

**Reconciling Individuality and Partnership Behind the Badge:
Career Sustainability of the Spouses of Indian Bureaucrats**

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Reconciling Individuality and Partnership Behind the Badge: Career Sustainability of the Spouses of Indian Bureaucrats

Abstract

Purpose: This study integrates the conservation of resources theory and sustainable career theory to explore career sustainability for spouses of Indian bureaucrats. Two research questions are addressed: (1) What competing demands arise between spouses' career aspirations and their expected role as partners of bureaucrats? (2) What coping strategies do spouses use to navigate the competing demands arising from the severely constrained agency in their work lives?

Design/Methodology/Approach: Following a qualitative approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 spouses of Indian bureaucrats, employing thematic analysis to identify codes and themes.

Findings: Spouses face competing demands, including the struggle for personal identity versus their partner's high-status role, career ambitions versus the constraints of bureaucratic life, and parenthood expectations versus professional growth conundrum. Limited opportunities to build independent networks and persistent resource depletion further endanger their career sustainability. In response, spouses adopt active strategies to acquire resources and passive strategies to conserve them.

Originality/Value: This study advances theoretical understanding by demonstrating how external factors, particularly a spouse's bureaucratic career, contribute to personal resource depletion, negatively affecting happiness, health, and productivity indicators of career sustainability. Practically, our findings provide actionable insights for HRM professionals, employers (of both bureaucrats and their spouses), and policymakers in India.

Keywords: Bureaucrats, Civil Servants, Conservation of Resources, HRM, India, Qualitative, Sustainable Career

Introduction

Work-family boundary management significantly influences career intentions (Allen and French, 2023; Halinski *et al.*, 2025), as work and home experiences are inherently entwined (Greenhaus and Kossek, 2014; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). However, much of the existing research on work-life conflict (e.g., Xian *et al.*, 2022), family-to-work enrichment (e.g., Su *et al.*, 2024), and family-boundary management (Halinski *et al.*, 2025) has relied predominantly on quantitative methodologies. Qualitative studies, where they exist, have largely focused on how both partners in a Dual Career Couple (DCC) navigate career growth within contextual constraints (e.g., Scurry and Clarke, 2022). Yet, a critical gap remains in understanding the specific career challenges faced by spouses of professionals who have severely limited agency in their work lives. Such an example is Indian bureaucrats, who often experience competing demands, tensions, and resource constraints in ways that differ from professionally equivalent DCCs (where both partners hold careers of comparable professional status and agency, and neither partner’s career is systematically subordinated by rigid institutional demands (Hart and Baruch, 2022; Richardson *et al.*, 2024; Venugopal and Huq, 2021)).

This study frames the context of Indian bureaucracy as an “extreme case” (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006) to spotlight career sustainability challenges relevant to a broader range of institutionally-constrained partnerships globally. The defining characteristics of such careers (e.g., rigid hierarchies, non-negotiable transfers, public visibility, and institutionalized spousal expectations) mirror those in military families (Castaneda and Harrell, 2008) and diplomatic partnerships (Hart and Baruch, 2022). Examining this extreme case has the potential to portray narratives of compromise and agency assertion to navigate career sustainability.

Securing a position as a bureaucrat within India’s civil service is an arduous and highly competitive process. The latest published figures show that in 2023 alone, over 1.3 million candidates applied for just 1,105 vacancies (Vajiram and Ravi, 2025). While bureaucratic

positions confer significant prestige and power (Harris *et al.*, 2023; Rich, 2023) they also demand extensive time commitments, involve frequent relocations, and often come with rigid administrative expectations, leading to poor work-life balance (Hart and Baruch, 2022; Lotta *et al.*, 2024). These pressures extend beyond the bureaucrat, profoundly shaping the career trajectories of their spouses. For example, spouses of bureaucrats are often expected to attend elite social functions, which can come at the expense of their own career aspirations and social networks (Bedi, 2021). Such expectations can lead to professional stagnation, career discontinuity, and identity conflicts for the non-bureaucrat spouse.

The spillover effects of a bureaucrat's career on their spouses' personal and professional life can significantly impact the acquisition and development of personal resources (Hobfoll, 1989; 2012; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). This resource depletion threatens key indicators of career sustainability, including health, happiness, and productivity (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden, 2005). Given that workforce participation is critical for economic productivity at the national and organizational levels, understanding these challenges is not only a matter of individual career sustainability but also a necessity for the broader sustainability of the career ecosystem (Donald and Jackson, 2023; Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

Consequently, this study integrates the conservation of resources theory and sustainable career theory to explore career sustainability for spouses of Indian bureaucrats. The study advances theoretical understanding by demonstrating how external factors, particularly a spouse's bureaucratic career, contribute to personal resource depletion, negatively affecting happiness, health, and productivity indicators of career sustainability. Practically, our findings provide actionable insights for HRM professionals, employers, and policymakers concerned with dual-career couples in institutionally demanding contexts.

Literature Review

Theoretical framework

A decade ago, the notion of sustainability was introduced to the career theory literature (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). Sustainable Career Theory (SCT) captures the dynamic interplay between individual and contextual factors over time, whereby the three core indicators of career sustainability are health (physical and mental well-being), happiness (satisfaction and subjective success), and productivity (performance and employability) (De Vos et al., 2020; cf. Van der Heijden, 2005). Building on this earlier foundation, further conceptualization of sustainable careers has developed via the integrative conceptual model for sustainable careers (Donald et al., 2024b) and the cyclical process framework for sustainable careers (Greenhaus et al., 2024). Yet, Talluri et al. (2025) observe how such models tend to overlook the private lives of individuals as critical determinants of career sustainability. To address this, they presented a model of sustainable careers through subjective person-career fit dynamics, which incorporated proximal and distal outcome perspectives as well as a dynamic feedback loop incorporating coping and defense mechanisms.

One such representative setting for considering the impact of private lives and coping mechanisms is that of DCCs, where agency is constrained due to the interdependence of career decisions resulting from shared caregiving responsibilities, dual workloads, and career mobility constraints (Allen and French, 2023). Literature identifies these kinds of setups as the idea of ‘linked lives’, recognizing that individuals’ career trajectories are fundamentally interconnected with and shaped by the lives of significant others, especially intimate partners. This perspective acknowledges that career decisions and outcomes cannot be understood in isolation but must be examined within the broader context of interdependent relationships (Elder, 1994). Within DCCs, the linked lives perspective manifests as partners’ careers become

“coupled” (Pixley and Moen, 2003), with one partner’s career transitions creating ripple effects that fundamentally alter the other’s career opportunities and constraints.

Requiring continuous adaptation, resource management, and negotiation within and beyond the workplace (Scurry and Clarke, 2022; Wong, 2023), career sustainability within DCCs warrants further investigation. Furthermore, while the conceptual model of sustainable careers (De Vos *et al.*, 2020) provides for the interaction between person, context, and time, we have a limited understanding of how focal actors utilize their resources situated within their contexts to make their careers sustainable. Although Mishra *et al.* (2024) explored the interaction between agentic and contextual factors leading to career sustainability for digital micro-entrepreneurs, there remains limited empirical consideration of the interaction between the resources an individual has access to and how they use such resources to make their careers sustainable (c.f. Nimmi *et al.*, 2021; 2022; Nguyen *et al.*, 2025).

The conservation of resources (COR) theory posits that individuals are motivated to acquire, protect, and expand their resources while mitigating actual or potential losses of their existing resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Whether psychological, social, or material, these resources do not exist in isolation but tend to accumulate or diminish in clusters, captured by the abstract notion of resources within one’s resource caravan (Hobfoll, 2012). External factors, such as societal expectations or workplace structures, create or block resource passageways that either facilitate or constrain an individual’s ability to leverage and deploy the resources within their resource caravan (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Over time, the accumulation or erosion of personal and professional resources determines whether an individual can maintain career continuity and fulfilment (Donald *et al.*, 2024b; Greenhaus *et al.*, 2024; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015).

Therefore, by integrating COR and sustainable career theories within the linked lives perspective, this study examines how bureaucrats’ spouses navigate career challenges, the

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extent to which they experience resource loss or gain, and the coping strategies they employ to sustain their careers despite contextual challenges.

Development of research questions

DCC literature has investigated the challenges arising from partners’ career interdependencies, such as how one partner’s professional obligations constrain or enable the other’s career trajectory (Nguyen *et al.*, 2025). There has also been an exploration of mutual career compromises that sustain relational equilibrium (Bataille and Hyland, 2022). Yet, prior scholarship has often viewed all types of DCC combinations as homogeneous, underscoring competing tensions between their demands and their partners’ career aspirations, such as conflicting schedules and relocation requirements (Shockley *et al.*, 2025). However, different career types within DCCs pose unique challenges for the focal actor and their partner.

For instance, academic DCCs find it difficult to secure jobs at the same institution (Putnam *et al.*, 2018), while spouses face inflexible parameters shaped by prestige, authority, mobility, and public expectations (Xian *et al.*, 2022). Within expatriate military DCCs, the trailing partner may experience difficulty in securing employment due to legal work restrictions or nontransferable skills and education (Richardson *et al.*, 2024; Venugopal and Huq, 2022). Doctors within DCCs report conflict due to their time on call out of working hours, the ethical commitment to medicine, and work encroaching into family responsibilities (Swanson and Power, 1999). Similarly, the journalism profession demands long and unpredictable hours, geographic mobility, and an expectation that professionals are always available when needed (Reid *et al.*, 2024).

Despite these considerations of DCCs involving academics, doctors, and journalists, research exploring the challenges for individuals whose spouses are bureaucrats remains lacking. Such research is necessary given that bureaucratic partnerships frequently exhibit asymmetric power dynamics on account of the social prestige it holds, reinforcing the

bureaucrat's career primacy (see Blossfeld and Drobnic, 2001). This reflects what is termed a 'choiceless' career scenario (Su *et al.*, 2024), whereby specific pressures and expectations pose distinctive challenges to the sustainability of the non-bureaucrat partner's career. Therefore, we investigate:

Research Question One (RQ1): What competing demands arise between spouses' career aspirations and their expected role as partners of bureaucrats?

While RQ1 explores competing demands faced by diplomatic spouses, understanding how they navigate these challenges is equally important. Career disruptions necessitate active adaptation as individuals seek to preserve their professional identities despite structural constraints (Scurry and Clarke, 2022; Sonpar *et al.*, 2022; Wong, 2023). When faced with challenges to sustain their career, individuals often employ preservation, as well as generation of resources to navigate the challenges (Richardson and McKenna, 2020). While much previous scholarly work has typically applied COR theory in the context of predicting stress and well-being (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), it can also enable us to further our understanding of sustainable careers (Donald, 2025; Nimmi *et al.*, 2021; 2022; Nguyen *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, although studies have utilized COR theory to examine the effects of non-work domains on career outcomes (Kelly *et al.*, 2020; Nimmi and Donald, 2023) as well as between burnout and career turnover intentions (Barthauer *et al.*, 2020), qualitative insights on how individuals navigate 'resource gain' and 'resource loss' cycles (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) remain scarce.

To conceptualize how individuals navigate resource loss, we draw from coping literature, which distinguishes between two primary functions: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). This study adopts the term Active Coping for problem-focused coping strategies that involve direct efforts to manage or alter an external stressor (Halbesleben, 2010) and Passive Coping for emotion-focused coping

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strategies that regulate internal emotional distress, particularly when a stressor seems unchangeable (Krischer *et al.*, 2010).

Spouses of bureaucrats continually operate within unique constraints that make career sustainability challenging. Nevertheless, they seek to assert agency to cope with the competing demands between their career aspirations and their expected roles as bureaucratic partners. However, our knowledge of how they create resource passageways to operationalize the resources in their resource caravans (Hobfoll, 2012; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) remains lacking. Considering how these spouses prioritize, invest in, and accumulate resources under the spillover of constrained circumstances has the potential to expand COR theory and enrich our understanding of career sustainability. Therefore, we investigate:

Research Question Two (RQ2): What coping strategies do spouses use to navigate the competing demands arising from the severely constrained agency in their work lives?

Methods

Research design and research tool

Adopting a qualitative approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the spouses of bureaucrats in India between March 2024 and January 2025. These 40-50 minute voice-recorded interviews explored competing demands and coping strategies (RQs 1 & 2) and gathered demographic data. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Hindi, as participants were encouraged to use the language they were most comfortable with to ensure richness and authenticity of the data. To ensure fidelity, a rigorous translation protocol was implemented. The research team included three native Hindi speakers proficient in English. Ethical approval was obtained via the Ethics Review Board of the lead author’s institution. Participants provided informed consent before participating in the study.

Recruitment of participants

We purposefully sampled educated spouses of Indian bureaucrats who were involved in the workforce, including those who had made significant career adaptations due to their spouse's bureaucratic career demands. This sampling strategy enabled us to capture a spectrum of career sustainability experiences, from those maintaining their original career trajectories to those who had shifted to more flexible employment arrangements. As shown in Table I, these adaptations included transitions (e.g., from Lecturer to Home Tutor; Architect to Freelancer), manifesting career adaptation. We recruited participants through acquaintances, social media, email and snowball sampling. Bureaucrats in our study were defined as the Indian Civil servants selected through the Civil Services Examination conducted by UPSC (Government of India, 2010). We aimed for variation in the service of bureaucrats whose spouses were sampled to capture disruption experiences.

Participant demographics

The study sample comprised 26 participants (18 women, 8 men), with an average age of 36 (max 49, min 28). The average tenure of their spouse as a bureaucrat was 9 years (max 21, min 2). Table I details the participant demographics.

INSERT TABLE I HERE

The sample size was determined by theoretical sufficiency (Braun and Clarke, 2022), achieved when researchers are confident in their interpretations and ability to address the RQs. Theoretical sufficiency was achieved after 24 participants, but we conducted two additional interviews to validate this. The sample size of 26 significantly exceeds the sample size of 18 in a recent study on the career sustainability of digital micro-entrepreneurs in India (Mishra *et al.*, 2024).

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Thematic analysis of data

The interview transcripts were loaded into NVivo, and we then used thematic analysis to understand the phenomenon from the participants’ perspective to address each RQ. We iteratively employed the six-phase thematic analysis process from Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022) to enhance findings. Following the Gioia methodology, our analysis moved from informant-centric concepts to theoretical abstraction. We began with open coding to generate first-order concepts. For instance, Saloni’s (ID 15) account of being called “IAS madam” was coded as ‘Identified as bureaucrat’s spouse (even in own professional space)’. We iteratively compared first-order concepts, asking, “what is the underlying experience here?” and grouped them into second-order themes. For example, concepts like being labeled by a spouse’s title and having professional merit overlooked were grouped into the second-order theme of ‘Recognition struggle’. Finally, we developed aggregate dimensions by examining relationships between second-order themes. Themes like ‘Recognition struggle’, ‘Instrumentalization’, and ‘Intrusive workplace visibility’ pointed to a larger conflict, forming the aggregate dimension of ‘Individual identity versus partner’s high-status role’. This systematic, multi-level analytical process, moving from specific participant experiences to broader theoretical constructs, allowed us to build the data structures to address RQ1 and RQ2. Additionally, pseudonyms were used to ensure participant confidentiality

Rigor was established by adhering to the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We ensured credibility (confidence in our findings) primarily through member checking, where participants reviewed their transcripts and our proposed themes to validate our interpretations (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Dependability and confirmability were achieved through two processes. First, we maintained a clear audit trail by documenting our systematic coding process. Second, we used investigator triangulation, wherein two researchers conducted the thematic analysis

independently before meeting to collectively agree upon the final themes. This process prioritizes researcher interpretation over ‘intercoder reliability’, a key tenet of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022). Finally, we supported transferability by providing rich descriptions of the context and direct participant quotes, allowing readers to assess the relevance of our findings to other settings.

Findings

RQ1. What competing demands arise between spouses’ career aspirations and their expected role as partners of bureaucrats?

Figure 1 (RQ1) evidences the final data structure (phase six) representing the documentation output from phases one to five based on guidance and notation by Gioia *et al.* (2013, p. 21).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Table II presents representative examples of raw data, first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions, reflecting the inductive process through which informant-centric terms were abstracted into researcher-centric themes to construct the study’s data structure

INSERT TABLE II HERE

Individual identity versus partner’s high-status role

Spouses of bureaucrats struggled to maintain a professional identity that was frequently overshadowed by their partner’s prestigious role. This tension manifested through three distinct challenges: the struggle for personal recognition, the instrumentalization of their professional relationships, and intrusive visibility in their own workplaces.

Recognition struggle: Participants described a persistent struggle to have their professional accomplishments recognized on their own merit, separate from their spousal identity. Their identity as a “bureaucrat’s spouse” often took precedence, diminishing their individual achievements. This was clearly articulated by Swarnima, a doctor: “*I am more*

commonly referred to as the doctor who is the SP’s wife in this town.” Similarly, Bhargavi, an architect, expressed frustration: “My work should stand on its own merit, but there’s this prevailing notion that my achievements are somehow tied to my spouse’s position.”

Instrumentalization: A second challenge involved the instrumentalization of professional relationships, where spouses felt colleagues and acquaintances viewed them as conduits to bureaucratic power rather than as peers. This undermined the potential for genuine workplace connections and created a sense of skepticism. Manavi, a teacher, described this tension: “My colleagues expect me to extend them favors through my husband’s position of authority. All this makes me skeptical while engaging with my colleagues. Why can’t my relations with them be independent of my husband?” Manavi’s experience shows how the partner’s status can permeate the spouse’s own work environment, turning potentially supportive peer relationships into transactional exchanges.

Intrusive workplace visibility: Participants reported being excessively noticed, lacking the privilege of having professional mistakes go unnoticed. To avoid perceptions of favoritism, colleagues and superiors would overcompensate by disproportionately highlighting the spouse’s flaws. As Sulekha, a resident doctor, explained: “I can’t make mistakes. Everyone notices when I make mistakes. Superiors make an example out of me to show they are impartial.” This constant, cautious monitoring transformed normal visibility into an intrusive experience, creating a climate of heightened professional risk where every action was magnified.

Career ambitions versus constraints of partner’s bureaucrat career

Spouses of bureaucrats face a fundamental conflict between their career aspirations and the rigid, non-negotiable demands of their partner’s profession. This challenge manifests through inflexibility in the partner’s career trajectory and the expectation that the spouse would scaffold their partner’s demanding job.

Inflexibility in the partner's career trajectory: The rigid transfer policies inherent in bureaucratic careers left spouses with severely limited agency over their own career planning and stability. Participants felt they had no choice but to continually adjust their professional lives to accommodate frequent and unpredictable relocations. Radha, a teacher, highlighted this reality: *"My husband has no say in deciding the city or nature of work. I can't do much about it other than adjusting my professional work around it. Many times, he has been asked to move within a year of his previous transfer. I had to adjust. There was no other choice for me."* This account shows how institutional structures governing the bureaucrat's career create a "choiceless" scenario for the spouse, systematically subordinating their career sustainability.

Scaffolding partner's job demands: Spouses of both genders reported making significant career sacrifices to support their partners' high-pressure jobs, often voluntarily stepping back from their own opportunities. Meenakshi, a tutor, shared her rationale: *"He is stressed almost all the time, and I don't blame him for that. His work lurks over his shoulder as there are no fixed hours. I avoid leadership roles and additional responsibilities so I can at least make things easier at home for him and ensure he is comfortable. He should not feel that he's all alone in this heavy lifting."* Similarly, Swagat, a product manager, recalled a significant sacrifice he made: *"I had to forgo the opportunity to represent my team while we were to meet this huge client in London. It was a huge thing for my career, but so was this for her."* These accounts show a clear pattern of one partner modifying their career ambitions to act as a support system or 'scaffold' for the bureaucrat's demanding role.

Parenthood expectations versus professional growth conundrum

The public nature of the bureaucratic role amplified parenting pressures, creating a conundrum for spouses trying to foster their own professional growth. This was evident in the pressure to provide exemplary care and the resulting unequal distribution of parenting roles.

Pressure to provide exemplary care: The bureaucrat’s public position amplifies expectations for their children’s success. Spouses felt intense pressure to ensure their children were perceived as successful and well-behaved, turning parenting into a form of public performance. Rekha, a social worker, described this pressure: “*I need to ensure that my kids do their best in both their studies and co-curriculars. People will make a mockery of us...the father is an IAS officer and look at their children.*” This pressure was compounded by serious concerns for their children's physical safety, stemming directly from the nature of their partner's work. Spouses worried that their partner’s official actions (e.g., shutting down illegal activities) could invite retaliation against their family. Tanvi, a teacher, expressed this deep-seated anxiety: “*As an IAS officer, he has to shut down illegal activities. I am anxious about my child's safety as my husband's right work invites enmity of the wrong people.*” This fusion of public performance expectations and genuine safety fears created an extraordinary burden of care, which directly competed with the time and mental energy spouses could dedicate to their own professional growth.

Unequal distribution of parenting roles: With bureaucrat partners frequently unavailable due to intense work demands, the spouse, regardless of gender, shouldered the primary parenting responsibilities. This often required them to sacrifice career-advancing opportunities for roles that offered more flexibility. Swagat, a product manager, shared: “*One should talk to their children, check their work and make them feel comfortable if they face any issue. After coming from work, I need to take this responsibility upon myself. I need to pass on important projects for this flexibility, it comes at the cost of my career. It’s okay until we both are putting in our best for the family.*” This burden extended beyond logistics; spouses also felt they had to emotionally and functionally compensate for their partner's absence, effectively trying to fill both parental roles to offset their partner not being around. Similarly, Yogesh, another product manager, poignantly described this effort: “*I try to be a good father and even*

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3 *a good mother (chuckles), but we all know it's not possible."* Together, these accounts reveal
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5 an unequal distribution that is not just about managing tasks, but about filling the void left by
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7 the bureaucrat's demanding career, a situation that directly forces spouses to deprioritize their
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9 own professional advancement.
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11 *Building independent networks versus adhering to bureaucratic networking norms*

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14 Spouses face a conflict between a desire to build independent networks and the pressure to
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16 adhere to bureaucratic networking norms. This is captured through two interconnected
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18 dimensions that constrain career development opportunities: networking obligations and
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24 *Networking obligations:* Spouses felt obligated to actively participate in their
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26 bureaucratic partners' networking commitments due to social pressure, even when it conflicted
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28 with their own career commitments. Bhargavi, a research architect, noted: "*The spouses of*
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30 *other bureaucrats typecast you if you don't participate in their meetings. I try to go, but their*
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32 *expectation for me to contribute as much time as they do is impractical given my working hours*
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34 *along with being the mother of a two-year-old."* Beyond informal social gatherings, these
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36 obligations often evolved into formal, compulsive responsibilities within spousal associations,
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38 which were presented in ways that made them difficult to refuse. This created a significant
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40 additional workload that directly competed with their professional duties. Vinita, an Assistant
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42 Professor of Law, described how this responsibility was thrust upon her: "*Soon after we moved*
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44 *to the state capital, the association president, the wife of my husband's senior, called and said*
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46 *it would be 'wonderful' for me to take on the secretary role. It wasn't really a question. In that*
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48 *circle, you don't say no to such a 'request.'* So, I found myself juggling their meeting minutes
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56 *Managing diplomatic protocols:* Additionally, some spouses were expected to follow
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58 bureaucratic norms, including attending official events and adhering to hierarchical
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expectations linked to their spouse’s rank, which they had to manage alongside their careers. Swarnima, a doctor, explained: “*There’s this unspoken rule that when my bureaucrat spouse is hosting delegates or higher-ups, I’m expected to tag along. It’s not just about being there; there’s this subtle hierarchy among spouses, especially among the uniformed bureaucracy that needs to be followed.*” This protocol extended into the home, transforming it from a private space into a venue for official functions that required meticulous, last-minute preparation. This compulsory hospitality placed a heavy burden on the spouse, often disrupting their own professional schedule without notice. Rekha shares: “*We’ll get a call in the afternoon that a senior official is visiting the city and will be joining us for dinner. Just like that, my entire evening is gone. My own work gets pushed aside, and everything becomes about making sure the house is impeccable and the menu is appropriate for the guest’s seniority.*” These findings show the complex and often restrictive environment that spouses of bureaucrats navigate, requiring them to continuously balance professional aspirations and personal network development with the societal and institutional expectations tied to their partner’s role.

RQ2: What coping strategies do spouses use to navigate the competing demands arising from the severely constrained agency in their working lives? Specifically, the competing demands identified in RQ1 of: (i) Individual identity versus partner’s high-status role (ii) Career ambition versus constraints of partner’s bureaucrat career (iii) Parenthood expectations versus professional growth conundrum, and (iv) Building independent networks versus adhering to bureaucratic networking norms).

To manage the tensions identified in RQ1, participants narrated two broad types of coping strategies, as shown in Table III.

INSERT TABLE III HERE

The first set of coping strategies focused on solving the competing demands via a solution-oriented approach, which we termed ‘Active Coping Strategies’. This kind of coping

strategy involved instrumental actions aimed at managing or altering the external stressor, such as seeking support or setting boundaries (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The other set of coping strategies focused on passively trying to make the situation better, which we termed 'Passive Coping Strategies'. This type of coping strategy involved participants regulating their internal emotional distress and acknowledging their helplessness to alter the competing demands (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Navigating 'individual identity versus partner's high-status role'

To cope with their overshadowed identity emanating from their partner's high-status role, participants employed several coping strategies. The primary active coping strategy was to build affirmative networks outside the bureaucratic ecosystem, so as to create a space for authentic connections free from the tagged status of the bureaucrat's partner. As Rekha, a social worker, explained: "*Operating as a constant support for your (bureaucrat) partner is not easy. Sometimes, you also need some support. I have a couple of friends with whom I can speak out my heart without being judged and labelled*".

In contrast, passive coping strategies were reflected in the *narratives of acceptance*, where participants saw themselves as an extension of the bureaucratic machinery put to the greater service of the nation, and carving out personal space for *restorative personal activities*. Ankita, a home tutor, articulated the former: "*If not me, someone else might have had to be his partner. My success, perhaps, lies in making life easier for him so that he may concentrate on his work better. It is a matter of understanding.*" The latter was expressed by Rudra, an online educator, found solace in artistic expression: "*I am a painter. I do madhubani painting (a famous type of painting renowned for intricate detailing and vibrant color palettes). That's my space where I can be myself. I fear not being judged as an imposter doing this... This brings me satisfaction.*"

Navigating 'career ambitions versus constraints of partner's bureaucratic career'

When faced with constraints to pursue their career ambitions due to their partner's bureaucratic job, spouses used active coping strategies to assert control and passive coping strategies to adapt to non-negotiable realities. Actively, they worked on *prioritization* and *setting clear boundaries* to balance competing demands and protect their professional time. Vidisha, a freelance architect, highlighted exercised prioritization: *"I understood that managing my traditional job while accommodating my (bureaucrat) partner's demanding job and frequent transfers was not sustainable. I had to choose one. I started a career in freelancing so that I can support my husband alongside my work"*. Sambhavna, a freelance consultant, described this direct, problem-focused action: *"I started enforcing a strict work-life separation... I communicated to my husband that between 9 AM and 3 PM, I would be entirely dedicated to my work, no exceptions"*

Those with lesser agency to manage this conundrum utilized passive coping strategies such as *synchronized career ambitions* and *embracing resilience*. Swagat highlights the adjustment of his career ambitions alongside his partner's bureaucratic career: *"Everyone's racing to be the next VP. But you realize you can't have two people in one family sprinting in different directions. I had to mentally step off that particular track. It wasn't about giving up, but rather, realizing what we want to win."* Vikram, a lecturer, emphasized mental resilience: *"Acceptance is the first step to finding a solution...I have accepted my life like that. I understand that I have to pursue my career amid these constraints. It becomes demanding, but I have always consoled myself that I can still do this."*

Navigating 'parenthood expectations versus professional growth conundrum'

In terms of parenting a bureaucrat's child and the constraints inflicted upon one's professional growth, participants used active coping strategies such as *seeking support from immediate family* and *internal negotiation of parental responsibilities*. Bhargavi, a research architect,

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3 emphasized the importance of internal negotiation with one's partner: *"Earlier, I was doing it*
4 *all by myself. But, as it was becoming too much for me, I spoke this out to my partner. So, we*
5 *divided parental roles. His job was to pick and drop our daughter from music classes in the*
6 *evening, while I manage sending her to and bringing her back from school."* Additionally,
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8 Manavi, a teacher, recalled: *"I tried to handle things for quite some time, but it was becoming*
9 *unmanageable. It was then that I asked my mother and mother-in-law to sequentially stay with*
10 *me until my son grows older."*

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Passive coping strategies included *asserting personal values* and *selective work engagement*. Ankita, a home tutor, described her journey toward asserting her parenting style: *"Everybody used to advise me on how to raise my kids and how not to. I tried to do everything at first, but eventually, I gave up. I had to know for myself as to how I wanted to raise my kids. With love, affection, and accepting their imperfections, and that's what I did. (smiles)."* Similarly, Pallavi, a marketing strategist narrated managing workload strategically: *"Proper time management and choosing where to invest and where not to invest oneself is really important. I try my best to escape engagements at my job where my absence may not be that problematic. This gives me some time to spend with my family."*

Navigating 'building independent networks versus adhering to bureaucratic networking norms'

Participants shared stories of how they coped with the mandate to attend bureaucratic functions, while letting go of meetings with college and school friends and thereby employing a variety of active and passive strategies. Active coping strategies focused on *prioritizing self-care*. Dipika, a teacher, recounted her realization: *"I lost touch with people who were once close to me, spending time with my partner's professional network, surrounded by people where I have to act out of obligation. I realized that I need to make a conscious effort to connect with people with whom I feel good and those who know me for who I am."*

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When active coping was not feasible, participants resorted to passive coping strategies, such as *performative participation in network rituals*. Although they did not openly reject these bureaucratic networking norms, they refused to internalize or believe in them. Frustrated, they only participated in events where their presence was indispensable, engaging in the bureaucratic rituals just for the sake of it. Manavi, a teacher, explained: “*I ask him (husband) if it’s really important for me to be there? Sometimes, there’s not much of a choice...I mentally prepare myself to do the drill and get out of there as soon as possible.*”

These findings illustrate how various active and passive coping strategies emerge as bureaucrats’ spouses navigate the structural, social, and professional challenges imposed by their partner’s career.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

Our study advances the understanding of career sustainability in uniquely constrained contexts (Talluri *et al.*, 2025), specifically addressing how spouses of bureaucrats navigate the competing demands of individual and spousal life. By integrating the sustainable careers theory and COR theory, we make three significant theoretical contributions.

First, we enrich De Vos *et al.*’s (2020) sustainable careers framework by theorizing how career sustainability plays out when agency is profoundly constrained. While previous research emphasizes individual adaptability (Talluri *et al.*, 2022), our findings reveal how institutional constraints and power asymmetries fundamentally reshape the *person-context-time* interaction in career sustainability. By identifying four distinct competing demands within bureaucratic DCCs—(1) individual identity versus partner’s high-status role; (2) career ambitions versus bureaucratic constraints; (3) parenthood expectations versus professional growth; and (4) building independent versus adhering to bureaucratic networks, we illuminate

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3 how individuals experience career sustainability challenges when contextual factors
4 systematically limit personal agency.
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8 Second, we advance COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2012) empirically validating the
9 crossover model (Bolger et al., 1989) in a new context. Our findings show that the competing
10 demands of a bureaucratic career create systemic spillovers, as stress is transmitted to the
11 spouse through three pathways: direct empathic transmission (e.g., absorbing a partner's strain
12 from their demanding job), indirect mediated transmission (e.g., internalizing external social
13 pressures), and shared stressors (e.g., mutual anxiety over child safety). This demonstrates that
14 stress transmission in such contexts is not merely dyadic but embedded within broader
15 institutional and societal structures, expanding COR theory's application to sustainable careers.
16 Furthermore, our study shows how institutional constraints block the 'resource passageways'
17 of bureaucrats' spouses, and compel spouses to adopt active and passive coping strategies to
18 maintain and restore resources in their 'resource caravans' amid adversity (Hobfoll, 2012;
19 Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018).
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35 Our identification of active and passive coping strategies provides empirical weight to
36 key COR principles. Active coping strategies (e.g., boundary setting) align with the gain
37 paradox principle, showing that resource gains become more crucial amid high risk of resource
38 loss (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Conversely, passive strategies legitimize the desperation principle
39 (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). For example, spouses' 'performative participation' in social rituals or
40 adopting 'narratives of acceptance' are not active problem-solving but defensive postures to
41 conserve dwindling psychological resources when feeling exhausted. Legitimizing these
42 principles within a career context extends COR beyond general resource investment
43 frameworks (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014) and informs discussions on career control as an
44 antecedent to proactive behaviors (Grabarski *et al.*, 2025).
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Third, while previous DCC literature highlights the compromise of careers primarily based on gender (e.g., Bataille and Hyland, 2023; Reich-Stiebert *et al.*, 2023), our findings provide empirical evidence of men also facing career challenges due to their partner’s dominant (bureaucratic) career. Our data shows male spouses, such as Yogesh and Vikram, shouldering primary parenting responsibilities, and others like Prashanth and Swagat struggling with identity subordination and making career sacrifices. We argue that these findings reveal a principle of institutional primacy, where the structural power and non-negotiable demands of the bureaucratic career create a power asymmetry that overrides any gender influences on career hierarchies within a partnership (Acker, 1990; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). In such contexts, the institution (not necessarily gender) dictates which partner's career is prioritized, compelling the non-bureaucrat spouse into adaptive and supportive roles to maintain the sustainability of the family unit and their own career (Pixley and Moen, 2003). This extends the ‘linked lives’ concept (Elder, 1994) by demonstrating that when one life is bound to a powerful institution, the linkage transmits institutional constraints that can subordinate a spouse's career regardless of gender. This offers a critical nuance to DCC literature, suggesting that future research must consider the interplay of institutional hierarchy alongside gender dynamics when examining career compromises (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006).

Collectively, these contributions illuminate the interplay between structural constraints and individual adaptation in career sustainability. Our findings extend beyond traditional gender-based analyses of DCCs to demonstrate how institutional hierarchy can supersede gender considerations in career compromise situations. By documenting resource orchestration strategies across genders, we support the ‘linked lives’ concept (Pixley and Moen, 2003) while revealing how bureaucratic structures shape resource passageways. This perspective enriches theoretical discourse on career sustainability by showing how individuals navigate complex power structures within institutional constraints rather than solely gendered expectations,

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3 offering a more comprehensive framework for examining contexts where personal and
4 professional boundaries are systematically challenged.
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8 ***Practical contribution and policy implications***
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10 Our study highlights the career sustainability challenges faced by spouses of Indian
11 bureaucrats, necessitating policy interventions to reduce career disruptions, foster workplace
12 inclusivity, and provide institutional support.
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17 Traditional talent management models overlook these unique DCC challenges, making
18 a shift toward a human-centric approach essential. For the government, this means recognizing
19 the impact of frequent transfers on spousal careers, children's education, and social stability.
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21 A co-location transfer policy should prioritize postings in the same or nearby cities for working
22 spouses. Officers with school-going children must receive extended tenures (5-7 years) during
23 critical academic years (10th and 12th Grade). Additionally, the absence of structured
24 employment support for spouses must be addressed through government-sponsored job
25 programs in PSUs, universities, public sector banks, and think tanks. Encouraging
26 entrepreneurship through funding and mentoring can further ease career disruptions.
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38 Moreover, bureaucratic roles must embrace digital governance, allowing officers in
39 finance, policymaking, and regulatory affairs to work remotely. Spousal considerations should
40 be integral to transfer, housing, and job training policies. Organizations employing bureaucrats'
41 spouses should implement seamless intercity transfers, remote work options, regional office
42 access, and career re-entry pathways. Most organizations lack spousal inclusion in HR policies,
43 which should be reversed with tailored policies recognizing their challenges.
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52 Society and families must also contribute. Community networks, RWAs, and NGOs
53 should facilitate social inclusion, while extended families must acknowledge and validate the
54 sacrifices of spouses. Supporting bureaucrats' spouses is about fairness and strengthening the
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very fabric of governance. As the backbone behind every dedicated civil servant, they deserve recognition, opportunity, and stability.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study focused exclusively on the experiences of spouses of bureaucrats in India, limiting the generalizability of our findings to other national contexts. Future research could explore cross-country comparisons to examine how varying sociocultural and institutional environments influence the challenges and coping strategies identified. Additionally, interviewing bureaucrats themselves, as well as their employers and organizations employing their spouses, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the structural constraints shaping spousal career sustainability.

An intriguing avenue for future research is the examination of DCCs where both partners hold prestigious professional positions. Investigating whether these couples experience greater institutional flexibility or different coping strategies could offer valuable insights into how structural accommodations impact career sustainability. Specifically, do these DCCs have more balanced coping strategies, or do they face unique challenges not captured in this study?

Furthermore, our study relied on single-timepoint interviews, raising the possibility of recall bias in retrospective narratives. Future studies could adopt a longitudinal design, perhaps through the use of diary studies (see Donald *et al.*, 2025), to track how these tensions and coping strategies evolve. Such approaches could provide deeper insights into the dynamic interplay between individual aspirations and systemic constraints.

Lastly, quantitative research could complement our findings by offering statistically significant data on spousal career outcomes, enabling policymakers and HRM professionals to develop evidence-based interventions. These studies could further inform (and subsequently

test the efficacy of) targeted strategies that support the career sustainability of bureaucrat's spouses through tailored employment policies and workplace flexibility.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex career sustainability challenges faced by spouses of Indian bureaucrats, revealing tensions between personal aspirations and bureaucratic expectations. Spouses navigate these challenges through active strategies, such as seeking meaningful engagements, establishing support networks, and asserting career boundaries, as well as passive strategies like career adaptation and performative participation in bureaucratic rituals. These findings underscore the critical role of policy interventions from both governments and organizations employing spouses of bureaucrats. A harmonious symphony of policy, purpose, and collective will must unfold, where governance, enterprise, and society entwine to weave support for bureaucrats' spouses, ensuring their dreams are not uprooted with every tide of duty but nurtured in the soil of stability, fulfilment, and lasting purpose.

Author Statements

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was obtained, and all participants provided informed consent before participating in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset cannot be shared publicly due to ethical approval restrictions.

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Table I. Participant Demographics

| ID | Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Education | Spouse's Tenure (Yrs) | Earlier Occupation | Current Occupation |
|----|-----------|--------|-----|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Amrutha | F | 28 | Fashion Designing | 2 | Fashion Designer | Fashion Designer |
| 2 | Bhargavi | F | 36 | B.Arch. | 6 | Industrial Architect | Research Architect |
| 3 | Swagat | M | 39 | Actuarial Science | 11 | Analyst | Product Manager |
| 4 | Rekha | F | 45 | LLB | 19 | Civil Lawyer | Social Worker |
| 5 | Ankita | F | 33 | M.Tech | 6 | Lecturer | Home Tutor |
| 6 | Radha | F | 47 | MSc. + BEd | 20 | Teacher | Teacher |
| 7 | Mahesh | M | 32 | MBA | 5 | Marketing Manager | Entrepreneur |
| 8 | Sulekha | F | 30 | MBBS | 6 | Intern | Resident Doctor |
| 9 | Tanvi | F | 34 | MSc. | 7 | Teacher | Teacher |
| 10 | Prashanth | M | 32 | B.Tech | 6 | Software Developer | Software Developer |
| 11 | Meenakshi | F | 49 | M.A. | 21 | Teacher | Tutor |
| 12 | Swapna | F | 35 | M.Phil. | 7 | Counsellor | Counsellor |
| 13 | Vidisha | F | 31 | B.Tech | 4 | Architect (Full-Time) | Architect (Freelance) |
| 14 | Vijay | M | 37 | M.C.A. | 12 | Computer Engineer | Computer Engineer |
| 15 | Saloni | F | 33 | M.Sc. | 6 | Lecturer | Teacher |
| 16 | Rudra | M | 37 | M.B.A. | 10 | Marketing Manager | Online Educator |
| 17 | Swarnima | F | 33 | MBBS | 3 | Doctor | Doctor |
| 18 | Manavi | F | 41 | Ph.D. | 13 | Asst. Professor | Teacher |
| 19 | Vikram | M | 34 | MSc | 5 | Lecturer | Lecturer |
| 20 | Pallavi | F | 34 | MBA | 8 | Product Manager | Marketing Strategist |
| 21 | Dipika | F | 35 | B.Tech | 10 | Engineer | Teacher |
| 22 | Yogesh | M | 38 | MBA | 9 | Product Manager | Product Manager |
| 23 | Vinita | F | 42 | Ph.D. | 18 | Lawyer (Practitioner) | Asst. Professor (Law) |
| 24 | Akriti | F | 35 | MBA | 8 | Consultant | Teacher |
| 25 | Ankit | M | 36 | B.Tech | 7 | Engineer | Engineer |
| 26 | Sambhavna | F | 35 | MBA | 7 | Consultant | Freelance Consultant |

Source: Authors own creation

Table II. Participant Quotes, First-Order Concepts, Second-Order Themes and Aggregate Dimensions

| Participant Quotes | First-Order Concepts | Second-Order Themes | Aggregate Dimensions |
|--|---|--------------------------------|---|
| <p>"In the staff room, I have a name tag like everyone else. But you know what they call me? 'IAS madam.' Not Saloni, not even 'English teacher.' Just 'IAS madam.' [Saloni, ID 15: Lecturer→Teacher, 6 years, M.Sc.]</p> <p>Sometimes, I wonder who I am outside of this constant association with my wife’s career. It's hard to carve out my own identity when people never look beyond the title of "the husband of." [Prashanth, ID 10: Software Developer→Software Developer, 6 years, B.Tech]</p> | <i>Identified as bureaucrat's spouse (even in own professional space)</i> | Recognition struggle | Individual identity versus partner’s high status role |
| <p>"I spent three years developing a new syllabus for constitutional law. When it was approved, the department head thanked me for 'using my connections' to get it through. What connections? I worked with the academic council, followed every procedure. But no—in his mind, my husband must have pulled strings. My eighteen years arguing cases? Irrelevant. My legal expertise? Must be borrowed from dinner table conversations with my bureaucrat husband." [Vinita, ID 23: Lawyer (Practitioner)→Asst. Professor (Law), 18 years, Ph.D.]</p> <p>"Last month, my sustainable housing design won a state award. You know what the newspaper wrote? 'Joint Secretary's wife receives architecture honor.' My name was in the third paragraph. The design details? Barely mentioned. But his department, his current posting, his batch year—all there. Ten years I've worked on green buildings, but the recognition comes with an asterisk: married to bureaucracy." [Bhargavi, ID 2: Industrial Architect→Research Architect, 6 years, B.Arch.]</p> | <i>Lack of recognition for professional pursuits by others</i> | | |
| <p>They made me the chair of the organizing committee of the Annual Day event. So, I was happy... Only later did I realize that it was done only to invite my bureaucrat husband as the chief guest.... [Manavi, ID 18: Asst. Professor→Teacher, 13 years, Ph.D.]</p> <p>Our comms team once asked if I’d speak at a government relations panel. ‘You’d bring credibility,’ they said. What they meant was, ‘You’d bring proximity.’ It felt less about my expertise and more about optics..." [Pallavi, ID 20: Product Manager→Marketing Strategist, 8 years, MBA]</p> | <i>Means to serve organizational interests</i> | Instrumental ization | |
| <p>"Team lunches are awkward. Casual conversation, then someone mentions their cousin needs a government job. Or their neighbor has a pending case. They don't ask directly—they tell stories, hoping I'll offer to help. 'Your wife must deal with such cases...' they hint. I've started eating at my desk. It's lonely, but at least lunch doesn't come with hidden agendas." [Prashanth, ID 10: Software Developer→Software Developer, 6 years, B.Tech]</p> <p>“I can’t help but wonder how many of these people (talking about co-workers) would still care about me if my husband’s title were not the anchor that holds our interactions together. I have learned to navigate these spaces, smiling and engaging in polite conversation, but inside, I know.... [Pallavi, ID 20: Product Manager→Marketing Strategist, 8 years, MBA]</p> | <i>Friendships for seeking bureaucrat's favor</i> | | |
| <p>I will tell you what happened in one of the meetings... I chose not to speak because the topic was sensitive and bordered on a department my spouse oversees. Afterward, I heard someone say, ‘She’s probably gathering intel.’ My silence had become its own kind of spotlight. Even my absence is overinterpreted. ." [Sulekha, ID 8: Intern→Resident Doctor, 6 years, MBBS]</p> <p>A colleague missed a deadline and got a quiet warning. When I made a similar error, my manager copied three people in the reprimand mail. I couldn’t help wondering—was it about the mistake, or about making an example of someone they assume has influence? ." [Prashanth, ID 10: Software Developer→Software Developer, 6 years, B.Tech]</p> | <i>Perceived inequality in attention</i> | Intrusive workplace visibility | |
| <p>"Small errors get amplified. I prescribed a generic instead of the specified brand—medically identical, but technically wrong. The CMO called a meeting about 'maintaining prescription protocols.' Made sure everyone knew he wasn't showing favoritism to the SP's wife.. They're so focused on appearing impartial that actual medical priorities get distorted." [Swarnima, ID 17: Doctor→Doctor, 3 years, MBBS]</p> <p>My supervisor once said in a meeting, ‘We even held [my name] accountable last quarter—consistency is key.’ That one sentence turned me into an example, as if my accountability had extra moral weight." [Yogesh, ID 22: Product Manager→Product Manager, 9 years, MBA]</p> | <i>Mistakes framed as examples of impartiality by superiors</i> | | |

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| <p>"People don't understand what it takes to clear UPSC. My husband attempted three times, studied eighteen hours daily, sacrificed everything. His parents sold their land to fund his coaching. When he finally cleared it, the entire village celebrated for a week. That kind of investment, that level of struggle—you can't just throw it away. So when transfer orders come, we pack. When his work extends past midnight, I manage everything else. His career isn't just a job; it's the culmination of years of sacrifice by an entire family." [Radha, ID 6, Teacher, 20 years]</p> <p>"He grew up in a village without electricity, studied under streetlights, walked ten kilometers to school. The civil services were his only escape from generational poverty. Now when people ask why I don't insist on staying in one place for my career, I remember him studying with borrowed books, surviving on one meal a day during preparation. That IAS badge represents not just his achievement but his family's dreams. How do you weigh my teaching career against his parents finally having a pucca house? Some sacrifices make sense when you understand the struggle behind that success." [Meenakshi, ID 11, Teacher→Tutor, 21 years]</p> | <i>Hard earned job</i> | Inflexibility in partner's career trajectory | Career ambition versus constraints of partner's bureaucrat career |
| <p>"When we enter any gathering, people stand up—for him, the Commissioner. His career decisions affect thousands; mine affects only individual clients. Society has already decided whose work matters more. And that is how his career's social standing made mine look like a hobby in comparison." [Vinita, ID 23, Lawyer→Assistant Professor, 18 years]</p> <p>"Architects design buildings; bureaucrats shape society—that's how our families see it. His transfer letter arrives with government seal, official urgency. My project commitments are 'adjustable' because private sector work lacks the gravitas of public service. That hierarchy of noble versus commercial work means my career automatically takes second position." [Bhargavi, ID 2, Architect→Research Architect, 6 years]</p> | <i>High social status</i> | | |
| <p>"The transfer policy is biblical truth in bureaucracy—non-negotiable, non-deferrable. When orders come, you have fifteen days to report. His department doesn't consider spousal employment while deciding postings. I've left three lecturer positions mid-session because challenging transfer orders means jeopardizing his entire career. The government invested in training him; they decide where that investment yields returns. My M.Tech qualification has no such institutional backing demanding geographical stability." [Ankita, ID 5, Lecturer→Home Tutor, 6 years]</p> <p>"Seventeen transfers in twenty years. Each posting serves administrative needs—tribal area development, border district management, urban governance. His expertise is portable; mine requires roots. Every transfer letter arrives with the weight of rules, regulations, service conditions he signed up for. Spouses aren't signatories, but we're bound by the same ordinance..... My teaching career became collateral damage to bureaucratic mobility. Seniority, relationships, institutional knowledge—reset with every relocation." [Radha, ID 6, Teacher, 20 years]</p> | <i>Frequent transfers</i> | | |
| <p>There are times when I am required to step up as an understanding and supportive partner..... Let me tell you an instance for example...., Once, she was heartbroken after being transferred out abruptly from a project she was invested in for the last two years and was just about to solve the case.... I literally saw her collapse into silence at home. I had to apply for a week's leave... She might be the bureaucrat for the world...But, for me, she is my better half... I made sure that I hold her disappointment like it was my own, reassuring her, shielding her from cynicism, until she could regain his political posture. The cost was mine—her composure was for the world...[Swagat, ID 3, Product Manager, 11 years]</p> <p>The nature of his job is such that there is a silent struggle always going on in the mind... political pressure, responsibilities... I've learned to read stress like weather—it doesn't need discussion, it needs space..... To keep the momentum going, I have to stand firm... There are many such instances...For example, When I received an award at my workplace, I told him casually, didn't make a big deal as he had just gone through a disciplinary audit. I didn't want him to feel smaller. Some days, even joy needs to be calibrated. [Meenakshi, ID 11, Teacher→Tutor, 21 years]</p> | <i>Prioritizing partner's wellbeing</i> | Scaffolding partner's job demands | |
| <p>"Joint responsibilities became solo projects by default. Parent-teacher meetings, doctor appointments, home repairs, investment decisions—her administrative duties override everything. I manage two sets of parents, coordinate family events, handle all domestic logistics. That I'm balancing two lives because bureaucratic service doesn't pause for personal responsibilities. Performance appraisals can't quantify managing a household single-handedly while maintaining career trajectory." [Yogesh, ID 22, Product Manager, 9 years]</p> <p>When our toddler slipped in the bathroom and needed stitches, I rushed to the hospital, blood on my kurta, panic in my voice. She was chairing a law-and-order review. She said, 'Keep me posted.' I sent him a photo of the stitched forehead and a smiling child. No caption. Just quiet competence. [Vikram, ID 19, Lecturer, 5 years]</p> | <i>Bearing partner's share of joint responsibilities</i> | | |

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| <p>"IAS officer's children must top every exam" says one relative... "You have to be like your father" says another.... And to meet these expectations requires full-time parenting... My decision to leave legal practice was largely based on orchestrating this very perfection.... [Rekha, ID 4, Social Worker, 19 years]</p> <p>When my daughter participated in a protest about women's safety, colleagues questioned, 'What will people say about the DC's daughter protesting?' Their childhood isn't private; it's public performance. The pressure to maintain exemplary children who reflect administrative success transforms parenting into reputation management. Natural childhood became casualty of social expectations." [Tanvi, ID 9, Teacher, 7 years]</p> | <p>Peer and social expectations</p> | <p>Pressure to provide exemplary care</p> | <p>Parenthood expectations versus professional growth conundrum</p> |
| <p>"I have researched well which route my daughter takes to school, who are her friends, who all she talks to... Safety is real threat... And it keeps looming on my work... But you see, I am a mother.... This cycle keeps repeating every year as transfers are almost inevitable... His career keeps advancing; her childhood keeps adapting...."[Dipika, ID 21, Teacher, 10 years]</p> <p>"His anti-corruption drives made powerful enemies. Our five-year-old can't comprehend why she can't play in the park like others. 'Bad people might hurt you because Papa stops their wrong work'—try explaining that to a kindergartener. I've installed tracking apps, security cameras, panic buttons. Play dates happen only at our home with vetted families." [Sulekha, ID 8, Resident Doctor, 6 years]</p> | <p>Child's safety concerns</p> | | |
| <p>"Single parenting isn't occasional; it's operational norm. Her 24/7 administrative availability means I'm default parent for everything—homework, health, happiness. School assumes mothers attend PTMs; I'm the anomaly father knowing every teacher, every subject, every challenge. Product development cycles compete with vaccination schedules, client meetings clash with school events. Paternity isn't measured in presence but performance. While she serves citizens, I serve our children exclusively. Career growth requires networking, visibility, extended hours—luxuries unavailable to primary caregivers in bureaucratic marriages." [Yogesh, ID 22, Product Manager, 9 years]</p> <p>"At dinner, it's just me and the kids most nights.... I love that she's changing the system.... But it's hard not to feel like the parent who is always present, yet always second... it's exhausting, and lonely in a way no one talks about.... The parenting burden isn't shared; it's shifted entirely based on whose career has flexibility..." [Vikram, ID 19, Lecturer, 5 years]</p> | <p>Disproportionate parenting burden</p> | <p>Unequal distribution of parenting roles</p> | |
| <p>"Even when she's home, she's mentally occupied—files on her lap, calls from the Secretariat. So I've trained myself and the kids not to expect 'availability' but to appreciate her presence when it comes. We've learned to live with part-time togetherness. [Swagat, ID 3, Product Manager, 11 years]</p> <p>"At school open house, every parent came in pairs. When I sat alone, the teacher said, 'Oh, your husband must be on a very important duty.' I nodded. What I didn't say was—it's the fourth open house in a row. And each time, my explanations are starting to sound like excuses, even to me." [Vinita, ID 23, Lawyer→Assistant Professor, 18 years]</p> | <p>Offsetting spouse not being around</p> | | |
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| <p>"Bureaucratic wives' associations aren't optional social clubs—they're unmarked job requirements. Monthly meetings discussing charity drives I don't believe in, cultural programs that often clash with project deadlines. These forced friendships with women I share nothing with except husband's service consume time, energy, emotional bandwidth my architecture practice desperately needs." [Bhargavi, ID 2, Research Architect, 6 years]</p> <p>"We've shared dinner tables, gifts, even family holidays, but if I stopped calling, I doubt they'd notice. These aren't friends. They're familiar strangers wearing the same smile I wear for them.... So I've learned to maintain friendships like a garden I didn't plant but must keep watering." [Dipika, ID 21, Teacher, 10 years]</p> | <p>Nurturing normative friendships</p> | <p>Networking obligations</p> | <p>Building independent networks versus adhering to bureaucratic networking norms</p> |
| <p>"Officers' wives expect participation in their initiatives—health camps, literacy drives, festival committees. It's community service with mandatory volunteering. These associations mean canceled client sessions... For instance, just last month, organizing the district women's day event meant week-long absence from practice. Every association meeting costs client trust...." [Swapna, ID 12, Counsellor, 7 years]</p> <p>There's home, there's work—and then there's the association. That third layer of labor seeps into weekends, evenings, and even personal holidays. And yet, it's treated as a natural extension of who I'm supposed to be. I can understand attending meetings—that's still manageable. But when they start assigning tasks like sourcing identical sarees for all members, it crosses a line. That's when the expectations stop feeling collective and start feeling intrusive. [Dipika, ID 21, Teacher, 10 years]</p> | <p>Additional compulsive responsibility (via associations)</p> | | |

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| <p>"Hosting guests isn't hospitality here (for a bureaucrat's spouse), it's her husband's performance evaluation, where wrong cutlery placement affects his annual confidential report. One has to be extra cautious..." [Swarnima, ID 17, Doctor, 3 years]</p> <p>"Twenty-one years of hosting equals museum of forgotten dinners. Ministers, secretaries, foreign delegations—our dining table witnessed more policy discussions than family meals. 5-8 days of the month are usually for this..."[Meenakshi, ID 11, Tutor, 21 years]</p> | <p><i>Frequently hosting elite guests</i></p> | <p>Managing diplomatic protocols</p> | |
| <p>There have been times I've canceled personal plans—doctor's appointments, even my own birthday—because we were expected at a function. These aren't requests; they're obligations wrapped in formality. My calendar is bureaucratically negotiable..... No one ever asked if I want to accompany him to these functions—it was just expected. Somewhere along the way, I have stopped asking myself if I wanted to go. I just keep a stock of sarees and a ready smile.. [Pallavi, ID 20, Marketing Strategist, 8 years]</p> <p>"Republic Day parade, Independence Day function, Gandhi Jayanti celebration—national holidays mean command performances. My tuition students adjust schedules around these immovable obligations. Unofficial functions prove worse—retirement parties, promotion celebrations, transfer farewells. Each requires presence, appropriate gift, correct behavior." [Ankita, ID 5, Home Tutor, 6 years].</p> | <p><i>Accompanying bureaucrat to official and unofficial functions</i></p> | | |

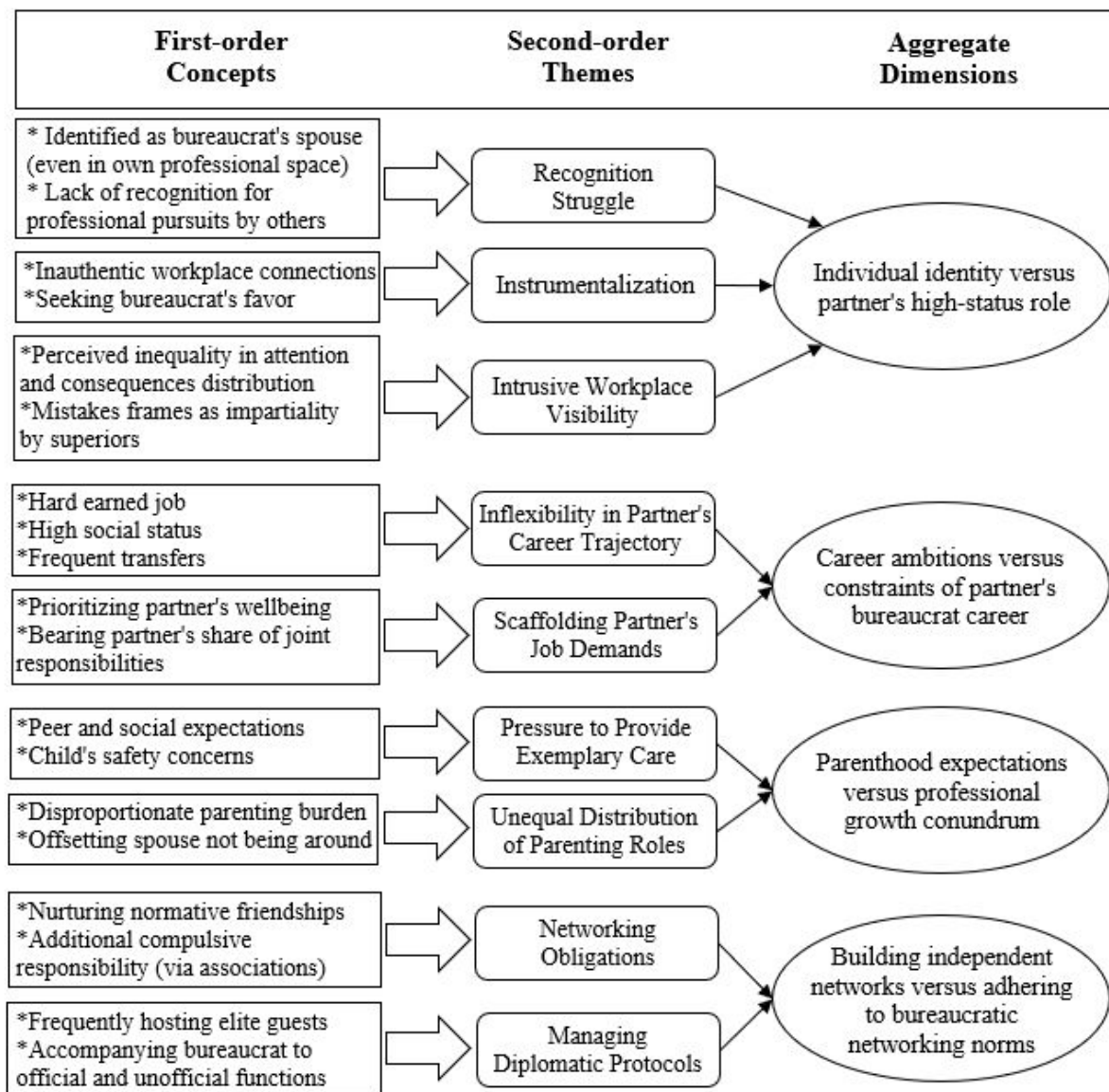
Source: Authors own creation

Table III. Competing Demands and Coping Strategies (RQ2)

| ID | Competing Demands | Active Coping Strategies (managing or altering the external stressor) | Passive Coping Strategies (regulating internal emotional distress) |
|----|--|--|--|
| 1 | Individual identity versus partner’s high-status role | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing affirmative networks | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Narratives of acceptance• Restorative personal activities |
| 2 | Career ambitions versus constraints of partner’s bureaucrat career | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prioritization• Setting clear boundaries | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Synchronized career ambitions• Embracing resilience |
| 3 | Parenthood expectations versus professional growth conundrum | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seeking support from immediate family• Internal negotiation of parenting responsibilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Asserting personal values• Selective work engagement |
| 4 | Building independent networks versus adhering to bureaucratic networking norms | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prioritizing self-care | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Performative participation in networking rituals |

Source: Authors own creation

Figure 1



Source: Authors own creation (based on notation by Gioia *et al.*, 2013)

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Caption

Figure 1: First-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions (RQ1).

Personnel Review