

Chapter 21

Teaching, Motherhood, and Professional Growth: Challenges Faced by Female ELT Teachers

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1. RATIONALE

Historically, the teaching profession has been dominated by women worldwide, including in the English Language Teaching (ELT) field (Kundu & Basu, 2022; Schmude & Jackisch, 2019). Nevertheless, the increasing female representation in this field has not necessarily been accompanied by recognition of the complexities of their professional experiences (Azmi, 2025). In recent decades, the role of ELT teachers has transformed significantly. Teachers not only deliver content but also act as learning facilitators, curriculum developers, researchers, lifelong learners, and agents of change to respond to technological advancements, learners' needs, and global demands. These shifts have made teacher professional development (TPD) a crucial element in enhancing competence and the quality of instruction. Research consistently confirms that sustained TPD contributes to improved teaching quality, the development of teachers' professional identities, and better student learning outcomes (Ambon et al., 2024; Phantharakphong & Liyanage, 2026). Accordingly, professional development is not merely a process of enhancing technical competence but also a process of shaping professional identity that enables teachers to adapt to the ever-evolving landscape of education.

Nevertheless, various studies on TPD still tend to view teachers as a homogenous group and potentially fail to consider how gender identity and domestic roles influence their professional experiences. Female teachers who are also mothers often experience challenges in coping with the intersection of professional development with their housework chores. In other words, they are required not only to fulfil their responsibilities as educators but also to meet societal expectations as primary caregivers of the family. Such a condition gives rise to more challenges, such as work-family conflicts, emotional labor, gendered expectations regarding women's roles, pressure to boost academic productivity, and a pile of administrative burdens in their institutions (Hermann et al., 2020; Howell, 2022). These challenges show that female teachers' professional experiences cannot be separated from the social and cultural context where they work (Galili, 2022; Hermann et al., 2020; Kılavuz & İnandı, 2026). Yet, most TPD programs are still designed using a 'one-size-fits-all' approach that assumes that both male and female teachers share relatively similar needs, opportunities, and working conditions. As a result, the unique experiences of female teachers, particularly those who are mothers, often fail to receive adequate attention in the design and implementation of professional development programs (Clarcke et al., 2020). In the context of ELT, this situation is further complicated as teaching English demands a high level of emotional engagement to foster interaction, motivation, and communication with learners, and thereby intensifies the emotional burden teachers need to manage (Benesch, 2017).

Given this context, this chapter aims to explore the relationship between teaching, motherhood, and the professional development of female teachers within the field of ELT. Rather than viewing motherhood as a barrier to career advancement, this chapter argues that the experience of being a mother can also serve as a valuable source of professional learning. The experience of raising children has the potential to enrich pedagogical sensitivity, strengthen emotional regulation skills, enhance

empathy towards learners, and shape leadership and decision-making capacities within teaching practices. Consequently, besides addressing the challenges female teachers face in balancing their roles as educators and mothers, this chapter also outlines strategies to support their continuous professional development across various career stages. In doing so, the discussion aims to provide a more comprehensive perspective on how teacher professional development should be designed to be more inclusive and gender-responsive, while also accommodating the diverse life experiences of female teachers.

2. IMPLEMENTATION

The professional development of female teachers in the context of ELT is not determined solely by participation in training, seminars, or formal competency-building activities. For female teachers who also fulfil the role of a mother, this process unfolds through an ongoing negotiation between professional demands and family responsibilities. Daily experiences, ranging from teaching and child-rearing to meeting institutional targets and maintaining psychological well-being, shape how these teachers perceive their profession and develop their competencies. Accordingly, this section focuses on four interconnected aspects: balancing teaching responsibilities with motherhood, managing emotional labor, shaping professional identity and career development, and strategies to support sustained professional development.

2.1 Balancing Teaching Responsibilities and Motherhood

Fulfilling the roles of both teacher and mother presents a complex challenge, as both demand significant investments of time, energy, and attention (Hermann et al., 2020; Howell, 2022). In the ELT profession, a teacher's duties do not end when classroom instruction concludes. Teachers need to prepare lesson plans, develop teaching materials, provide feedback on student

assignments, grade work, attend meetings, and enhance their professional competence through various training activities. Conversely, when returning home, female teachers often face domestic responsibilities such as childcare and supervising their children's studies, and managing household chores (Howell, 2022). This hectic situation creates work-family conflicts, a scenario where work and family demands clash, such that success in one role may diminish the capacity to perform effectively in the other (Hermann et al., 2020; Muasya, 2020)

This conflict often manifests in seemingly simple daily activities that nonetheless impact a teacher's well-being and productivity significantly. For instance, an ELT teacher might need to prepare lesson materials or grade student work while simultaneously supervising a toddler at play or helping a child with their studies at home (Mazlan et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers had to conduct online classes from home while caring for their pre-school-aged children or assisting their own children with their online schooling (Rani & Venkatalakshmi, 2025).

Nevertheless, research indicates that the experience of juggling these dual roles does not always yield negative outcomes. Some female teachers gradually develop time-management skills, the ability to set priorities, and the flexibility to handle multiple, simultaneous demands. Thus, balancing teaching responsibilities with motherhood is not merely a challenge. It is also a process of professional learning that strengthens a teacher's adaptability in navigating the dynamics of the profession (Weisberger et al., 2026)

2.2 Emotional Labor and Teacher Well-being

In addition to facing high job demands, female teachers also engage in emotional labor, a task that often goes unseen. The concept of emotional labor refers to an individual's efforts to manage and display specific emotions in accordance with professional requirements, even when their actual feelings may

differ (Hochschild, 2003). The accumulation of emotional labor across school and family environments can heighten the risk of emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue. Teachers may need to maintain a friendly and enthusiastic demeanor toward students even while grappling with personal pressures or fatigue resulting from family responsibilities (Febrianto et al., 2022). In certain situations, they must soothe students struggling with learning difficulties while simultaneously managing their own anxiety about their children's well-being at home.

On the other hand, the experience of motherhood can also enrich a teacher's understanding of students' emotional needs. Raising children often fosters empathy, patience, and the capacity to gauge students' emotional states, thereby contributing to a more supportive classroom climate (Meng et al., 2020). As a result, managing teacher well-being should be a crucial component of professional development programs (Dwivedi et al., 2024), as the quality of instruction depends not only on pedagogical competence but also on a teacher's ability to maintain their emotional health.

2.3 Professional Identity and Career Development

Motherhood also influences how teachers view themselves as professionals (Weisberger et al., 2026); a teacher's professional identity is not a fixed characteristic but rather one that continuously evolves through teaching experiences, social interactions, and changing roles in their personal lives (Beka & Gjelij, 2025). Upon entering the phase of motherhood, teachers often need to renegotiate their priorities, career aspirations, and definitions of professional success (Hermann et al., 2020). This process can give rise to a dilemma between the desire for continued academic growth and the need to attend to family responsibilities. Consequently, career progression does not always align with an individual's level of competence.

However, the experience of motherhood can actually strengthen self-confidence, decision-making abilities, leadership

skills, and reflection on teaching practices. Many teachers develop a more humanistic pedagogical perspective after becoming mothers, as they gain a deeper understanding of the diverse needs of learners and the importance of fostering positive classroom relationships (Weisberger et al., 2026).

2.4 Strategies for Sustainable Professional Growth

Given the complex challenges faced by female teachers, professional development needs to be designed as a continuous process that is responsive to individual needs, at a personal level. Teachers can enhance their professional development through reflective practice, participation in mentoring programs, the establishment of professional networks (peer support), and the use of digital learning, such as webinars, online courses, or virtual communities (Kayaduman, 2022; Rinne et al., 2025). These strategies enable teachers to continue developing their competencies despite time constraints resulting from family responsibilities.

At the institutional level, school and higher education play a vital role in fostering a work environment that supports a balance between professional and family life. Policies such as flexible work schedules, the provision of childcare facilities or support, equitable workload distribution, and gender-sensitive leadership can enhance the participation of female teachers in various professional development activities (Chibhoyi et al., 2026). An inclusive work environment also encourages teachers to pursue career advancement without having to sacrifice their family responsibilities (Chakravarty & Satpathy, 2026). Furthermore, professional development should not rely solely on sporadic formal training but should also involve collaborative learning. Activities like Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), action research, peer discussions, and online continuing professional development (CPD) provide opportunities for teachers to share experiences, reflect on their teaching practices, and find solutions to the challenges they face. This approach views professional

development as a contextual, collaborative, and ongoing process, so it can better accommodate the needs of female teachers at various stages of their lives and careers.

3. REFLECTION

Literature on motherhood and teachers' professional development reveals two complementary perspectives. Motherhood should not be viewed through a dichotomy as either a hindrance to or a driver of professional development. Its impacts depend heavily on how the individual navigates the experience and, on the support, provided by the social environment and the teacher's employing institution. Therefore, a more appropriate approach is to view motherhood as part of a dynamic professional journey, in which challenges and opportunities evolve concurrently throughout a teacher's career trajectory.

Furthermore, the challenges faced by female teachers do not stem solely from their roles as mothers. In many cases, these obstacles are compounded by structural factors, such as family-unfriendly institutional policies, gender stereotypes that position women as primarily responsible for domestic duties, inflexible workloads, and unequal sharing of caregiving responsibilities within the family. These conditions demonstrate that the professional development success of female teachers cannot be attributed entirely to an individual's ability to manage time or enhance their competence. Instead, it is shaped by a complex interplay of workplace, psychosocial, and organizational factors, far beyond individual abilities alone (Brandisauskiene et al., 2020). Furthermore, changes at the organizational and policy levels are required to foster a work environment that is more inclusive, equitable, and supportive of a balance between professional and family life (Kılavuz & İnandi, 2026). In other words, sustainable professional development relies not only on the quality of teachers as individuals but also as educational ecosystems capable of accommodating the diverse life experiences of educators (Hasbi et al., 2025).

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