15 The Invisible Cost of Success: Work–Family Conflict, Emotional Well-Being, and Career Advancement among Women Professionals

Dr. Zeenat Mirza*
Associate Professor, Agarwal PG College, Jaipur.
*Corresponding Author: zeenatmirza76@gmail.com

Abstract

Women's participation in professional and economic life has stretched opportunities for independence, guidance, and personal achievement. However, professional success may coexist with competing family responsibilities and organisational expectations that make work–family balance difficult to achieve. This paper examines the nature of work–family conflict experienced by women, its implications for emotional well-being, the factors contributing to such conflict, and the role of organisational support in addressing it. The discussion focuses on time-related pressures, work-related stress, gendered expectations, household responsibilities, workplace culture, and access to flexible working arrangements. The narrative indicates that work–family conflict should not be understood solely as an individual time-management problem; it is also shaped by family arrangements, and wider office and social norms. The paper argues that women's career success should be assessed not only through professional achievements but also through the opportunities available to pursue those achievements.

Keywords: Work–Family Conflict, Women Professionals, Organisational Support, Flexible Working Arrangements.

Introduction

Women's participation in professional life is an important dimension of development. Education and employment enable women to develop their capabilities, exercise greater financial independence, participate in decision-making, and contribute to national development. Many women professionals are expected to meet demanding workplace targets while also managing childcare, eldercare, domestic responsibilities, and family expectations. These overlapping demands can create a persistent tension between professional and personal roles. The challenge is particularly significant when workplace expectations are inflexible and domestic responsibilities are distributed unequally.

The International Labour Organization reported in October 2024 that approximately 708 million women worldwide were outside the labour force because of unpaid care responsibilities, based on its global estimates for 2023. This figure concerns women outside the labour force, rather than employed women experiencing work–family conflict, but it illustrates the wider relationship between care responsibilities and women's economic participation.

As per International Labour Organization work–family conflict arises when the demands of employment and family life become incompatible. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) identified three major forms of conflict: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behaviour-based conflict. Time-based conflict occurs when the time required by one role restricts participation in another. Strain-based conflict emerges when pressure or fatigue in one domain affects performance in another. Behaviour-based conflict occurs when behaviours expected in one role are difficult to reconcile with expectations in another.

For women professionals, these pressures may influence job satisfaction, career choices, and the willingness to pursue leadership positions. Some women may decline promotions, reduce working hours, or change jobs, due to accommodate family demands. These outcomes are not inevitable, but they demonstrate why career expansion must be examined together with the conditions under which professional success is achieved.

The issue is not simply whether women can balance their work and family lives. It is also whether workplaces, families, and institutions provide fair and practical conditions that allow women to succeed without bearing a disproportionate share of the costs.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing recognition of gender equality and women's professional accomplishment, the demands of paid employment and unpaid care continue to intersect in ways that can place considerable pressure on women. Long working hours, heavy workloads, limited flexibility, expectations of constant availability, and unequal domestic responsibilities may restrict the time and energy available for personal recovery and family engagement.

The problem extends beyond immediate inconvenience. At the same time, organisational policies intended to support work–life balance may have limited value. The central problem addressed by this paper is the gap between women's growing professional aspirations and the structural conditions that may make those aspirations difficult to pursue sustainably.

ISBN: 978-93-49468-41-2

Research Objectives

The paper is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the nature of work–family conflict experienced by women professionals while balancing professional responsibilities and family commitments.
- To assess the relationship between work–family conflict and emotional well-being among women professionals, particularly in terms of stress, emotional exhaustion, and psychological balance.
- To identify the key factors contributing to work–family conflict, including workload, organisational expectations, family responsibilities, gender roles, and inadequate support systems.
- To evaluate the role of organisational support mechanisms, including flexible working arrangements, supportive leadership, and family-friendly workplace policies, in reducing work–family conflict.

Research Gap

Although work–family conflict has been widely studied, limited integrated attention is given to its relationship with emotional well-being, contributing factors, and organisational support among women professionals in the Indian context.

The availability and practical accessibility of family-friendly policies, supportive leadership, and flexible working arrangements also require further examination. This study addresses these gaps by developing an integrated conceptual framework to understand work–family conflict and identify measures to promote women's well-being and professional growth.

Research Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and conceptual research design based on secondary sources. The selected literature is examined thematically under four areas corresponding to the research objectives:

- Nature and dimensions of work–family conflict.
- Work–family conflict and emotional well-being.
- Workplace, family, and social factors contributing to conflict.
- Organisational support mechanisms and their potential role in reducing conflict.

The analysis is interpretive and comparative. It identifies recurring themes, differences in emphasis, and implications for organisations and future research.

ISBN: 978-93-49468-41-2

Review of Literature

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) established a foundational framework for understanding conflict between work and family roles. Their model distinguishes between time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based conflict, demonstrating that incompatible role demands can arise from limited time, the transfer of stress across domains, and conflicting behavioural expectations.

Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams (2000) subsequently developed and validated a multidimensional measure of work–family conflict. Their approach considers both the direction of interference—work interfering with family and family interfering with work—and the time, strain, and behaviour dimensions of that interference.

These frameworks are relevant because work–family conflict is not a single experience. A woman may have sufficient time for family responsibilities but experience emotional exhaustion, or she may experience schedule conflicts even when she feels emotionally supported. Recognising these distinctions helps avoid treating all work–family difficulties as identical.

Finding and Analysis

- **Work–Family Conflict and Emotional Well-Being**

Work–family conflict can involve sustained anxiety arising from mismatched expectations. When work demands fall over into family life, employees may find it difficult to recover emotionally from workplace stress. Conversely, family demands may reduce the time and energy available for professional responsibilities. These findings suggest that emotional well-being should be understood in relation to both individual circumstances and the resources available to women.

- **Family Responsibilities and Gendered Expectations**

Unpaid care work is an important contextual factor in women's participation in employment. The ILO's 2024 reporting highlights the disproportionate burden of unpaid care borne by women and the implications for their economic participation.

Women professionals may therefore experience not only a conflict between paid work and family life but also a conflict between socially expected care giving roles and professional ambitions. The extent of this pressure can differ according to household arrangements, family support, socioeconomic circumstances, the availability of childcare, and the nature of employment.

An important implication is that work–family conflict should not be explained through gender stereotypes or assumptions that women are naturally responsible for domestic care. Instead, it should be examined in terms of how responsibilities are allocated and what support systems are available.

ISBN: 978-93-49468-41-2

- **Organisational Support and Flexible Working Arrangements**

Organisations can influence work–family conflict through workload allocation, staffing levels, scheduling practices, managerial behaviour, leave policies, and the extent to which employees can use flexible arrangements.

A systematic review and meta-analysis published in 2026 examined flexible working arrangements, work–life balance, work–family conflict, and organisational commitment across 38 studies involving 83,951 participants. It reported a positive association between flexible working arrangements and work–life balance, while the pooled relationship with work–family conflict was not statistically significant. The authors also noted contextual differences across countries.

Organisational support is therefore likely to depend not simply on the existence of policies but also on how they are implemented, whether managers encourage their use, and whether employees can access them without fearing adverse career consequences.

Recommendations

Based on the literature synthesis, the following measures are proposed.

For Organisations

- Introduce flexible scheduling and predictable working hours wherever operationally feasible.
- Review workload allocation and discourage unnecessary after-hours communication.
- Train managers to recognise work–family pressures and respond without gender-based assumptions.
- Ensure that employees can use family-friendly policies without stigma or perceived career penalties.
- Evaluate support policies through employee feedback and periodic assessments.

For Families and Society

- Encourage equitable sharing of domestic and caregiving responsibilities.
- Recognise unpaid care work as a shared social responsibility rather than an exclusively female obligation.
- Challenge stereotypes that portray professional ambition and family commitment as incompatible.

For Policymakers and Researchers

- Strengthen access to affordable childcare and care services.
- Encourage gender-responsive employment practices.

ISBN: 978-93-49468-41-2

- Undertake empirical research across different sectors, career stages, and family circumstances.
- Examine whether flexible policies are genuinely accessible and whether they improve employee well-being over time.

These recommendations are proposed measures, not interventions whose effectiveness has been tested by the present paper.

Conclusion

The relationship between professional success and personal well-being is an important dimension of women's participation in the workforce. Work–family conflict illustrates how competing responsibilities, workplace expectations, and unequal caregiving arrangements can create challenges for women seeking to develop their careers while maintaining fulfilling personal and family lives.

The literature reviewed in this paper suggests that work–family conflict is multidimensional and shaped by more than individual time-management practices. Emotional strain, workload, social expectations, and organisational culture all deserve consideration. It also indicates that organisational support may be beneficial, although the effectiveness of flexible working arrangements depends on the circumstances in which they are implemented.

A meaningful response requires a shift from viewing work–family conflict as a private problem for women to recognising it as a shared organisational and social concern. Ultimately, the true measure of women's professional success should include not only what they achieve, but also whether they have fair opportunities to achieve it without sacrificing their well-being, dignity, or aspirations.

References

1. Carlson, D. S., Kacmar, K. M., & Williams, L. J. (2000). Construction and initial validation of a multidimensional measure of work–family conflict. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 56(2), 249–276. https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1999.1713
2. Çivilidağ, A., & Durmaz, Ş. (2026). The relationship of flexible working arrangements on work-family conflict, work-life balance and organizational commitment: A systematic review and meta-analysis. BMC Psychology, 14, Article 472. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-026-04216-y
3. Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). Sources of conflict between work and family roles. Academy of Management Review, 10(1), 76–88. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1985.4277352

ISBN: 978-93-49468-41-2

4. International Labour Organization. (2024, October 29). Unpaid care work prevents 708 million women from participating in the labour market. https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/unpaid-care-work-prevents-708-million-women-participating-labour-market

5. Promoting women's well-being: A systematic review of protective factors for work–family conflict. (2023). International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37947550/

6. Sohal, A., Sharma, D., & Sharma, S. (2025). Work–family conflict: A systematic literature review and research agenda. European Management Journal. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2025.10.002.

ISBN: 978-93-49468-41-2