

Work-Life Balance and Career Breaks of Working Women

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Abstract

Today majority of the educated Indian women are allowed to work; still their careers are bound by many problems which they face as they are expected to fulfill dual responsibilities at the workplace and home. Some of which are break in career at various stages of life, gender discrimination in pay and promotional opportunities, and restriction from home to travel for work abroad or even out of town. Even the professional women (doctors, lawyers, MDs, etc.) and women entrepreneurs do have to face these boundations of time as they too have responsibilities back at home. The difficulty doubles for working women who have small children. This creates stress and work pressure in them as they are able to concentrate less on their work which eventually affects their productivity. As a result, most of the times women are perceived to be less competent although that might be not be the case each time. Consequently even those women, who are performing well, sometimes remain unnoticed due to their tag of being a mother or a wife with lot of household responsibilities. Through our paper, we have tried to find out how women involved in various occupations and belonging to different social backgrounds manage their household and childcare responsibility to progress in their career. Our sample includes self-employed women, women doing service and also those women who are temporarily unemployed due to career break. From our survey we aim to study the challenges that working women have to face in their attempt to strike a balance between work and family and investigate how often the imbalance between work and family leads to a career break for women. Our study also includes a discussion on the various strategies adopted by working women to balance their household/childcare responsibilities with job responsibilities.

Keywords: Work Life Balance, Dual Responsibility, Career Break,

Introduction

Work and family are the two most important domains in a person's life and their interface has been the object of study for researchers worldwide. According to Sturges & Guest (2004), there is a felt need to balance and integrate family needs and career requirements and research in the field of work family interface has increased dramatically in the past two decades (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). The changing social structures arising out of dual career couples, single parent families, an increasing number of parents with dependent care responsibilities for children, and ageing parents have all

contributed to increasing research in the area of work-life balance. Throughout history, work and life were basically integrated. Life activities like public involvement, child care, and elder care happened together with the work. Work-Life Balance is not a new concept it has evolved over time. Anne-Marie Slaughter, most recently known for her controversial piece, “why women still cannot have it all” forced a discussion among the corporate, political educational circles about how much and when women can balance their personal lives with their careers. Indian families are undergoing rapid changes due to the increased pace of urbanization and modernization. Indian women belonging to all classes have entered into paid occupations. For working women balancing a challenging career with life outside work is a complex task. Working women have to maintain a balance between family, career, health and society. In the current scenario it is very important that what place a woman is holding in the society. At the present time, Indian women's exposure to educational opportunities is substantially higher than it was some decades ago, especially in the urban setting. This has opened new vistas, increased awareness and raised aspirations of personal growth. This, along with economic pressure, has been instrumental in influencing women's decision to enter the work force. Most studies of employed married women in India have reported economic need as being the primary reason given for working. But it is also true that women are more likely than men to adapt their work patterns to meet family and child care demands because they are most often the primary child caregiver in the home. Many studies have reported women using several different adaptive strategies, such as engaging in entrepreneurial activities, home-based work, and part-time work in order to balance family and work demands better, especially the demands of child care. And with the change in Indian society from joint family system to nuclear families, the burden on women for selecting a suitable alternative has become even more challenging. This paper focuses on the challenges faced by working women in their attempt to strike a balance between work and family, how they lead to a break in women's career and discuss the various strategies adopted by working women to balance their household/childcare responsibilities with job responsibilities.

Why Are India's Women So Stressed Out?

Women in India have struggled to establish an identity and create a space for themselves in their workplace. The biggest worry of modern times is that women have more time saving devices but less time. Women are very stressed by life which seems to keep speeding up on them. They work longer hours and take less holidays. They are sadder than ever before. They are more contactable than ever before, often interrupted during family dinners or other important events by a mobile phone ring. Tapping its rich mine of [educated female talent has been an important factor in allowing India](#)

[to become one of the world's fastest-growing economies.](#) But recently this particular dynamo has been showing signs of strain. According to [“Women of Tomorrow.”](#) a recent Nielsen survey of 6,500 women across 21 different nations, Indian women are the most stressed in the world today. An overwhelming 87% of Indian women said they felt stressed most of the time, and 82% reported that they had no time to relax. The Nielsen survey's respondents blame the difficulty of juggling multiple roles at home and work. Career opportunities for women in “the New India” are rapidly expanding, but family expectations and social mores remain rooted in tradition. Not surprisingly, the most stress is felt among women between 25 and 55 years of age, who are trying to balance demanding careers with obligations at home.

The following are some reasons which make the life of Indian working women more stressful:

- Traditional family structures have a disproportionate effect on Indian women, even those who are urban, college-educated professionals, and especially for those who are the first generation in their families to have a career. Indian women are pulled by demands from relatives as they attempt to conform to the paradigm of “ideal daughter,” “ideal wife,” and “ideal daughter-in-law.”
- The perception of organization towards working women: Ambitious women often feel they have to overcompensate at work to counter ingrained preconceptions about their commitment or competence. A perception that a woman is just working until she gets married or that she is not a long-term resource is adding to the difficulties working women face in developing their career. But proving their worth by putting in longer hours or volunteering for business trips — the conventional methods to further one's career — isn't always possible.
- Inflexibility in work: Despite the technological prowess of India's engineers and outsourcing firms, the country's basic infrastructure isn't sophisticated enough to support telecommuting and work-from-home arrangements on a widespread basis. Furthermore, [flex time](#) is rarely an option in a workplace culture that focuses on face time rather than results. Even in companies which have these facilities, it is not considered the right thing to do if you are serious about going up the corporate ladder.

Review Of Previous Works

- Indra, K. (2014) aimed to find the impact of family support and suggests the need to initiatives of Work-Life Balance practices through his study Role of Family Support in Balancing Personal and Work Life of Women Employees. He suggested Family support, spouse

support, Social support may require for care giving for Children, Elder parents / in-laws and dependents, etc., for balancing the work and non-work responsibilities of working women.

- A Study on Work Life Conflict and Flexible Work Arrangements that Aid Work Life Balance: Perception of Working Women in Dual Career Families by Seshadri, U., & Kar, D., (2012) involved gathering of opinion of working women in dual career families on work life balance variables and support required from employers. It concluded that working women perceive that organizational policies that promote flexible work arrangements have positive direct association with work life balance. Thus, time flexibility is the most important factor considered by women employees to balance their work and family life. Particularly the following factors affected this perception: ability to interrupt office work to attend family matters and return to work, ability to arrange a convenient work schedule, provision to work partially from home, provision of leave when required, provision of child care as well as elderly care facilities, etc. An overwhelming 93% of the respondents agreed that they would work hard to manage both work and family while 88.6% said they would not mind spending more time on fulfilling family's responsibilities, thus indicating importance of family in women's lives. A majority of women (90% of respondents) indicated that they expect support from organizations to give them permission to attend advanced courses/conferences, etc, suggesting strong desire to continuously advance their knowledge and skill set. Also, the study point out that organizational support is very crucial in selecting job opportunities and in achieving a desired level of work life balance.
- Kavitha, P., Kavitha, V., & Arulmurugan, P., (2012) in their study on Role Of Stress Among Women Employees Forming Majority Workforce At IT Sector in Chennai and Coimbatore, Tier I and Tier II centres concluded that women professionals in IT Sector are experiencing high Organizational Role Stress. Significant difference was observed between married (mean score of 9.14) and unmarried females (mean score of 6.59) on Inter Role Distance i.e. conflict between organizational and non-organizational roles, especially relevant for dual career couples. As long as one member of family stays at home to take care of family, Inter- Role Conflict is expected to be less. Married women have also shown more Role Expectation Conflict than unmarried women as married women generally respond to a bigger set of significant others i.e. conflicting expectations and demands by different role senders. Married females also reported higher stress due to Role Overload i.e. too much is expected from the role than they can cope with.
- Dam, L., & Daphtardar, S., (2012) in their study on Work Life Balance by Women Faculty Members: The Conundrum Within made an attempt to examine the Work Life Balance of faculty members in Management Colleges in Pune and found out that a majority of women faculty members find it difficult to balance work and life. The stress from job spills over in their personal life and it is hard to take out time for self development and activities of self interest. Also, it has severe impact on their physical and mental health. Working beyond the official working hours and spending too much time on household chores also disturbs the thin line of balance between work and life, as females are generally more responsible for child care, elderly care and household responsibilities. Also, the time taken to travel to the workplace has been reported by 89% of respondents to be a major inhibitor to work life balance.
- Valk, R., & Srinivasan, V., (2011) in their study "Work-family balance of Indian women software professionals: A qualitative study" attempted to understand how work and family related factors influence the work-family balance of Indian women IT professionals. Their study was based on an exploratory qualitative study of 13 women IT professionals in the software sector in Bangalore, India. The narratives revealed six major themes: familial influences on life choices; multi-role responsibilities and attempts to negotiate them; self and professional identity; work-life challenges and coping strategies; organizational policies and practices; and social support.
- Elizabeth, Lily, & David, (2004) investigated the influence of gender and tenure status in balancing parenthood and career and results revealed that women reported greater career and family stress and perceptions of less institutional support for balance of work and family as compared to men.
- Campbell, C., (1994, pp.349) study results revealed that women with children were significantly lower in occupational commitment relative to women without children. Contrary to expectation, women with younger children outperformed women with older children.

Methodology

Statement of problem:

Today majority of the educated Indian women are allowed to work; still their careers are bound by many problems which they face as they are expected to fulfill dual responsibilities at the workplace and home. Some of the problems faced by working women in the work place are lack of respect from their male colleagues, gender discrimination in pay and promotional opportunities, and restriction from home to travel for work abroad or even out of town. Even the professional women (doctors, lawyers, MDs, etc.) and

women entrepreneurs do have to face these boundations of time as they too have responsibilities back at home. This makes them more stressed and at times also leads to various health problems. The difficulty doubles for working women who have small children and are left with only two options i.e. either leave their jobs or leave their children in daycare or in hands maid on whom they have little faith. This creates even more stress and work pressure in them as they are able to concentrate less on their work which eventually affects their productivity. Most of the times women are perceived to be less competent due to all these reasons although that might be not be the case each time. Consequently even those women who are performing well, sometimes remain unnoticed due to their tag of being a mother or a wife with lot of household responsibilities.

Objectives of the paper:

- To study the challenges that working women have to face in their attempt to strike a balance between work and family.
- To investigate how often the imbalance between work and family leads to a career break for women.
- To discuss the various strategies adopted by working women to balance their household/childcare responsibilities with job responsibilities.

Method of data collection:

Through our paper, we have tried to find out how women in Urban Ahmedabad involved in various occupations and belonging to different social backgrounds manage their household and childcare responsibility to progress in their career. For this, we took a sample of working women including those who are in service as well as those who are self-employed. Convenience sampling method was used to approach them and then respondents were made to participate in the survey through an online questionnaire. The data thus collected was analyzed using SPSS software with the help of simple frequency distribution, Mann-Whitney Test, Kruskal-Wallis Test, compared means and cross tabulation.

Scope of The Study: This study was undertaken through an online questionnaire which was made filled by women working in some of the private and public sector service organizations including banks, educational institutions and BPOs/KPOs/consultancies. The target group was married women with/without children falling in the age group of 25-50 who are either working in jobs or self-employed.

Analysis

Work-Life Balance situation

To analyze the work-life balance of the working women and understand the impact it has on their career options, a no. of parameters were taken into consideration such as limitation

on travelling, hours of work, taking up challenging task, limited jobs, work related stress, etc. the mean for these parameters was 2.34, indicating that most women agreed to have to face all these challenges due to their dual responsibilities.

Family Support

When asked about the family support from spouse and in laws/parents in balancing the dual responsibilities most women were positive and agreed to the fact that their spouse and family were in fact a helping hand in managing their dual responsibilities. However this can be true only for women who are presently working and those out of work may be lacking support from spouse or family, which could be one of the reasons for their facing a break in career. Also survey being done exclusively in Gujarat' Ahmedabad city where we find most of the in-laws open minded and supportive towards their daughter in law, women here are still in a favorable situation as compared to women of other states.

Employers/Partners' perception

As far as the perception of the employer or business partners towards working women is concerned, most women were neutral. This might be the case either due to not experiencing any strong bias or prejudice while on work from their bosses and colleagues or it may be because most of these prejudices are not clearly evident, especially not in the initial phases of career. But for women who do make it up to the higher positions increasingly face these challenges as roles become more challenging and employers consider them of less capable of handling the pressure along with their household responsibilities.

Duration of break

Highest proportion (22% of women who took a break) of break typically ranged between 4-6 months. This could possibly be because most women took a break due to child bearing, and hence resumed after 6 months. However, if we add up the % of women who have experienced a break of 1 year or above, as much as 46% of the women have taken at least a 1 year long break. We all know what this could mean. The longer the break is, the more difficulty in finding a suitable job matching with earlier work profiles and scarifying pay.

Reasons for Break in career

Almost 88% of the women in the survey agreed that they had to take a career break at some or the other point in their lives. Childbearing and marriage were the two most dominant reasons for taking a break.

Some interesting relations were observed between the reason behind taking a break and duration of that break. They are as under:

- 3 out of 4 women who took a break awaiting better prospects didn't take a break of longer than a month.
- Ideally when males take a break due to marriage it isn't longer than a month, but surprisingly, only 2 women resumed work immediately after marriage. Most of the other joined only after 6 months or 1 year and some even after 2-3 years.
- Most women who took a break for childbearing remained out of work from a period ranging from 6 months to 2 years.
- Also in case of relocation of spouse, women resumed work again only after a gap of minimum 6 months.

Strategies to balance work and home

The most common strategies adopted by working women to manage their dual responsibilities are taking support from family and selecting a less demanding career. 34% of the women seek the help of either their own parents, grandparents or in laws to help balance their work and household responsibilities. As this proportion is quite high consequently only 6 % of the women feel the need to opt for childcare outsourcing (i.e. hiring nannies or keeping their children in crash, etc). 28% of the women have made some or the other sacrificing in their job profile to select a less demanding career where working hours and responsibilities are limited to allow them the much needed flexibility in job. Unfortunately the ratio of women opting work from home or part-time work is very limited as in India these options are very limited. Only a selected companies give the option of work from home to their female staff and that too only if the employee is on a certain grade of the hierarchy. And as far as part-time work is concerned, due to the conservative approach of most mediocre firms and organizations, there are very few options available for working part-time whether it is for males or females.

Family type and strategy used to balance

We tried to study whether there is any relation between the type of family i.e. joint or nuclear and the strategy adopted by the women to balance her work and households. We found that when it comes to outsourcing childcare, both women in joint families and nuclear families are not that much in favor of it. But when it comes to outsourcing of household chores, women in nuclear families adopt it more and none of the women in joint families takes outside help for doing household chores. More women from nuclear families as compared to women from joint family have to select a less demanding career possibly as they lack support of other family members because according to the survey most of the women who said they relied on family support to balance their dual responsibilities, belonged to joint families.

Comparison of Work Life Balance by Age, family type, employment status and no. of children

In our study, we tried to compare the work life balance situation of various women by their age groups, employment status, no. of children and family type.

To have an idea about the work-life balance situation of women belonging to various age groups, Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted. The responses of all age group's women were similar and all agreed on the fact that they faced lot of challenges in balancing work and home together. Only women beyond 40 had somewhat different opinion with regards to their situation. This may be due to their children who are grown up and don't require that much care and time as in case of younger ones. Also with time women master the task of balancing the dual responsibilities.

To compare the work-life balance situation of women according to type of family, Man-Whitney test was conducted. But no mark able difference was found between women from both the categories as significance level was 0.235.

To find out whether no. of children made any difference in the work-life balance situation of women, Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted fetching a significance level of 0.147. Hence there wasn't much difference among women having less or more kids also.

Since in all of the tests, null hypothesis got accepted, it is clearly evident that the work-life balance situation is more or less similar for all women and all of them do face challenges in managing the dual responsibilities in various stages of their life. So to gain a deeper understanding, we undertook compared means test. One interesting observation from this test was that the opinion of both employed and self-employed women about their work-life balance was quite similar but for women who are temporarily out of employment reported a more stronger agreement about the challenges of the dual responsibilities.

Conclusion

The study revealed that most women definitely have a tough time dealing with the day to day challenges of being a working wife or working mother. In the career cycle of women, they are compelled to take a break from career not once but repeatedly many times during different stages of their lives. However things can be smoother if one has a support system in the form of a good spouse or supportive family. Small children are an important reason behind women taking career breaks or finding it difficult in maintaining their work-life balance as it was observed that women more than 40 year olds find it easier to balance work and life as their kids are grown up. Also childbearing is an event which leads to very long breaks (2-5 years) in a women's career. Most women seek domestic help from

outside but for their child care responsibilities they are more dependent on other family members generally elders. One important suggestion for the employers is if the opportunities of flexible work hours and work from home are increased for women, less of them will have to sacrifice their career choices by selecting a less demanding career.

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Appendices

Table 1: Mann-Whitney Test for Family Type Vs WLB

	Family_Type	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
	1.00	24	22.96	551.00
WLB	2.00	26	27.85	724.00
	Total	50		

Test Statistics^a

	WLB
Mann-Whitney U	251.000
Wilcoxon W	551.000
Z	-1.187
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.235

a. Grouping Variable: Family_Type

Table 2: Kruskal-Wallis Test for No. of children VS WLB

	No.of_Childre n	N	Mean Rank
WLB	.00	17	31.09
	1.00	23	22.30
	2.00	10	23.35
	Total	50	

Test Statistics^{a,b}

	WLB
Chi-Square	3.834
Df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.147

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: No.of_Children

Table 3: Kruskal-Wallis Test for Age VS WLB

	AGE	N	Mean Rank
WLB	1.00	22	22.11
	2.00	19	25.82
	3.00	5	26.20
	4.00	4	41.75
	Total	50	

Test Statistics^{a,b}

	WLB
Chi-Square	6.200
Df	3
Asymp. Sig.	.102

a. Kruskal Wallis

Test

b. Grouping Variable:

AGE

**Table 4: Compared Means for WLB
WLB * Employment_Status**

WLB

Employment_Stat us	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
1.00	2.4174	35	.80888
2.00	2.6267	6	1.23025
3.00	1.8778	9	.62476
Total	2.3454	50	.85189

WLB * AGE

WLB

AGE	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
1.00	2.1455	22	.68939
2.00	2.3842	19	1.01528
3.00	2.3780	5	.85386
4.00	3.2200	4	.21276
Total	2.3454	50	.85189

WLB * Family_Type

WLB

Family_Ty pe	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
1.00	2.1858	24	.87789
2.00	2.4927	26	.81631
Total	2.3454	50	.85189

WLB * No.of_Children

WLB

No.of_Childr en	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
.00	2.6876	17	.85791
1.00	2.1604	23	.76879
2.00	2.1890	10	.92847
Total	2.3454	50	.85189