

Balancing Strategies in Academic, Professional and Personal Responsibilities: A Qualitative Study of Married Women

Faria Awan¹, Saima Munawar¹, Rabia Nauman², Jolita Vveinhardt^{3*}

¹Institute of Business Management, Karachi, ²Institute for Educational Development, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan, ³Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Business, ³Klaipėdos valstybinė kolegija/Higher Education Institution, Klaipėda, Lithuania. *Corresponding Author's Email: j.vveinhardt@gmail.com, j.vveinhardt@kvk.lt

Abstract

Work-and-study is an arrangement under which individuals engage in paid employment while studying. Hence, it is possible to obtain practical experience while pursuing educational goals. Such a model is quite commonly followed to reduce the cost of education and ensure the best preparation for career work. In this way, balancing work and studies means earning but also greater overall satisfaction. This study investigated the balancing strategies that Pakistani married women in Karachi adopt to achieve balance in terms of academic, professional and personal responsibilities. In this study, ten faculty members and five department heads from five universities in Karachi were selected. Semi structured interviews were conducted for data collection and thematic analysis was performed. The findings of this study show that the primary challenges women face are time limitations, financial strain and gender disparity. The findings highlight the need to address these problems to enhance morale, job satisfaction and commitment while reducing workplace stress among women. In summary, the study revealed a need for special interventions that might eliminate time and monetary barriers for working women. In-depth accounts from respondents and departmental heads offer valuable recommendations to institutions and policymakers on creating a conducive environment.

Keywords: Boundary Theory, Challenges Working Women, Heads Perception, Spillover Model, Work-study Balance.

Introduction

Work-study balance refers to concurrently managing working on paid employment and pursuing education (1). Academics are growing interest in students' perceptions of the challenges they face in managing academic and professional tasks (2). Although work-study balance is not unequivocally defined and depends on individual circumstances and priorities (3), maintaining this balance is an essential factor in seeking academic and professional success. Challenges related to work-study balance become particularly complex for married women, who, in addition to academic and professional commitments, also have to fulfil family roles (4). Despite its strengths, part-time study alongside a full-time job presents many additional challenges, including time scarcity, fatigue and the need to manage responsibilities, as some often have to combine very different commitments and roles (5–8). Additional pressure is created by cultural norms and social expectations, since married women are expected to pay more attention to the family (9, 10). This scenario is far more challenging in developing

countries such as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The literature from South Asia and Islamic countries indicates that women face significant challenges in balancing academic, professional and family responsibilities because of deeply rooted sociocultural expectations, gendered domestic roles and limited institutional support (11–13). Studies from India and Sri Lanka have reported that excessive workloads, a lack of childcare support, inflexible workplace policies and inadequate organizational practices negatively affect women's work-life balance and professional well-being (4, 14, 15). Similarly, research from Afghanistan highlights that married female students experience academic stress, domestic overload and insufficient family support, which adversely influence educational performance and mental well-being (16, 17). In Islamic sociocultural contexts such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Egypt, Indonesia and Brunei, studies reveal that patriarchal norms, gender segregation and expectations regarding women's caregiving roles continue to shape women's academic and

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(Received 14th February 2026; Accepted 15th July 2026; Published 27th July 2026)

professional experiences (2, 10, 18–20). Although recent research emphasizes the importance of organizational support, flexible policies and educational empowerment in improving women's work–life balance, few studies have specifically explored the integrated experience of work–study–life balance among married working women within developing and Islamic cultural contexts.

Problem Statement and Research Aim

The literature in Pakistan suggests that women face substantial challenges in balancing work and personal life because of patriarchal social structures, cultural expectations, gender discrimination and limited institutional support (21). Studies have shown that Pakistani women often carry dual responsibilities of professional work and domestic caregiving, which negatively affect their psychological well-being, career progression and work-life balance (22). Women are overburdened by academic workloads, personal commitments, jobs and family responsibilities, which affect their levels of stress and academic performance (23, 24). Research further indicates that workplace stress, inflexible organizational policies, unequal treatment and a lack of departmental support create additional burdens for women pursuing academic and professional goals simultaneously (25). Recent studies have also highlighted broader structural barriers, including limited female labor force participation, workplace harassment, limited mobility and inadequate digital access, which further constrain women's educational and professional advancement in Pakistan (26, 27). Additionally, research on empowerment has revealed that sociocultural norms, implementation gaps in gender-supportive policies and regional inequalities continue to hinder women's transition from higher education to professional life (28, 29). Studies also report that academic stress, intimate partner violence and family pressure negatively influence women's educational performance and mental health in Pakistani settings (24). Workplace mistreatment is not only a practical barrier but also a serious moral challenge (15, 30, 31). Economic benefits and shorter working hours can improve work–life balance and supportive workplace policies for female employees are recommended (32). Pakistani women, who pursue academic–professional goals and take care of their

households and children, endure a negative influence on their overall wellbeing (33).

While prior research has examined work–life balance, women's empowerment, workplace barriers and career progression separately, limited attention has been given to the combined experience of managing work, study and personal life simultaneously among married women in Pakistan. Moreover, there is a lack of qualitative evidence exploring both women's lived experiences and institutional perspectives regarding work-study-life balance. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the challenges and experiences faced by married women in managing work-study-life balance, examine the perceptions of university heads regarding these challenges and identify supportive strategies and institutional interventions that can help women effectively balance their academic, professional and personal responsibilities. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

Q1. What challenges do married women face in managing the work–study–life balance in Karachi?

Q2. How do university heads perceive the challenges faced by women in work–study–life balance?

Q3. What recommendations do HODs propose to reduce the challenges women face in managing work–study–life balance?

The results of the study will allow a better understanding of the problems encountered by married women when work, studies and family commitments are combined. In addition, this study highlights the role of universities and employers in addressing this issue, while the findings of the study may contribute to systemic changes ensuring women's greater empowerment in academic and professional fields, especially in developing countries.

Theoretical Background and Empirical Literature

The current study uses spillover theory and boundary theory as a theoretical lens through which to understand the phenomenon of work-study–life balance. Researchers suggest that spillovers can be both negative and positive (34). The literature shows that work-study conflict can transfer the negative effects of organizational commitment to domestic problems (35). Similarly, positive spillover occurs when an employee's satisfaction and competence in one area

contributes to a sense of fulfilment and contentment in another domain (35). According to this theory, the negative effects of workplace and academic problems adversely influence the personal life of women. Conversely, if women have positive experiences in their academic or professional lives, this can increase their personal life satisfaction and improve their overall self-feeling.

Boundary theory postulates a pattern of how people cope with the boundaries between different domains in their life, such as work, family and personal life (36). According to boundary theory, individuals manage the boundaries between different domains to achieve balance and treat work, study and life as distinct yet interactive environments, each governed by its own characteristics (37). Managing various roles helps one to successfully work in different sectors (38). In addition, the ability to effectively manage different roles can help not only improve education and career but also increase personal well-being (39, 40).

Methodology

This qualitative study aimed to explore the challenges and experiences of married women in managing work-study-life balance, examine the perceptions of university heads regarding these challenges and identify supportive strategies and institutional interventions that can help women effectively balance their academic, professional and personal responsibilities. The research methodology explained here aligns with the research question.

This research was conducted at five higher education institutions in an urban community within a specific locality of Karachi, Pakistan. To maintain institutional confidentiality, the names of the participating universities have been concealed; however, the study sites were located within Karachi, approximately between the coordinates 24.8147°N, 67.0497°E and 24.9416°N, 67.1753°E. These institutions are private and offer degree programs at the master's and doctoral levels. Purposive sampling was used for the study's participant selection. The purposive sampling technique involves selecting a sample on the basis of specific knowledge and in line with the purpose of the research (41). Qualitative research generally relies on purposive sampling of the participants for

data collection. This is because participants can provide pertinent information about the topic under investigation. The purposive sampling technique involves selecting individuals or groups with knowledge or experience of the phenomenon of interest (41). The data were collected from two students and one HOD in each organization. The responses from the students were utilized to answer RQ1 and RQ3, whereas the HOD responses were analysed to answer RQ2.

Furthermore, availability, willingness to participate and the ability to articulate experiences and opinions are important. The total number of participants was 15 married women working and studying at the same university and the age group ranged from 30–45 years. Thus, the researcher selected a purposive sampling technique for collecting data for the current study. Purposive sampling methods were chosen to enable the researcher to answer the research question and obtain in-depth information about the research question.

Semi structured interviews were employed for data collection, exploring participants' perceptions and opinions on complex issues while allowing for in-depth probing and elaboration (42). An expert-verified interview guide was developed on the basis of the research questions to explore respondents' perspectives on their tasks and duties (43).

On the basis of the interview guide, semi-structured interviews of 30 to 40 minutes were conducted at a mutually convenient time for the researchers and participants. Considering the collectivist and patriarchal cultural context of Pakistan, several culturally sensitive practices were adopted during both data collection and analysis. To build rapport and enhance the expression of the problems faced by the participants, the interviews were conducted in the native language Urdu. Moreover, throughout the interviews, the participants were encouraged to share more information. The interviews were conducted in a respectful, private and non-judgmental environment to encourage participants to discuss sensitive experiences related to family responsibilities, workplace challenges and gender expectations. These interviews were later translated and transcribed within 48 hours of the meetings. The recordings and the transcriptions of

the interviews were saved on the shared Google Drive to provide access to all the researchers.

The data were analysed using an inductive approach to identify significant patterns and themes through thematic analysis (43). The transcriptions were initially subjected to free coding, after which axial coding was applied to derive themes from the coded data. Finally, selective coding was used to finalize the analysis and refine the findings.

Ten married female faculty members and five HODs participated in the study. Both groups were examined separately and complementarily to cover different aspects of the research goals. The interviews with the faculty members focused primarily on the lived experiences and difficulties of married working women in balancing their academic, professional and personal responsibilities, whereas those with HODs explored institutional perceptions and organizational challenges and suggested support for married working women. Thematic analysis of each group was performed separately to obtain results that were integrated into a general theme of work-life balance in higher education institutions.

This study rigorously followed ethical procedure guidelines for social research, including participant autonomy, beneficence, justice and integrity, to ensure moral and responsible research practices. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were approved by the College of Business Management Ethical Review Team (CBM-ERT). Verbal consent was obtained from each participant during the recorded interview. Moreover, participants and the institutional heads were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the data obtained. Given the patriarchal and collectivist context of this study, particular attention was given to culturally sensitive interview practices and to the creation of a safe environment for open disclosure (44, 45).

Results

Sample Profile

Table 1 presents the demographic and professional profiles of the study participants, including their educational qualifications, age, years of experience and institutional roles within higher educational institutions.

Table 1: Profile of the Respondents'

ID	Degree	Age	Years of Experience	Respondent's Position
H11	PHD	50	20	HOD
F11	Mphil	50-60	20	Faculty
F12	Mphil-llm	50	25	Faculty
H21	Phd	50-60	30	HOD
F21	Phd	55-65	26	Faculty
F22	Phd in progress	35	18	Faculty
H31	Mphil	34	10	HOD
F31	Phd	32	17	Faculty
F32	Mphil	40	12	Faculty
F41	Mphil-mba	36	11	Faculty
F42	Mphil	37	8	Faculty
H41	Phd in progress	32	7	HOD
F51	MS	48	20	Faculty
H51	PhD	43	18	HOD
F52	Mphil	33	7	Faculty

Thematic Analysis Findings

The findings for each research question, including the generated themes, have been provided separately, with excerpts from participant interviews for support.

The Challenges Married Women Face in Balancing Work and Studies

The first research question aimed to explore the challenges faced by married women. The interviews with the participant teachers revealed three major themes: (a) lack of support, (b) work

politics and (c) overwhelming work burden. Each of these aspects is elaborated upon in detail below.

Lack of Support

The theme discussed here is the lack of support from families where the participants shared their thoughts. F11 expressed her thoughts and said:

I can't manage my academic commitments, which leads to delays in my educational endeavors, as there are many expectations to be fulfilled by me from my family. As a wife, I am expected to fulfil every obligation of my family, which overburdens my educational endeavors. [F11]

We have no financial support to do my PhD from my family, but there is scholarship support, which is hard to take. With the inflation, do you think it is possible? [F12]

Owing to lowering the demands. I ask my husband. I need support and guidance to have my degree processed faster. So, I could earn better and meet my finances. [F32]

One of the faculty members shared completely different thoughts about a lack of support from family:

However, working and studying in Pakistan implies that people who are close to you (family) would be interested in finding faults about you rather than supporting you. [F42]

This becomes a critical barrier to success or well-being when family support is not extended to married working women who pursue higher education. The findings indicated that families are cautious about extending the necessary support. As such, women are suspected of neglecting household and family duties. This further adds to the amount of stress and burden these women face, but it also limits them from fully devoting themselves to their studies and career-building. In the absence of family support, they have to manage many demanding roles by themselves, which might lead to burnout and deterioration in their academic performance and mental health. Additionally, this dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which women's educational and professional aspirations become deprioritized. The reluctance on the part of families to support married working women in their educational pursuits speaks instead to a larger societal problem: one in which contributions by women other than those in the home are devalued.

Work Politics

Another theme from the participants' interviews was work politics, primarily due to gender inequality and favouritism. Most of the participants shared their thoughts on how difficult it is to work in educational institutions where female teachers have to fulfil the obligations given to them by their HODs. In addition, faculty members shared their thoughts regarding work politics in educational institutions and shed light on several challenges they face regarding gender inequality and favouritism. All of the participants encountered various forms of gender inequality, office politics and favouritism perpetuated by their HODs. Faculty members expressed their problems in different ways.

I have realized that our HOD often forgets my achievements and favours their male faculty members irrespective of how hard or well I try. [F11]

I have witnessed it too. It is as if we work twice as hard to recognize we deserve. It is not just favouritism. However, subtle sexism is involved. Like the ideas are not much appreciated if they are yours, compared to the ideas that the male teachers provide. [F41]

It is quite unfair to see that the male members of the faculty are treated like loyal, although we may put the same as well as slightly more effort. As female faculty members, we should be treated fairly because we are also studying simultaneously. [F51] It's so frustrating in that regard because they might not be the most qualified, but it will still lean more towards males for just being male. [F21]

It is unfair that the male faculty members are given preference over us, yet we work as hard as them, if not more. We are female faculty members pursuing further studies; therefore, we deserve equal recognition and support. [F52]

In contrast, some faculty members had different opinions, where she reported that there is an equal distribution of work for both male and female faculty members.

There is an equally shared workload. I believe that male and female faculty members are given the same share of administrative and academic work. [F12]

Research findings reveal a concerning trend in some academic institutions where male faculty members are favoured over their female counterparts in terms of task allocation and

recognition for their work. It tends to appreciate male faculty members and keep fewer burdensome tasks for them while unloading more responsibility on female faculty members. Discrimination against female faculty members can have serious implications for the morale and job satisfaction of female faculty members. One woman interviewee from a given institution noted that on her campus, there were no reported differences in work-life balance or feeling supported at work between genders (46). In settings where gender equality is valued and fairness in the distribution of duties is implemented, it is expected that female faculty members feel valued and that support for their faculty roles improves significantly. Institutions must work actively to reduce work distribution and recognition biases, offering equal opportunities for a man or woman to emerge (47).

Overwhelming Work Burden

The theme that was brought forward here by the participants was Overwhelming Work Burden because

- (a) Unmanageable Academic Work,
- (b) Excessive Learning Obligations,
- (c) Late sitting,
- (f) Time Management and
- (e) Additional Task.

Each participant shared his or her thoughts on how overwhelming the work burden was.

I cannot believe how much work we are expected to handle, especially with our HODs constantly piling on more tasks. I am on the verge of burnout. It is not just the teaching; it is the endless paperwork, meetings and additional work we are made to do. In addition, when we approach them with our concerns, they downplay it or act like we should be able to handle it all. [F12]

There have been multiple times when I feel that is now the hour that I want to have a serious discussion with my HOD about prioritizing my tasks and every time, he has the same answer; everything must be done since everything is equally important. I guess he cannot realize the pressure we are under trying to manage home, study and work simultaneously in our lives during the period. [F22]

We should present it to them and give them more concrete examples. Maybe they see only a picture. I reckon we should show them how exactly we can decrease the workload using different strategies or

techniques. Obviously, time should be managed correctly. [F42]

We must have clear boundaries on our work schedule. After all, work during late hours and such demands cannot be something we look to get habitual into. At least, our priorities for our families should remain there, just like ours. [F51]

The results of the study show that most married working women have very large responsibilities at work, without taking into account the fact that they are studying and have to do housework. They often stay at work longer until they complete their tasks but do not receive training on prioritizing their duties. In addition, they are often given additional tasks without taking into account their dual roles (48).

HODs Perceived Women's Challenges in Balancing Work, Life and Studies

The major themes from the interviews with the participants who were HODs of universities included (a) strict policy, (b) expectations, (c) lack of motivation, (d) lack of a conducive environment and (e) incompetence. These aspects are discussed below in detail.

Strict Policies

HODs require that female faculty members face strict policy because of inflexibility at work, fixed time issues and privacy settings. The HODs from different educational institutions expressed their discomfort and all agreed that there must be a more supportive and understanding work environment for female married faculty studying and pursuing their educational endeavors simultaneously.

It is becoming difficult for female faculties to manage strict policies and inflexibility at work. There must be some relaxation for female married faculty members, especially when they know that we are studying at the same time. [H21]

The administration forgets that married female faculty members have other responsibilities in addition to class. [H31]

Faculty meetings carry on way over the scheduled time. It makes it so hard to keep up the extended hours for female married faculties like us with such meetings. [H51]

The HOD expressed their discomfort with the juggling act that female faculty must perform at the institution and at home.

Female faculty members have to behave like machines. Just because they are married does not

mean they can do everything they are supposed to do. No consideration is given to the fact that these female teachers may also have family emergencies or personal appointments. [H22]

Research findings indicate that some HODs are concerned about working married women and that they understand the difficulties that they face while working. Some HODs at certain educational institutions were genuinely concerned about the problems faced by working married women.

Over Expectations

The theme discussed here is 'Over Expectations' from married female faculty. These female members believe that there should be advocacy for what they do and need support. All HODs believe that too much is expected from them, believing that as they are married and taking care of things at the institution and home, they would be able to do anything that they set their minds to.

It feels like they are supermen and we are not. I mean multitasking, who can handle everything without breaking a sweat. [H21]

They have been given extra duties without considering the existing workload.

They are supposed to know everything and figure things out on our own. [H41]

It's like female faculties have to get through everything themselves. We need to understand that these female teachers are also human with their limitations and challenges. [H31]

Based on the results of the study, most heads of departments treat working married women as exceptionally talented and compare them to superheroes in terms of their ability to combine work, studies and family duties. This perception is based on the assumption that they can easily complete all tasks assigned to them. However, one head of the department expressed a contrary view, recognizing that working married women have limited opportunities and that they are people, not machines. The latter head of the department expressed concern about possible burnout and warned about excessive workload.

Lack of Motivation

Here, we discuss the topic "Lack of Motivation". According to the heads of departments, in their educational institutions, where salaries are lower, there are greater workloads and no prospects of promotion and married members of female faculties lack motivation. Each of the HODs

discussed the demotivating aspects that they faced in their educational institutions.

It is regrettable to see how this lack of interest in work affects married female faculty members. [H11]

The effort of female faculty is not considered at all. The work continues to increase, but no one shows concern for their good health. [H21]

Compared with their male counterparts, the female faculty members are married and believe that they put in the same, if not more, effort; however, they are not paid equally. It is becoming frustrating and makes me wonder whether they are actually recognized for their efforts or not. [H51]

The research findings indicate that HODs acknowledge the lack of motivation among married female faculty members.

Lack of Conducive Environment

The theme discussed here is the lack of a favourable environment. The heads of departments raised their concern and felt the need for a more adaptable and inclusive working environment to make their learning institution a haven where all married female faculties, without facing unnecessary difficulties, could continue to serve their duties. The management's outdated approach hinders our ability to create a dynamic and engaging learning environment. The HODs had similar views related to the environment.

It's sad that we still face harassment in this century. The inappropriate behavior towards us, it's sad. [H21]

The age gap is another factor involved in teaching, whereby some male lecturers tend to consider us inferior just because they are women and thus very offensive. [H11]

It is very frustrating. Although we have proposed several new teaching methods, such as using technology, the responses have been rather negative. [H51]

They are judged on another scale, which is quite obvious in terms of promotion and recognition. [H41]

HODs' Suggestions for Women

Balancing Work and Studies

The major themes identified from the interviews with HODs include (a) Policy Implementation, (b) Management Support and (c) Facilities Intensive. Each of these aspects is elaborated upon in detail below.

Policy Implementation

The HODs proposed implementing sound policies to support married female faculty members in balancing their work and studies. The HODs emphasized the need to address these challenges: I think the most important issue is that of women balancing work and studies. We need more practical solutions rather than just policies. Flexibility in work hours, childcare support and mentorship programs would help a lot. [H11]

At our learning institution, it seeks to have an enabling environment that nurtures the woman to succeed in her professional and educational setup. Perhaps remote work or flexible scheduling can be allowed if technological integration is used. [H31] HODs believed that the workload for married and pregnant faculty members should be lessened.

There should be separate and fewer working hours for pregnant female faculty members, especially when they are also studying at the same time. Training and development opportunities should specifically be tailored to women's needs. We can also have workshops on time management, stress reduction and career advancement strategies, which could make a real difference. [H21]

The HODs have proposed relevant key points for creating and implementing such policy recommendations, which would create a flexible environment and motivate working married women to focus on their studies and their jobs. These policy suggestions would positively impact working married women and reduce their stress levels.

Management Support

The HODs contributed valuable feedback and opinions regarding management support, through which female faculty members would feel at ease while pursuing their degrees. The HODs expressed their willingness to extend support to working married women by addressing the challenges they face during their work and study hours. They showed a commitment to implementing policies aimed at providing the necessary assistance and support to help resolve these issues effectively. All the HODs shared their views related to this area.

With respect to HOD, we should focus on crucial aspects through which female teachers can feel comfortable. However, the eligibility criteria should be fair and inclusive. It is essential not to create barriers that hinder access to support for women from diverse backgrounds. [H11]

There should be some flexibility in eligibility criteria, especially for women who are studying at the same time. There should be leverage given to women, as they are putting extra effort. Different challenges women face call for a different set of support mechanisms to accommodate diverse situations. [H21]

To help women who are studying at the same time in our institute, regular check-ins and open communication between HODs and female faculty staff are vital. This helps us understand the challenges faced and make necessary adjustments or accommodations. [H31]

Facilities Intensive

The HODs proposed several supportive measures to address the challenges faced by women balancing work and study. They suggested continuous learning opportunities, including training programs and certifications tailored to align with women's work and study interests. They also highlighted the need for counselling services specifically designed for female faculty pursuing higher education to help them manage stress and navigate challenges effectively. Additionally, the value of building networks and creating platforms where women can connect, share experiences and support one another was emphasized, fostering a sense of community and mutual assistance. They supported the idea of counselling sessions for female faculty teachers pursuing higher education. They elaborated by saying,

Training and certification would be a welcome step. Continuing learning opportunities along with work or study interests is very important. [H51]

Counselling services tailored to the needs of women balancing dual responsibilities could significantly help them manage stress and navigate challenges effectively. [H31]

Building networks is of paramount importance. It can create platforms where women can connect, share experiences and support one another. That can be quite empowering. It would foster community and mutual assistance. [H41]

A summary of the findings is presented in Table 2, which summarizes the major themes and corresponding codes identified through thematic analysis, highlighting the challenges faced by married women in balancing work and studies, university heads' perceptions of these challenges and the proposed institutional strategies for improving work-study-life balance.

Table 2: Summary of the Themes

Themes	Codes
Challenges married women face in balancing work and studies in Karachi	Lack of Support Work Politics Overwhelming Work Burden Lack of Management
The Heads of the university's perceptions regarding women's challenges in balancing work life and studies?	Strict Policy Over Expectations Lack of Motivation Lack of Conducive Environment Trust Deficit
The propositions put forward by the heads of the organization regarding alleviating the challenges women face in balancing work and studies?	Policy Implementation Management Support Facilities Intensive Innovative Approaches

Discussion

The findings of the current study are in line with the findings of previous studies from Pakistan, South Asia and Islamic countries. The findings show that most working married women experience frustration and anger because of a lack of recognition of their hard work and dedication. The females also reported that they faced challenges while juggling with work, studies and family because of sociocultural norms and institutional policies. This is in line with previous Pakistani studies (21, 22, 24). Women in academia face significant challenges in career progression, as they must balance work demands with family responsibilities (49). Similarly, the results of the current study reveal that academic and professional stress affects the mental health of working women, which is in line with the findings of a study conducted on work-life balance in Pakistan (17). Individuals tend to adapt to their workplace pressures and psychologically, they may engage in family conversations or leisure activities once their work hours have concluded (37).

The results of the current study also show that gender bias in educational institutions can take various forms and is most common at higher levels of management. Similarly, a study revealed that married women in India face considerable barriers to managing their work and studies to acquire education and find employment, especially when they face gender discrimination, where priority is given to household duties rather than career advancement (50). Another study emphasized that female employees encounter work-study conflicts

caused by undue working hours and strict work schedules, which often require them to work over time to meet organizational objectives (22).

The study results show that in addition to non-supportive administration, married women are overburdened with long working hours. Married working women face conflicts arising from overtime requirements and inflexible work schedules, which both affect their professional duties and interfere with their academic activities, creating significant challenges in combining work and studies. These findings are in line with spillover theory, which suggests that problems in one area of life have a spillover effect on other areas of life (51). This situation often leads to frustration and loss of motivation. Married working women who pursue higher education should be empowered so that they can better overcome these challenges (52). This study highlights the importance of promoting a conducive organizational culture that takes into account work-life balance and the diverse needs of employees. Such a supportive environment would motivate married working women to strive for excellence and provide them with more opportunities to achieve a balance between their professional and academic priorities.

The findings of the current study revealed that the prevailing notion of being considered a 'super woman' is a misconception that women can be mothers as well as study for longer hours and that they can play numerous other roles within and outside their workplace. According to the research findings, married working women can exhibit the

roles of motherhood, professional work and study for extended hours, as they delve into the societal expectation that women predominantly can be nurturers and caregivers; thus, they can handle the exhaustive task of maintaining and managing a family while studying as well (4, 18). However, working married women employees continue to offer their personal time to balance their work and research, as it becomes an obligation to fulfil their work and study priorities, much more than their health and personal well-being, even family. The findings highlight that higher management members believe that married women can perform multiple tasks at home and work since they play many roles as teachers, wives and mothers (4, 18). The findings of the current study are largely in line with the findings of studies conducted in India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Egypt and Oman (13, 15, 16, 19, 20); however, the findings of the current study report unsupportive institutional policies in Pakistan. This finding deviates from the findings of a study from Saudi Arabia, which reported that institutional policies support married women under government reforms (2).

The results of the current study are in line with spill-over theory, which states that what happens in one domain influences the other domains of life. Negative spill-over occurs when rigid workplace policies—such as inflexibility and excessive working hours—cause employees to be stressed and dissatisfied, creating work-study conflict. Such unfavourable policies always create a work environment where married women find it challenging to maintain their dual responsibilities; they become stressed and work less productively (53).

Similarly, boundary theory emphasizes the importance of having strong boundaries between different areas of life. As seen in this study, the blurred boundaries force women working to stretch roles across work, study and family, creating role conflict. For example, the expectations attached to the “super woman” ideal blur the interdomain boundaries, forcing women to juggle roles. These unrealistic demands often put a strain on women’s well-being.

To address these challenges, workplaces and educational institutions should develop favourable policies to resolve work-study conflicts. In this context, organizations must create a culture of autonomy, constructive feedback and flexibility to

balance work-study conditions. These positive spill-over measures empower women to translate gains and effectiveness in one part of their lives into another. Beyond this, a lack of financial capabilities and, most importantly, unsupportive management practices often hinder women from creating proper balances between work and study; therefore, fulfilling education goals takes a longer time, as observed in recent literature reviews (6, 54). Such challenges are said to be covered through flexible working schedules, among others, as well as through policy reforms that help women maintain the right kind of gap between their professional, academic and personal lives. In line with boundary theory, such tailored interventions are important for supporting working married women in the academy and far beyond them.

Conclusion

This study provides deep insights into the struggles of Pakistani women who are balancing academics, careers and family at the same time. There are two primary sources of stress for women in this situation. First, they have to operate in a patriarchal society that is not equitable for women. Second, although with societal progress, they are pursuing their career and education, they are still the primary caregivers at home. Workers and households are still in the process of providing an equitable landscape to women. In this situation, the vulnerabilities of Pakistani women can be resolved only when women’s problems are approached at the grassroots level to provide an inclusive environment.

Practical Implications

The results of this study reveal that universities should establish a comprehensive support system for working married women. Educational institutions can help by offering flexible options such as flexible academic schedules, reduced or flexible workloads, hybrid and online courses and deadline extensions for women who are juggling multiple responsibilities. Additionally, universities should consider offering accommodations for pregnancy, including maternity leave flexibility and supportive policies for pregnant faculty and students. Additionally, providing easily accessible childcare support facilities in institutions can greatly alleviate working mothers’ burdens and promote their educational and working involvement. Access to counselling and mental

health support services is also crucial, as women often face stress, burnout and emotional fatigue because of the demands of juggling family, work and academic responsibilities. In addition, mentorship initiatives, peer networks and gender-responsive institutional policies and structures can foster a more inclusive and supportive academic environment, empowering married working women to realize their educational and professional aspirations effectively.

Limitations and Future Research

Directions

Although this study provides deep insights, it has limitations that open up opportunities for further research. First, the scope of the research was limited to private universities, possibly without considering the experience of women working in governmental institutions. Second, this study focused on the problems encountered by married working women, while future research could examine the experiences of unmarried women or those at different life stages to provide comparative insights into the impact of personal circumstances on work-study balance. Furthermore, although this study used a qualitative approach to provide comprehensive and detailed information, further research employing quantitative methods with larger and more diverse samples from private and public universities could confirm the current results and ensure greater generalizability. Moreover, the sample size for the current study was quite limited in terms of size and institutional and geographic focus. Future studies should be conducted in other geographical areas and research contexts to enhance the comprehensiveness and generalizability of the findings. The current study was based on the self-reported accounts of the participants, which could have resulted in respondent bias in the research findings. Future studies can choose an ethnographic approach to reduce this bias.

Abbreviations

AI: Artificial Intelligence, HR: Human Resources, HOD: Head of Department/Heads of Department, MBA: Master of Business Administration, MPhil: Master of Philosophy, MS: Master of Science, PhD: Doctor of Philosophy, UNDP United Nations Development Programme, WFB: Work-Family Balance, WLB: Work-Life Balance.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to sincerely acknowledge the participating organizations for their cooperation, support and facilitation of data collection for this study.

Author Contributions

Faria Awan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing-Original Draft, Saima Munawar: Formal Analysis, Writing-Original Draft, Writing-Review, Editing, Rabia Nauman: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review, Editing, Jolita Vveinhardt: Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review, Editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The interview transcripts translated into the English language are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors declare that this manuscript was entirely written and developed by them without the use of generative AI or AI-assisted tools. All the ideas, analyses and discussions presented in this study reflect the authors' own thinking, effort and academic judgment. English-language reviews of the manuscript were also performed using AJE Rubriq. The authors take full responsibility for the content's originality, interpretation and accuracy.

Ethics Approval

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were approved by the College of Business Management Ethical Review Team (CBM-ERT).

Funding

This work received no external funding.

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How to Cite: Awan F, Munawar S, Nauman R, Vveinhardt J. Balancing Strategies in Academic, Professional and Personal Responsibilities: A Qualitative Study of Married Women. *Int Res J Multidiscip Scope*. 2026;7(3):1648-1661. DOI: 10.47857/irjms.2026.v07i03.010589