



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Impact of work–life balance on mental health of working women

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2026, 30(01), 2502-2506

Publication history: Received on 15 March 2026; revised on 22 April 2026; accepted on 24 April 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2026.30.1.1064>

Abstract

Work–life balance is widely recognized as a critical determinant of mental well-being, particularly for women who often manage professional responsibilities alongside disproportionate unpaid domestic and care giving work. In the contemporary globalized economy, women’s participation in the workforce has increasingly shifted from being a matter of choice to an economic necessity. However, this transformation has not been matched by an equal redistribution of domestic roles and responsibilities within households. As a result, many working women experience a “dual burden,” simultaneously fulfilling the expectations of an “ideal worker” in the professional sphere and an “ideal caregiver” in the private sphere. This paper explores the multidimensional concept of work–life balance, its factors and significant impact on the mental well-being of working women, with particular reference to the Indian context. Drawing on sociological perspectives and recent empirical studies, the research highlights how inadequate work–life balance contributes to develop the levels of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and burnout.

Keywords: Work-Life Balance; Mental Well-being; Working Women; India; Psychological Distress

1. Introduction

The desire for a better work-life balance has become one of the growing concerns in contemporary society. Women’s lives are often shaped by multiple, overlapping roles—as professionals, mothers, caregivers, wives, and daughters. Much of women’s time is consumed by socially imposed duties rather than consciously chosen priorities. As a result, women frequently end up prioritizing everyone else’s needs while postponing their own health, rest, and personal aspirations. Work-life balance is a multi-dimensional concept that defines the equilibrium an individual seeks between their professional obligations and their personal life, including family, health, and leisure. WLB entails adjusting work patterns to accommodate responsibilities like childcare or eldercare. In India, balancing professional and personal lives remains a pressing discourse. Working individuals navigate dual roles, but work stress often spills over, affecting family, organizations, and society. This problem is worse by high- performance pressures in many professional fields and by economic factors like falling income, slow growth, and layoffs. A notable gap is the lack of WLB accommodations, particularly burdensome for women as primary family caretakers. These stressors foster fatigue, errors, injuries, and absenteeism. Work and personal life form two sides of the same coin.

1.1. Evidence on Work–Life Imbalance among Indian Women

The Indian Institute of Management Ahmadabad (IIMA) study, which surveyed over 2000 working women across various sectors in India, revealing significant work-life imbalance challenges. 67% of women report struggling with work-life balance reflecting pervasive stress and conflict between job and home responsibilities. In the same study, 53% felt guilty about not spending enough time with family, and 60% of working mothers cited pressure from both work and home as a source of mental fatigue. 48% cited workplace culture as a major contributor to stress and imbalance. All working women experience various obstacles in their personal as well as professional life. Women are struggling to

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balance between work-life which ultimately hampering their social life. While trying to balance their work-life, they feel pressure. Since women need to play different roles in society it became harder for women to keep balance between person and professional life. (Times of India 23rd September 2024)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, sectors across the country saw work-from-home arrangements compound pressures for women. A survey of 2,500 Indian professionals showed that 61% of women felt conflicted between home and work duties, and 43.7% said their work-life balance worsened due to added housework and care responsibilities.

Gender Differences in Stress and Mental Health Studies on workplace stress highlight that Indian women experience higher levels of stress than men.

According to the Your Dost survey'2024 (mental health platform) reported that about 72.2% of female respondents experienced high stress levels, compared to 53.64% of men. Moreover, societal stigmas around mental health often prevent women from seeking help, and data suggests that women constitute a significant proportion of mental health struggles in India. These figures underscore the intersection of work-life balance struggles and broader mental health outcomes. In contemporary society, the pursuit of better WLB has emerged as a key concern. Organizations must integrate WLB strategies into job design and employment policies. Identifying WLB benefits is essential before implementing programs, enabling firms to appreciate their value and craft effective interventions. Role incompatibility—where work and family obligations conflict—forces individuals to prioritize one domain at the expense of the other, heightening stress. India has seen notable changes in women's participation in the workforce.

Recent surveys show that the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) has significantly risen from around 23% in 2017-18 to about 41.7% in 2023-24, indicating increased inclusion of women in economic activities. This growth reflects structural shifts in the labour market, but also underscores persistent gender inequalities in job quality, pay, and security.

Despite this increase, India's female participation remains below global peers, and experts estimate it may take decades to match the average in other G20 countries. These macro trends are crucial because higher participation often means added pressures for women to manage dual responsibilities.

Work life balance: For working women, work-life balance is not simply about managing office hours and household work; it is about recognizing mental well-being, self-care, and personal growth as legitimate priorities. Scheduling priorities might mean setting boundaries at work, allocating time for rest without guilt, or consciously sharing domestic responsibilities. The term refers to the equilibrium between an individual's professional responsibilities and personal life. Work-life balance means tackling daily tasks effectively without sacrificing personal priorities- like health, family and friends, culture, and hobbies and vice versa. This doesn't require equal time for every aspect; instead individuals intentionally allocate their energy and hours based on personal values and goals. When women only respond to what is already on their schedule - office deadlines, household tasks, care giving, they risk burnout, stress, and emotional exhaustion.

Mental wellbeing: On the other hand mental well-being refers to a state in which individuals realize their abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute meaningfully to their community. It refers to a positive state of psychological and emotional health; it indicates that a person is able to function cognitively and emotionally in a manner that is productive and fulfilling. Wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct (Seligman, 2012) that involves more than just being in a good mood or feeling happy. In addition to positive emotions, wellbeing is achieved through optimal development, a 'meaningful' life, and satisfaction of basic human needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000) It is a multidimensional capability of mind. Mental wellbeing is far more than just the absence of sadness or the presence of happiness; it is the comprehensive "capability of mind" that encompasses both how we feel and how we function. Mental wellbeing enable us to cope with stress, learn effectively work While we often conflate wellbeing with our immediate mood, the World Health Organization and Sapien Labs highlight that true mental health is the engine that allows us to navigate life's complexities—enabling us to cope with stress, learn effectively, work productively, and maintain healthy social connections. It allows an individual to not only function at a high level but also contribute meaningfully to their community.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Work-life balance (WLB) poses a critical challenge for Indian working women, intensified by patriarchal norms, role overload, and limited institutional support. Women's lives revolve around overlapping roles as professionals, mothers, caregivers, and wives. India's female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) has surged from 23% in 2017-18 to 41.07%

in 2023-24, yet persistent gender inequalities exacerbate WLB struggles. Sociologically, WLB emerges from intersections of class, gender, occupation, and family dynamics, rooted in patriarchal undervaluation of domestic labor. This leads to role conflict, mental health issues, and burnout. Organizations must integrate WLB strategies into policies to boost satisfaction, retention, and productivity. Sociologically, WLB emerges from the interplay of class, gender, occupation, and family dynamics, deeply rooted in patriarchal structures that undervalue domestic labor. Women are often expected to embody the "ideal worker" while fulfilling caregiver roles, leading to role overload and conflict. A healthy WLB is increasingly recognized as vital for mental wellbeing of women.

1.3. Significance of the study

Mental wellbeing is often treated as an individual struggle, but for women, but it is deeply tied to systematic discrimination, social norms, gender roles etc. Mental healthcare is the fundamental right (Mental healthcare Act 2017 and National Mental Health Policy 2014). But the fact is women faces unique challenges, bearing the double burden both paid employment and unpaid household responsibilities. According to 2019 UN Women report women perform three times more unpaid care work than men worldwide. The study of work-life balance and mental well-being among Indian women is important, because women in Indian society have multifaceted roles in professional and domestic spheres. In Indian society, women frequently bear the dual burden of paid employment and unpaid household duties that leading to heightened stress, anxiety, and burnout. Looking at this balance shows how hard it can be to balance work and family responsibilities as well as how it can affect mental health. Examining this balance is vital for enhances women's quality of life, productivity, and empowerment which is the key drivers of sustainable social and economic progress in India.

1.4. Objectives:

The main objective of this paper is

- to explore the key factors effecting work life balance among Indian women.
- to analyse the negative effect of imbalance work life on mental wellbeing
- Methodology: This paper is based on secondary research methodology. The study synthesizes and critically analyzes findings drawn from existing academic articles, pivotal legal judgments, comprehensive policy reports, and established social science research.
- Descriptive research design is used to analyse data systematically, collected from secondary sources.

2. Discussion and findings

A shift from survival-based time management to value-based living for women, is crucial for achieving genuine work life balance and protecting mental well-being. When women are empowered to schedule their priorities, they move closer to a life that is balanced, dignified, and emotionally healthy. In India's fast-growing economy, women are participating in both paid jobs and home duties like never before. Yet, striking a true work-life balance, fulfilling professional responsibilities alongside personal ones without burnout—remains a significant concern. This affects not just productivity but also mental health. For Indian women, established gender roles, heavy household expectations, and scarce institutional support make it even harder. Work–life balance is also a socio structural issue shaped by class, gender, occupation and family. For women, it often means bearing the full load of both “ideal worker” and “ideal caregiver” roles, leading to role overload, conflict and poor mental health. Sociological perspectives highlight that such gendered division of labour is rooted in patriarchal norms that undervalue women’s unpaid domestic work.

Some of the Factors Affecting Women’s Work–Life Balance among Indian women from sociological point of view:

2.1. Traditional Gender Norms

Patriarchy is the base of Indian society and posses a norms inherent tendency to disempower and control women’s everyday aspect of life. Societal norms frequently position women as primary caregivers and homemakers, even when employed. Patriarchal expectations assign women the “second shift”—paid work followed by domestic work. Such norms constrain women’s autonomy over time and choices.

2.2. Family Structure and Support

The presence of young children or elderly dependents intensifies strain, especially in the absence of extended family networks or accessible childcare options

2.3. Role Overload and Dual Burden

Working women routinely experience role overload from managing household chores alongside paid employment, with limited male partner involvement. This double burden leads to psychological conflict between occupational and family's demand.

2.4. Organisational Cultures

Rigid workplace structures, long working hours, lack of flexible schedules and limited remote work options further disadvantage women. Only a minority of organisations offer flexibility that could help balance roles.

2.5. Social pressure and Stereotypes

Women pursuing career advancement often face guilt or societal judgment for deviating from conventional family-oriented roles.

2.6. Economic Pressures

Low-quality jobs, wage gaps, and insecurity in employment increase stress, as women often lack of social and financial safeguards.

3. Impact on Mental Well -Being

An imbalanced work-life balance has profound and multifaceted consequences for individuals, organizations, and society at large. When professional obligations consistently outweigh personal time, individuals are exposed to sustained levels of stress that can significantly impair their psychological well-being. Chronic work-related pressure often results in anxiety and Depression, irritability, Sleep Disturbances, emotional exhaustion, and, in severe cases, depression and burnout. The absence of sufficient recovery time prevents individuals from effectively managing stress, thereby diminishing cognitive functioning, concentration, and decision-making abilities. Over time, this psychological strain not only reduces job satisfaction but also undermines overall life satisfaction.

In addition to mental health implications, an imbalanced work-life structure adversely affects physical health. Prolonged working hours and inadequate rest contribute to fatigue, sleep disturbances, and weakened immune function. Persistent stress can elevate the risk of hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, and other stress-related illnesses. Moreover, individuals who prioritize work excessively may neglect essential health-promoting behaviors such as regular exercise, balanced nutrition, and routine medical care, further exacerbating health risks.

Work-life imbalance also has significant social consequences. Limited time and emotional availability can strain relationships with family members, friends, and colleagues. Reduced participation in social and recreational activities may lead to feelings of isolation and weakened social support systems. As interpersonal relationships deteriorate, individuals may experience diminished emotional resilience, which further intensifies stress and dissatisfaction.

At the same time, excessive dedication to work does not necessarily translate into enhanced productivity. Instead, sustained overwork can harm creativity, problem-solving capacity, and overall efficiency. Employees experiencing burnout are more likely to exhibit decreased engagement, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover intentions. Consequently, organizations may suffer from reduced performance outcomes and increased operational costs.

Work-life balance remains a central challenge for Indian women, shaped by gendered social norms, inadequate institutional support, and rising economic demands. It has become a burning issue in today's modern world. Numerous researches have been done regarding this issue. Working women struggle to reconcile professional and personal roles, contributing to stress and compromised mental well-being. Addressing this issue requires a multi-dimensional approach—from workplace reforms to mental health initiatives and societal changes that challenge gender stereotypes. Enhancing women's work-life balance is not only a gender equity goal but also pivotal for socio-economic development of the society and the well-being of its workforce. It is very necessary to acknowledge women by providing more appropriate work-life balance measures for them.

4. Conclusion

Different research reveals that women experienced depression at rates is much higher than men. In India mental health of working women is a critical issue due to the combined impact of gender norms, stigma, caregiving responsibilities,

unequal power structure of patriarchal social system, and limited access to mental health care it is not only a biological factor. In today's fast pace world, this balance is crucial for job satisfaction, physical health and mental well-being of women. An imbalanced work-life extends beyond individual discomfort to create broader psychological, physical, social, and organizational challenges. Maintaining work-life balance is essential for protecting mental well-being of women to ensuring long-term productivity. Women with balanced lives are more resilient, creative, and emotionally stable. From an organizational perspective, women employees with good mental well-being show higher engagement, better performance, and lower absenteeism. Promoting a sustainable integration of professional and personal responsibilities is therefore essential for maintaining long-term well-being, fostering healthy relationships, and ensuring consistent productivity and performance. It also strengthens relationships with employers by fostering mutual respect and productivity

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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