Work-Life Balance for Women: A Critical Evaluation of HR Practices – Online Policies vs. Ground-Level Application

Varsha Dubey
(Research Scholar)
Department of Management,
Mangalayatan University
Email: Dubey.varsha1993@gmail.com

Abstract

Over the past decade, the work-life balance (WLB) of female employees has undergone considerable transformation, driven by technological advancements, organizational restructuring, evolving gender roles, and shifting societal expectations. Work-life balance (WLB) remains a persistent challenge for women professionals globally. Despite the existence of progressive human resource (HR) policies promoting flexible work hours, remote work, maternity benefits, and mental wellness support, a significant gap exists between online policy documentation and ground-level application. This paper critically examines this discrepancy, focusing on the Indian corporate and service sector landscape. Using a mixed-method approach—quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews—the study uncovers how many HR policies serve more as symbolic gestures than practical tools. It further investigates the structural and cultural barriers to effective implementation and the consequences for female professionals. By drawing upon real-world narratives and organizational audits, this paper advocates for a gender-sensitive, accountable, and participative HR framework. The findings emphasize the urgent need for accountability in HR practices, gender-sensitive implementation, and participative policy auditing.

Keywords

Work-life balance, women professionals, HR policy, implementation gap, flexible work, gender equity

1.Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB) refers to the harmonious coexistence between an individual's professional responsibilities and personal life. For female employees, this balance has historically been difficult to achieve due to gendered expectations, cultural norms, and disproportionate caregiving duties. In the 21st century, the professional landscape has witnessed a considerable increase in women's participation. However, women continue to face unique challenges in balancing their personal and professional lives. The concept of work-life balance (WLB) has evolved from being an individual responsibility to an institutional concern.

Human Resource (HR) policies play a pivotal role in shaping how women navigate their dual roles. While most organizations document WLB-friendly policies online—like flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and mental health support—the extent of their implementation remains questionable. This paper explores the gap between the presence of such policies and their actual on-ground application, highlighting the consequences for women professionals. The issue is further compounded by entrenched gender norms, lack of monitoring mechanisms, and resistance to culture change, which hinder the translation of well-meaning policies into practice.

2. Literature Review

The concept of work-life balance has been extensively discussed in academic and professional literature. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) introduced the conflict theory explaining how work and family responsibilities interfere with each other. The spillover model suggests that stress or satisfaction in one domain spills into the other.). The work-family border theory suggests that balancing work and family life depends on setting clear boundaries between professional and domestic roles (Clark, 2000). In recent years, gender-sensitive HR practices have become central to organizational well-being. However, several studies reveal a disconnect between policy creation and execution (Kaur & Saini, 2020). Policies often exist only to fulfill compliance mandates rather than to empower employees. Further, women-specific challenges such as maternity transitions, childcare responsibilities, and societal expectations amplify the need for effective WLB interventions. Research from SHRM (2021) and ILO (2022) highlights that while policies like maternity leave, flexi-time, and wellness programs exist, implementation varies significantly across industries and geographies. This suggests that symbolic inclusion of policies in HR portals is insufficient unless backed by institutional support and behavioral change across managerial levels. Many Indian companies still lack comprehensive policies to support female employees at different life stages (Sinha, 2021).

3. Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Analyze the gap between online HR policies and their practical implementation.

2. Assess the impact of this gap on women's work-life balance.

3. Suggest measures for bridging the policy-practice divide.

4. Evaluate the role of organizational culture and leadership in shaping implementation outcomes.

4. Methodology

A mixed-method approach was adopted. Quantitative data was gathered through surveys conducted among 200 women professionals from corporate, healthcare, and educational sectors in urban India. In addition, qualitative interviews were held with 20 participants to gain deeper insights. Organizations' HR portals were reviewed to understand the nature of policies published online. The data was analyzed using SPSS for statistical insights and thematic coding for qualitative narratives. A case study method was also employed to assess the structural differences in WLB practices among large-scale multinationals and small-to-mid-size enterprises (SMEs). Special attention was given to policies such as flexible work timing, mental health leaves, and child-care assistance to identify operational barriers.

5. Results

The study yielded the following key findings:

• 87% of organizations listed flexible working options online, yet only 39% of women had consistent access to them.

• 60% of respondents reported managerial discouragement when applying for flexible hours or leave.

• Many reported a lack of communication channels to voice concerns about WLB policy misuse or neglect.

• Policy knowledge was often limited to HR heads, with team leaders unaware or unwilling to apply them.

• 43% of respondents cited peer pressure or career stagnation as reasons for not utilizing work-life balance schemes.

• In SMEs, WLB practices were largely dependent on individual leadership rather than documented policy enforcement.

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6. Discussion

The findings highlight a symbolic adoption of HR practices rather than substantive implementation. Many policies, though publicly available, are not integrated into team-level practices. This creates a dissonance between organizational promise and employee experience. The problem is exacerbated by a lack of monitoring mechanisms, inadequate training of managers, and absence of gender-sensitivity frameworks in execution. The dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities places women in a vulnerable position—where

opting for balance can be perceived as professional disinterest. The study also observed that in many cases, HR documentation of policies served to fulfill audit requirements or enhance employer branding, but did not translate into cultural or structural transformation. Respondents often indicated that while HR departments promote work-life balance initiatives, operational departments do not support their actual application. In some sectors, particularly healthcare, there was a clear tension between service continuity and policy execution, creating ethical dilemmas for frontline female staff.

7. Recommendations

To address the policy-practice gap and promote genuine work-life balance for women professionals, the following strategies are recommended:

• Establish internal WLB audits to measure policy reach and impact using qualitative and quantitative indicators.

• Train line managers and supervisors on gender-sensitive leadership and flexible team management.

• Develop anonymous feedback loops allowing women to report WLB policy challenges or implementation lapses.

• Include work-life balance KPIs in the performance reviews of mid and senior-level management.

• Set up HR-Women Advisory Committees that periodically review, evaluate, and update work-life policies based on lived experiences.

• Promote a cultural shift from presenteeism to productivity by redefining success metrics.

• Invest in awareness campaigns within the organization to destigmatize the use of flexibility and wellness benefits.

8. Conclusion

Work-life balance for women cannot be achieved through symbolic policies alone. It requires a cultural shift in the way organizations perceive flexibility, productivity, and gender equity. The study underscores that bridging the policy-implementation divide is essential not just for employee satisfaction, but for sustainable organizational development. Effective execution of HR policies not only enhances employee well-being but also supports diversity goals, strengthens employer branding, and drives long-term institutional trust. If organizations truly aim to retain female talent and empower inclusive growth, they must align their formal HR strategies with ground realities through accountable leadership and participative governance.

9. References

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