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Feminine Leadership in Academia: Balancing Career Aspirations and Personal Responsibilities

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Abstract

Although women participation in higher education and professional field has changed the contemporary society in a remarkable manner, the problems associated with balancing their desire for job and their responsibilities as a member of a family and home are still a great challenge for women research scholars and academicians. This chapter analyzes the professional and personal responsibility issues in the context of the feminist public/private sphere debate. Although women have participated more in the public sphere of education, work, and research, they are still subjected to unequal demands in the private sphere, such as care work, domestic management, and emotional work. Although many discussions have been held on women's labour force participation and how they cope with it, few studies have examined the experiences of women research scholars who combine academic productivity with family expectations and social norms, especially in developing societies. This chapter seeks to examine the structural, social, and emotional factors affecting women scholars and their experience of juggling multiple roles and the impact of institutional and familial support networks on work–life balance. While women scientists have gained more opportunities for career advancement, they are often confronted with role conflict, stress, and disproportionate domestic responsibilities. It also emphasizes the important role for class privilege, supportive family structures, and flexible institutional policies in determining women's capacity to balance. The chapter ends with the conclusion that work–life balance is not only an individual matter but a structural and gendered matter that is related to the social arrangements in society that are patriarchal. Thus, it is important to institute institutional changes that will be gender sensitive and share domestic duties in a just manner, to foster inclusive academic and professional environments for women. Jelke Vattu, in his role as a Woman Research Scholar, contributed to the Public–Private Sphere Debate by examining the concept of Work–Life Balance through the lens of Feminist Theory, shedding light on the responsibilities that lies with women.

Keywords: Work–Life Balance, Feminist Theory, Public–Private Sphere Debate, Women Research Scholars, Gendered Responsibilities.

Introduction

The growing role of women in higher education and research has changed the face of today's society and eroded traditional gender roles in the workforce. In recent decades, women have increasingly entered into the public sphere as academics, researchers, administrators and professionals. Despite these developments, women's struggle for a balance between a career and family life remains a constant issue. A challenge of balancing work and responsibilities has become an important space of scholarly research, especially in feminist studies, which challenges the separation between the public and private that has traditionally taken place. (Habermas, 1962; Olsen, 1993)

In the past, patriarchal social systems delegated the job of running the house, child and emotional work to women and political and economic work to men. Women today are very active in the workplace but domestic expectations have not decreased in step. Previous research by other scholars like Arlie Hochschild, Marsha Stoltz-Loike, and Gail Verlander has identified the problems of role conflict, emotional stress, unequal domestic labor, and work–life imbalance among working women. Feminist scholars in the Indian context have highlighted the invisibility of women's unpaid work and structural inequalities that women face in relation to their involvement in public life, for example, Vina Mazumdar and Devaki Jain. (Hochschild, 1989; Stoltz-Loike, 1992; Verlander, 2004; Mazumdar, 1994; Jain, 2005)

Although there is increasing body of literature on work–life balance and women's working life in general, there is a dearth of research that specifically focuses on the experience of women research scholars and academics in the context of the feminist public–private sphere debate. Research tends to ignore the nexus between class, institutional support, emotional labour and productivity in educational settings, especially in developing societies such as India. Hence, the aim of the present study is to explore the barriers that women scholars encounter in sustaining their professional duties and personal life and to examine the role of gendered expectations in women's academic experience. (Fraser, 1997; Walby, 1990)

This research is primarily aimed to explore the relationship between the career aspiration, household duties and institutional structures impacting women scholars. The study additionally seeks to examine the importance of family support, work flexibility and socio-economic factors in determining women's work-life balance. The study is restricted only to women pursuing higher education and research in particular, but is set in the context of the academic environment in India. (Pateman, 1988)

This study is important as it enriches the feminist framework on gendered labor and emphasizes the importance of inclusive institutional policies, gender

fairness in domestic responsibilities and supportive academic settings for women scholars. (Olsen, 1993; Fraser, 1997)

Historical Evolution of Women's Work and Family Roles

- **Traditional Roles of Women in Society**

Traditionally, women have been seen as having a primary role in the private sphere of society; in the household, in child caring, in caring, in emotional labour. Women were predominantly wives, mothers, and caregivers, and men were the ones in the public sphere of politics, education, and production. Social institutions like family, religion, caste and custom in the Indian context contributed to the domestic role of the women and restricted their involvement in public life. Domestic work by women was still largely uncompensated and unacknowledged as critical to family survival and social reproduction. (Walby, 1990; Pateman, 1988)

Ethics of sacrifice, obedience and care were stressed in traditional Indian society for the women. Women struggled to access to education, property rights and economic independence for centuries. Other social practices like child marriage, purdah, dowry and unequal inheritance further hampered women autonomy and mobility. Feminist academics claim that these institutions reinforced the dichotomy of public and private sphere and have become naturalized. (Desai, 1957; Chakravarti, 1993)

- **Women's Entry into Education and Workforce**

Women's involvement in education and employment began to gradually grow during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Women's group organizations, among others, led the social reform movements in the field of legal reforms and education of women. The Constitution of India, upon gaining independence, granted equality before law and an end to discrimination against women. (Mazumdar, 1974; Government of India, 1950)

Despite constitutional provisions, however, girls' and women's access to education, employment and political participation remained unequal. As industrialization, urbanization, and modernization progressed in the twentieth century, women were able to pursue careers in the fields of teaching, nursing, administration, medicine, and later, academia and research. Despite this, however, household chores were still largely borne by women, thus resulting in a "double burden" of paid and unpaid work. (Hochschild, 1989; Jain, 2005)

- **Growth of Dual-Career Families**

With the economic transformation, the climbing educational opportunities and growing aspirations of women, the presence of dual career families became visible in the late twentieth century. Women's involvement in the professional areas such as

higher education, corporate jobs, healthcare and information technology was further enhanced by liberalization and globalization in the 1990s. (Desai & Krishnaraj, 1990)

Even with this change, feminist academics noted that the burden of domestic work did not decrease in sync with women's. Nevertheless, feminist academics noted that domestic work for women did not decrease proportionately with this change. Women were increasingly working in both the professional and domestic sectors at the same time, resulting in role conflict, stress, emotional exhaustion and work–life imbalance. Arlie Hochschild's concept of the “second shift” was particularly relevant to women's experience in dual-career families. (Hochschild, 1989; Stoltz-Loike, 1992)

- **Development of Women's Studies and Feminist Scholarship**

Feminist scholarship emerged in the 1970s as a new focus in the study of women's issues. Worldwide, the women's liberation movement called into question the patriarchal social system and promoted the idea of the personal being political. In India, women's studies emerged as an interdisciplinary academic field that explored the issue of gender parity, unpaid work, violence against women and absence of women from decision-making processes. (Hanisch, 1970; Mazumdar, 1994)

Vina Mazumdar, Devaki Jain and Neera Desai were scholars who were instrumental in the institutionalization of women's studies and feminist research in India. The emphasis gradually shifted to the convergence of patriarchy, labour, class, caste and state policies pertaining to women's lives. (Jain, 2005; Desai & Krishnaraj, 1990)

- **Indian Context: Towards Equality Report (1974)**

The Towards Equality Report by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974) was among the most important milestones in feminist scholarship in India. This report is considered to be the birth of the modern women's movement in independent India. It seriously analysed the socio-economic, educational, political and legal situation of women and highlighted the existence of structural gender inequalities despite the constitutional provisions on the principle of equality. (Committee on the Status of Women in India [CSWI], 1974)

The report highlighted:

- shifting work patterns in the agriculture sector, and
- differences in education between boys and girls,
- unequal wages,
- political underrepresentation,
- declining sex ratio,
- and invisibility of women's unpaid domestic work.

It contended that development policies had failed to substantially enhance the status of women, and proposed to make changes in education, employment, health and law that would be gender-sensitive. The report also helped to spur the development of women's groups, feminist activism, and women's studies centres in India. (CSWI, 1974; Mazumdar, 1994)

Work-Life Balance for Women in Contemporary Times: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

Work-life balance is one of the foremost concerns of women in the current society. There has been a shift in traditional gender roles due to increased participation of women in various fields such as education, employment, politics and public life, but women still face unequal domestic responsibilities, emotional labour, and structural discrimination. Feminist scholars believe that women's experiences of balancing work and home demands a sociological, psychological, economic, political, cultural and technological approach.

- **Sociological Perspective**

The sociological view focuses on the role of sociological institutions, gender norms and patriarchy in the experiences of women scholars in balancing their careers and family. Although women have historically been the ones to handle childcare and care-giving in the home, the private sphere, men have traditionally performed the role of political and working citizens, to the exclusion of the private sphere of domestic duties in the home, childcare and caregiving. Women still face the "double burden" of both paid work and unpaid domestic responsibilities in the private sphere, even today (Walby, 1990; Hochschild, 1989). The role of gender socialization is very important in developing these expectations, as from a very early age, women are taught to focus primarily on family and caring for family members, and this expectation remains strong throughout their education and career, particularly in societies such as in India where marriage, motherhood and family honour are important. Employed women come home from work and do more work at home, which causes emotional and physical fatigue, according to Arlie Hochschild in *The Second Shift* (1989). Thus, women scholars encounter ongoing issues such as role conflict, stereotyping, emotional labor, expectations of the traditional family and experiencing a work-family imbalance. (Oakley, 1974; Desai, 1957)

- **Psychological Perspective**

The emotional and mental burden of being a multi-purpose employee is an important yet under-discussed aspect of the work done by women in the academy, from a feminist psychological perspective. Modern women researchers often face stress, anxiety, burnout, guilt, emotional exhaustion and identity conflict when balancing the multiple demands of high performance as mothers, wives, caregivers, and successful professionals. The multiple roles create a considerable level of role

strain which has a detrimental effect on mental health and contributes to the internalized gender norms that lead women to feel guilty when they invest in their career rather than their families and vice versa, which feminist scholars describe as “internalized gender norms”. This psychological suffering is not simply an individual problem, but a structural one of the continued presence of patriarchal norms that assign primary care taking and emotional work to women, even as they are slowly entering the public sphere of academia (Gilligan, 1982; Verlander, 2004). However, feminist research has also taken into account women's coping and emotional responsiveness as resilient responses and strategies of negotiation in limited social contexts, that can be considered as forms of everyday resistance. The main problems – burnout and stress, identity conflict, mental health, work-related anxiety and emotional exhaustion – are systemic and need institutional intervention and not merely personal help seeking. (Hochschild, 1989)

- **Economic Perspective**

The study of women's involvement in the labour market, financial autonomy and domestic unpaid care from an economic point of view, shows that women's labour market participation has increased globally, however, structural inequalities still exist. Feminist economic analysis points to interrelated processes of economic injustice such as unequal opportunities, unequal pay, occupational segregation, and the devaluation of unpaid care work. Women continue to carry out most of the unpaid domestic work, as the feminist economists, such as Devaki Jain, have powerfully pointed out, and this work, though largely invisible, is fundamentally necessary for the sustenance of families, communities and national economies (Jain, 2005; Fraser, 1997). Moreover, class is a crucial mediator of women's experiences of work–life balance as different class groups experience the burden of domestic work differently; upper-class women can sometimes partially relieve this burden by delegating household duties to others, while poor and working-class women suffer from a “triple burden” of paid work, household work, and intensive care work. As a result, women scholars and women professionals in key economic positions across class locations are confronted by serious economic problems of women such as gender wage gap, economic dependency, invisibility of unpaid domestic work, restricted economic mobility and exploitation in informal economy (Crenshaw, 1989; Federici, 2012).

- **Political and Legal Perspective**

Political and legal feminist analysis critically analyses women's access to rights, their institutional representation and the effectiveness of legal protection in patriarchal state structures. Voting rights, property rights, educational access, and political rights have been historically denied to women, leading women's movements both locally and worldwide to call for equality in citizenship, representation, labor rights, and general laws (Government of India, 1950). In the Indian context, the

Constitution of India (1950) was a major constitutional legal document that brought the franchise altogether for women since the inception, thus giving them political rights. From an economic perspective, Articles 14 and 15 guaranteed the equality before law, and non-discrimination, respectively, while Article 16 guaranteed equal opportunity in public employment. Moreover, social and cultural rights such as protection from discrimination, right to education, right to dignity, right to cultural participation, were also constitutionally guaranteed. Yet, critically from a feminist perspective, the deep disjuncture between de jure and de facto equality highlights the fact that formal equality does not necessarily equate to material equality, especially when it comes to structural change to tackle patriarchy, unpaid care work and institutional inequalities. (Olsen, 1993; Pateman, 1988)

Important Indian Laws Protecting Women's Rights

Law	Year	Purpose
Hindu Succession Act	1956 (amended 2005)	Equal inheritance rights
Dowry Prohibition Act	1961	Prohibits dowry
Equal Remuneration Act	1976	Equal wages for equal work
Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act	2005	Protection from domestic abuse
Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act	2013	Workplace safety
Maternity Benefit Act	1961 (amended 2017)	Paid maternity leave
Prohibition of Child Marriage Act	2006	Prevents child marriage

The Indian Parliament has also introduced reservations for women in local governance through the:

- 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992), ensuring women's political participation in Panchayati Raj institutions.

Even though there are legal measures and constitutional statements, women in the public sphere still face systematic barriers. These encompassed, but were not limited to, chronic under-representation of women in leadership and decision-making roles within academic institutions and the profession, widespread institutional discrimination in the recruitment, promotion and allocation of resources, inadequate implementation and enforcement of existing legislation on women's rights, and ongoing risk of women being subjected to sexual harassment, both overt and covert.

These challenges are all collective symptoms of the feminist scholars of what they would call as an institutionalized patriarchy that is constraining women's full and equal participation in professional life.

Anthropological and cultural perspective.

The building of women's identities and responsibilities is deeply rooted in traditions and practices, as well as religious norms and beliefs, and consequently in social values, that all contribute to managing women's position in society from a cultural and anthropological feminist point of view. (Chakravarti, 1993; Uberoi, 1993) In many cultures, however, the socialization of women includes an emphasis on harmony, family, and the suppression of personal goals, norms that are not only psychological or lifestyle decisions but ideological tools of patriarchal wielders. In Indian discourses, women are consistently portrayed as unconditional caregivers, dutiful wives, and loving mothers, which further entrenched their association with the private sphere and restricted their freedom in career and social engagements. Such gendered cultural norms have a significant effect on the work–life balance of female scholars, as they often bring internalized pressure to conform to the caregiving role even as they work in academia. Importantly, feminist anthropological work shows that women's experiences are not uniform and that the nature of constraints and agency experienced by women can be shaped by multiple layers of caste, class, religion, region, and ethnicity. Moreover, media, literature and cinema are potent ideological devices that influence the perception of womanhood in society and at times as a taboo to be handled in a particular manner – one that is focused on domestic life and household chores. As a result, female academics encounter major obstacles that stem from gendered traditions and cultural norms, expectations of marriage and kinship, limitations on physical and social mobility, and societal stigma against women pursuing academic careers. (Crenshaw, 1989)

Technological and Contemporary Challenges

From a feminist perspective, technology has acted as a contradictory force in the lives of women scholars. It has greatly improved access to education, employment, professional networking, and activism. It has also created digital platforms that support research, online teaching, and global academic collaboration. However, it has also deepened the gendered divide between public and private spaces. The post-pandemic work culture has made this worse by increasing digital labor, online teaching burdens, and expectations to constantly work from home. This situation blurs the already thin line between professional productivity and domestic duties (Fraser, 2016). Additionally, women scholars frequently encounter cyber harassment, online abuse, and digital surveillance. These forms of gendered violence extend patriarchal control into virtual environments. On top of these issues, the ongoing gender digital divide limits technological access for economically marginalized women. This situation reinforces existing class and caste inequalities

within digital systems. As a result, key challenges in this tech-driven landscape include digital burnout, pressure to work from home, online harassment, technology-based exploitation, and unequal digital access. All of these require urgent feminist critique and structural action. Conclusion Women's work-life balance today is influenced by interconnected social, psychological, economic, political, cultural, and technological factors. Although women have gained significant political, legal, economic, and educational rights, deep-rooted inequalities and patriarchal expectations still affect their personal and professional lives(UN Women, 2021)

Perspectives of International Scholars on Women's Work–Life Balance and the Public–Private Sphere Debate

Betty Friedan (1963): The *Feminine Mystique* (1963) is an important book by Betty Friedan, who reviewed the sense of dissatisfaction felt by middle-class American women who were limited mostly to domestic roles. Friedan labeled this condition as “the problem that has no name,” referring to the frustrations of women with material comforts. She claimed that the social organization was patriarchal and that women were confined to their roles of wife and mother and therefore intellectual and professionally underdeveloped. Friedan's writing was instrumental to the second wave of feminists and called into question the notions of women's place within the private sphere. (Friedan, 1963)

Ann Oakley (1974): The *Sociology of Housework* by Ann Oakley (1974) explored the social and feminist aspect of domestic work. Oakley claimed that the role of women in the home is not an instinctive role; it is a social role created by society. Her research illustrated that women's invisible and under-valued unpaid domestic labour in patriarchal societies.(Oakley, 1974)

Arlie Hochschild (1989): Hochschild first coined the term “second shift” in 1989 in *The Second Shift*, where she discusses how employed women do paid work in the public sphere and unpaid domestic labor at home. The study brought to the fore the concepts of emotional labour, role conflict and tiredness of working women despite the rise of women's participation in the workforce. (Hochschild, 1989)

Marsha Stoltz-Loike (1992): Marsha Stoltz-Loike's (1992) study *The Working Family* was based on the lives of women in the dual-income family. The study revealed that women still had disproportionate domestic duties even though they were employed. The role conflict, stress and significance of institutional and familial support systems were stressed by Stoltz-Loike. (Stoltz-Loike, 1992)

Frances Olsen (1993): The public/private distinction was the subject of feminist critique in the writings of Frances Olsen (1993) in *Constitutional Law: Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Distinction*. Olsen maintained that the private sphere association of women brings about a reinforcement of patriarchy, thereby

restricting women's access to power, law and economic participation. She stated that domestic/labor relations are political and not personal. (Olsen, 1993)

Gail Verlander (2004): *Female Physicians: Balancing Career and Family* (2004) by Gail Verlander explores the lives of female medical practitioners and the challenges of balancing their work and family lives. The study posited that there is a subjectivity and dependency of work–life balance, influenced by support systems, personal priorities and institutional flexibility. (Verlander, 2004)

Perspectives of Indian Feminist Scholars on Women's Work–Life Balance and Gendered Responsibilities

- **Vina Mazumdar**

Vina Mazumdar is one of the trailblazers of Women Studies in India. She did her work on women's labor, education, structural inequalities and women's political participation. Mazumdar highlighted that women's social duties and domestic work in the household limit their involvement in public life. She also contributed extensively to the *Towards Equality Report* (1974) which highlighted the gender inequity in India. (Mazumdar, 1994)

- **Devaki Jain**

Devaki Jain explored the role of women in the economy, unpaid work and gendered policy making. Her feminist economic approach drew attention to the fact that women's role as providers of domestic and informal work is not recognized in terms of its economic value and importance, despite the critical function these women play in the economy and in their communities. (Jain, 2005)

- **Neera Desai**

Neera Desai made a significant contribution in the area of Women Studies and Sociological studies in India. The subject of her work was the changing social role of women, family roles, education and modernization. Desai highlighted the role of patriarchy and social institutions in the life of women in terms of opportunities. (Desai, 1957)

Between Public Ambition and Private Responsibility: Career Challenges for Contemporary Women

This is a significant one to ask. Although the 21st century has seen women make strides at work, there are some well-known challenges that continue and new ones to address. Challenges can frequently be interrelated, thus forming a system of barriers instead of single challenges. (Fraser, 1997; Sandberg, 2013)

Here are some of the main problems women are facing in their career.

- **There is a persistent pay gap and persistent promotion gap**

There is a gap in pay and in promotion – which is persistent.

A gender pay gap exists even in countries with equal pay legislation. In the United States, women continue to earn about 82 cents for every dollar earned by men and even less for women of color.

- The "Motherhood Penalty": Women may be less competent and less committed after giving birth, resulting in fewer promotions and lower wages. On the other hand, men are likely to be given the "fatherhood premium" (stability and commitment).
- The biggest obstacle to a woman's career path is not the "glass ceiling" at the top but the first rung up to manager. It takes 87 women to enter the pipeline for each 100 men promoted to manager. (Correll et al., 2007; Sandberg, 2013)

- **Unequal sharing of domestic & care work**

In dual-incomes families, women bear the responsibility for child care, elder care, home management and more. This was particularly brought to light during the COVID-19 pandemic when women were much more likely than men to stop working to deal with school closure and family illness.

- After a day of working, many women come home to many more hours of housework, the "Second Shift".
- Career Interruptions: Skill atrophy, reduced network, lifetime lost income. Limited or flexible positions typically offer lower compensation, and less career growth. (Hochschild, 1989; UN Women, 2020)

- **Workplace Harassment, Bias, and Lack of Psychological Safety**

Awareness raised with #MeToo but harassment and subtle bias is still prevalent.

- Overt Harassment: There is still unwanted advance, gatekeeping, or hostile environment for the women in male dominated occupations (tech, finance, constructions).
- Microaggressions include women being interrupted more often during meetings than men, their ideas being "bro-propriated," questions asked about whether women are "bossy" or "assertive" (and the judgment being more stringent in the former case), and women being judged more severely for errors.
- Fear of retaliation – many women are not willing to report problems or harm, which impacts on their mental wellbeing and work effectiveness. (Crenshaw, 1989; McKinsey & Company, 2023)

- **The Double Bind of Leadership: An Eye on the Prize**

Women leaders find themselves in a Catch-22. Society demands women to be "communal" (warm and nurturing and selfless) and demands "agentic" (decisive, ambitious and authoritative) women to be leaders.

- Too Soft, Too Hard: An authority woman is considered "aggressive" or "emotional," a warm woman is considered "not leadership material."
- Mere competitiveness vs. Likability: Successful men are liked, successful women are often resented. Research reveals that the same traits which make a man a "brilliant, go-getter" make a woman "ruthless and difficult." (Eagly & Carli, 2007)

- **Restricted Mentorship, Sponsorship and Networks.**

Men connect with each other through informal channels (golf, drinks after work) and sponsor other men. Women are less likely to be represented by senior leaders who will actively promote their interests.

- Women report a difficulty of being mentored by someone senior to them, particularly if they are in a field where there are fewer women at the top.
- Women, especially in finance, law, and tech, are usually left out of "Boys' Clubs" – informal networks of power that determines plum assignments and promotions. (Sandberg, 2013)

- **Industrial segregation and the 'glass cliff'.**

- Vertical Segregation: Women are under-represented in higher-paid and higher-status occupations (such as C-suite, STEM, skilled trades) and over-represented in lower-paid occupations of the "pink collar" variety (such as teaching, nursing, admin).
- The Glass Cliff: Women more likely to be promoted to leadership positions when in crisis (e.g., failing company). These are jobs that are going to fail at a higher rate and they're going to hurt the woman's reputation more and a man is going to have a more stable situation to be successful. (Ryan & Haslam, 2005)

- **Health and Reproductive challenges**

- No Menopause Support Policies – Many workplaces lack policies on menopause symptoms, which mean women are hiding symptoms, not being able to perform at their best, or leaving early.
- High stress, long hours work makes it physically impossible to do fertility treatment and appointment time off is often disapproved.

- Women are less likely to be offered bereavement leave or policies to support them to carry on working immediately after miscarriage or pregnancy loss. (Verlander, 2004)
- **Safety and Logistics**
 - Late Hours/Commuting: Late work or commuting is necessary for some industries (consulting, medicine, hospitality). Women are more likely to be subjected to harassment or assault when travelling to and from work or in a workplace setting where they are the only ones present.
 - While in many parts of the world women are forced out of the workforce due to lack of safe, private, hygienic bathrooms or breastfeeding/pumping facilities. (UN Women, 2020)
- **Intersectionality: Not a Monolith**
 - Race/Class/Disability/Sexual orientation/Geography are additional challenges to the ones listed above.
 - Sexism and racism are experienced by women of color, who may be "overlooked for leadership" or "seen as angry" when seeking to speak up for themselves.
 - LGBTQ+ women can experience further discrimination, misgendering and/or absent policies (e.g. parental leave for two mothers).
 - Women with disability are subjected to workplace in-accessibility and stigma with regards to their competence.
 - Women in developing economies may not be entitled to fundamental legal rights of protection against dismissal owing to pregnancy or even the right to work. (Crenshaw, 1989)

What is changing (cautiously for the better)?

- There is increased flexibility regarding care work with remote/hybrid work.
- Pay transparency laws are contributing to wage disparity closure.
- Companies are looking at promotion pipelines as a result of DEI initiatives.
- Parental leave for all parents (including fathers) is beginning to normalise parenting.
- Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) offer peer support and advocacy. (Fraser, 2016; McKinsey & Company, 2023)

In short:

The central issue is that jobs were designed for and by men who always had a full-time, stay-at-home spouse at home. Structures at work, including expectations for 24/7 work, linear career paths, social networks, and elevation processes, are not

yet fully attuned to many families. Addressing these challenges will not only require individuals to be 'resilient' or 'leaning in', but a change in the system with regard to policy, culture and law. (Pateman, 1988; Fraser, 1997)

Essential solutions for Women Scholars to achieve Work-Life Balance

Women can use strategies to help negotiate the structures in place, and to advocate for changes.

- **Individual Level Strategies (Agency & Self Preservation)**

These assist women in handling on-the-spot stress and establish limits in flawed systems.

Boundary setting & time blocking: Clearly signal hours for academic work (research, writing) as separate from family time. Block out “non-negotiable” personal time on a digital calendar (for example, 6-8 PM dinner/children). Explain these limits to managers, coworkers and family.

Learning to Say "No": Pressure for excessive service roles (committee work, student advising) not contributing to research; learning to say “no” is a challenge often faced by women. Focus on things that help you to move forward in your career.

Letting Go of Perfectionism ("Good Enough is Perfect"): “Good Enough is Perfect”: Challenge the myth of the “perfect mother”, “perfect wife”, and “perfect scholar”. Do “good enough” jobs at home to have energy for work.

Micro-Routines for Self-Care: These are brief consistent self-care routines (e.g., reading for pleasure for 10 mins, walking, 5 mins meditation). Avoid waiting for “vacations” to take a break.

Creating a “Personal Board of Advisors”: Find 2-3 trusted people you can seek career advice, emotional support, and reality check from senior women, sympathetic male colleagues. (Gilligan, 1982)

- **Familial & Relational Solutions (Redistributing the "Second Shift")**

The private sphere needs to be re-negotiated to deal with the unequal domestic burden.

Explicit Negotiation of Domestic Labor: Conduct family meetings to share chores in a structured manner; not just “helping”. Provide opportunity for children to take on cooking, cleaning, child and elder tasks on tools such as chore charts, not by gender.

Outsourcing where possible: Where money can be saved, pay for the help of the domestic workers (cleaners, cook, washing laundry). Think of this as an investment in your career and not a luxury. If income is low, consider joint ventures within the community or extended family.

Normalise Partner's Primary Caregiving: Parental leave, school meetings, and sick-child days should be equal. This helps to dispel the traditional notion that the mother should be the first to respond.

Assigning responsibilities to remember birthdays, make doctor appointments and to keep up with family socializing is explicit. These invisible chores are usually performed by females and are a huge mental burden. (Hochschild, 1989)

- **Institutional & Workplace Solutions**

Encourage and adopt flexible work arrangements (formalized):

- Relaxed deadlines for giving birth or childcare.
- Distance or blended learning/educational settings.
- Part-time teaching roles (little but increasing).
- Part-time working arrangements for administrative jobs.

On-Site or Subsidized Childcare & Eldercare: Universities shall offer low-cost, dependable care for children and elderly on irregular academic hours.

Mentorship & Sponsorship Programs: Create formal mentoring and sponsorship programs involving senior faculty to actively encourage (rather than only advise) junior women faculty.

Workload Equity Audits: Institutions should periodically do a workload audit to make sure that women are not disproportionately burdened with low credit high time tasks.

Breastfeeding/Pumping Rooms and Menopause Support: Ensure private, hygienic rooms are available that have refrigeration. Raise awareness and to establish policies for symptoms associated with menopause and to plan for sick leave.

Have clear and non-retaliatory mechanisms for reporting bias/harassment; take action that has meaning. (Verlander, 2004; Sandberg, 2013)

- **Societal & Policy-Level Solutions (Long-Term Change)**

These need to be tackled together and by feminists.

Normalisation of caregiving roles for all parents (mothers and fathers) to avoid hiring discrimination against women through the implementation of Universal Paid Parental Leave.

Enforcement of Equal Remuneration Act: Ensure more pay transparency and regular Gender audits in Academic Institutions.

Public investment in Care Infrastructure: Government provision of creches, after school care, care for the elderly reduces the burden on the individual family.

Campaigns to Change Social Norms: Media, education campaigns, and community campaigns that challenge the notion that domestic work is "natural" for women, and promote engaged fatherhood.

Legal Recognition of Unpaid Domestic Work: Advocate for policies that value and collect data on unpaid care work (as feminist economists such as Devaki Jain have called for, for years). (Jain, 2005; Fraser, 1997)

- **Digital & Technological Solutions (Managing Blurred Boundaries)**

These are necessary for Women Scholars in the Post pandemic era.

Reduce mental load by using Productivity Tools strategically – such as Trello, Asana or Notion for research projects and family tasks.

Establish "Tech-Free Zones/Times": No emails after 8 PM or at meal times. Get all work app notifications turned off on personal devices.

Use Online Networks: Accountability with virtual writing groups (e.g., #AcWriMo, Shut Up & Write). Find research partners via social media without traveling.

Digital Safety Practices: Employ passwords, two-factor authentication, report cyber harassment right away. Women scholars should be trained in cyber security at the institution. (UN Women, 2021)

Conclusion

Achieving work-life balance for women scholars is not a matter of personal time management alone. As the feminist public-private sphere debate makes clear, sustainable balance requires simultaneous strategies at the individual, familial, institutional, and policy levels. While women can adopt coping mechanisms such as boundary-setting and redistributing domestic labor, genuine transformation depends on structural reforms: flexible academic policies, affordable care infrastructure, and legal enforcement of equal partnerships. Only by addressing both **agency and structure** can academia move beyond the rhetoric of 'leaning in' to create truly inclusive spaces for women's intellectual and professional lives.

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