

Solo-living and childless professional women: Navigating the 'balanced mother ideal' over the fertile years

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Abstract

One in five women are childless at midlife, and for an estimated 90 percent of these women, childlessness is not actively chosen. In this article, we explore how solo-living and childless professional women navigate the 'balanced mother ideal' over their fertile years and what this means for organizations and organization studies. Drawing on biographical narrative interview data from solo-living professional women in the UK, we argue that identifications with the balanced mother ideal change over the life course as a result of futurity, ambivalence, and suppression of negative emotions—part of the logic of both postfeminism and neoliberal feminism—and the 'disenfranchized grief' of contingent childlessness. At the point of *late fertility*, the absence of alternative social narratives to the balanced mother ideal appears to create a crisis point for childless women, including in the workplace. We conclude our article with recommendations for how organizations can better cater to the needs of this significant, yet largely silenced, demographic group.

KEYWORDS

childlessness, neoliberal feminism, postfeminism, professional

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1 | INTRODUCTION

While considerable research attention has been directed toward social norms concerning work and motherhood and how these shape women's attitudes and work-life decisions, most research has focused on women who have already become mothers. Much less attention has been paid to childless women, especially over the life course. Yet fertility rates worldwide have been steadily falling for the last 50 years (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017) and increasing numbers of women are remaining childless (ONS, 2022). Childless women make up 20% of women at midlife (Berrington, 2017; Tanturri et al., 2015), and for an estimated 90% of these women, childlessness is not actively chosen (Archetti, 2019). Involuntary childlessness can be linked to infertility (medical pathology) but can also be due to circumstances, such as sexual orientation or lack of a partner (Tonkin, 2010). Archetti (2019, p. 175) contends that despite the prevalence of childlessness, the childless are 'nearly nonexistent from the perspective of the general population', with 'particularly the involuntary childless [being] virtually invisible'. In this paper, we explore this invisibility with reference to the workplace and women's careers.

The paper was born out of an empirical puzzle that emerged from a research study that used biographical narrative interviewing to explore the work-life interface of 35 solo-living managers and professionals aged from mid-twenties to mid-forties. While the narratives (issues cited and tone) of the male participants seemed largely consistent across the sample, there were notable differences within the narratives of the 18 female participants, which appeared to be associated with their age or stage in the life course. We suggest that the differences in the dataset relate to how childless professional women navigate the working mother norm, or more specifically, the 'balanced mother ideal' (Rottenberg, 2014a), discussed in contemporary scholarship on neoliberal feminism and post-feminism, over their fertile years.

Theoretically, we address the need to expand conceptualizing around the balanced mother ideal to understand the work-life interface and needs of single and childless women over the life course. We ask how professional solo-living women navigate the norm at different ages; whether they recognize structural barriers to attaining and performing this ideal, or think it a matter of choice and merit; if they do recognize barriers, how they respond; and what impact this all has on their attitudes to their careers and organizations.

We offer futurity, ambivalence, and suppression of negative emotions—part of the logic of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism—and the 'disenfranchized grief' (Tonkin, 2010) of contingent childlessness—as key to understanding changing identifications over time and how the needs of this considerable demographic group remain silenced in the workplace.

Our paper proceeds as follows. We start by exploring the balanced mother ideal—its origin and the implications for working mothers and organizations. We then set out the challenge faced by professional women seeking to attain this ideal—in terms of aligning career-building, relationship-building, and fertility within a strict social timetable—and consider what happens if they do not. After discussing the limited existing literature on the implications of this challenge for workers and organizations, we outline the empirical research the paper draws upon and the data analysis strategy employed. We then present our findings that identifications with the balanced mother ideal change across the life course, before discussing the mechanisms that perpetuate this, the implications for organizational practice, and directions for future research.

1.1 | The balanced mother ideal

Gender roles at work and in the home are informed by dominant social discourses, including neoliberalism, patriarchy, and pronatalism. Discourses inform an individual's self-understanding and practices—their 'sensibility' (Gill, 2017)—reaching deeply into their structures of feeling and becoming a kind of common sense in the public mood. Neoliberalism promotes market competition as a dominant and natural mode of human organizing. Adkins (2018) suggests that neoliberalism is an incomplete system for human life because it values one mode of human labor—market

production—and seeks to avoid investing in human reproduction (including maternity and childcare). Neoliberalism thus operates alongside other discourses aimed at ensuring human reproduction and thus a workforce of the future: pronatalism, which encourages childbearing (Warnes, 2019), and patriarchy, which segregates masculine and feminine labor and valorizes masculine practices (Walby, 1989). Women are told that childbearing and childrearing are important and primarily their responsibility, but also that market production is the most valuable human activity. Without adequate structural supports, they are largely expected to be limitless in their capacity to conduct both market work and unpaid social reproductive work (Adkins, 2018).

The disadvantages faced by women in the workplace—including those linked to career gaps for childbearing and a 'second shift' at home—have been long acknowledged. They were a key driver in second-wave/liberal feminist action in the 1970s and associated advancement in workplace provisions for working women and mothers, including via legislative protections. However, inequalities and motherhood penalties persist (e.g., Maxwell et al., 2019; Mayson & Bardoel, 2021; Pringle et al., 2017; Rouse et al., 2021).

In recent decades, two emerging discourses are likely to have informed women's sensibilities, including their identifications with working motherhood. The first is postfeminism—the narrative that feminism has actually won and women no longer face disadvantage at work, which suppresses the need for further collective action (Adkins, 2018; McRobbie, 2004; Scharff, 2012; Tasker & Negra, 2007). According to postfeminism, life outcomes are the product of choice and hard-earned personal merit (Kumra & Simpson, 2017; Lewis et al., 2017). While the surface impression is that women have a range of life options and pathways for success, the unquestioned ideal subject position of heterosexual working wife and mother persists (Lewis, 2017).

The postfeminist working mother ideal differs from the housewifery ideal in earlier gender regimes. Postfeminism demands dual performance of masculinity/feminism (drive, ambition, and emancipation, particularly in work and premarital sex) as well as femininity (curating an attractive body and being a good wife and mother). There is also a 'makeover paradigm' that extends 'beyond the surface of the body to an incitement to 'makeover' one's interior life' (Gill, 2017, p. 607). Several authors have highlighted the psychic and affective life of postfeminism, where women must foreground resilience (Gill & Orgad, 2018), confidence (Gill & Orgad, 2015), and happiness (Davies, 2015). The associated outlawing of negative states, such as anger and insecurity (Gill, 2017, p. 610), closes down public displays of disquiet with postfeminist lives (Adkins, 2018).

Lewis (2017) suggests that postfeminism offers all women four maternal subjectivities. Three are aligned with professional subjectivity. A woman can focus on her career, while buying childcare, as a corporate mother; 'retreat' to the home yet make this a career project, as a professional mother; or combine career with motherhood as a working mother. The ultimate postfeminist maternal subjectivity is the working mother who manages to juggle/balance roles via work intensification and temporal flexibility (Lewis, 2017; McRobbie, 2015)

The second discourse is neoliberal feminism—a term coined by Rottenberg (2014b) when she detected high-profile career women departing from the denial of gender struggle in postfeminism. These women acknowledged gender inequality (e.g., wage gaps and sexual harassment) and some described themselves as feminists. However, rather than seeking change to social systems through collective action and using the language of autonomy, rights, liberation, and social justice, the ideal neoliberal feminist subject is entrepreneurial in taking control of her situation, assuming responsibility for organizing (if not always doing) care labor and managing her own working life and well-being. Neoliberal feminist heroes 'lean in' to unequal relations and compete to build careers that do not damage family roles, thereby performing the happy 'balanced woman' (Rottenberg, 2014a) ideal.

Arguably, many contemporary organizational initiatives geared toward supporting working mothers reinforce neoliberal feminist discourse that working mothers should take responsibility, work it out for themselves, and lean in; for example, flexible working options that do not actually reduce workload expectations (see Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020).

1.2 | Navigating the balanced mother ideal when single and childless

Articles specifically examining the influence of 'ideal motherhood' ideologies on childless working women are rare (Myers, 2017). In this section, we consider the work required to actually attain the balanced mother ideal, the issues and barriers that women must negotiate along the way, and the issue of the ideal not being attained (due to circumstances, as opposed to 'child-free' choice).

Becoming a balanced mother involves developing the right kind of career, with the right kind of relationship, and to form the right kind of family—all while a woman is both fertile and of a socially sanctioned age for childbearing. Neoliberalism expects women to be active participants in the labor market (Orgad & De Benedictis, 2015) and long-hours, high-powered waged work are glamorized in postfeminism (Orgad, 2017) and neoliberal feminism. To invest in education and career, professional women cannot be distracted by relationships or pulled into parenting too young. For women in their twenties, there is an emphasis on hook-up culture (Rottenberg, 2017) and 'pure relationships' (Giddens, 1992) that provide stimulation for as long as they last, but no permanence.

There is a social timetable for acceptable singleness, however. When approaching or turning 30, a woman is generally expected to want to 'unsingle' herself (Lahad, 2014; Taylor, 2011). 'Late singlehood', where singlehood becomes a 'problem in the eyes of society' (Lahad, 2017, p. 3), denotes failure (wrong choices in the past) and narrowing options. A woman must therefore prioritize relationship-building alongside career-building at this age. Yet, single professionals are erroneously presumed to be 'ideal workers' by neoliberal organizations, always available for work (Utoft, 2020).

To achieve the consumption standards associated with professional workers and honor deep investment in neoliberal markets (e.g., mortgage, pension) (Adkins, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2015), professional women must form a dual-earner household with a male professional (or equivalent) (Elliott, 2016; Rumens, 2017). To enable her to be a working mother, her partner must combine his masculine career drive and attractive embodiment with a willingness to play a supporting domestic role (Lewis et al., 2017). Finding and attracting this kind of almost mythical 'ideal' man is clearly not easy. Gunnarsson (2014) argues that women are still exposed to patriarchal ideas that their value is vested in male sexual attention. They are socialized to doubt their merit in the love market, overlook men's failure to perform romantic care and domestic duties, and invest an unfair share of 'love practices' to win security and legitimization. This means women are often neither the lead 'choosers' in relationships, despite postfeminism's surface message, nor are they necessarily able to merit the attention of a rare 'new man'.

There is then the matter of biology—the fertile female body—to factor into planning. While fertility is to be suppressed during intense career-building—there comes a point when a woman needs to consider her fertility if she is to achieve the balanced mother ideal. Postfeminism subjects women to a cultural biological clock (Cooke et al., 2012; McRobbie, 2004), although people cannot accurately predict fertility patterns and fertility treatments may (rather unreliably) mediate decline (Okun et al., 2014). This means that most professional women are expected to be actively trying to have children in their thirties.

By the late thirties/early forties, if a woman has not yet successfully aligned her career, relationship, fertility, and childbearing, she is faced with navigating an older nonmother identity, including in the workplace. Whether the childlessness is voluntary, or by circumstance, this is likely to pose a challenge. Literature on 'contingent' childlessness (by circumstance) makes reference to 'disenfranchized grief' (Tonkin, 2010). This refers to the pain of a loss that is not socially legitimate, which leads to silence, isolation, and alienation, which in turn perpetuates a lack of understanding. This is a worrying issue, especially set alongside the suppression of negative affect in postfeminism and neoliberal feminism.

In the next section, we examine the limited literature that might help inform our understanding of the experiences of nonmothers in the workplace across the life course.

1.3 | Organizations, organizations studies, and childless women

While many organizations pride themselves on being 'family-friendly' and offering tailored support for working (often professional) mothers, there appears to be far less awareness of the needs of childless women in the workplace, over the life course, and specific provisions. It seems that finding a partner, remaining partnered, getting (and staying) pregnant, or indeed coping with not becoming a parent have largely been considered as outside the organizational remit.

In recent years, limited research attention has been directed to the work-life challenges of single staff (Dumas & Perry-Smith, 2018; Gao & Sai, 2021; Utoft, 2020), which includes some attention to the barriers to family formation, including finding a partner when working hours are long (Wilkinson et al., 2017) and fertility decisions (Ollilainen, 2019). There is some evidence that single childless staff have little sense of entitlement to support from the employer around nonwork concerns, linked to a lack of legislative provision and workplace norms (Wilkinson et al., 2017, 2018).

In terms of becoming a parent, there is evidence of emerging organizational interest in complex fertility issues, and emerging research interest in the lived experience of combining fertility treatment with work (Griffiths, 2021; Hanna & Gough, 2020; Payne et al., 2019; van den Akker et al., 2016) and miscarriage in the workplace (Boncori & Smith, 2019; Porschitz & Siler, 2017). Acknowledging the incompatibility of careers and fertility temporally, there is also interest in egg-freezing as a corporate benefit, with questions arising about motives (giving women peace of mind or allowing the extraction of market labor for longer) (Zeno, 2020).

Limited attention has been paid to older nonmothers at work, their work-life interface needs, and their attitudes toward work. Cutcher (2021) suggests that older childless women are often expected to give their all at work but also keep quiet about prioritizing work over family. There is a suggestion that these women reap the benefits of being ideal workers in terms of pay and advancement (Wood & Newton, 2006). Yet, childlessness fails to comply with pronatalism, where female ambivalence to mothering is regarded as unnatural (Cutcher, 2021). The voluntarily childless may need to give the impression that they are infertile, still hoping to have a child, or making a special contribution to society or mothering colleagues to avoid being labeled as selfish or ruthlessly ambitious (Cutcher, 2021; Park, 2002). On the other hand, there is little organizational space for the 'disenfranchised grief' (Tonkin, 2010) that comes with failing to become a mother when this was desired, especially due to circumstances (lack of a partner). While there has been recent interest in the experience of women at work at the end of fertility—in terms of menopause transition—the focus is primarily on the challenges of managing symptoms at work, how women view themselves at this time, and the 'menopause taboo' (i.e., Atkinson et al., 2021; Butler, 2020; Grandey et al., 2020; Steffan, 2021)—not the emotional side of navigating involuntary childlessness and the demise of the balanced mother potential, which is likely affecting almost one in five menopausal women.

Significant questions remain about how childless women in the workplace navigate the balanced mother ideal: Do they recognize barriers to 'becoming' a working mother, and how gendered structures and cultures (including in the workplace) create/exacerbate barriers, or do they think it is all a matter of choice and personal merit? If they do recognize structural barriers, how do they respond? Do they see this as a personal problem to resolve, or look to collective action? Do things change over the life course? How do identifications influence career decisions; attitude toward jobs; motivation and performance at work; expectations of their employer; and utilization of available workplace provisions? Is negative affect expressed? In the next section, we outline the research data we draw upon to begin exploring these questions.

2 | METHODS

As stated in the introduction, our data was collected as part of a broader qualitative study on the work-life interface for solo-living managers and professionals in the UK. The original sample included 35 men and women who self-identified as managers or professionals, were living alone, aged 24–44 (the peak solo-living age-range within

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Sector	Job role	Age	Category	Salary (£)	Relationship status
1. Leah	Private	HR Manager	24–30	Early fertility	20–29k	Partnered
2. Louize	Private	Head of Marketing	24–30	Early fertility	30–39k	Single
3. Jude	Public	HR Manager	24–30	Early fertility	30–39k	Single
4. Vera	Private	Business Performance Analyst	24–30	Early fertility	20–29k	Single
5. Isla	Public	Solicitor	31–35	Peak fertility	Over 50k	Single
6. Judith	Public	Academic	31–35	Peak fertility	30–39k	Single
7. Stacy	Public	Mental Health Nurse	31–35	Peak fertility	20–29k	Divorced and single
8. Courtney	Public	Project Manager	31–35	Peak fertility	30–39k	Single
9. Florence	Private	Solicitor	31–35	Peak fertility	Over 50k	Single
10. Ann	Public	Anesthetist	31–35	Peak fertility	Over 50k	Single
11. Grace	Private	Solicitor	31–35	Peak fertility	Over 50k	Divorced and single
12. Suzanne	Private	Corporate HR	31–35	Peak fertility	Over 50k	Single
13. Gemma	Public	Clinical Psychologist	36–44	Late fertility	30–39k	Single
14. Maria	Public and Private	Lecturer	36–44	Late fertility	30–39k	Single
15. Jenny	Private	Marketing Manager	36–44	Late fertility	Over 50k	Single
16. Samantha	Private	Regulatory Project Manager	36–44	Late fertility	40–49k	Single
17. Charlie	Public	Training and Development Manager	36–44	Late fertility	40–49k	Partnered
18. Roo	Private	Finance Manager	36–44	Late fertility	40–49k	Divorced and single

the working population) (Lewis, 2005). The data was not collected with the central issues in the paper in mind, and we do not claim representativeness. Rather, we use the dataset to explore processes of identification with the balanced mother ideal among childless and solo-living professional women—thus drawing on the interviews of the 18 women who took part [See Table 1 for participant profile]. The women worked as certified professionals (academic, solicitors, healthcare professionals, human resources, accountancy) and/or in higher technical occupations (business analyst, project manager). All had at least an undergraduate degree. Salary levels varied, but many were earning over £50k. Most of the women were single (two were partnered but solo-living) and had never been married (three were divorced and single). All but one was white. We acknowledge the limited sample size and are not aiming for theoretical saturation; rather we approached this paper from the perspective of trying to understand an empirical puzzle emerging from this dataset.

The initial call for research participants was made via a regional social/activity network with a membership base largely matching the target participant profile for the original study. This was supplemented with social media posts and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling was then employed to ensure a mixture of ages, roles, and industries, spanning the private and public sectors.

As little was known about work-life relations for this demographic group, biographical narrative enquiry was adopted (Wengraf, 2011) with an open question starting each interview asking for the individual's work-life story. Then followed a semi-structured section asking for details on different aspects of their work and home life. The interview schedule can be found in Appendix A. There were no direct questions about relationship and parenting

intentions (although these sometimes emerged in probing questions). Instead, we asked open questions concerning what was important to participants: their perceptions of living alone, what they spent time on, and their plans for the future. The omission of direct questions on relationships/motherhood intention may be considered beneficial as participants mentioned these when deemed important to their own experience, rather than in response to a question, when it may not be a current concern. The lead author conducted the interviews, and they typically lasted 60–90 min.

For the original project, researcher notes were kept during data collection and transcription, and data was analyzed via a structured manual coding process inspired by Seidel and Kelle (1995, p. 55). Case accounts were then constructed, illustrating the work-life trajectory of each interviewee and the interplay of key themes. One finding was varying attitudes to career and broader life (including relationships and motherhood) within the female participants, correlating with their age, something largely missing among the men. This led us to consider life course and identifications with a 'balanced mother ideal' as possibly fruitful conceptually. Moving back and forth between the data and literature, we were interested in how these women were talking about their careers and their lives outside of work and whether principles from the literature on the working/balanced mother ideal in relation to postfeminism and neoliberal feminism might help us understand their accounts and their differences.

When developing this paper, a more focused data analysis strategy was then undertaken, using template analysis (TA) (King, 2004). TA is a particular type of thematic analysis that involves the development of a coding 'template', which summarizes themes identified by the researcher(s) as important in a dataset and organizes them in a meaningful (hierarchical) manner. It is applicable within a variety of epistemological perspectives (King, 2012), including analysis of discourses in interviews (i.e., Harding et al., 2014), and balances a relatively high degree of structure with adaptability to the needs of a particular study (Brooks et al., 2015). Meaningful themes (to the specific research questions) and codes are applied to parts of the dataset and revised as necessary, facilitating a holistic approach rather than considering one theme or code at a time (McDowall & Saunders, 2010). The approach is flexible regarding the specifics of the template produced, allowing themes to be developed more extensively where the richest data is found (Brooks et al., 2015). We started our analysis with meaningful themes from the first round of analysis (i.e., work and career, relationships/dating, motherhood) and also postfeminism and neoliberal feminism (each with a set of potentially relevant codes, such as 'choice', 'merit', 'masculinity', 'femininity', 'makeover', 'structural barriers', 'affect'), and applied this to a sample of transcripts. As we were already interested in variation between case accounts based on age, we applied the template to 10 transcripts, including participants at the younger and older ends of our sample age range.

At this point, we began to think in terms of *early fertility*, *peak fertility*, and *late fertility* groupings. This exercise allowed the template to be refined, with some codes (from the literature) being removed/modified where not useful or appropriate to the data examined, and new codes being added via the identification of novel combinations, such as 'relationships/dating' being combined with 'structural barriers' to result in an additional code for exploring awareness of structural barriers to meeting a partner, which impacts upon becoming a 'balanced mother'. We used the revised template to analyze all remaining transcripts through a process of constant revision (McDowall & Saunders, 2010).

We looked for commonalities, differences, and exceptions in the quotes extracted for each code/theme (within and between rough age groupings) clarifying our age groups and assigning cases accordingly. *Early fertility* refers to age 24–30 (4 participants); *peak fertility* to age 31–35 (8 participants); and *late fertility* to age 36–44 (6 participants). We also considered the interplay of the various codes/themes within each age category. We acknowledge that these age ranges are not 'fixed' and that they relate to the different identifications we detected, albeit that change from one to another was often a complex and incomplete process. While we present the groups separately analytically, and they are effectively cohorts of women, our argument is that women's life courses involve transitions and that we can detect these transitions analytically in our data. We ended up with a matrix of themes and age categories, with supporting key quotes, which served as the basis for our interpretation of the dataset and writing up of our findings.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Early-fertility childless professional women

The main focus for the women in the *early-fertility* grouping (aged 24–30) was career development and the accumulation of money for consumption, particularly home ownership. There is some support for a postfeminist sensibility in these accounts, with masculine traits of drive, ambition, achievement and independence being emphasized, and a sense of options and choice over the work-life interface. *Early fertility* women can be seen to fit the unencumbered, ideal worker norm, with the balanced mother ideal only vaguely implied in their accounts, as something for the future.

HR Manager Leah says her career is far more important than work-life balance right now, and elaborates with: 'it's the achievement, I think I've always been quite driven by achievement... Job titles and all that are quite nice, and the status associated with it'. Louize (Marketing Manager) uses market terminology to discuss broader life activities, as well as career goals, suggesting deep identification with neoliberal discourse 'insinuating itself into "the nooks and crannies of everyday life"' (Littler, 2017) (Gill, 2017, p. 608). In the example she gives, her body is used for purposes very different to childbearing:

I have personal goals each year, to sort of push myself...the three peaks challenge...a half-marathon... [and] ongoing learning, so doing... CPD each year... But in terms of overall, it's kind of aspiring to where I want to be I suppose, and making sure I'm going in the right direction, i.e. buying a house.

The consumption of home ownership here is echoed by Vera (Accountant): 'I'd always wanted my own house, and I'd had the aim since I'd started working really that I wanted to move out before I was 21, to be on the property ladder'. She speaks also of time and energy in making the home perfect, addressing the postfeminist requirement for feminine performance alongside masculinity, but here directed toward the feminine consumption of home makeover.

There is little mention of family formation in these women's interviews, with a perhaps naïve optimism that the career context will not prove problematic when the time is right. For example, Louize (Marketing Manager) prefaces a discussion of her desired future career with a presumption of parenting: 'once I'm settled in terms of house, partner, all that kind of stuff...'. Where relationships are mentioned, it is more about sexual freedom and 'pure relationships' (Giddens, 1992), expressing a masculine sexual liberty. Vera (Accountant) comments:

I've been single for a year now. So yeah, I'm quite fun-loving, and yeah I actually wanted a year of being single, which I've achieved—with a lot of fun stories along the way. So yeah, that's really my life story—enjoying being single and living on my own.

When asked if she'd like a relationship after 1 year, Vera replies: 'No, at the moment I am seeing someone, but not seriously'. There is some mention of relationships faltering due to work commitments, but these women are more likely to attribute this to the fault of the men, for not appreciating the participants' heavy investment in their careers as opposed to unreasonable occupational demands. There is a sense in which women feel liberated to be ambitious and independent in their sexual and intimate lives and that they are delaying the work of heterosexual love, or perhaps laying the foundations—in terms of accruing merit in the relationship market—although maybe not consciously.

Working long hours (Leah and Louize estimated over 50 h per week) is framed in the language of personal choice, with scant recognition of the particular inequalities this creates for women under gendered care arrangements. Vera (Accountant) refers to work-life balance as a 'mind-set, of how much work can rule your life', and Leah (HR Manager) talks at length about the 'meritocracy' that governs career progression in her firm, concluding with 'we try to live by that value, and I whole-heartedly agree that's what we do'. There is some recognition from Louize (Marketing Manager) that female colleagues who are mothers experience occupational segregation, working in roles that are

exempt from long hours and travel but offer fewer career development opportunities. She couches her discussion here in a largely postfeminist (choice and competition) way, however, saying long hours are needed 'when you want your section of the business to thrive'. She thus defends the system, failing to consider how her own priorities, needs, and working arrangements may develop in the future or show any feminist solidarity with colleagues who are mothers.

3.2 | Peak-fertility childless professional women

Peak-fertility is the rather narrow window of the life course that social norms signal as the right time for a professional woman to become a wife and mother. As with their *early-fertility* peers, women in the *peak-fertility* grouping (aged 31–35) emphasized career development, achievement, making money for consumption, independence, and being in a constant state of self-improvement or makeover: 'I want to be well respected at work... but I feel like you need to achieve something with your weekend, and with your holiday, and with your evenings' (Ann, Anesthetist); 'To get my own house and to have my own things... that's my next big driver' (Isla, Solicitor). However, these women were also talking about seeking more balanced (in terms of relationships and family) lives. Solicitor Grace follows a career-centered discussion with:

being in a committed relationship is important... I'm glad I've got a career, I enjoy it, but it's not everything, it's just a part really... And you don't want to be... I never saw myself as this kind of massive career woman, and I think a lot of single women, and a lot of my single friends at work that live on their own, they feel the same way. And they really don't want to be seen in that light, you know basically 'my life is work'... you're fighting against that.

For Anesthetist Ann, the time to transition to a more balanced life is close but has not yet arrived: 'my priorities are currently my work but I don't necessarily always want them to be, if that makes sense'.

When speaking of past relationship breakdown, five of these women mentioned the partner not understanding their career commitments, and this being a flaw of the man. There is also, however, a creeping recognition of the challenges involved in being chosen by (as well as choosing) a partner and the vulnerabilities posed by partnering, especially when this may compromise financial independence:

I worry about reaching a point where I can't work, or I'm in a relationship and I don't work, and then I get screwed over down the line, and I can't pay my mortgage or my lifestyle completely changes (Suzanne, HR Manager)

A growing concern over aging and fertility is evident, alongside concerns about finding and keeping the right kind of partner. Suzanne (HR Manager) says: 'I definitely want to have a family, and I'm in kind of the last window for doing that because I'm 35—I'm 36 [soon]'. Yet she wants a partner who fits a masculine ideal, to balance her feminine lead mother role: 'I wouldn't want someone who earned a lot less than me who was happy to stay at home whilst I went out' (Suzanne, HR Manager).

Some women were ambivalent about having children but felt under pressure to decide, exemplifying the centrality of the balanced mother ideal in *peak fertility*:

It's really difficult for a woman because... you've also got to factor in your biological clock, and you know... when do you fit that in? *It's actually really hard*, because I'm not maternal at all... But it doesn't mean I don't want to do it... *I don't know*. So [pause] *I really don't, I really don't know*... Whereas for my friend James, he thinks he's just starting out in his career and it's great, whereas, for me, I'm thinking 'Oh god, I'll have to fit in a gap' and then... *I really don't know where I will be* (Florence, Solicitor)

The language here—the repetition of ‘I don’t know’, sets this stage apart from the agentic *early-fertility* phase. Women in *peak fertility* are aware that they are expected to make painful compromises that are different to their male colleagues:

I’m working often more than 60-hours a week... and like now I’m single as well, there’s no time to meet, to go on dates. And it’s a female thing, like men on my grade are all married and have small children at home (Suzanne, HR Manager)

I don’t necessarily want to have children but... it’s just not considered at all... there’s no way that... you would absolutely need a partner who would support you, and even then... it would be so difficult to not be in the rat-race...in the game, writing (Judith, Academic)

Men...Partners... perhaps have got a wife... those wives are sitting at home and like organising their whole lives for them. Whereas you don’t really have that as a woman, there isn’t that same concept, because if you had a husband you’d probably be supporting him or it would be equal—it wouldn’t be the same unequalness (Florence, Corporate Law)

Solicitor Florence notes the lack of working mothers at Partner level in her firm, with the only example in her specialism being a woman who had a child via IVF after becoming a Partner in the firm. While Florence is not actively considering fertility treatment for herself (as noted above, she is not even sure she wants to be a mother), fertility treatment is perhaps recognized as a tool for deferring the moment of having to choose or actualize balanced motherhood. There is no detailed discussion about the circumstances that led to the colleague’s fertility journey, and no evidence of any awareness of the limited success rates of IVF—which would make a deferral strategy risky.

Structural barriers and inequalities are recognized more by this group as a whole, in contrast to their younger peers. Academic Judith speaks jokily about a question she raised to a male presenter at an academic conference about career building: ‘well how do you suggest an early career academic has children... especially if they have to make them themselves? [laughs]’. She went on: ‘because some of my friends that have just finished their PhD are having children but they’re men, and their partners are not academics’. Despite speaking up about structural inequalities and pointing out system flaws, she sees this as a dilemma to be resolved at a personal level that she has not yet worked out. She says motherhood is ‘just another project—it is life rather than work, but it’s also just another impossible project that you can never finish’.

Some of the *peak-fertility* women had identified strategies for ‘leaning in’ and finding space for motherhood, should they meet a partner and become pregnant. Anesthetist Ann says she will go part-time, and Solicitor Grace says she will focus on a lateral, family-friendly move instead of promotion to Partnership: ‘I’d like to build up doing bigger cases, making a bit of a name for myself possibly. That is a way I could avoid the partnership route—just become technically well-known’. They also comment on how others around them are ‘leaning in’ in different ways. Florence cites women Partners in other parts of her business who have ‘all got nannies, because that’s the only way they can do it’—normalizing the ‘corporate mother’ (Lewis, 2017) solution, of sub-contracting childcare.

HR Manager Suzanne seems to be applying the agentic, planning attitude she has thus far employed in career-building to tackle the project of becoming a balanced mother. While the alarm call of the ‘biological clock’ is calling (quote above), she believes she has time to strategize her way to motherhood without compromising her career, even managing the threat of pregnancy discrimination through her creative action:

I imagine I’ve got two or three more in-house roles in me and then I’ll go off and do my own thing. But I’m also trying to work out the best time for me to—trying to project when I might be in a position to have a baby and things, and let’s say I met someone then... I mean my sister met someone... and got married [eight months later], so I know it can happen really fast, but trying to work out how to time a

job move with... so you're not in a company where you've only been there for six months then you're announcing that you're pregnant, and then everyone hates you forever. So it's a question I'm asking myself a lot at the moment

It seems that at *peak fertility*, there is a mingling of both postfeminist and neoliberal feminist influences. There is growing recognition of the gendered structural constraints to becoming and being a balanced woman, but these women look inwardly to navigate/overcome them. They maintain hopeful that they will be chosen, that a relationship will last, that they will be able to become mothers and then successfully balance a family with their careers, when the time comes. They remain 'ideal workers' in the eyes of their organization, professions and society.

3.3 | Late-fertility childless professional women

Late fertility is a crisis point in terms of the balanced mother ideal for single, childless women. The women we interviewed in this grouping (aged 36–44) had progressed to mainly senior roles, which could be seen as them 'ripping' the benefit of being an ideal worker in salary and status, but these jobs did not deliver the fulfillment expected during the years of career investment. These women worked long hours and flagged this as unavoidable and problematic, rather than a choice and natural requirement to progress. Their roles involved unsatisfactory tasks, 'fire-fighting', limitless need to pick up more work when managing a team and conflict with their own managers. Rather than criticizing industry or organizational structures and/or cultures, however, the women looked inward, blaming their earlier choices for career dissatisfaction. Most of their friends were balanced mothers by this point, and this, combined with their long working hours, resulted in socially isolated lives. Marketing Manager Jenny says: 'when I look back over the last 10 years... it's all been work... and it does get me quite down, because... the weeks go by and you realize that you... don't get to see your friends [or] go out a bit more to meet somebody'. Clinical Psychologist Gemma likewise comments: 'I'm doing a hard job that I've worked fucking hard to get, but I have no life'.

In terms of becoming a wife, all but one of these women stated they wanted to cohabit with a partner in future (the other omitting any mention of future relationship status/living arrangement). Some also alluded to children. Luck and chance are, however, emphasized over choice, and there is some resignation that it might not happen:

It'd be nice to meet somebody and settle down, you know whether I'll have kids—probably not given that I'm nearly 40 (Jenny, Marketing Manager)

I just can't imagine that ever happening to me, but anyway [laughs] if I did meet someone and had kids and stuff... (Samantha, Project Manager)

None of these *late-fertility* women said they did not want children, and some mentioned the challenges to fertility—both biological clocks and the stress of work. Lecturer Maria says she wants children: 'if it's possible to get pregnant with the kind of stress that I'm under at the moment, which is... I've been told not to try'. There is no suggestion that she has ever raised this at work as a work-life balance challenge, brought on by organizational demands. None of the women expressed any plans for nonheteronormative parenting, such as donor sperm, adopting, or sharing parental responsibilities with other single or lesbian mums. Long-term single Samantha does not explain why she cannot imagine a romantic partnership 'happening to her', but her passive language perhaps suggests concern over her own merit in the heterosexual love market.

In *peak fertility*, there are likely less 'new men' on the market and women have often suffered relationship breakdown. The naïve optimism of earlier years is replaced by more guarded discussion about investment in relationships and becoming a dependent balanced mother. Clinical Psychologist Gemma says: 'I think I have to be entirely self-reliant because I can't rely on other people because other people are not reliable'. While Charlie (Training and

Development Manager) was one of the few participants in a relationship at the time of interview, she spoke of it in quite uncertain terms:

It's really messy, because he's coming out of a relationship, he's got a little girl, so I don't see him very often... So hopefully... I'll be able to see a bit more of him...I think if things did change with him... I would still keep my house... I suppose, maybe that's just like the history I've had, where you know I bought the house with somebody and then we split up, and you're potentially then going to lose your house... so, I suppose, a bit cynical view of relationships, but I think that's life...

Charlie frames her experiences in the language of personal responsibility—she trusted too easily, was hurt, and so protected her heart by staying single, and investing further in work.

It seems that women in *late fertility* are at a crossroads and in a protracted ambivalent state characterized by disillusion and confusion. Some are still tentatively hoping to become a balanced mother. Clinical Psychologist Gemma says: 'I suppose [pause] yeah maybe have a family or something, yeah and maybe, I can imagine, I suppose, in terms of being a parent I wouldn't really want to work full-time'. But there are also plans to move on with a life that is not centered upon motherhood:

The thought of working full-time for the whole of my working life doesn't appeal, for me it only really appeals when the income is useful...the plan is just having more fun, more social time, more doing stuff, more seeing things, and not worrying about money in terms of doing it

None of the women had concrete alternative plans to the balanced mother ideal. When speaking of the future, financial stability (career, mortgage, pension) was a core concern, which perhaps traps them in jobs that are no longer fulfilling. A couple of women had difficulty speaking of the future at all, indicating perhaps a lack of alternative discourse to direct sensemaking and action. There was a definite sense of failure ('I don't know how you manage, because I don't manage'), sadness ('welling up' at work), and powerlessness. These are unspeakable negative states in postfeminism and neoliberal feminism, and indeed there is little evidence of them speaking up or engaging in collective challenge. While these women may have fit (and appear to still fit) the ideal worker profile through their careers, there remain questions as to whether these women are indeed the 'ideal employees' for their organizations, if their self-esteem, motivation, engagement, and ongoing career aspirations may be affected.

4 | DISCUSSION

A range of social discourses, including neoliberalism, patriarchy, pronatalism, postfeminism, and neoliberal feminism, have created a balanced mother ideal, which most (and especially professional) women are required to navigate. This ideal requires work from women who have attained it—'leaning in' to balance paid work with unpaid care work and remaining positive about it—but also from those still trying to attain it—in terms of synchronizing career-building, relationship-building and maintenance, and the fertile body. In this article, we explore how professional women who are solo-living and childless navigate this ideal over the fertile years.

We suggest that identifications with the balanced mother change over time. In *early fertility* (roughly ages 24–30), the childless professional women we interviewed appeared to largely buy into postfeminist arguments of meritocracy, choice, and sexual liberty (Kumra & Simpson, 2017; Lewis et al., 2017). They were focused on career-building and did not show a strong commitment to relationships or family-building. There was some evidence that they were dealing with the balanced mother ideal via futurity—or hopeful investment in the future (see Rottenberg, 2017)—failing to consider the structural issues that might make this identity difficult to both become and fulfill.

The women we interviewed at *peak fertility* (roughly aged 31–35) were approaching the socially prescribed time window for actualizing the balanced mother ideal. These women showed more recognition of the structural barriers

to both becoming, and being, a balanced mother. Futurity was still evident in their accounts, somewhat assisted by the potential of fertility treatment to extend the fertile window, but this was accompanied by rising ambivalence—something defined by Berlant (2008) as the failure of a relation and the opposite of happiness (cited by Catherine Gill in Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). For some of the women, there was ambivalence over motherhood desire, which was coming up against time-based pressure to decide. For most of the women, there was ambivalence over the attainability of the balanced mother ideal. And yet this 'opposite of happiness' is not welcome in postfeminist and neoliberal feminist times, and so these women look inwardly to resolve the tensions, rather than speaking out or looking for collective challenge.

The women we interviewed in *late fertility* (roughly aged 36–44) can be seen to have reached a crisis point when it comes to the balanced mother ideal—as awareness of their single status and/or disillusion with romantic relationships alongside waning fertility call its feasibility into question. Earlier futurity looked like cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011). Many of these women express dissatisfaction with their jobs, and so there is an element of regret over previous life choices. Some of the women had not yet totally abandoned hope of motherhood, but they were not confident that this would be achieved by active planning—rather it would be a matter of luck/chance. There was little evidence of confident plans for alternative, childless futures, perhaps because there are few alternative narratives for professional women to the balanced mother or childfree 'career woman'. Women in *late fertility* appear stuck in ambivalence, sadness, and powerlessness.

Tonkin (2010) talks of the 'disenfranchized grief' of contingent childlessness—a mourning over not becoming a mother, which cannot be voiced because it is not socially acceptable. It is likely that some of the women we interviewed were experiencing, or would go on to experience such grief. There is also perhaps a disenfranchized grief over failing to actualize a desired social identity (the valorized balanced mother ideal) or of having choice over this identity taken away. This grief is silenced in several ways. Firstly, it is linked to gender, age, and failure in the relationship market. Secondly, negative affect in general is silenced in postfeminism and neoliberal feminism. Thirdly, there are insufficient alternative social narratives to the balanced mother ideal to connect to. This mirrors Orgad's (2017) observation of how ex-career, stay-at-home mums 'struggle to articulate [their] experience outside of and against the 'lean in' confidence/ambition narrative' (Orgad, 2017, p. 179). Finally, specifically in the workplace, there are no work-life narratives and support specifically aimed at this demographic group and issue (unlike working mothers). They thus have little sense of entitlement to support for their unique work-life challenges and dilemmas (Wilkinson et al., 2017). They may also have concerns about a general lack of understanding from others due to their relatively privileged position in terms of seniority and salary.

So what does this mean for organizations? While it may seem that childless professional women are 'ripping' the benefits of being ideal workers, we argue that their situation may in fact be far from ideal—for either themselves or their organizations. The *late-fertility* women we interviewed are unlikely to be the most committed of employees, and we do not know what they will prioritize beyond their fertile years. While some proactive employers are starting to take action to support 'reproductive life cycle' issues that are broader than pregnancy/maternity, with evidence of interest in fertility treatment and menopause, issues associated with contingent childlessness appear to be overlooked—including the difficulties of scheduling career-building, relationship-building, and fertility; and the disenfranchized grief (Tonkin, 2010) of not becoming a mother when this was desired, or at least not 'not desired' (as in the childfree choice). There are likely significant organizational tolls to overlooking the needs of this considerable and seemingly increasing demographic group, in terms of performance, motivation, engagement, and even exit.

Further research is needed to determine the specific workplace interventions that are most appropriate for childless professional women over the life course, but organizations might consider signposting to specialist support communities (such as Gateway Women, n.d¹), raising the issue of childlessness in professional women's networks in certain industries, or setting up bespoke workplace staff network (see the example of Bristol university). This would encourage childlessness to be seen as a topic that can—and should—be discussed in the workplace and make it more legitimate for affected employees to demand support. Organizations and professional bodies could investigate career coaching that includes consideration of family planning and the recognition of factors that are

outside of personal choice/control. Organizations could work on offering time and space for the 'disenfranchized grief' of involuntary childlessness, and help employees work out alternative work-life roles and priorities moving forward. There might be signposting to specialist counseling. There should be opportunities for skill development and finding 'passion' from work over the life course—as seniority does not necessarily equate to job satisfaction. Career coaching/mentoring should thus be available to mid-career and older professional women as well as their younger peers. Finally, flexibility options should be available to all staff, with role models of uptake including childless older women.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

While there is a considerable body of literature exploring the challenges of working motherhood and the neoliberal 'balanced mother' (Rottenberg, 2014a) ideal specifically, much less attention has been paid to the positioning and work-life needs of childless women. In this paper, we explored how solo-living professional women navigate the 'balanced mother ideal' over their fertile years. Our aim in studying solo-living childless professional women was not to reinforce the balanced mother ideal and conspire in perceiving these women as 'failures'. Rather, we sought to explore critically how dominant discourses inform these women's identifications, decisions, and affect.

Using empirical data from biographical narrative interviews with 18 solo-living and childless professional women in the UK, aged 24–44, we offer futurity, ambivalence, and the suppression of negative emotions—part of the logic of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism—as well as the 'disenfranchized grief' of contingent childlessness (Tonkin, 2010) as important concepts for understanding how identifications with the balanced mother ideal change over time, and why childless women can feel 'stuck' in ambivalence in *late fertility*. We believe this is important for broadening the debate about what childless women need in the workplace.

The sample strategy for the study from which this paper developed precluded exploration of the identifications of childless solo-living professional women beyond *late fertility* (mid-40s) but this is a clear avenue for further research. The older women we spoke to were raw, still making sense of their possible 'failure' in attaining the balanced mother ideal. Most of them disliked their jobs, and the prospect of adapting to a more de-gendered ideal neoliberal subject appeared to hold little appeal. It would be interesting to see what they do next. Do they makeover their lives to enjoy a different self-expression and a more multi-focal life (Engler et al., 2011), thus a different way of being a 'balanced woman' or something else? Do they start behaving in a more rebellious or 'aberrant' way? (Littler, 2019; Walters & Harrison, 2014). We encourage research in different occupational contexts and longitudinal approaches. Research might also explore how involuntary childlessness affects organizational outcomes, such as motivation, engagement, and performance—where concerns have traditionally been linked to the working mother demographic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their support, guidance and patience through the publication process.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Gateway Women is a global friendship, support and advocacy network for childless women established in the UK in 2011 by Jody Day, with a social reach of circa 2 million women. <https://gateway-women.com/>.

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How to cite this article: Wilkinson, Krystal, and Julia Rouse. 2022. "Solo-Living and Childless Professional Women: Navigating the 'Balanced Mother Ideal' Over the Fertile Years." *Gender, Work & Organization* 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12900>.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- Participant work/life story
- Probing for more detail on significant elements of story—including jobs, job change decisions, living arrangement changes and decisions, relationships.
- What is important to you in life? Probes.
- What does work mean to you? How important? How much time spent per week? Does this feel right?
- How much time spent on other activities? Does this feel right?
- Benefits and downsides of living alone
- Workgroup dynamics
- Job role/Organisation influence on work-life balance (flexibility, control, mobility, WLB policies)
- Industry/occupation influence on work-life balance
- What are your intentions for the future in terms of work and non-work?