practice.

7.5. Recommendations for Future Research

The finding of this research could be used as the base for multiple follow-up studies for future research, helping to deepen the understanding of gender-specific WLB issues inside the civil society sector, especially in the Global South.

Firstly, future research could expand the scope of this study by drawing on a larger and more diverse sample for the data collection. For example, could the sample include women working in CSO from rural areas, who are part of an ethnic minority or who are part of the lower-income bracket. This could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of variables like class, geographical location or ethnic identity on the WLB of female civil society workers. Furthermore, could the conduction of interviews in Vietnamese (supported by a translator or bilingual researcher) increase the participation in the interview process of Vietnamese women who do not feel as comfortable communicating in English.

Second, the scope of the research could be expanded beyond the category of the sector and of gender as well. To be able to improve the sector-specific conditions it could be feasible to compare the experience of women working in the civil society sector with those of other professional sectors. Such studies could target e.g. private companies, the public administrative sector, the informal sector, or the scientific sector. This could help identify which struggles are specific for the civil society sector and which are gender specific. Furthermore, could a study including the male experience, of male civil society workers or the romantic partners of female civil society workers, deepen the understanding of changing gender norms, the divide of care work responsibilities or the resistance against those norms.

In this research already differences between women of different ages were noticeable. WLB hence is not a static experience but is in constant change during the different life stages of women. Therefore, a longitudinal or life-course-oriented approach could help to shed light on the differences between women in different stages of their careers, in different family-constellations or in different social networks. Longitudinal studies in this regard could showcase how gender-specific coping strategies and struggles develop over time. This could serve to investigate the longevity of different coping strategies.

Next, it could be feasible to continue researching mental health, emotional work and cultural stigmatisation further. Since the findings of this study showed the significance of the influence of emotional struggles on mental health and the clear connection between psychological suffering and gender, work and cultural stigmatisation, it could be recommended for further research to investigate how cultural stigmata influence emotional vulnerability and how this furthermore connects to the ability of women to seek help. This research has given first clues that the topic of mental health might still be chronically underrepresented in Vietnamese society. Quantitative methods could be used to detect the existing prevalence of burnout, anxiety and depression amongst civil society workers.

The last recommendation for future research that should be mentioned would be the further inquiry of the organisational and political frame which the civil society sector in Vietnam is operating from. Additional case studies on different types of organisations could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding on which organisational policies can improve WLB for women. Future studies could also focus on organisational dynamics such as the donor-recipient relationships within the civil society sector, labour protection policies in Vietnam, or alternative financing models to ensure improved childcare services.

The topic of WLB should be continued to be researched to make sure that one-sided narratives about work and gender will be consistently questioned, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive, culturally situated and gender equality-orientated understanding. All in all, it should not only be about showcasing how women deal with the situations and circumstances that they were given but it should be about criticizing the collective and structural systems that create gendered struggles and about fostering systematic change to support women and provide them equal opportunities.

7.6. Concluding Remarks

This study set out to shed light onto the complex realities of women working in the civil society sector in Vietnam in their effort to achieve WLB. From the ten women who were interviewed for the research, not a single one didn't have a story to tell about struggle, exhaustion, stress and worries, just to get by on the day to day. These many stories of struggle and constant negotiation between opposing poles showcase that the term "balance" is through and through misleading. "Balance" implies control and active determination of life conditions, whereas the women in this thesis were rather perpetually juggling a web of requirements, expectations and emotional responsibilities. The women I was able to interview for this research were resilient,

deeply committed to their work and creative in their strategies to adapt to the circumstances they were given. Day in day out, they manoeuvred through a system that doesn't recognize, support or appreciate their needs, as women or mothers.

The observation of these realities through a post-colonial feminist lens allowed the critique of WLB as an individualized, privatized and gender-neutral issue. This study showed how "balance" of work and life is contextual and deeply rooted in cultural norms, organisational policies, economic restraints and gendered expectations. While dominant discourses promote self-regulation and resilience of the individual, this research calls for more systemic responsibility, from institutions, political agents, donors and the societies. The illustration of the strategies of resilience of the women should serve us as the base to question why women have to go to such lengths to combine work and private life in the first place.

The findings of this research are not only relevant for the context of Vietnam, but they are applicable for widespread, global patterns of gender-based inequality and discrimination in the context of paid work and care work. The readers of this study are invited to ask themselves fundamental and uncomfortable questions: Who is allowed to rest? Who is allowed to ask for help? And how do we need to structure organisations and societies so that balance is not an individual struggle but a collective duty and an individual right?

Although this study has its limitations, its findings contribute to the discourse about WLB by arguing this just does not exist for women and for mothers. I deeply thank every woman that I have talked to and that has shared her story. I hope that giving voice to the complex daily struggles of women worldwide can hopefully serve, maybe someday, as a catalyst for change.

8. References

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