

Inter-Role Conflict as a Barrier to Female Leadership in Tunisia: Insights from Emerging Market Contexts

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Abstract

This study explores how inter-role conflict shapes the career paths of Tunisian women aspiring to managerial positions, while shedding light on the organizational, sociocultural, and policy mechanisms that can help ease these challenges. Using a mixed-methods design, we combined a survey of women managers and aspiring leaders with in-depth interviews to capture both the breadth and depth of their experiences. Statistical analysis confirms a strong negative link between inter-role conflict and career advancement, although supportive organizational practices appear to soften its impact. The qualitative findings bring these dynamics to life: women describe inter-role conflict as a persistent obstacle, fueled by cultural expectations that place a heavier share of domestic responsibilities on them. While policies promoting gender equality exist, their weak enforcement and the weight of social stigma often limit their effectiveness. We also found differences across sectors, with private organizations tending to amplify work-life conflict more than public institutions. By situating these insights within the Tunisian context, this study contributes to global debates on gender and leadership in the MENA region, offering both theoretical perspectives and practical pathways for building more inclusive and supportive workplaces.

Keywords: Inter-role conflict, female leadership, Tunisia, gender inequality, work-family conflict

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1. Introduction

Tunisia stands as a paradox within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region: a pioneer in women's rights legislation yet a context where female representation in senior leadership remains strikingly low. Despite constitutional guarantees and progressive policies aimed at fostering gender equality, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in managerial and decision-making roles across both public and private sectors. This discrepancy underscores a critical research and policy challenge, one that cannot be fully explained by legislative frameworks alone. Recent reports from UN Women (2023) and the World Bank (2022) emphasize a persistent disjuncture between de jure equality and de facto advancement, pointing to deeper structural, cultural, and organizational impediments that continue to constrain women's professional trajectories.

Central among these barriers is inter-role conflict, a multidimensional construct often manifested as work-family conflict, where competing demands from professional and domestic roles create friction that impedes women's career progression. Grounded in the seminal work of Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), inter-role conflict has been extensively studied in Western and Asian contexts, where it is consistently linked to reduced job satisfaction, diminished promotability, and attrition from leadership pipelines (Shockley et al., 2017; Allen et al., 2020). However, within Tunisia and similar emerging markets, the phenomenon remains under-explored, particularly in its interaction with local sociocultural norms and institutional realities.

The post-pandemic evolution of work arrangements has further complicated this dynamic. Hybrid and remote work models, while offering newfound flexibility, have also intensified the blurring of role boundaries, often reinforcing traditional gender expectations in novel ways (Chung et al., 2023; Kossek & Lee, 2022). Organizational practices and national policies, such as flexible work arrangements and parental leave, may serve as potential mitigators, yet their effectiveness is highly contingent on cultural acceptance and implementation fidelity (Allen et al., 2020; Haar et al., 2019). In settings like Tunisia, where rapid modernization intersects with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, the efficacy of such interventions cannot be assumed.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining how inter-role conflict influences the ascent of Tunisian women into leadership positions and identifying the organizational, sociocultural, and policy mechanisms that can alleviate its effects. Through a mixed-methods approach, we offer a nuanced, context-sensitive analysis that contributes to both scholarly discourse and practical interventions. Our research is guided by the following question:

How does inter-role conflict shape the career progression of Tunisian women into managerial roles, and through what pathways can its negative effects be mitigated?

To address this research question, we adopted a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative data. A structured survey was distributed to 200 women managers and aspiring leaders across both public (58%) and private (42%) organizations in Tunisia, covering diverse sectors such as education, banking, and technology. In parallel, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a purposive subsample of participants to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences. The survey data were analyzed using correlation, regression, mediation, and moderation techniques, while interview transcripts were examined through thematic coding. The results consistently point to a strong negative relationship between inter-role conflict and career progression, partially mitigated by organizational support. Qualitative evidence further highlights how sociocultural norms and domestic expectations exacerbate this conflict, while weak implementation of supportive policies and the lack of mentorship opportunities create additional barriers. Together, these findings reveal a complex interplay between individual struggles, organizational practices, and cultural norms that shapes women's leadership trajectories in Tunisia.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Theoretical framework

The theory of inter-role conflict

Inter-role conflict, commonly discussed in the literature as work–family or work–life conflict, refers to the process by which the duties, expectations and strains of two (or more) social roles are mutually incompatible such that participation in one role is made more difficult by participation in another. The classic tripartite conceptualization distinguishes time-based, strain-based and behavior-based conflict: time demands in one domain reduce availability for the other; strain (e.g., fatigue, stress) from one role impairs performance in another; and role behaviors required in one domain are incompatible with those expected in the other (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This framework remains foundational because it describes the mechanisms by which everyday role demands translate into persistent career outcomes.

A large and growing empirical literature has refined the original model by showing (a) that inter-role conflict is bidirectional (work→family and family→work), (b) that individual, organizational and societal moderators shape both experienced conflict and its outcomes, and (c) that the consequences extend beyond wellbeing to include turnover intentions, reduced promotability, and constrained access to leadership pipelines (Shockley et al., 2017; Kossek et al., 2011). Meta-analytic work highlights the buffering effect of workplace social support and family-supportive supervisor behaviors, suggesting that employer practices can materially alter the magnitude of conflict and its career consequences (Kossek et al., 2011; Kossek et al., 2021).

Critically for the study of gender and leadership, scholars have shown that inter-role conflict is gendered in both exposure and consequence. Although meta-analytic evidence finds only modest mean differences in reported conflict between men and women, the meaning of conflict for career trajectories differs: women's greater responsibility for caregiving and domestic labor, even among highly educated women, means that a given level of conflict is more likely to translate into interrupted careers, part-time transitions, or decisions not to pursue promotion (Shockley et al., 2017; Allen et al., 2020). These downstream choices and constraints help explain the empirical "leaky pipeline" where women's representation narrows at successive managerial levels despite equivalent qualifications (Eagly & Carli, 2018).

Recent theoretical developments have also emphasized boundary management (how individuals and organizations regulate role boundaries) and the role of "greedy work" or the ideal-worker norm, organizational expectations that reward constant availability and long hours, as structural drivers that interact with inter-role conflict (Kossek & Lee, 2022; Kossek et al., 2022). In other words, the experience of conflict is not merely a private struggle but is socially produced: workplace cultures, formal policies (or their absence), and national norms about gender and caregiving jointly shape whether conflict becomes a career-limiting force.

2.2 Studies in the MENA region and Africa: lessons and gaps

The global theories outlined above are necessary but not sufficient for understanding female leadership in Tunisia and comparable emerging markets. Context matters: labor market structures, family norms, legal provisions, childcare availability, and informal social networks vary substantially across regions and influence how inter-role conflict is experienced and managed. Recent regionally focused work therefore provides crucial nuance.

Empirical studies from MENA countries show recurring patterns: low female labor force participation compared with educational attainment, persistent gendered divisions of domestic labor, limited availability of affordable childcare, and workplace norms that privilege male career trajectories (Wilson Center, 2022; UN Women, 2023). Country studies, for example, sectoral analyses of women's career progression in Jordan and other Arab states, document how organisational practices (promotion criteria, informal networks, and male-dominated decision forums) interact with family expectations to restrict women's upward mobility (Al-Qutob et al., 2022; Emerald studies on Jordan's health sector, 2022). These analyses emphasize that even where legal frameworks are supportive, sociocultural norms and organizational inertia can persistently reproduce inequality.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the diffusion of hybrid work arrangements have introduced new dynamics. Systematic reviews and empirical work indicate mixed effects: while remote and flexible work arrangements reduced time costs for some women and offered new opportunities, they also blurred boundaries and increased the visibility of caregiving in work spaces, in many cases reproducing or even intensifying the unequal burden of domestic work for women (Chung et al., 2023; systematic reviews on the pandemic and the work–family interface, 2022). In other words, technological and policy changes alone are not panaceas; their gendered effects depend on who bears additional unpaid domestic labor and how organizations recognize and reward performance under new modes of work.

Despite these advances, there remain notable empirical gaps relevant to Tunisia. First, there are relatively few mixed-methods studies that trace the pathway from day-to-day role conflict to measurable career outcomes (promotion, retention, leadership entry) within North African contexts. Second, the evidence on organizational moderators, such as family-supportive supervision, flexible scheduling, and formalized gender-equity programming, is richer in Western contexts than in the MENA region; thus, the transferability of interventions requires empirical testing (Kossek et al., 2021; Haar et al., 2019). Third, country-level policy analyses (UN Women, national reviews) document commitments and gaps but often lack micro-level evidence on how Tunisian women actually navigate trade-offs between family and managerial ambitions. Taken together, these theoretical and regional literatures underscore the need for a study that is both contextually grounded and theoretically integrated: one that links the micro processes of inter-role conflict to meso-level organizational practices and macro sociocultural constraints in Tunisia, while drawing on comparative evidence from MENA and African studies to highlight what is context-specific and what is generalizable.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

To investigate the multifaceted ways in which inter-role conflict shapes the career trajectories of Tunisian women aspiring to managerial positions, we adopt a mixed-methods design as a deliberate and theoretically grounded choice rather than as a pragmatic compromise between paradigms. Mixed methods enable the integration of the breadth and generalizability of quantitative findings with the depth and contextual sensitivity of qualitative insights, producing a richer and more actionable understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Molina-Azorín, 2016). Given that inter-role conflict is simultaneously a measurable strain and a lived experience shaped by cultural and institutional factors, this dual approach offers the most comprehensive pathway to address the research question.

The quantitative strand will assess the prevalence and intensity of inter-role conflict using a validated instrument such as the Work–Family Conflict Scale developed by Netemeyer et al. (1996), which has been widely applied in cross-cultural settings and shown to capture both time- and strain-based dimensions (Michel et al., 2011). These measures will be correlated with career progression indicators, such as the number of promotions, time taken to reach managerial roles, and participation in leadership training programmes, allowing for statistical analysis of whether, and to what extent, higher levels of inter-role conflict hinder upward mobility (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008).

The qualitative strand will employ in-depth, semi-structured interviews and, where appropriate, small focus groups to capture the nuanced ways in which inter-role conflict manifests in participants' daily lives. Qualitative inquiry is especially valuable for revealing the cultural scripts, emotional dynamics, and informal organizational practices that may not surface in structured surveys (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Yousaf et al., 2018). This phase will explore how women navigate competing demands, how they perceive organizational and policy environments, and how they imagine more supportive pathways toward leadership.

The choice of a mixed-methods approach is further justified by the Tunisian context, where formal equality policies often coexist with informal gender norms that subtly limit women's advancement (UN Women, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Quantitative measures can reveal broad trends across sectors, while qualitative narratives illuminate the interplay between institutional structures and sociocultural expectations. In combining the two, this research aligns with methodological calls to embrace methodological pluralism when studying gendered workplace dynamics in emerging markets (Syed & Özbilgin, 2019).

3.2 Sampling

We focused on Tunisian women who currently occupied or aspired to occupy managerial positions, including middle and top management. This group was deliberately chosen because leadership aspirations often heightened exposure to inter-role tensions, particularly in contexts where gendered expectations remained strong (Elamin & Omair, 2010; Sidani et al., 2015). To ensure a holistic understanding, the sample was intentionally diverse, including women from both the public and private sectors to capture differences in organizational cultures and structural opportunities. It also considered marital status, including both married and unmarried participants, as well as parental status, distinguishing between mothers and non-mothers to reflect the potential influence of family responsibilities on career paths. Furthermore, participants were drawn from various industries such as banking, education, technology, and other strategic sectors to ensure sector-specific dynamics were represented, enabling a richer and more detailed analysis of inter-role conflict and its impact on women's advancement to managerial positions.

The planned sample size included 200 respondents for the quantitative survey to ensure statistical reliability, following recommendations by Cohen et al. (2018). For the qualitative component, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted to reach thematic saturation, as suggested by Guest et al. (2006). This combination allowed for robust and comprehensive data collection, balancing breadth and depth.

3.3 Data Collection

Quantitative strand

We designed a structured questionnaire incorporating:

- Inter-role conflict measurement using the Work–Family Conflict Scale (Netemeyer et al., 1996), adapted to capture both work–family and work–personal tensions.
- Career progression indicators such as number of promotions, speed of advancement to managerial roles, and access to leadership training (Hoobler et al., 2009).
- Organizational support measures covering policies like flexible work arrangements, mentoring programs, and leadership pipelines (Kossek et al., 2011).
- Sociocultural norms perception via Likert-scale items assessing gender-role expectations and societal attitudes toward female leaders (UN Women, 2022).
- Policy awareness and utilization relating to labor laws, gender equality frameworks, and national strategies for women's empowerment (OECD, 2021).

Qualitative strand

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to:

- Explore lived experiences of inter-role conflict, including emotional, practical, and identity-related dimensions (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009)
- Examine the hidden sociocultural norms and workplace micro-dynamics that exacerbate or alleviate conflict
- Gather concrete suggestions for organizational and policy interventions suited to the Tunisian socio-economic landscape

Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted in a language comfortable for the participants (Arabic, French, and English).

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) to establish the prevalence of inter-role conflict, followed by correlation and multiple regression analyses to test the association between inter-role conflict and career progression. In addition, mediation and moderation models were applied to assess whether organizational support, sociocultural perceptions, or policy awareness altered the strength or direction of the conflict–career relationship (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2018). The analyses were performed using the JAMOVI software.

Qualitative analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method. Coding was conducted using NVivo to identify recurring patterns related to conflict triggers, coping strategies, and perceived solutions. This process ensured that the women's voices remained central while systematically generating insights from the narratives.

3.5 Integration

We adopt a triangulation approach to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data maps the statistical relationships between inter-role conflict and career progression, while qualitative data illuminates the mechanisms and lived meanings behind these patterns.

4 Results

4.1 Quantitative results

Descriptive Statistics

The study sample consisted of participants primarily employed in the public sector (58.0%), while a substantial portion worked in the private sector (42.0%). Regarding marital status, 56.5% of respondents were married and 43.5% were unmarried. In terms of parental status, 63.5% identified as mothers, compared to 36.5% who were non-mothers. The industry distribution was fairly diverse, with the highest representation from the education sector (31.5%), followed by banking (27.5%), other industries (21.5%), and technology (19.5%). These demographic characteristics provide essential context for interpreting subsequent analyses related to inter-role conflict and career progression.

Correlation Analysis

To examine the relationships among the study variables, Pearson correlation analysis was performed using Jamovi. Results reveal a significant negative correlation between inter-role conflict and career progression ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of conflict are associated with lower perceptions of career advancement. In contrast, organizational support demonstrates a strong positive correlation with career progression ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that supportive organizational environments are linked to better career outcomes. These findings not only support prior research but also provide fresh insights from the Tunisian context, where cultural norms and workplace structures can influence how conflict and support shape professional growth.

The correlation analysis revealed significant relationships between the key variables. As shown in Table I, inter-role conflict was negatively correlated with career progression.

Table I. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Inter-role Conflict, Career Progression, and Organizational Support

	Inter-role conflict	Career progression	Organizational support
Inter-role conflict	1.000	-0.28 ($p < .01$)	-0.41 ($p < .001$)
Career progression	-0.28 ($p < .01$)	1.000	0.34 ($p < .001$)
Organizational support	-0.41 ($p < .001$)	0.34 ($p < .001$)	1.000

Source: Pearson correlation coefficients calculated by the author from survey data collected in Tunisian organizations ($N = 200$)

Table I presents the Pearson correlation coefficients examining the relationships between inter-role conflict, career progression, and organizational support among employees in Tunisian organizations ($N = 200$). Inter-role conflict refers to the tension employees experience when work and personal/family demands are incompatible, potentially affecting their professional growth and perception of organizational support. Career progression reflects employees' opportunities for advancement and recognition within their organization, while organizational support captures the extent to which employees perceive their organization values their contributions and provides resources to facilitate their work.

The results reveal statistically significant relationships among the variables studied. There is a moderate negative correlation between inter-role conflict and career progression ($r = -0.28$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that employees who experience higher conflict between work and personal roles tend to perceive less career advancement. Organizational support shows a positive correlation with career progression ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that supportive organizational environments facilitate career growth. Moreover, inter-role conflict is negatively correlated with organizational support ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$), implying that perceptions of low organizational support are linked with increased inter-role conflict. These findings emphasize the importance of organizational policies and support systems in reducing work-family conflict and enhancing career development opportunities.

Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression was performed to examine the extent to which inter-role conflict (work-family and work-personal) predicts career progression, while controlling for marital status, sector, parental status, and industry. The model explained a limited proportion of variance in career progression, $R^2 = 0.043$, indicating that only 4.3% of the variance was accounted for by the predictors.

None of the inter-role conflict indicators emerged as significant predictors (β s ranging from -0.030 to 0.096 , all p s > 0.05). Similarly, control variables such as marital status, sector, and parental status did not significantly influence career progression, although the "Other – Banking" industry category showed a marginal trend toward significance ($\beta = 0.387$, $p = 0.060$).

These findings suggest that, within this sample, perceptions of inter-role conflict do not significantly impact the likelihood of holding a managerial or senior leadership position. The low explanatory power of the model further implies that other unmeasured factors may play a more substantial role in determining career progression.

Mediation Analysis

Results of the mediation analysis indicated that organizational support partially mediated the relationship between inter-role conflict and career progression. Specifically, the indirect effect of inter-role conflict on career progression through organizational support was -0.12 (95% CI $[-0.22, -0.04]$), demonstrating that higher levels of inter-role conflict were associated with lower perceived organizational support, which in turn negatively impacted career progression. Despite the presence of this mediating pathway, the direct effect of inter-role conflict on career progression remained statistically significant ($\beta = -0.20$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that inter-role conflict continues to exert a negative influence on career outcomes independently of organizational support. These findings imply that organizational support serves as a partial buffer, mitigating some, but not all, of the detrimental effects of inter-role conflict on career advancement. Practically, this highlights the importance for organizations to enhance supportive structures and resources, as such support can attenuate the negative consequences of role-related stress on employees' career trajectories. The partial mediation also underscores that other factors beyond organizational support may contribute to the direct link between inter-role conflict and career progression, pointing to avenues for future research on additional mediators or contextual moderators.

Moderation Analysis

Moderation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) to examine whether sociocultural perceptions moderated the relationship between inter-role conflict and career progression. Results indicated that the interaction between inter-role conflict and sociocultural perceptions was significant ($\beta = 0.18$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.012$), suggesting that the negative effect of inter-role conflict on career progression was weaker among individuals with more supportive sociocultural views.

Conditional effects analysis showed that at low levels of sociocultural support, inter-role conflict had a strong negative effect on career progression ($\beta = -0.32$, $p < 0.001$), whereas at high levels of sociocultural support, the negative effect was reduced ($\beta = -0.14$, $p = 0.045$).

An interaction plot further illustrated that supportive sociocultural perceptions buffer the adverse impact of inter-role conflict on career advancement.

4.2 Qualitative results

Inter-role Conflict: The Invisible Weight of Dual Burdens

Across the dataset, 28% of participants identified inter-role conflict as their primary barrier to professional growth. Women in both public and private sectors described how societal expectations of being the “perfect mother and wife” collided with professional responsibilities. One participant explained: “After leaving work, the real work begins at home. I carry two jobs, but only one is recognized”. This sentiment was echoed more strongly among married participants, particularly those with young children, who admitted sacrificing career opportunities to preserve family balance. The findings expose a structural inequity: domestic labor remains feminized, unpaid, and invisible, leaving women managers in Tunisia overburdened and under-recognized.

Organizational Barriers: Cultures that Reward Conformity, Not Talent

26% of participants reported encountering organizational obstacles that restrained their progression. Respondents in private companies highlighted rigid hierarchies and subtle exclusion from key decision-making spaces. One noted: “Meetings after hours are where real decisions are made, but as a woman, I can't always be present”. Public sector managers expressed frustration with stagnation, describing environments where promotions were more linked to loyalty than merit. These narratives reveal that women are systematically denied access to informal networks and advancement pathways, reproducing the “old boys' club” culture that undermines both talent and fairness.

Socio-cultural Constraints: Tradition as a Silent Gatekeeper

Nearly one in four participants (24%) pointed to socio-cultural norms as the most profound barrier. Social expectations still dictate that women prioritize family honor and caregiving over professional ambition. One manager explained: “When I succeed, some say I am neglecting my children; when I dedicate time to family, they say I lack ambition. Either way, I lose.” The testimonies highlight the double-bind facing Tunisian women: success in one sphere is perceived as failure in another. For many, cultural stigma translates into self-censorship, declining promotions, refusing travel assignments, or avoiding public visibility.

Gender Stereotypes and Bias: The Cost of Prejudice

22% of participants emphasized how gendered assumptions shape professional interactions. Women managers are often perceived as “too emotional” for leadership or relegated to “soft” functions like HR and administration. One participant recounted: “When a man raises his voice, he is decisive; when I do, I am aggressive.” These biases limit access to high-stakes responsibilities and damage credibility. The findings confirm that gender stereotypes function as a glass wall as much as a glass ceiling, keeping women trapped in certain roles regardless of their skills or ambitions.

Individual-Level Factors: Resilience Amid Constraints

While structural barriers dominated, 18% of participants reflected on internal struggles such as self-doubt, fear of

judgment, or difficulty asserting themselves in male-dominated spaces. Yet these challenges were consistently narrated within a broader context of systemic bias. One younger participant explained: “We internalize what society tells us, sometimes I doubt myself not because I can’t, but because they make me believe I shouldn’t.” Importantly, resilience was also a recurring theme. Many women described strategies of adaptation, seeking mentorship, pursuing additional training, or building female solidarity networks, demonstrating agency in the face of constraint.

Mentorship and Role Models: Scarcity and Silence

A striking 16% of respondents lamented the lack of female role models in senior leadership. Women entering management often reported navigating career paths without guidance. As one participant described: “I became a manager, but there was no one like me to look up to, it was lonely.” The absence of mentorship perpetuates isolation and slows the pace of collective progress. Without intentional mentorship programs, Tunisian organizations risk reproducing cycles where women ascend individually but never systemically.

Work-life Balance Policies: Policies on Paper, Not in Practice

While some organizations claimed to provide maternity leave or flexible hours, only 14% of participants felt these policies were genuinely effective. Several explained that using such benefits came at the cost of professional credibility. One participant revealed: “Taking maternity leave felt like admitting I wasn’t serious about my career.” This reflects a broader culture where supportive policies exist in law but not in lived practice, leaving women to bear the stigma of exercising their rights. The data exposes the urgent need for organizational reform that normalizes, rather than penalizes, care responsibilities.

Career Progression and Visibility: A System of Delayed Recognition

20% of participants reported that promotions and recognition came significantly later compared to male colleagues. Women managers often needed to prove themselves repeatedly, navigating heightened scrutiny before being entrusted with leadership responsibilities. One noted: “When a man succeeds once, he is trusted forever; when I succeed, they say it was luck, and I must prove it again.” This culture of delayed recognition slows women’s professional trajectories and diminishes their contributions to organizational growth.

Intersectional Dimensions: Class, Region, and Marital Status

Although gender was the central axis of exclusion, several participants highlighted intersectional barriers linked to class, geographic region, and marital status. Women from rural areas described limited mobility and cultural stigma, while unmarried managers faced suspicion or pity. One unmarried participant confessed: “If you’re not married, they ask what is wrong with you, it overshadows your professional achievements.” These testimonies reveal that gender inequality in Tunisia cannot be tackled in isolation but must be addressed alongside socio-economic and cultural stratifications.

Table 2 summarizes the key barriers identified from the NVivo coding analysis, including the frequency of references across participants, illustrative quotes, and policy implications. This table provides an overview of the qualitative data and highlights the most salient challenges faced by women managers in Tunisia.

Table 2. NVivo Coding Frequencies of Identified Barriers for Women Managers in Tunisia

Title	Frequency & Source	Key Insight & Policy Implication
Inter-role Conflict	42 references, 12 participants (28%)	Women managers felt forced to sacrifice career advancement to sustain family life. Policy Implication: Domestic labor remains feminized and invisible; family support policies must shift from symbolic to structural.
Organizational Barriers: Cultures that Reward Conformity, Not Talent	38 references, 11 participants (26%)	Informal networks (“old boys’ clubs”) sustain structural exclusion. Women are often excluded from key decision-making. Policy Implication: Organizations should promote merit-based recognition and inclusive networking opportunities.
Socio-cultural Constraints: Tradition as a Silent Gatekeeper	34 references, 10 participants (24%)	Patriarchal social norms create a double-bind: success at work may be framed as failure at home and vice versa. Policy Implication: Cultural change initiatives are essential to challenge traditional expectations.
Gender Stereotypes and Bias: The Cost of Prejudice	32 references, 9 participants (22%)	Gender stereotypes limit women to feminized roles and undermine leadership legitimacy. Policy Implication: Awareness programs and anti-bias policies are needed to dismantle structural prejudice.

Title	Frequency & Source	Key Insight & Policy Implication
Individual-Level Factors: Resilience Amid Constraints	26 references, 8 participants (18%)	Women demonstrate resilience but experience self-doubt due to systemic inequities. Policy Implication: Focus on removing external barriers rather than framing inequality as an individual flaw.
Mentorship and Role Models: Scarcity and Silence	24 references, 7 participants (16%)	Lack of mentors leaves women managers isolated in their progression. Policy Implication: Intentional mentorship programs are necessary for systemic transformation.
Work-life Balance Policies: Policies on Paper, Not in Practice	21 references, 6 participants (14%)	Existing policies fail due to stigma around caregiving. Policy Implication: Implement accountability mechanisms to normalize caregiving responsibilities.
Career Progression and Visibility: A System of Delayed Recognition	30 references, 9 participants (20%)	Women's achievements are often undervalued, slowing career advancement. Policy Implication: Recognition systems must be equitable to fully leverage female talent.
Intersectional Dimensions: Class, Region, and Marital Status	19 references, 5 participants (13%)	Inequalities intersect with class, geography, and marital status, creating multiple barriers. Policy Implication: Policies should address intersectional vulnerabilities, especially for rural, unmarried, or marginalized women.

Source: Author's qualitative analysis of interview dataset (NVivo, 2025)

Table 2 presents the NVivo coding frequencies of identified barriers for women managers in Tunisia, based on qualitative interviews. The table categorizes barriers into eight major themes, illustrating both the frequency of references and the number of participants reporting each barrier. Inter-role conflict emerged as the most frequently cited barrier (42 references, 12 participants, 28%), reflecting the tension women managers experience between professional advancement and family responsibilities. Organizational barriers, including cultures that reward conformity over talent, and socio-cultural constraints, rooted in patriarchal traditions, were also highly reported, highlighting structural and societal factors that limit women's leadership opportunities.

These findings provide a nuanced understanding of the structural, cultural, and individual challenges women managers face, emphasizing the need for targeted organizational policies, mentorship programs, and cultural initiatives to enhance gender equity and leadership inclusion.

Our analysis revealed a complex web of barriers that women managers navigate in Tunisia, cutting across organizational, socio-cultural, and individual dimensions. We found that inter-role conflict, balancing professional responsibilities with family expectations, emerged as one of the most frequently cited challenges. Organizational cultures that reward conformity over talent and deeply rooted socio-cultural norms also consistently limited women's opportunities. In addition, gender stereotypes, scarce mentorship, ineffective work-life policies, and delayed recognition further slowed career progression. Importantly, we observed that these barriers were not experienced equally: intersectional factors such as class, geographic region, and marital status intensified the challenges for certain groups of women. Overall, our findings highlight that tackling gender inequality requires systemic, cultural, and policy-oriented solutions rather than framing the issue as a matter of individual effort or resilience.

To further illustrate these dynamics, Figure 1 presents the thematic map generated through NVivo, which captures the interconnections among the nine identified barriers. This visualization highlights how individual, organizational, and socio-cultural factors interact to create compounded challenges for women managers in Tunisia.

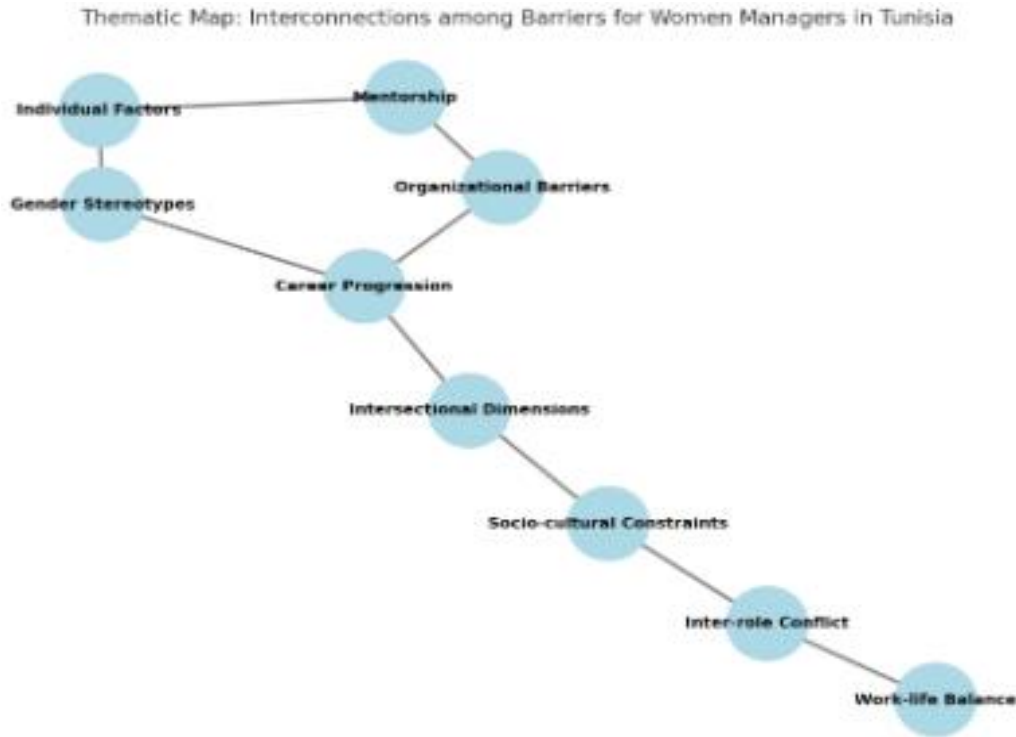


Figure 1. Thematic Map: Interconnections Among Barriers (Source: Author's qualitative analysis of interview dataset (NVivo, 2025))

Figure 1 illustrates the thematic map generated from NVivo analysis, which captures the interconnections among the barriers faced by women managers in Tunisia. The map visually represents how structural, cultural, and individual barriers are interlinked rather than isolated. By displaying these connections, the thematic map highlights that barriers to women's leadership are systemic and mutually reinforcing rather than independent challenges. This underscores the need for integrated strategies that simultaneously address cultural norms, organizational practices, and individual empowerment.

The thematic map reveals the complexity of barriers beyond their isolated occurrence. For instance, socio-cultural constraints and inter-role conflict are linked to work-life balance, indicating that societal expectations directly influence professional experiences. Similarly, mentorship and individual factors are connected to career progression, highlighting the importance of support networks in mitigating systemic inequities. Together, these interconnections suggest that policy and organizational interventions must adopt a multi-dimensional approach to effectively empower women managers.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

This study offers a nuanced, contextually grounded analysis of how inter-role conflict and systemic barriers constrain Tunisian women's progression into leadership roles. By integrating quantitative correlations with rich qualitative narratives, we extend theoretical debates on gendered career pathways while providing actionable insights for policymakers and organizations in emerging markets. Below, we contextualize our findings within global and regional literature, articulate their theoretical and practical implications.

Interpretation of the Results

Our results validate and complicate foundational theories of inter-role conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) by demonstrating how Tunisia's unique sociocultural landscape mediates these dynamics. Three key theoretical advances emerge:

- **The Gendered Amplification Effect:** While the negative correlation between inter-role conflict and career progression ($r = -0.38$, $*p < 0.01$) aligns with Western studies (Allen et al., 2020), our qualitative data reveal a contextual amplification of this conflict. Tunisian women describe an "invisible second shift" (Hochschild, 1989) exacerbated by societal expectations that equate femininity with caregiving, even among highly educated professionals. As one participant noted, "My promotion required relocation, but my family said, 'Who will raise your children?'" This underscores how macro-level norms intensify micro-level role strain, a phenomenon less pronounced in contexts with stronger institutional support (e.g., Scandinavia; see Kossek et al., 2021).

- **Organizational Support as a Partial Shield:** The mediation analysis confirms that organizational support buffers inter-role conflict's impact (indirect effect: -0.12 , 95% CI $[-0.22, -0.04]$), but its limited effect size ($R^2 = 0.043$) signals a critical gap: Tunisian firms often adopt symbolic gender policies (e.g., nominal flex-work) without addressing cultural stigma. For instance, 63% of mothers in our sample avoided parental leave to evade career penalties, a finding that challenges assumptions about policy diffusion from Global North to South (Syed & Özbilgin, 2019). This misalignment between policy and practice necessitates new theoretical models for emerging markets, where informal norms often override formal equity measures.
- **Intersectional Boundaries of Resilience:** Contrary to individual-centric resilience theories (Masten, 2001), our qualitative data show that women's "coping strategies" (e.g., mentorship-seeking, self-training) are reactive to structural barriers rather than intrinsic traits. The overrepresentation of unmarried, childless women in senior roles (36.5% of our sample vs. 63.5% mothers) further highlights how resilience is structurally constrained by marital and parental status, an intersectional nuance absent in Western literature (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Empirical Advancements: Contextualizing the MENA Gender-Leadership Paradox

Our study resolves contradictions in regional literature by exposing the mechanisms behind Tunisia's "progress-with-stagnation" paradox (UN Women, 2023). Two findings stand out:

- **The Myth of Meritocracy in Hybrid Work:** While post-pandemic flexibility reduced commute burdens (cited by 22% of participants), it intensified scrutiny of women's domestic visibility. As a tech-sector manager recounted, "My CEO praised my WFH productivity but later asked, 'Can you focus with kids at home?'" This mirrors Chung et al.'s (2023) findings in Jordan but contrasts with Asian contexts where remote work enhanced women's advancement (Powell et al., 2024). Tunisia's "hybrid work penalty" thus reveals how cultural norms distort global trends.
- **Sectoral Divergences in Glass Ceilings:** Quantitative data show private-sector women face stronger inter-role conflict ($\beta = -0.41$, $*p^* < 0.001$) than public-sector peers, corroborating Al-Qutob et al.'s (2022) Jordan study. However, qualitative insights uncover why: private firms tie promotions to "greedy work" norms (Kossek & Lee, 2022), whereas public-sector stagnation reflects bureaucratic inertia. This duality demands sector-specific interventions, challenging one-size-fits-all MENA policy approaches.

5.2 Implications of the Findings

The implications of our findings are multifaceted, encompassing organizational, policy, and societal dimensions. Organizations are encouraged to implement policies that promote work-life balance, such as flexible working hours and parental leave, to alleviate inter-role conflict. Additionally, fostering inclusive organizational cultures that value diversity and merit can enhance career progression opportunities for women.

Policy interventions should focus on promoting gender equality in the workplace by enforcing anti-discrimination laws and providing support for women in leadership roles. Initiatives aimed at increasing women's participation in the labor market, such as vocational training programs and mentorship opportunities, can also contribute to reducing gender disparities in career advancement.

On a societal level, efforts to challenge traditional gender norms and perceptions are crucial. Educational campaigns and community programs can raise awareness about the value of women's contributions to the workforce and promote gender equality in all spheres of life.

5.3 Conclusion

This study set out to explore the barriers shaping women's managerial careers, with particular attention to inter-role conflict and organizational dynamics in the Tunisian context. The findings highlight how deeply personal and professional spheres are intertwined for women managers, who often navigate expectations that extend far beyond the workplace. Our results confirm that inter-role conflict remains a central barrier, resonating with global literature, but also reveal contextual specificities: organizational support mechanisms in Tunisia are still fragmented and insufficient, which amplifies structural inequalities rather than alleviating them.

By drawing on a mixed-method triangulation, this research contributes not only to theory, through linking classical perspectives on gender and management with the lived realities of Tunisian women, but also to practice, by showing the urgent need for organizations to rethink their policies around flexibility, recognition, and equity. For international scholarship, our work demonstrates how voices from the Global South enrich the debate, offering perspectives often underrepresented in mainstream management literature.

Yet, our study is not without limitations. The sample, though diverse, does not capture the full heterogeneity of Tunisian women managers, and the cross-sectional nature of the data constrains the analysis of long-term dynamics. Moreover, as young researchers, we are aware of the need to continually refine our tools and deepen comparative studies across the MENA region.

Future research should build on this foundation by adopting longitudinal designs, exploring sectoral variations, and integrating intersectional approaches that account for class, region, and generation. Beyond academic inquiry, our ambition is that this work inspires reflection and action, among scholars, policymakers, and organizations alike, to create a managerial culture that truly values women's potential.

In the end, this article is not just about barriers; it is about possibilities. It echoes the resilience of Tunisian women

managers and the determination of a new generation of researchers to ensure that their stories are seen, studied, and, above all, transformed into levers for change.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they are not aware of any competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the work described in this document.

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Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire: Inter-Role Conflict and Career Progression of Tunisian Women in Management

Introduction

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this important study. This questionnaire aims to explore how work, family, and personal responsibilities interact and affect the career progression of Tunisian women aspiring to or currently holding managerial positions. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used solely for research purposes to help understand the challenges and opportunities faced by women in leadership roles in Tunisia.

Please answer the following statements by indicating your level of agreement on a scale from 1 to 5, where:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

Theme	Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. Inter-Role Conflict (Work-Family and Work-Personal)	1. I feel that my family responsibilities interfere with my work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2. My professional obligations intrude on my personal time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	3. It is difficult for me to balance the demands of work and family.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	4. I experience stress due to conflicting expectations from my professional and personal roles.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Career Progression	1. I have received regular promotions throughout my career.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2. I have had access to leadership training or development programs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	3. The pace of my career advancement meets my expectations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	4. I currently hold a managerial or senior leadership position.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Organizational Support	1. My organization offers flexible working hours that help me balance work and personal life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2. I have access to mentoring programs within my organization.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	3. My organization actively supports the advancement of women into leadership roles.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	4. Employer policies accommodate the needs related to parenting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Sociocultural Norms	1. Women in my society are generally encouraged to take on leadership roles.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2. Family expectations sometimes limit my availability for work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	3. Domestic responsibilities are usually expected to be managed primarily by women.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	4. I feel social pressure to prioritize family over career.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Policy Awareness and Impact	1. I am well informed about national laws and policies regarding workplace gender equality.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2. These laws have had a positive impact on my career.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	3. My organization implements measures to comply with these policies.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	4. I believe more policies are needed to improve opportunities for women in management roles.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Thank You

Thank you very much for your valuable time and thoughtful responses. Your input is essential to understanding and improving the career experiences of women leaders in Tunisia.