

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Work Life Balance: Demystifying the Myth among Modern Day Female Academics

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Abstract: This paper provides a conceptual analysis of the work life balance initiatives adopted by female academics in South Africa. The intersecting identities and roles within home, work, community and society experienced by women pull them in multiple directions. Yet, there is limited research that has examined female academics' ability to balance work and personal life and overcome work life conflict. Therefore, it is necessary to review the facets that influence work life balance and the extent to which these facets can be demystified and the role of leadership. Based upon these important insights, the challenges of females work life balance are embedded in socio-cultural practices, personal variables and institutional factors. The implication of this study is that it will enable leaders, policy makers and the relevant stakeholders to come up with various ideologies, perspectives and interventions that enhance and/or promote work life balance among female academics in SA.

Keywords: *Work life balance, Myth, Well-being, Females, Academics.*

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Introduction

Finding an appropriate balance between work and daily life is a challenge that all workers regardless of gender. In particular, results of an international survey of academic professions which was carried out in 1996 using data from 14 countries revealed that academics now face demands for greater accountability and improved work-life balance in the workplace. Similar results have also been depicted in modern day research in South Africa [1].

Furthermore, some of the factors that have contributed to work-life balance challenges of educators include, among others: population increases, diversity in university populations, increases in cost of living, and conditions of service, new rules and regulations of the education department, curriculum changes, performance appraisal systems and demands of union [2]. Traditional gender ideologies of women's roles revolving around domesticity hold back some of them from making the necessary compromises meant to help them build their research skills and advance in their career [34].

As a result, the intersecting identities and roles within home, work, community and society experienced by women pull them in a myriad of ways that interferes in their research capacity construction and development. [5]. In South Africa, 18% of employees work very long hours, more than the OECD average of 13%. Furthermore, full-time workers devote 61% of their day on average, or 14.7 hours, to personal care (eating, sleeping, etc.) and leisure (socialising with friends and family, hobbies, games, computer and television use, etc.). This is less than the OECD average of 15 hours [6].

In addition, the EAP (Economically Active Population) figures of the past have changed and there are more women at work than men compared to the period before the 1998 elections and the adoption of the Employment Equity Act, 1998 (EEA) [7]. It is also important to note that section 15 of the EEA stipulates that designated employers must adopt affirmative action measures to ensure equitable representation of designated groups (which includes women) at the workplace [8].

Moreover, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, 1997 (the BCEA) does envisage the need for family responsibility leave and affords the leave to all employees who have been in employment with an employer for longer than four month [9] This analysis, therefore, highlights the regulatory framework for work-life balance. The trend in recent years is that every change impacts negatively or positively on employees.

The amount of work people do is intrinsically tied to the meaning of work in their lives, and this meaning can change over time and across circumstances [10]. In particular, there is a myth that 'work-life balance' can be achieved through quick fixes rather than challenging the place of paid work in people's lives [11, 12]. For female academics, the choices pertaining to work-life balance are influenced by the institutional structures that do or do not support the combination of motherhood, paid work and other career prerogatives.

As such, there is need in South Africa to examine the issue of state policy regarding work life balance among female academics. In addition, in light of South Africa's undeniable integration into the new globalised world more organisations run demanding schedules rendering some work life balance policies impractical. Consequentially, the pressure on employers for workplace reforms emanates from two perspectives namely, employees who want better life balance and a civil society which is demanding that employers internalise societal and cultural norms on work life balance [13,14].

Hence, the image of an "ideal worker" as someone who is without responsibilities, fully committed to only the employer's needs should actively be challenged, since it often ignores the realities that employees are faced with on a daily basis [15]. It is against this construct that this paper provides a conceptual analysis of work-life balance among female academics. The major question to be addressed is how important is work- life or life work balance among female academics in South Africa? The first section provides the overview of the literature pertaining to work life balance; the second one delves into the findings. Lastly, the conclusions and recommendations are provided.

Literature Review

Clarification of Key Terms

Work Life Balance

Work-life balance is a broad and complex phenomenon, lacking a universal definition. As a crucial aspect of employee engagement as well employee and organisational wellness, it remains an interesting field of research, especially due to the changing demographic employee profile [16]. Consisting of three components (time, involvement and satisfaction balance) and two approaches (individual and organisational), work-life balance can be defined as "a state where an individual manages real or potential conflicts between different demands on his or her time and energy in a way that satisfies his/her needs for well-being and self-fulfilment" [17].

These three components of work life balance can be characterised as follows; time balance being the equal distribution of time between one's family and work; involvement balance being the equal distribution of time between the psychological involvement at work and with family and lastly satisfaction balance which is the equal distribution of satisfaction with one's family and their work [18]. It is not enough to rely on one definition of this complex phenomenon, hence, [19] work-life balance is defined as "the extent to which an employee experiences feeling fulfilled and having his or her needs met in both work and non-work facets of life".

Myth

"A myth is at the very least a traditional tale that has been passed down from generation to generation". From a psychological point of view [20] myths are regarded as rudimentary philosophies, while from a historical-ethnographic standpoint they are labelled 'widely held' or 'ethnic' ideas. Representing a significant development in daily life, myths are also an important part of cultural competences as they fortify customs and give worth to the messages transferred amongst generations [21].

A myth is defined by Literary Devices Editors, [22] as a "legendary or a traditional story that usually concerns an event, or a hero, with or without using factual or real explanations, particularly one concerning with demigods or deities, and describes some rites, practices and natural phenomenon". Existing in every society as the basic element of human culture, myths are characterised by historical events and supernatural beings

[23]. The main function of myths is to teach moral lessons and explain historical records resulting in the creative use of myths in the themes as stories of many authors. In South Africa, many organisations still feel that helping employees balance competing work and nonwork demands is not their responsibility. Universities in particular, tend to subscribe to a somewhat dated view called the “myth of separate world”. This is based on the premise that work is work and life is life and the two domains do not overlap. The perception depicted is that organisations are in the business of increasing shareholder values and serving customers and not helping employees cope with work life issues.

Modern day Female Academics

Female academics can be any independent, fearless, passionate, confident and multi-faceted woman embracing the 21st Century in their academic profession bold enough to step into a sphere that was once dominated by males. One may beg to differ what exactly constitutes a modern day female academic, and just like any new phenomenon there is no substantial definition of the phrase.

In the past years a lion’s share of research on women academics and career advancement has been generated in western countries such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America and women continue to be under-represented in tenured academic positions [24]. Although the numbers of women in higher education is escalating in lots of countries, the majority dominate low-rank, part-time or short-term positions and the proportion of women in a large amount of senior academic positions are diminutive [25].

Socio cultural, family conflicts, lack of role models and mentors, male power and structural stumbling blocks exist for modern day female academics as they advance their careers despite the fact that female academics do excessively more teaching [26,29].

They are more positively orientated to educating [30], identify more as educators, invest more in developing a teaching identity, are more likely to voluntarily practice the scholarship of teaching and learning [31,32] and prepare more for teaching responsibilities [33].

Despite the benefits that females provide academia, there are still very few women employed as academics.

Review of Literature

In assessing the work-life balance debate, it is important to understand not only the underlying assumptions about work and life, but also about the relationship between the two. Commonly, work is presumed to have an adverse bearing on life, nevertheless, careful scrutiny of the assumption reveals that the lengthening working hours, indicates that this assumption is too simplistic [34]. The expression work life balance is frequently recycled to describe over-stressed employees, family problems and the retention of “Generation Y” individuals and the non-existence of this balance is perceived by the organisation and individual as a predicament [35].

Numerous studies have publicised that work and family are the two utmost expressive spheres in the life of a working person and global inclinations concerning employee and organisational wellness accentuate work-life balance and have directed a significant shift in the workplace towards work-life balance and quality of life [36, 37]. Resultantly, research and literature in the past decade reflects an amplified curiosity in work-life balance concerns globally [38] and in work-home relations in the South African work context [39, 42].

Academia is a demanding profession, as supported by mass research that authenticates the devastating bearing of occupational stress and burnout on the work and life of academics [43]. Over the past 20 years, numerous changes that South African higher education institutions have been subjected to have been predominant through increases in student enrolment, entrepreneurship, changes in funding and accountability, importance of performance-based incentives and emphasis on the efficiency of Higher Education staff [44].

As a result the work of female academics becomes more emotionally demanding, fragmented and implies a loss of professional autonomy, scholar identity and psychological ownership [45,47]. Such fragmentation if left unchecked destabilises the quality, productivity and creativity of these modern day female academics' work in addition to

their health, well-being and morale [48]. The changes that have occurred over the past 20 years have seen the rise of modern day female academics emerging hence causing a shift in the demographic profiles of academics worldwide [49]. Recent trends have seen a shift in the breadwinner role being thrust from the male to couples equally contributing to the household and single parent households. The traditional eight-hour working day is no longer the norm as academics through the emergence of information technology can access their work anytime and anywhere allowing for greater flexibility [50]. High on the new South Africa democratic government's agenda after apartheid was advancing the higher education sector [51].

Thus, innumerable interventions were instituted allowing the progression of women and to increase the number of women in higher education, grants and more positions for women academics were made available [52,53]. Interestingly, women in higher education in South Africa and the United States as stated by Johnson and Thomas [54] endure numerous setbacks as are considered to be outsiders within their academic environments and due to their small numbers; women academics are often invisible and voiceless.

The Higher Education South Africa found out in 2007 that only three Vice Chancellors out of 23 universities in South Africa were women and five out of 23 registrars were women (HER-SA, 2007). Since then, the picture has not changed much and these inequalities are still in place [55]. The ability to balance work and family responsibilities is a major factor that can impact on female career progression within an academic context and globally Universities have been slow to respond to work and family balance issues [56]. Earlier research indicates that gender shapes the kind of responsibilities and additional duties that female academics are expected to face [57].

Helping to give modern day female academics a voice are work-life balance policies that have recently been developed frequently include benefits such as flexible work hours, child- and elder-care provisions, paid maternity leave, adoption assistance, leave or time off, education assistance, health assistance, and housing assistance [58].

However, the accelerating work/spend cycle results in two main outcomes that are growing in frequency: firstly the breakdown of an individual whose work habits surpass the tolerance point, and secondly poor decisions by organizational leaders, sacrificing the firm's long-term viability for more immediate market gain [59].

Thus the growing emergence of the concept of work-life balance in the academic community, leads to two different perspectives. The first perspective relates to the practitioner approach and the other to the academic approach. On the one hand the practitioner approach concerns itself with the usability of the construct and its tangible outcomes such as improved employee retention, commitment and productivity. On the other hand, the academic approach focuses on the development of constructs, philosophies, paradigms and theories.

Discussion of Findings

Work-life conflict is the most dominant than life-work conflict attributable to the reality that work peripheries are less permeable than life/family peripheries [60].

It is vital to highlight that work and family are the two most important life domains for adult's especially modern day women hence; their reality to deal with work-life conflict is predominant [61,62]. With advances in technology, the academic life of modern day females amongst other professions has revolutionized their daily lives for the better and also for the worst. Over years the worst outcome has been noted from numerous changes in the world, is the fact that there is still a significant challenge with regards to Work-life balance among female educators [63].

Even after nearly forty years after the end of formal licit hurdles that presented a restriction to the participation of women in academia, there is still an under-representation of women in academia and those that are fortunately within the profession seldom go up the academic rank [64, 65]. Despite the numerous researches done on work-life balance of female academics around the world, very little research has focused on South Africa. To help substantiate findings from past research five themes have been identified. Firstly,

work related antecedents (hours worked, inflexible work schedules, supportive organisational culture). Secondly, work related outcomes (job dissatisfaction, family and work absenteeism, performance, safety participation, workplace cognitive failure).

Thirdly, family related outcomes (life, marital and family dissatisfaction, family stress, health issues). Fourthly, psychological health (stress, mood disorder, depression, anxiety) and lastly, physical health (musculoskeletal pain, sleep quality, cardiovascular, blood pressure).

Within academia, work-related stress has negative spill-overs as it determines one's quality of life hence has explicitly been associated with job dissatisfaction, increased smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, physical ill health and poor psychological well-being. This ultimately results in poor work performance, decrease in faculty productivity, absenteeism, propensity to leave and higher staff turnover. Fig 1 represent the schematic view of the themes emanating from the conceptual analysis.

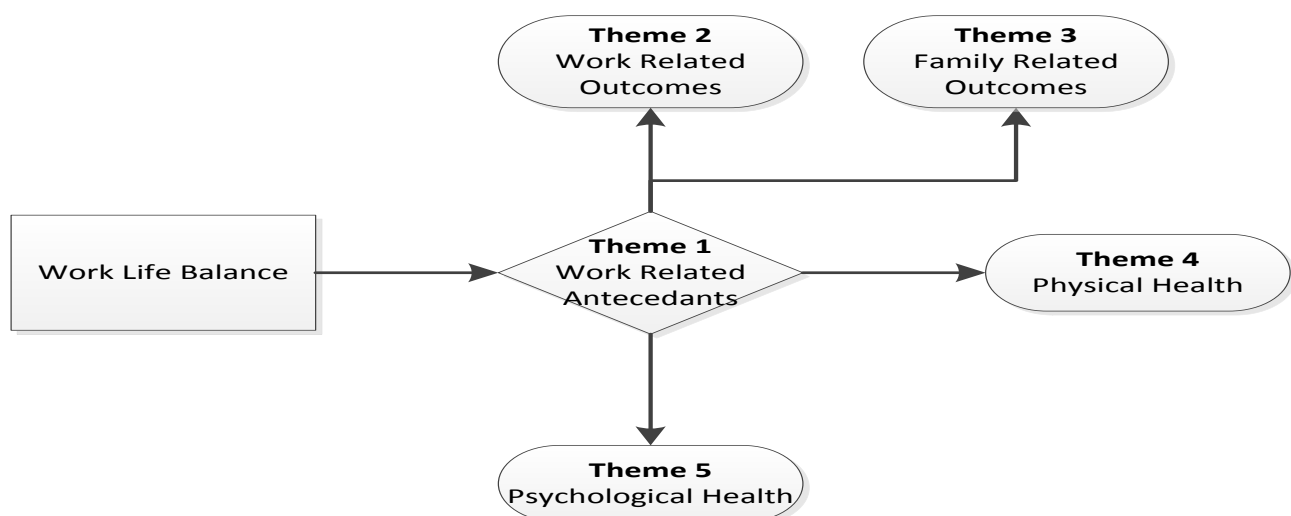


Fig 1: Work-life Balance themes for Morden Day Female Academics
Source: Nzonzo and Maingehama (2018)**** Developed from Conceptual Framework

Work Related Antecedents

Women face fundamental limitations in developing personal networks because they prefer to associate with others like themselves hence, this significantly plays a role on their network formation. Most institutions in academia are male-dominated, so female academics have fewer opportunities to develop their most preferred network ties within institutions [66].

As a result of gender attributes and stereotypes, women are less desirable network contacts for men resulting in women confronting even greater difficulty developing network ties than men do. Similar research [67] found that the pressure of being excluded was predominately the reason responsible for women's disregard of preference of female friends (homophily), hence, women are likely to develop fewer and weaker network ties within institutions than their male colleagues. Most aspects within academia, for example, faculty decision-

making, mentoring, informal conversations about research and formal collaboration all

take place within the informal networks of a department or institution which means that the absence of strong ties to these informal networks will create perceptions of exclusion [68]. This exclusion may then spur up negative spill-overs from work to family as women will perceive that they are not receiving enough support because the support of the supervisor is negatively associated with work-life balance [69] and is related to perceptions of greater organizational work-life support [70,71].

Other than having a supportive organisational culture other work related antecedents exist; most empirical studies [72, 73] confirm that longer working time, work overload and modified working time escalate the perception on work-life balance. Work related antecedents (increasing working hours, high job involvement, and job stress) deepen the spill-over of work into family, contributing to lower psychological well-being

[74]. Job stress ($\rho = 0.48$) and schedule flexibility ($\rho = -0.30$) are those work-related antecedents that have been found to have the strongest relationships with work-life balance in a meta-analytic study [75].

Similar research found out that women who reported working less than 20 hours per week reported less conflict, whereas working 45 hours or more per week caused more conflict for both women and men. Therefore, it is crucial for female academics to take heed of work related antecedents owing to the fact that the perceived time pressure serves as the predictor of the amount of outcomes related to the job [76].

Furthermore, research has affirmed that the challenges of building women's research capacity are embedded in socio-cultural practices, personal/demographic variables and institutional factors. The intersecting hold back some of them from making the necessary compromises meant to help them build their research skills and advance in their career. In view of this, women's restricted mobility once married with children was cited as a key constraining socio-cultural norm that impacted on women's opportunities for research capacity and development [77].

Work Related Outcomes

Job requirements particularly those related to scheduling for example working in shifts, overtime, weekend, and evening work, impose on an individual's personal time and thereby creating an imbalance in allocating work roles [78]. Findings show that on a daily basis, modern day women in academia face the challenge of allocating limited resources to various spheres of their work and the consequences of experiencing conflict are particularly worrying in the organisations as they contribute to lower performance and the overall success of the department or institution [79].

Apart from low performance, turnover intention is another consequence that brings costs to the organization and is related to stress spill-overs and by leaving a job, an individual preserves their time and energy amongst other resources that would have been lost from the stress caused in their work role [80]. In addition, different studies report the positive influence of work-life balance battle on turnover intention and meta-

analytic studies also confirm the positive nature of the relationship highlighting that turnover is a strong determinant of work-life conflict [81].

A fascinating comparative finding in one American study similar to South Africa was that gender was found to be a significant predictor of turnover intention, with women being less likely to leave a job. Furthermore, there are existing studies regarding absenteeism and they highlight that it is a negative consequence of conflicting role demands. An independent study of 432 employees found that women with a strong work-life conflict exhibit absenteeism, whereas they did not find this relationship among men [82].

In a related study, the relationship between perceived conflict and leaving early was stronger for women with family responsibilities and apart from confirming the positive relationship between conflict and absenteeism, a recent longitudinal study found that participation in decision-making at work safeguarded this effect [83]. Similarly, there were no gender differences in terms of work-life imbalance. Perhaps, more women have entered the workforce and are moving away from the traditional role of caregiver to one of a career-oriented caregiver.

This trend could also be attributed to the more recent addition of family management facilities (e.g. childcare services, time management courses) that some organizations provide. Women were also found to regard a sense of job security and subjective feelings of success (such as growth and development opportunities, the intrinsic value of the job, and work-home balance) as more important than men, who appear to place higher value on objective aspects of achievement and career success. The findings also show that female participants regarded their work as a valuable activity to a significantly higher degree than their male counterparts.

Family Related Outcomes

Research shows that work, rather than family characteristics, have the strongest correlation with work life balance [84]. Work demands could consequently not be wholly related with ill health, but somewhat wield its negative effects on health through a

process of spill-over, generally accompanied by a short supply of quantitative and qualitative recuperation during non-working hours infringing on the time one spends with their family [85].

When women are experiencing high work demands, they need recovery time at home to reduce fatigue and other stressful effects of high work demands. However, if they also have high overload and pressure at home, they will possibly experience fewer opportunities to manage home responsibilities or have insufficient leisure time to recover from demands faced at work.

Therefore, “when the time at home is used to deal with additional overload and pressure (instead of using the time to recover from negative load reactions that spilled over to the home domain), women do not fully recover from high effort investment at work” [86]. For some, work is replacing family, friendship circles and social groups. Work gives people a feeling of being tied into the larger society, of having something to do, of having a purpose in life.

The organization within which people work is becoming their most significant community. With these changes, work has become the centrepiece of modern lives, the place where most people seek and find their sense of meaning. Indeed, over the past ten years, more and more employees sought answers in organizations to the questions of the human soul and meaning in life [87].

The concept of social capital or support is important in understanding participants' perceptions of their ability to cope and the stress that participants experience. Therefore, whilst social capital at work is very important, social capital in the home environment is also important to women's experience of work-life balance. This is an important consideration apart from the organisational factors such as long working hours.

Psychological Health

A number of research findings prove that increased work-life conflict brings negative psychological consequences. The average weighted correlation between conflict and general psychological strain is 0.29, whereas the correlation with depression is 0.32 and a strong and positive relationship was also

found with emotional exhaustion [88, 89]. Furthermore, people who experience work-life conflict often were 3.13 times more likely to have a mood disorder, 2.46 times more likely to have an anxiety disorder and 1.99 times more likely to have a substance dependence disorder in comparison with those who do not experience work-family conflict. A significant psychological consequence is burnout as it represents an outflow of energy, which causes a lot of conflict as burnout eventually causing long-term stress at work [90, 91].

Both work demands and home demands have a direct effect on burnout, home demands will also require a certain amount of mental and physical effort that is associated with physiological or psychological cost and it is therefore acceptable to reason that high home demands, like high work demands, will also be related to ill health [92, 93]. There is a lot of burnout demonstrated by academics and most of them demonstrate feelings of anxiety, depression, burnout, anger, irritability and helplessness. Within the South African context, [94] recently found that high levels of psychological and physical ill health in a sample of 372 university staff members.

While the country experiences and approaches differ the more generic taken-for-granted assumptions that permeate the work-life balance discourse and reflect on some of the implications. While all the limitations of the work metaphor, limit our thinking about the issues, critical issues of work-life assumptions are gender neutrality, individual choice and cultural neutrality.

Physical Health

There is growing evidence that supports the idea that work - life conflict leads to poor physical health, poor perceived health and depressive behaviour [95, 96].

Work-life conflict, negatively affects physical and mental health and it causes physical health problems like hypertension obesity, high cholesterol levels, lower physical stamina 2009 and behaviours like overeating, skipping meals, and devoting less time and energy to exercise. Other authors report the following symptoms: problems with sleep, headaches, fatigue, chest pains, and alcohol abuse. Women's health happens to be dependent on their ability to adjust their

professional and private responsibilities, for that reason, their ability to cope with conflicting needs have strong repercussions for their levels of physical health, anxiety and depressive mood. A study on stress among academics [97] also showed that stress about work-life balance results in burnout and physical consequences such as headache, backache, upset stomach, fatigue and sleep deprivation. Female academics reported higher levels of physical ill health than male academics.

Women working in higher education experience more stressors and strains than their male counterparts as a result of a lack of role models and increased role conflict as they endeavour to balance roles at work and at home. The demands on women's time coupled with role conflicts and the absence of mentors negatively affect their health, work and relationships. Based on the findings, results showed that older academics (60 to 69 years) were less troubled by physical and psychological ill health problems. This may be because as people get older they become more experienced and more worldly-wise and consequently adopt more rational cognitive coping mechanisms than younger academics.

Conclusion

Institutional practices that reflect power-laden norm and values affect women negatively. Although female academics are enhancing their research careers, there remains a gender gap in academia that is perpetuated by structural barriers to women's research capacity development [98, 99]. There is a need for more opportunities for female academics to collaboratively discuss challenges, share experiences and learn from each other's strategies provide on how to improve their research capacities [100].

Universities are being repositioned in terms of their relationship with the state and industry as they are viewed as key players in the national economic system where knowledge and highly skilled human resources are perceived as the fuel of economic development [101,102]. Happiness

is generally related to aspects in life such as the enjoyment of a good or pleasurable life as well as aspects beyond pleasure. These may include aspects such as good health and social interactions, religion, love and marriage, work and internal experiences (for example, internal motivation, flow and meaningfulness in work and life) [103]. Thus, work life balance is therefore not one single ultimate experience but a series of individual experiences, unfolding over time, which could be better described as life-balance moments.

Recommendations

An integrated approach to work towards a work-life balance culture needs to address policies; attitudes and behaviours; and employee awareness and capability [104]. Achieving a work-life balance culture is probably a leadership issue as much as anything. It will require congruence among organisational policies and will require wisdom in assisting and supporting people to achieve organisational and personal goals. Primary interventions may, in the first place, be directed at either the work situation or the coping capability of the employee. Worker-oriented interventions are aimed at training employees to deal more effectively or modify their work-life balance initiatives.

If the physical and psychological factors in particular are allowed to continue unattended, organisations can expect to encounter negative costs effects, such as burnout, absenteeism and employee turnover, and diminished levels of service [105]. Secondary-level interventions can be implemented to increase their coping capability of employees.

Typical examples would entail time management, conflict resolution techniques and coping strategies. Tertiary-level interventions are concerned with the rehabilitation of individuals who have suffered ill-health or reduced well-being as a result of strain in the workplace. Creating organizational cultures that foster positive workplace social support as an ongoing aspect of the work environment is a key element of building a sustainable female academic workforce.

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