

# Breaking Boundaries: A Feminist Perspective on Work-Life Balance and Women's Empowerment in Emerging Economies

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## ABSTRACT

Work-life balance (WLB) has evolved from personal concern to a critical socio-political issue intersecting with gender, labor, and empowerment discourses, especially within emerging economies. This paper advances a feminist perspective on WLB, emphasizing its role as a structural determinant of women's agency and social change. Focusing on young professional women in Pakistan, the study reveals how the erosion of boundaries between work and life perpetuates gendered inequalities, emotional labor, and cultural expectations. Drawing on qualitative narratives, the research highlights women's resilience and agency in reconfiguring their roles amidst systemic constraints. The findings advocate for gender-sensitive policies and organizational reforms that recognize WLB as a feminist imperative for sustainable empowerment. The paper contributes to feminist HRM literature by emphasizing collective agency, ethical workplace practices, and policy interventions aligned with social justice goals.

## 1. Introduction

Women in emerging economies continue to challenge systemic barriers to claim professional and personal agency. However, the expectation of seamless work-life integration, often without adequate institutional support, remains a silent barrier to genuine empowerment. In Pakistan, young professional women face the compounded challenge of balancing demanding careers with deep-rooted societal and familial expectations. This paper repositions work-life balance (WLB) from a soft HR issue to a feminist lens for understanding structural inequalities. Through qualitative narratives of young professional women navigating these dynamics, the study underscores that WLB is a critical site for social justice and gender emancipation.

## 2. Literature Review

The concern regarding an imbalance life was initially raised by working mothers in UK in the 1960s and 1970s. However, later in 1980s, Work-life balance (WLB) has developed as a central theme in gender and development studies, particularly as women in emerging economies

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struggle with increasingly complex professional and domestic roles (Silbermann, 2015). Historically, the traditional male-breadwinner model has dominated the societal expectations and organizational policies. Although there has been a lot of debate going on regarding gender roles, yet, many organizations still follow old policies (Uddin, 2021). Feminist scholars highlight that WLB is not just an individual choice or personal responsibility, but a structural and cultural issue tied to the unequal power structures we see in companies and society as a whole (Sørensen, 2017).

Over the past few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified gender inequalities. Women had to juggle working from home, helping with kids' schooling, and taking care of family, often all at once. This constant balancing act has added to their emotional burden and pushed many into a state of digital exhaustion. As a result, the line between work and personal life became even more blurred, making existing challenges even harder to manage (Chung et al., 2021; Schieman et al., 2021). In places like Pakistan, where strong cultural traditions are in play, women face unique challenges when it comes to balancing their jobs and home life. Even though more women are joining the workforce, there's still this expectation that they are responsible for handling most of the household chores (Marcén & Morales, 2019).

In addition to gender roles, intersectionality further complicates the empowerment narrative. Because there are substantial barriers like class, marital status, and workplace hierarchies. Luiz and Terziev (2024) point out that these overlapping social identities often make it harder for women to feel empowered at work. Some of the recent studies from eastern countries have also shown that in order to achieve women empowerment, personal choices and bigger structural issues also plays a prominent role. For example, Aman et al. (2022) conducted a study on women of Saudia Arabia and Kazakhstan and the findings demonstrate that in order to achieve gender diversity in managerial positions it is important for organizations to empower female talent.

With the passage of time as females are taking up the managerial positions the feminist literature also calls for a shift from the concept of 'balance' toward 'integration'. This means instead of sticking to the concept of balance the integration of work and life should be given preference (Sørensen, 2017; Kossek et al., 2025). Also there is actual need to incorporate feminist ethics while devising workplace policies so that a real change should be experienced (Divya et al., 2024). Feminist HRM scholars also argue for a holistic rethinking of WLB, by suggesting that organizations should actively consider how women's agency shapes their environments, rather than incorporating one size fits all approach while devising policies (Kiran & Batool, 2024).

A feminist HRM perspective critically interrogates about the power dynamics being at play within the organizational structures. Such as policies, and cultural norms, highlighting how women's bodies, time, and emotional labor are regulated by institutional expectations (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). Aman et al. (2022) point out that the way organizations expect women to act and how they see their commitment really makes it tough for them to balance work and personal life. They also emphasize that these gender gaps persist due to deeply rooted power relations rather than individual shortfalls. Moreover, contemporary feminist research highlights the benefits of promoting gender diversity, especially in leadership roles (Begum et al., 2013).

As Aman et al. (2022) pointed out that having a mix of genders in management can make a company more effective and helps with bigger social goals, like cutting down on inequalities and improving job quality. Their work highlights the importance of systemic support in enabling gender diversity, particularly in traditional patriarchal societies.

Over the last two centuries, both work and family dynamics have undergone significant transformation. As the connection between professional and family life continues to evolve,

scholars have developed and applied new theoretical frameworks to better explain this shifting relationship (Kiran & Batool, 2022). In sum, the evolving feminist research on WLB strongly calls for recognizing and reorganizing the invisible labor that is being often put on women. This could happen by creating organizational responsibility towards more gender-inclusive workplaces (Saliya, 2023). A feminist theoretical framework grounded at changing structures and acknowledges different identities gives a solid base for pushing gender equity in both work and home life (Lobene, 2019). Women's empowerment and gender diversity are not individual choices rather it's the collective institutional responsibility and ultimately this connects to broader aims like social justice and sustainable growth (Mukhtar, 2020).

In response, feminist theorists have called for more flexible, context-aware models for work-life balance that are not simply about balancing work and life in an idealized sense but about sharing the invisible labor that women perform (Ryan & Gatrell, 2022). These models call for collective responsibility from a personalized approach in order to create more gender-inclusive workplaces (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

Additionally, feminist HRM theory encourages a focus on empowerment in the workplace, not just by introducing new policies but as a process of active agency. It is all about creating spaces for collective voice to negotiating boundaries and also challenging traditional gender roles (Saha, 2020). Through this lens, women are not seen as passive subjects of organizational control but as active agents, who can reshape their environments in ways that support their autonomy and well-being.

Looking at work-life balance (WLB) through a feminist lens helps us see the misbalance and unfairness that shape what women experiences at work and at home (Grönlund & Öun, 2018). It calls for breaking down the old patriarchal rules that limit women's autonomy. As per Luiz & Terziev (2024) there is a need to reshape WLB through a feminist approach that supports not just women's participation in the workforce, but also empower them in shaping work environments.

### **3. Methodology**

The current study adopts a qualitative feminist research design to explore the lived experiences of young professional women struggling to navigate work-life balance in Pakistan. As per the guidelines provided by Creswell, (2009) regarding sample size which is 5-25 samples, are considered to be suitable for qualitative study. Therefore, for current study 20 participants were interviewed until the result reached saturation. Purposive sampling was used to recruit these 20 young professional women, aged 24-35, from diverse sectors including Telecom, IT, healthcare, banking, and education. All participants were based in urban centers of Pakistan and identified as full-time employees in demanding roles. Recruitment was conducted through professional networks and social media, ensuring voluntary and informed participation.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person and via Zoom (for remote participants), allowing flexibility while maintaining depth. Interviews ranged from 45 to 70 minutes and were conducted in either English or Urdu, depending on the participant's preference. For the Urdu interviews, Google Docs' voice typing feature was used to transcribe the audio, selecting Urdu (Pakistan) to convert the speech into written text. The researcher followed Halai's (2007) guidelines for transcribing interviews conducted in Urdu. Although Roman Urdu (Urdu written in English script) was an option, the researcher opted for standard Urdu script to preserve linguistic integrity. The English words were automatically transcribed in English script. Only the Urdu segments relevant to the researcher's analysis were translated using Google Translate. As Halai (2007) describes, such translated transcripts are considered

"transmuted text," acknowledging that translation may slightly reshape original meanings. To ensure accuracy, a reverse translation was conducted to verify that the core meaning of the data remained intact.

A feminist lens was maintained in framing the questions, which emphasized everyday negotiations, emotional labor, coping strategies, and perceptions of empowerment.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. Participants were briefed about their rights, and informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Special attention was paid to create a safe and non-judgmental interview environment, particularly when discussing gender power dynamics or personal struggles.

Thematic analysis was applied using (Clarke & Braun, 2017) six-step framework. Transcripts were coded iteratively, moving from descriptive to interpretive layers, with constant reflexivity to account for the researcher's positionality. QDA Miner software supported the coding process and allowed categorization of recurring patterns.

*Table 1: Sample Demographics*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Designation</b>
Maham	28	Education	4	Lecturer
Zainab	24	IT	2	Software Developer
Amna	26	Telecom	4	Customer Support Executive
Maida	30	Healthcare	4	Medical Officer
Zainab	30	IT	4	Software Developer
Amna	30	Telecom	6	Network Engineer
Maryam	34	IT	5	Software Developer
Aqsa	30	Telecom	6	Customer Support Rep
Rabia	34	Banking	9	Relationship Manager
Joveria	28	Banking	6	Relationship Manager
Hafsa	30	Education	2	Academic Coordinator
Iqra	31	Banking	6	Banking Associate
Areeba	32	IT	8	UI/UX Designer
Nimra	30	Banking	7	Credit Analyst
Sara	30	Healthcare	2	Healthcare Administrator
Sadia	32	Telecom	9	Customer Support Rep
Mehwish	29	Healthcare	2	Medical Officer
Hira	31	IT	8	Software Developer
Warda	32	Healthcare	9	Nurse
Sana	35	Banking	8	Credit Analyst

#### 4. Results

Thematic analysis was used using QDA miner software (Qualitative data analysis). After the analysis, a total of nine codes emerged which were later classified under four respective themes. Table 2 shows all the themes and their codes with the brief description of each code along with its frequency of occurrence across all transcriptions and the frequency of occurrence of participants (cases).

Table 2: Major Themes and Codes

Theme	Code	Description	Code %	Cases	Cases %
<i>Boundary Negotiation and Emotional Labor</i>	Role-switching	Shifting between professional and personal roles throughout the day	8.5	15	16
	Emotional regulation	Managing emotions to meet expectations in both home and work settings	7.2	13	13.9
	Mental fatigue	Experiencing exhaustion due to constant multitasking and invisible labor	5.8	10	10.6
<i>Institutional Invisibility and Symbolic Support</i>	Token policies	Presence of WLB policies that exist only on paper without real enforcement	6.2	12	12.8
	Flexibility stigma	Judgment faced when utilizing flexible work options, especially by women	5.5	9	9.6
<i>Gendered Expectations and Cultural Norms</i>	Marital status bias	Bias in workload or expectations based on marital status	6.8	11	11.7
	Eldercare obligations	Responsibility of caring for aging family members impacting work-life balance	5.4	8	8.5
<i>Resilience, Agency, and Reimagining Empowerment</i>	Peer support	Informal emotional or logistical support received from female peers	7	13	13.9
	Redefining success	Reframing achievement beyond traditional career metrics	7.6	14	14.9

Figure 1 depicts the frequency of the occurrence of all the codes as per the number of participants (cases). According to the results, the most repetitive codes identified by the participants are role switching, redefining success, followed by emotional regulation and peer support.

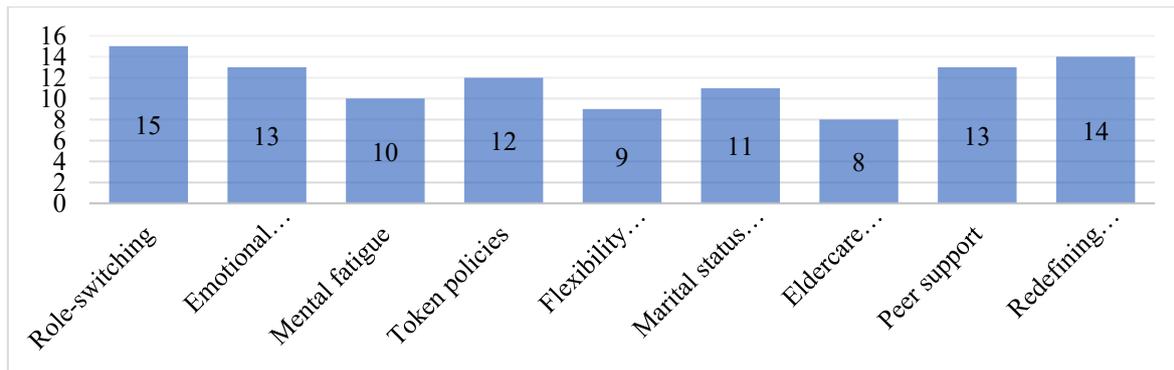


Figure 1. Codes Similarly

Figure 2 highlights the most and least discussed codes through a word cloud.



Figure 2. Word Cloud

#### 4.1 Theme 1. Boundary Negotiation and Emotional Labor

When the participants were asked questions about how they regulate their emotions while balancing between their job and home. In response most of the participants share their constant struggle while switching from one emotional state to another. This negotiation was often emotional and invisible, particularly when remote work blurred the boundaries. Many participants shared how they engaged in mental 'role-switching' several times a day, transitioning from professionals to caregivers, daughters, or partners. These transitions were not smooth but emotionally charged, requiring substantial unacknowledged labor. Some of the examples of participants are as follows:

*“I shut down my laptop and immediately start cooking or helping my mother-in-law, there's no real break, just a mental shift.” (Nimra-30 years old-Relationship Manager= i.e. Nimra-30-RM).*

One of the participants also described that this ‘mental role-switching’ was often intense and performed multiple times a day:

*“By 10 a.m., I’m a team lead. By 2 p.m., I’m tutoring my child. By evening, I’m someone’s daughter or daughter-in-law. There’s no real me-time.” (Hafsa-30-AC).*

Another participant said that due to constant role switching they get exhausted but cannot openly share their emotional expressions:

*“I have to smile through frustration because if I speak up, I’m labeled moody or difficult” (Areeba- 32, UD)*

Such efforts were invisible yet exhausting, normalized within both workplace and familial systems, and largely unrecognized as real labor.

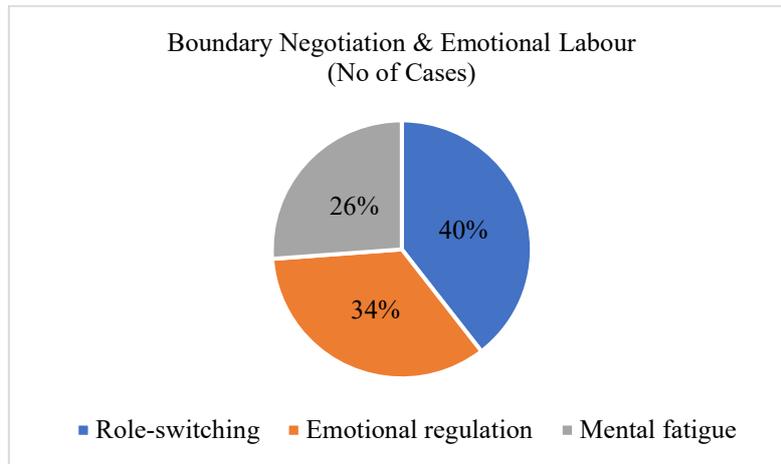


Figure 3. Boundary Negotiation

#### 4.2 Theme 2. Institutional Invisibility and Symbolic Support

When participants were asked about the support from their organizations, they shared that while organizations adopted progressive values, participants still reported a disconnect between expectation and reality. Policies such as flexible work and parental leave were either inconsistently implemented or culturally discouraged.

*“When I asked for flexible hours, I was told it would hurt my promotion chances.” (Sadia-32-CSR)*

Many participants described workplace support as “symbolic rather than substantial.”

*“They held a gender equality seminar, but my maternity leave was still unpaid, and my work piled up while I was gone.” (Amna-30-NE).*

Another participant shares her struggle of applying for her leave for marriage and how she struggles before applying for her entitled leave:

*“When I was getting married, and I needed leaves for my wedding then I had to work hard prior asking for my earned leaves so that my manager wouldn’t be reluctant while approving it.” (Joveria-28-RM)*

Therefore, through these accounts it was observed that when organizations did not offer real and practical support, like flexible work hours, parental or earned leaves, or clear boundaries, it made women feel even more excluded or sidelined. As a result, traditional gender roles and patriarchal expectations continue to exist, even though companies might appear supportive on the surface through symbolic actions or policies that don’t bring actual change.

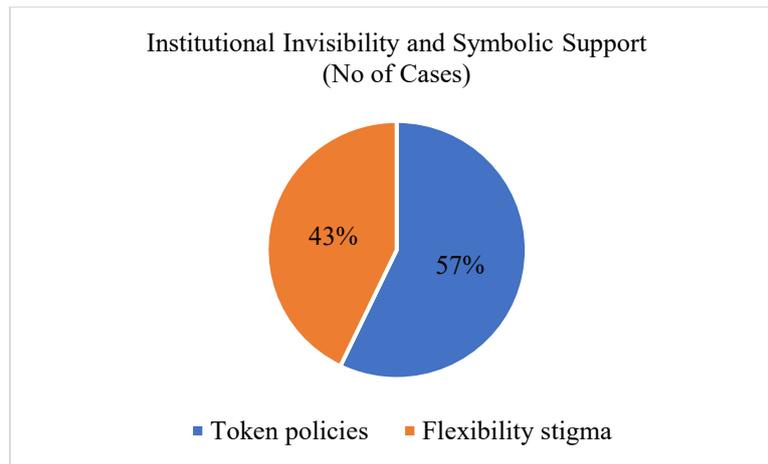


Figure 4. Symbolic Support

### 4.3 Theme 3. Gendered Expectations and the Weight of Cultural Norms

During discussions about gender disparity the participants described how they were often caught in a “*double bind*”, a situation where no matter what they did, they were judged unfairly. Unmarried women were given more work because it was assumed they had no family duties, while married women had to constantly prove they were serious about their careers, as people questioned their ability to manage both work and home. The women also explained that cultural expectations: like cooking, caring for elders, and keeping peace at home, still applied to them, even when they were the main earners in the household. These pressures showed how gender roles remained strong, regardless of women’s professional achievements:

*“Since I’m single, they assume I can stay late or take on extra work, so no one asks if I have other responsibilities.” (Hira-31-SE).*

Another participant opens about her struggle to keep up with her performance since she got married:

*“There’s a perception that ambitious women are neglecting their families. To prove them wrong, since I got married, I’ve worked hard to excel in my career while also managing my household. It’s tiring” (Rabia-34-RM)*

In the same way, married participants were under constant pressure to prove dedication at work, fearing negative perceptions.

*“People think I’m less serious about work now that I’m married. I must outperform just to maintain credibility.” (Nimra-30-CA).*

Along with marital status, cultural expectations persisted even when women were the primary earners:

*“Even after an 18-hour shift, I’m expected to cook, smile, and not complain.” (Mehwish-29-MO).*

These overlapping burdens reflect the intersection of professional demands and traditional familial roles, reinforcing the need for systemic change.

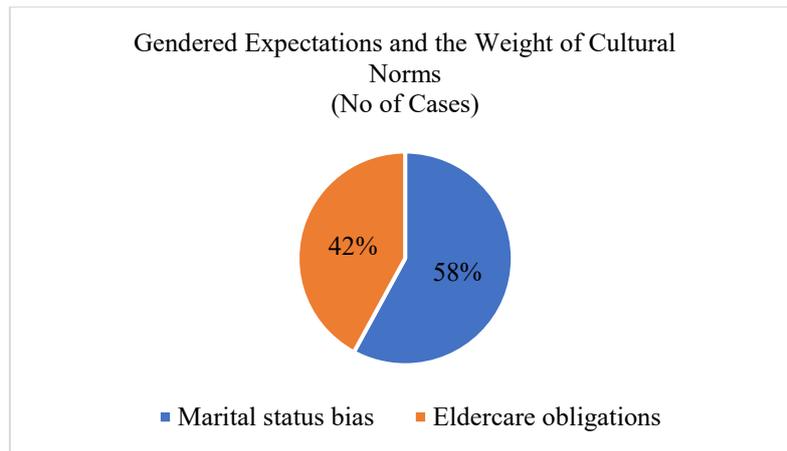


Figure 5. Cultural Norms

#### 4.4 Theme 4. Resilience, Agency, and Reimagining Empowerment

Even though the women faced systemic barriers, like rigid work cultures or unequal expectations, they didn't remain passive. Instead, they took initiative both individually and together. Rather than chasing an unrealistic idea of a "perfect" work-life balance, they focused on what felt empowering to them personally. For some participants, this meant setting clear boundaries between work and home. While others looked for jobs that were more inclusive, many also formed informal support groups with other women to share experiences and help each other cope. In doing so, they redefined success on their own terms.

*"I left my old job for this job where they let me work on hybrid basis, it pays less, but I sleep better and feel human." (Maham-28-Lecturer).*

Participants also found strength in collective support:

*"A few of us have a separate WhatsApp group other than official groups where we talk, vent, and share about daily incidents. It's so therapeutic." (Aqsa-30-CSR).*

In this context, for women, empowerment was not just about personal achievement or climbing the career ladder. Instead, it was observed as a form of quiet resistance against gender expectations. By setting boundaries, supporting each other, and redefining what truly matters like personal well-being, caring for one another, and balance. Hence these women are pushing back against traditional norms. Their actions became part of a broader, feminist way of challenging the status quo.

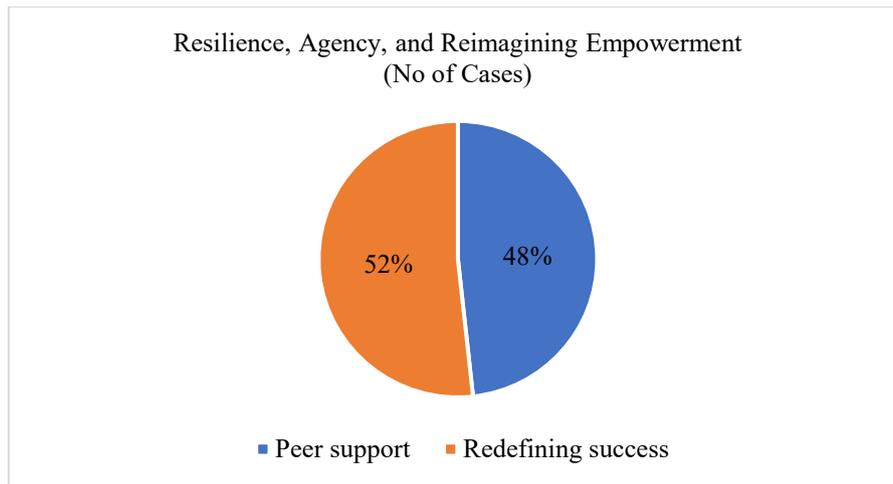


Figure 6. Reimagining Empowerment

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study challenge conventional definitions of work-life balance by foregrounding women lived experiences. WLB emerges as more than a personal or organizational concern, it is deeply shaped by gendered expectations and systemic inequalities. Similarly, organizational support was often symbolic rather than substantive. One participant remarked: *“They held a gender equality seminar, but my maternity leave was still unpaid, and my work piled up while I was gone”* (Amna-30-NE). Such examples highlight how symbolic organizational gestures fail to address deeper structural inequities, echoing feminist critiques that tokenistic policies often obscure entrenched power relations (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019).

The participants’ narratives demonstrate that work-life balance is not merely a question of time management but a negotiation of systemic inequalities. For instance, one respondent noted, *“By 10 a.m., I’m a team lead. By 2 p.m., I’m tutoring my child. By evening, I’m someone’s daughter or daughter-in-law. There’s no real me-time”* (Hafsa-30-AC). This statement underscores the emotional burden of constant role-switching and its impact on women’s autonomy.

Moreover, cultural expectations amplify these systemic barriers. Women reported that regardless of professional achievements, they remained bound by household responsibilities: *“Even after an 18-hour shift, I’m expected to cook, smile, and not complain”* (Mehwish-29-MO). These accounts reflect how patriarchal cultural norms intersect with organizational shortcomings, reinforcing inequality. In this way, the findings align with feminist HRM scholarship that frames work-life balance as a collective and institutional responsibility rather than an individual challenge (Kossek & Lee, 2022). Importantly, despite systemic barriers, the study highlights the resilience and agency of professional women.

Despite barriers, the participants demonstrated resilience and agency by redefining success on their own terms. Some prioritized well-being over traditional career metrics, while others found empowerment in collective peer support. As one participant explained: *“A few of us have a separate WhatsApp group... we talk, vent, and share about daily incidents. It’s so therapeutic”* (Aqsa-30-CSR). These everyday acts of resistance reflect a feminist reimagining of empowerment grounded in solidarity and autonomy.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study views work-life balance not just as a personal or workplace issue, but as a feminist issue, deeply connected to women's rights and empowerment, especially in developing countries. In Pakistan, young professional women struggle to balance work and personal life due to a mix of systemic barriers, rigid cultural norms, and the emotional strain of managing both roles. These struggles are made worse by a lack of action from organizations, harsh social judgments, and the absence of meaningful support systems.

Yet, within this struggle lies the potential for transformation. Women are slowly reclaiming their space through boundary-setting, community-building, and redefinition of professional success. These acts, though often invisible, represent powerful steps toward emancipation, equity, and self-authorship.

If institutions, policymakers, and organizational leaders are genuinely committed to women's empowerment, they must go beyond symbolic policies and address the deep-rooted cultural and structural barriers that undermine WLB. Empowerment must be holistic enabling women not just to participate in the workforce but to do so on terms that affirm their dignity, autonomy, and well-being.

As we move forward, work-life balance should no longer be treated as a perk it is a feminist imperative and a cornerstone for inclusive, sustainable social change.

## **7. Recommendations**

**Policy Level: Mandatory WLB Provisions in Labor Laws Tailored for Gender-Specific Needs.** To create meaningful change, work-life balance (WLB) policies must be embedded within judicial frameworks that move beyond one-size-fits-all provisions. In many emerging economies, existing labor laws fail to explicitly address the gendered dimensions of work-life conflict. It is therefore crucial to mandate WLB entitlements, such as paid parental leave for all genders, breastfeeding breaks, caregiving support, and flexible work arrangements within national labor laws. These policies need to reflect the realities on the ground, acknowledging that women often carry a heavier load of caregiving responsibilities because of deep-rooted cultural and patriarchal expectations. Moreover, there is a need for gender-sensitive legal audits and accountability systems to ensure these rights are genuinely upheld in practice. They should not be treated as optional or merely symbolic gestures.

For example, the introduction of mandatory "care leave" distinct from medical or annual leave, can help make visible the often-overlooked emotional and physical labor of caregiving, which continues to fall largely on women

**Organizational Level: Gender-Responsive HRM with Clear Accountability for Work Boundaries.** At the organizational level, there is a need for feminist-informed HRM practices. These should go beyond merely accommodating women. Instead, they must work to reshape workplace culture to be truly inclusive. This includes setting clear work hours, allowing the right to disconnect, and offering flexible work without penalties. HR and leadership teams must be trained in gender sensitivity and unconscious bias. Their progress should be tracked using KPIs focused on gender equity in work-life balance. Organizations should also provide safe channels for reporting concerns. Mental health support must be offered, especially to address the emotional labor that many women perform every day.

*A gender responsive HRM approach recognizes that equality is not the same. It requires accommodating structural disadvantages while affirming women's agency.*

**Societal Level: Media Campaigns to Redefine Success and Balance Beyond Productivity Metrics.** Finally, work life balance cannot be fully achieved without change at the societal level. There must be a shift in how we define productivity, success, and gender roles. Media plays a critical role in shaping cultural values. Therefore, targeted media campaigns should help people see success differently. Emotional well-being, caregiving, and community support should matter just as much as income or job titles. These messages can challenge harmful ideals of constant hustle and narrow definitions of success tied to masculinity. Stories that promote balanced living, shared caregiving, and feminist leadership need more visibility. Public broadcasters, social influencers, and government programs must work together to reshape cultural norms around work and family life.

*By redefining “balance” and “success” at the societal level, we build cultural legitimacy for equitable work-life models, especially for women in non-Western contexts.*

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