

WORK-LIFE BALANCE – IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKING WOMEN

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Abstract: Work life balance is a term used to describe the balance between an individual's personal life and professional life. A healthy work-life balance assumes great significance for working women particularly in the current context in which both, the family and the workplace have posed several challenges and problems for women. The dynamics of the work environment have exerted enormous pressure on working women as they need to cope with virtually two full time jobs – one at the office and the other at home. Review of literature related to the subject has revealed that working women experience greater difficulty than men in balancing work and family. It is also found that they experience conflict as there is job spill over into the home more frequently than home spill over into work. Besides to succeed in one environment, working women are often called upon to make sacrifices in another as each of the environments makes different demands on them and have distinct norms to adhere to. This study investigates the factors affecting work life balance among working women and the consequences of poor-work life balance. Data were obtained through a structured questionnaire administered to 125 randomly selected working women across organizations/institutions in Bangalore City. The response rate was about 93% and the obtained data were statistically analysed. Results indicate that a significant proportion of working women are experiencing difficulty in balancing work and family due to excessive work pressure, too little time for themselves and the need to fulfill others' expectations of them. Majority of the working women experience job spill over into the home as they have to put in longer hours. Major consequences of poor work-life balance are high levels of stress and anxiety, disharmony at home, experiencing job burnout and inability to realize full potential. They feel irritable and resentful often due to their inability to balance work and family life. The findings have implications for working women and provide insights into finding solutions to maintain healthy work life balance. Two models of work life balance, viz. role-analysis model and three factor model have been developed to enable working women resolve the conflict caused due to poor work life balance. These models equip women with the mechanism to strike a fine balance and make them smarter, healthier and happier in every facet of their lives. Both the models assume greater significance for working women across the world as it helps them resolve the dilemmas of managing their multiple roles in the personal and professional lives.

Keywords: Job burnout; Role analysis; Working women; Work life balance; Work pressure.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty first century organisations are characterised by persistent changes, uncertainties and excessive pressure to increase productivity. These changes disturb the balance in the lives of employees causing confusion and stress. This is also fuelled by extreme levels of competitiveness in the work sphere posing new challenges and problems to workers. Technological advancements and new inventions have impacted the socio-cultural context by introducing multi-cultural life styles in Indian homes. In the midst of all this, the compelling need for growth in all spheres, for individuals as well as for organisations has resulted in imbalance in the lives of the workforce. The incessant demands on their time and effort to enhance productivity have created enormous stress

and pressure causing disequilibrium between work life and family life. Most employees either spend long hours at their work place or carry work home thereby compromising on the quality of life.

What is work life balance?

In the words of Jim Bird, CEO of worklifebalance.com, work-life balance does not mean equal balance between professional and personal life. It is careful synchronisation of an individual's varied pursuits that may include family, work, leisure, social obligations, health, career and spirituality. While some of the pursuits need greater attention, others may require lesser focus. Striking a fine balance by prioritising these human quests will result in work-life balance. It is individual specific and keeps changing over time. According to Stewart Friedman - Professor of Management and Founding Director of Wharton School's Leadership Program and of its Work -Life Integration project - "a one size fits all; mentality in human resources management often perpetuates frustration among employees. It is not an uncommon problem in many HR areas, where, for the sake of equality, there's a standard policy implemented in a way that is universally acceptable, even though everyone's life is different and everyone needs different things in terms of how to integrate the different pieces. It's got to be customised". Friedman's research indicates that the solution lies in approaching the components of work, family, community and self as a comprehensive system.

Work-life balance and women

Traditionally, women have been looked upon as nurturers and care givers and assigned all roles related to maintaining and managing a family. Men perceive themselves as breadwinners and society also expects them to perform work roles to earn and support the family. However, the nature of work-force has been changing and the percentage of men as wage earners and women as housewives has been rapidly declining. In urban India, the percentage of dual-earner couples is gradually increasing and for most women and men today, their work environment and the family have become the two important institutions in life. Changes in the workforce are accompanied by changes in values, creating a new emphasis on the balance between work-life and family life (Hall 1986). Work-life balance assumes great significance for women as they are virtually in two full time jobs - one at home and the other at office. Working mothers often have to challenge perceptions and stereotypes that evolve as a working woman becomes a working mother... When a woman seeks a position of power within an organisation, she must consider the toll on other facets of her life, including hobbies, personal relationships and family. Most executive jobs require a substantial amount of time and effort, which a working mother may not be able to devote due to family obligations. So also, it may be nearly impossible for a working mother in a top management position to be the primary care giver of her child. Women often find it more difficult to maintain balance on account of the competing pressures of work and demands at home. Working women have to carefully handle their personal balance and skilfully blend their roles, so as to optimise their potential in all quadrants of life.

Literature Review

Most previous research on the ability to balance work and family indicates that because women typically maintain major responsibility for the home and the family, they have greater difficulty in balancing work and family than men (Duxbury and Higgins 1991). Spill over theory asserts that there is similarity between what occurs in a family environment (Staines 1980), such that happiness at work leads to happiness at home. In addition a person's work experiences are assumed to influence what he/she does away from work (Champoux 1978). It is also assumed that attitudes at work become ingrained and is carried over into home life (Kando and Summers 1971) or that work attitudes affect a basic orientation towards the self, others and children (Mortimer et al 1986). Spill over is generally discussed in terms of positive relationships, but it is also possible to have negative spill over (Piotrkowski 1978). The spillover in which the work is boring or monotonous can result in an energy deficit making the person lazy which in turn leads to his/her not doing certain things at home. Compensation theory states that events at home provide "shock absorbers" for disappointments at work and vice versa (Crosby 1984). This theory postulates that there is an inverse relationship between work and family, such that work and non-work experiences tend to be antithetical (Staines 1980). Segmentation theory postulates that work and family environments are distinct and that an individual can function successfully in one without any influence on the other (Evans and Bartolome 1984, Payton-Miyazaki and Brayfield 1974, Piotrkowski 1978). The family is seen as the realm of affectivity, intimacy and significant ascribed relations, whereas, the work world is viewed as impersonal, competitive and instrumental rather than expressive (Piotrkowski 1978). Instrumental theory suggests that one environment is a means by which things are obtained in the other environment. For example, work outcomes lead to good family life and are a means

to get some pleasures of life (Evans and Batolome 1984, Payton-Miyazaki and Brayfield 1976). Conflict theory states that satisfaction or success in one environment entails sacrifices in the other; the two environments are incompatible because they have distinct norms and requirements (Evans and Bartolome 1984; Greenhaus and Beutelo 1985; Payton-Miyazaki and Brayfield 1976).

A study titled "Balancing work and family after childbirth: A Longitudinal Analysis" by Grice, M.M.; McGovern, P.M.; Alexander, B.H.; Ukestad, L.; Hellerstedt, W. revealed that by 11 weeks after childbirth, 53% of the women returned to work; by six months, almost all the women were back at work. Women experienced job spill over into the home more frequently than home spill over into work.... There was "a positive relationship" between health and total hours worked, with each additional hour of work being associated with a slight impact on both mental and physical health." A positive association was found between women's mental health scores and both social support from co-workers and positive feedback from family members, about the way a woman balanced both work and family. There was an inverse relationship between work flexibility and job spill over, with more flexible work arrangements, not increasing the amount of time a woman is able to spend with her child.

The Study

The present study was essentially planned as a descriptive/analytical research. The main objectives are:

- To determine the factors affecting work life balance among working women and
- To find out the consequences of poor work-life balance for working women.

Most specifically, the study is intended to analyse the following:-

- Whether there is excessive work pressure in personal and professional domains.
- Whether there is constant need to fulfil others' expectations
- Whether job burnout is a result of poor work-life balance; and
- What are the implications of the above for working women?

This study is based on the assumption that there are factors in the family as well as work environment that impact work life balance of working women. It is also based on the premise that poor work-life balance has implications for working women which could be identified. Further, by developing suitable models to build healthy work-life balance, working women could enhance their quality of lives, both in the family as well as work domains.

METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken by collecting data from working women across organisations/institutions in Bangalore city. The respondents to the survey were from a random sample of women who were engaged in paid employment or who were self-employed. The survey instrument was distributed among 125 such working women and 116 survey responses have been collected. The responses have come from 5 women who were self employed, 63 women employees working in the private sector, 14 in the public sector, 32 in academic institutions and 2 from other organisations such as NGOs. To make the population as homogenous as possible the sample was limited to women who met the following two criteria: 1) They had to be engaged in full-time paid employment outside the home 2) Their minimum qualification had to be a graduate degree in any discipline. The factors affecting work-life balance of working women are many. This study does not take into consideration job type and family type of the respondents.

Qualitative data was sourced from journals, relevant literature and also through discussions, open ended questions and observations. Quantitative data was collected by administering a structured questionnaire which included sections on factors affecting work-life balance and consequences of poor work-life balance. Personal data of respondents were also collected. A five point scale was used to find out the degree of agreement for each item on the questionnaire.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are discussed in terms of factors affecting work life balance and consequences of poor work life balance for working women.

- A. Demographic Profile:** A review of the demographic profile of respondents indicates that the majority of them (75%) were in the age group of 35- 45 years with one or two children. While 44% of the respondents had no elderly dependents to care for, the rest of them had at least one elderly dependent in their care. Therefore, a large majority of the respondents belonged to a family of at least three members. The entire

sample of working women selected for the purpose of this study was required to have completed their graduation. Most of them (54%) were post graduates, 17% were professionals and about 10% had a doctorate or some other degree. A small proportion (19%) were graduates without having pursued any higher qualification. 84% of the respondents were married and 7% were separated, divorced or widowed. About 66% of the respondents had 10 -20 years work experience while 14% had over 20 years work experience. 4% of the women were self-employed, 54% in the private sector, 12% in the public sector, 28% in academic institutions and 2% were employed in other organisations. Open ended questions to respondents revealed that majority of the women had taken a conscious decision to pursue a career and many of them had made the choice of occupation without any force or pressure. Majority of them had taken up a job as it would fulfil their need to be independent and self-reliant and some of them took up a job to supplement the family income. None of the respondents felt that their contribution to the organisation was not valued. Over 85% of the respondents perceived themselves as making substantial contribution to their organisation. They also felt worthy of their status and position. The analysis indicates that women in employment have chosen to take up paid work out of their own volition and are not necessarily employed to provide financial support to their families. Discussions with respondents also revealed that women in higher level career positions have better work life balance due to higher income and the more flexible nature of their work. It was also opined that working women with family support enjoyed work life balance and less work pressure.

B. Factors affecting work life balance

The degrees of agreement about factors affecting work life balance of respondents was assessed using an instrument consisting of 15 items on a 5 point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The responses have been analysed as follows.

Burden of excessive work: 67% of the respondents agree that they suffer from the burden of excessive work. Working women are often confronted with tasks involving children, home, in-laws, parents and their social circle. To add to this they must also take up multiple roles in their personal lives. With the increasing demands on the job, working women have to spend long hours of work and sometimes even carry their work home. Therefore majority of them are burdened with excessive work in both their personal and work spaces. This is a contributing factor to work life imbalance and may lead to conflict.

Interference of work with family life: Majority of the respondents agreed that work interfered with family life. This may be attributed to the fact that mostly work hours are not limited to 7 or 8 hours a day and the private sector employees spend 12-16 hours at work. This leaves them with very little time for family. As more than one half of the respondents are employed in the private sector, there may be interference of work with family life due to long hours spent in completing official work.

Fulfil others' expectations: A large majority of the respondents (77%) agree that they are under pressure to fulfil other's expectations. As working women are constantly juggling between two full time jobs, taking multiple roles in both domains, there is a lot of work pressure resulting in work life conflict. While, there is a lot of expectation from family to fulfil social roles, the organisation also expects them to perform effectively. Both domains expect the working women to do full justice to all their roles thereby exerting tremendous stress and strain. The above analysis suggests that in trying to fulfil others' expectations, working women are often left with very little space for themselves to pursue their personal interests.

Longer work hours: Working women have to put in longer hours of work as they need to compete with their male counterparts in their work domain so as to remain in the race for advancement and promotions. In the Indian context, women remain the sole caretakers of children and older dependents which will entail longer hours of work at home thus jeopardizing their work life balance. It is observed that working women are left with hardly any time to pursue personal interests.

No time for oneself: Majority of the respondents agreed that they had no time for themselves. Though a large majority (84%) of the respondents did not have to travel frequently at work and over 50% of them also had family support, they had to commute long distances everyday to work. This robbed them of precious time that could be constructively spent for their personal growth or spiritual pursuits.

Further, the analysis of responses on factors affecting work life balance has indicated that working women selected for the purpose of this study are not necessarily stressed due to financial pressures. Over 40% of the respondents also disagree that they do not find time to meet social obligations. Working women in India are not exempt from fulfilling their social obligations. As women are aware that certain social obligations must be met whether they are working or not, they may be consciously setting aside the time to fulfill such obligations. Discussions with respondents revealed that though the younger generation Indian men today are more tolerant of non-traditional lifestyles of the working women in their homes, they are still fairly conservative and expect women to manage household work and childrearing tasks. Often, working women are expected to make career sacrifice by restricting themselves to limited work at the workplace. This may cause anger and frustration which has the potential to spill over to the various roles women play in their work and family lives.

C. Consequences of poor work-life balance

The responses concerning consequences of poor work-life balance are analyzed.

High levels of stress and anxiety : Majority (78%) of the respondents agree that they experience high levels of stress and anxiety due to poor work-life balance. Working women not only have to manage the tasks involved in bearing and raising children but also have to deal with high levels of anxiety in having to compete in a man's world. Besides, they have to constantly juggle between the family and work preventing them from aspiring to progress in their career beyond a particular level. Some working women may choose to prioritize career over family. In such cases, they may experience frustration and guilt in compromising on the time to be spent with family. In either situation, working women are forced to make a difficult choice or compromise resulting in stress and anxiety thereby adversely affecting their health.

Disharmony at home: 68% of the respondents agree that the consequence of poor work-life balance is disharmony at home. Indian societal norms prescribe that women must perform certain household chores whether they are employed or not. In case of working women, their work responsibilities may prevent them from conforming to societal norms causing displeasure among family members resulting in discord and disharmony at home. Unwillingness on the part of other family members to share work exerts pressure on the working women. Moreover, the tendency to belittle a working woman's career and conferring a higher status as the primary breadwinner's role for the man, results in the dumping of all household responsibilities upon the woman. This biased treatment of working women results in imbalance which could lead to frustration and disharmony at home.

Job burnout: Majority of the respondents fall in the age bracket between 35 years and 55 years with more than 10 years work experience. Therefore, they are likely to be in the middle management cadre having to lead teams and fulfill higher level responsibilities. At this stage of their lives, they are also likely to be engaged in the upbringing of teenage children and caring for elderly dependants. All this exerts tremendous strain as, often the working women are torn between the demands of their personal and professional lives. In the workspace, they need to compete with younger colleagues and keep themselves updated of developments in their areas of work. Beyond a point, it becomes very difficult for working women to cope with the pressures at work. Many of them are also affected by deteriorating health which further aggravates their problems both at work and at home. A large majority of the respondents agree that one of the consequences of poor work-life balance is job burnout. The analysis clearly indicates that excess work and the resultant imbalance leads to job burnout among working women.

Inability to realize full potential: Most Indian women are not encouraged to prioritize career over family. Therefore quite often they forsake their chances for career advancement in the early stages of their work lives. In the process, they lose many opportunities and by the time they are in a position to accept greater responsibilities, no such position may be available. Moreover assignments of repetitive and monotonous nature assigned to women also inhibit their creativity and prevents them from realizing their full potential. This builds frustration and resentment among working women which impacts their various roles causing imbalance. Thus it may be inferred that poor work-life balance inhibits ability of working women to realize their full potential. As women play multiple roles, very often, the roles overlap preventing them from delineating their workspace from family space. The working women therefore, make compromises in one or the other space in order, to manage situations momentarily. Therefore, they are unable to realize their full potential in both domains.

Though more than one half of the respondents did not feel guilty of neglecting either family or work, over 60% of them felt irritable and resentful very often. However majority were neither resorting to binge eating, alcoholism nor smoking nor losing interest in life as a result of poor work life balance. Therefore, it can be inferred that working women experience job burnout and high levels of stress and anxiety as a result of poor work life balance. Their inability to realize their full potential both at work and home can also be frustrating causing resentment and negative emotions towards their immediate environment. This could be causing disharmony at home thereby affecting their quality of life.

MODELS OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Two models of work-life balance have been developed based on the premise that solutions to the problem of poor work-life balance can be obtained either by analyzing one's roles in both, personal and professional domains and/or by understanding the three key factors that help to establish healthy work-life balance. Both models focus on the self as a medium to resolve the conflict caused due to imbalance.

Role Analysis Model

A working woman is constantly confronted with the dilemmas of managing her multiple roles. Every role assumes great significance in the context of her contribution to both, the family and work. It can often, get very difficult for the working woman to strike the right balance because all roles call for her attention at the same time. The role analysis model is depicted as in Figure1 below:

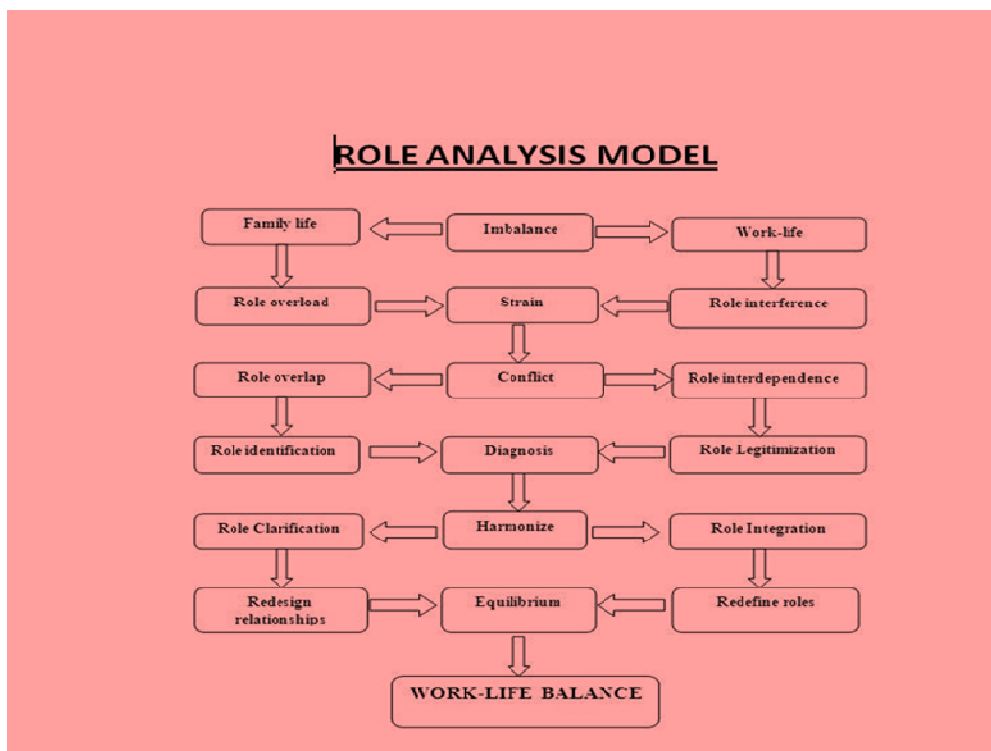


Figure 1: Role Analysis Model

Imbalance in work-life of a working woman is caused due to role overload in family life and role interference in work life. A working woman is burdened with the responsibility of managing family matters, child care, elderly care and other mundane household work. To add to this, she is also expected to fulfill many social obligations like entertaining friends and relatives and attending social functions. Her multiple roles as mother,

daughter, daughter-in-law, sister, spouse, friend and so on take a toll on her time and energy causing strain. In her work life, as a sub-ordinate to her boss and a superior to juniors, the working woman experiences role interference. Role interference occurs when the demands of one role interfaces with the demands of another. While she has to perform her work roles as required by her superior, the working woman also has to cater to the professional needs of her juniors. In this she is likely to face the problem of role interference resulting in strain. The strain in family life and/or professional life can lead to work-life conflict. To manage the conflict in her personal life, the working woman will resort to overlapping roles. So, while she is a daughter-in-law, she also assumes the role of a nurse to her ailing mother-in-law. In her work life she attempts to manage the conflict by engaging in role interdependence. She tries to bring some semblance of balance by establishing superior-subordinate role interdependence through effective inter-personal communication.

Role overlap in family life will lead the working woman to role identification through a process of diagnosis. In work life, role interdependence enables role legitimization for her as a result of diagnosis. This results in harmony between family life and work life through role clarity in the former and role integration in the latter. Therefore the working woman will redesign relationships in the family space and redefine roles in the work space to achieve equilibrium and therefore work-life balance.

Three factor model

This model advocates that the key to healthy work life balance lies in maintaining a dynamic equilibrium of three factors i.e. knowledge, behaviour and skill in both family as well as work life. The three factor model is depicted in Figure 2 as follows:

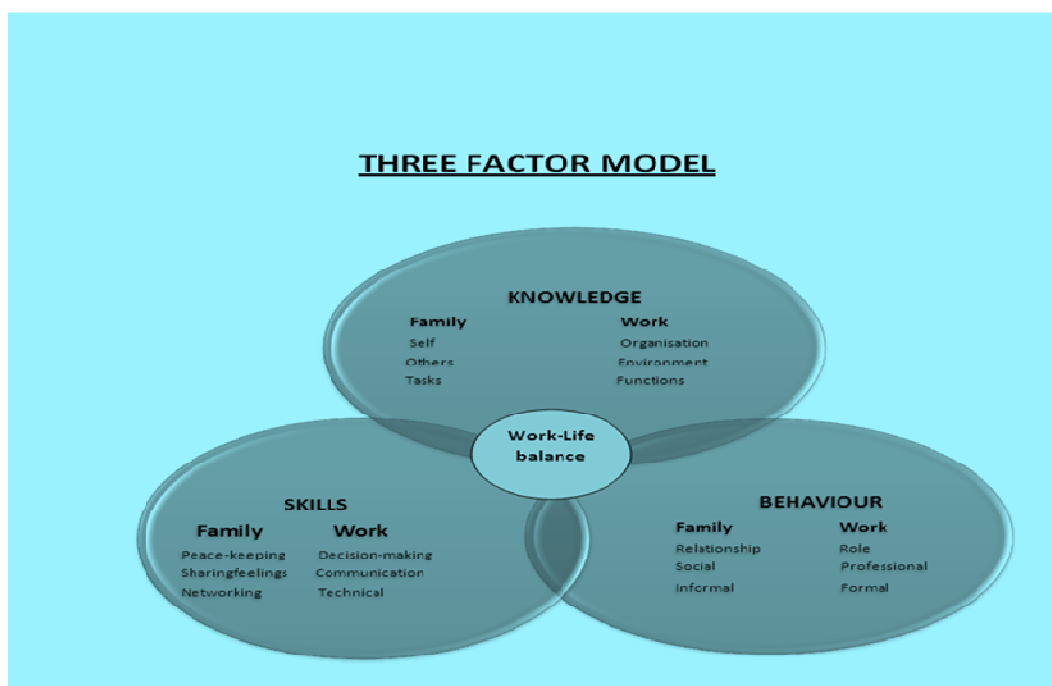


Figure 2: Three Factor Model

Knowledge of the self, others and tasks in family life enables the working woman to engage effectively in her multiple roles as mother, spouse, sister, daughter and so on. It also enables her to develop meaningful relationships with others and provides clarity of the tasks involved in managing the various roles. In having complete knowledge of her organisation, the external environment with which she must interface and the functions that her work roles involve, the working woman can establish the right balance for achievement and enjoyment in both spheres.

In family life, the working woman's behaviour being relationship based, she must accord due importance to all her personal relationships and engage in the social environment through informal interaction. Her behaviour in the work place should be role based and therefore, professional and formal.

The working woman also has to develop relevant skills to deal with both, the family and work spheres. In the family space, she should be adept in peace keeping skills by sharing feelings and encouraging others to do the same. Moreover to build her support system, she must network effectively. In the work space, she must focus upon decision making and technical skills and ensure that she builds effective communication with her team. A judicious blend of the three factors – knowledge, behaviour and skill will enable the working woman to strike a healthy work life balance.

CONCLUSION

The analyses of work life balance presented in this study are an attempt to understand factors affecting work life balance of working women and consequences of poor work life balance. In the Indian context, women remain primarily responsible for their family and career is rarely given top priority. This study has revealed that burden of excessive work, the need to fulfil others' expectations and not having time for themselves are the prime factors affecting work life balance of working women. As a consequence women suffer from job burn-out, experience high levels of stress and anxiety, are unable to realize their full potential and also do not enjoy harmonious family life. Informal discussions with working women revealed that those who had family support and flexible work schedule enjoyed better work life balance.

The above findings have implications for working women with regard to gaining a deeper understanding of factors affecting work life balance and consequences of poor work life balance. It also provides insights into finding solutions to maintain healthy work life balance. The role analysis model and the three factor model of work life balance clearly elucidate the fact that working women must take responsibility to achieve a harmonious balance in both spheres of their lives.

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