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**PERSPECTIVES****Parental role conflict in night shift nursing workers: A perspective on feminist ethics towards nursing career development**Ni Luh Dwi Indrayani<sup>1</sup>✉, Chi-Yin Kao<sup>2</sup>**Author information**<sup>1</sup> Department of Nursing, Institute of Technology and Health Bali, Indonesia<sup>2</sup> Department of Nursing, National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan

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<https://doi.org/10.31603/ihs.11814>**Abstract**

The source of professional nurses is inevitably needed in the near future. Contradictory, the nursing professional source remains debatable, as the fact of the occurrence of a nursing turnover rate. Studies reported personal reasons influenced the nurse turnover rate in which parental role conflict was included. The current study utilizes feminist ethics to explore parental role conflict in nurses, specifically in relation to their professional career development in nursing. Applying a feminist ethics approach to understanding parental role conflicts enables a comprehensive analysis of prospective alternatives from both policy and educational perspectives. Prospective alternatives grounded in feminist ethics can effectively address the moral imperatives of respecting nurses' career development preferences and general rights. This paper contributes to developing novel solutions for the ethical dilemmas of parental issues and night shifts in healthcare settings that could benefit healthcare professionals.

**Keywords:** Feminist ethics; night shift nurses; nursing career development; parental role conflict**Introduction**

Worldwide is expecting to earn more nurses. COVID 19 pandemic known as one of the stressful situations, the case subsequences to the shortage of nurses especially overflow in intensive care units that at least 6 million new nursing jobs by 2030 is needed to project the shortage distribution across the world (Lowe, 2020). Health workers in the next 15 years are expecting to drive a greater demand due to population growth, ageing societies, and changing disease patterns (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Australia, Canada, Ireland and UK modelled their demand for nurses in 2025 and predicted shortage of nurses (WHO, 2017). Additionally, The registered nurse workforce in 2019 is expected to grow from 3 million to 3.3 million over 10 years up to 2029, 7% increased (American Association of College of Nursing [AACN], 2020). It is projected by 2030 40 million new health sector jobs will be hired (WHO, 2021). The need for professional nurses has become fundamental. The development of nursing career requires a strong interest from new nurses. contrast, a study found a high-rate nursing turnover (Currie & Hill, 2012). The primary reason of leaving led by work hours in the weekend or nights with no flexibility (50%) and personal reasons including caring for physical and emotional illness, spouse responsibility, child and parents, also returning to school (40%) (Strachota et al., 2003). Similar findings in Indonesia reveal that nurses are leaving their positions due to personal reasons (36%), including marriage, family responsibilities, childcare, pregnancy, pursuing higher-paying occupations, or encountering mismatches between their educational qualifications and workplace conditions (Yamaguchi et al., 2016). Additionally, factors such as increased workload, environmental conditions, and economic considerations have been identified (Currie & Hill, 2012). Studies conducted in Atlanta have also highlighted extrinsic factors such as fatigue and overwhelming emotional and physical exhaustion (MacKusick & Minick, 2010). The work-family culture in night shift and raising a child factors influenced the intention of nurses to leave profession (Jahromi et al, 2013).

Research findings also indicate that nurses working night shifts experience difficulties in parenting (Matheson et al., 2019; Vitale et al., 2015; West et al., 2016). For example, a qualitative study shown that one nurse who work in night shift categorized into child-care theme, which compulsory to involve cost of child-care, afterschool care, and

shared parental care (West et al, 2016). Feeling guilty and overwhelmed while managing shift work leads nurses to opt for career breaks to care for their children and nine out of ten participants experiencing difficulties in childcare (Matheson et al., 2019). Evening shifts were reported as particularly challenging for parenting (Vitale, Varrone-Ganesh, & Vu, 2015). A study in Japan found a significant intention to leave among hospital nurses due to work interfering with family life (Yamaguchi et al., 2016). The consequences of parental role conflict between their job and nighttime bonding with their child or children include trade-offs that can damage relationships, impact children's needs and development, and potentially lead to nurses leaving their jobs. Therefore, this study aims to explore the ethical dilemma of parental role conflict among night shift nurses, examining career development and proposing solutions to address the question of what should be done ethically.

### **The exemplary case to achieve a profound understanding of parental role conflict**

Jill, a 28-year-old nurse with four years of professional experience, is currently facing significant challenges in balancing her career and family life. Since the birth of her 12-month-old baby, she has been working frequent night shifts, which has left her physically and emotionally exhausted. The pressures of working during the COVID-19 pandemic have only worsened her fatigue, leading to feelings of guilt, distance from family while resting time, and inadequacy as she struggles to meet the needs of her family (**Figure 1**). Jill's emotional burden is compounded by societal judgment, particularly from her mother-in-law, who criticizes her perceived lack of attention to her family. These judgments contribute to Jill's self-blame, as she begins to question her ability to effectively manage both her professional and personal responsibilities. Prior to marriage and motherhood, Jill was passionately committed to advancing her nursing career, setting ambitious goals and working diligently to achieve them. However, the demands of motherhood have shifted her priorities, and she now places her family's needs above her career aspirations.



**Figure 1.** Illustration of the emotional distance nurses experienced from their family during COVID-19 Quarantine (author's documentation).

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the case, this exemplary case is explored using an ethical problem description from a feminist ethics perspective, this including examining moral distress related to parental conflicts;

analyzing relationship and responsibilities, and proposing alternatives to address the dilemma of balancing parental roles with nursing career development. According to the feminist ethics perspective, Jill's situation highlights the ethical problem of moral distress caused by parental conflicts. Feminist ethics emphasizes the importance of relationships, care, and responsibilities, particularly in contexts where women, like Jill, are often expected to juggle multiple roles. Jill's feelings of guilt and exhaustion stem from her internal struggle to fulfill her responsibilities as both a nurse and a mother, each of which requires significant time, energy, and emotional investment (**Figure 2**). Moral distress arises when Jill feels that she cannot adequately meet the demands of one role without neglecting the other, leading her to experience frustration and self-doubt. In feminist ethics, the emphasis is placed on the relational aspect of caregiving, recognizing that both nursing and parenting are acts of care that require empathy, understanding, and support from society. However, Jill's experience is shaped by societal expectations that women should prioritize family over career, an expectation that adds to her moral distress and creates a conflict between her desire for career growth and her role as a mother. To address Jill's dilemma, it is crucial to propose alternatives that allow her to balance her parental responsibilities with her career development in nursing. Solutions should consider both structural and personal adjustments.



**Figure 2.** Illustration of shift breaktime during COVID pandemic (*author's documentation*)

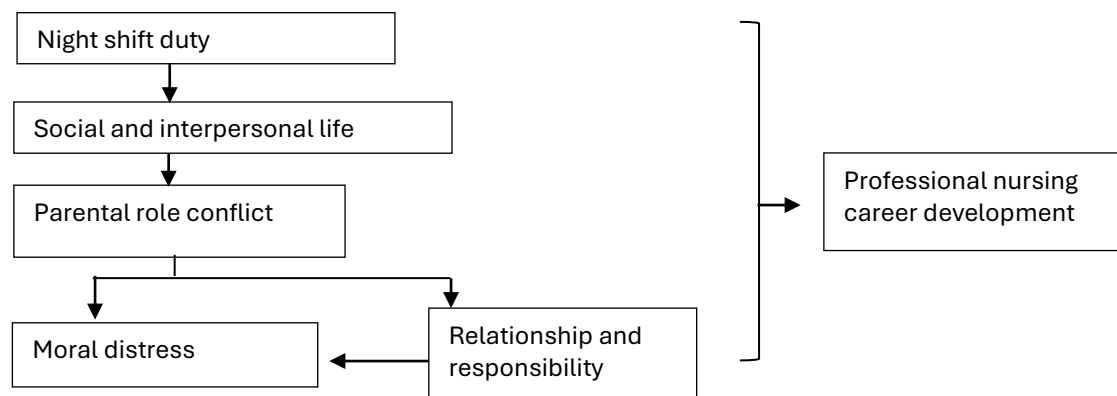
#### **Ethical problem description and the perspective of feminist ethics on parental role conflict**

The nurse, who has been practicing for four years, expressed fatigue attributed to frequent night shifts. With a twelve-month-old baby, she experiences guilt over her perceived inability to adequately care for her child and family. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these personal challenges. She blames herself amidst societal judgment, particularly from her mother-in-law, highlighting underlying value system issues. Furthermore, the nurse mentioned that prior to marriage and parenthood, she was passionately driven to advance her career in nursing, which she now perceives as unattainable based on her personal ideals. Choosing a feminist ethics approach to discuss the parental role of night shift nurses dilemma is suitable because it involves examining the ethical implications through a feminist lens, which prioritizes gender equality, justice, and the unique experiences of

women. In gender perspective, feminist ethics focuses on understanding how gender roles or societal expectation impact ethical issues (Lee & Tang, 2015). In the context of night shift nurses who are parents, it considers how traditional gender norms influence their caregiving responsibilities both at work and at home. Night shift work may disrupt traditional caregiving roles. Feminist ethics emphasizes for night shift nurses who are parents, this approach questions whether societal norms unfairly burden women with more childcare responsibilities, especially when they work non-traditional hours. Feminist ethics values empirical evidence and lived experiences, such as the discomfort felt during night shifts, with more than half of workers reporting negative impacts on their attitude, while 80% of research shows that night shifts disturb social life and increase interpersonal conflict within families (Begum et al., 2024). The feminist ethics is plural which covering the diversity in all range of moral experience (Marcellus, 2004). The nurses' work embedded in complex social networks such as families, patients, health care discipline, administrators that nested nurse in a vulnerable condition (Peter & Liaschenko, 2013) which influence their consideration whether to continue their future developmental career. The type and extent of caregiving responsibilities impacting women's employment contribute to the phenomenon known as role overload (Lee & Tang, 2015). A unique experience that could be found is in the parental role conflict.

Parental role conflict among nurses can be one of the distresses faced by nurses in their workplace. According to North American Nursing Diagnosis Association (NANDA) 2018-2020, parental role conflict is defined as the experience felt by a parent regarding a role confusion and conflict in response to the crisis. It is characterized by the presence of anxiety, fear, frustration; concern about family; guilt, reluctance to participate in caregiver activities; and perceived inadequacy of providing child's need and loss of control over child decision. These characteristics are occurred among the nurses (Books et al., 2017; Matheson et al., 2019), which further understanding to view this issue is necessity. The perspective of feminist ethics is useful to explore about the nursing issue moreover the uncovering knowledge of it. This paper can be viewed as a form of the complexity of nurses' distress and how the alternative could foster their habitable workplace. The authors believe the parental role conflict is fundamentally a reaction to the constraint for the moral identity, relationships, and responsibilities that underlie these understanding. Applying feminist ethics approach potentially explore parental role conflict that can be viewed from their moral identity like personal factors: culture, self-ideal or actualization to set a role as a nurse and parents, relationship and the responsibility as a nurse according to law or regulation. Based on reviewed literature highlighting the effects of night shift duties on social and interpersonal aspects, parental role conflict, moral distress including hindrances to self-actualization, significant implications arise for the career development of professional nurses. In response, the authors propose a framework to elucidate parental role conflicts in nursing career development, employing a feminist ethics approach (**Figure 3**).

**Figure 3.** Framework of parental role conflict toward nursing career development.



**Moral distress toward the case of parental role conflict**

In feminist ethics, the key of identity revolves around how individual perceives morality and navigate actions and values in response to or in consideration of care (Pettersson & Liaschenko, 2013). The moral agent is shaped by life circumstances, which influence who they become and why, with moral distress arising when they cannot align with their core values or fulfill ideal roles, such as the socially constructed identity of a nurse, who may also be a parent

or health provider, roles that inherently affect their work (Pettersson & Liaschenko, 2013). Following this study analysis, the nurse values of parental role and other environment values can shape their determination toward their career. Examining case observed among nurses in their nursing career development, the authors identify a dilemma centered around nurse identity. Based on literature, the authors note that personal factors significantly influence parental role conflict among nurses, particularly those working night shifts, across both least developed and developing countries. In summary at Australia and United States (Books, Coody, Kauffman, & Abraham, 2017; Matheson, O'Brien, & Reid, 2019). The authors identify that the case impacts autonomy by hindering the ability to meet personal ideals. Furthermore, the situation leans towards beneficence through disruptions in relationships with spouses and children, accompanied by feelings of guilt in managing childcare responsibilities. Compare to the less developed countries like Indonesia (Yestiana et al., 2019) and Iran (Jahromi et al., 2013), the ethical concern revolves around beneficence, particularly when cultural values are integrated into the systems of values with this statement: *"They say that working in the morning and evening is OK, but I have to be home at night" also "their families were against their wives' night working"*. The social environments could influence how nurses shape their identities, which is a crucial aspect to consider in their nursing careers. Cultural norms, societal expectations, and family dynamics prevalent in these regions may impact how nurses perceive their roles and responsibilities both professionally and personally. Therefore, understanding and navigating these social contexts are essential for nurses to effectively manage their careers in the nursing profession. This awareness helps in aligning personal values with professional ethics and responsibilities, ensuring a balanced approach to patient care and personal well-being.

### **Relationship and responsibility**

A relationship is defined as a human connection characterized by mutual expectations and trust. Relationship can be emphasized on the linkage or interdependence that involved human beings in response to psychological fulfilment (Green, 2012). One will aware their responsibility due to the commitment. Moral distress of one nurse may recognize if others cannot be trusted (Peter & Liaschenko, 2013). Parental role conflict can impact nurses' responsibilities within their relationships. Conversely, the quality of these relationships can also affect individuals either positively or negatively. Therefore, establishing a good relationship allows nurses to construct their career development while maintaining mutual trust in their roles. Referring the International Council of Nurses, the fundamental responsibility of nurses encompass promotion, prevention, restoration, and alleviation of suffering (Peter & Liaschenko, 2013). Considering justice, the existing law in Australia with Family Law act 1975, No. 53, compilation n. 81 Division 2, family responsibilities 61B, it mentions that parental responsibility include day to day issues and long-term decision for children. In Indonesia, according to the development of society and family act no 52, year 2009, the family need to be live in healthy environment and family itself characterized as by harmonious, responsible, and devoted to God Almighty. Among the various factors influencing ethical principles, those that shape future nursing career development are particularly crucial. These factors play a significant role in determining how nurses navigate their professional paths, including ethical decision-making and the development of their professional identities.

### **Exploring prospective strategies as innovative solutions to address the ethical dilemmas arising from parental role conflicts in nursing career development**

Feminist ethics has been employed as an approach to examine the antecedents and consequences of parental role conflict. To propose prospective strategies as innovative solutions, feminist ethics—incorporating theories derived from utilitarianism, which consider the goods of life, shared values, emancipation, and the ethical justification of actions—is employed (Rawlinson, 2001). By applying feminist ethics, the discourse on parental roles among night shift nurses gains depth and sensitivity toward the gender-specific challenges they encounter (Lee & Tang, 2015). Applying feminist ethics approach potentially fosters critical reflection on how policies, societal norms, and workplace cultures can enhance support for gender equality and promote fair distribution of caregiving responsibilities. The utilitarianism emphasized on promoting the greatest good for the greatest number, maximal value; maintaining the agent neutral of intrinsic good, for instance happiness; following the principle of the greatest good involves balancing the interests of all parties affected while also examining factors that attract the nurses to remain in the profession (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). These perspectives illustrate how novel alternatives for addressing parental role conflict recommend adopting approaches that balance considerations of the greatest good

with a focus on intrinsic values to guide decision-making; and awareness of the relevant regulations among stakeholders, such as policymakers and nurse educators.

The authors focused on innovation in policy regulation and nursing education as effective approaches to problem-solving. The authors emphasize these two major aspects for exploration based on reviews highlighting influential factors contributing to nursing shortage: policy attention, education, and job control (Yamaguchi et al., 2016). The data identified work excessive hours for more than 48 hours per week is in Southern Asia (54.5%) become the highest among all (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017). Based on article 77, working hours, Act of The Republic of Indonesia year 2003, number 13, that concern about manpower, the working hours shall arrange 7 to 8 hours per day and 40 hours per week for 5 working days in a week. Therefore, the authors recommend collaborating those policy for nurse-parents with the use of technology like a digital recorder, ensuring that they do not have consecutive overlapping night shifts. This adjustment is aimed at preserving their relationships with children and spouses. Night shift work can lead to prolonged fatigue (Haluza et al., 2019), which may result in increased sick leave and potentially contribute to higher turnover rates in the future. The authors view job control rules as innovative strategies for implementing measures to balance working hours. Nurses on night shift duty should have a minimum of three days off to ensure full recovery from prolonged fatigue (Haluza et al., 2019). ILO prepare a working time practical tool, called the Guide to developing balanced working time arrangements (ILO, 2017). Consistently changing shifts have been reported to statistically correlate with higher levels of Work-Family Conflict and workload compared to those consistently working daytime shifts (Ekici et al., 2017). Nursing managers should ensure that fostering work group cohesion, such as encouraging mutual support among team members, is effective in reducing turnover (Yamaguchi et al., 2016). Therefore, creating a supportive working environment in clinical services is proposed as an innovation to foster strong relationships between parents and their children. Research indicates accompanying children during night shift duty promote work-family balance that enable to improve nurse retention (Yamaguchi et al., 2016). Applying a supportive work-family culture which has been shown to predict a reduction in home healthcare. This implies that regulations, such as providing affordable daycare for nursing staff to facilitate feeding or bonding time with their children during breaks in night shifts, suggested as an innovative strategy. Other alternatives include family leave policies, such as those seen in Japan and the United States, which regulate paternity leave to promote increased paternal involvement in childcare and to support maternity options for women (Saypoff, 2012).

In nursing education, the authors emphasized novel solutions for promoting a positive image of the nursing career for both men and women, particularly in relation to balancing parental roles. Since worldwide data found 90% nurse is dominated with women (Drennan & Ross, 2019), the education related to spouse relationship in terms of parenting would be needed. A scholarship targeting parent-nurses, supporting their pursuit of advanced studies, represents a promising policy strategy to enhance job satisfaction and fulfill their career aspirations. Education in philosophy promotes and nurtures resilience and self-care, offering new horizons for the nursing profession in the 21st century. This empowerment enables nurses to address emerging challenges related to parental role conflict, ensuring they can sustain their profession while balancing nursing career and parenting responsibilities effectively. A group leader in nursing area (Pettersson et al., 2004) is also possible to be done like providing a service related to parental role education while promoting child development. Additionally, this approach provides an opportunity to facilitate advancements in medical care research.

Feminist ethics offers a valuable framework for understanding the parental role conflict experienced by nurses working night shifts, particularly by highlighting the relational and caregiving responsibilities that are often disproportionately born by women. In the context of nursing, feminist ethics recognizes that traditional gender roles and societal expectations can exacerbate the conflict between professional duties and family responsibilities. By applying feminist ethics, the deeper insights could be gained on how night shift nurses, particularly those with caregiving roles, face moral distress due to the tension between their work and parental roles. This ethical perspective is not only helpful for understanding the phenomena but also for developing innovative strategies that can promote both personal well-being and career growth for nurses. Central to feminist ethics is the principle of care, which encourages policies and practices that support a nurse's ability to care for both patients and family members without sacrificing one for the other. The integration of feminist ethics into nursing career development can lead to strategies that promote the greatest good for the greatest number, enhancing both individual happiness and collective well-being within the profession. Addressing these ethical concerns, nursing as a profession can build a more resilient workforce capable of navigating the demands of both their personal and professional lives.

Offering more flexible work schedules or opportunities to reduce night shifts could alleviate some of the fatigue and guilt Jill experiences, allowing her to spend more quality time with her family. Mentorship programs or counseling services tailored to nurses who are also mothers could provide emotional support, helping nurse manage societal judgments and navigate her dual roles more confidently. Additionally, feminist ethics encourages a re-evaluation of societal norms and expectations, advocating for a culture that supports working mothers rather than criticizing them. By fostering a supportive work environment and challenging traditional gender roles, nurses can continue to pursue her nursing career without compromising her responsibilities to her family, thereby alleviating her moral distress and promoting a healthier work-life balance.

## Conclusion

The implications of applying feminist ethics to address parental role conflict extend beyond individual nurses to the profession as a whole, as well as other related sectors. Nursing professionals would benefit from more inclusive policies and support systems that recognize the dual roles many nurses play as both caregivers in their professional and personal lives. This approach could also serve as a model for other sectors facing similar challenges, encouraging a broader cultural shift toward more flexible and supportive workplaces for working parents. Future studies should further explore how feminist ethics can be applied to other aspects of healthcare, such as the retention of other healthcare workers, or examine how different ethical frameworks could complement feminist ethics in addressing workforce challenges.

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## Author's perspective

### Key points

- The nursing professional source remains debatable, as the fact of the occurrence of a nursing turnover rate
- Feminist ethics offers a valuable framework for understanding the parental role conflict experienced by nurses working night shifts
- Prospective alternatives grounded in feminist ethics can effectively address the moral imperatives

### Potential areas of interest

- How can feminist ethics help create policies that support nurses as both professionals and parents?
- How could applying feminist ethics in nursing inspire more flexible and supportive workplaces in other fields?
- How can future research combine other ethical approaches with feminist ethics to address healthcare issues?

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