

Exploring the Dimensions of Informal Learning from Unpaid Work among Women in Academics in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife

Tajudeen Ade Akinsooto and Adejoke Clara Babalola

Department of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning, Faculty of Education Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Women academics perform extensive unpaid domestic and care work alongside their professional responsibilities, yet the informal learning embedded in these experiences remains largely overlooked in adult education research. This study examined the dimensions of informal learning derived from unpaid work among women academics at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. It explored the manifestations of unpaid work, the influence of cultural practices, the informal learning outcomes generated, and the adaptive strategies used to balance academic and domestic responsibilities. A qualitative case study design was adopted involving ten purposively selected female academics from different academic ranks and departments. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using interpretative thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The findings revealed that unpaid work extended beyond domestic chores to include caregiving, emotional labour, institutional responsibilities, and community service, all of which affected academic productivity and wellbeing. Cultural norms continued to position women as primary caregivers despite their professional roles. Unpaid work emerged as a significant site of informal learning, fostering organisational competence, time management, emotional intelligence, resilience, multitasking, problem-solving, and adaptive decision-making. Participants relied on time management, delegation, boundary setting, and support networks to manage competing responsibilities. However, the competencies developed through unpaid work remained largely invisible within institutional reward systems. The study concludes that unpaid domestic and care work constitutes an important but undervalued context for lifelong and informal learning among women academics. It recommends greater institutional recognition of informal learning, gender-equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities, and policies that better support women academics in balancing professional and family roles.

Keywords: Informal learning; Unpaid work; Women academics; Gender norms; Work–life balance.

INTRODUCTION

All over the world, women play critical roles in their homes, communities, and workplaces. They engaging in diverse unpaid domestic and care activities alongside their formal employment. Despite increasing participation in the labour market, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work, including childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning, and other household responsibilities due to entrenched gender norms and the traditional division of labour (Addati et al., 2018; Khan & Malik, 2023; Women's Academy for Leadership and Political Excellence, 2024). In many societies, women are expected to perform routine household tasks and caregiving functions irrespective of their occupational status, often requiring them to balance multiple identities simultaneously as workers, mothers, wives, and caregivers (Khan & Malik, 2023). Women, without exception, perform more than three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men globally, a pattern largely shaped by entrenched gender norms and the traditional division of labour (Addati et al., 2018; Khan & Malik, 2023). Similarly, UN Women (2016) argues that unpaid care work remains one of the most significant barriers to gender equality, limiting women's opportunities for economic advancement, leadership, and professional development. Consequently, many women experience a "double burden" or "second shift," whereby formal employment is combined with substantial domestic responsibilities that remain largely unrecognised and uncompensated.

Within the African patriarchal context, particularly in societies such as Nigeria, unpaid household and care work remains largely invisible, despite the knowledge, skills, and competencies embedded in these activities. Women academics frequently manage competing demands arising from professional responsibilities and family obligations, with caregiving and domestic labour continuing to influence their productivity, career trajectories, and well-being (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Derrick et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2025). Cultural expectations further position women as primarily responsible for domestic roles (Ekong, 2010), reinforcing gendered divisions of labour even among highly educated professionals.

In Nigeria, prevailing gender norms and socialisation processes reinforce the expectation that domestic responsibilities are primarily women’s obligations regardless of their employment status. Adebola (2021) observed that gender socialisation naturalises women’s involvement in unpaid care work, with responsibilities such as fuel and water collection, household maintenance, and caregiving falling predominantly on women and girls. Similarly, studies on Nigerian households indicate that patriarchal structures and traditional role expectations continue to assign domestic labour principally to women, even as they increasingly participate in formal economic activities (Akànle et al., 2016). Consequently, many women experience a “double burden” of combining paid work with extensive unpaid domestic responsibilities.

Among women academics, this dual responsibility often manifests in the simultaneous management of teaching, research, supervision, administrative duties, and traditional gender roles within the family. Although academic work is frequently associated with flexibility and intellectual autonomy, women scholars continue to negotiate competing demands from both professional and domestic spheres. Research indicates that caregiving responsibilities significantly shape academic productivity, career progression, and well-being, with women assuming a disproportionately larger share of childcare and household labour than their male counterparts (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Derrick et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2025). In Nigeria, entrenched socio-cultural and gender norms continue to assign women primary responsibility for caregiving and domestic work, often alongside their paid employment and professional responsibilities (Adisa et al., 2021). Consequently, women may experience a double burden as they negotiate competing demands across domestic and occupational spheres. As Aina (2012) argues, gender relations and development processes in Nigeria remain strongly influenced by traditional constructions of women’s roles within the family.

Consequently, women academics continually devise strategies for negotiating the demands of paid employment and unpaid care work, drawing upon experiential knowledge and informal learning processes embedded in everyday life. Mejiuni (2013) contends that lived experiences and social interactions constitute important sites of informal and mutual learning through which women acquire knowledge, resilience, and transformative capacities. The interaction between paid academic labour and unpaid domestic work therefore provides an important lens for understanding gender inequality as well as the informal learning experiences and adaptive capacities that women develop in managing multiple responsibilities.

Statement of Problem

In Nigeria, unpaid domestic and care work constitutes a substantial and gendered dimension of women’s everyday lives. Recent national evidence shows that women spend considerably more time than men on unpaid domestic and care work, while such work is also widely perceived as undervalued (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2025). Research on Nigerian women’s learning experiences has highlighted household chores, maternal responsibilities and multiple roles as important factors shaping their engagement with learning (Effe, 1991; Femi-Aderinto, 2021). Against this background, viewing unpaid domestic and care work solely as a responsibility or constraint may obscure the learning that may emerge through these everyday experiences. For women academics, who continuously negotiate unpaid domestic and care responsibilities alongside their professional roles, the learning that emerges from these everyday experiences requires closer attention as a potential dimension of informal learning. This concern aligns with Mejiuni’s (2012) observation that informal learning is often shadowy, unnamed, and insufficiently researched, despite its continuous presence within both formal and non-formal settings. From a structural feminist perspective, this invisibility is reinforced by patriarchal social structures that devalue knowledge and learning associated with women’s private and domestic roles (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence on how women academics generate informal learning through unpaid work and how they manage the competing

demands of academic and domestic responsibilities. Therefore, this study investigated the dimensions of informal learning from unpaid work among women academics at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. Specifically, it explored the manifestations of unpaid work among the participants, examined the influence of cultural practices on their unpaid work experiences, investigated the informal learning outcomes derived from such engagements, and identified the adaptive strategies they employed to manage both academic and domestic responsibilities.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a combination of feminist theory (particularly structural feminist perspective) and lifelong learning theory. From a structural feminist perspective, unpaid domestic and care work is understood as socially constructed and gendered labour that is historically undervalued and rendered invisible within patriarchal systems. This framework explains how societal norms assign women primary responsibility for reproductive and caregiving roles, thereby shaping their lived experiences and limiting recognition of the knowledge generated within these spaces (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Complementing this, the lifelong learning perspective conceptualises learning as a continuous and life-wide process that occurs across diverse contexts of everyday life. From this perspective, learning is not confined to formal educational institutions but also emerges through informal experiences associated with family, work, community and other spheres of daily life (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning [UIL], 2022). This perspective allows unpaid domestic and care work to be viewed as a significant site of informal learning where women develop skills such as time management, multitasking, emotional resilience, negotiation, and adaptive strategies. Together, these frameworks provide an analytical lens for understanding how unpaid work among women academics becomes a site of hidden but meaningful learning that contributes to both personal development and academic productivity.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore informal learning experiences derived from unpaid work among women academics. The study was conducted at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select ten female lecturers from different academic ranks and departments to ensure variation in academic experience and career stage. Participants were selected based on their status as full-time women academics and their experiences with unpaid work responsibilities. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide, which was administered to the participants. The participants provided written responses to the interview questions, thereby enabling them to share rich accounts of their lived experiences. Where further explanation or clarification was required, the researcher conducted follow-up interactions with the concerned participants to obtain additional information and ensure accurate interpretation of their responses. Data collection continued until no substantially new information emerged. The data were analysed using interpretative thematic analysis, involving repeated reading of responses, coding, categorisation, and interpretation of recurring themes relating to unpaid work, informal learning experiences, cultural influences, and adaptive strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, were observed throughout the study. Participants were assigned codes ranging from Female Academic 1 (FA1) to Female Academic 10 (FA10) to protect their identities. They occupied different academic positions and represented diverse departments.

Trustworthiness of the study was enhanced through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was ensured through peer debriefing and member checking. Preliminary findings were presented at an international conference, where scholars and researchers critically engaged with the study through questions and comments. The feedback obtained enabled the researchers to clarify interpretations and refine the analysis. In addition, the findings were shared with participants to ascertain whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. Dependability was supported through the systematic application of data collection, coding, and thematic analysis procedures across all participants' responses. Confirmability was enhanced by retaining participants' transcripts and grounding interpretations in their accounts, with thematic findings supported by illustrative

excerpts. Transferability was facilitated through detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and institutional setting, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study explored the manifestations of unpaid work, the influence of cultural practices on unpaid work, the informal learning experiences derived from unpaid work, and the adaptive strategies used by female academics in balancing academic and domestic responsibilities. The analysis moves beyond descriptive reporting to interrogate the meanings participants attached to their experiences, the socio-cultural structures shaping those experiences, and the implications for women's academic lives and professional development.

Across the interviews, unpaid work emerged not merely as a set of domestic tasks but as a deeply gendered social expectation embedded in cultural norms, institutional assumptions, and family structures. While some participants viewed unpaid work as an unavoidable extension of womanhood, others critically questioned the unequal burdens attached to femininity and academic identity. The analysis is organised according to the four study objectives.

Objective One: Manifestations of Unpaid Work Among Female Academics

The analysis revealed that unpaid work among female academics was manifested through four interconnected themes: (i) domestic labour as invisible routine work, (ii) caregiving and emotional labour, (iii) unpaid institutional and community responsibilities, and (iv) the intrusion of unpaid work into academic productivity and wellbeing (Figure 1).



Note. Authors' fieldwork, 2026.

Domestic Labour as Invisible Routine Work

A dominant manifestation of unpaid work among participants was the performance of routine domestic labour such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping, and childcare. Although these activities appeared ordinary and repetitive, the interviews revealed that they consumed significant physical and emotional energy. Cooking emerged as the most demanding unpaid responsibility across the narratives. FA1 explained that she had to prepare "three different meals" daily for members of her household, including her mother-in-law, while FA5 stated that cooking "requires standing for long periods and constant movement in the kitchen." Similarly, FA7 described how cooking different meals for different family members became exhausting:

The kind of food I cook for my children and husband is different from the one I cook for grandma. (FA7)

These accounts establish that unpaid domestic labour is not merely about completing tasks but involves constant coordination, planning, and emotional attentiveness to the preferences and needs of others. The burden of cooking was not simply physical; it involved what may be described as mental labour or cognitive responsibility. Participants were expected to remember schedules, anticipate needs, and maintain household

functionality. The narratives also showed that domestic labour remained largely invisible despite its intensity. Participants often referred to these tasks as “normal” responsibilities of womanhood. FA6 stated that unpaid domestic work “has become part of me,” revealing how deeply normalised such labour has become. This normalisation obscures the extent to which unpaid work consumes women’s time and energy. Importantly, the analysis suggests that unpaid work is not experienced as occasional labour but as continuous labour without clear boundaries. FA8’s detailed description of her daily routine illustrated how unpaid work structures the entire rhythm of her day. Her schedule began at 5am with meal preparation and house cleaning and extended into late-night academic work after family responsibilities had been completed. The narrative proves how academic labour is often fitted around domestic responsibilities rather than the reverse.

This finding is consistent with the broader literature on women’s unpaid care and domestic work, which shows that household labour is often normalised and rendered invisible despite the considerable time, energy and coordination it requires (Addati et al., 2018; UN Women, 2016). The present findings extend this understanding to women academics by showing that professional status does not necessarily reduce women’s responsibility for routine domestic labour. Rather, domestic responsibilities continue to operate alongside academic work, creating an everyday context in which women must continuously coordinate competing demands.

Caregiving and Emotional Labour

Another manifestation of unpaid work was caregiving and emotional support within households and extended families. Participants were expected to care not only for children but also for spouses, elderly relatives, and members of the extended family. FA10 described herself as “a teacher, homemaker, cook, nursing parent, a judge, a mediator, laundry person, home manager and so on,” reflecting the multiplicity of caregiving identities women are expected to embody simultaneously. Similarly, FA8 highlighted responsibilities such as caring for sick family members, school runs, homework supervision, and emotional availability to family members.

The analysis indicates that caregiving extended beyond physical assistance into emotional labour. Women were expected to maintain harmony within the family, mediate conflicts, and provide emotional reassurance. FA1 spoke about “settling disputes,” while FA10 discussed the emotional strain that emerged when people criticised or misinterpreted her actions during caregiving or welfare-related tasks. This emotional dimension of unpaid work is significant because it shows that unpaid labour is not reducible to physical chores alone. Emotional regulation, relationship management, and the expectation to remain emotionally available are forms of labour that often go unnoticed yet deeply shape women’s experiences. Furthermore, caregiving responsibilities were intensified by intergenerational obligations. Participants such as FA1 and FA7 cared for older family members alongside children and spouses, illustrating how female academics often function as intergenerational caregivers. This reflects broader African family systems where women are positioned as central coordinators of family wellbeing.

This finding reinforces the broader understanding of unpaid care work as extending beyond physical household tasks to include the emotional and relational work required to sustain family wellbeing (Addati et al., 2018; UN Women, 2016). In the context of women academics, the findings suggest that caregiving involves a combination of physical, emotional and organisational responsibilities. This is particularly important because such forms of labour may remain largely invisible precisely because they are embedded within everyday family relationships rather than recognised as identifiable work.

Unpaid Institutional and Community Responsibilities

Beyond domestic spaces, unpaid work also extended into institutional and community contexts. Several participants reported being assigned welfare-related or hospitality-related tasks within academic spaces because they were women. FA10 provided a particularly critical reflection on this issue:

When it comes to tasks that people have associated with women during posting or welfare issues, they say women you already do this shopping so go and do it for us. (FA10)

Her narrative reveals how domestic gender roles are reproduced within academic institutions. Skills associated with homemaking, cooking, organisation, and hospitality were transferred into institutional settings and treated as naturally feminine competencies. As a result, women became responsible for organising events, welfare activities, shopping, catering, and hospitality-related assignments, often without recognition. Similarly, FA3 stated that women are often called upon to arrange meals, decorate offices, and organise programmes at work. These findings suggest that gendered expectations do not disappear within professional environments; instead, they are institutionalised in subtle ways.

The analysis further reveals that community responsibilities also contributed to unpaid labour burdens. FA7 described representing her family in community development activities and family meetings, while FA10 discussed mentoring younger girls in church and community settings. Such responsibilities were framed as “service to humanity” and were rarely monetarily rewarded. This shows that unpaid work among female academics operates across multiple social spaces - home, institution, church, and community - creating overlapping layers of obligation.

The finding that unpaid responsibilities extend into institutional and community spaces suggests that gendered expectations surrounding women’s labour are not confined to the household. This observation is consistent with the structural feminist perspective adopted in this study, which views women’s roles and responsibilities as shaped by broader social structures rather than by individual choices alone. In this sense, the participants’ experiences demonstrate how competencies and expectations associated with domestic and caregiving roles may be reproduced within professional and community settings, thereby extending the boundaries of unpaid labour beyond the private sphere.

Intrusion of Unpaid Work into Academic Productivity and Wellbeing

A major interpretative theme was the extent to which unpaid work interfered with academic productivity, concentration, and wellbeing. Participants repeatedly described unpaid work as energy-draining, distracting, and time-consuming. FA2 stated that unpaid work “drains my energy as it interferes with my career,” while FA7 explained:

The time I am supposed to spend on academic work and research, I usually spend it on domestic chores and by the time I am done, I would have been tired. (FA7)

Similarly, FA9 noted that unpaid work affected her ability to dedicate uninterrupted time to research and academic writing, especially during evenings when she was exhausted.

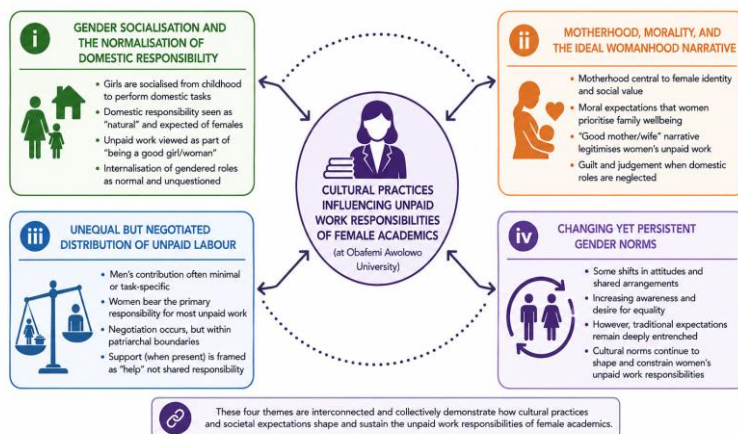
The finding that unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities interfere with academic productivity is consistent with research showing that family and caregiving responsibilities can shape women’s academic work and career experiences (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Derrick et al., 2021). The present study adds an important dimension to this literature by showing how the time and energy consumed by unpaid work affect not only the quantity of time available for academic activities but also the conditions under which such work is performed. Academic tasks are frequently undertaken after domestic responsibilities have been completed. This suggests that professional work may be accommodated around unpaid labour rather than being given equivalent protected time.

The interviews reveal that academic work often becomes secondary to domestic obligations. Many participants completed academic tasks late at night after household duties had been fulfilled. FA8 described conducting personal research work between 12:30am and 2am after completing family responsibilities. FA10 similarly reported sleeping around midnight after satisfying the needs of children, spouse, church obligations, and domestic tasks. These narratives suggest that women’s academic labour is frequently compressed into periods of exhaustion rather than being allocated protected intellectual time. Consequently, unpaid work contributes to fatigue, reduced concentration, and emotional stress. The findings also point to an important contradiction. Although universities often evaluate academics based on research output, publications, and productivity, the gendered realities affecting women’s capacity to meet these expectations are largely ignored. Unpaid work, therefore, functions as a hidden structural factor shaping academic advancement.

Objective Two: Influence of Cultural Practices on Unpaid Work Responsibilities

This objective examined how cultural practices and societal expectations influence the unpaid work responsibilities of female academics at Obafemi Awolowo University. The analysis reveals that unpaid work among female academics is deeply embedded within gendered cultural norms that define women primarily as caregivers, homemakers, and custodians of family wellbeing regardless of their professional status. Participants' narratives indicate that unpaid work is not simply an individual domestic obligation but a socially regulated responsibility reinforced through childhood socialisation, moral expectations surrounding womanhood and motherhood, and persistent patriarchal assumptions about gender roles. Although some participants acknowledged gradual shifts in gender relations and domestic arrangements, the findings indicate that cultural expectations surrounding women's unpaid labour remain strongly influential. Four interconnected themes emerged from the analysis: (i) gender socialisation and the normalisation of domestic responsibility, (ii) motherhood, morality, and the ideal womanhood narrative, (iii) unequal but negotiated distribution of unpaid labour, and (iv) changing yet persistent gender norms (Figure 2).

Influence of Cultural Practices on Unpaid Work Responsibilities



Note. Authors' fieldwork, 2026.

Gender Socialisation and the Normalisation of Domestic Responsibility

A major theme emerging from the interviews was that unpaid domestic labour is culturally constructed as a natural responsibility of women. Participants repeatedly linked their unpaid work responsibilities to childhood socialisation and societal conditioning that positioned women as primary caregivers and domestic managers. FA7 explained: "Right from childhood, we were taught that female gender should do house chores." Similarly, FA8 stated that: "As a Yoruba woman, culture demands that my home should be well-kept by me, cooking, cleaning and attending to the children should be done by the woman." These narratives reveal how gender roles are transmitted through socialisation processes that present domestic labour as an inherent feminine duty rather than a negotiable social arrangement. Domestic work is, therefore normalised to the extent that women internalise these expectations as part of their identity. The analysis further suggests that this internalisation makes unpaid work appear natural and unquestionable. FA7 stated that domestic work had "become part of me," revealing how cultural conditioning transforms gendered labour into routine behaviour that women may no longer critically interrogate. Importantly, participants' professional status as academics did not exempt them from these expectations. Despite occupying intellectually demanding positions, they remained culturally accountable for maintaining domestic order and caregiving responsibilities. FA3 noted: "As a wife and mother, I'm expected to take care of my husband and children and engage in gender-ascribed roles." This indicates that academic identity coexists with traditional gender identity rather than replacing it. Women are expected to succeed professionally while simultaneously fulfilling culturally prescribed domestic obligations.

This finding is consistent with research suggesting that gender socialisation plays an important role in shaping women's involvement in unpaid care and domestic work. Adebola (2021) argues that gender socialisation contributes to the normalisation of women's responsibility for unpaid care work, while Akanle et al. (2016)

similarly highlight the persistence of gendered expectations surrounding household chores in Nigeria. The present findings extend these observations to female academics by showing that professional and educational attainment does not necessarily displace culturally acquired expectations regarding domestic responsibility. Rather, such expectations continue to influence women's everyday experiences even within highly educated professional groups. The findings therefore suggest that unpaid work among female academics is sustained through cultural normalisation. Since domestic labour is framed as an ordinary expression of femininity, its unequal distribution becomes socially accepted and often invisible.

Motherhood, Morality, and the Ideal Womanhood Narrative

Another significant theme was the moral framing of motherhood and wifehood within cultural expectations. Participants described intense societal pressure to prioritise family responsibilities regardless of professional demands. The findings indicate that society often evaluates women's worth through their ability to perform caregiving and domestic roles successfully. FA10 provided a detailed reflection on this issue: "People would always tell you that you are first a mother before you work or consider yourself first as a mother, as a wife before you think of yourself as a female academic." Similarly, FA9 explained: "Society often assumes that a woman, even if she is highly educated, should put her home first." These responses reveal that motherhood is culturally positioned as women's primary identity, while professional achievement becomes secondary. Female academics are therefore expected to ensure that career aspirations do not interfere with domestic responsibilities. The analysis also reveals that these expectations are reinforced through guilt and moral judgement. FA5 stated: "Even when I am tired, I feel compelled to cook so as not to be perceived as failing in my role."

This illustrates how cultural expectations are internalised emotionally. Women monitor themselves against societal standards of the "good wife" or "good mother," leading them to continue unpaid domestic labour even under conditions of exhaustion. FA10 further explained that women who delay childbirth, employ house helps, or appear less available to family members are sometimes perceived negatively: "Some would not even agree that you should have a house help because it looks as if you are not responsible enough." This reflects the moralisation of caregiving within the society. Delegating domestic responsibilities may be interpreted as evidence of irresponsibility or insufficient maternal commitment. Consequently, women experience pressure not merely to perform unpaid work but to personally embody caregiving labour.

This finding resonates with the broader literature on gender relations in Nigeria, which highlights the persistence of culturally constructed expectations regarding women's roles within the family (Aina, 2012). The participants' accounts further suggest that these expectations operate not only through the allocation of domestic responsibilities but also through moral judgements about what constitutes responsible motherhood and wifehood. This extends the discussion of unpaid work by showing that cultural expectations can influence women's decisions through internalised standards of ideal womanhood, making the negotiation or delegation of domestic responsibilities a socially and emotionally complex process. The findings, therefore, suggest that unpaid work is culturally sustained through moral expectations surrounding ideal womanhood. Women are encouraged to interpret sacrifice, caregiving, and domestic availability as indicators of responsible femininity and successful motherhood.

Unequal but Negotiated Distribution of Unpaid Labour

The interviews also revealed that unpaid domestic labour remains unevenly distributed within many households, although some participants reported increasing male participation in domestic responsibilities. Several participants explained that women still carry the major burden of domestic coordination and caregiving. FA2 described unpaid work as: "Not distributive as the burden lies on one shoulder." Similarly, FA9 stated: "While my spouse offers some support, the bulk of domestic work still falls on me." These accounts suggest that women remain the default household managers even in homes where men contribute occasionally. Domestic work continues to be feminised, with women expected to oversee cooking, cleaning, childcare, and household organisation.

A particularly important insight emerging from the data is that men's contributions are often framed as assistance rather than shared obligation. FA9 noted that male involvement is perceived as "helping" instead of collective responsibility. This distinction is analytically significant because it reinforces the assumption that domestic labour fundamentally belongs to women. However, the findings also reveal evidence of negotiated gender arrangements within some households. FA5 described a relatively collaborative domestic arrangement involving her husband and children: "My husband contributes by assisting with meal preparation, such as cutting vegetables, and maintaining the compound." Similarly, FA3 explained that her husband supervises cooking and cleaning during the week, while FA10 described her husband as "gender blind" regarding domestic responsibilities: "We do not believe that the spoon came with you from heaven as a woman." This statement symbolically rejects essentialist beliefs that domestic competence is biologically attached to femininity. FA10's narrative particularly demonstrates resistance against rigid patriarchal assumptions about gender roles. Nevertheless, even within relatively supportive households, women often retained supervisory and emotional responsibility for ensuring domestic systems function effectively. The findings, therefore, indicate that male participation may reduce physical workload without completely dismantling gendered expectations surrounding domestic management.

This finding is consistent with Akanle et al. (2016), who observed that although gender roles within Nigerian households are changing, domestic responsibilities continue to be shaped by persistent gender expectations. The present findings similarly suggest that increased male participation in household labour does not necessarily result in an equal redistribution of unpaid work. Rather, men's involvement may reduce some of the physical demands placed on women while leaving women with the responsibility for coordinating and ensuring that domestic activities are completed. This suggests that changes in household practices may be occurring incrementally without necessarily transforming the underlying gendered expectations surrounding domestic management.

Changing Yet Persistent Gender Norms

Participants acknowledged that cultural expectations surrounding women's unpaid work are gradually changing, particularly due to women's increasing economic participation, education, and global exposure. However, traditional gender norms remain deeply influential. FA4 explained: "Many women out there are now pursuing different career opportunities for financial empowerment. They prefer to hire a help for the house chores." Similarly, FA8 stated: "Families are beginning to understand the dynamics of joint effort." These responses suggest that changing economic realities and women's professional advancement are reshaping domestic arrangements in some households. Participants noted that women increasingly outsource domestic labour, negotiate shared responsibilities, and prioritise professional commitments. FA10 linked these changes to globalisation and exposure to different social systems: "The world is becoming a global village. People are seeing how things are going." According to her, migration and international exposure challenge rigid traditional arrangements because couples living abroad often cannot sustain strict gender divisions of labour. Despite these changes, participants repeatedly emphasised that traditional expectations remain persistent. FA6 simply stated that cultural expectations regarding women's unpaid work had "not changed," while FA1 observed that women are still expected to take primary responsibility for domestic tasks.

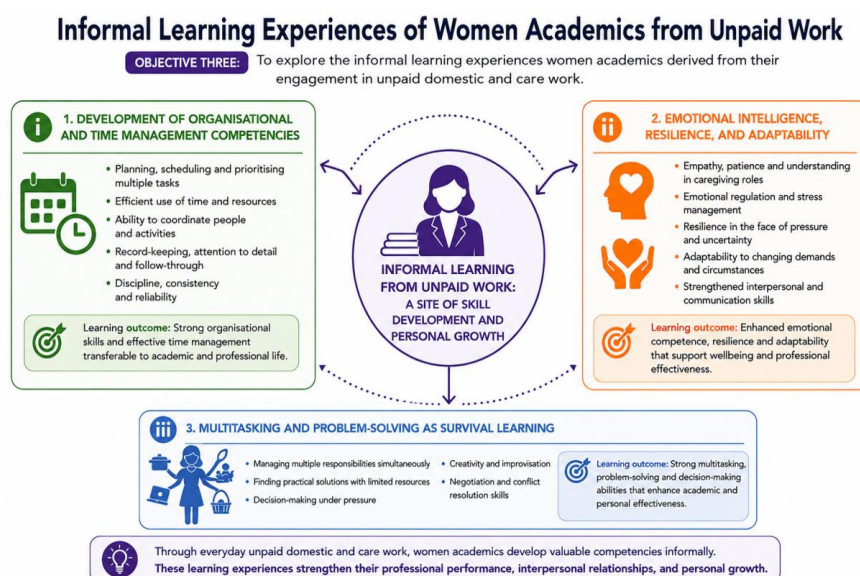
The findings, therefore, reveal an important contradiction. Although women's participation in higher education and professional careers has expanded, domestic expectations have not reduced proportionately. Rather than replacing traditional domestic roles, professional responsibilities have been added onto them. This creates what may be interpreted as a "double burden" where female academics must simultaneously meet the demands of academic productivity and culturally prescribed domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, the findings suggest that cultural change is uneven across social contexts. Some immediate households may adopt more flexible gender arrangements, while extended family structures and broader community expectations continue to reinforce traditional norms. FA10 explained that tensions sometimes arise within extended family networks because relatives still expect women to perform domestic roles regardless of professional obligations. Thus, female academics often manage competing realities: progressive domestic partnerships on one hand and persistent traditional expectations from wider society on the other.

The analysis shows that cultural practices significantly shape the unpaid work responsibilities of female academics at Obafemi Awolowo University. Through gender socialisation, moral expectations surrounding motherhood and wifehood, and persistent patriarchal assumptions about domestic labour, women continue to be positioned as primary caregivers and household managers regardless of their academic status. Although some participants reported supportive spouses and evolving gender norms, unpaid work remains strongly feminised. The findings further reveal that cultural expectations are maintained not only through external pressure but also through internalised beliefs about good womanhood and responsible motherhood. Importantly, the study reveals the contradiction between women's growing participation in professional and academic life and the persistence of traditional domestic expectations. Female academics are therefore, required to negotiate multiple identities simultaneously, balancing intellectual labour with culturally embedded caregiving responsibilities. The findings ultimately suggest that unpaid work among female academics is not merely a private household matter but a reflection of broader socio-cultural structures that continue to shape gender relations within contemporary society.

Objective Three: Informal Learning Experiences Derived from Unpaid Work

This objective explored the informal learning experiences female academics derived from their engagement in unpaid domestic and care work. The findings reveal that unpaid work functioned as an important site of experiential learning through which participants acquired organisational, emotional, managerial, and survival-oriented competencies. Rather than being viewed merely as repetitive domestic activities, unpaid responsibilities became spaces where women developed skills that were transferable into academic and professional life.

The analysis further shows that informal learning from unpaid work occurred largely outside formal educational structures, yet significantly shaped participants' professional effectiveness, interpersonal relationships, and personal development. However, despite the extensive competencies gained, many participants felt that these forms of learning remained undervalued within academic and societal spaces. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: (i) development of organisational and time management competencies, (ii) emotional intelligence, resilience, and adaptability, and (iii) multitasking and problem-solving as survival learning.



Note. Authors' fieldwork, 2026.

Development of Organisational and Time Management Competencies

A dominant theme across participants' narratives was that unpaid work strengthened their organisational abilities and time management skills. Participants repeatedly described how managing domestic responsibilities taught them how to coordinate multiple tasks, structure activities, and maximise limited time.

FA1 identified “time management” as a key lesson gained from unpaid work, explaining that these experiences influenced how she organised her daily activities: “Most times, I have to draw out schedules to manage my daily activities.” Similarly, FA4 explained that unpaid domestic work taught her how to coordinate multiple activities simultaneously: “I try to manage my time in achieving different tasks, which include waking up early to prepare children for school and also leave early for work.” FA8 also highlighted “work prioritisation,” organisational skills, and management abilities as important forms of learning gained from domestic responsibilities.

The analysis suggests that unpaid work involves complex managerial labour that requires planning, scheduling, coordination, and anticipation of future needs. Contrary to assumptions that domestic work is unskilled, participants’ narratives reveal that household management demands strategic thinking and organisational competence. Importantly, these competencies were transferable into academic work. FA6 explained that skills gained from caregiving and domestic management directly enhanced her effectiveness as a lecturer: “My time management and organisational skills help me balance teaching, research, grading, and administrative duties efficiently.” Similarly, FA9 explained that unpaid work strengthened her ability to manage teaching, supervision, meetings, and deadlines effectively. The findings, therefore, challenge the assumption that valuable learning only occurs within formal institutions. Participants developed practical managerial expertise through everyday domestic experiences that significantly shaped their professional competence.

This finding aligns with Mejiuni’s (2013) conceptualisation of everyday experience and social interaction as important contexts for informal and mutual learning. In the present study, participants’ organisational and time-management competencies were not acquired through formal training but developed through repeated engagement with the practical demands of domestic and caregiving responsibilities. The transfer of these competencies into teaching, research, supervision, and administrative work further demonstrates how learning acquired through everyday life can become relevant to professional practice.

Emotional Intelligence, Resilience, and Adaptability

Another important theme was the development of emotional intelligence, resilience, patience, and adaptability through unpaid domestic and care work. Participants described unpaid work as emotionally demanding but also transformative in shaping their interpersonal and emotional capacities. FA1 explained that unpaid work helped her develop empathy: “Unpaid work has helped me to be emphatic. To show empathy.” Similarly, FA6 stated that caregiving strengthened her emotional intelligence, patience, and communication abilities: “Caregiving has strengthened my communication, patience, and emotional intelligence.” These findings reveal that unpaid work involves emotional labour that requires women to regulate emotions, manage relationships, and respond sensitively to the needs of others. Through these experiences, participants developed emotional competencies that extended into mentoring, teaching, and academic collaboration.

Resilience also emerged strongly within participants’ narratives. FA9 explained that unpaid work made her: “More resilient, patient, and adaptable.” Similarly, FA7 reflected on the major adjustment she experienced after marriage: “Before I got married, I was not used to doing all these domestic chores... Since I got married, I had to adjust. The lesson is that a person should be able to adapt to many situations.” FA7’s narrative is particularly significant because it illustrates how unpaid work became a process of identity transformation and survival learning. Her transition from a background with domestic aides to personally performing extensive domestic labour required emotional adaptation and self-redefinition.

The findings further suggest that emotional learning from unpaid work extended beyond endurance into self-awareness and self-preservation. FA10 reflected:

I have learnt to take things easy, do the best I can do and not overstretch myself... I realise I can’t please everyone.

This suggests reflective learning about personal boundaries, emotional limits, and realistic expectations. Thus, unpaid work functioned not only as labour but also as a site of psychological and emotional development. This

finding further illustrates the experiential character of informal learning. The emotional capacities described by participants emerged through their direct engagement with caregiving, interpersonal relationships, and the everyday demands of family life rather than through deliberately structured instruction. In this respect, the findings support Mejiuni's (2013) view of lived experience as a context through which women can develop knowledge and capacities that are meaningful to their everyday lives.

Multitasking and Problem-Solving as Survival Learning

Participants also described unpaid work as a context where they developed multitasking, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities necessary for navigating competing responsibilities. FA5 explained that cooking strengthened her ability to manage multiple tasks simultaneously:

Cooking, in particular, requires managing multiple tasks simultaneously. This has strengthened my ability to organise activities, think ahead, and make quick decisions.

Similarly, FA7 described her ability to simultaneously perform caregiving and domestic activities:

I can do three things at the same time. I can be cooking, washing clothes and also attending to grandma and the children at the same time. (FA7)

These accounts reveal that unpaid work requires continuous coordination under pressure. Participants constantly balanced caregiving, household management, academic work, and emotional responsibilities within limited timeframes. FA2 also highlighted "problem solving skill and rational decision making" as important lessons gained from unpaid work. She further explained that attending community meetings exposed her to different perspectives and approaches to solving problems. Similarly, FA6 explained:

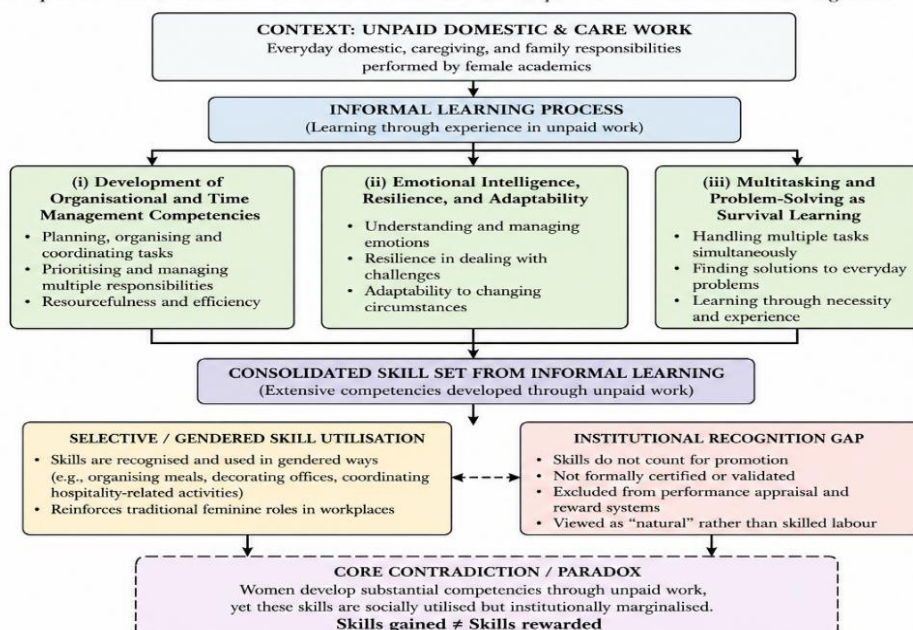
Through unpaid work, I've strengthened problem-solving skills by handling unexpected household challenges such as resolving conflicts, managing limited resources, or adjusting plans quickly.

The analysis suggests that unpaid work became a form of practical survival learning where participants developed flexibility, improvisation, and strategic decision-making. These abilities were not abstract competencies but emerged through balancing everyday uncertainties, emotional pressures, and resource constraints. Importantly, participants transferred these survival-oriented competencies into academic settings. FA6 explained that these skills supported her in managing academic pressures and students' learning challenges. Thus, the findings reveal that unpaid work contributes significantly to the development of practical intelligence and adaptive competence. This finding further illustrates the experiential character of informal learning. The emotional capacities described by participants emerged through their direct engagement with caregiving, interpersonal relationships, and the everyday demands of family life rather than through deliberately structured instruction. In this respect, the findings support Mejiuni's (2013) view of lived experience as a context through which women can develop knowledge and capacities that are meaningful to their everyday lives.

The contradiction between skill acquisition and institutional recognition

A major interpretative theme emerging from the analysis was the contradiction between the extensive competencies women developed through unpaid work and the lack of institutional recognition for those skills (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: The Contradiction between Skill Acquisition and Institutional Recognition



Note. This framework illustrates the paradox in which informal learning from unpaid domestic and care work is both relied upon and overlooked within institutional systems.

Note. Authors' fieldwork, 2026.

Several participants argued that the knowledge gained through unpaid work remains undervalued because domestic labour is culturally perceived as natural feminine behaviour rather than skilled labour. FA5 stated: "No, it is generally not recognised. This is because such work is often undervalued." Similarly, FA7 lamented: "Some of these skills or knowledge gained from unpaid work do not count for promotion in the workplace." FA6 further explained that unpaid work involves "management, caregiving, negotiation, budgeting, and emotional labour," yet these competencies are rarely acknowledged because they are viewed as "natural" rather than skilled labour.

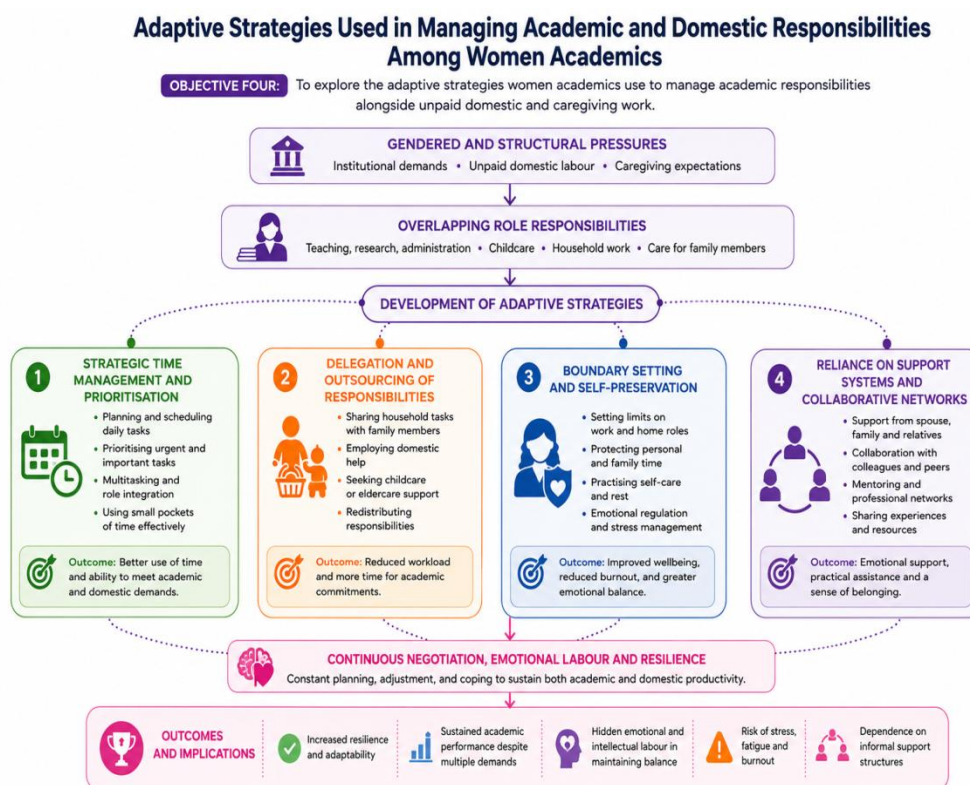
These findings reveal a major contradiction within academic and societal structures. Women develop substantial competencies through unpaid domestic labour, yet these forms of learning remain largely invisible within institutional reward systems. Interestingly, some participants suggested that women's unpaid skills are recognised selectively and in gendered ways. FA3 explained that women are often called upon to organise meals, decorate offices, and coordinate hospitality-related activities within workplaces because of assumptions about feminine domestic competence. This shows that women's domestic skills are acknowledged when they reinforce traditional gender roles, but not necessarily when discussions of leadership, productivity, or promotion emerge.

The analysis, therefore, suggests that informal learning derived from unpaid work exists within a paradox: it is socially utilised yet institutionally marginalised. This paradox is important for understanding the status of informal learning within professional settings. While participants' accounts demonstrate that unpaid work generates knowledge and competencies that are transferable to academic practice, these forms of learning remain difficult to recognise because they are acquired outside formal educational and institutional structures. This finding is consistent with the lifelong learning perspective, which recognises everyday life experiences and diverse social contexts as important sites of learning (UIL, 2022), as well as with Mejiuni's (2013) view of lived experiences and social interactions as important sites of informal and mutual learning. However, the present study extends these perspectives by highlighting a gap between the acquisition of learning through everyday unpaid work and its institutional recognition within academic settings. The analysis reveals that unpaid domestic and care work functions as an important site of informal learning for female academics. Through everyday domestic responsibilities, participants developed organisational competence, emotional intelligence, resilience, multitasking abilities, decision-making skills, and adaptive capacities that significantly shaped both their personal and professional lives. Importantly, these findings challenge assumptions that domestic labour is unskilled or intellectually insignificant. Participants' experiences reveal that unpaid work

involves sophisticated forms of planning, emotional regulation, conflict management, and strategic thinking. However, despite the extensive learning generated through unpaid work, participants consistently highlighted the lack of formal recognition attached to these competencies. Academic institutions continue to privilege formally measurable outputs while overlooking the hidden experiential learning embedded within women's domestic labour. The findings, therefore, reveal that unpaid work among female academics is simultaneously a source of empowerment, survival learning, emotional growth, and structural invisibility.

Objective Four: Adaptive Strategies Used in Managing Academic and Domestic Responsibilities

This objective examined the adaptive strategies employed by female academics in balancing academic responsibilities with unpaid domestic and caregiving work. The findings reveal that participants actively developed coping mechanisms and survival strategies to go through the overlapping demands of professional and domestic life. These adaptive strategies were not merely individual lifestyle choices but responses to structural pressures created by gendered expectations, institutional demands, and family responsibilities. The analysis further shows that balancing academic work and unpaid labour required constant negotiation, emotional regulation, strategic planning, and reliance on support systems. While participants showed remarkable resilience and adaptability, the findings also reveal the hidden emotional and intellectual labour involved in sustaining both domestic and academic productivity. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: (i) strategic time management and prioritisation, (ii) delegation and outsourcing of responsibilities, (iii) boundary setting and self-preservation, and (iv) reliance on support systems and collaborative networks (Figure 3)



Note. Authors' fieldwork, 2026.

Strategic Time Management and Prioritisation

The most dominant coping strategy identified across participants' narratives was deliberate time management and prioritisation of responsibilities. Participants described structuring their daily lives through schedules, routines, and task organisation in order to manage competing demands effectively. FA1 explained: "Most times, I have to draw out schedules to manage my daily activities." Similarly, FA9 stated: "I create a schedule and prioritise tasks according to urgency and importance." These responses suggest that time management was not simply a productivity technique but a survival mechanism developed in response to overlapping domestic

and professional obligations. Several participants described waking up very early or working late into the night to create uninterrupted periods for academic tasks. FA8 provided a detailed description of her routine:

“I wake up around 5am to prepare meals and organise the children for school before leaving for work... Most of my personal academic work is done late at night after everyone has slept.” (FA8)

This narrative illustrates how academic work is often compressed into periods of exhaustion after domestic responsibilities have been fulfilled. Rather than academic tasks being prioritised independently, they are frequently fitted around caregiving and household duties. Participants also described prioritisation as involving constant negotiation between urgent domestic needs and professional expectations. FA3 explained that she prioritised academic tasks during periods of deadlines, while family demands took precedence during emergencies involving children or relatives. The analysis, therefore, suggests that female academics constantly shift between competing roles, requiring advanced organisational abilities and continuous decision-making regarding which responsibilities demand immediate attention. Importantly, this form of strategic management reflects hidden intellectual labour. Women are not merely performing tasks; they are continuously planning, coordinating, and recalibrating responsibilities across multiple domains of life.

This finding is consistent with research showing that women academics often negotiate the competing demands of academic work and family responsibilities, with gender and family roles shaping the experience of work-family stress (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). The present findings add to this literature by showing that time management and prioritisation become active strategies through which female academics accommodate these competing demands. However, the need for such intensive scheduling also reflects the unequal distribution of responsibilities rather than simply individual differences in organisational ability.

Delegation and Outsourcing of Responsibilities

Another important adaptive strategy was the delegation and outsourcing of domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Participants explained that sharing tasks with family members or employing paid assistance helped reduce the intensity of unpaid labour. FA5 described involving family members in domestic activities: “My husband contributes by assisting with meal preparation... while the children also participate in household chores.” (FA5) Similarly, FA8 explained that she delegated some academic and domestic responsibilities to trusted individuals: “I delegate some tasks to my children, domestic assistants, and even research assistants when necessary.” (FA8) These findings indicate that delegation became a practical necessity rather than a luxury. Without some redistribution of labour, participants would struggle to meet both academic and domestic expectations. Several participants also discussed outsourcing domestic labour through paid assistance. FA2 explained that she employed labourers to support domestic tasks: “I use paid labourers to assist with some domestic responsibilities.” (FA2) Similarly, FA10 noted that she sometimes hired caterers or external support during major family events to reduce stress and workload.

However, the analysis reveals that delegation and outsourcing rarely eliminated women’s responsibilities completely. Participants often retained supervisory and managerial roles even when tasks were shared or outsourced. FA7 explained that although she delegated community-related tasks to paid workers, she still had to monitor and supervise the process. This suggests that women remained central coordinators of domestic systems even when labour was redistributed. The finding that delegation does not necessarily remove women’s responsibility for coordinating domestic work is important because it shifts attention from the physical performance of household tasks to the less visible work of organising and supervising them. This is consistent with the broader literature on unpaid care work, which recognises that care responsibilities involve substantial coordination and management beyond the direct performance of household tasks (Addati et al., 2018). The present study further shows that women’s ability to delegate is also conditioned by their access to financial and relational resources, meaning that outsourcing is not equally available to all female academics. Delegation therefore reduced physical exhaustion to some extent but did not necessarily remove the mental and emotional burden attached to household management. Furthermore, access to outsourcing was shaped by economic capacity. Participants with higher financial resources appeared better positioned to employ domestic help, suggesting that coping capacities may vary according to socioeconomic status.

Boundary Setting and Self-Preservation

The findings also revealed that participants developed strategies centred on boundary setting, emotional regulation, and self-preservation in response to overwhelming responsibilities. FA10 reflected extensively on the importance of setting limits: “I have learnt to say NO when necessary... You can’t kill yourself and it is only God that is irreplaceable.” (FA10) This statement reflects resistance against cultural expectations that women should endlessly absorb responsibilities without complaint or limitation. FA10’s narrative demonstrates critical self-awareness and the recognition that continuous self-sacrifice may threaten personal wellbeing. Similarly, FA1 explained that she had learned to “set boundaries” in managing responsibilities. Participants also described the importance of rest and emotional recovery. FA5 explained that she occasionally took short naps or moments of quietness to recover from exhaustion. Likewise, FA10 stated that there were times she intentionally switched off her phone and rested in order to regain emotional stability.

The analysis suggests that self-care became a necessary coping mechanism because of the cumulative physical and emotional demands associated with balancing academic and domestic work. Importantly, these strategies represent more than personal wellness practices; they reflect subtle forms of resistance against unrealistic expectations surrounding ideal womanhood and endless caregiving. By learning to refuse excessive demands and protect personal wellbeing, participants challenged the cultural assumption that women must always remain available to others. At the same time, the findings reveal the emotional difficulty associated with boundary setting. Some participants still expressed feelings of guilt whenever they reduced domestic involvement or prioritised personal rest. This reveals how deeply internalised cultural expectations continue to shape women’s self-perception even when they attempt to resist them.

This finding reinforces the earlier observation that cultural expectations surrounding ideal womanhood continue to shape women’s responses to unpaid work. The participants’ efforts to establish boundaries, therefore, represent not simply personal coping strategies but attempts to negotiate expectations that position women as continuously available to family members. In this respect, the findings suggest that adaptive strategies can simultaneously reflect agency and the constraints within which that agency is exercised.

Reliance on Support Systems and Collaborative Networks

Another major coping mechanism identified in the analysis was reliance on support systems involving spouses, family members, colleagues, friends, neighbours, and religious communities. FA10 gave a detailed account of how supportive networks assisted her during motherhood and demanding academic periods: “There were colleagues and family members who helped me with transportation, childcare, and emotional support during difficult periods.” (FA10) Similarly, FA5 described her husband as both emotional and intellectual support: “He also assists academically by reviewing my papers before submission.” (FA5) These responses suggest that balancing academic and domestic responsibilities often depended on collaborative relationships rather than individual effort alone. Support systems also extended beyond immediate family. Some participants relied on neighbours, church members, domestic workers, and colleagues for childcare, emotional encouragement, and logistical support. FA8 explained that trusted social networks were important in helping her cope with periods of intense pressure.

However, the findings also reveal inequalities in access to support. FA6 explicitly stated: “I really do not have support.” (FA6) This absence of support intensified her workload and emotional burden. The contrast between participants with strong support systems and those without demonstrates how coping capacities are shaped not only by personal resilience but also by social and relational resources. Importantly, the findings indicate that support systems were mostly informal and relational rather than institutional. Participants rarely mentioned formal university structures designed to assist female academics with caregiving responsibilities or work-life balance. This suggests that universities often depend on women’s private support systems to sustain their professional productivity without addressing the structural realities affecting female academics. This finding is particularly significant in light of research on women’s academic work, which indicates that family responsibilities and caregiving demands can shape women’s academic experiences and productivity (Derrick et al., 2021). The present study extends this discussion by showing that female academics frequently rely on informal networks to absorb responsibilities that might otherwise constrain their academic work. The absence

of comparable institutional support in participants' accounts suggests that the capacity to remain productive may depend partly on the availability of private social resources rather than on institutional arrangements designed to address caregiving responsibilities.

The analysis shows that female academics employ multiple adaptive strategies to manage the competing demands of academic work and unpaid domestic labour. These strategies include strategic time management, delegation and outsourcing, boundary setting, emotional self-preservation, and reliance on support systems. Importantly, the findings reveal that these coping mechanisms are not simply personal lifestyle choices but responses to deeply gendered structural pressures. Participants constantly negotiated academic expectations alongside cultural obligations surrounding caregiving, domestic labour, and emotional availability. The study further highlights that balancing professional and domestic responsibilities requires substantial hidden intellectual and emotional labour involving planning, coordination, supervision, emotional regulation, and survival-oriented decision-making. Although participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability, the findings also expose the limitations of relying solely on individual coping strategies in the absence of institutional support. Universities continue to benefit from women's academic labour while often overlooking the gendered domestic realities shaping their productivity and wellbeing. The findings, therefore, suggest the need for broader institutional and societal recognition of the hidden labour involved in sustaining women's participation within academia.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that unpaid domestic and care work is not merely a private responsibility but an important context for informal learning and lifelong development among women academics. Although participants experienced considerable challenges arising from the intersection of academic responsibilities and culturally prescribed domestic roles, they also acquired valuable competencies in time management, organisation, emotional intelligence, resilience, multitasking, problem-solving, and leadership through their everyday experiences. These competencies enhanced their professional effectiveness and enabled them to balance the competing demands of academic and family life. The findings further reveal that deeply rooted cultural norms and patriarchal expectations continue to assign women primary responsibility for unpaid work, resulting in a persistent double burden that affects academic productivity, wellbeing, and career progression. Despite the substantial knowledge and skills developed through unpaid work, these learning outcomes remain largely invisible within institutional recognition and reward systems. Consequently, universities continue to benefit from women's professional contributions without adequately acknowledging the hidden labour that sustains them. The study concludes that unpaid work should be recognised as a legitimate site of informal learning and knowledge production. There is a need for universities and policymakers to develop gender-responsive policies that support work-life balance, promote equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities, and recognise the competencies acquired through unpaid work. Such measures would contribute to greater gender equity in academia while validating the significant learning and professional value embedded in women's unpaid domestic and care work.

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