

RESEARCH NOTES

Walking The Tightrope: A Narrative Review of Work-Family Conflict and Balance Among Working Women

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Abstract: *Working women adopt multiple roles such as that of an employee or entrepreneur, a wife, mother and daughter-in-law. Due to their role responsibilities they encounter multiple challenges in balancing work and family life. This can result in outcomes such as fatigue, stress and poor health. A narrative review was therefore conducted to examine in-depth, specific factors that challenged and facilitated work-family integration for working women in the Indian context. Through a multidisciplinary approach, studies from various disciplines were selected. These disciplines included sociology, economics, management, psychology, public health and commerce. The review identified various challenging and facilitating factors which were work-related, family-related and related to one's personal or psychological characteristics. The review also identified themes relating to the nature of work-family integration among women in the Indian context. The themes are discussed in the context of previous studies and theories in the literature. The study bears important implications for future research in women's work and family integration.*

Keywords: Working women, Work-family balance, Work-family conflict, Multidisciplinary study, Narrative review, Themes

INTRODUCTION

Work and family represent two of the most important facets of life in adulthood. Work can be a source of self-esteem, identity and meaning. Family life can fulfil the need for belongingness and foster a sense of deep connection and care with significant others. The benefits of work and family can, however, be challenged when the roles and responsibilities of these domains overlap and conflict with each other.

Work and family tend to demand considerable investment of time, energy and attention from an individual. Work-family conflict is a form of inter-role conflict that results from an incompatibility between work and family responsibilities. When one domain interferes with an individual's ability to effectively carry out their roles in the other domain, work-family conflict can occur. In this context, work-family conflict is bi-directional. Work-to-family conflict results when work demands interfere with family life. Similarly, family-to-work conflict occurs when family responsibilities intervene in work life (Schwartz, 2018).

In work-family integration, another concept that has emerged in the literature is work-family balance. This construct represents healthy functioning in work and family domains, characterized by minimal or reduced experience of work-family conflict (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011). For an individual with limited resources of time and energy, achieving a healthy integration of work and family life is essential for wellbeing. This is especially relevant for married, working women who often find themselves at the crossroads of work and family demands.

Over the past few decades, more women in India have emerged into the workforce by gaining employment in various sectors or establishing themselves as entrepreneurs in various fields. But their involvement in work outside the home has not been a substitute for their work at home. Women continue to assume primary responsibility for childcare, elder care and household chores (Bharathi & Mala, 2016). This is more prominent in the Indian context which is largely family-oriented (Rajadhyaksha & Velgach, 2015). Prevailing socio-cultural beliefs tend to frame gender role expectations for men and women. In more traditional cultures, the divide between the 'breadwinner' and 'caregiver' roles is well-defined with men occupying the former and women, the latter. These deeply rooted roles continue to shape family life and women's experiences with work-family integration in the present social milieu.

Studies show that women's experiences of work-family integration differ from that of men's due to the

multiple responsibilities they shoulder at home. Childcare, primary management of household duties and work commitments lead to multi-tasking for women. Women report feeling rushed and under considerable time pressure, with little time for leisure (Sullivan, 2019). These experiences result in stress, fatigue, burnout and health issues among women.

The present study aimed to further knowledge on the nature of work-family integration for women, specifically in the Indian context. A narrative review of empirical studies was conducted to uncover the factors affecting work-family integration and themes pertaining to the nature of work-family interface for Indian women.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theories of work-family integration

In the literature of work-family integration, various theories explain work-family conflict and work-family balance. According to role strain theory, work-family conflicts occur when one role interferes with fulfilment of responsibilities in the other role due to limited resources. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) defined work-family conflict as time, strain and behavior based conflicts. In time-based conflict, time spent at work can interfere with family duties. For women, a spouse with a demanding career increases time spent at home, thereby interfering with work responsibilities.

According to boundary theory, work and family life can be segmented by thin or thick boundaries. Thick boundaries ensure clear separation of work and family domains. Thin boundaries imply poor role clarity and segmentation, leading to overlap and conflict (Schwartz, 2018). On the interaction between work and family domains, spillover theory describes that the experiences of one domain spills over to the other domain. Spillover can be positive or negative. In positive spillover for example, success and happiness at work can spill over to the family domain, enriching it. In negative spillover, distress at work can diminish family experiences (Mathew & Panchanatham, 2011).

International studies on work-family integration

Empirical studies of working women have tested the implications of these theories. Berger (2018) found that working mothers with excessive work and family demands faced time-based conflicts and experienced lower satisfaction in work and family domains. In support of the boundary theory, McCloskey and Crowne (2023) found that women whose boundaries were permeable and not flexible, experienced the greatest work-family conflicts. Wattis et al. (2013) highlighted the subjective experiences of work-family integration among women. Various personal and situational factors were found to produce unique situations of work-family conflict and balance among women. Women with social support and part-time work managed their duties better. However, women who worked during evenings and weekends experienced greater conflicts.

These findings demonstrate that work-family integration for working women is akin to walking a tightrope. Integrating both domains with limited time and energy, requires a delicate balance between work and family responsibilities. These studies show that various factors determine the nature of work-family integration among women. Therefore, a narrative review was undertaken to identify the factors and nature of work-family integration among working women in the Indian context.

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

The following research questions for the literature review are presented below:

1. What factors challenge and facilitate the integration of work and family among women in the Indian context?
2. What are the themes that describe or illustrate the nature of work-family integration for women in the Indian context?

Research Design

A narrative review was adopted in the present study because it enables in-depth understanding. The review also identified distinctive themes pertaining to the nature of work-life integration in order to generate insights and provide a meaningful understanding of this topic.

A multidisciplinary approach was used by identifying studies from various disciplines. This allowed for diversity in study selection and a presentation of findings coalesced from multiple perspectives.

PROCEDURE

Search and Screening: The initial search terms were “work-family balance”, “work-family conflict” “Indian women”. As studies were collected, search terms were modified to include “gender”, “role conflict” “work-life balance” and “work-life conflict”. This expanded the scope of studies examining unique aspects of work-family interface for women. The term “work-life” was used as it is frequently used interchangeably with “work-family”.

Articles were screened based on their relevance to the research questions and according to the following inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Empirical studies using quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods approaches.
2. Studies conducted from 2010 to 2025.
3. Studies conducted across multiple disciplines.

Exclusion criteria:

1. Theoretical or review papers.
2. Studies conducted before 2010.
3. Studies involving a specific context such as the impact of the pandemic on work-family integration.

Studies conducted during the past 15 years were selected as they covered recent work-family dynamics. Studies with a focus on the effects of the pandemic were removed because work-family dynamics were significantly altered during this time.

26 studies were finally selected for the review. Studies were conducted across multiple disciplines including sociology, management, psychology, economics, commerce and public health. Studies were conducted across multiple cities in India. Women participants worked in various fields such as education, healthcare and IT. Studies employed quantitative or qualitative methodology.

Data Extraction: Key findings relevant to the research questions were extracted from each study. These findings were used as a basis for analysis.

Analysis

A three-step process of data analysis was applied. In step 1, initial codes based on the key findings were generated. In step 2, these codes were summarized into

challenging and facilitating factors. This step was conducted to address the first research question. In step 3, broad overarching themes were identified. These themes described the nature of work-family integration among Indian working women and addressed the second research question. The themes are presented in the form of a narrative to illustrate the unique characteristics of work-family integration among women.

RESULTS

The challenging and facilitating factors affecting work-family integration for working women were identified. Challenging factors are those that make work-life integration difficult for women, resulting in work-family conflicts or imbalance. Facilitating factors are those that enable work-family integration, resulting in work-family balance.

These factors were further categorized as personal/demographic factors, work-related and family-related factors.

Personal/Demographic Factors

Age: Many studies reported women of younger age (under 30-40 years) to experience more work-family conflict and imbalance compared to women of the older age group. Younger age was therefore identified as a challenging factor. Younger women may face more adjustment issues as they have fewer years of experience at work and younger children at home (Ali et al., 2025).

Self-Care and Management: Self-care and management was identified as a facilitating factor. Women reported that caring for the self through regular exercise, healthy diets, adequate rest and sleep, enabled work-family integration (Bharathi & Mala, 2016). Additionally, women who managed their time effectively by planning for their duties in advance, reported greater balance in the two domains.

Role Orientation: Clarity about career goals and role priority were found to be facilitating factors that enhanced work-family balance. Women who prioritized their family roles experienced greater fulfilment and better work-family balance (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011). Women who were oriented to traditional gender role beliefs, experienced more conflict and less satisfaction than those oriented to egalitarian gender roles (Rajadhyaksha & Velgach, 2015).

Work-Related Factors

Time Spent at Work: The overall time that women spent at work, including time spent during travel, emerged as a challenging factor. Long and odd working hours were predominant reasons for imbalance and conflicts. It resulted in less time with family members, especially with one's spouse and children. Inability to devote time to childcare due to one's work schedule was cited as an important cause for imbalance. This contributed to feelings of guilt (Rawat & Athaide, 2022; Sundaresan, 2014) and dissatisfaction with life. On the other hand, women who did not work overtime and established boundaries, reported better work-family balance (Srilatha, 2023).

Work Flexibility: Flexible working hours and the ability to work from home was regarded by many women as a source of work-family balance as it allowed them to handle their responsibilities with ease. Work flexibility was thus a facilitating factor.

Work Experience: Work experience was a facilitating factor for women. Gaining more years of experience resulted in better adjustment to one's work role and therefore contributed to better work-family balance (Ali et al., 2025).

Workplace Support: Peer and organizational support emerged as a facilitating factor. Getting help from peers at work contributed to better work-family management (Srilatha, 2023), and buffered the effects of work-family conflict on mental health.

Family-Related Factors

Family Responsibilities: Women were responsible for multiple aspects of home life including childcare, elder care and household work. Role overload on the family front was a challenging factor for women as it added to difficulties in managing the work-family interface. Family workload was intensified when spouse's profession was demanding or required longer hours, when women had more children, younger children and elders at home (eg. Rawat & Athaide, 2022).

Caregiving: In the caregiving role, childcare was an important factor in determining women's work-family integration. In particular, the inability to devote time and attention towards childcare was a challenging factor. It contributed to stress, guilt and mental disturbance (Sundaresan, 2014). The effect of this on children also contributed to conflict. When women prioritized caregiving responsibilities, they experienced better balance (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011). In addition to childcare, elder care was also a challenging factor as it added to workload (Mathew & Panchanathan, 2011). Overall, time spent on family care contributed to imbalance (Rajadhyaksha & Velgach, 2015).

Division of Labor: Unequal division of labor at home was a challenging factor in achieving work-family balance. Women assumed primary responsibility for household chores. They undertook a disproportionately larger share of household work compared to their spouses (Rawat & Athaide, 2022).

Family Support: Family support, including support from husband, was a major facilitating factor for women as it contributed to better work-family balance. On the other hand, lack of support at home contributed to imbalance (Mathew & Panchanathan, 2011).

DISCUSSION

This section presents the overarching themes pertaining to the nature of work-family integration among women in the Indian context. The themes are organized in a narrative with to present a picture of work-family integration and are further discussed in the context of previous studies conducted on the work-family interface.

Gendered roles

Women were found to be committed to gendered roles at home. They spent more time than men on childcare, elder care and household chores (Rajadhyaksha & Velgach, 2015). This was a reflection of gendered thinking, where women believed that homecare was their principal obligation (Bansal & Agarwal, 2017) while men believed that homecare was not their primary responsibility. As a result, men felt more successful in achieving work-life balance, while women reported more conflicts and imbalance in striving to fulfil their duties. Despite women's status as a dual-earner in the family, their earner role was regarded as secondary to their husband's and their caregiving role was regarded as their top priority (Bansal & Agarwal, 2017). Fulfilling gendered roles appears to be a function of gender role beliefs among both men and women. In dual-earner households, men may more likely be the primary breadwinner and women, the primary caregiver.

Shouldering the Double Burden

In the context of gendered roles, women shouldered primary responsibility for childcare, elder care and household work apart from their responsibilities at work. This was, in some cases, accompanied by little family support and augmented by young children, more children and a busy spouse. Their intense involvement in all aspects of home life contributed to energy strain and role overload (eg. Sundaresan, 2014). Role conflicts generally entailed that women felt pulled in different directions. Consequences of their workload led to time-based conflicts, with less time for themselves, leisure and socialization activities.

Career versus Care

A common theme that emerged was the binary choice that women felt about their career and caregiving responsibilities. Women perceived that family responsibilities determined whether they could progress in their career and undertake new opportunities at work. Career modifications were highly possible considering family duties (Gaur & Singh, 2024). Women experienced greater balance when career aspirations were held back to fulfil family duties. The effect of this was observed in children who desired their mother's involvement in all aspects of their life and felt neglected in their absence. Children responded better to increased maternal presence at home (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011).

Family Comes First

An implicit priority to family life was observed among women. Women believed family to be more important than work. They desired to spend quality time with family, and especially to be involved in childcare. (Rawat & Athaide, 2022).

Mothers of young children and teenagers alike, were highly involved in their children's life from taking care of their physical health to providing emotional support. Work commitments however, made it difficult for them to spend quality time with family (Gaur & Singh, 2024). Women reported work interfering with family life. This resulted in feelings of guilt as they had to compromise on family life. Women experienced more work-to-parent conflict than men. Diverting attention from childcare by leaving children to go to work, impacted women's mental health. Women desired flexible working hours, paid leave and the opportunity for work breaks. Family happiness was important for work-life balance. Women's stress was eased by spending time with family and they felt content and fulfilled in prioritizing family life (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011).

It Takes a Village

In association with the proverb "it takes a village to raise a child", women benefited from having a support network while fulfilling the duties of their multiple roles. Social support in the form of peer and organizational support at work and family and spousal support at home, was important in determining work-family integration. The presence of support at home, especially from the husband, facilitated work-family balance while the lack of it thereof, added to conflicts (Mathew & Panchanatham, 2011).

The themes in this study align with theories of work-family integration. Women experienced time-based conflicts and role strain due to multiple responsibilities. Similar to the findings of Wattis et al. (2013), women's experiences were determined by multiple factors. This highlighted the unique nature of work-family integration for

working women. Studies show that working women continue to undertake a disproportionately large share of housework (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018). In the present study, this was found to elicit gender differences where men experienced greater work-family balance than women.

For women, there is an intricate relationship between career advancement and family responsibilities. With the attitude of "family comes first", women have been found to choose a slower career trajectory, with part-time work and career shifts. Among women who have chosen to balance both, they have relied on a support network at the workplace and at home from one's husband, parents and in-laws (Wattis et al., 2013). These findings substantiate the themes identified in the study. They also highlight the value of family life among women and the importance of social support in fulfilling their career aspirations.

CONCLUSION

The study findings illustrate the unique nature of work-family integration among Indian working women. The study highlights the value of family life among women and the importance of social support in fulfilling their career aspirations. It contributes to the literature by identifying challenging and facilitating factors in domains such as work life, family life and personal or psychological characteristics.

The findings also bear implications for future research. The impact of challenging factors can adversely affect women's physical health and wellbeing. Interventions that mitigate these negative effects are suggested.

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