

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Harmonizing care and identity: Music education, gendered emotional labor, and women's mental health consciousness

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Abstract

This research explores the intersection of music education and gendered emotional labor in China, focusing on the impact of this intersection on the mental health of women educators. Utilizing theories of emotional labor, gendered care work, and mental health literacy, the study implemented an integrated model through a quantitative cross-sectional survey involving 312 women music educators from urban primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions. Using structural equation modeling, the study revealed that gendered emotional labor significantly contributes to professional identity strain while diminishing mental health awareness. Professional identity strain further dampens mental health consciousness, whereas enhanced mental health awareness predicts improved psychological well-being, resilience, and reduced burnout and anxiety. Mediation analysis demonstrated that the influence of emotional labor on mental health primarily occurs via identity strain and mental health awareness. The study advances emotional labor theory by pinpointing professional identity strain as a critical psychological pathway, reconceptualizes music education as simultaneously nurturing and demanding for women educators, and identifies mental health awareness as a modifiable protective factor. These findings emphasize the importance of culturally attuned, gender-responsive institutional strategies to foster psychological well-being and professional sustainability for women educators in China. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2026; 30 [15]: 117-126).

Keywords: Music education, gendered emotional labor, professional identity, mental health consciousness, women educators, mental health literacy, China

Résumé

Cette recherche explore l'intersection de l'éducation musicale et du travail émotionnel genré en Chine, en se concentrant sur son impact sur la santé mentale des femmes éducatrices. Utilisant les théories du travail émotionnel, du travail de soin genré et de la littératie en santé mentale, l'étude a mis en œuvre un modèle intégré à travers une enquête quantitative transversale impliquant 312 femmes éducatrices en musique provenant d'établissements primaires, secondaires et tertiaires urbains. À l'aide de la modélisation par équations structurelles, les résultats ont révélé que le travail émotionnel genré contribue significativement à la tension liée à l'identité professionnelle tout en diminuant la conscience de la santé mentale. La tension liée à l'identité professionnelle réduit davantage la conscience de la santé mentale, tandis qu'une meilleure conscience de la santé mentale prédit un bien-être psychologique amélioré, une résilience accrue, et une réduction de l'épuisement professionnel et de l'anxiété. L'analyse de médiation a démontré que l'influence du travail émotionnel sur la santé mentale se produit principalement par le biais de la tension identitaire et de la conscience de la santé mentale. L'étude fait progresser la théorie du travail émotionnel en identifiant la tension liée à l'identité professionnelle comme une voie psychologique critique, reconceptualise l'éducation musicale comme à la fois nourrissante et exigeante pour les femmes éducatrices, et identifie la conscience de la santé mentale comme un facteur de protection modifiable. Ces résultats soulignent l'importance de stratégies institutionnelles culturellement adaptées et sensibles au genre pour favoriser le bien-être psychologique et la durabilité des femmes éducatrices en Chine. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2026; 30 [15]: 117-126).

Mots-clés: Éducation musicale, travail émotionnel genré, identité professionnelle, conscience de la santé mentale, femmes éducatrices, littératie en santé mentale, Chine

Introduction

Mental health has emerged as a critical public health and social development concern in

contemporary China, particularly for women working within care-oriented and emotionally demanding professions. Rapid socioeconomic transformation, intensified labor expectations, and

deeply embedded gender norms have reshaped women's everyday experiences of work, identity, and wellbeing. Within this context, emotional labor and the management of feelings to fulfill occupational and social expectations has become a central yet under-examined determinant of women's mental health consciousness and coping practices.¹ Music education, as a profession positioned at the intersection of care, creativity, and pedagogy, offers a particularly revealing site for examining how gendered emotional labor interacts with identity formation and mental health awareness.

In China's education sector, teachers are expected not only to deliver academic outcomes but also to perform extensive affective work, including emotional regulation, nurturing behaviors, and moral role modeling. Prior research has shown that Chinese educators engage in high levels of emotional labor, often shaped by Confucian ethics emphasizing harmony, self-discipline, and relational responsibility.² These demands are not gender-neutral. Female teachers, especially in arts and music education, are disproportionately positioned as emotional caregivers who are expected to display warmth, patience, and emotional availability while suppressing stress, frustration, or psychological distress.³ Such expectations contribute to cumulative emotional strain, heightening vulnerability to burnout, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

Music education occupies a unique dual role in this landscape. On one hand, music-based pedagogies and interventions have been empirically linked to improved emotional regulation, psychological wellbeing, and stress reduction among learners and educators in China.⁴ On the other hand, music teachers themselves face intensified identity pressures, balancing artistic ideals with institutional performance metrics and affective expectations. Recent studies on Chinese music educators indicate growing identity conflicts and adaptive coping strategies—such as emotional withdrawal or “lying flat” responses, reflecting deeper mental health struggles within the profession.⁵ This paradox underscores the need to examine music education not merely as a therapeutic tool, but also as a labor context that

simultaneously produces emotional wellbeing and emotional burden.

Gendered emotional labor further complicates this dynamic. Empirical evidence from Chinese educational settings demonstrates that emotional labor significantly predicts mental health outcomes, with surface acting associated with psychological distress and deep acting yielding mixed effects depending on institutional support and individual resources.⁶ Women educators are more likely to internalize emotional demands, often framing stress as a personal inadequacy rather than a structural condition; which limits help-seeking behaviors and delays mental health awareness. Such patterns resonate with broader findings on women's mental health literacy in China, where awareness, recognition of symptoms, and willingness to seek support remain uneven despite expanding policy attention.⁷

Mental health consciousness defined as awareness, interpretation, and reflexive engagement with one's psychological wellbeing has been identified as a crucial mediator between emotional labor and mental health outcomes. National surveys in China reveal persistent gaps in mental health literacy, particularly among women balancing professional, familial, and emotional caregiving roles.⁸ Lower mental health literacy is strongly associated with untreated anxiety and depression, reinforcing cycles of silent suffering and emotional normalization.⁹ Within feminized professions such as music education, this lack of consciousness is further masked by cultural narratives that frame emotional endurance and self-sacrifice as professional virtues.

Despite growing scholarship on emotional labor, teacher wellbeing, and music-based mental health interventions, existing literature remains fragmented. Few studies integrate music education, gendered emotional labor, and women's mental health consciousness within a single analytical framework, particularly in the Chinese context. This paper addresses this gap by examining how emotional labor practices in music education shape women educators' identity negotiations and mental health awareness. By situating music education within broader gendered labor structures and mental health discourses in China, the study

contributes to interdisciplinary debates across education, gender studies, and mental health policy, while offering evidence-based insights for more equitable and psychologically sustainable educational environments.

Methods

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to explore the relationships between gendered emotional labor, professional identity strain, mental health consciousness, and mental health outcomes among women music educators in China. The methodology is described below in terms of study context, population, sample size, sampling method, and data collection procedures.

Study context

The study was conducted in several urban regions of China, specifically Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Xi'an. These cities were chosen due to their significant cultural, educational, and professional diversity, making them ideal for examining the experiences of women music educators in different educational contexts. These educators work in both public and private primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions. The study aimed to capture their perceptions of emotional labor, professional identity, mental health awareness, and mental health outcomes within the context of their unique educational roles.

Population and sample

The sample size of 312 participants was determined based on a power analysis using G*Power 3.1, which indicated that a sample size of 312 would provide sufficient statistical power (0.80) to detect medium effect sizes ($f^2 = 0.15$) at a significance level of 0.05. This ensures the reliability of the SEM analysis and the ability to detect meaningful relationships between constructs. The sample size was based on previous studies of similar size in educational research contexts.

The target population for this study consisted of female music educators working in both public and private educational institutions across the selected urban regions in China. These participants were selected due to their engagement

in emotionally demanding and care-oriented work, which forms the foundation of the study's focus on gendered emotional labor and mental health outcomes. The final sample consisted of 312 women music educators, representing a broad spectrum of educational levels, including 38% from primary schools, 42% from secondary schools, and 20% from tertiary institutions. The selection of participants aimed to include a diverse range of educators working in various educational settings, ensuring that the sample was representative of the broader population of women music educators in China.

Sampling method

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, which allowed for the selection of individuals who meet specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (i.e., female music educators). To further ensure diversity in the sample, snowball sampling was also employed, where initial participants were asked to refer other potential participants within their professional networks. This method helped to reach educators who might not have been directly accessible through other means. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the study adhered to ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent and ensuring anonymity.

Data collection procedures

Data for this study were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of validated measurement scales adapted to the Chinese educational context. The questionnaire was designed to capture self-reported perceptions and experiences of the participants regarding emotional labor, professional identity, mental health consciousness, and mental health outcomes. The survey was administered online through a secure survey platform, and participants were given clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to be concise, ensuring that participants could complete it in approximately 20–25 minutes.

The survey was constructed using validated scales tailored to measure specific constructs such as emotional labor, professional identity strain, mental health consciousness, and mental health

outcomes. These scales were meticulously adjusted to align with the Chinese educational setting, thereby ensuring both cultural appropriateness and contextual relevance.

Gendered Emotional Labor (GEL) was assessed through items evaluating surface acting, deep acting, and emotional suppression. These items were adapted from Hochschild's Emotional Labor Scale as well as Grandey's Deep Acting and Surface Acting Scales^{1, 3, 4}. Examples included statements like "I try to control my emotions even when I feel frustrated," representing surface acting, and "I modify my inner feelings to meet the expectations of my students," reflecting deep acting.

Professional Identity Strain (PIS) was measured through dimensions such as caregiver identity, artistic self-concept, moral responsibility, and identity strain. The indicators were derived from established frameworks^{5, 6}. One sample item was: "I feel torn between being a nurturing teacher and an artistic professional."

Mental Health Consciousness (MHC) was evaluated using items that encompassed mental health awareness, recognition of psychological distress, and a willingness to seek help. These were adapted from existing mental health literacy scales. Mental Health Outcomes (MHO) focused on dimensions such as emotional well-being, burnout, anxiety, and psychological resilience^{7, 9}. A sample statement included: "I often feel anxious about my professional responsibilities." Responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), enabling a detailed understanding of participants' perceptions across all constructs.

Reliability and validity

Before data collection, the reliability and validity of the questionnaire were assessed. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each construct to assess internal consistency, with values above 0.70 indicating satisfactory reliability. Composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were also calculated to ensure convergent validity. Additionally, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to confirm the construct validity of the measurement scales used in the questionnaire.

Data analysis

Advanced statistical methods were utilized in the data analysis to ensure the robustness and reliability of the findings. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the hypothesized relationships and moderation effects within the study. SPSS was used for preliminary descriptive statistics, while Amos facilitated the implementation of SEM, chosen for its ability to simultaneously evaluate multiple relationships among latent variables. Before proceeding with the main analysis, thorough data preprocessing was undertaken to enhance quality and reliability. This involved screening the dataset for missing values and outliers. Missing data were addressed through multiple imputation methods, and outliers were identified using Z-scores, with exclusions made as necessary to mitigate their influence on the outcomes. The SEM model underwent Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess the validity of the measurement framework. Model fit was evaluated using several fit indices, applying thresholds such as a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.90 or higher, a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) below 0.08, and a Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) under 0.08. The measurement model showed strong alignment with the data, yielding fit indices of CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.047, and SRMR = 0.041.

Ethical considerations

The study utilized snowball sampling, which involves participants referring others within their professional networks. To maintain anonymity and protect participants' identities, the following procedures were employed: (1) Participants were assigned unique identification codes instead of using personal names, (2) Recruitment and data collection occurred through secure online platforms, ensuring privacy, (3) All data were stored securely, and access was restricted to authorized members of the research team. Additionally, participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and used only for the purposes of this research. The ethical considerations were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Jiangxi Science and Technology Normal University.

Results

Descriptive statistics and reliability analysis

A total of $N = 312$ women music educators participated in the study. Respondents represented primary (38%), secondary (42%), and tertiary education institutions (20%). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and internal consistency measures for all latent constructs. All constructs exceeded the recommended reliability threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$, indicating strong internal consistency. These values are consistent with prior emotional labor and mental health studies in Chinese educational contexts.^{1,4,7}

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and reliability measures

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Gendered Emotional Labor (GEL)	9	3.71	0.62	0.88
Professional Identity Strain (PIS)	6	3.54	0.67	0.86
Mental Health Consciousness (MHC)	6	3.12	0.71	0.84
Mental Health Outcomes (MHO)	8	3.29	0.65	0.89

Table 2: Measurement model results

Construct	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE
GEL	0.68–0.84	0.90	0.56
PIS	0.70–0.86	0.88	0.59
MHC	0.66–0.83	0.86	0.53
MHO	0.71–0.88	0.91	0.60

Note: GEL = Gendered Emotional Labor; PIS = Professional Identity Strain; MHC = Mental Health Consciousness; MHO = Mental Health Outcomes; SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 3: Correlation matrix

Construct	GEL	PIS	MHC	MHO
GEL	1.00			
PIS	0.56**	1.00		
MHC	−0.42**	−0.48**	1.00	
MHO	−0.39**	−0.52**	0.61**	1.00

Note: GEL = Gendered Emotional Labor; PIS = Professional Identity Strain; MHC = Mental Health Consciousness; MHO = Mental Health Outcomes; SD = Standard Deviation. * $p < 0.01$

Correlation analysis

Table 3 presents Pearson correlation coefficients among the key constructs. Gendered emotional labor showed a strong positive correlation with professional identity strain and negative

Measurement model: confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess convergent and discriminant validity. Table 2 presents factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). All standardized loadings exceeded 0.60, CR values were above 0.70, and AVE values exceeded the 0.50 threshold, confirming satisfactory convergent validity. Discriminant validity was established as the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded inter-construct correlations. These results align with prior measurement practices in studies of emotional labor and mental health literacy.²

correlations with mental health consciousness and outcomes. Mental health consciousness was strongly and positively correlated with mental health outcomes. These patterns are consistent with prior findings that emotional labor increases psychological strain while awareness and literacy buffer negative outcomes.^{4,7}

Structural equation modeling (SEM) results

Structural equation modeling was used to check the proposed relationships. The structural model fit the data well. The fit measures were: CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.047, and SRMR = 0.041. All of these values met the standard guidelines, showing that the model fits the data adequately.

Gendered emotional labor significantly increased professional identity strain, supporting H1, consistent with gendered emotional labor literature in Chinese education.^{1,3}

Emotional labor and identity strain both significantly reduced mental health consciousness, supporting H2 and H3, corroborating findings on emotional suppression and low mental health literacy among women educators.^{10–12}

Table 4: Structural path coefficients

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	Result
H1	GEL → PIS	0.58***	9.41	Supported
H2	GEL → MHC	-0.31***	-5.62	Supported
H3	PIS → MHC	-0.37***	-6.48	Supported
H4	MHC → MHO	0.63***	10.12	Supported
H5	GEL → PIS → MHC	Indirect	—	Supported
H6	PIS → MHC → MHO	Indirect	—	Supported

Note: GEL = Gendered Emotional Labor; PIS = Professional Identity Strain; MHC = Mental Health Consciousness; MHO = Mental Health Outcomes; β = Standardized beta coefficient; **p < 0.001.

Discussion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the gendered emotional labor in music education and its impact on women educators' mental health consciousness in China. The findings underscore the complex relationship between emotional labor, professional identity strain, and mental health outcomes, particularly highlighting the significant role of mental health consciousness in mediating these effects. By integrating gendered emotional labor theory with mental health literacy, this study advances our understanding of how emotional labor, often invisible and undervalued, directly contributes to identity conflict and mental health issues in feminized professions like music education.

H1: gendered emotional labor and professional identity strain

Hypothesis 1 proposed that gendered emotional labor would be positively associated with professional identity strain among women music educators. The results strongly support this hypothesis, confirming that sustained emotional regulation intensifies identity conflict. This finding aligns with emotional labor theory, which posits that continuous regulation of feelings, particularly surface acting produces alienation between the “performed self” and the authentic self.² In the Chinese educational context, this process is amplified by Confucian ideals of harmony, self-restraint, and moral exemplarity, which normalize emotional endurance as professional virtue¹³. For women music educators, emotional labor is not merely an occupational requirement but a gendered

expectation embedded in caregiving norms¹⁴. The significant association between emotional labor and identity strain corroborates prior findings that female educators internalize emotional expectations more deeply than men, leading to heightened identity dissonance and emotional exhaustion.^{8,15-19} This study extends earlier work by demonstrating that such identity strain is particularly pronounced in music education, a context in emotional expressiveness is both pedagogically demanded and institutionally regulated.²⁰

H2: gendered emotional labor and mental health consciousness

Hypothesis 2 posited a negative relationship between gendered emotional labor and mental health consciousness. The results confirm that higher emotional labor is associated with reduced awareness and recognition of psychological distress. This finding is theoretically consistent with scholarship suggesting that emotional labor encourages emotional normalization- a process whereby distress is reframed as professional responsibility rather than a health concern.^{19, 21}

In China, mental health stigma and moralized work ethics further suppress mental health awareness among women educators.²² Emotional labor thus operates as a silencing mechanism, discouraging reflexive engagement with psychological wellbeing.²³ This finding advance mental health literacy theory by empirically demonstrating that emotional labor is not only psychologically taxing but also cognitively obscuring, reducing individuals' capacity to recognize and interpret distress.

H3: professional identity strain and mental health consciousness

Hypothesis 3 proposed that professional identity strain would negatively affect mental health consciousness. The results support this hypothesis, indicating that identity conflict undermines women educators' ability to recognize and articulate mental health needs. Identity theory suggests that when individuals experience role overload or identity inconsistency, they prioritize role maintenance over self-care.⁹ In music education, women are expected to simultaneously embody caregiver, artist, and moral role model identities. The resulting identity strain diverts cognitive and emotional resources away from self-reflection and mental health awareness. This finding complements prior studies showing that identity instability among Chinese educators is associated with disengagement, emotional withdrawal, and delayed help-seeking.^{6,9}

H4: mental health consciousness and mental health outcomes

Hypothesis 4 proposed that mental health consciousness would positively predict mental health outcomes. The strong positive association observed in the results confirms the central role of awareness and recognition in protecting psychological wellbeing. This finding is consistent with national and regional studies in China demonstrating that higher mental health literacy is associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout²⁴⁻²⁹. Theoretically, this supports mental health literacy frameworks that position awareness as a prerequisite for adaptive coping and help-seeking. In feminized professions such as music education, where emotional suffering is often normalized, mental health consciousness emerges as a critical buffer against emotional depletion.

H5: mediation of professional identity strain

Hypothesis 5 proposed that professional identity strain mediates the relationship between gendered emotional labor and mental health consciousness. The mediation effect observed confirms that emotional labor does not directly suppress mental health awareness; rather, it does so through

identity-based mechanisms. This finding advances emotional labor theory by empirically validating identity strain as a key psychological pathway linking emotional demands to mental health cognition. This result is particularly important in the Chinese context, where institutional cultures emphasize role fulfillment and moral discipline. Emotional labor intensifies identity strain, which in turn constrains mental health consciousness by prioritizing role conformity over self-reflection^{2,4}.

H6: mediation of mental health consciousness

Hypothesis 6 proposed that mental health consciousness mediates the relationship between professional identity strain and mental health outcomes. The results support this hypothesis, confirming that identity strain affects wellbeing primarily by limiting awareness and recognition of distress. This finding extends existing research by demonstrating that identity strain alone does not inevitably lead to poor mental health outcomes; rather, outcomes depend on whether individuals possess the cognitive and emotional resources to interpret strain as a health issue. The mediation effect highlights the critical role of mental health awareness as a modifiable protective factor, aligning with recent advocacy for literacy-focused interventions within Chinese education systems^{30,31}. Prior studies have demonstrated that professional identity strain serves as a direct predictor of burnout among Chinese teachers^{19,32}. Additionally, mental health literacy has been identified as an effective buffer against the adverse impact of perceived stress on anxiety.³¹

Strengths and limitations of the study

One of the key strengths of this study lies in its adequate sample size (N = 312), which provides robust statistical power and enhances the generalizability of the findings across different educational contexts in China. The quantitative methodology, specifically the use of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), allows for a nuanced understanding of the relationships between emotional labor, identity strain, mental health consciousness, and mental health outcomes. This is an important contribution, as it allows for the exploration of these constructs in a single model,

offering more comprehensive insights than studies that examine these factors in isolation.

Moreover, the diverse sample which includes women music educators from primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions ensures that the study captures a broad range of experiences, which enriches the findings and ensures relevance across different levels of the education system.

Despite these strengths, there are several limitations that need to be addressed. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. While the study provides strong correlations between emotional labor, identity strain, and mental health outcomes, the temporal relationships between these variables remain unclear. Future studies could benefit from a longitudinal design to examine how emotional labor and mental health consciousness evolve over time and how early interventions might impact long-term mental health outcomes.

Second, the study relies on self-reported data, which may introduce some response bias. While the use of validated measurement scales helps mitigate this risk, participants may still have underreported distress due to social desirability bias, especially in a culture that values emotional endurance and self-sacrifice. Additionally, the snowball sampling method could have led to selection bias, as it may have favored individuals who are more connected within the music education community, potentially overlooking those who are less engaged or less vocal about their struggles.

The data were gathered solely from three prominent urban centers (Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Xi'an). As a result, the findings may not fully apply to women music educators in rural or less developed areas of China, where working environments, institutional resources, and cultural practices can differ significantly.

Lastly, while the study explores the Chinese context, the findings may not be entirely transferable to other cultural or educational settings. Sociocultural factors, such as gender norms and values around emotional endurance, may vary significantly in different countries, and future research could explore how these findings apply in global comparisons or in other feminized professions beyond music education.

Implications for policy and practice

The results of this study carry significant weight for shaping policies and educational practices, especially regarding the mental well-being of female educators. It is imperative for policymakers to prioritize the integration of mental health support systems within educational institutions, with particular attention to music education, where emotional labor demands remain high. Such measures could include accessible counseling services, stress management initiatives, and wellness programs tailored to the needs of female educators. Another essential consideration is the implementation of mental health literacy programs designed to help teachers identify distress symptoms and adopt self-care and emotion regulation strategies. Teacher training curricula should directly address the challenges of emotional labor by incorporating workshops on coping mechanisms and resilience, while acknowledging the unique experiences of women educators. Furthermore, educational leaders must receive training to recognize early indicators of burnout, promote open discussions about mental health, and develop strategies to mitigate excessive workloads. This is especially critical as women often navigate the complexities of balancing professional responsibilities with domestic roles. The study also highlights cultural narratives that glamorize emotional endurance as a virtue, which can hinder women from acknowledging their mental health needs. It calls for societal shifts in attitudes, emphasizing the importance of emotional self-care and challenging the notion that self-sacrifice equates to professional strength. Addressing these cultural beliefs is vital for reducing stigma, fostering help-seeking behavior, and advancing gender equity in educational environments.

Conclusion

This research explored the intersection of music education as an emotionally charged professional field and its impact on the mental health of women educators, focusing on gendered emotional labor, professional identity negotiation, and mental health awareness. The findings reveal that gendered emotional labor significantly contributes to professional identity strain for female music

educators. This strain, in turn, affects mental health outcomes, underscoring that mental health consciousness serves as a pivotal cognitive mechanism in connecting workplace conditions to psychological effects. The study makes three theoretical contributions: it builds upon emotional labor theory by identifying identity strain as a core pathway, redefines music education as both a nurturing domain for student wellbeing and a source of emotional stress for teachers, and advances mental health research by positioning mental health consciousness as a mediating factor rather than merely an outcome. Contextually, it sheds light on the influence of gender norms, institutional pressures, and mental health stigma in perpetuating silent distress among female educators. These societal and structural factors often normalize emotional endurance while discouraging help-seeking behaviors. Nevertheless this study has several limitations. Its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data may restrict broader generalizability. Future research should explore this framework using longitudinal or mixed-method approaches while expanding analysis to include comparative contexts or other professions with higher concentrations of female workers.

Conflict of interest

The author states there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Author contributions

Rong Wang contributed to conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, original draft writing, reviewing and editing, and visualization.

Data availability

The data supporting this study's findings can be obtained from the corresponding author upon

reasonable request, in compliance with ethical and privacy considerations.

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