

From Professional to Domestic: The Narrative Role Disorientation Experienced by Women Leaving the Workforce

Irma Tiana Cahyaningrum^{1*}, Jaya Addin Linando²

Universitas Islam Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Irma Tiana Cahyaningrum Cahyanm156@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

How do women experience life after leaving the workforce and transitioning into domestic roles? This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to analyze the changes women experience when shifting from professional to domestic roles. Specifically, it explores how the loss of professional routines can lead to role disorientation for women who have left the workforce. The findings reveal that ceasing work creates significant disruptions in three key areas of life: identity, time, and activity. Women describe this disorientation as feelings of awkwardness, confusion, emptiness, and a persistent sense that something is missing from their daily lives. These findings affirm that leaving the workforce is a transitional experience that shakes the foundation of women's lives, not merely a change in status

INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in the workforce significantly declines after marriage (Barhate et al., 2021), primarily due to the dual demands of professional and domestic responsibilities (Wolor et al., 2020). These conflicting pressures make time management difficult and often force women to leave their jobs (Fajri et al., 2025).

The decision to leave the labor force is influenced by external and internal factors. External factors include workload hours (Huang et al., 2020), societal expectations (McIntosh et al., 2012), dual-role conflict (Dewi, 2017), and preferences of their children and partners (Rahma & Nurchayati, 2021). Internally, many women are driven by a personal desire to take full responsibility for their children (Rahma & Nurchayati, 2021; yeni et al., 2022). These decisions are closely tied to the strong social norms and gender expectations that prioritize domestic roles over professional ones (McIntosh et al., 2012; Bjuggren & Henrekson, 2018), thereby making such choices socially and morally acceptable.

Leaving the workforce involves more than just a change in employment status; it is a role transition – a process involving psychological and physical changes as one moves from one role to another (Levine & Hog, 2010). Such a transition often leads to tension and various challenges for the individuals (Allen & Vliert, 1984), because the changes require them to reconstruct their sense of self. A drastic transition in roles can cause disorientation.

Disorientation is a state in which life loses direction and purpose (Tuan, 1999). Disorientation typically occurs in response to major life changes (Harbin, 2016). It is marked by the disappearance of the familiar and the emergence of unfamiliar experiences (Solnit, 2005), and is characterized by feelings of aimlessness, confusion, anxiety, and uncertainty about oneself. These feelings cause individuals to question their understanding, lose a sense of control, and feel unsure of the steps they should take (Cabanias, 2025).

Although research on women leaving the workforce is increasing, existing studies largely focus on the reasons why women leave (Wiladatika, 2016; Siswati, 2020; Yeni et al., 2022; Fajri et al., 2025; Sho'ib, 2025) or the consequences that follow (Barhate et al., 2021; Brazier et al., 2025; Günther et al., 2025). What is missing from this literature is an in-depth examination of the actual experience of the transition itself, particularly how women navigate the dynamics resulting from leaving their professional identities behind. This gap is significant because, without an understanding of how disorientation develops from within, interventions and support systems will remain structure-based but blind to experience.

Therefore, this study focuses on role disorientation as a problem that emerges when women leave the workforce. Unlike a simple transition into a new role, leaving employment brings about profound changes that significantly reshape daily life. This study elaborates on disorientation as an issue that arises after ceasing employment. Rather than treating role disorientation as a peripheral side effect of role change, this study positions it as a central yet underexplored issue in its own right. By examining how role disorientation is experienced and shaped by the changes women face after leaving the workforce. This study

redefines labor force exit as a critical transitional period deserving focused academic attention, rather than merely being viewed as an endpoint. These findings contribute to the literature on role transitions among women after leaving the workforce and provide practical guidance for women currently undergoing or preparing to face this significant life change

LITERATURE REVIEW

Working Women

Working women are defined as those who are actively engaged in paid employment, entrepreneurship, or other forms of work outside the domestic sphere (Rani, 2024). There are several reasons that motivate women to work, including supplementing household income, avoiding boredom or monotony during leisure time, pursuing personal interest and talents, gaining social status, and developing their potential. For working women, employment can serve as a means of achieving personal growth, self-exploration, and forming a personal identity (Wiladatika, 2016). Through work, women attain independence in action and thought as well as economic independence (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011; Ahmed & Aktar, 2022). Moreover, work can also provide both latent and manifest benefits. Latent benefits include time structure, activity, social contact, status, and collective purpose, while manifest benefits refer to direct financial income (Jahoda, 1982).

Women's Role Conflict

Women who continue working after marriage typically face two main demands: their professional work and their household responsibilities (Rahma & Nurchayati, 2021). This situation makes it difficult to balance professional responsibilities, domestic duties, and social commitments (Rani, 2024; Ghaleb et al., 2025). The social expectations and behavioral norms women face when balancing roles cause them to experience higher levels of dual-role conflict than men do (Chung & Van Der Lippe, 2020; Taghizadeh et al., 2021). The multitude of demands women must fulfill creates a pressure-filled dilemma in their daily lives (Swathi & Reddy, 2016; Wolor et al., 2020). This leads women to experience exhaustion in multiple areas of their lives, including work, family life, and emotions (Seligman et al., 2005; Cho et al., 2012; Linando et al., 2022; Erogul, 2025).

Reasons Women Leave the Workforce

Family and gender sociologists suggest that women are not always satisfied with their participation in the labor market (Lu et al., 2023). This is largely because work causes them to miss out on time with their families and other opportunities (Kan, 2007; Kozaryn & Valente, 2018). Additionally, they fear losing closeness and intimacy with their children (Rahma & Nurchayati, 2021). The most dominant reason behind women's decision to leave the workforce is therefore related to child-rearing and family caregiving (Rahma & Nurchayati, 2021). However, other factors also influence this decision, including a lack of affordable childcare, unhealthy workplace cultures, inflexible schedules, and unreasonable demands (Orgad, 2025).

Women's Role Transition

Transition can be understood as an event that triggers the construction of meaning and identity within an individual (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Transitions in women's social roles, as well as shifts in work and motherhood-related identity, have implications for self-perception and relationships (Van Der Werff et al., 2019). One of the most complex forms of role change occurs when employed women shift into domestic roles (Ryan & Tonkiss, 2023). This condition provides an opportunity for women to significantly renegotiate their subjectivity and self-awareness (Parton et al., 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the concept of individual consciousness and the experiences of women who have left the workforce. This approach seeks to understand life events within the framework of societal thinking and behaviour as perceived by individuals (Nasir et al., 2023). In this study, data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to give participants the opportunity to discuss their experiences in greater detail.

This study involved 15 married women with previous work experience who are now fully focused on domestic roles. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, which occurs when data from various perspectives show recurring patterns (Speziale & Carpenter, 2011).

Table 1. Research Informants

No	Initials	Age (Years)	Length of Marriage	Previous Job	Length of Employment
1	J	56	37 years	Factory worker	3 years
2	KW	47	24 years	Retail employee	3 years
3	SNK	53	30 years	Administrative staff	2 years
4	RW	32	14 years	Factory worker	2 years
5	WPS	41	11 years	Bank teller staff	2 years
6	STL	31	3 years	Teacher	4 years
7	DER	25	4 years	Cosmetics beauty advisor	1 years
8	NH	36	13 years	Factory worker	2 years
9	T	34	5 years	Beauty therapist	6 years
10	M	37	14 years	Factory worker	3 years
11	TR	34	12 years	Retail employee	3 years
12	NS	34	4 years	Tax supervisor	1 years
13	AKW	27	5 years	Shop assistant	1 years
14	ADKW	32	11 years	Factory worker	6 years
15	DS	29	5 years	Bank frontliner staff	3 years

After data collection was complete, the next step was data analysis. This study employed thematic analysis, a data analysis technique. This technique can be used to analyze data to identify patterns or discover themes within it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this analytical technique, Braun & Clarke (2006) describe a six-phase framework that includes familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up.

In the first phase, the researcher familiarizes herself with the collected data through interview transcripts and recordings. The second phase, generating initial codes, involves coding meaningful segments across all transcripts. The third phase, searching for themes, involved grouping related codes and exploring their interconnections. The fourth phase, reviewing potential themes to ensure they accurately represented the data and conveyed a meaningful response to the research questions. The fifth phase, defining and naming theme, involves articulating the meaning of each themes and assigning precise, representative labels. Finally, in the sixth and final phase, writing up, the refined themes were organized into a coherent and accessible narrative.

To ensure the validity of the data, several verification procedures were carried out: credibility testing through triangulation, reflexivity, and peer debriefing. Triangulation is a method used to examine data validity by reviewing information from different perspectives on the subject under investigation to reduce ambiguity and double meanings during data collection and analysis (Alfansyur & Mariyani, 2020). In this study, triangulation was applied by comparing meanings across respondents with different backgrounds, enabling the identification of both consistent patterns and meaningful variations within the data. This study also employed reflexivity testing. Reflexivity within phenomenological theory, focused on questioning the researcher's subjectivity as part of examining how the subject is present within the object, because subject and object are inherently interconnected (Finlay, 2002). The researcher carried out reflexivity by documenting their emotional responses during the interviews and distinguishing them from the data provided by the participants. Additionally, the researcher recorded nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, changes in intonation, and speech pauses, to provide contextual information and support a deeper understanding of the meaning behind the participants experiences. Furthermore, the researcher conducted peer debriefing. Peer debriefing involves engaging a peer debriefer to discuss the core elements, flow, and findings generated from the data collection process (McMahon & Winch, 2018).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Self-Portrait in the Professional Space: Making Sense of Experience of Being a Working Woman

For women, work provides subjective well-being through positive feelings such as happiness, pride, and empowerment. These feelings stem from income, social interaction, independence, and the ability to meet one's own need autonomously.

Table 2. Self-Portrait in the Professional Space: Making Sense of Experience of Being a Working Woman

Respondents	Verbatim	Code	Group
AKW	<i>"It was enjoyable, because i got paid."</i>	Happy because of earning income	Subjective well-being

DR	<i>"What made me happy about working was meeting people and making friends."</i>	Happy because of social interaction	
M	<i>"As for pride, there was definitely some. I felt proud when I looked at my neighbors who had gotten married and weren't working because I was earning money on my own. Even though my husband worked, I earned money too. Even though my husband gave me money too, I could still find my own."</i>	Proud because of not being dependence	
DER	<i>"When you work, you have power. You can buy things with your own money."</i>	Empowered because of being able to meet one's own needs	

These experiences reflect the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs outlined in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Ryan & Deci (2000): competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Working women feel competent when they can earn an income independently. Furthermore, women who are actively engaged in the workforce feel connected to others through the social interactions they encounter in the workplace. Additionally, working women feel autonomous when they have financial control over their needs and desires.

The positive feelings that women experience while working reflect their emotional state and are connected to identity formation. This finding aligns with Bosma & Kunnen (2001) view that identity is inherently linked to emotion. In this study's context, these emotional experiences are internalized and develop into part of the formation of an individual's identity as an independent and active person.

Table 3. Emotional Experiences

Respondents	Verbatim	Code	Group
TR	<i>"Oh yes, I did feel independent. Even though I'm married, when we work, we don't need to burden our husbands. If we want something for ourselves, like cosmetics or whatever, we don't have to ask. We already have our own income"</i>	Independent while working	Identity
NS	<i>"If I'd say independent, yes; active, yes. When I was working, I was really active. Active in every way, because when I was working I also had a lot of side jobs going on. It felt like I was at my most motivated"</i>	Active while working	

Nevertheless, behind the positive feelings associated with work and the formation of self-identity, the dimension of time presents its own dynamics in terms of management. Based on field findings, working hours have a binding structure. This creates limitations yet brings a sense of structure.

Table 4. Creates Limitations Yet Brings A Sense Of Structure.

Respondents	Verbatim	Code	Group
AKW	<i>"Because when your work, your time is tied up"</i>	Bound time	Time
DER	<i>"The hard part about working is that our time with our children and family is limited. It feels like there's a lack of communication"</i>	Limited working hours	
SNK	<i>"Like I said, your time is more structured when you work"</i>	Excess working hours	
J	<i>"So in the morning, I would come in between 6:30 or 07:00 AM, and leave the factory at around 06:00 TO 6:30"</i>	Work schedule	
SNK	<i>"When you work, it's different – at this hour you're still at the office, then you go home and everything follows a pattern. That actually keeps things well-organized"</i>	Excess working hours	

Greenhaus & Beutell (1985) concept of time-based work-family conflict captures this dimension. In this model, time devoted to work encroaches on family roles. This issue is further exacerbated by a lack of personal recovery time, which Haar et al., (2014) refer to as work-life conflict. Conversely, this same structure carries a latent benefit. As Jahoda (1982) argues, a fixed work schedule provides individuals with regularity and a framework that organizes daily life, rendering time purposeful.

In the lives of working women, work activity also plays an important role in shaping the rhythm of daily life. This activity becomes an integral part of their daily routine. The series of activities they carry out gives their daily lives a high level of intensity and density. Under these conditions, work becomes their primary daily activity. This busyness makes women feel as though they have meaningful things to do every day.

Table 5. Lives Of Working Women, Work Activity Also Plays An Important Role In Shaping The Rhythm Of Daily Life

Respondents	Verbatim	Code	Group
STL	<i>"Usually, I would wake up at a certain time, then had to get ready for work and so on"</i>	Work routine	Activity
T	<i>"When you work, you're busy with work activities, like waking up early and going to work"</i>	Work busyness	
NS	<i>"The activities were also really packed"</i>	Work density	
DS	<i>"Yeah, and it was like you'd leave in the morning, come home late in the afternoon, and before you knew it, you'd leave again early the next morning. It just felt so packed"</i>	The presence of patterns that shape the rhythm of activities	
T	<i>"Usually, every day was busy with work"</i>	Work busyness	

ADKW	<i>"Usually, when you work, there are scheduled activities"</i>	Daily activities	
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These findings aligns with (Jahoda, 1982) Latent Deprivation Theory, which positions activity as a core latent benefit of employment – one that affords an individual's regular purposeful engagement. The resulting busyness is not incidental. As Gershuny, (2005) observes, it becomes an inherent feature of socially and economically active lives.

Thus, the self-portrait of women in the professional space reveals the presence of various aspects that play a crucial role in the lives of working women.

Table 6. Summary Table of Findings on Women's Experiences While Working

Dimension	Experiences While Working
Identity	Shaping self-perception as an independent, active individual through subjective well-being.
Time	Bound working hours create limitations while bringing a sense of structure.
Activity	Dense and dynamic activities that provide meaning in daily life.

A Shifting Space: Narratives of Disorientation

The lifestyle that women establish during their working years does not simply vanish when they leave the workforce. Rather, it becomes an enduring reference point through which they interpret subsequent changes. When women transition from the professional to the domestic sphere, simultaneous and interconnected changes occur across three key dimensions: identity, time, and activity. This forms a complex transitional experience, which is consistent with Rahma & Nurchayati (2021) observation that ceasing work disrupts established habits and routines.

In terms of identity, leaving the workforce triggers a significant shift in self-perception. Women who defined themselves as independent individuals lose that identity when they relinquish their role as workers. This is because they no longer have an independent income or the capacity to make autonomous decisions. This leads to increased dependence on others. This aligns with Barhate et al., (2021), who argue that exiting work due to domestic obligations means not only losing a professional position but also experiencing a profound identity shift. The psychological consequences are tangible. Some women experience a decline in empowerment and self-confidence. Günther et al., (2025) link this decline directly to the loss of the worker role and its implications for identity and psychological well-being.

This condition is further complicated by a pervasive sense of awkwardness, which is rooted in the discrepancy between women's internalized value of independence and their new reality of being more dependent on others. This experience reflects Festinger (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory, wherein psychological tension arises when one's core values and actual circumstances are mismatched. For women whose professional identity was built on independence, this contradiction manifests as awkwardness and a persistent sense of being out of alignment with themselves.

Table 7. Women whose professional identity was built on independence

Respondents	Verbatim	Code	Group
KW	<i>"Because I went from being an indepent working woman to a housewife"</i>	From worker to housewife	Identity shift
RW	<i>"When you're not working and just focusing on the household, you need your husband's permission for eveeverything. You're no longer earning"</i>	Depedency	
AKW	<i>"You feel like you have less power"</i>	Decline in empowerment	Decline in subjective well being
RW	<i>"It's just that I used to earn my own money, and then I suddenly couldn't anymore. I started to doubt myself, wondering if I could still do this without working and if I could still be like I was before"</i>	Decline in self-confidence	
AKW	<i>"Because I believe women should work, I ended up consumed by my mindset, asking myself, 'Why am I not working?'"</i>	A sense of awkwardness resulting from a sshift values	

Changes in time management are another defining aspect of this transition. The structured time that employment provided by organizing daily routines and delineating boundaries between activities disappears when leaving the workforce. This leaves time disorganized and prone to being wasted. This is consistent with Jahoda (1982) Latent Deprivation Theory, which posits that temporal regularity during employment does not derive from individuals time management capacity, but rather from the external structure imposed by work itself. When this structure is removed, individuals lose the primary scaffold that maintained the order of their daily lives.

Table 8. Structure is removed, individuals lose the primary scaffold that maintained the order of their daily lives

Respondents	Verbatim	Code	Group
ADKW	<i>"The 24 hours that I used to spend with 12 of them at work are now spent entirely at home"</i>	Working hours shift to domestic	Shifting time
RW	<i>"Usually, when it was around 5 o'clock I would come and rect, but when you're not working, there's sometimes no rest at all, just a little bit here and there, taking care of the house, taking care of the children"</i>	Disappearance of time structure	The impact of shifting time
SNK	<i>"When you're not working, your time just goes all over the place"</i>	Time becomes less organized	
SNK	<i>"That's the downside, you cant't stay focused, so a lot of time ends up being wasted"</i>	Time is wasted	
SNK	<i>"Now (after leaving work) it's not organized hahaha, because I'm just"</i>	Time becomes unstructured	

	<i>focused on the household, so I can do things whenever I want"</i>		
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Changes in daily activity are equally pronounced. Activities that were once dense and dynamic give way to limited and repetitive domestic routines. According to Jahoda (1982) Latent Deprivation Theory, activities constitute a latent benefit of employment whose value becomes apparent only in its absence. Women who leave the workforce recognize that the diversity and dynamism of their professional activities were fundamental sources of meaning and vitality. When daily life contracts into a narrow domestic routine, individuals not only lose the content of their former activities, but also the experience of purposeful engagement that once filled their days.

Table 9. The experience of purposeful engagement that once filled their days

Respondents	Verbatim	Code	Group
ADKW	<i>"And now (after leaving work), I just stay at home doing nothing. Just watching TV and watching the kids go to school. That's it"</i>	Limited and repetitive activities	Shifting activities
DER	<i>"Then (after leaving work) I wake up in the morning with nothing to do. Just cook, clean the house, wake my husband up, wake the kids up and bathe them. It's back to how it was before I worked"</i>	Limited and repetitive activities	
ADKW	<i>"Now, once the housework is done, what else is there to do?"</i>	Absence of follow-up activities	
SNK	<i>"After dropping my child off at school, I think to my self, 'What am I going to do at home? I'll just cook, and then it's done. After that, what else?'"</i>	Absence of follow-up activities	

Collectively, these changes culminate in an experience of role disorientation. This condition initially surfaces as awkwardness and unfamiliarity in response to sudden disruption of routine, deepening into confusion regarding in daily activities. This aligns with Cabanas (2025) perspective, which views disorientation as an emotional experience arising from a mismatch between what was previously considered familiar and the unfamiliar reality one now inhabits. In this context, the awkwardness and confusion women experience after leaving the workforce manifest as the emotional dimension of disorientation. This occurs as a result of routines and rhythms of life that are no longer the same as before.

At a deeper level, disorientation touches on existential meaning. Women who have left the workforce often describe feelings of emptiness and a persistent sense that something is missing, which is a consequence of no longer engaging in the productive activities that previously filled their days. This experience can be understood through Tuan (1977) perspective in "Space and Place : The Perspective of Experience" which distinguishes between space as a neutral physical environment and place as space that has acquired meaning through

experience and repeated engagement. Withing this framework, the work environment that long served as the setting for women's professional lives is not merely a physical space but a meaningful place transformed through accumulated experiences, routines, and sustained engagement over many years. When work is no longer part of their lives, individuals experience the loss of not only work activity itself but also the loss of the place that had long provided meaning in their daily lives. Tuan (1977) argues that losing this sense of place gives rise to disorientation because individuals no longer have an anchor or meaning in their lives that served as foundation for understanding themselves and their existence. This condition leads women who have left the workforce to experience emptiness and loss. They feel as if something is missing from their daily lives because that which had previously given meaning to their is no longer being carried out.

Table 10. Condition leads women who have left the workforce to experience emptiness and loss.

Respondents	Verbatim	Code	Group
M	<i>"At first, it still feel awkward because I'm used to working every day, having colleagues, and meeting a lot of people. But now, I'm stuck at home, and the only people I see are my children, my husband, and my family. At first, I was still in shock and not used to it"</i>	Feelings of awkwardness accompanied by unfamiliarity	Disorientation
DS	<i>"I felt confused because my usual routine from morning to afternoon was working. Being at home felt like doing something new, like doing the laundry."</i>	Confusion	
RW	<i>"The confusion came from the fact that I used to work and now I'm just idle-not knowing what to do, just confused"</i>	Confusion	
WPS	<i>"Even though I was confused about what to do, what used to be a hectic rush in the morning was now just ordinary"</i>	Confusion	
SNK	<i>"Now (after leaving work) it feels empty. There are no stacks of papers to look at, just stack of pans"</i>	Emptiness	
NS	<i>"There's definitely something missing – something missing from the daily activities. Something is genuinely gone. I used to be so busy from morning until night, especially when I worked in Jakarta with all the traffic. I'd get home late and leave early the next morning. I was just so busy. Yeah, something's is missing hahaha, why am I just lounging around like this?"</i>	Loss	
T	<i>"At first it felt like something was lacking, well it's just that I was used to having a full schedule of activities"</i>	A Sense that something is missing	

This role disorientation indicates that becoming a housewife is more than just a change in role; It is a process of reconfiguring meaning and everyday life for a woman who was previously active in the workforce.

Table 11. Summary Table of Findings on Women After Leaving the Workforce

Dimension	Experiences After Leaving the Workforce	Implications / Disorientation
Identity	A shift in self-identity occurs due to the loss of sources of subjective well-being and increased dependence on others.	There was a decline in empowerment and self-confidence, accompanied by the emergence of a sense of awkwardness resulting from the discrepancy between one's personal value of independence and one's current reality
Time	Time becomes centered around households matters and is carried out without clear working hours boundaries or structure.	The time now available becomes disorganized and tends to be wasted, as it is no longer utilised optimally.
Activity	Daily activities become focused on domestic work, thus tending to becoming more limited and repetitive	The emergence of feelings of awkwardness accompanied by unfamiliarity, confusion, emptiness, loss and a sense that something is missing from daily life.

CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATION

Conclusion

The experience of role disorientation that women undergo after leaving the workforce is complex and multifaceted, and cannot be divorced from the significant role work has played in their lives for a long time. Throughout their working years, employment sustained three key components of their lives: identity, time, and activity. However, after leaving the workforce, significant changes occur in these three areas of their daily lives. These changes ultimately give rise to role disorientation, which is characterized by feeling of awkwardness, unfamiliarity, confusion, emptiness, loss, and a sense that something is missing from daily life. This affirms that for women, the cessation of professional activity is not merely a change in status from worker to housewife. Rather, it is a transitional experience that shakes the very foundation of their lives, rendering disorientation as a tangible reality to their everyday existence. This disorientation indicates that becoming a housewife is more than just a change in role, it is a process of reconfiguring meaning and everyday life for a woman who was previously active in the workforce

Recommendation

For women who are planning to leave the workforce, this study recommends the importance of preparing oneself psychologically before exiting professional life, particularly in terms of readiness to face changes in identity, time structure, and daily activities that will inevitably occur. Women are advised to

build a meaningful life outside of work well before their intended departure, so that the transition does not lead to an overwhelming sense of emptiness.

For future research, it is recommended to explore more deeply process of adaptation from the experience of role disorientation that occurs, as well as the factors that influence women's ability to cope with it. In addition. Future research may also consider using a longitudinal approach to understand how role disorientation changes over time.

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