



Navigating the Double Shift: Work-Life Balance Challenges and Strategies for Working Women

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Abstract

The 21st-century professional landscape is defined by the significant entry of women into the formal workforce, challenging traditional gender hierarchies and driving global economic growth. However, this advancement has precipitated a critical Work-Life Balance (WLB) crisis. Despite professional integration, societal structures remain largely unchanged, imposing a "Second Shift" or double burden on women who remain primary caregivers and domestic labourers. This study explores the structural and cultural factors contributing to Work-Life Conflict (WLC), examining how the "ideal worker" model inherently clashes with entrenched social roles. Through an analysis of the enabling and constraining factors governing dual-role performance, the research identifies severe consequences, including heightened stress, burnout, organizational absenteeism, and declining birth rates. Findings suggest that existing workplace flexibility is insufficient; a sustainable resolution requires a fundamental societal redistribution of domestic responsibilities. This paper provides empirical insights intended to guide corporate and governmental bodies in framing targeted policies that move beyond mere participation toward genuine gender equity and well-being.

Keywords: Work-Life Balance (WLB), Second Shift, Gender Equality, Work-Life Conflict (WLC), Dual-Role Performance, Double Burden, Corporate Policy, Gender Equity.

Introduction

The entry of women into the 21st-century professional sphere, while representing a significant societal advancement that challenges traditional customs and establishes women as essential earning members, has nonetheless created a crisis of Work-Life Balance (WLB). This is because gender inequality persists: working women must maintain a difficult dual identity—a leader in the office and a primary caregiver (daughter, wife, mother) at home—and are often expected to perform both roles with equal, relentless efficiency. This expectation generates considerable stress and fundamental WLB challenges, leading to negative societal consequences such as increased stress, absenteeism, turnover, familial strain, and declining birth rates. Therefore, there is an urgent need for empirical research to identify the enabling and constraining factors that govern women's dual-role performance, alongside the coping mechanisms they employ. The findings from this study are essential to inform corporate and governmental bodies, allowing them to frame targeted policies and strategies necessary to maintain WLB and mitigate these pervasive social and economic problems.

The increasing global participation of women in the formal workforce represents a significant economic and social advancement, yet this integration has concurrently amplified the enduring challenges associated with Work-Life Balance (WLB). The increasing global participation of women in the formal workforce represents a significant economic and social advancement, contributing substantially to global GDP growth and challenging traditional gendered hierarchies. However, this integration has concurrently amplified the enduring challenges associated with Work-Life Balance (WLB). This complexity arises because while

women have gained access to the professional domain, the societal structure governing domestic responsibilities has largely remained unchanged. This disparity imposes a "double burden" or "Second Shift" on working women, where professional demands are simply layered onto their existing, primary responsibilities for domestic labor, childcare, and familial emotional management. Consequently, the professional sphere—often operating under an "ideal worker" model that assumes an employee has no competing domestic duties—inherently conflicts with women's entrenched social roles, leading to heightened Work-Life Conflict (WLC), increased stress, and the risk of burnout. Thus, the success of women's entry into the workforce must be measured not only by their presence but by the degree to which organizations and policies adapt to ensure this advancement does not necessitate the sacrifice of personal well-being or familial roles.

WLB is conventionally defined as achieving satisfaction and effective functioning across the interconnected domains of one's professional life and non-work commitments, encompassing family, social, and personal roles (Greenhaus et al., 2003). For working women, the attainment of this balance is uniquely complex due to the persistence of deeply ingrained gender role expectations, which disproportionately assign primary responsibility for domestic labor and caregiving tasks to women, irrespective of their professional status. This societal allocation of duties results in the phenomenon famously termed the "Second Shift" (Hochschild, 1989), where women effectively manage the demands of a full-time job followed by an equivalent, often invisible, shift of unpaid domestic labor. This paper aims to systematically explore the specific structural and cultural factors contributing to Work-Life Conflict (WLC) among working women, analyze the resulting personal and organizational costs, and critically evaluate the efficacy of existing organizational and policy interventions. We posit that a sustainable resolution to WLC for women requires not merely the provision of flexible workplace policies but a fundamental societal re-evaluation and redistribution of the domestic and caregiving burden. The subsequent sections will establish the theoretical framework, analyze the empirical drivers and impacts of the Double Shift, and propose policy recommendations aligned with promoting gender equity.

Literature Review

Work life balance is a term used to describe the balance between an individual's personal life and professional life. A healthy work-life balance assumes great significance for working women particularly in the current context in which both, the family and the workplace have posed several challenges and problems for women. The dynamics of the work environment have exerted enormous pressure on working women as they need to cope with virtually two full time jobs – one at the office and the other at home. Review of literature related to the subject has revealed that working women experience greater difficulty than men in balancing work and family. It is also found that they experience conflict as there is job spill over into the home more frequently than home spill over into work. Besides to succeed in one environment, working women are often called upon to make sacrifices in another as each of the environments makes different demands on them and have distinct norms to adhere to (Sundaresan 2014).

Improving job satisfaction in remote work requires supervisor behaviour, work-life balance and good work-life spillover. The results of this study suggest that in order to enhance the well-being of remote workers, companies should implement work-life policies and supportive supervisory techniques (García-Salirrosas et al., 2023).

According to Manoharan et al (2023), preserving a positive work-life balance dramatically raises job satisfaction, which boosts organisational performance and gives IT companies a competitive edge. The past literature addressed very limited construct to understand WLB and JS. Current study incorporated comprehensive variables along with hierarchical cluster analysis. It helps to evaluate the current state of WLB and JS among working women.

Defining Work-Life Conflict (WLC)

Work-Life Conflict (WLC) is a specific type of inter-role conflict where the pressures from the professional domain and the non-work domain (which includes family, personal, and social life) are mutually opposing, making effective participation in one role challenging due to demands from the other. This concept goes

beyond mere stress or busyness; it describes an incompatibility arising from the simultaneous demands of a person's multiple life roles. WLC occurs when the simultaneous demands from the work domain and the family/personal domain are mutually incompatible, where participation in one role is made more difficult by participation in the other.

Academic literature identifies three core forms of this conflict (Greenhaus et al., 2003). **Time-Based Conflict:** This occurs when the time committed to one role makes it physically impossible or difficult to fulfill the requirements of another role. For example, if a job requires extensive travel or routinely necessitates working 60 hours per week, the time investment leaves insufficient time for engaging in family responsibilities, such as attending a child's school event or assisting an elderly parent. Time-Based Conflict arises when the time invested in one role diminishes the time available for the other, such as extensive travel or long working hours limiting family interaction.

Strain-Based Conflict: This is the most common and damaging form, where the psychological stress, fatigue, and tension generated in one domain negatively spills over into the other. For instance, experiencing high levels of stress or frustration at work can leave an individual too exhausted, irritable, or emotionally drained to be present, patient, or effective in their family or personal relationships upon returning home. The stress from one role actively impairs functioning in the other. Strain-Based Conflict is the most pervasive form, where the stress, tension, and emotional fatigue generated in one role spill over to negatively affect the disposition and performance in the other.

Behavior-Based Conflict: This arises when the specific behaviors, attitudes, or personality traits required for success in one role are inappropriate or detrimental in the other. For example, an individual trained to be highly assertive, competitive, and task-focused (effective traits for a corporate executive) may find these behaviors difficult to switch off at home, leading to friction and poor communication in their nurturing, supportive family role.

Behaviour-Based Conflict occurs when the behavioral patterns required for success in one sphere are inappropriate in the other, such as the difficulty in transitioning from an authoritarian management style at work to a nurturing role at home. Understanding these dimensions is crucial, as the female experience of WLC frequently involves a severe degree of strain-based conflict exacerbated by the cumulative demands of time and behavior (Clark, 2000).

Theoretical Frameworks Explaining Gendered Conflict

The differential experience of WLC is best understood through several established sociological and psychological theories. **Role Overload Theory** posits that WLC is inevitable when the total time and psychological demands of all roles—professional, parental, familial, and spousal—exceed an individual's finite capacity (Sieber, 1974). This theory is particularly salient for women, who statistically retain disproportionate responsibility for the bulk of unpaid domestic labor, rendering them inherently prone to overload. Furthermore, **Social Role Theory** suggests that gendered societal expectations fundamentally drive this disparity. Since the nurturing, relationship-oriented role is traditionally prescribed to women, their intense involvement in caregiving is viewed as essential and non-negotiable, significantly increasing the associated psychological pressure and guilt when work demands conflict with family time. This creates a deeply rooted psychological barrier to achieving equilibrium. Complementing this, **Boundary Theory** (Clark, 2000) examines how individuals manage the interface between their roles. While contemporary technology facilitates the blending of roles (integration), women often find that the permeability of the work boundary allows professional demands to aggressively encroach upon their personal time, leading to constant interruption and an inability to fully detach (Kossek et al., 2014).

Findings and Discussion: The Double Shift and Its Organizational Impacts

The Unique Drivers of WLC for Women

Empirical findings consistently confirm that the greatest drivers of WLC for women stem from gendered roles, primarily the pervasive reality of the **Second Shift** (Hochschild, 1989). Even in dual-earner

households, studies show that women spend significantly more time on routine domestic chores and childcare compared to their male partners. This leads to chronic time scarcity and perpetual strain, resulting in what is often termed the "mental load"—the continuous, exhaustive planning, organizing, and logistical management of the household and family schedule (Acker, 1990). This mental labor is invisible and uncompensated but directly depletes the emotional and cognitive resources required for professional performance, aligning perfectly with Resource Conservation (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that stress arises from the threatened or actual loss of valuable personal resources.

The Cost to Career Progression

The consequences of WLC are not merely personal; they impose significant organizational costs and perpetuate systemic gender inequality. The consequences of Work-Life Conflict (WLC) are far-reaching, extending beyond the individual's personal distress to impose significant organizational costs and actively perpetuate systemic gender inequality within the professional sphere. When WLC is exacerbated by the female burden of the "Second Shift," the resulting strain is a primary factor driving the Maternal Wall Bias, a subtle yet powerful form of discrimination where managers assume mothers are less committed or competent, leading to negative performance evaluations, fewer developmental assignments, and subsequently, slower career advancement (Kossek et al., 2014). This systemic bias directly contributes to the "glass ceiling" and the persistence of the gender pay gap in senior roles. Furthermore, WLC is a key catalyst for women choosing to "off-ramp" (leave the workforce entirely) or "scale back" (transition to part-time or less demanding roles), a phenomenon that represents a critical loss of human capital investment for organizations and national economies. Thus, the organizational cost includes high employee turnover, reduced productivity due to burnout (Allen et al., 2000), and a failure to diversify leadership, proving that the struggle for balance is not a private matter but a central driver of inequality in the modern workplace.

The strain imposed by the Second Shift is a major contributing factor to the Maternal Wall Bias, where female employees who are or are perceived to be mothers are often subjected to negative workplace assumptions regarding their commitment and competence (Kossek et al., 2014). This subtle yet powerful discrimination can manifest as fewer developmental assignments, lower performance evaluations, and ultimately, slower career advancement, contributing substantially to the gender pay gap and the "glass ceiling" that limits female representation in senior leadership. WLC is frequently cited as the primary driver for women voluntarily "off-ramping" (leaving the workforce) or "scaling back" (transitioning to less demanding or part-time roles), thereby sacrificing human capital investment and career momentum. The pervasive "Always On" work culture, further enabled by mobile technology, exacerbates this conflict by eroding the last boundaries between work and home, ensuring that stress from the workplace continually spills over, leading to severe emotional exhaustion and burnout (Allen et al., 2000).

Conclusion

The rigorous examination of Work-Life Balance (WLB) among working women confirms that the challenge is fundamentally structural, rooted deeply in persistent, unequal gender role expectations rather than individual failure to manage time. The analysis demonstrated that the concept of the "Second Shift" (Hochschild, 1989) is not an outdated phenomenon but a defining characteristic of modern professional life for women, leading directly to heightened Work-Life Conflict (WLC). This conflict, as framed by Role Overload and Boundary Theories (Clark, 2000; Sieber, 1974), imposes severe consequences, including chronic strain-based conflict, elevated rates of burnout and adverse health outcomes, and significant career stagnation driven by the Maternal Wall Bias (Kossek et al., 2014). The paper emphasizes that while the shift to hybrid and remote work offers flexibility, it has simultaneously increased the permeability of work-family boundaries, further burdening women with the simultaneous demands of professional and caregiving roles. Ultimately, the ability of organizations and nations to fully realize the potential of their female workforce hinges upon policies that move beyond token flexibility to challenge and redistribute the domestic and emotional labor historically assigned to women.

Recommendations

Addressing the complex nature of WLC for working women requires a coordinated effort across policy, organizational culture, and societal norms. The following recommendations are proposed to create an equitable framework for WLB:

1. Organizational Policy and Culture

- **Mandate and Normalize Paternity Leave:** Organizations must implement and actively encourage the use of gender-neutral parental leave to normalize fathers' involvement in early-stage caregiving. This directly supports the equitable distribution of the "Second Shift" and mitigates the assumption that caregiving is solely a maternal responsibility (Allen et al., 2000).
- **Implement Results-Oriented Work Environment (ROWE):** Shift performance evaluation away from "face time" and physical presence to measurable output and results. This reduces the penalization associated with utilizing flexible hours and supports employees who need to manage non-traditional schedules (Kossek et al., 2014).
- **Establish "Right to Disconnect" Policies:** Formalize policies that protect personal time by limiting the expectation for employees to respond to work-related communications (emails, calls) outside of designated working hours. This is crucial for strengthening the work-life boundary and reducing strain-based conflict.

2. Government and Public Policy

- **Subsidize and Expand Quality Childcare Infrastructure:** Governments must substantially invest in making high-quality, reliable, and affordable public or subsidized childcare widely available. This is the single most effective external support mechanism for reducing the domestic time burden on working mothers, thereby lowering the risk of role overload.
- **Invest in Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch national campaigns, potentially integrated through educational curricula, to explicitly challenge traditional gender roles regarding domestic and caregiving duties. Education must target both boys and girls to foster a societal culture of shared responsibility.

3. Leveraging Technology Responsibly

- **Provide WLB Training for Remote Workers and Managers:** Offer specific training on how to use technology to segment work and non-work lives effectively. Managers need training to recognize the signs of burnout caused by the constant availability of technology and actively intervene to protect employee downtime.

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Sundaresan, Shobha, Work-Life Balance – Implications for Working Women (October 4, 2014). OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development, Vol. 7, No. 7, pp. 93-102, 2014, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2505439>

