

Work-Life Balance among Men and Women: A Psychological Perspective - A Narrative Review

Akila Devi R

Department of Psychology – PG Studies, Centre for Distance and Online Education, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India

Abstract: *Work-life balance is a multidimensional psychological and social experience shaped by the relationship between paid employment, personal life, and family responsibilities. Gender is often examined as a factor in this relationship, yet evidence does not support assuming that men or women universally experience greater work-family conflict. This narrative review synthesises foundational theories and selected research on work-family conflict, work-family enrichment, perceived stress, gendered unpaid care work, and organisational resources. Greenhaus and Beutell's framework identifies time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based conflict, while the transactional model of stress and coping explains how appraisal and perceived resources influence responses to demands. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that average gender differences in work-family conflict are often modest and depend on contextual factors, including parental status, job conditions, and the direction of conflict. International labour reports show that unequal unpaid care responsibilities can shape opportunities, time pressure, and recovery, without determining every individual's experience. Research from India adds context-specific evidence but varies in occupation, sample, and measurement. The review argues that work-life balance should be understood through an intersection of gender, caregiving, work hours, schedule control, supervisor support, and coping resources. Organisations should prioritise predictable scheduling, fair workloads, inclusive flexibility, and accessible caregiving support. Future research should use transparent sampling, appropriate validated instruments, and designs that distinguish association from causation. This paper is a narrative review of published literature and does not report new participant data.*

Keywords: work-life balance; work-family conflict; perceived stress; gender; caregiving; organisational support

1. Introduction

Work and personal life are connected domains through which people obtain income, identity, social relationships, achievement, belonging, and recovery. Work-life balance refers not to an identical division of hours for everyone, but to the perceived ability to meet important work and non-work responsibilities in a manner that is acceptable to the individual. The experience is subjective and changes across occupations, household arrangements, and life stages.

Digital communication, remote and hybrid work, shift schedules, long commutes, dual-earner households, and expectations of continuous availability can blur boundaries between paid work and personal life. Work may interfere with family commitments when overtime prevents participation in important events; family responsibilities may also interrupt work concentration. Repeated interference can contribute to time pressure, fatigue, worry, guilt, and reduced opportunities for recovery.

Gender is relevant because social expectations and the distribution of paid and unpaid work remain unequal in many settings. However, gender alone does not explain each person's experience. Occupational sector, job level, working hours, income, parental status, caregiving intensity, schedule flexibility, and household support may all influence perceived balance. This review considers gender as one factor within a wider psychological and social system.

2. Review Approach and Scope

This paper presents a narrative review of selected foundational theories, measurement research, international labour reports, meta-analytic evidence, and studies relevant to work-life balance and gender. It draws on sources cited in the underlying student project, including work-family

conflict theory, stress-and-coping theory, work-family enrichment, research on gender differences, and studies of unpaid care work. It is not a systematic review: no exhaustive database search, formal screening protocol, or quantitative synthesis is claimed. The conclusions should be read as an interpretive synthesis of the selected literature rather than as a complete estimate of all available evidence.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

3.1 Work- Family Conflict Theory

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) describe three forms of work-family conflict. Time-based conflict occurs when time committed to one role limits participation in another. Strain-based conflict occurs when fatigue, worry, or irritability generated in one role makes it harder to participate in another. Behaviour-based conflict arises when behaviour expected in one role is incompatible with expectations in another. The framework remains useful because it identifies mechanisms rather than treating work-life difficulty as a single undifferentiated outcome.

3.2 Transactional stress and coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualise stress as a transaction between a person and the environment. People appraise whether demands are threatening or manageable and evaluate the resources available to respond. Problem-focused coping may include workload negotiation, planning, or arranging care; emotion-focused coping may include relaxation, acceptance, and seeking emotional support. The same demand can be experienced differently depending on perceived control, social support, health, and coping options.

3.3 Work- Family Enrichment

Work and family are not always competing domains. Greenhaus and Powell (2006) describe work-family enrichment as the process through which resources or experiences in one role improve functioning in another. Employment may provide income, confidence, skills, and positive affect that benefit personal life, while supportive relationships may improve mood and functioning at work. This perspective prevents work-life balance from being reduced solely to conflict and strain.

3.4 Role Expectations and Resource Conservation

Role theory draws attention to the expectations attached to social positions and the pressure created by multiple roles. In some settings, women are expected to take primary responsibility for household management and caregiving, while men may experience expectations to be primary earners or demonstrate uninterrupted work commitment. These patterns are social possibilities, not universal traits. A resource-conservation perspective also highlights the importance of time, energy, money, status, and support. Resource loss or insufficient recovery may intensify stress, whereas schedule control and shared responsibilities may help preserve resources.

4. What does the evidence say about gender differences?

A major meta-analysis by Shockley et al. (2017), integrating more than 350 independent samples and over 250,000 workers, found more evidence of similarity than difference in overall reported work-family conflict. The authors also identified contextual moderators, including parental status, dual-earner status, conflict type, and whether men and women held the same job. This challenges the assumption that one gender universally experiences greater conflict. At the same time, average similarities can conceal important differences between occupations, households, and forms of role interference.

Research in India illustrates why context matters. Mayya et al. (2021) studied 263 college and university teachers in Karnataka. Their reported unadjusted work-life balance means differed between men and women, but the unadjusted comparison did not reach conventional statistical significance; adjusted analyses indicated an association between gender and scores. These results belong to the specific population and instrument used and should not be treated as representative of all Indian workers. Jogi (2023) reported gender and generational differences among 69 employees in an Indian start-up, but the small and occupationally specific sample limits generalisation.

5. Unpaid care work and structural conditions

International Labour Organization reports show that unpaid care work is unequally distributed by gender in many settings. Charmes (2019) analyses time-use data to demonstrate that paid employment cannot be fully understood without considering domestic and care tasks. Addati et al. (2018) similarly connect the organisation of

unpaid and paid care with gender inequality, labour-market participation, and decent work.

These structural patterns can affect available time, career opportunities, fatigue, and recovery. However, population-level differences do not establish that every woman has poorer work-life balance than every man. Caregiving responsibilities differ across households, and some men carry substantial care responsibilities. Workplace flexibility, income, access to formal care, family support, and job security can also alter how demands are experienced. A useful psychological analysis therefore measures caregiving and work conditions rather than inferring them from gender.

6. Work-life balance and perceived stress

Perceived stress concerns how unpredictable, uncontrollable, or overloaded people appraise their lives, rather than simply the number of tasks they perform. Cohen et al. (1983) introduced the Perceived Stress Scale as a global measure of appraised stress. Any empirical study using this instrument should specify the version, follow its scoring instructions, and verify suitability and permissions; it should not use the scale as a diagnostic tool.

Work-family conflict may be associated with perceived stress when demands compete for limited time and energy or when people feel they lack control and support. The relationship may also operate in the other direction: high stress can influence how people evaluate their work-life balance. Cross-sectional correlations can establish association, not causal direction. Studies should therefore report effect sizes and confidence intervals where possible, not rely on p-values alone, and interpret results in light of the sample and measurement properties.

7. Organisational and practical implications

Organisations should address work design rather than treating work-life balance only as an individual time-management problem. Predictable schedules, realistic workloads, role clarity, fair shift-swapping, and early notice of roster changes can improve employees' ability to plan non-work responsibilities. Flexibility should be accessible across genders and job levels where operational requirements permit.

Supervisors shape whether policies are usable in practice. Managers can normalise discussion of competing demands, avoid rewarding constant after-hours availability as the sole sign of commitment, and evaluate employees against clear outcomes rather than visible online presence alone. Caregiving leave and flexibility should not lead to informal career penalties.

Support for psychological well-being can include confidential counselling or employee assistance resources, opportunities for recovery, and respectful conversations about workload. At the family level, explicit communication and fair distribution of domestic and caregiving tasks may reduce invisible planning burdens. Such recommendations should be adapted to the work setting and evaluated rather than assumed to be effective in every context.

8. Methodological Considerations for Future Research

Research on work-life balance varies in definitions, instruments, populations, and study designs. Self-report measures are appropriate for perceived experiences but may be affected by recall, social desirability, and current mood. Cross-sectional studies cannot establish causation, and convenience samples should not be described as representative of all employed adults. A small sample may also lack power to detect modest differences or support complex multivariable models.

Future studies should define work-life balance, work-family conflict, enrichment, and perceived stress separately; select validated instruments suited to the target population and language; and document scoring and permissions. Sampling should seek diversity in occupation, work arrangement, caregiving status, and job level. Longitudinal designs can examine changes over time, while qualitative interviews can explore how individuals define balance and negotiate expectations. Researchers should obtain informed consent, protect confidentiality, report non-significant results, and never fabricate or misrepresent participant data.

9. Conclusion

Work-life balance is a psychological and social process shaped by the interaction of work demands, personal responsibilities, perceived control, coping resources, social support, and organisational conditions. The literature does not justify a universal claim that either men or women always experience poorer balance. Gendered patterns of unpaid care work matter, but their effects are mediated by household arrangements, job design, and access to resources.

A more useful approach is to examine gender alongside caregiving, work hours, schedule predictability, supervisor support, and opportunities for recovery. Organisations can support employees through fair workloads, inclusive flexibility, predictable scheduling, and policies that do not penalise caregiving. Future empirical studies should use transparent methods and appropriate measures, and interpret associations without causal overstatement. This paper is a narrative review and does not present new participant data.