

“Glass ceiling, work–family conflict, job strain, and intention to quit among female employees in the Vietnamese public sector”

AUTHORS

Tien Chau Thuy Huynh 
Han Nu Ngoc Ton 

Nhan Trong Nguyen 
Thy Thi Bao Huynh 

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Tien Chau Thuy Huynh, Ph.D. Student, Researcher, School of Economics, Finance and Accounting, International University, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Han Nu Ngoc Ton, Dr., Lecturer, School of Business, International University, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. (Corresponding author)

Nhan Trong Nguyen, Bachelor Student, School of Economics, Finance and Accounting, International University, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Thy Thi Bao Huynh, Master Student, School of Economics, Finance and Accounting, International University, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.



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Tien Chau Thuy Huynh (Vietnam), Han Nu Ngoc Ton (Vietnam),
Nhan Trong Nguyen (Vietnam), Thy Thi Bao Huynh (Vietnam)

GLASS CEILING, WORK–FAMILY CONFLICT, JOB STRAIN, AND INTENTION TO QUIT AMONG FEMALE EMPLOYEES IN THE VIETNAMESE PUBLIC SECTOR

Abstract

This study explores the relationship among glass ceiling, work–family conflict, job strain, and intention to quit among female employees in the Vietnamese public sector. Data were gathered through a mass survey of 635 respondents in Ho Chi Minh City and An Giang province by utilizing a non-probability sampling method and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicate that glass ceiling is positively associated with both work–family conflict and intention to quit, while work–family conflict is positively connected with job strain. Job strain is positively associated with intention to quit. Work–family conflict shows no meaningful direct association with intention to quit. However, the results show that job strain mediates the association between work–family conflict and intention to quit, whereas work–family conflict does not significantly mediate the link between glass ceiling and intention to quit. Multigroup analysis reveals that the direct link between glass ceiling and intention to quit is significant only for female employees with children, women in leadership roles, and married women, but not for women without children, non-leaders, or single and divorced women. These findings contribute to the literature on gendered organizations and job strain by showing how structural career barriers and work–family pressures relate to the turnover intentions of female public sector employees in an emerging economy and offer practical implications for retention-oriented human resource policies in Vietnamese public organizations.

Keywords

glass ceiling, work–family conflict, job strain, intention to quit, female employee, public sector, Vietnam

JEL Classification

J16, J28, J45, J63, D23

INTRODUCTION

The Vietnamese public sector provides administrative and social services and employs a large number of highly skilled women in education, healthcare, and public administration. Recent studies show that women in Vietnam still face challenges in achieving leadership positions and balancing work and family responsibilities, especially within hierarchical government agencies, despite the government's commitment to gender equality (Mate et al., 2019; Maheshwari, 2023). In this regard, examining the links between perceived glass ceiling, work–family conflict, job strain, and intention to quit among female public employees can provide useful implications for gender equality policies and human resource management in the Vietnamese public sector.

The glass ceiling is a key term employed to understand gender inequality in organizations. It is an intangible but persistent barrier that hinders women from obtaining top leadership roles despite possessing the appropriate skills and experience (A. Khan & N. Khan, 2022).

Contemporary literature has highlighted gender-specific challenges in contemporary public sector settings, such as work–family conflict among young female politicians and some professional groups (Johansson Sevä & Öun, 2019; Verge & Pastor, 2018; Labrague, 2021; Mumu et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there has been little research on the experiences of women professionals and employees at the administrative and local levels in the public sector with respect to glass ceiling conditions and the relationship of these beliefs with their work and career outcomes.

The study uses gendered organizations theory to identify the glass ceiling as a phenomenon beyond individual perceptions of inequity. The gendered organizations theory provides a lens to understand how gender inequalities are embedded in organizational structures, such as inequalities in decision-making authority, career progression, and biased expectations about women's roles (Acker, 1990; Balmer et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2012). Although its application in public sector settings is still limited, this perspective has considerable potential for understanding glass ceiling and work–family conflict (Varasteh et al., 2022; Yildiz et al., 2021). Moreover, most of the existing studies on gender-based discrimination of female employees focus on specific occupational groups, such as nurses, and cannot fully explain gender-based discrimination for a broad range of female employees in the public sector (Labrague, 2021; Mumu et al., 2021).

This study uses the job demands–control (JDC) model to explain the stress-related consequences of these circumstances. In the JDC model, strain is most likely to occur when employees face high demands and have limited control over their work (Wu et al., 2023). The present study conceptualizes work–family conflict as a demand-related stressor that exacerbates psychological strain. Job strain is a key mechanism linking role conflict and intention to quit. The use of the theory of gendered organizations combined with the JDC model allows for studying the structural career barriers in relation to the daily work–family experiences of female employees and their intentions to leave the workforce.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The idea of gendered organizations, developed by Acker (1990), explains how workplace practices reproduce gendered patterns of inequality inside organizations. According to the notion of gendered organizations, organizational structures, norms, and practices in everyday life are not gender-neutral but consistently reproduce uneven chances for men and women (Acker, 1990). From this perspective, the glass ceiling is a structural hurdle ingrained in promotion systems, leadership standards, and decision-making processes that prevent women from succeeding despite being qualified and experienced. This lens is particularly relevant for understanding how female employees perceive career impediments in institutional environments, such as the public sector. In this context, the glass ceiling in the current study represents perceived structural barriers that impede women from obtaining higher-level positions and long-term professional advancement. Women who face persistent barriers to career progression are more likely

to consider leaving for more equitable workplaces, particularly when they perceive limited opportunities for advancement and experience biased evaluation or leadership practices (Huffman & Olson, 2017; Gould et al., 2023). This body of work demonstrates how organizational norms and power dynamics sustain the glass ceiling and shape women's career paths, offering an essential framework for studying glass ceiling effects on work experiences and withdrawal intentions (Taparia & Lenka, 2022; Mastracci & Arreola, 2016). This study uses gendered organizations theory to frame the glass ceiling as a phenomenon of structurally male-biased organizational structures rather than as a purely individual experience. In this approach, increased perceptions of the glass ceiling are expected to be related to higher levels of work–family conflict and stronger intention to quit among female employees in the public sector.

Work–family conflict is a type of interrole conflict that occurs when demands from the work domain interfere with the family domain (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Boakye et al. (2022) found a constant

positive link between work demands and work-family conflict, indicating that heavier workloads, time pressure, and role expectations are more likely to cause conflict between work and family duties. Women who face glass ceiling conditions may encounter additional role demands, needing to continually prove professional ability to overcome career restrictions while also meeting family commitments, hence increasing work-family conflict (Shaaban, 2025; Sidani, 2016). Individual and contextual factors also impact work-family conflict; according to Nilufer Azeez and Priyadarshini (2018), women's willingness to perform mandatory job responsibilities with inadequate support can increase work-family conflict. Thomas and Ganster (1995) found that conflicts between work and home duties can cause stress and weaken both mental and physical health. Negative outcomes such as emotional instability and discomfort increase perceived work-family conflict (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Work-family conflict is also acknowledged as a professional constraint associated with family responsibilities such as childcare, eldercare, travel, and personal commitments (Orser et al., 2012).

Gender variations in work-family conflict have been widely reported in the literature, with male managers reporting fewer challenges connected to work-family conflict than female managers (Zhao & Yang, 2021). This may be partly because women are less likely to set rigid boundaries between work responsibilities and family roles (Islam et al., 2020). In many Asian nations, female employees frequently have little familial and societal support for their professional pursuits and higher job stress, consistent with Acker's (1990) gendered organizations approach (Sperlich & Geyer, 2015). Overall, previous research has supported a positive association between work-family conflict and job strain (Armstrong et al., 2015). Three primary sources of work-family conflict are identified: time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based conflicts (Nasharudin & Rui, 2024). Morin et al. (2023) also discovered a connection between such conflict and psychological suffering, as well as a tendency to leave the organization. Building on this literature, the present study views work-family conflict as a significant role-based outcome of perceived glass ceiling circumstances and an important predictor of job strain and intention to quit among female public sector employees.

Karasek (1979) asserts that job strain arises when high job demands coincide with low job control or flexibility. Job strain has been linked to symptoms of mental stress, including emotional tiredness, physical health difficulties, and psychological health concerns. Research suggests that job strain among managers and professionals stems from both internal and external factors, such as complex roles, diverse job demands, wider spans of control, limited support, and challenges in managing work in resource- and budget-constrained situations (Wong & Spence Laschinger, 2015). A large body of research in the healthcare sector shows that nurses report higher job strain in positions with high workload demands (Bourbonnais et al., 2006; Landsbergis, 1988; Schmidt & Diestel, 2011).

The job demand-control (JDC) model explains these tendencies, proposing that psychological strain is most prevalent when employees encounter high expectations with limited control. Job demands include workload, time pressure, physical and mental demands, and other aspects of work that are associated with stress (Heponiemi et al., 2016; Karasek, 1979). Job control is the level of autonomy employees have in their job, such as flexibility, decision-making, and control over how the work is done (Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997). Greater job control can help to decrease stress, boost motivation, and lower tension (Parker, 2014), which can result in improved mental health. Morin et al. (2023) show that high job demands are associated with increased psychological distress, including job strain and work-family conflict. Furthermore, job control refers to the degree of employee autonomy in their work, including job flexibility, decision-making authority, and the ability to regulate work approaches (Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997). By helping employees manage stress better, increasing motivation, and reducing tension, high job control contributes to improved mental well-being (Parker, 2014). Employees who experience complex job strain and limited job autonomy may feel stuck in their roles, with few prospects for career growth or reduced professional demands. Many women choose to leave their companies to seek more equitable employment elsewhere (Gould et al., 2023). From this perspective, work-family conflict may be defined as a work-related demand that adds to overall strain,

particularly when autonomy and support are low. The complexity of job strain and limited job control might make employees feel stuck in their positions, see few chances for professional advancement or lessened demands, and so be more inclined to contemplate leaving the business (Gould et al., 2023). Consistent with the JDC model, the current study conceptualizes job strain as a proximal psychological state linking work–family conflict to intention to quit.

Intention to quit refers to the workers' conscious willingness to leave their organization and is considered a proximal predictor of actual turnover. Multiple factors, including job strain and work unhappiness, influence intention to quit (Kiaye & Singh, 2013). Previous studies have demonstrated that women who experience the glass ceiling are more likely to have higher intentions to leave, especially when they consider the promotion processes and leadership structures to be prejudiced (Balasubramanian & Lathabhavan, 2017; Downes et al., 2014). Although several studies evaluated the glass ceiling–intention to quit associations through mediating variables, such as work–family conflict, loss of hope, and animosity (Javadizadeh et al., 2024; Noor et al., 2024), direct impacts of the glass ceiling on intention to quit have been rarely studied, particularly in public sector contexts.

Several studies have found a strong positive association between work–family conflict and intention to quit (Allen et al., 2000; Amstad et al., 2011). For example, Haar et al. (2012) show a significant relationship between both time- and strain-based work–family conflict dimensions and resignation intentions. Babic et al. (2015) establish a direct link between work–family conflict and intention to resign among hospital personnel. Wong and Spence Laschinger (2015) and Heponiemi et al. (2016) show that job strain is positively and directly associated with intention to quit and that this relationship can be indirectly mediated by burnout and cynicism. An increase in job strain during times of personnel shortages and high workloads leads to increased resignation intentions (Heponiemi et al., 2016). Based on this information, the present study conceptualizes intention to quit as a withdrawal outcome that is affected by structural career barriers of the glass ceiling as well as psychological strain caused by work–family demands.

Beyond the direct relationships, the mediating effects of work–family conflict and job strain warrant further investigation (Fontes et al., 2025). Babic and Hansez (2021) explain the glass ceiling and intention to quit association as a possible mediation role of work–family conflict in the relationship between glass ceiling views and intention to quit, because women who face obstacles to their careers are more likely to experience increased role conflict. However, empirical evidence on this pathway remains inconsistent and appears to be context-sensitive, particularly in public sector settings, where formal regulations and limits can affect both career development and work–family experiences (A. Khan & N. Khan, 2022). According to the JDC model, work–family conflict is a job requirement that can exhaust personal resources and lead to job strain as an intermediate psychological state before employees decide to leave the organization (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). However, the sequential pathway of work–family conflict increasing job strain and job strain increasing intention to quit has been empirically supported in healthcare settings (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Morin et al., 2023) but remains underexplored among female public sector personnel in emerging nations such as Vietnam.

Drawing on gendered organizations theory and the JDC model, the present study posits that the glass ceiling is related to work–family conflict and intention to quit, work–family conflict is associated with job strain and intention to quit, and job strain serves as a mediator linking work–family conflict and intention to quit. The importance of this analysis is due to its focus on female employees in the Vietnamese public sector (Mate et al., 2019; Maheshwari, 2023). It is based on the conceptual framework proposed by Babic and Hansez (2021), which includes four constructs: glass ceiling, work–family conflict, job strain, and intention to quit.

This study aims to examine the relationships among glass ceiling, work–family conflict, job strain, and intention to quit among female employees in the Vietnamese public sector. Specifically, it examines the direct effects of glass ceiling on work–family conflict and intention to quit; the direct effects of work–family conflict on job strain and intention to quit; the direct effect

Source: The conceptual framework was developed based on Babic and Hansez (2021), Elacqua et al. (2009), Geurts et al. (2005), and Hom and Griffeth (1991).

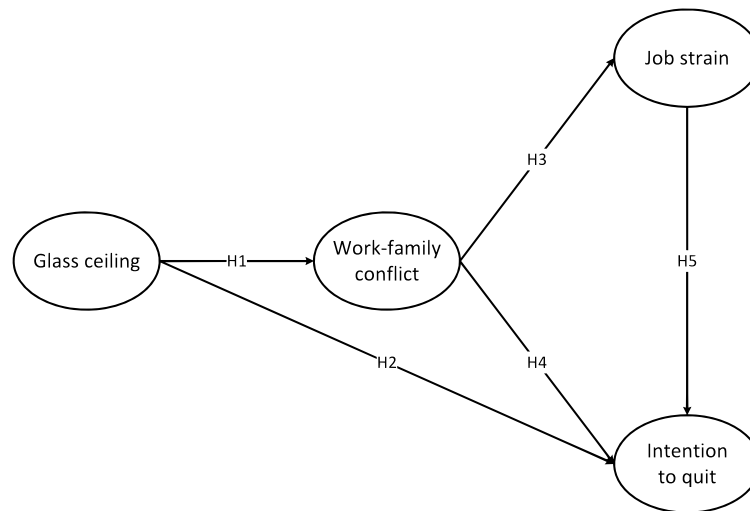


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework

of job strain on intention to quit; the mediating roles of work–family conflict and job strain; and subgroup differences by parental status, leadership position, and marital status.

The study also explores the extent to which these connections change across subgroups defined by parental status, leadership position, and marital status.

The theoretical research model is presented in Figure 1, and the proposed research hypotheses are as follows:

- H1: The glass ceiling has a significantly positive impact on work–family conflict.*
- H2: The glass ceiling has a significantly positive impact on intention to quit.*
- H2a: Work–family conflict mediates the relationship between the glass ceiling and the intention to quit.*
- H3: Work–family conflict has a significantly positive impact on job strain.*
- H4: Work–family conflict has a significantly positive impact on the intention to quit.*
- H4a: Job strain mediates the relationship between work–family conflict and intention to quit.*

H5: Job strain has a significantly positive impact on the intention to quit.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

The study employed partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS (version 4) for inferential analysis on the conceptual framework (e.g., measurement model testing, structural model testing, measurement invariance testing, and multigroup analysis). Indeed, PLS-SEM emphasizes prediction and explanation (i.e., dual purpose or causal-predictive nature) (Guenther et al., 2023 cited in Tran-Pham et al., 2025).

The reflective measurement model requires achieving internally consistent reliability and convergent validity among latent variables with Hair et al. (2019)'s recommended thresholds (e.g., reflective factor loading from and above 0.708, composite reliability (CR) from 0.7 to 0.95, average variance extracted (AVE) from and above 0.5, discriminant analysis with heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) and Fornell–Larcker criterion).

The structural model assessment includes hypothesis testing, coefficient of determination (R -squared), blindfolding (Q -squared), and effect size (f -squared). Hair et al. (2019 cited in Ngoc Ton et al., 2023, and

Tran-Pham et al., 2025) introduce the classification of *R*-squared values (i.e., small: 0.02; medium: 0.13; large: 0.26). Blindfolding (*Q*-squared) for predictive accuracy of the PLS path model should be higher than zero with three levels (i.e., small: 0.25, medium: 0.5, large: 0.5) (Hair et al., 2019). Effect size (*f*-squared) values are classified with four levels (i.e., no effect: less than 0.02; small: 0.02; medium: 0.15; large: 0.35) (Hair et al., 2019).

Common method bias is controlled through a full collinearity test using a random dummy variable to capture issues with lateral or vertical collinearity. Basically, all full collinearity variance inflation factors (full collinearity VIFs) should be below a threshold of 3.3 to be free of common method bias (Kock, 2017; Kock & Lynn, 2012 cited in Tran-Pham et al., 2025).

Multigroup analysis (MGA) in PLS-SEM is used to investigate moderation across multiple relationships in the conceptual framework and is conducted with the measurement invariance of composite models (MICOM) procedure (Cheah et al., 2020; Tran-Pham et al., 2025).

2.2. Research sample

The study employed non-probability sampling methods (e.g., purposive, quota, and snowball) to recruit female public-sector employees in Ho Chi Minh City and An Giang Province (i.e., southern Vietnam) during 2023–2024.

The first phase was conducted in November 2023 to approach female employees across Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) from all member universities, member institutes, affiliates, and functional departments.

The second phase was conducted from March to September 2024 to reach female civil servants and public employees of administrative agencies and public service units across three levels (e.g., provincial, district, and commune) in An Giang province.

The minimum sample size was calculated from two different perspectives. Firstly, Nunnally (1967) and Everitt (1975) propose the “10-times rule” (10 cases per variable); hence, the minimum sample

size should be 200, with a total of 20 observed variables/items/psychological questions (see the measurement scale in detail in Appendix A). Secondly, the minimum sample size was determined using an a priori power analysis via G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) with a 20% buffer (Hair et al., 2021). Based on a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), an alpha level of 0.05, and a power of 0.8 with 6 maximum items of one construct (i.e., the maximum number of arrows/paths pointing at any single construct in the model), the required minimum sample size should be 111. The mass survey collected 653 samples, of which 635 were valid, and 18 were deleted due to incomplete surveys, straight-liners, outliers, or inconsistent demographic information. The final valid cases of 635 satisfied the minimum sample sizes calculated above from two different perspectives.

2.3. Measurement scales

Appendix A provides detailed information on the measurement scale. There are two main types of questions in the questionnaire: demographic questions and psychological questions (i.e., answered on a five-point Likert scale). Five items from the glass ceiling are adapted from Elacqua et al. (2009). Six items of work–family conflict are adjusted from Geurts et al. (2005). Five items of job strain are modified from Babic and Hansez (2021). Four items of intention to quit are adapted from Hom and Griffeth (1991). Hence, work–family conflict has the maximum number of observed/manifest variables/items in the model.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 provides a descriptive analysis of 635 valid cases from the mass survey, classified by age, work experience, marital status, having children, being a leader, working province, and working position. The survey was conducted in one province and one city, of which the majority of surveyed female employees are in the public sector in Ho Chi Minh City and An Giang province.

Table 2 presents the reliability and convergent validity of all latent constructs based on item selection conducted in the measurement model assessment. Five items were deleted (i.e., GC2 and

Table 1. Respondent demographics

Categories	Outcomes	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 30	105	16.54
	From 30 to 40	295	46.46
	From 40 to 50	195	30.71
	Above 50	40	6.29
Working experience	From 2 to 5 years	132	20.79
	From 6 to 10 years	140	22.05
	From 11 to 20 years	275	43.31
	Above 20 years	88	13.85
Marital status	Single	151	23.78
	Married	453	71.34
	Divorced	31	4.88
Having baby	Yes	458	72.13
	No	177	27.87
Being a leader	Yes	399	62.83
	No	236	37.17
Working province	Ho Chi Minh	334	52.60
	An Giang	301	47.40
Working position	Civil servant	39	6.14
	Specialist	442	69.61
	Staff	61	9.61
	Lecturer	73	11.50
	Researcher	20	3.14
Total		635	100.00

GC4 of glass ceiling, JST1 of job strain, and IQ1 and IQ2 of intention to quit). All latent variables with retained items had factor loadings ranging from 0.75 to 0.887 and achieved the threshold (i.e., above 0.708). All latent variables had acceptable CR and AVE values (i.e., ranging from 0.708 to 0.903 and from 0.608 to 0.773, respectively) and met the thresholds (i.e., ranging from 0.7 to 0.95 and above 0.5, respectively). Table 3 and Table 4 show that the discriminant analysis satisfied the Fornell–Larcker criterion (i.e., the square root of AVE for each latent construct is higher than the off-diagonal correlation) and HTMT (i.e., all HTMT ratios were below 0.85), respectively. Hence, all latent variables had good reliability and convergent validity.

The structural model had a large effect (i.e., above 0.26) with *R*-squared values of two exogenous variables: job strain (0.444) and intention to quit (0.239). All the explanatory variables in the structural model collectively explain 44.4% and 23.9% of the variability in job strain and intention to quit, respectively (see Table 2).

All full collinearity VIFs were in the range from 1.115 to 1.925 and below the 3.3 threshold, mean-

ing they are free of common method bias (see Table 2).

Table 5 and Figure 2 show the results of hypothesis testing in the conceptual framework. The effect of the glass ceiling on work-family conflict was significantly positive ($\beta = 0.371, p \leq 0.001$). This result supports H1, indicating that higher perceptions of glass ceiling are associated with higher levels of work-family conflict. Glass ceiling had a significantly positive impact on intention to quit ($\beta = 0.240, p \leq 0.001$) (H2 is supported). Work-family conflict had a significantly positive impact on job strain ($\beta = 0.666, p \leq 0.001$). Therefore, H3 is supported, indicating that work-family conflict substantially increases job strain among employees. Unfortunately, work-family conflict had an insignificant impact on intention to quit; hence, H4 is rejected. Finally, there was a significantly positive relationship between job strain and intention to quit ($\beta = 0.325, p \leq 0.001$), supporting H5.

Table 6 demonstrates the results of mediating effects. Glass ceiling had a significantly positive impact on intention to quit with only a direct effect; work-family conflict insignificantly mediated such a causal relationship. Job strain significantly

mediated (i.e., indirect-only) the causal relationship between work–family conflict and intention to quit. According to Zhao et al. (2010), work–family conflict is considered an omitted mediator intervening in the causal relationship between the glass ceiling and intention to quit, whereas job strain is identified as a mediator consistent with the hypothesized theoretical framework.

Table 7 presents a multigroup analysis across subgroups (i.e., having a baby, being a leader, and marital status). MICOM procedures revealed partial measurement invariance across these three subgroups, as assessed by permutation testing. The glass ceiling had a significant positive impact on intention to quit among female employees with a baby/babies, consistent with the analysis of the pooled data. In contrast, such a causal relationship was insignificant among female employees

without a baby. The glass ceiling had a significant positive impact on intention to quit among female leaders, consistent with the analysis of the pooled data. In contrast, such a causal relationship was insignificant among female employees in general. The glass ceiling had a significant positive impact on intention to quit among married female employees, consistent with the analysis of the pooled data. In contrast, such a causal relationship was insignificant among single and divorced female employees. Work–family conflict had a significantly positive impact on intention to quit among female employees, contradicting the analysis of the pooled data.

Consistent with the analysis of the pooled data, the causal relationship was insignificant across various subgroups (i.e., having a baby, no baby, being a leader, single, divorced, and married).

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity of latent constructs

Construct	Code	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE	R-squared	Full collinearity VIF
Threshold		≥ 0.708		[0.7;0.95]	[0.7;0.95]	≥ 0.5		≤ 3.3
Glass ceiling	GC1	0.779	0.728	0.727	0.846	0.648		1.115
	GC3	0.830						
	GC5	0.804						
Work–family conflict	WFC1	0.750	0.871	0.872	0.903	0.608	0.137	1.837
	WFC2	0.769						
	WFC3	0.803						
	WFC4	0.790						
	WFC5	0.807						
	WFC6	0.758						
Job strain	JST2	0.763	0.814	0.817	0.878	0.643	0.444	1.925
	JST3	0.780						
	JST4	0.838						
	JST5	0.823						
Intention to quit	IQ3	0.887	0.707	0.708	0.872	0.773	0.239	1.282
	IQ4	0.871						

Note: CR = Composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted.

Table 3. Discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion)

Construct		Fornell-Larcker criterion			
		1	2	3	4
1	Glass ceiling	0.805			
2	Intention to quit	0.362	0.879		
3	Job strain	0.333	0.429	0.802	
4	Work–family conflict	0.371	0.341	0.666	0.780

Note: Bold number in the table is the square root of AVE for each latent construct.

Table 4. Discriminant validity (Heterotrait–monotrait ratio)

Construct		Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)			
		1	2	3	4
1	Glass ceiling	Criteria ≤ 0.85			
2	Intention to quit	0.501			
3	Job strain	0.432	0.566		
4	Work–family conflict	0.463	0.434	0.790	

Table 5. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Causal relationship	Estimate	Effect size (f^2)	Supported
H1	Glass ceiling $\rightarrow$ Work–family conflict	0.371***	0.159 (medium)	Yes
H2	Glass ceiling $\rightarrow$ Intention to quit	0.24***	0.064 (small)	Yes
H3	Work–family conflict $\rightarrow$ Job strain	0.666***	0.799 (large)	Yes
H4	Work–family conflict $\rightarrow$ Intention to quit	0.035	0.001 (no effect)	No
H5	Job strain $\rightarrow$ Intention to quit	0.325***	0.076 (small)	Yes

Note: *** p-value ≤ 0.001 ; ** p-value ≤ 0.01 ; * p-value ≤ 0.05 .

Table 6. Mediating effects

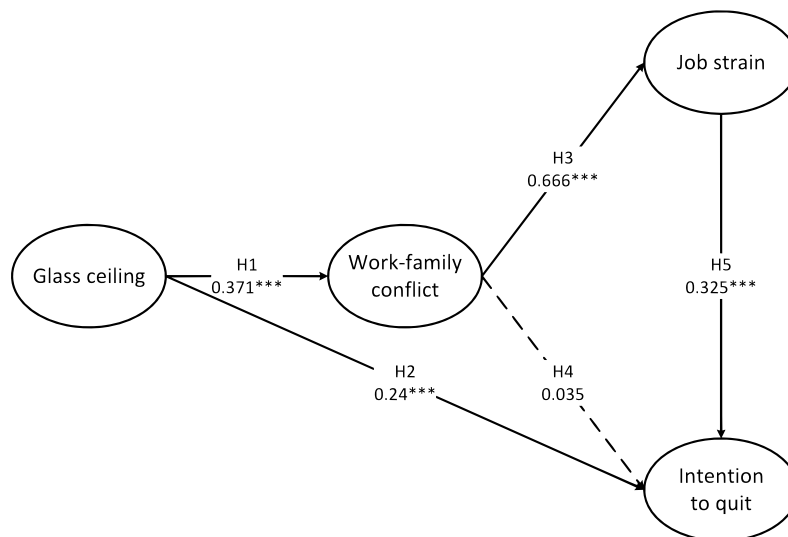
Independent variable	Mediator	Dependent variable	Indirect effect	Direct effect	Mediation type	Result
Glass ceiling	Work–family conflict	Intention to quit	0.013	0.24***	Direct-only (non-mediation)	H2a was not supported
Work–family conflict	Job strain	Intention to quit	0.217***	0.035	Indirect-only (Mediation)	H4a was supported

Note: *** p-value ≤ 0.001 ; ** p-value ≤ 0.01 ; * p-value ≤ 0.05 .

Table 7. Multigroup analysis

Hypothesis	Causal relationship	Pool data (n = 635)	Baby		Leader		Marital status	
			Having baby (n = 458)	No baby (n = 177)	Not being leader (n = 236)	Being a leader (n = 399)	Single & divorced (n = 182)	Married (n = 453)
H1	Glass ceiling $\rightarrow$ Work–family conflict	0.371***	0.373***	0.368***	0.449***	0.32***	0.426***	0.357***
H2	Glass ceiling $\rightarrow$ Intention to quit	0.24***	0.288***	0.135	0.077	0.328***	0.157	0.288***
H3	Work–family conflict $\rightarrow$ Job strain	0.666***	0.698***	0.554***	0.696***	0.647***	0.619***	0.685***
H4	Work–family conflict $\rightarrow$ Intention to quit	0.035	0.092	–0.084	0.221*	–0.045	–0.122	0.11
H5	Job strain $\rightarrow$ Intention to quit	0.325***	0.275***	0.346***	0.222*	0.361***	0.345***	0.279***

Note: *** p-value ≤ 0.001 ; ** p-value ≤ 0.01 ; * p-value ≤ 0.05 .



Note: *** p-value ≤ 0.001 ; ** p-value ≤ 0.01 ; * p-value ≤ 0.05 .

Figure 2. Theoretical estimation

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the relationships between the glass ceiling, work–family conflict, job strain, and intention to quit among female employees in the Vietnamese public sector. Drawing on gendered organizations theory and the job demands–control (JDC) model, the study hypothesized that perceptions of glass ceiling would be positively related to work–family conflict and intention to quit; that work–family conflict would be positively related to job strain and intention to quit, and that job strain would mediate the relationship between work–family conflict and intention to quit, while work–family conflict would mediate the relationship between glass ceiling and intention to quit.

The empirical results offer partial support for this framework. First, glass ceiling is positively related to work–family conflict, suggesting that women who perceive stronger structural barriers to advancement experience higher levels of work–family conflict. Second, glass ceiling is also positively related to intention to quit, indicating that career blockage is directly associated with stronger intentions to leave the organization among female public sector employees. Third, work–family conflict is positively related to job strain, and job strain is positively related to intention to quit, indicating that work–family conflict contributes to psychological strain and that such strain is linked to higher quitting intentions.

In contrast, work–family conflict is not significantly associated with intention to quit, and does not significantly mediate the link between glass ceiling and intention to quit. By contrast, job strain fully mediates the relationship between work–family conflict and intention to quit, meaning that work–family conflict is related to turnover intentions primarily when it develops into job strain rather than through a direct pathway. Multigroup analyses further show that the glass ceiling–intention to quit link is significant for women with children, in leadership positions, and married, but not for women without children, non-leaders, or single and divorced.

The positive associations of glass ceiling with work–family conflict and intention to quit are generally consistent with gendered organizations theory, which suggests that organizational structures, norms, and practices are not gender neutral but systematically reproduce unequal opportunities for men and women. Women who perceive a glass ceiling in promotion systems, leadership expectations, and decision-making processes may need to devote greater emotional and temporal resources to sustaining their careers, which in turn can heighten work–family conflict. At the same time, persistent structural barriers may signal limited long-term prospects, which can directly strengthen intentions to leave the organization.

The direct glass ceiling–intention to quit association found in this study goes beyond previous work that has mainly considered the glass ceiling–intention to quit relationship through mediating variables such as work–family conflict, loss of hope, or hostility. The direct path observed here suggests that, in the Vietnamese public sector, women do not necessarily need to experience elevated work–family conflict before translating perceived glass ceiling conditions into withdrawal intentions. Instead, the perception of blocked advancement itself may be sufficient to prompt thoughts of quitting, particularly when alternative career options exist in other public or private organizations.

The multigroup findings add further nuance. The glass ceiling–intention to quit relationship is particularly strong among women with children, in leadership roles, and married, implying that structural career obstacles may be experienced as more consequential when they overlap with family responsibilities and leadership expectations. For mothers and married women, glass ceiling conditions may exacerbate the perceived mismatch between career investments and rewards, while for women leaders, the lack of progression beyond current positions may be especially salient.

The strong positive association between work–family conflict and job strain is in line with the JDC model, which proposes that psychological strain occurs when high demands are combined with low control and limited resources. In this study, work–family conflict is conceptualized as a demand that contributes to women’s overall workload and emotional burden, and the results show that higher work–family conflict is associated with substantially higher job strain. This supports the idea that difficulties in combining work and family roles can translate into strain at work. Job strain is, in turn, positively related to intention to quit, which is consistent with previous findings (Wong & Spence Laschinger, 2015; Heponiemi et al., 2016) that higher strain is associated with stronger turnover intentions among managers and professionals. The full mediation of the work–family conflict and intention to quit link by job strain in the pooled sample implies that work–family pressures are more likely to result in quitting intentions when they accumulate into a state of sustained psychological strain. Work–family conflict alone

may therefore be insufficient to trigger an intention to leave unless it is accompanied by feelings of overload, exhaustion, and lack of control at work.

Interestingly, work–family conflict is not significantly directly associated with intention to quit, even though there is meta-analytic evidence (Amstad et al., 2011; Yildiz et al., 2021) for a robust work–family conflict–intention to quit relationship in other contexts. One possible explanation is that women in the Vietnamese public sector may tolerate a certain level of work–family conflict due to job security, pension benefits, and cultural expectations, and only begin to consider quitting when conflict escalates into more serious strain. Women may also perceive limited external opportunities, making them hesitant to leave unless their psychological well-being suffers significantly. These interpretations highlight the importance of taking contextual factors into account when generalizing work–family conflict and intention to quit findings across institutional settings.

The mediation results contribute to ongoing discussions about the roles of work–family conflict and strain in linking structural barriers to turnover intentions. The glass ceiling–intention to quit link through work–family conflict can be classified as a “direct-only” mediation, in which the direct path is significant but the indirect path through work–family conflict is not. This suggests that work–family conflict does not serve as a key mediating mechanism in the glass ceiling and intention to quit relationship in this context. Meanwhile, the work–family conflict and intention to quit relationship through job strain is an “indirect-only” mediation, where job strain operates as a consistent mediator.

These results partially differ from Babic and Hansez (2021), who identified work–family conflict as a mediator between glass ceiling perceptions and job strain and as a partial mediator of the effect on intention to quit in healthcare settings. In this study, work–family conflict remains a major predictor of job strain but does not link glass ceiling to intention to quit or intention to quit directly in the pooled public sector sample. This disparity implies that the strength and nature of glass ceiling and work–family conflict and intention to quit pathways are context-sensitive and

may be shaped by sector-specific working conditions, formal rules, and the availability of alternative employers.

Overall, the findings underscore job strain as an important mechanism in the turnover process and suggest that interventions to reduce strain may be particularly beneficial in mitigating the adverse effects of work–family conflict on female employees' retention in the public sector. The results yield three key theoretical implications. First, the study integrates gendered organizations theory and the JDC model to explain female public employees' withdrawal intentions through structural career barriers, role-based conflict, and psychological strain. Second, the study refines understanding of the work–family conflict and intention to quit relationship by demonstrating that work–family conflict may not always be strongly and directly related to quitting intentions even when meta-analyses have revealed a robust relationship (Allen et al., 2000; Amstad et al., 2011) and by highlighting psychological strain as a major proximal antecedent of turnover intentions. Third, the multi-group results show that the effect of glass ceiling on intention to quit is not uniform among female employees but is stronger for mothers, married women, and women in leadership roles, pointing to an intersection between structural gender barriers, family responsibilities, and leadership roles and encouraging further research on the moderating effects of organizational and family-related resources.

The findings suggest that retaining female talent in the Vietnamese public sector requires attention to both structural and psychosocial dimensions. On the structural side, organizations should review promotion schemes, selection processes, and

informal practices that may reveal a glass ceiling, especially for women with family responsibilities or in leadership positions. Transparent criteria, mentoring programs, and proactive measures to address gender bias could reduce perceptions of blocked advancement and, in turn, diminish quitting intentions. On the psychosocial side, the central role of job strain in the work–family conflict and intention to quit relationship indicates the importance of interventions targeting job strain, such as workload redesign, increased job control, flexible working arrangements, and improved access to support resources. Reducing strain may weaken the link between work–family conflict and turnover intentions in public organizations and thereby support the sustainability of the female workforce.

This paper has several limitations. First, it emphasizes psychological strain and desire to resign, but does not investigate the effects of these processes on female employees' job performance or leadership effectiveness. Future studies may examine the impact of perceived glass ceiling circumstances on the effectiveness of female executives in public and commercial enterprises. Second, the sample only includes female workers and managers in Ho Chi Minh city and An Giang province, which may limit the generalization of the results to other parts of Vietnam. Future research should expand the sample to include more provinces and localities, such as the newly merged areas of Ho Chi Minh City and other areas in the Mekong Delta, and examine whether the relations between the glass ceiling and career outcomes are moderated by geographical context (urban versus rural), organizational factors (e.g., culture and leadership), and individual characteristics (e.g., family background and income).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between the glass ceiling, work–family conflict, job strain, and intention to quit among female public employees in Vietnam. This study uses survey data from 635 respondents using PLS-SEM analysis. The study reveals that the glass ceiling is positively associated with work–family conflict and intention to quit, work–family conflict is positively associated with job strain, and job strain is positively associated with intention to quit. In contrast, work–family conflict is not significantly directly related to intention to quit and does not significantly mediate the association between glass ceiling and intention to quit; however, job strain significantly mediates the relationship between work–family conflict and intention to quit.

The findings suggest that structural career impediments are related to work–family conflict and intention to quit, and work–family conflict is only consequential for quitting when it rises to job strain. The multigroup results further suggest that the glass ceiling and intention to quit link is especially robust for women with children, married women, and women in leadership positions, underscoring how the glass ceiling conceptions are intertwined with family duties and leadership positions. Thus, the study contributes to the theory of gendered organizations and the job demands–control viewpoint within the Vietnamese public sector, suggesting that efforts to reduce perceived barriers to advancement and job satisfaction may be crucial for retaining female talent.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Tien Chau Thuy Huynh, Han Nu Ngoc Ton.

Data curation: Han Nu Ngoc Ton.

Formal analysis: Tien Chau Thuy Huynh, Han Nu Ngoc Ton, Nhan Trong Nguyen, Thy Thi Bao Huynh.

Funding acquisition: Tien Chau Thuy Huynh.

Investigation: Tien Chau Thuy Huynh, Han Nu Ngoc Ton, Nhan Trong Nguyen, Thy Thi Bao Huynh.

Methodology: Tien Chau Thuy Huynh, Han Nu Ngoc Ton, Nhan Trong Nguyen, Thy Thi Bao Huynh.

Project administration: Tien Chau Thuy Huynh.

Resources: Tien Chau Thuy Huynh.

Software: Han Nu Ngoc Ton.

Supervision: Han Nu Ngoc Ton.

Validation: Han Nu Ngoc Ton.

Visualization: Tien Chau Thuy Huynh, Han Nu Ngoc Ton, Nhan Trong Nguyen, Thy Thi Bao Huynh.

Writing – original draft: Tien Chau Thuy Huynh, Han Nu Ngoc Ton, Nhan Trong Nguyen, Thy Thi Bao Huynh.

Writing – review & editing: Tien Chau Thuy Huynh, Han Nu Ngoc Ton, Nhan Trong Nguyen, Thy Thi Bao Huynh.

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