

Shifting Boundaries: Women's Career Empowerment Through Flexibility in Hotels

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Abstract: This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experience and subjective meaning of work flexibility for women's career empowerment in star-rated hotels in Semarang. Eight female employees from various departments of 3-5 star hotels participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews. The analysis generated four superordinate themes: (1) the meaning of work flexibility in the hotel context, (2) work-family balance negotiation strategies, (3) psychological empowerment through flexibility, and (4) women's career barriers. Findings reveal that in the 24-hour hospitality industry, work flexibility is primarily understood as control over shift schedules rather than location flexibility. Access to schedule flexibility enhances all four dimensions of Spreitzer's psychological empowerment: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Self-determination emerged as the most affected dimension, where the ability to manage work schedules increased perceptions of autonomy and life control. Supervisor support as border-keepers and female solidarity play crucial roles in work-family balance negotiation. However, glass ceiling barriers and gender stereotypes remain persistent. This research provides a novel theoretical integration of work-family border theory and psychological empowerment theory, offering practical implications for gender-sensitive HR policy development in the hotel industry. **Keywords:** Hospitality Industry; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Work Flexibility, Psychological Empowerment; Women's Career.

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1. Introduction

The hospitality industry is a sector dominated by female workforce, yet their representation in managerial and executive positions remains severely limited. Global data indicates that women contribute more than 50% of the workforce in the hospitality sector, yet only approximately 25% occupy leadership positions [1]. This gender imbalance phenomenon becomes increasingly complex when associated with hotel operational characteristics that operate 24 hours with rigid shift systems, thereby creating distinct challenges for women in balancing professional and domestic responsibilities. Previous studies have identified that women in the hospitality industry face various career barriers rooted in the glass ceiling, gender stereotypes, and limited access to flexible work policies [2], [3].

Work flexibility has become a central issue in contemporary human resource management, particularly post-COVID-19 pandemic which accelerated the transformation of global work patterns [4]. Work flexibility encompasses arrangements that enable employees to have control over when and where they work, including flexible scheduling, compressed workweek, and job sharing [5]. Research demonstrates that work flexibility can enhance work-life balance, job satisfaction, and employee retention, particularly for women who have dual roles as professional workers and family caregivers [6], [7]. Nevertheless, the implementation of work

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flexibility in the hospitality industry faces unique challenges given the operational characteristics that demand physical presence of employees.

Women's empowerment in the career context constitutes a multidimensional process involving increased control over professional decisions, access to resources, and the capability to realize one's potential [8]. In the hospitality industry, women's career empowerment is not merely related to job promotion but also encompasses autonomy in decision-making, recognition of contributions, and balance between professional aspirations and family responsibilities [9]. Fan et al.'s study in China revealed that female managers in the hospitality sector encounter barriers across social, organizational, familial, and personal dimensions that interact in shaping their career trajectories [10]. This indicates that work flexibility can serve as an important instrument in women's career empowerment, yet profound understanding of how women interpret and experience the relationship between the two remains limited.

Literature review indicates significant research gaps in studies of work flexibility and women's empowerment in the hospitality industry. First, most research on flexible work arrangements has been conducted in office-based sectors in developed countries, while the context of service industries with 24/7 operational characteristics remains underexplored [11]. Second, existing studies tend to employ quantitative approaches measuring causal relationships between variables but insufficiently explore the meaning and subjective experiences of women in negotiating work flexibility [12]. Third, research in developing countries, particularly Indonesia with its strong patriarchal cultural context, remains severely limited despite the unique dynamics of gender in the workplace [13].

Previous research on women's careers in the hospitality industry has been dominated by quantitative approaches utilizing surveys and statistical analysis to identify factors influencing career advancement. Zhong et al.'s study employed factor analysis to discover dimensions that support or impede women's advancement to executive positions [14]. Similarly, Campos-Soria et al.'s research applied regression models to analyze the gender-based wage gap in the hospitality sector [15]. The strength of quantitative approaches lies in their ability to generalize findings and identify predictable patterns. However, this approach has limitations in capturing the complexity of women's lived experience, organizational culture nuances, and individual negotiation dynamics in specific work contexts [16]. These limitations affirm the need for qualitative approaches that can explore profound meanings and informants' subjective experiences.

Based on these gaps, this study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the meaning of work flexibility for women's career empowerment in star-rated hotels. The phenomenological approach was selected as it enables researchers to understand the essence of experience from the perspective of individuals who directly experience it [17]. This method is relevant for revealing how female hotel employees interpret the concept of work flexibility in their work context, the forms of negotiation they undertake to balance work and family demands, and how work flexibility influences their perception of self-empowerment. The research location focuses on star-rated hotels in Semarang City, Central Java, considering that this city has a rapidly developing hospitality industry alongside the growth of tourism and MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Convention, Exhibition) sectors in Indonesia.

The research questions in this study are: (1) How do female employees in star-rated hotels in Semarang interpret the concept of work flexibility in their work context?; (2) What are women's experiences in negotiating work flexibility to balance professional and domestic roles?; and (3) How does work flexibility influence women's perceptions of career empowerment in the hospitality industry? This research is expected to provide theoretical contributions in enriching the literature on the relationship between work flexibility and women's empowerment from an interpretive perspective in developing country contexts, as well as practical contributions in the form of recommendations for hotel management in designing gender-sensitive human resource policies that support women's career advancement.

2. Preliminaries or Related Work or Literature Review

2.1. Work-Family Border Theory and Work Flexibility

Work-family border theory developed by Clark serves as the primary theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of work flexibility and work-life balance [18]. This theory explains that individuals are border-crossers who routinely traverse the boundaries between work and family domains. The flexibility and permeability of borders between these two domains influence individuals' ability to balance their dual roles [4]. Allen et al. identified that flexible work arrangements (FWA) encompass temporal flexibility (flextime) and spatial flexibility (flexplace), both of which have different implications for work-family conflict [19]. Chen and Fulmer's research found that employees' experiences with FWA are positively related to work attitudes, although this relationship is moderated by supportive organizational culture [20].

In the hospitality industry context, work flexibility implementation faces unique challenges. Chiang et al. revealed that job control and work-life balance practices moderate the relationship between employee stress in the hotel and catering industry [21]. Unlike office-based sectors, hotels operate with rigid shift systems so that available forms of flexibility are more limited to schedule arrangements rather than work location [1]. Kaya and Karatepe's study on hotel employees demonstrated that work-life balance mediates the relationship between psychological contract breach and employee attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, indicating the importance of policies supporting flexibility [6].

2.2. Psychological Empowerment Theory and Women's Career Empowerment

The psychological empowerment theory developed by Spreitzer provides a conceptual framework for understanding women's career empowerment [22]. Spreitzer defines psychological empowerment as a multidimensional motivational construct consisting of four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Meta-analysis by Seibert et al. confirmed that psychological empowerment has a positive relationship with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance [23]. In the women's context, Rasheed et al. found that women-friendly HRM practices influence career advancement through the mediation of psychological empowerment [24].

The relationship between work flexibility and women's empowerment has been examined from various perspectives. Shifrin and Michel in their meta-analysis found that FWA is positively associated with employee health, which is an important prerequisite for empowerment [7]. Brega et al. evaluated FWA policies from a capabilities perspective and found that policy accessibility highly depends on explicit design and is not conditioned solely for caregiving [25]. A longitudinal study in Germany using fixed effects data demonstrated that FWA implementation increases internal promotion opportunities to managerial positions, with women and men receiving equal benefits [26].

2.3. Glass Ceiling and Women's Career Barriers in the Hospitality Industry

The glass ceiling phenomenon remains a central issue in women's careers in the hospitality industry. A systematic review by Segovia-Pérez et al. identified that women's career barriers in this sector encompass personal, organizational, and socio-cultural dimensions [27]. Mooney et al. found that the intersection of gender with age and ethnicity creates patterns of sustained exploitation in hotel careers [3]. Kokkranikal et al.'s qualitative study in the UK revealed that career disablers such as gender stereotypes, masculine organizational culture, and lack of female mentors interact to form systemic barriers to women's advancement [1].

Research in Asia demonstrates unique cultural contexts. Fan et al. explored barriers faced by mid-level female managers in China's tourism sector using the *nei-wai* (inside-outside) ideology perspective, revealing inhibiting factors across social, organizational, familial, and personal dimensions [10]. Denizci Guillet et al. questioned the concept of feminine leadership in the hospitality industry and found that female leaders must negotiate their gender identity in male-dominated environments [28]. O'Neill et al.'s recent systematic review identified two critical gaps: insufficient socio-cultural context in understanding work-life demands and inconsistent use of theoretical frameworks [11].

Although the literature on work flexibility and women's empowerment has developed, several gaps need to be addressed. First, the majority of research has been conducted in Western countries with quantitative approaches [12], thus understanding of subjective meanings and women's experiences in Asian contexts, particularly Indonesia, remains limited. Second, theoretical integration between work-family border theory and psychological empowerment theory in the hospitality industry context has not been extensively explored. Third, Dashper emphasized the need for a mentoring approach for gender equality in the hospitality industry, yet research on how women actively negotiate work flexibility for their career empowerment remains scarce [2]. This research contributes to filling these gaps by phenomenologically exploring the meaning of work flexibility for women's career empowerment in Indonesian star-rated hotels.

3. Proposed Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological design to explore the meaning of work flexibility for women's career empowerment in star-rated hotels. The phenomenological approach was selected as it enables researchers to understand the essence of experience from the perspective of individuals who directly experience it [29]. Specifically, this research adopts Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) developed by Smith et al. [30]. IPA is a methodological framework focusing on exploring how individuals interpret their lived experiences, with theoretical foundations in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography [31]. The selection of IPA is based on its relevance for examining complex, ambiguous, and emotionally laden topics such as work flexibility negotiation and women's career empowerment [32].

The conceptual framework of this research is built upon the integration of work-family border theory [18] and psychological empowerment theory [22]. Work-family border theory explains that the flexibility and permeability of boundaries between work and family domains influence individuals' ability to balance dual roles. Meanwhile, psychological empowerment theory identifies four empowerment dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact.

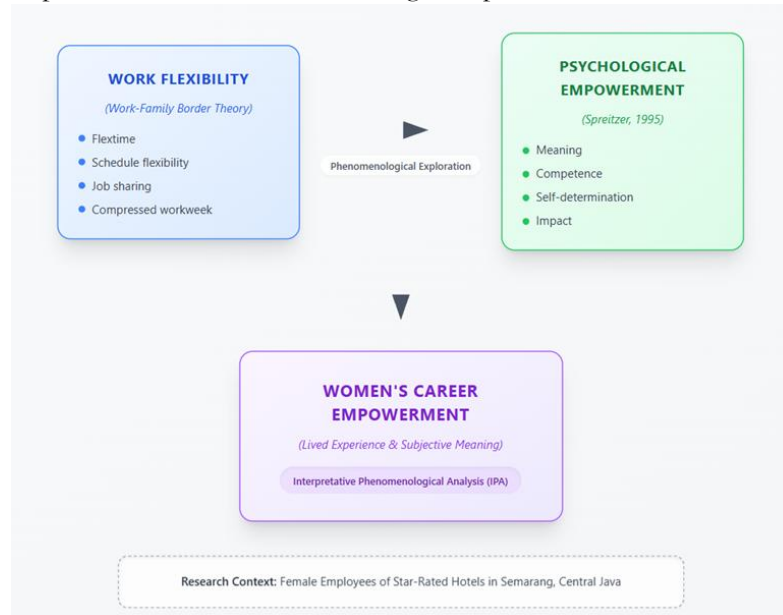


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Research participants are female employees of 3-5 star hotels in Semarang City selected purposively with criteria: (1) married or having family dependents, (2) minimum 2 years of work experience, and (3) occupying positions from staff to manager. Sample size in IPA is idiographic with a recommendation of 6-10 participants to enable in-depth analysis of each case [30]. This study involved 8 participants from various departments (front office, housekeeping, F&B, and HRD) to obtain experiential variation. A homogeneous sampling approach was

applied to ensure participants share similar experiences regarding the phenomenon under study [33].

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 60-90 minutes per session. The interview protocol was developed based on three research questions: (1) meaning of work flexibility in the work context, (2) work flexibility negotiation experiences, and (3) flexibility's impact on career empowerment perception. Interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. To ensure data trustworthiness, this research applied trustworthiness criteria including: credibility (member checking), transferability (thick description), dependability (audit trail), and confirmability (reflexive journaling) as recommended by Lincoln and Guba [34].

Data analysis follows IPA procedures consisting of six stages [35]: (1) reading and re-reading transcripts to obtain holistic understanding; (2) creating exploratory notes encompassing descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments; (3) developing experiential themes from notes; (4) searching for connections across themes; (5) analyzing subsequent cases; and (6) searching for cross-case patterns. The analysis process was conducted idiographically by analyzing each case in-depth before moving to generalization [36]. Double hermeneutics was applied where researchers attempt to understand how participants interpret their experiences while researchers themselves also interpret those meanings [30].

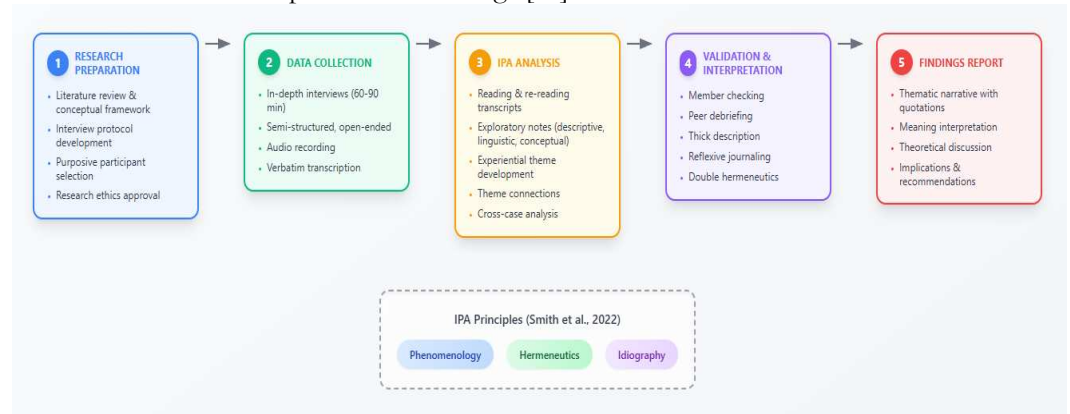


Figure 2. Research Stage Flowchart

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

Participant Characteristics

This study involved eight female participants working at 3-5 star hotels in Semarang City. Participant selection was conducted purposively considering homogeneity criteria required in IPA studies [35]. All participants were married and had family dependents, with work experience ranging from 3-15 years in the hospitality industry. Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of research participants.

Table 1. Demographic Profiles of Research Participants

Code	Age	Department	Position	Tenure	Children
P1	32 years	Front Office	Supervisor	8 years	2
P2	38 years	Housekeeping	Asst. Manager	12 years	2
P3	29 years	F&B Service	Senior Staff	5 years	1
P4	35 years	HRD	HR Officer	7 years	2
P5	41 years	Front Office	FO Manager	15 years	3

P6	33 years	F&B Kitchen	Senior Cook	6 years	1
P7	36 years	Housekeeping	Supervisor	9 years	2
P8	30 years	Sales Marketing	Sales Exec.	4 years	1

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Themes Identified from IPA Analysis

Data analysis using IPA procedures [35] generated four superordinate themes and twelve sub-themes reflecting participants' experiences in interpreting work flexibility and its relationship with career empowerment. Table 2 presents the thematic structure resulting from the analysis.

Table 2. Thematic Structure from IPA Analysis

Superordinate Theme	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Meaning of Work Flexibility in Hotel Context	1.1 Flexibility as temporal boundary negotiation 1.2 Control over shift schedules as autonomy 1.3 Limitations of location flexibility
Theme 2: Work-Family Balance Negotiation Strategies	2.1 Supervisor support as border-keeper 2.2 Solidarity among female colleagues 2.3 Sacrifice and guilt
Theme 3: Psychological Empowerment through Flexibility	3.1 Enhanced work meaning 3.2 Strengthened self-determination 3.3 Feelings of competence and impact
Theme 4: Women's Career Barriers and Challenges	4.1 Gender stereotypes and glass ceiling 4.2 Masculine organizational culture 4.3 Limited access to career development

Source: IPA Data Analysis, 2025

Theme 1: Meaning of Work Flexibility in the Hotel Context

The first theme reveals how participants interpret the concept of work flexibility in the context of 24-hour hotel operations. Unlike office sectors that more easily adopt flexible work arrangements (FWA), the hospitality industry has unique characteristics limiting available forms of flexibility [1]. All participants interpreted work flexibility primarily in the temporal dimension, namely shift schedule and work time arrangements, rather than spatial dimensions such as work from home.

Participant P1 expressed the meaning of work flexibility as the ability to negotiate shift schedules: *"Flexibility for me means being able to swap shifts with colleagues when there's an urgent need for my child. That's already very helpful, even though I can't work from home like office workers"* (P1, Front Office Supervisor). This statement reflects the reality of the hospitality industry where employee physical presence is mandatory, making temporal flexibility the most relevant and meaningful form for female employees.

Control over shift schedules was perceived as an important form of autonomy. P5, who has worked for 15 years, stated: *"Now I have the authority to arrange my team's schedule myself. That makes me feel more empowered; I can adjust to family needs without having to ask for permission constantly"* (P5, FO Manager). This experience indicates that flexibility in the hotel context is more related to job level and seniority, where managerial positions provide greater access to work time arrangements.

Theme 2: Work-Family Balance Negotiation Strategies

The second theme describes strategies used by participants in negotiating balance between work demands and family responsibilities. Consistent with work-family border theory [18], participants serve as border-crossers who routinely traverse boundaries between work and

family domains. Supervisor support was identified as a crucial factor facilitating cross-domain transitions.

P2 described the supervisor's role as a border-keeper: *"My supervisor understands that I have a small child. They often give me morning shifts so I can pick up my child from school in the afternoon. That's very helpful; I feel valued as both a mother and a worker"* (P2, Housekeeping Asst. Manager). This finding is consistent with Kaya and Karatepe's research identifying that work-life balance practices in hotels are mediated by management support [6].

Solidarity among female colleagues also emerged as an important strategy. P7 revealed: *"We mothers in housekeeping help each other. If someone's child is sick, others will cover. This has become an unwritten rule among us"* (P7, Housekeeping Supervisor). This phenomenon reflects the formation of informal gender-based support networks that help women overcome limitations in formal organizational policies.

Nevertheless, this negotiation process is not free from sacrifice and guilt. P3 candidly stated: *"Sometimes I feel guilty when I have to work overtime and can't accompany my child at home. But I also feel guilty if I keep taking leave for family matters. It feels like I can't win either way"* (P3, F&B Service Senior Staff). This ambivalent experience is consistent with Carvalho et al.'s findings that women in the hospitality industry face constant dilemmas between career aspirations and domestic role expectations [9].

Theme 3: Psychological Empowerment through Flexibility

The third theme explores the relationship between access to work flexibility and perceptions of psychological empowerment. Referring to Spreitzer's psychological empowerment theory, psychological empowerment consists of four dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact [22]. Participants experienced enhancement in all four dimensions when they had access to work flexibility.

Table 3 presents representative quotations illustrating the manifestation of four psychological empowerment dimensions in participants' experiences.

Table 3. Manifestation of Psychological Empowerment Dimensions

Dimension	Representative Quotation
Meaning	<i>"When the hotel provides flexibility, I feel this job is truly meaningful. I can still be a good mother while also being a valued professional"</i> (P4)
Competence	<i>"With adjustable schedules, I have time to attend training and develop my skills. Now I'm more confident in my abilities"</i> (P5)
Self-determination	<i>"Being able to determine which shift I work makes me feel I have control over my life. I'm not entirely dependent on others' decisions"</i> (P2)
Impact	<i>"I can give my maximum contribution because I'm not stressed thinking about my child at home. My performance has improved and my supervisor acknowledges it"</i> (P6)

Source: IPA Data Analysis, 2025

The self-determination dimension emerged as the most prominent in participants' experiences. Spreitzer defines self-determination as the perception of having choices in initiating and regulating actions [22]. In this research context, access to work schedule flexibility directly enhanced participants' autonomy perceptions. P8 revealed: *"Being able to request a schedule that fits my family's needs feels like having control over my own life. I become more motivated to work because I feel treated as a human being, not just a worker"* (P8, Sales Executive).

Theme 4: Women's Career Barriers and Challenges

Although work flexibility is perceived positively for empowerment, participants also identified various structural barriers limiting their career advancement. The glass ceiling phenomenon

was still strongly felt in the Semarang hospitality industry, consistent with O'Neill et al.'s systematic findings on women's career barriers in the global hospitality sector [11].

P5, who has reached a managerial position, described her experience: *"To reach this position, I had to work twice as hard as my male colleagues. There's an assumption that married women cannot be fully committed to work. Yet precisely because I'm a mother, I'm more organized and efficient"* (P5, FO Manager). This statement reflects gender stereotypes associating motherhood with limited professional commitment, as identified in Kokkrankal et al.'s study in the UK [1].

Masculine organizational culture also emerged as a significant barrier. P6 revealed: *"In the kitchen, it's really a male world. Sometimes I feel not taken seriously because I'm a woman. I have to prove myself multiple times before being acknowledged"* (P6, Senior Cook). This finding aligns with Denizci Guillet et al.'s research finding that female leaders in the hospitality industry must negotiate their gender identity in environments dominated by masculine values [28].

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. The Meaning of Work Flexibility in the Indonesian Hospitality Context

This study's findings reveal that female hotel employees in Semarang interpret work flexibility differently from the dominant conceptualization in Western literature, which tends to emphasize location flexibility (telecommuting) and time flexibility (flextime). In the operational context of hotels requiring employee physical presence, flexibility is primarily interpreted as the ability to negotiate shift schedules and obtain autonomy in work time arrangements. These findings enrich theoretical understanding of flexible work arrangements by demonstrating that the concept of flexibility is contextual and must be understood within the framework of specific industry characteristics [20].

These results are consistent with O'Neill et al.'s systematic review identifying that most work flexibility studies have been conducted in office-based contexts in developed countries, thus underrepresenting the reality of service industries with 24/7 operational characteristics [11]. In the hospitality industry, available forms of flexibility are more limited to schedule arrangements rather than work location [1]. Nevertheless, these findings demonstrate that despite being limited, temporal flexibility still holds significant meaning for female employees' empowerment. This aligns with meta-analysis finding that various forms of FWA, including schedule flexibility, are positively associated with employee health and well-being [7].

Within the framework of work-family border theory [18], shift schedule flexibility enables participants to manage the permeability of boundaries between work and family domains. This theory explains that individuals are border-crossers who routinely traverse both domain boundaries, and boundary flexibility influences their ability to balance dual roles. These research findings confirm Clark's proposition that control over work time and schedules constitutes a key determinant of work-family balance. Furthermore, this study extends the theory by demonstrating that in Indonesia's patriarchal cultural context [13], supervisor support and female solidarity function as additional mechanisms facilitating boundary management.

4.2.2. Work Flexibility as a Catalyst for Psychological Empowerment

The central finding of this research is the positive relationship between access to work flexibility and participants' perceptions of psychological empowerment. Using the psychological empowerment theory framework [22], analysis demonstrates that work flexibility contributes to all four empowerment dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. These findings strengthen Seibert et al.'s meta-analysis confirming positive relationships between psychological empowerment and various work outcomes including job satisfaction and organizational commitment [23].

The self-determination dimension emerged as the dimension most affected by work flexibility availability. Spreitzer defines self-determination as the feeling of having choices in initiating and regulating work actions [22]. When female employees have the ability to influence their work schedules, they experience significant enhancement in autonomy perceptions and control over their professional lives. These findings are consistent with Chiang et al.'s research

finding that job control and work-life balance practices function as moderators of the relationship between stress and hotel employee outcomes [21].

The meaning dimension also experienced strengthening when participants had access to flexibility. Participants reported that the ability to balance professional and family responsibilities enhanced congruence between personal values and job demands. These findings support Spreitzer's proposition that meaning reflects congruence between employees' values, beliefs, and behaviors with job requirements [21]. In the context of Indonesian women who internalize strong family values, the ability to fulfill dual roles without sacrificing either strengthens perceptions of work meaningfulness.

A recent study by Rasheed et al. found that women-friendly human resource management practices influence career advancement through the mediation of psychological empowerment [21]. This research extends those findings by demonstrating that work flexibility constitutes one form of HRM practice that directly contributes to psychological empowerment. The theoretical integration between work-family border theory and psychological empowerment theory in this research provides a more comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding the mechanism through which work flexibility empowers female employees.

4.2.3. Persistence of the Glass Ceiling and Its Implications

Although work flexibility contributes positively to psychological empowerment, this research also reveals the persistence of structural barriers limiting women's career advancement in Semarang's hospitality industry. The glass ceiling phenomenon identified in this research is consistent with global findings on gender inequality in the hospitality sector [27], [37]. Gender stereotypes associating motherhood with limited professional commitment remain significant barriers, despite participants perceiving themselves as competent and dedicated workers.

These research findings support Kokkranikal et al.'s systematic review identifying that women's career barriers in the UK hospitality industry include gender bias, work-family imbalance, lack of female mentors, and gender microaggressions [1]. In the Indonesian context, these barriers are complicated by patriarchal cultural values affirming women's domestic roles [13]. Fan et al.'s study in China uses the *nei-wai* (inside-outside) ideology perspective to explain how traditional gender expectations shape barriers across social, organizational, familial, and personal dimensions [10]. Similar findings were identified in this research, where participants experienced pressure to prioritize domestic roles despite having high career aspirations.

An important implication of these findings is that work flexibility, while beneficial, is insufficient to overcome structural barriers to women's career advancement. Dashper emphasizes the need for a mentoring approach for gender equality in the hospitality industry [2]. This research confirms the importance of multi-level interventions encompassing not only work flexibility policies but also organizational culture transformation, mentoring programs, and gender-sensitive promotion policies. As argued by Chung and Van der Lippe that work flexibility must be integrated with broader gender equality policies to produce transformative impacts on women's careers [4].

4.2.4. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This research provides several significant theoretical contributions. First, this study integrates work-family border theory and psychological empowerment theory in the hospitality industry context, generating a more comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between work flexibility and women's empowerment. Second, this research enriches the literature with a phenomenological perspective from a developing country context, addressing the gap identified by Beigi et al. regarding limited understanding of women's subjective meanings in negotiating work flexibility. Third, this study contributes to contextual understanding of work flexibility in the 24/7 service industry, whose characteristics differ from office sectors [12].

From a practical perspective, these research findings have important implications for hotel management in designing gender-sensitive human resource policies. First, hotels need to develop structured yet accommodative schedule flexibility policies for female employees with

family responsibilities. Second, supervisor training on their roles as border-keepers supporting subordinates' work-family balance is essential. Third, forming formal support networks for female employees can institutionalize existing informal solidarity. Fourth, mentoring programs and transparent promotion policies are needed to overcome persistent glass ceiling barriers.

Thus, this study demonstrates that temporal flexibility (a border management mechanism) acts as a critical antecedent that fosters the psychological cognitions of empowerment, particularly self-determination and meaning, among women in the hospitality sector

5. Comparison

To provide a measurable depiction of this study's contribution, a systematic comparison is presented with recent state-of-the-art studies in the field of work flexibility and women's empowerment in the hospitality industry. **Table 4** presents a comparative matrix based on several critical dimensions: research focus, methodological approach, theoretical framework, geographical context, and key findings.

Table 4. Comparison with State-of-the-Art Studies

Study	Focus	Method	Theory	Context	Key Findings
Kokkrankal et al. (2024)	Women's career barriers	Qualitative, Analysis	Thematic Gendered Organiza-tions	United Kingdom	Gender bias, inflexibility, lack of mentoring
O'Neill et al. (2025)	Systematic review of women's careers	Systematic Review	Literature Multiple theories	Global	Gap: lack of socio-cultural context
Fan et al. (2024)	Barriers faced by mid-level female managers	Qualitative, Theory	Grounded Nei-wai Ideology	China	Social, organizational, familial, and personal barriers
Shifrin & Michel (2022)	Flexible work arrangements (FWA) and employee health	Meta-analysis	Conservation of Re-sources	Multi-country	FWA positively associated with health
Rasheed et al. (2024)	HRM practices and women's careers	Quantitative, SEM	Psychological Em-powerment	Pakistan	Psychological empowerment mediates HRM-career relationship
Russen et al. (2021)	Gender diversity in hospitality TMT	Systematic Review	Upper Echelons Theory	Global	Broken rung phenomenon, lack of role models
This Study (2024)	Meaning of work flexibility and empowerment	Qualitative, IPA	Work-Family Border + Psychological Em-powerment	Indonesia (Semarang)	Theoretical integration, Southeast Asian context

Source: Compiled from various sources, 2025

Based on the comparison with state-of-the-art studies, this research offers several distinctive contributions, as identified in **Table 5**.

Table 5. Matrix of Research Novelty and Contributions

Aspect	State-of-the-Art	Contribution of This Study
Methodological Approach	Dominantly quantitative (SEM, regression) or general thematic analysis	IPA focusing on lived experiences and double hermeneutics
Theoretical Integration	Single theoretical framework (empowerment OR work-family)	Integration of Work-Family Border Theory AND Psychological Empowerment Theory
Geographical Context	Predominantly Western countries (UK, US, Europe) or China	Indonesian context with distinctive patriarchal culture in Southeast Asia

Aspect	State-of-the-Art	Contribution of This Study
Industry Focus	FWA in office-based sectors or hospitality in developed countries	Star-rated hotels in a developing city (Semarang) with specific operational characteristics
Conceptualization of Flexibility	FWA as telecommuting/remote work	Flexibility as control over shift schedules in a 24/7 operational context
Empowerment Mechanism	Empowerment treated primarily as an outcome	Elucidation of empowerment processes through Spreitzer's four dimensions from a phenomenological perspective
Social Role	Supervisor support as a moderating variable	Supervisor as a border-keeper and female solidarity as an informal mechanism

Source: Author's Analysis, 2025

First, from a methodological perspective, this study is among the first to employ **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)** to explore the relationship between work flexibility and women's empowerment in the hospitality industry. In contrast to Kokkrankal et al., who applied reflexive thematic analysis [1], or Fan et al. who adopted grounded theory [10], the IPA approach enables an in-depth exploration of how participants make sense of their experiences through a process of **double hermeneutics** [35]. This approach yields a richer understanding of the subjective dimensions of empowerment that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative approaches such as those employed by Rasheed et al. [24].

Second, in terms of theoretical integration, this study explicitly integrates **Work–Family Border Theory** [18] with **Psychological Empowerment Theory** [22]. The systematic review by O'Neill et al. identified inconsistency in the use of theoretical frameworks as a critical gap in the women's career literature within hospitality [11]. This study addresses that gap by demonstrating how border management mechanisms are linked to the four dimensions of psychological empowerment, thereby offering a more comprehensive conceptual framework.

Third, with respect to geographical and cultural context, this research addresses the gap identified by Beigi et al. concerning the limited number of qualitative studies from developing countries [12]. Unlike Fan et al. who examined the Chinese context through the lens of *nei-nai* ideology [10], this study reveals unique dynamics within the Indonesian context, where Islamic values and Javanese cultural norms intersect with modern professional expectations. The finding regarding the role of **female solidarity as an informal mechanism** facilitating work–family negotiation constitutes a novel empirical contribution that has not been previously identified in the literature.

Fourth, in terms of conceptualizing work flexibility, this study extends the understanding of flexible work arrangements within a **24/7 service industry context**. The meta-analysis by Shifrin and Michel on FWA and employee health is dominated by studies conducted in sectors that permit telecommuting [7]. This research demonstrates that in the hospitality industry—where physical presence is mandatory—**temporal flexibility in the form of control over shift schedules** carries equally significant meaning and impact for employee empowerment.

6. Conclusions

This research successfully explored the meaning of work flexibility for women's career empowerment in star-rated hotels in Semarang through an interpretive phenomenological approach. The main findings demonstrate that in the context of the 24-hour hospitality industry, work flexibility is primarily interpreted as the ability to control shift schedules rather than location flexibility. Access to schedule flexibility significantly enhances all four dimensions of psychological empowerment—meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact—with self-determination as the most affected dimension.

The synthesis of findings confirms the relationship between research results and established objectives. Participants experienced increased autonomy, work meaningfulness, and feelings of competence when they had control over work time. Supervisor support as border-keepers

and female solidarity play crucial roles in facilitating work-family balance negotiation. However, glass ceiling barriers and gender stereotypes remain persistent, indicating that work flexibility alone is insufficient to overcome structural inequality.

The theoretical implications of this research include the integration of work-family border theory and psychological empowerment theory in the Southeast Asian hospitality context, enriching the literature with phenomenological perspectives from developing countries. Practically, these findings recommend that hotels develop structured schedule flexibility policies, train supervisors on border-keeper roles, and establish formal support networks for female employees.

Research limitations include the focus on star-rated hotels in one city which limits transferability, as well as participant homogeneity being married. Future research is recommended to expand the geographical context, compare experiences of married and single women, and employ longitudinal designs to track empowerment dynamics over time.

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