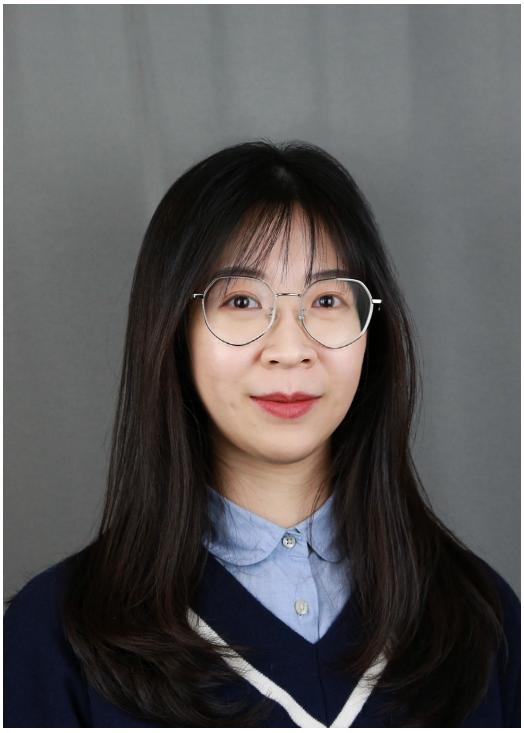
FEATURED SCHOLAR

Each month the Work and Family Researchers Network spotlights the contributions of a scholar who is making significant advances in understanding work-family concerns. We are delighted to present the following interview with **Manlin Cai**.



MANLIN CAI

Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Sociology

The University of British Colombia

Canada

Experts Panel Link: https://wfrn.org/expert/manlin-cai/

WFRN – ***How did you first get introduced to work-family issues and become a researcher in this field?***

Manlin – My interest in work-family issues was first sparked by my own family background. From a young age, I often reflected on my experiences growing up as an only daughter in a stepfamily during China's one-child policy era. I was also drawn to TV shows about romantic relationships and enjoyed thinking about the questions they raised on marriage and family.

I was formally introduced to family research when pursuing my master's degree at the University of Chicago. In my thesis, I examined how queer Chinese individuals navigate their sexual identities and heteronormative parental pressures in their marriage decisions.

During my doctoral studies at the University of British Columbia, my interest gradually expanded to include work and work-family research. I came to recognize that work and family are so closely interconnected that what happens within families cannot always be understood by looking at family life alone. This curiosity about work-family linkages motivated my dissertation research on workplace authority, gender, and family dynamics.

WFRN - ***How did you first get involved with the WFRN? What do you value most about the organization?***

Manlin – I first became involved with the WFRN when I attended the 2024 Conference and Predoctoral Preconference in Montreal, Canada. As a graduate student at that time, I felt somewhat anxious about attending a conference, presenting my work, and networking. The Preconference provided such a welcoming introduction, and those worries quickly eased. I was struck by how easy it was to connect with fellow participants and by how openly and generously faculty members shared their career journeys and advice during the workshops.

What I value most about the WFRN is the strong sense of community that the leadership team intentionally works to cultivate and that members help sustain through participation. In addition to the academic exchanges through conference sessions, I try to participate in as many activities as possible, including receptions, networking dinners, and the mentorship program. Next time, I will definitely apply for the Early Career Fellowship Program!

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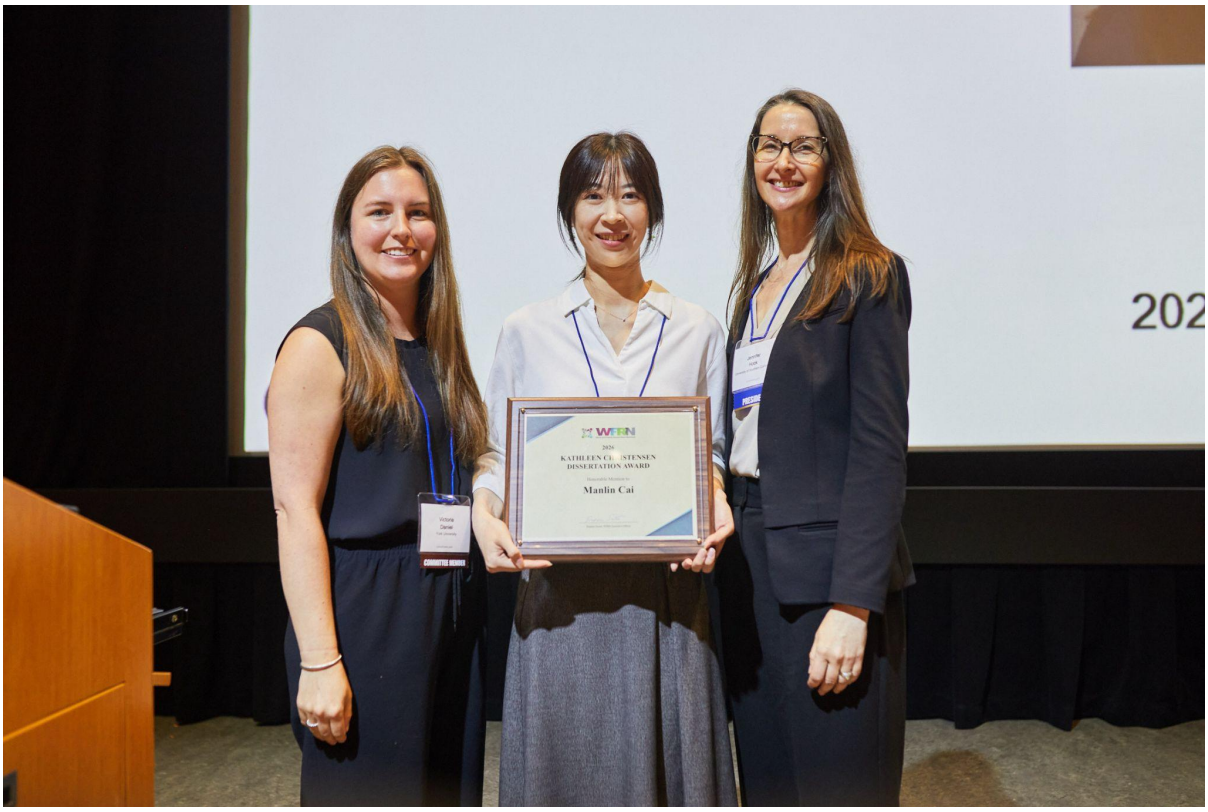
The WFRN conferences are the most international and interdisciplinary conference I have attended. I especially value the opportunity to discuss shared interests in work and family with people from different disciplines and regions of the world.



WFRN – ***Tell us about your current research, what are you studying?***

Manlin – My current scholarship focuses on work and family along two lines. First, I investigate gender inequality at the work-family interface, particularly in relation to workplace authority. My dissertation is among the first to examine the gendered consequences of parenthood for workplace authority in a non-Western context, China. It also investigates how unequal access to authority shapes the division of housework and subjective well-being among married couples. I am currently revising these dissertation chapters for publication (stay tuned!), and one chapter has recently been published in *Social Forces*. I am also

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developing a new project using Canadian longitudinal data to examine how remote and hybrid work transform the rewards and costs of workplace authority across work, family, and status domains.

My second line of research foregrounds everyday complexities facing racialized immigrants in their work and family lives, such as how they form romantic relationships, navigate educational and work opportunities, and secure permanent residency. A recent article in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* examines how Chinese student migrants navigate emerging risks related to work and settlement in the host society and build transnational social protection across individual resources, families, the state, and the market.

WFRN – ***What are your big findings? Did you make any unexpected discoveries?***

Manlin – I would like to highlight my research on how gender and parenthood shape access to supervisory authority in China. Overall, women's likelihood of holding authority declines after becoming mothers, especially after having two or more children, whereas men experience little change. A key finding is that these patterns differ between China's state and private sectors. A considerable motherhood penalty is concentrated in the private sector, whereas a fatherhood premium emerges only in the state sector. Check out my article in *Social Forces* for more details!

I was initially surprised by the absence of an overall fatherhood advantage, but this finding led me to develop richer theoretical contributions. The ways that meanings of gender and parenthood translate into employment outcomes further depend on institutional conditions. China's state sector (governments, state-owned or collectively owned enterprises, and public institutions) features a male-dominated party-state hierarchy and pronatalist agendas. In this context, fatherhood may strongly connect to signals of maturity, responsibility, and moral standing. As these qualities can enter the state sector's promotion and leadership evaluations, fathers may gain greater access to leadership pathways and supervisory positions.

By contrast, the private sector, which employes about 70% of workers, is more market-oriented with limited care provision. As individuals and families increasingly bear caregiving responsibilities, private employers may more likely view parenthood, even fatherhood, as a potential constraint on workers'

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availability and productivity. These concerns may offset the traditional positive meanings attached to fatherhood and thereby diminish the premium in authority.

WFRN – ***How can your research guide the formulation of social policy?***

Manlin – Using the article introduced above as an example, my findings highlight how institutional conditions can reshape gender and parenthood inequalities at work, which points to several policy implications. For example, reducing gender asymmetry in parental leave entitlements, rather than simply extending leave duration, may better encourage uptake among fathers, reduce women's disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, and weaken the norms that treat mothers as the default primary caregiver. Expanding accessible childcare can also reduce unpaid family labor and ease both actual and perceived employment constraints associated with caregiving. These constraints particularly limit mothers' authority prospects, but they may increasingly shape fathers' career trajectories as well. Third, because the motherhood penalty is concentrated in private-sector employment, stronger enforcement of labor laws and anti-discrimination organizational practices in hiring and promotion may be especially important in private enterprises.

I have also contributed more directly to policy discussions by leading a policy brief in partnership with the Vanier Institute of the Family on care/work policies for managing routine and unpredictable caregiving. The brief reviews regulations for key employment rights in relation to routine caregiving responsibilities under the Canada Labour Code and provincial/territorial employment standards. We underscore that providing more comprehensive and equitable access to flexible work and leave options is essential for enabling parents to effectively manage employment and caregiving responsibilities.

WFRN – ***What directions hold the greatest promise for discovery in the work-family field? I am thinking here of theory, methods, or research questions that might be posed.***

Manlin – At the 2026 WFRN Conference, I attended a few sessions on how technological change, particularly generative AI and robotics, is reshaping the present and future of work and workers' lives. These discussions inspired my own thinking, and they highlighted how much remains to be explored. For example, more research is needed to document empirical patterns of AI use across occupations and industries, and to examine how its returns and costs,

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both on and off the job, are distributed differently across social groups. Although this area may be currently considered "trendy," I don't think everyone should simply follow the trend. Rather, it is helpful to stay current and open-minded as we live in and study this rapidly changing world.

I am also deeply interested in the growing diversity in family forms, just as how my own family background first taught me about such diversity and sparked my interest in this field. Some trends I am thinking of include adults living at home with parents, LGBTQ+ parenting, and chosen families. It is equally important to recognize and situate family diversity within specific sociocultural, economic, and political contexts.

Finally, I cannot think about the future of work-family research without considering aging societies and the core question of who cares for whom, which also brings the two directions above together in understanding how care is organized.

WFRN – ***What advice would you give to graduate students or those early in their professional careers***

Manlin – As an early-career scholar, I have benefited a lot from building a support network, or simply from talking to people! One thing I learned early in my studies was "Don't be afraid to reach out." My doctoral advisor and committee members supported me through every step of learning the craft of research while giving me room to grow independently; Other faulty members generously offered feedback on my manuscripts and application materials; I met peers through conferences who were at similar career stages and we encouraged one another along the way. It is these connections that have stayed with me and inspired me to be part of others' support networks.

Recently, as I am preparing for the next chapter of my journey, I have come to let go of my desire for predictability. Deep down, I tend to view unpredictability as risks, but I am coming to see it is an unavoidable part of life and what makes life colorful. I'm sharing this perspective with others who navigate a similar life stage: Do your work and let life unfold.

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ABOUT THE WFRN

The Work and Family Researchers Network's mission is to facilitate virtual and face-to-face interaction among academic work and family researchers from a broad range of fields as well as engage the next generation of work and family scholars. The WFRN welcomes the participation of policy makers and workplace practitioners as it seeks to promote knowledge and understanding of work and family issues among the community of global stakeholders.

To learn more about the WFRN, please visit our website WFRN.ORG. To become a member, please click on this link https://wfrn.org/become-a-member/.

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