Identifying Factors Influencing Career Disengagement in Highly Educated Women

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A R t i c l e   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to explore the underlying factors that contribute to career disengagement among highly educated women in South Africa.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed to investigate the lived experiences of 24 highly educated women who had voluntarily disengaged from their professional careers. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and met the criteria of holding at least a postgraduate qualification and having exited or reduced participation in formal employment. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 and 70 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software. Thematic analysis was conducted through an inductive coding process, encompassing open, axial, and selective coding stages. The study followed the principle of theoretical saturation, and credibility was ensured through member checking and peer debriefing.

Findings: Thematic analysis revealed four main themes influencing career disengagement: structural and institutional barriers, sociocultural expectations and pressures, psychological and emotional burnout, and life re-prioritization and autonomy. Subthemes included inflexible work arrangements, gendered organizational cultures, internalized role conflict, emotional exhaustion, and the pursuit of meaningful, autonomous lifestyles. Participants frequently described systemic inequities, social judgment, and identity-related struggles as contributing factors. For many, disengagement was not solely a response to adverse conditions but a deliberate decision to prioritize well-being, autonomy, and personal fulfillment.

Conclusion: Career disengagement among highly educated women is shaped by a complex interplay of systemic, cultural, and psychological factors. These findings highlight the need for organizational and societal reforms to foster inclusive, flexible, and meaningful career pathways for women.

Keywords: Career disengagement; highly educated women; qualitative research; gendered expectations; workplace flexibility; emotional burnout

1. Introduction

Despite growing advancements in educational access and professional attainment, highly educated women continue to encounter systemic and psychological barriers that disrupt long-term career engagement. While women increasingly pursue higher education and enter diverse professional domains, their sustained participation in formal labor markets remains uneven, especially at advanced career stages. The phenomenon of career disengagement among highly educated women has become a pressing area of inquiry, as it not only affects individual aspirations and well-being but also has broader socioeconomic consequences, such as the underutilization of human capital and diminished gender equity in leadership (Bourezg et al., 2024). Understanding the factors that influence these women's decisions to withdraw from or reduce participation in their careers requires an exploration that goes beyond surface-level statistics to uncover the interplay of structural, cultural, and personal dimensions.

Emerging research points to a complex web of influences that drive career disengagement. Institutional barriers such as discriminatory promotion practices, inflexible work environments, and tokenistic inclusion contribute to feelings of alienation among women in professional spaces (Terpstra-Tong et al., 2024). These structural inequalities are often compounded by deep-rooted sociocultural expectations that reinforce traditional gender roles and subtly discourage long-term ambition, particularly for women with caregiving responsibilities (Shrestha, 2024; Tabassum & Rahman, 2020). Such pressures can lead to chronic role conflict and a gradual erosion of professional identity. As research across varied national contexts has demonstrated, women frequently internalize these tensions, resulting in stress, guilt, and ultimately, career disengagement (Mihajlov et al., 2024; Venkat et al., 2023).

The notion of career satisfaction—long considered a key predictor of occupational persistence—is itself shaped by gendered dynamics. Studies reveal that women may report paradoxically high satisfaction despite limited advancement opportunities, suggesting that adaptation to constrained expectations may mask deeper disengagement (Ghaleb, 2024; Mihajlov et al., 2024). In such cases, career disengagement may not stem from dissatisfaction in the conventional sense but from a broader recalibration of life priorities in response to systemic barriers and shifting personal values. For instance, research has shown that highly educated women often reorient their careers to achieve autonomy, meaning, and alignment with their broader life goals, which may include caregiving, community involvement, or entrepreneurial endeavors (Parola & Felaco, 2024; Yamasaki, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and intensified these dynamics. Gender disparities in career satisfaction and work hours became more pronounced, particularly in science and academic fields where the demands of productivity collided with increased domestic responsibilities (Heo et al., 2022). While many men were able to maintain stable work patterns, women disproportionately reduced their hours or exited their roles altogether, exacerbating the gender gap in career advancement and economic security. These patterns suggest that systemic vulnerability persists for women even at high levels of professional achievement, undermining efforts toward gender equality in the workplace (Abu-Tineh et al., 2023; EdİNsel, 2023).

Moreover, the intersection of career disengagement with psychological variables such as well-being, identity, and motivation has been gaining scholarly attention. Career disengagement is rarely a spontaneous decision; it often follows prolonged periods of emotional fatigue, disillusionment, and perceived lack of purpose (Wu et al., 2024; Yang, 2024). Research on career adaptability and satisfaction reveals that when women perceive their career environments as misaligned with their values or unsupportive of growth, they may disengage to preserve psychological well-being (Ghosh et al., 2019; Oliveira & Marques, 2024). In this context, disengagement may serve as a coping mechanism—a way to restore autonomy, reduce stress, or reclaim a fragmented identity.

Academic literature also suggests that psychological outcomes such as subjective well-being, academic engagement, and life satisfaction are closely intertwined with career satisfaction and persistence (Seo, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). For highly educated women, disengagement does not always equate to failure or frustration; rather, it can represent a deliberate, strategic decision to pursue paths that are personally fulfilling but fall outside traditional employment structures (Wei et al., 2024). In fact, the shift toward borderless career attitudes—where success is defined less by institutional benchmarks and more by personal growth and resilience—is particularly pronounced among women who have achieved high academic credentials but find conventional career paths unaccommodating (Lee & Park, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the consequences of disengagement must also be considered within broader economic and

sociopolitical frameworks. The underutilization of highly educated women's skills poses long-term risks for national development, organizational diversity, and innovation (Terpstra-Tong et al., 2024; Yamasaki, 2020). Additionally, disengagement often entails a trade-off between personal well-being and economic security. For some, the departure from the workforce leads to feelings of empowerment and autonomy; for others, it results in isolation, identity loss, or diminished future opportunities (Jung, 2022; Kim, 2020).

In developing regions such as South Africa, where the legacies of social inequality intersect with evolving gender norms, these dynamics take on added complexity. While educational access for women has improved significantly, labor market structures and cultural expectations often lag behind. Recent studies on women's career satisfaction in developing contexts emphasize the importance of analyzing both internal and external motivators, including family expectations, workplace culture, and psychological readiness (Bourezg et al., 2024; Ghaleb, 2024). In this environment, highly educated women may find themselves caught between competing demands—striving for professional achievement while being expected to conform to traditional caregiving roles. These tensions may be especially acute for women in midlife or those transitioning between career phases, prompting decisions to reduce professional engagement or explore alternative pathways (Shrestha, 2024; Yang, 2024).

Furthermore, research in cross-cultural and comparative settings reveals that gender composition within workplaces significantly shapes women's perceptions of inclusion, opportunity, and satisfaction (Terpstra-Tong et al., 2024). When women are underrepresented or isolated in their fields, they are more likely to report feelings of alienation, marginalization, and lack of upward mobility. These experiences contribute to a gradual withdrawal from professional life, especially when coupled with limited support systems or inadequate institutional responses. Importantly, such disengagement is not merely a reflection of individual limitations but a structural response to persistent inequities (Edİnsel, 2023; Venkat et al., 2023).

In light of the multidimensional nature of career disengagement among highly educated women, qualitative inquiry is essential for capturing the depth and complexity of their lived experiences. Quantitative metrics alone cannot fully explain why women with advanced qualifications and evident professional success choose to disengage. Instead, in-depth, interpretive methods are needed to uncover the nuanced narratives that inform these decisions—narratives

shaped by institutional cultures, personal identities, family dynamics, and broader sociocultural contexts (Oliveira & Marques, 2024; Wu et al., 2024).

Therefore, the present study aims to explore the factors influencing career disengagement in highly educated women through a qualitative lens.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm to explore the underlying factors contributing to career disengagement among highly educated women. The research design was chosen to facilitate a deep understanding of participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations. The study population consisted of 24 women residing in South Africa who had obtained at least a postgraduate qualification and had either voluntarily exited or significantly reduced their participation in formal employment. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling via professional networks, women's career forums, and online platforms aimed at postgraduate alumni groups. The inclusion criteria ensured that participants had direct experience with the phenomenon of interest and could provide rich, reflective narratives about their career trajectories. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes or significant information emerged from subsequent interviews, thereby confirming the adequacy of the sample size for qualitative analysis.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was conducted exclusively through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants the flexibility to express their experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews through a guiding framework of open-ended questions. Interviews were held either in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' preferences and availability. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Interview questions focused on themes such as educational and professional background, work-life balance, organizational culture, societal expectations, and personal values regarding career and identity. Follow-up prompts were used to explore responses in greater depth, and

interviewer neutrality was maintained to minimize bias and encourage open dialogue.

2.3. Data Analysis

Following data collection, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to qualitative content analysis using NVivo software. The data analysis process involved iterative coding and constant comparison, beginning with open coding to identify key concepts and patterns. Codes were then organized into categories and subcategories through axial coding, facilitating the identification of relationships among emerging themes. Finally, selective coding was used to integrate categories into overarching themes that captured the essence of factors influencing career disengagement. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted with several participants to validate interpretations, and peer debriefing was used throughout the analytic process to enhance reflexivity and minimize researcher bias.

3.   Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 24 highly educated women residing in South Africa who had voluntarily disengaged from their professional careers. Participants ranged in age from 32 to 58 years, with a mean age of 43.2 years. The majority held master's degrees (n = 14), while the remaining participants held doctoral degrees (n = 10). In terms of marital status, 17 participants were married, 5 were single, and 2 were divorced. Most participants (n = 20) had children, and of these, 12 reported having two or more children. Regarding employment status at the time of the interview, 15 participants were entirely out of the formal labor force, while 9 were engaged in part-time, freelance, or informal work. Participants represented a diverse range of former professions, including academia (n = 7), corporate management (n = 6), law (n = 5), healthcare (n = 4), and engineering (n = 2). The demographic distribution ensured a heterogeneous sample capable of providing varied and nuanced insights into the experience of career disengagement.

Table 1

Main themes, subcategories, and concepts related to career disengagement in highly educated women

Main Themes (Categories)	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Structural and Institutional Barriers	Gendered Workplace Norms	Glass ceiling, lack of female leadership, gender stereotypes, informal exclusion
	Inflexible Work Arrangements	Rigid hours, lack of remote work, limited part-time roles, penalized maternity leave
	Discriminatory Promotion Practices	Favoritism, biased evaluations, opaque criteria, exclusion from projects
	Organizational Culture of Overwork	Long hours, burnout, unrealistic expectations, presenteeism
	Lack of Support for Working Mothers	No childcare facilities, unsupportive supervisors, stigma around parenting
	Tokenism and Isolation	Being the only woman, surface-level diversity, isolation in decision-making
	Limited Career Advancement Channels	Dead-end roles, repetitive tasks, blocked growth paths
2. Sociocultural Expectations and Pressures	Traditional Gender Roles	Homemaker expectations, family-first ideology, male breadwinner norm
	Social Judgment and Guilt	Stigma around ambition, guilt over working motherhood, peer disapproval
	Cultural Expectations Around Femininity	Self-sacrifice, modesty in ambition, nurturing over assertiveness
	Family Expectations	Elder care obligations, spousal expectations, pressure to reduce work hours
	Internalized Role Conflicts	Identity confusion, internal struggle, tension between roles
	Fear of Social Rejection	Being labeled selfish, fear of rejection from social circles, isolation
3. Psychological and Emotional Burnout	Chronic Work Stress	Emotional exhaustion, daily dread, unmanageable workload
	Loss of Personal Fulfillment	Feeling empty, lack of joy in achievements, questioning career purpose
	Emotional Disengagement	Detachment from work, emotional numbness, disinterest in growth
	Anxiety and Depression	Panic attacks, persistent sadness, mental health struggles
	Identity Crisis	Who am I without my job?, shifting self-concept, uncertainty about value
4. Life Re-Prioritization and Autonomy	Pursuit of Meaningful Engagement	Volunteering, creative work, mentoring, values-based projects
	Desire for Autonomy	Freedom in time, independence in decisions, control over life

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Reconnection with Family and Self	Time with children, personal development, reestablishing balance
Exploration of Alternative Career Paths	Entrepreneurship, academia, consulting, passion projects
Reclaiming Agency	Taking control, redefining success, setting boundaries

The first main theme that emerged from the data was Structural and Institutional Barriers, which encapsulated a range of systemic issues within workplace environments that contributed to participants' disengagement from their careers. One significant subcategory within this theme was Gendered Workplace Norms, where participants frequently reported encountering subtle and overt gender biases. Many women described feeling overlooked for leadership roles, stating that "no matter how qualified I was, the men got the real opportunities." Some participants also referred to being excluded from informal decision-making spaces such as after-hours gatherings or strategic conversations, reinforcing a sense of professional invisibility.

Another prominent subcategory was Inflexible Work Arrangements, which highlighted the difficulty of navigating rigid workplace expectations alongside caregiving responsibilities. Women shared experiences of requesting flexible hours or remote work and being denied or penalized. One participant said, "I asked to work from home twice a week, and they looked at me like I was asking for a vacation," demonstrating the limited structural support for alternative work arrangements.

Discriminatory Promotion Practices also played a role in career disengagement, with several participants noting that advancement was often not based on merit. Instead, favoritism and unclear criteria dictated promotions. As one interviewee expressed, "I kept getting passed over without explanation, even though my results were always top-tier." These perceptions of unfairness contributed to a sense of futility and discouragement.

An additional subcategory was Organizational Culture of Overwork, where participants described being subjected to relentless performance expectations and long working hours, often at the expense of their well-being. One woman reflected, "They made it seem like if you left at 5 p.m., you weren't serious about your job." This culture fostered burnout and created an unsustainable work environment.

The subcategory Lack of Support for Working Mothers was also prevalent. Many participants indicated that while their organizations superficially supported family life, practical support was missing. "There was no real maternity policy," one woman stated. "You were expected to come back and act like nothing changed." The lack of childcare support and empathy from supervisors made continued engagement in their careers increasingly difficult.

Participants also described Tokenism and Isolation, particularly in male-dominated industries. Being the sole woman on a team was not empowering but alienating. One participant noted, "I was there for the diversity numbers, not to actually contribute to key decisions." This kind of surface-level inclusion eroded motivation and confidence.

Finally, Limited Career Advancement Channels emerged as a key subcategory, with participants describing repetitive or stagnated job roles. As one interviewee said, "It felt like I was in the same position for years with no way forward. They stopped investing in my growth." This lack of progression undermined professional identity and encouraged disengagement.

The second overarching theme was Sociocultural Expectations and Pressures, which reflected external demands imposed by society and close relationships. Within the subcategory Traditional Gender Roles, participants reported feeling constrained by societal norms that expected women to prioritize home and caregiving. "My husband was supportive, but everyone else acted like I was neglecting my kids by working full-time," one woman shared.

In the subcategory Social Judgment and Guilt, several participants recounted the emotional toll of being perceived as overly ambitious or neglectful. This judgment came from extended family, peers, and even other women. One participant stated, "You start feeling guilty for succeeding. It's like you're betraying the sisterhood if you don't slow down."

Cultural Expectations Around Femininity also influenced decisions to disengage from careers. Women described pressures to be nurturing, humble, and self-sacrificing. "You can't be assertive without being called aggressive," one woman explained. These constraints clashed with professional demands and often resulted in internal conflict.

Family Expectations served as another force shaping disengagement. Participants shared that their families expected them to assume eldercare responsibilities or reduce work commitments after marriage. "My mother-in-law asked when I would quit work and focus on the family," one woman recalled. Such expectations created tension between personal aspirations and familial obligations.

The subcategory Internalized Role Conflicts captured the psychological struggle between multiple roles. Many women expressed feelings of inadequacy in all domains. "At work, I felt like a bad mom. At home, I felt like a bad employee," one participant said, encapsulating the emotional burden of navigating dual responsibilities.

Finally, Fear of Social Rejection emerged as a barrier to career persistence. Women feared alienation or negative labeling for defying traditional roles. One participant disclosed, "When I said I was going back to full-time work, friends acted like I was choosing myself over my family."

The third major theme was Psychological and Emotional Burnout, encompassing the internal consequences of prolonged stress and conflict. The subcategory Chronic Work Stress included reports of fatigue, anxiety, and a sense of being overwhelmed. "Every day felt like a battle. I was running on empty," one woman described. This constant stress eventually led many to exit the workforce.

In the subcategory Loss of Personal Fulfillment, participants spoke of no longer deriving meaning from their achievements. "I used to be proud of my work. Now I just feel numb," one participant said. This emotional detachment made it difficult to stay motivated in their roles.

Emotional Disengagement followed closely, with women describing an increasing sense of disconnection from their professional identities. "I stopped caring about results. I was just going through the motions," a participant explained, reflecting a deep sense of alienation.

In the subcategory Anxiety and Depression, women shared that their mental health had deteriorated due to sustained workplace pressures. "I started having panic attacks before meetings," one participant said. These conditions often went untreated and eventually necessitated withdrawal from professional life.

Identity Crisis also emerged as a powerful subtheme. Many participants described struggling to reconcile their professional ambitions with their emotional well-being. "I didn't know who I was anymore. My job was my identity, and now I didn't want it," one woman confessed.

The final theme, Life Re-Prioritization and Autonomy, focused on the ways in which women restructured their lives post-disengagement. In the subcategory Pursuit of Meaningful Engagement, participants described turning to volunteerism, creative endeavors, and community work that aligned with their values. "I started mentoring young girls in STEM. That gives me more joy than my old job ever did," one woman reflected.

Desire for Autonomy was a recurring motivation for disengagement. Participants expressed a yearning for independence and control over their time. "I was tired of being told how to live every hour of my day," one participant stated, highlighting the appeal of self-directed work.

The subcategory Reconnection with Family and Self revealed that many women used disengagement as an opportunity to heal, spend time with loved ones, and restore balance. "I finally had time to breathe, to just be with my children without checking emails," one woman noted.

Exploration of Alternative Career Paths also emerged, with women considering entrepreneurship, academic work, or passion-based projects. "I started a small business that lets me be my own boss," one participant shared, demonstrating a shift toward self-defined success.

Lastly, Reclaiming Agency captured the sense of empowerment many women experienced after leaving traditional work environments. "I made the choice to leave. That's power," one woman stated. This redefinition of success and autonomy signified a critical step in their journey toward personal and professional fulfillment.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of the complex and interrelated factors influencing career disengagement in highly educated women in South Africa. Four overarching themes emerged from the interviews: structural and institutional barriers, sociocultural expectations and pressures, psychological and emotional burnout, and life re-prioritization and autonomy. These themes capture both external and internal dynamics that shape women's decisions to reduce or exit their professional engagement despite high levels of education and prior career investment.

The first theme, structural and institutional barriers, highlights the enduring impact of gendered norms in organizational culture. Participants reported experiences of discrimination in promotion practices, inflexible work arrangements, tokenistic inclusion, and a culture of overwork. These institutional dynamics limited their opportunities for growth and eroded their motivation to remain professionally active. These findings strongly align with prior research indicating that women in male-dominated or hierarchically rigid environments often face marginalization, which leads to disengagement over time (Bourezg et al., 2024; Terpstra-Tong et al., 2024). The issue of tokenism, in particular, emerged as a demotivating force,

echoing findings from cross-national research showing that surface-level diversity efforts without structural inclusion reinforce feelings of isolation (Venkat et al., 2023).

Another striking result was the impact of inflexibility in work arrangements, particularly for women with caregiving responsibilities. Participants shared that requests for part-time work, remote options, or maternity leave were often met with resistance or penalization. This reflects existing evidence that organizational rigidity is a critical barrier for women seeking work-life balance and is a recurring cause of career dissatisfaction (Abu-Tineh et al., 2023; Heo et al., 2022). While these women were highly capable and motivated, the lack of institutional responsiveness contributed to their eventual disengagement. This pattern supports findings from public and private sector studies where inflexible environments are cited as major contributors to women's exit from formal employment (EdİNsel, 2023; Shrestha, 2024).

The second theme, sociocultural expectations and pressures, revealed that participants were negotiating career aspirations within a larger cultural framework that continues to emphasize traditional gender roles. Women reported internalizing expectations to prioritize family and caregiving, often leading to feelings of guilt, conflict, and social disapproval when trying to maintain ambitious career paths. These narratives are consistent with prior findings that suggest women are often seen as primary caregivers in many societies, which significantly constrains their ability to fully engage in professional life (Tabassum & Rahman, 2020; Yang, 2024). Even when participants received support from immediate family members, broader societal messages about "appropriate" gender roles remained a powerful deterrent to long-term career involvement (Bourezg et al., 2024; Jiang, 2024).

Additionally, many participants described feeling judged or stigmatized for their ambition. This resonates with previous work suggesting that women often experience a double bind—where assertiveness and drive are penalized as socially inappropriate or unfeminine (Mihajlov et al., 2024; Terpstra-Tong et al., 2024). These internalized role conflicts produced emotional strain, reinforcing disengagement not merely as a professional choice but as a survival mechanism to reduce psychological conflict. These findings mirror earlier reports in academic settings where female professionals withdraw to avoid the dissonance caused by mismatched personal and societal expectations (Tabassum & Rahman, 2020; Venkat et al., 2023).

The third theme, psychological and emotional burnout, emerged as a critical consequence of prolonged exposure to institutional and cultural stressors. Participants shared stories of anxiety, chronic fatigue, and identity struggles that arose from attempting to balance unrealistic demands. These results echo earlier studies showing that when women face simultaneous career and domestic stress without adequate support, the risk of emotional exhaustion and career dissatisfaction escalates sharply (Heo et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2024). Emotional disengagement and mental health challenges described by participants in this study reflect broader trends reported during the COVID-19 pandemic, where gender disparities in burnout and career satisfaction became more visible (Oliveira & Marques, 2024; Seo, 2023).

Moreover, some participants experienced a profound loss of meaning and purpose, despite reaching high levels of success. These findings align with prior literature emphasizing that for many highly educated women, career fulfillment is not solely derived from position or salary but from the extent to which the work environment supports their identity, autonomy, and well-being (Ghaleb, 2024; Kim, 2020). The inability to align professional activities with personal values was a recurrent trigger for withdrawal. In fact, previous research underscores that even in the presence of objective success, misalignment with personal values or unresolved identity tensions can result in detachment and reevaluation of career goals (Wu et al., 2024; Yang, 2024).

The final theme, life re-prioritization and autonomy, captures an important counter-narrative to the idea that disengagement is necessarily a negative or reactive process. For many participants, stepping away from formal employment was a deliberate and empowering choice aimed at reclaiming autonomy, rediscovering purpose, and restoring emotional balance. These women often redirected their energy toward family, creative pursuits, entrepreneurship, or community involvement—roles they found personally meaningful. This aligns with emerging research on borderless career orientations, in which success is redefined in terms of flexibility, autonomy, and personal growth rather than traditional status markers (Oliveira & Marques, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). In such frameworks, disengagement is not viewed as failure but as transformation.

Moreover, this study supports findings that highly educated women are increasingly seeking careers that support subjective well-being and life satisfaction, even if

these choices fall outside the boundaries of conventional employment (Parola & Felaco, 2024; Wei et al., 2024). Rather than accept unaccommodating professional structures, they proactively disengage to build more holistic and values-aligned lives. For some, this included transitioning into education, consulting, or part-time roles—spaces that offered greater control over time and energy. This mirrors studies on mid-career professionals who leave formal systems to preserve their mental health, autonomy, or relational connections (Jung, 2022; Lee & Park, 2022).

Taken together, the findings highlight that career disengagement among highly educated women cannot be attributed to a single factor. Instead, it emerges from a cumulative process shaped by systemic inequalities, cultural norms, and personal recalibrations. While institutional and societal factors create the conditions for disengagement, women's responses are shaped by their inner negotiations between career identities and broader life goals. These results support a growing consensus in the literature that meaningful and sustainable career engagement requires not just equal access, but environments that are structurally inclusive, psychologically safe, and culturally responsive (Ghosh et al., 2019; Terpstra-Tong et al., 2024).

5. Limitations and Suggestions

While this study offers rich insights into the lived experiences of highly educated women who disengaged from their careers, it has several limitations. The sample was limited to 24 participants from South Africa, and while this enabled in-depth exploration, it restricts the generalizability of the findings. The research focused primarily on women with postgraduate qualifications, which may not reflect the experiences of women with different educational or socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, as with all self-reported qualitative studies, the data rely on retrospective accounts that may be influenced by memory bias or personal interpretations shaped over time.

Future research could expand the scope of inquiry to include longitudinal studies that track women's career trajectories over time, allowing for the observation of disengagement as a process rather than a fixed point. Comparative studies across countries or regions could also shed light on how cultural, economic, or policy differences shape disengagement experiences. Including perspectives from employers, partners, or colleagues could enrich the understanding of external expectations and support systems. Furthermore, exploring disengagement among underrepresented groups—such as women with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, or those from rural backgrounds—would deepen the inclusivity of career research.

Organizations should prioritize structural reforms that enable flexibility, transparent promotion pathways, and inclusive leadership development. Workplace cultures must be actively shaped to challenge gendered expectations and normalize caregiving responsibilities across all genders. Human resources departments should invest in policies that support mental health, career autonomy, and return-to-work programs for women who wish to reengage professionally. Finally, mentoring and peer support programs can provide critical networks for women navigating career transitions, helping them remain connected to professional communities even during periods of disengagement.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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