

An Analysis of the Identity Constraints and Maternal Burdens Faced by Career Women in *All Her Fault*

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Abstract: Through a realist narrative approach, *All Her Fault* portrays the multiple pressures and identity conflicts that contemporary career women face as they navigate between professional advancement and family life. Taking the series as its object of study, this article adopts close textual analysis and a feminist perspective to examine the formation of identity constraints and the maternal burden imposed on working women. The analysis reveals that, through the overlapping narratives of family crises, childcare challenges, and workplace difficulties, responsibility is repeatedly assigned to female characters, reflecting the feminization of maternal responsibility and the persistence of gender-unequal divisions of labor in society. At the same time, motherhood is moralized and idealized, placing women under dual constraints at both emotional and institutional levels. While the series depicts women's reflection on and resistance to unfair distributions of responsibility, it also underscores the difficulty of overcoming structural limitations through individual effort alone. This article argues that, even as the drama offers a realistic portrayal of women's lived dilemmas, it also exposes the gendered discursive boundaries that remain to be challenged in female-centered screen narratives.

Keywords: Maternal Burden; Identity Constraints; Gendered Discourse; Maternal Morality; *All Her Fault*

1. Introduction

Issues that concern women have long occupied a central place in literary and audiovisual narratives, both in China and abroad, a focus closely intertwined with the historical trajectory of women's movements. In recent years, an increasing number of films and television dramas have turned their attention to women's lived realities, which bring topics such as career

women, maternal pressure, social recognition, and family structures into the public sphere. Rather than confining themselves to portrayals of female success, these works confront the conflicts and institutional pressures arising from the multiple roles women are expected to assume in everyday life—as daughters, wives, mothers, and employees. Within this context, women are no longer framed merely as inspirational subjects who can succeed through effort alone; instead, they are situated within complex social structures, where their difficulties often stem from unequal gendered divisions of roles and functions, compounded by familial expectations, social pressures, and persistent stereotypes.

The television drama *All Her Fault*, adapted from the novel of the same title and aired in November 2025, emerges as a realist, female-centered work shaped by this specific social context. Focusing on the interplay between work and family in the lives of career women, the series weaves together a series of seemingly unrelated conflicts to foreground the tensions women face among professional development, domestic responsibility, and expectations of motherhood. The truth is feminist scholarship has examined the relationship between maternal practice and identity or subjectivity from two key perspectives, the first of which concerns how motherhood reshapes women's self-identification [1]. Particularly noteworthy is the title itself—*All Her Fault*—which carries a strong evaluative charge. Across social, familial, and professional roles, responsibility is implicitly gendered: it is not “his fault,” but “hers.” This framing mirrors a common tendency in contemporary society to habitually attribute failure or family problems to women. Taking *All Her Fault* as its object of analysis, this article mainly explores the identity constraints faced by career women and the burdens of motherhood from these two interrelated dimensions. It is hoped to seek to

examine how the drama reconstructs women's structural predicaments within multiple social roles through specific plot developments and character relationships. At the same time, it also considers both the significance and the limitations of the series in its portrayal of women's reflection and resistance. Through a combination of close textual analysis and a feminist perspective, this study aims to uncover the gendered discourses embedded in audiovisual narratives and to reflect on their broader social implications.

2. Narrative Structure and the Construction of Gendered Discourse in *All Her Fault*

2.1 The Configuration of Plot Conflicts and the Mechanism of "Attributing Responsibility"

Rather than centering its narrative on a single triggering incident, *All Her Fault* constructs conflict through the continual accumulation of family crises, workplace pressures, social prejudice, and childcare challenges. This layered approach produces a high-intensity and sustained conflict structure. When Peter learns that their son Milo has gone missing, his immediate response is not concern or self-reflection but blame: he questions why his wife Marissa did not pick up the child. This reaction stands in sharp contrast to Marissa's visible anxiety and self-reproach. By asking, "Why didn't you check the number?" [2], Peter deflects his own paternal responsibility. Such cumulative storytelling keeps the female protagonist at the intersection of multiple pressures and lays the narrative groundwork for the formation of a persistent "responsibility attribution" mechanism.

Within the domestic sphere, marital tension and imbalanced parent-child interactions are repeatedly foregrounded. Subtle yet deeply entrenched forms of control within Peter and Marissa's marriage surface through everyday interactions. At the same time, workplace pressure does not diminish in response to women's domestic responsibilities; instead, it intensifies at certain and critical moments. Women are expected to remain fully committed professionals while simultaneously assuming primary care-giving roles at home. This dual demand is nearly impossible to reconcile in reality, yet it is rendered natural and unquestioned within the narrative. Childcare

functions as a crucial mediating element in the series. Children's emotional fluctuations, behavioral issues, or developmental difficulties are frequently linked directly to maternal choices. Whether it involves work schedules or lapses in emotional regulation, mothers are positioned as the decisive factor in a child's development process. By contrast, fathers' absence or limited involvement is often downplayed or ignored and rarely becomes the focal point of conflict. Through this narrative arrangement, pressures from family life, the workplace, and parenting are continually compressed onto female characters, turning them into the primary bearers of blame.

It is obvious that "fault" is rarely assigned through explicit verbal accusation. Instead, it is repeatedly affirmed through narrative progression and character reactions. Each choice made by a female character is framed as high-risk: decisions such as hiring a nanny, for instance, are retrospectively reinterpreted as potential "sources of error" when problems arise later in their life or career. Over time, responsibility attribution shifts from evaluating specific actions to negating women's roles as a whole, thereby completing the narrative construction of "it's all her fault."

2.2 Realist Expression under a Female-Centered Perspective

In terms of narrative perspective, *All Her Fault* clearly centers on women's experiences, adopting a realist mode guided predominantly by a female viewpoint. The series devotes considerable attention to women's everyday lives in both domestic and professional settings. Moments of mutual support and empathy between Marissa and Jenny, as well as Jenny's struggle to balance work with caring for her son, allow viewers to understand how conflicts emerge from women's subjective experiences. This strategy enhances the sense of realism, while simultaneously amplifying the pressures women endure—being blamed, criticized, and held to an ideal of "perfect motherhood." Under the guise of perfection, women are trapped in what resembles an original sin. The image of the "good mother" or "perfect mother" continues to permeate public policy, media discourse, popular culture, and workplaces. As a result, it definitely shapes mother's everyday practices and interactions [3].

By placing women's experiences at the narrative

core, the plot unfolds primarily through female emotional fluctuations, psychological struggles, and real-life decisions. Audiences are drawn into women's inner worlds, made to feel their exhaustion and anxiety as they navigate multiple roles, a mother, a wife and an employee. Yet this intense focus on women's experiences also subtly reinforces women's tendency toward self-blame. As female characters repeatedly question whether their actions were appropriate, structural problems recede behind individualized experiences. Moreover, the series' meticulous depiction of everyday details further intensifies the realism of women's burdens. Time pressure at work and the endless cycle of domestic chores together form the basic texture of women's lives. Through repetitive portrayals of daily routines, the series illustrates how women's energy is steadily depleted by seemingly minor but persistent tasks. While this detail-oriented realism makes women's dilemmas strikingly tangible, it also risks framing these problems as matters of personal capacity or time management.

It is worth noting that male characters receive far less detailed treatment in their daily lives. Their pressures tend to appear in abstract or fragmented forms. This imbalance renders women's labor concrete and visible, while men's responsibilities remain largely abstracted, producing an unequal structure of narrative attention. As a result, the female-centered realist approach, even as it exposes women's conditions, inadvertently intensifies the concentration of responsibility on women.

2.3 Ideological Implications of the Title and the Central Proposition

The title *All Her Fault* functions not merely as a summary of narrative conflict but as a proposition imbued with strong ideological implications. Even before the story unfolds, it preconfigures a direction of blame, embedding gender bias into the text under the guise of neutrality. Linguistically, the pronoun "her" is both specific and general: it refers to an individual character while simultaneously carrying a universalizing implication. This ambiguity allows responsibility to extend beyond the individual to become an implicit indictment of women as a group. Fault is presupposed as inevitable; the only question left unanswered is where the fault lies and who is the one to make mistakes. Within this framework,

women are placed under scrutiny, while men and social structures retreat into the background. When normative constraints are imposed on mothers, they are often the first to apologize: "I'm sorry. I didn't mean the evening to be so unpleasant," or "Sorry, very sorry. It's been a scary day today" [2]. They are consistently positioned as the ones expected to bridge misunderstandings and repair relational ruptures. As the plot advances, the series repeatedly confirms this proposition, making "it's all her fault" appear to be an objective description of reality rather than a value judgment. The outcomes of family disputes, parenting challenges, and workplace conflicts are repeatedly traced back to women's choices and attitudes, reinforcing social notions that feminize maternal responsibility and domestic failure. This narrative strategy does not amount to overt misogyny; rather, it reproduces dominant gender discourses embedded in society.

In this sense, *All Her Fault* both reflects prevailing gender biases and, inadvertently, participates in their reproduction. Although the series exposes the pressures women face through realist techniques, it struggles to fully escape a framework that attributes problems to individual women. This tension constitutes a key scholarly value of the work, making it a compelling case for analyzing how gendered discourse is constructed in contemporary screen narratives.

In sum, through its narrative structure and plot design, *All Her Fault* persistently directs "fault" toward female characters, thereby constructing a gendered discourse grounded in social reality. Rather than representing a simple character bias, this discourse reenacts the process by which women's responsibility is naturalized in everyday life, laying the narrative foundation for further analysis of identity constraints and maternal burdens faced by career women.

3. The Identity Bind of Professional Women: Structural Dilemmas under Multiple Roles

3.1 The Logic of Conflict between Professional Identity and Motherhood

In *All Her Fault*, female characters are first introduced through their professional identities. They are portrayed as competent, skilled, and driven by clearly defined career ambitions. Yet professional achievement does not liberate them

from traditional gender roles. On the contrary, it places them in a prolonged and unresolved tension with the role of motherhood within existing social structures. Contemporary middle-class motherhood, in particular, places strong emphasis on emotional labor and affective involvement [4]. The conflict between being a professional woman and a mother, therefore, cannot be reduced to flawed personal choices; rather, it is jointly produced by the institutional expectations imposed by both the workplace and the family.

Family expectations regarding women's primary responsibility for care-giving remain largely unchanged, regardless of women's occupational status. The family structures depicted in the series largely reproduce traditional gender divisions of labor, positioning women as the central caregivers responsible for children's development and the daily functioning of the household. Irrespective of their professional rank or workload, women are implicitly expected to give priority to family demands in terms of time, emotional investment, and physical energy. Such taken-for-granted assumptions force women to act as mediators when work and family collide, instead of allowing them the legitimacy to refuse either demand outright.

As Rich argues, "motherhood as an institution is deeply intertwined with patriarchy; it is defined by dominant male norms and historically constructed social expectations regarding what mothers should be and do." [5]. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the series through Jenny's husband, who prefers to sit in his car drinking beverages and scrolling through short videos rather than caring for their child, only to deceive his wife into returning home by claiming he needs to attend a meeting. His behavior exemplifies what is often described as "quasi-widowed parenting," characterized by the mother's chronic overload and the father's minimal presence [6]. Under the simultaneous pressure of workplace demands and familial expectations, the conflict between professional identity and motherhood continues to intensify. Every decision a woman/wife/mother makes is accompanied by accusations of neglect toward the role she temporarily deprioritizes. Such accusations do not stem from incompetence but from entrenched social biases and the structural incompatibility of gendered divisions of labor. As one line in the series poignantly captures:

"Peter, I've missed so much work." [2]. Here, professional pressure and familial responsibility converge, producing a dual sense of failure—both as a corporate manager and as a mother.

3.2 The Impact of Identity Fragmentation on Female Subjectivity

Prolonged exposure to conflicting role expectations significantly undermines female subjectivity. In the series, women constantly shift between professional and domestic identities, gradually depleting their psychological resilience and sense of self. Identity fragmentation is not merely a matter of time or energy allocation; more profoundly, it reshapes women's understanding of their own value.

Psychological strain manifests most visibly through persistent self-doubt when conflicts arise. When women fail to satisfy both workplace and family expectations simultaneously, responsibility is often internalized and attributed to personal inadequacy rather than structural injustice. This pattern of self-blame is repeatedly dramatized in the series, as reflected in the line, "Sitting here laughing, while my son is missing." [2]. Women thus endure not only external pressure but also an internalized moral judgment. The mutual exclusivity of the standards for being a "good mother" and a "good employee" represents the core of this identity rupture. While the ideal mother is imagined as endlessly available and emotionally devoted, the ideal employee is expected to demonstrate efficiency, commitment, and constant availability. These two ideals are fundamentally incompatible in practice, yet they are simultaneously imposed on women. Failure to meet either standard results in being labeled doubly deficient.

Over time, female subjectivity is compressed into a reactive posture shaped by others' expectations. Personal desires, professional aspirations, and emotional needs are repeatedly deferred, as women come to evaluate themselves less in terms of autonomy and more in terms of adequacy. Through its nuanced portrayal of women's psychological trajectories, the series reveals how identity fragmentation erodes female subjectivity and offers a critical lens for understanding the structural predicament of professional women. Jenny's defiant declaration— "I'm not a bad mom, I'm a

fucking great mom.” [2] —exposes the moral stigmatization imposed on mothers, who are labeled as self-indulgent simply for hiring a nanny to care for their child.

By foregrounding the multiple role conflicts experienced by professional women, *All Her Fault* uncovers the structural forces underlying identity constraints. The dilemmas women face are not the outcomes of individual choices but the combined effects of workplace institutions, domestic labor arrangements, and gendered cultural norms. This analysis lays the groundwork for a deeper exploration of the mechanisms through which the motherhood bind is produced.

4. The Formation and Reproduction of the Motherhood Bind

4.1 The Myth of Motherhood within Sociocultural Contexts

In *All Her Fault*, motherhood is not merely portrayed as a familial role; it emerges as a highly moralized and idealized social identity. Sheryl points to a similar phenomenon, noting that “society assumes that good mothers should be constantly attentive to their children, a cultural expectation that emphasizes women’s obligation to spend extensive time with them.”[7] As a long-standing cultural narrative, the myth of motherhood is sustained through repetition and reinforcement, constructing maternal identity as one defined by unconditional devotion, emotional abundance, and self-sacrifice. Within this narrative framework, mothers are expected to prioritize family above all else, while personal needs and professional aspirations are naturally relegated to a secondary position.

The ideology of intensive motherhood positions mothers as the most suitable and indispensable caregivers for their children. It demands that women enact motherhood through selfless dedication, thereby safeguarding children’s physical and psychological development and maximizing family welfare [8]. The moralization of motherhood is most evident in the value judgments imposed on maternal behavior. Mothers’ decisions are no longer treated as ordinary life choices; instead, they are endowed with moral significance. Whether a mother spends sufficient time with her child or consistently prioritizes family interests often becomes a criterion for evaluating her

legitimacy as a “qualified” mother. Such moral framing elevates motherhood beyond a functional division of labor, transforming it into a moral obligation—one that invites criticism and condemnation when unmet.

At the same time, maternal identity is continuously idealized within broader sociocultural representations. Film and television narratives, public discourse, and everyday experiences collectively construct the image of the “perfect mother”: endlessly patient, selfless, and emotionally stable. This idealized figure obscures the complexity of mothers as individuals and conceals the substantial labor costs embedded in everyday mothering. When women fail to live up to this ideal, their actions are readily interpreted as neglect or inadequacy. Against this backdrop, women are widely perceived as the “natural bearers” of family responsibility. This assumption is not grounded in women’s abilities or preferences, but rather in an essentialized understanding of the relationship between femininity and motherhood. Motherhood is treated as an innate capacity and obligation, resulting in a profoundly unequal gendered distribution of care-giving responsibilities within the family. The female characters in the series are repeatedly pushed toward the center of domestic responsibility precisely within this sociocultural context.

4.2 The Unilateral Concentration of Maternal Responsibility within Family Structures

The motherhood bind is shaped not only by cultural ideology but also by the allocation of power and responsibility within family structures. Through its depiction of intrafamilial relationships, *All Her Fault* exposes the process through which maternal responsibility becomes increasingly concentrated in one direction. Central to this process is the marginalization and weakening of fatherhood, which significantly intensifies the burden placed on mothers.

In the series, fathers frequently appear as symbolic participants in childcare. Even when they are involved, their contributions are framed as “help” or “assistance” rather than as expressions of primary responsibility. Fathers rarely concern themselves with details such as what clothes their children wear, while mothers are keenly aware of whether the small dinosaur on a child’s shirt is embroidered on the left or the right. Such narrative choices consistently position fatherhood at the periphery. Paternal

involvement is neither taken for granted nor treated as a key standard by which family functioning is evaluated. When fathers withdraw from domestic responsibilities due to work or personal reasons, their absence is often rationalized rather than questioned.

By contrast, mothers are portrayed as the core operators of the household. When problems arise, they become the first to be scrutinized. Whether tensions emerge in parent-child relationships or deviations appear in children's development, responsibility is automatically attributed to mothers. This unidirectional concentration of accountability gradually transforms motherhood into a social burden that is difficult to shed. Importantly, this burden is not unique to the fictional world of the series. Chinese scholars have noted that, "in response to contemporary realities, many policy-oriented discussions advocate reducing maternal pressure and addressing the motherhood dilemma in order to eliminate the so-called 'caregiver penalty' at its root." [9].

Within family conflicts, mothers are frequently cast as scapegoats. When responsibility cannot be clearly assigned to a specific action or decision, maternal attitudes and choices become the most convenient targets for doubt and blame. This scapegoating mechanism is not grounded in empirical assessment but in deeply entrenched beliefs about gendered divisions of labor. Through its continual repetition, the gendered power structure within the family is preserved, and the motherhood bind is further reinforced through everyday interactions.

4.3 The Reinforcement and Reflection of the Motherhood Bind through Screen Narratives

As a work grounded in realist storytelling, *All Her Fault* both exposes the dilemmas of motherhood and, inevitably, participates in the reproduction of the motherhood bind. Through its narrative structure and plot arrangements, maternal responsibility is repeatedly naturalized, shaping the audience's understanding of what motherhood entails. As the story unfolds, motherhood is treated as a self-evident obligation. Female characters confronting domestic and childcare challenges are rarely granted the space to refuse or renegotiate responsibility. Even when they attempt to claim time for personal growth or career development, they often do so at the cost of heightened emotional labor to maintain temporary familial

stability. While this narrative emphasis highlights women's capacity for sacrifice, it simultaneously reinforces the notion that maternal responsibility is non-negotiable.

Furthermore, the series renders women's emotional labor highly visible through its detailed portrayal of female emotional responses. Women are not only tasked with performing concrete care-giving duties but are also expected to regulate the emotions of family members, mediate conflicts, and sustain relational harmony. Although emotional labor is depicted as an integral component of motherhood, it is rarely acknowledged explicitly as labor. At the same time, women are subjected to moral scrutiny from both family and society. Every maternal decision becomes potential evidence for evaluating a woman's competence as a mother, with such judgments largely ignoring structural constraints and focusing narrowly on individual behavior. While the series partially reflects on this injustice by portraying women's internal struggles, its narrative framework ultimately struggles to move beyond a logic that positions female sacrifice as the primary solution.

In sum, through its portrayal of motherhood myths, family structures, and narrative strategies, *All Her Fault* reveals the mechanisms through which the motherhood bind is both formed and reproduced. Motherhood does not emerge as a natural or inevitable female responsibility; rather, it is continuously reinforced through the combined effects of sociocultural norms, family organization, and narrative discourse. This analysis provides a critical lens for understanding the multiple pressures faced by professional women and offers practical insight for rethinking gendered divisions of labor and the allocation of family responsibilities.

5. Expressions of Female Resistance and Its Real-World Limits

5.1 Self-reflection and the Emergence of Feminist Awareness

In *All Her Fault*, women are not portrayed as remaining permanently in a position of passive endurance. As the narrative unfolds, female characters gradually begin to reflect on the multiple responsibilities imposed upon them, and this process of self-reflection marks an important starting point for female resistance. Compared to their earlier, unquestioning

acceptance of pressure from both family and workplace, women come to realize that their difficulties do not stem solely from personal capability or effort, but are closely tied to inequitable distributions of responsibility. This trajectory aligns with a core feminist theme: the movement from compliance and dependency toward resistance and autonomy reflects broader shifts in social consciousness [10].

First, women begin to voice doubts about the fairness of responsibility allocation. When family or childcare problems are repeatedly attributed to their personal choices, female characters gradually recognize the bias embedded in such attribution. Once, Zhang Xiaohong put, “The mother’s continuous attempts to overcome the emotional labor challenges of motherhood also reflect her active subjectivity in the practice of motherhood.” [11]. They become aware that, under similar circumstances, men rarely face comparable levels of moral scrutiny or accountability. The emergence of this awareness signals a shift away from self-blame and toward an initial critique of external structures.

At the same time, the series loosens its adherence to the narrative of the “perfect mother.” Women no longer fully endorse the belief that motherhood requires unconditional self-sacrifice; instead, they begin to acknowledge their own exhaustion and emotional needs. They spend time together with their children, share coffee, and enjoy moments of quiet companionship. By questioning the idealized standards of motherhood, maternal figures are transformed from singular moral symbols into individuals with complex emotions and lived constraints. Although this awakening remains restrained, its very presence constitutes a challenge to dominant discourses surrounding motherhood.

Nevertheless, such awakening largely remains at the level of consciousness and does not translate into substantive structural change. While women begin to question existing arrangements, they are still required to shoulder responsibility in practice, foreshadowing the limits that their resistance encounters.

5.2 The Value and Limitations of Realist Representation

From the perspective of realist storytelling, *All Her Fault* holds significant value in its portrayal of female resistance. Through nuanced

depictions of women’s psychological shifts under layered pressures, the series renders female struggles visible in an authentic and grounded manner. This realism disrupts romanticized assumptions that women are inherently resilient or naturally responsible for care-giving, enabling viewers to grasp the difficulty and cost of resistance.

Also, realist representation is not without its limitations. Although the series exposes structural problems, its narrative resolutions tend to rely on women’s understanding, tolerance, or self-adjustment as primary solutions. Such an approach risks perpetuating a cyclical narrative of female self-sacrifice, in which tensions appear temporarily eased without being fundamentally addressed. Women’s growth at the conclusion of the story is often framed as an increased capacity to endure hardship, rather than as a transformation of unjust structures. While this developmental arc aligns with lived reality, it may also soften the work’s critical edge, encouraging audiences to interpret inequality as a matter of individual resilience rather than collective responsibility.

In its depiction of female resistance, *All Her Fault* thus achieves both representational significance and reveals the constraints faced by screen narratives attempting to challenge gendered discourse. While women’s resistance offers viewers an entry point for reflecting on gender structures, its practical limits remind us that meaningful change must extend beyond the individual and toward institutional and cultural reconstruction.

6. Conclusion

An analysis of *All Her Fault* demonstrates that the identity constraints faced by professional women are not the result of personal inadequacy or individual choice, but are shaped by the combined forces of workplace institutions, family structures, and sociocultural norms. The motherhood bind, as a central component of this dynamic, intensifies women’s burdens through moralized narratives and mechanisms of responsibility concentration.

Through its realist approach, the series exposes the dilemmas experienced by women navigating multiple roles, offering viewers valuable insight into contemporary female experiences. At the same time, it reveals the challenges that women-centered screen narratives face when attempting to move beyond traditional

frameworks. Future research may adopt a comparative perspective to examine similarities and differences in the construction of motherhood and female identity across diverse film and television texts, thereby deepening our understanding of gender-related issues.

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