

Wearing two crowns: A Phenomenological study on the lived experiences of female school administrators as mothers and leaders

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of female school administrators at one higher education institution in the Philippines who juggle the dual roles of educational leader and maternal responsibilities. Grounded in a qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design, the study investigates how these mothers negotiate the intersecting and often competing demands of professional authority and maternal care. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight purposely selected administrators and analyzed using thematic analysis assisted by Delve software. The findings reveal three central themes analyzed through the dual lenses of Boundary Theory and Work-Family Enrichment Theory: (1) the persistent challenges of maintaining boundaries amidst heavy workloads, personnel shortages, and emotional exhaustion; (2) the profound impact of professional responsibilities on parenting, which leads to the bleeding of leadership behaviors into domestic interactions alongside a positive enrichment of their professional drive; and (3) the cognitive and emotional processes of "making sense" of their dual lives, achieved through resilient pragmatism, faith, and a strategic redefinition of success that positions career renunciation as an act of maternal agency. The study concludes that while the tension between these "two crowns" is significant, female administrators actively synthesize these domains to cultivate a distinct, hybridized leadership style rooted in empathy and adaptability. These insights underscore the critical need for higher education institutions to implement structural support systems, such as flexible work arrangements, systematic workload audits, and localized mental health initiatives, to sustain the well-being and retention of mother-leaders. Keywords: Educational Leadership, Motherhood, Boundary Spillover, Work-Family Enrichment, Female Administrators

RESUMO

Este estudo explora as experiências vividas por mulheres em cargos de gestão educacional em uma instituição de ensino superior nas Filipinas, que conciliam os papéis de líderes educacionais e as responsabilidades maternas. Baseado em um delineamento de pesquisa fenomenológica descritiva e qualitativa, o estudo investiga como essas mães lidam com as demandas concomitantes — e frequentemente conflitantes — da autoridade profissional e do cuidado materno. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas em profundidade com oito gestoras selecionadas intencionalmente e analisados utilizando a análise temática com o auxílio do software Delve. Os resultados revelam três temas centrais, analisados sob a dupla perspectiva da Teoria das Fronteiras (*Boundary Theory*) e da Teoria do Enriquecimento Trabalho-Família: (1) os desafios persistentes para manter fronteiras em meio a cargas de trabalho excessivas, escassez de pessoal e exaustão emocional; (2) o profundo impacto das responsabilidades profissionais na maternidade, resultando na transposição de comportamentos de liderança para as interações domésticas, paralelamente a um enriquecimento positivo de sua motivação profissional; e (3) os processos cognitivos e emocionais de atribuição de sentido às suas vidas duplas, alcançados por meio de um pragmatismo resiliente, da fé e de uma redefinição estratégica do sucesso, que posiciona a renúncia à carreira como um ato de agência materna. O estudo conclui que, embora a tensão entre essas "duas coroas" seja significativa, as gestoras sintetizam ativamente esses domínios para cultivar um estilo de liderança distinto e híbrido, fundamentado na empatia e na adaptabilidade. Essas constatações ressaltam a necessidade crítica de as instituições de ensino superior implementarem sistemas de apoio estrutural — como regimes de trabalho flexíveis, auditorias sistemáticas de carga de trabalho e iniciativas locais de saúde mental — para assegurar o bem-estar e a retenção dessas líderes que também são mães. Palavras-chave: Liderança Educacional, Maternidade, Transbordamento de Fronteiras, Enriquecimento Trabalho-Família, Mulheres em Cargos de Gestão.

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Introduction

Globally, the higher institution academic landscape and its highest authority of leadership were predominantly male dominated (Correa et al., 2025). In the 2024 report, women comprised about 30% of leaders in higher education (HolonIQ & QS 2024), however, the contemporary higher educational sphere has witnessed a paradigm shift, that is, women increasingly joining the administrative domain.

In the Philippine context, higher education institutions mirror these global trends; data from the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) indicates that out of over 2,100 higher education institutions, only about 39% are led by women (Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2016). However, more recent evaluations reveal a persistent glass ceiling. While female representation at the mid-management level nears parity—averaging 47.92% in recent regional studies of State Universities and Colleges—women remain significantly underrepresented in top executive and strategic roles (Tugonon & Adlawan, 2025).

This reflects broader regional trends where up to 80% of apex university executive positions are still occupied by men (Manimtim & Perez, 2021). These women are tasked with steering educational institutions through complex modern challenges, requiring immense dedication, strategic vision, and emotional intelligence. Yet, for many of these female administrators, their institutional authority represents only one facet of their daily reality; the other is defined by the profound, lived experience of motherhood and its accompanying responsibilities.

The intersection of academia and motherhood is fraught with well-documented systemic challenges. Research indicates that parenthood disproportionately impacts women's academic and professional trajectories. For instance, studies show that 43% of female academics and scientists leave full-time employment after having their first child, driven by the severe 'productivity penalty' associated with motherhood and a lack of systemic support for work-life reconciliation (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2019; Jones & Floyd, 2023). They are often caught in a societal tug-of-war, pressured to conform to the "ideal worker" norm in their institutions while simultaneously striving to meet the exhausting expectation of being the "perfect mother" at home.

This study is grounded in the broader context of women's lived experiences in educational leadership worldwide. Across countries and cultures, researchers have examined the struggles female leaders face as they pursue professional goals while managing family life. Within the Philippine landscape, this friction is deeply tied to an ongoing cultural shift; as Abiera (2024) notes, the steady influx of women into the labor force fundamentally challenges the traditional Filipino adage, "Ang ina ang ilaw ng tahanan" (The mother is the light of the home). This evolution has transformed motherhood from a strictly domestic, stay-at-home role into a dynamic, multi-faceted philosophy that includes working professionals and mothers

who must entrust childcare to others during working hours. Consequently, when female academics ascend to executive roles, they are not merely managing workplace tasks; they are actively renegotiating the deep-seated cultural philosophy of what it means to be a mother in the modern Philippines.

Expanding this discourse globally, in Ghana, for instance, Yeng et al. (2024) found that gender stereotyping and resistance from colleagues hinder women's leadership opportunities. Leadership coaching has been identified as an effective tool to help women navigate these challenges and maintain work-life balance (Dzingwa & Terblanche, 2024). Despite progress, the "motherhood penalty" continues to affect women's career advancement, with systemic biases limiting their access to leadership roles (Torres et al., 2024). In higher education, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, even when they hold similar qualification profiles to men (Meza-Mejia et al., 2023). Similarly, Kazak (2022) highlighted the barriers faced by female teachers aspiring to administrative posts, while Edaño et al. (2025) emphasized how higher education intentionally builds women's confidence and adaptability in male-dominated academic workplaces.

In Asia, research continues to shed light on how social expectations, family responsibilities, and professional aspirations shape women's leadership journeys. Across the region, women remain underrepresented in leadership, particularly in education and other male dominated sectors. Boche (2022) reported that the pressures of the COVID 19 pandemic intensified work family imbalance among female leaders in higher education.

Westover (2024) highlighted the positive impact of flexible work arrangements and caregiving support on women's job satisfaction and retention. In Israel, Weisberger et al. (2025) documented teacher mothers' growing work family conflict during the pandemic, calling for policy reform. Similarly, S, N. S. K., and Talwar (2024) underscored the emotional strain experienced by working mothers and the urgent need for better emotional and institutional support. In Indonesia, Pratama et al. (2024) found that female principals in South Sumatra rely on personal resilience and strategic coping mechanisms to navigate their professional challenges. Together, these studies emphasized the necessity of systemic support, policy improvements, and cultural change to empower women in leadership.

Bringing the focus to the Philippine context, female leaders in education also face the ongoing challenge of balancing their dual roles. Encila and Madrigal (2021) examined how solo parent administrators manage their duties through time management and social support systems. Espartinez (2022) found that academic mothers in higher education experienced tension between being ideal professionals and attentive mothers, worsened by the lack of institutional support during the pandemic. Similarly, Canson and Caelian (2024) highlighted the struggles of teacher mothers in Santa Rosa, Laguna, who needed better stress management and stronger support networks. In Ozamiz City, Kazak (2022) noted that school administrators

faced significant barriers in integrated schools, while Najera and Gearlan (2021) discussed how Catholic school leaders balanced faith based leadership with real world educational challenges.

At Marikina Polytechnic College, female school administrators experience unique challenges in fulfilling their leadership roles while managing household responsibilities. These challenges are shaped by societal expectations, gender biases, and the constant negotiation between personal and professional duties. Understanding their experiences is vital for several reasons. First, it reveals how social and familial pressures affect women's leadership and professional growth. Second, it provides insights that can help institutions like Marikina Polytechnic College create stronger support systems for female administrators to thrive both at work and at home. Finally, it underscores the importance of inclusive policies that acknowledge women's dual responsibilities and promote healthier work life balance. By capturing the lived experiences of these women, this study aims to contribute meaningful perspectives on leadership, gender roles, and work life integration within the Philippine educational landscape.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically anchored in the integration of Greenhaus and Powell's (2006) Work-Family Enrichment Theory and Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate's (2000) Boundary Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a robust dual lens for examining how individuals create operational margins between distinct social roles while concurrently leveraging the positive, bidirectional transfer of resources between those domains.

Boundary Theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) posits that individuals establish cognitive, physical, and behavioral perimeters to navigate the micro-transitions between highly differentiated roles, such as corporate administrator and parent. When these perimeters weaken under heavy institutional workloads, 'boundary bleeding' occurs, causing behavioral patterns from one domain to spill into the other.

Conversely, Work-Family Enrichment Theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) shifts the focus from structural friction to positive spillover, asserting that skills, psychological capital, and values cultivated within one sphere directly enhance performance, empathy, and effectiveness within the alternative sphere.

The 'Two Crowns' paradigm expands these established frameworks by addressing a conceptual gap regarding high-status identity intersectionality in higher education. First, while Boundary Theory treats roles as segmented spaces to be managed, the 'Two Crowns' metaphor conceptualizes motherhood and academic leadership as concurrent positions of apex gravity and systemic honor that cannot be cleanly separated. Second, this study advances Enrichment Theory by demonstrating that the cross-domain transfer is not merely transactional (e.g., transferring a skill); rather, it is transformative.

The crowns melt together, showing that maternal empathy fundamentally redefines institutional governance, while administrative precision restructures domestic management.

Ultimately, this integrated framework positions the dual realities of female executives not as competing deficits, but as a synthesized, hybridized matrix of compassionate authority.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research approach to better understand the lived experiences of female school administrators who are also mothers at Marikina Polytechnic College. This approach was chosen because it allowed for an in-depth understanding of how participants experience and make meaning of their dual roles as educational leaders and mothers.

The researchers followed an exploratory approach, using one-on-one, in-depth interviews guided by semi-structured questions, enabling participants to openly share their personal narratives in a respectful and supportive environment. Themes and meanings were allowed to emerge naturally from the data, which were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to challenges, strengths, and coping strategies. This approach ensured that the participants' voices remained central while providing a holistic and empathetic understanding of how they balance their responsibilities as both leaders and mothers.

Description of Respondent

The participants in this study are female school administrators from Marikina Polytechnic College who are also mothers. These individuals have unique lived experiences that reflect the intersection of educational leadership and motherhood, making them well-positioned to provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling was employed to intentionally select participants whose roles and personal experiences align with the focus of the study. This sampling approach is especially suitable for phenomenological research, which emphasizes the depth and richness of lived experiences rather than the number of participants (Sauro, 2021).

To be eligible, participants must meet the following criteria:

1. Be female and a mother, whether actively parenting or having already raised their children;
2. Be currently serving or have previously served in a formal school leadership position at Marikina Polytechnic College, such as Dean, Vice President, Director, Department Head, or Coordinator, regardless of the length of service;
3. Have held full administrative responsibilities and not merely assistant or support roles;
4. Be willing to participate in a guided, in-depth interview and openly share their lived experiences.

Women who have only served in assistant positions without full administrative responsibilities, those who are not mothers, and individuals unwilling to participate in the reflective interview process are excluded from the study. An initial estimate of eight (8) participants was identified, with the final number determined based on data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews.

Participants were carefully selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus. Prior to participation, all respondents were provided with informed consent forms outlining the purpose of the study, how their information would be kept confidential, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Scope and Delimitations

To preserve the conceptual depth and contextual homogeneity essential to descriptive phenomenology, this study was explicitly delimited to female administrators within a single Higher Education Institution (HEI) campus. Higher education administrative environments possess distinct structural complexities—such as navigating tri-focal functions (instruction, research, and extension), managing institutional audit backlogs, and enduring extended off-hour obligations—that differentiate them from basic education settings.

Furthermore, while the participants' demographic profiles varied regarding the number and developmental age of their children, these factors were treated as fluid dimensions of the overarching phenomenon rather than strict exclusionary variables. The study bounded its scope to the shared essence of navigating professional authority and maternal care simultaneously, recognizing that whether an administrator is actively parenting toddlers or maintaining maternal bonds with adult children, the psychological weight of managing "two crowns" remains structurally present. By keeping these parameters open, the study captured a holistic spectrum of the maternal-leadership lifecycle within the specific, high-stress ecology of a Philippine state college

The Researcher's Role and Reflexivity

The research team for this study possesses a dual-layered dynamic, comprising student researchers and a supervising faculty member who served as the research adviser. This structural composition presented distinct operational advantages and unique reflexivity challenges that required careful navigation.

The student researchers approached the data collection from an outsider-within perspective. Lacking direct administrative or professional ties to the participants, the student researchers provided a neutral, non-threatening space during the semi-structured interviews. This effectively mitigated power asymmetries and social desirability bias, allowing the school administrators to speak openly about their vulnerabilities, structural backlogs, and emotional exhaustion without fearing institutional repercussions or professional judgment. Conversely, the supervising faculty adviser provided essential insider contextual knowledge, ensuring that

the structural nuances of the institution's administrative ecology were accurately captured and interpreted during the thematic analysis.

To mitigate potential biases stemming from the faculty member's peer relationships with the participants and the student researchers' academic positionality, the team strictly adhered to the phenomenological practice of bracketing. Prior to data collection, the entire team engaged in collaborative reflexivity sessions to document and actively shelf pre-conceived assumptions regarding administrative burdens and the motherhood responsibilities.

To guarantee that the data remained grounded solely in the participants' authentic narratives, the faculty adviser did not conduct the primary interviews, thereby ensuring the participants felt unburdened by peer dynamics. Furthermore, a strict audit trail was maintained: transcriptions and initial code generations were independently executed by the student researchers using *Delve* software, cross-examined by the team during peer debriefings, and subjected to rigorous member-checking, where participants validated their verbatim transcripts to confirm that the final themes genuinely mirrored their lived experiences.

Table 1.

Participants of the Study

Participant	College Specialization
A	Academic Program Chair
B	Academic Program Coordinator
C	Director
D	Director
E	Executive Board Officer
F	Director
G	Functional Unit Coordinator
H	Unit Head

Data Collection

The researcher secured formal approval from female school administrators who were also mothers and courteously invited them to join the study through personal outreach and written consent.

Recruitment occurred with empathy, highlighting that their experiences were valuable and would be treated with confidentiality. One-on-one, in-depth interviews were then held at times and locations that were convenient for each participant, whether in school offices or in quiet cafés after work.

These discussions, guided by semi-structured questions, were documented with permission and subsequently transcribed to preserve the authenticity of their voices.

Each story gathered was more than just data; it served as a glimpse into the daily balancing act of motherhood and leadership, shared with resilience, honesty, strength, and heart.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the commencement of data collection, the study's research protocol, interview guide, and participant recruitment strategies were submitted to and officially cleared by the institutional research ethics committee of the higher education institution. A formal Research Ethics Certificate was officially secured before proceeding with any data gathering activities, under Clearance Certificate Number: 2025-UG-006.

All selected female administrators were issued formal Participant Information Sheets and written Informed Consent Forms, explicitly emphasizing that participation was entirely voluntary and that they retained the right to withdraw from the study at any juncture without institutional or professional repercussions. To guarantee absolute anonymity and data security, all direct identifiers were stripped from the narratives, and alphanumeric pseudonyms (e.g., Participant A, Participant B) were assigned to the respondents. To further safeguard their identities, institutional titles presented in reporting matrices were highly generalized to ensure participants remain completely unidentifiable to their immediate colleagues.

All digital audio files, verbatim transcripts, and coding matrices were encrypted and stored in a password-protected cloud repository accessible exclusively to the primary research team, strictly complying with the statutory mandates of the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). Physical field notes were secured in a locked cabinet and will be completely destroyed via secure shredding alongside the permanent deletion of digital assets six months after publication. These rigorous programmatic measures reflect the researchers' deep respect for the trust and psychological safety of the participants throughout the empirical process.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

To capture the essence of the participants' lived experiences, the qualitative data were scrutinized using a rigorous, step-by-step thematic analysis framework, systematically executed across six distinct phases using *Delve* online qualitative analysis software to manage the dataset:

Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data. The student researchers transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. The research team then read and re-read the transcripts multiple times while listening to the original audio to ensure absolute accuracy and complete immersion in the narratives.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes. Open coding was systematically applied line-by-line. Meaningful structural units, statements, and psychological expressions regarding workloads, parenting spillovers, and coping strategies were tagged with conceptual labels.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes. The generated codes were organized and clustered into broader, over-arching thematic categories that addressed the central research inquiries.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes. The candidate themes were verified against the raw text and the accumulated code pool to ensure structural harmony, refining the boundaries of each theme.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes. The team finalized the operational definitions and conceptual names for the distinct themes, which culminated in the extraction of the three core thematic paradigms (Boundaries, Priorities, and Perspective/Fulfillment).

Phase 6: Producing the Report. The finalized themes were woven into a cohesive phenomenological narrative integrated with existing literature to provide deep, conceptual insight into the "two crowns" phenomenon.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To fulfill standard criteria for qualitative trustworthiness—specifically credibility, dependability, and confirmability—the research team implemented four strict methodological safeguards:

Member-Checking: Once transcription was completed, the verbatim scripts were returned to the respective participants for validation. The administrators reviewed the texts to confirm that the transcriptions accurately captured their intended meanings and authentic voices, ensuring data credibility.

Peer Debriefing: The student researchers and the supervising faculty adviser held regular, structured debriefing sessions. During these meetings, emerging interpretations, conceptual directions, and potential blind spots were constructively challenged, ensuring that the analytical process remained ethically balanced and contextually accurate.

Inter-Coder Agreement: To establish interpretive dependability, a subset of the transcripts was independently coded by the student researchers and cross-examined by the faculty adviser. Code discrepancies were discussed until a consensus was reached, establishing

high inter-coder reliability and ensuring that coding structures were not driven by individual bias.

Audit Trail: A transparent, comprehensive audit trail was systematically maintained using *Delve* software. This archive preserved chronological records of raw interview audio, reflective bracketing logs, evolving codebooks, and thematic maps, ensuring that any external auditor can clearly trace the path from raw participant testimony to the study's final conclusions.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the phenomenological study on the lived experiences of female school administrators who are also mothers currently employed at Marikina Polytechnic College. The analysis is structured around three central themes derived from the study's research questions: (1) challenges faced by female school administrators as mothers and leaders, (2) the effect of their responsibilities at work to their maternal roles, and (3) in what ways do they make sense of their daily lives as they navigate the challenges and joys of being devoted mothers and committed leaders? Each theme is discussed in relation to existing literature to provide deeper insight into the meanings drawn from the participants' lived experiences.

Theme 1. Challenges faced by female school administrators as mothers and leaders.

The participants shared how they managed the demands of school leadership while fulfilling their roles as mothers, often experiencing conflicts between professional and family responsibilities. Most described experiencing sacrifice, health issues, exhaustion, burnout, and conflicts as they tried to manage both areas. They also shared some strategies they use to cope, including careful decision-making, planning, balancing priorities, and maintaining professionalism.

From their experiences, two key themes emerged: boundaries and strategies. These themes show how the pressure of work and family responsibilities affect their daily decisions, time management, and ability to perform well in both roles.

Table 2.*Challenges faced by female school administrators as mothers and leaders*

THEMES	Conceptual Codes & Analytical Definitions	REPRESENTATIVE RESPONSES
a. Boundaries	Role Overload & Health Constraints: The sacrifice of physical well-being, severe emotional burnout, and chronic fatigue stemming from unmitigated backlogs and a lack of administrative support staff.	<i>“Three positions, different positions, manpower, and a lot of backlogs”</i>
b. Strategies	Compartmentalized Prioritization: Deliberate cognitive planning, professional boundaries preservation, and strategic time allocation aimed at separating personal and professional spheres.	<i>“Just set the right priorities, making time for both family and professional”</i>

Boundaries

The lived experiences of the participants reveal that navigating apex administrative duties while maintaining maternal responsibilities creates significant operational and psychological friction. Under this theme, the structural dynamics of boundaries and coping strategies emerged as central to their daily realities. This subtheme explicitly illustrates what Ashforth et al. (2000) conceptualize as the challenges of "high role differentiation" paired with extreme workload demands.

The participants operate within a high-stakes institutional landscape characterized by severe personnel shortages, unmitigated backlogs, and multi-layered governance expectations, as vividly articulated by Participant A: “Three positions, different positions, manpower, and a lot of backlogs.” This structural boundary collapse experienced by the administrators due to severe personnel shortages and compounding backlogs directly corroborates the contemporary findings of Jones and Floyd (2023) and Harris et al. (2024). These scholars observed that modern higher education management environments are increasingly defined by intensification, where female executives are routinely expected to perform multi-layered institutional roles without a corresponding increase in administrative support staff.

This structural deficit forces an involuntary degradation of personal boundaries, transforming what should be a manageable professional load into a source of severe chronic exhaustion and health strain. Analyzed through Boundary Theory, these administrative burdens artificially thicken the cognitive and physical space required by the institution, making

it mathematically and emotionally difficult for the administrators to delineate between their roles. The lack of operational support forces a continuous collapse of personal boundaries.

Consequently, rather than executing seamless micro-role transitions between being an institutional leader and a mother, the participants experience severe boundary degradation, which rapidly culminates in physical sacrifice, health compromises, chronic exhaustion, and profound emotional burnout. This reality strongly mirrors the global findings of Messias et al. (2024), whose phenomenological inquiry into female higher education managers in Brazil unmasked the identical structural friction.

Messias et al. (2024) demonstrated that deep-seated gender biases and organizational barriers inherently target mother-leaders, systematically precipitating acute boundary degradation and burnout as they attempt to balance institutional manager profiles with maternal duties. By anchoring the experiences at Marikina Polytechnic College alongside these parallel Brazilian narratives, this study underscores that the systemic exhaustion Bornout and collapse of operational boundaries faced by female executives is a pervasive, cross-cultural structural phenomenon within global higher education governance.

Strategies

To counter this boundary degradation, the participants do not remain passive; instead, they engage in deliberate behavioral and cognitive work to preserve their personal margins. This is captured in their reliance on systematic decision-making, meticulous planning, and the strict maintenance of compartmentalized professionalism. As Participant B shared: *“Just set the right priorities, making time for both family and professional.”* From a theoretical standpoint, this represents an active attempt at role segmenting. By consciously mapping out temporal and spatial boundaries (e.g., allocating explicit, non-negotiable hours for family), these mother-leaders attempt to artificially control the spillover of institutional stress, allowing them to maintain high professional standards at their institution without completely sacrificing their domestic presence.

This active boundary management strongly mirrors the qualitative sociological findings of du Plessis et al. (2018), who investigated female academics in leadership positions within a South African university framework. Du Plessis et al. (2018) observed that contemporary female academic leaders increasingly desire a strict equilibrium between their private and domestic spheres, actively fighting the negative spillover model to elevate themselves above socially enforced gender restrictions. Furthermore, their research notes that the interrelated forces of re-traditionalisation (the persistence of traditional mother/wife expectations) and de-traditionalisation (breaking away into apex professional roles) heavily dictate how women structure these daily limits. By utilizing these intentional boundaries, the administrators at Marikina Polytechnic College directly resist traditional role constrictions, using agentic

prioritization to successfully execute their dual responsibilities as both modern educational executives and devoted mothers.

Theme 2. The effect of their responsibilities at work to their maternal roles.

The structural demands of educational leadership do not stop at the institutional gates; they actively shape and alter the domestic realities and parenting styles of the participants. The participants shared that their work responsibilities greatly affect their roles as mothers, often causing stress and making it hard to choose what to prioritize. Balancing their duties as leaders and as parents requires constant decision-making, especially when work goes beyond office hours. Many of them said that their jobs sometimes limit the time, attention, and energy they can give to their families, leading to hard choices. From their experiences, two key themes emerged: priorities and effects on parenting. These themes reflect how work responsibilities shape their daily maternal roles, decisions, and relationships at home.

Table 3.

Effect of work responsibilities on their maternal roles

THEMES	Conceptual Codes & Analytical Definitions	REPRESENTATIVE RESPONSES
a. Priorities	Familial Value Realignment: Navigating guilt and constrained family time by consciously centering family as the primary motivator, buffered by institutional peer support networks.	<i>"But family should come first because you are working for your family."</i>
b. Effects on Parenting	Behavioral Spillover & Boundary Bleeding: The unconscious transfer of institutional authority, leadership strategies, and pedagogical behaviors into home interactions with children.	<i>"My husband told me that I am doing to our child what I do with my students... I have to separate my teaching role..."</i>

Priorities

The necessity of managing heavy institutional workloads outside standard operational hours constantly forces these administrators into complex moral and logistical trade-offs. However, the data reveals a critical manifestation of Work-Family Enrichment Theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006): despite intense time scarcity, the participants' maternal identity

serves as a powerful psychological resource that positively recharges their professional drive. Participant B conceptualized this value alignment by stating: *“But family should come first because you are working for your family.”* Here, motherhood shifts from being a competing drain to the primary motivational anchor for leadership.

This value alignment and motivational shift directly mirror the contemporary empirical findings of Domínguez-Soto et al. (2025) on top female executives in Spain. In their qualitative study of senior corporate leaders, Domínguez-Soto et al. (2025) challenged the traditional narrative of the "motherhood penalty," explicitly introducing the model of "motherhood-work enrichment" (MWE). Their research proves that instead of acting as a barrier to career progression, concurrent motherhood and high-level manager roles serve as a catalyst for critical leadership qualities. By applying this MWE lens to the narratives at Marikina Polytechnic College, it becomes evident that maternal identity does not merely coexist with institutional authority; rather, it actively enriches it, transforming the domestic sphere into a site of profound psychological empowerment and career motivation.

Furthermore, this internal grounding is heavily reinforced by external, localized enrichment mechanisms—specifically, a robust support system of understanding co-workers who actively offer mutual aid during peak periods of institutional stress *“I am thankful to the co-workers I interact with... they help you as well”*. This collaborative peer network serves as an institutional buffer, easing the physical transitions between domains.

Effects on Parenting

A highly nuanced finding of this study is the involuntary occurrence of behavioral spillover, where the authoritative, structural, and pedagogical habits built within the administrative domain bleed heavily into domestic childcare. This is powerfully illustrated by Participant F, whose husband explicitly observed: *“I would consider myself as sometimes overstepping my boundaries because my husband told me that I am doing to our child what I do with my students.”*

So I said he is probably right; I have to separate my teaching role and teaching functions from my motherly duties.” This narrative serves as a textbook qualitative validation of Ashforth et al.’s (2000) concept of boundary bleeding. Because the cognitive schema required to run academic programs is highly agentic, assertive, and structural, administrators find it difficult to immediately deactivate this mental state when crossing the border back into the home. Recognizing this bleeding effect forces a deep, reflexive self-awareness, prompting the mother-leader to consciously adjust her behavior to ensure that her children receive nurturing maternal care rather than rigid institutional management.

This manifestation of leadership and pedagogical behaviors involuntarily "bleeding" into the domestic environment provides a clear empirical validation of Ashforth et al.’s (2000)

Boundary Theory regarding asymmetric role permeability. It also aligns closely with the regional findings of Espartinez (2022) and Larasatie and Ulifah (2023), who noted that the highly authoritative, structural schemas required to successfully steer academic programs are cognitively dominant. As a result, female educational leaders in the Philippines frequently experience difficulty instantly deactivating these executive behaviors when crossing the physical border back into the household, resulting in an unconscious carryover of institutional authority into maternal interactions.

Theme 3. Ways of Making Sense of Daily Lived Realities

The cognitive and emotional synthesis of wearing two crowns is achieved through continuous reflection, structural adjustments, and a holistic redefinition of what constitutes a successful life.

Table 4.

Ways of female school administrators make sense of their daily lives

SUBTHEMES	Conceptual Codes & Analytical Definitions	REPRESENTATIVE RESPONSES
a. Perspective	Resilient Pragmatism & Cognitive Re-anchoring: The adoption of localized, non-perfectionist strategies—including task-pacing, spiritual grounding, and emotional release—to mentally balance overlapping roles without experiencing psychological breakdown.	<i>“Do your best. Don’t pressure yourself. Take one task and role at a time. It’s okay to cry sometimes, but at the end of the day, you need to think positively and consider what can help you grow as an individual.”</i>
b. Fulfillment	Strategic Identity Restructuring & Role Subversion: Reclaiming personal margins and inner peace by consciously shifting success away from linear organizational climbing toward family presence and mental well-being, even when it requires temporary career renunciation.	<i>“Another step for me was leaving my position because of burnout. I was really, really depressed, exhausted, and thinking very negatively. After resting, I reflected for two years and realized that I had exchanged so many things that I shouldn’t have; I should have prioritized my family first.”</i>

Perspective

The participants develop a mindset of resilient pragmatism, consciously shifting away from Westernized, perfectionist definitions of work-life integration. They embrace human

limitations, rely heavily on spiritual faith, and practice cognitive pacing. This is beautifully captured in the advice shared by Participant E: *“Do your best. Don’t pressure yourself. Take one task and role at a time. It’s okay to cry sometimes, but at the end of the day, you need to think positively and consider what can help you grow as an individual.”*

The participants' reliance on an incremental, task-by-task pragmatic mindset and spiritual anchoring as essential coping mechanisms directly echoes the observations of Encila and Madrigal (2021) and Pratama et al. (2024) regarding institutional navigating styles in Southeast Asia. Within the Philippine academic workspace, when formal structural support systems are lacking, female leaders routinely rely on localized, internal psychological capital—specifically faith and intentional self-compassion—to process daily emotional fatigue and maintain professional consistency without succumbing to immediate psychological distress.

Theoretically, this demonstrates a highly evolved form of cognitive border management. Instead of fighting the overlapping nature of their roles, these women expand their psychological capital (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). They view moments of vulnerability such as crying not as structural failures, but as necessary, healthy emotional releases that build long-term individual and professional growth.

Fulfillment

Analyzed deeply through Boundary Theory (Ashforth et al., 2000), Participant H’s temporary exit from leadership represents a radical, agentic choice of 'Structural Boundary Reclamation' rather than a mechanical failure to cope. Faced with irreversible boundary bleeding, her two-year reflective pause served as a necessary space for existential identity restructuring. During this period, the 'leadership crown' was intentionally renounced to protect the 'maternal crown' from total depletion.

This aligns with Greenhaus and Powell’s (2006) broader concept of value-driven realignment, yet it expands the theory by showing that enrichment is not always an active state of successful juggling. True fulfillment and self-worth for these female executives are frequently recovered only after confronting structural breaking points, forcing them to deliberately step away from organizational power to realign their priorities around family presence, inner peace, and authentic self-preservation.

A foundational theoretical contribution of this study emerges in how these women achieve true fulfillment by subverting traditional institutional expectations of endless upward career climbing. For some participants, achieving inner peace required a radical, structural boundary choice: the deliberate, temporary renunciation of their leadership crowns. As Participant H profoundly disclosed: *“Another step for me was leaving my position because of burnout. I was really, really depressed, exhausted, and thinking very negatively. After*

resting, I reflected for two years and realized that I had exchanged so many things that I shouldn't have; I should have prioritized my family first."

This narrative deeply expands Greenhaus and Powell's (2006) Work-Family Enrichment model. Traditional paradigms often treat career continuity as the ultimate marker of successful role balance. However, Participant H's two-year period of deep reflection demonstrates that strategic renunciation—stepping away from organizational power to reclaim familial boundaries—is a profound act of agency and identity protection. True fulfillment is achieved when the individual stops trying to force incompatible, resource-draining institutional structures to align with maternal values, choosing instead to redefine success around family presence, mental well-being, and authentic self-worth.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study examined the lived realities of eight female school administrators at Marikina Polytechnic College who navigate the concurrent operational and domestic demands of educational leadership and motherhood. The qualitative findings demonstrate that occupying top-tier institutional roles yields persistent structural friction, characterized by heavy workloads, systemic time scarcity, and chronic emotional fatigue. These administrative burdens frequently extend beyond conventional office hours, disrupting household routines and precipitating acute boundary degradation.

Nevertheless, the data unmasks a highly sophisticated capacity for agency among these mother-leaders. Rather than remaining passive subjects of role conflict, the participants engage in deliberate behavioral and cognitive border management, utilizing meticulous planning, task segmentation, and institutional peer networks to safeguard their domestic margins.

When analyzed through the dual lenses of Boundary Theory and Work-Family Enrichment Theory, the 'Two Crowns' metaphor emerges as a transformative conceptual model rather than a simple narrative description. The study concludes that the relationship between executive educational governance and maternal identity is fundamentally reciprocal and symbiotic. While the rigid, asset-draining structures of higher education can trigger severe burnout—sometimes requiring strategic career renunciation for identity self-preservation—the psychological capital, profound empathy, and emotional intelligence cultivated within the maternal sphere actively enrich and humanize institutional leadership practices. Ultimately, this study shifts the academic discourse away from a deficit-based 'work-life balance' model toward a framework of identity synthesis.

To sustain the professional longevity and well-being of mother-administrators, higher education institutions must dismantle rigid ideal-worker expectations and proactively

implement structural safeguards, including workload audits, systemic flexibilities, and localized mental health blueprints.

Implications

Based on the findings of the study, educational institutions are encouraged to create supportive environments that recognize the realities faced by female school administrators who balance leadership and motherhood by offering flexible work arrangements, manageable workloads, clear role expectations, and access to mentoring, peer support, and counseling services to reduce stress and emotional exhaustion.

Female school administrators are encouraged to practice self-compassion by setting healthy boundaries, prioritizing responsibilities, and making time for rest and self-care while drawing strength from their families, colleagues, and fellow women leaders to sustain resilience and fulfillment. Future researchers are encouraged to further explore the lived experiences of women balancing leadership and motherhood across different contexts to better understand how support systems, workplace culture, and family dynamics shape their ability to manage challenges, find meaning, and achieve balance in both their personal and professional lives.

Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

The authors declare that GeminiAI was used to assist with language translation, grammar editing, and formatting. All core ideas, research design, data analysis, and scholarly interpretations were independently developed and critically reviewed by the authors. The content and conclusions remain their sole responsibility.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared the absence of any conflict of interest among the authors, reviewers, and editors.

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