

## CHAPTER 5-

### WHAT DOES THIS RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT WORK-FAMILY BALANCE: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The current study was conducted in Vadodara city to understand employed women's experiences of work-family balance. The focus was on understanding the positive spillovers between work and family that facilitate balance and lead to enrichment; and the factors that hindered their process of work-family balance; their navigation through the negative spillover of the demands of work and family. This research integrates the positive and negative side of the spillovers to understand the experiences of employed women about their work-family balance. It is a sequential explanatory mixed method research design conducted in two phases where quantitative data was collected first using a scale to measure the level of work-family balance of women, followed by qualitative interviews to understand the processes involved in creating work-family balance. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, correlations, and ANOVA and for interview data, I have used thematic analysis.

The results of the study were viewed with a conceptual lens of family theories of '*Social exchange*' and '*Conflict framework*' (White, 2005; White & Klein, 2002). These concepts were integrated into four-fold taxonomies put forth by Frone (2003), where the domains of work and family are seen both as facilitating as well as conflicting with each other. The conceptual framework presented in figure 5.1 summarizes all the findings in a nutshell. The top four boxes of the figure clearly show that work and family have their own demands, responsibilities, resources and support. As per the four-fold taxonomy given by Frone (2003), work and family enhance as well as create difficulties for each other. On the positive side, the spillover between work and family can enhance each other in various ways, by increasing their access to resources and support. The resources and support received in each sphere leads to efficiency in the other sphere. The skills acquired in one sphere can be applied in the other sphere. The satisfaction of a job well done leads to a good emotional state which has an overall benefit.

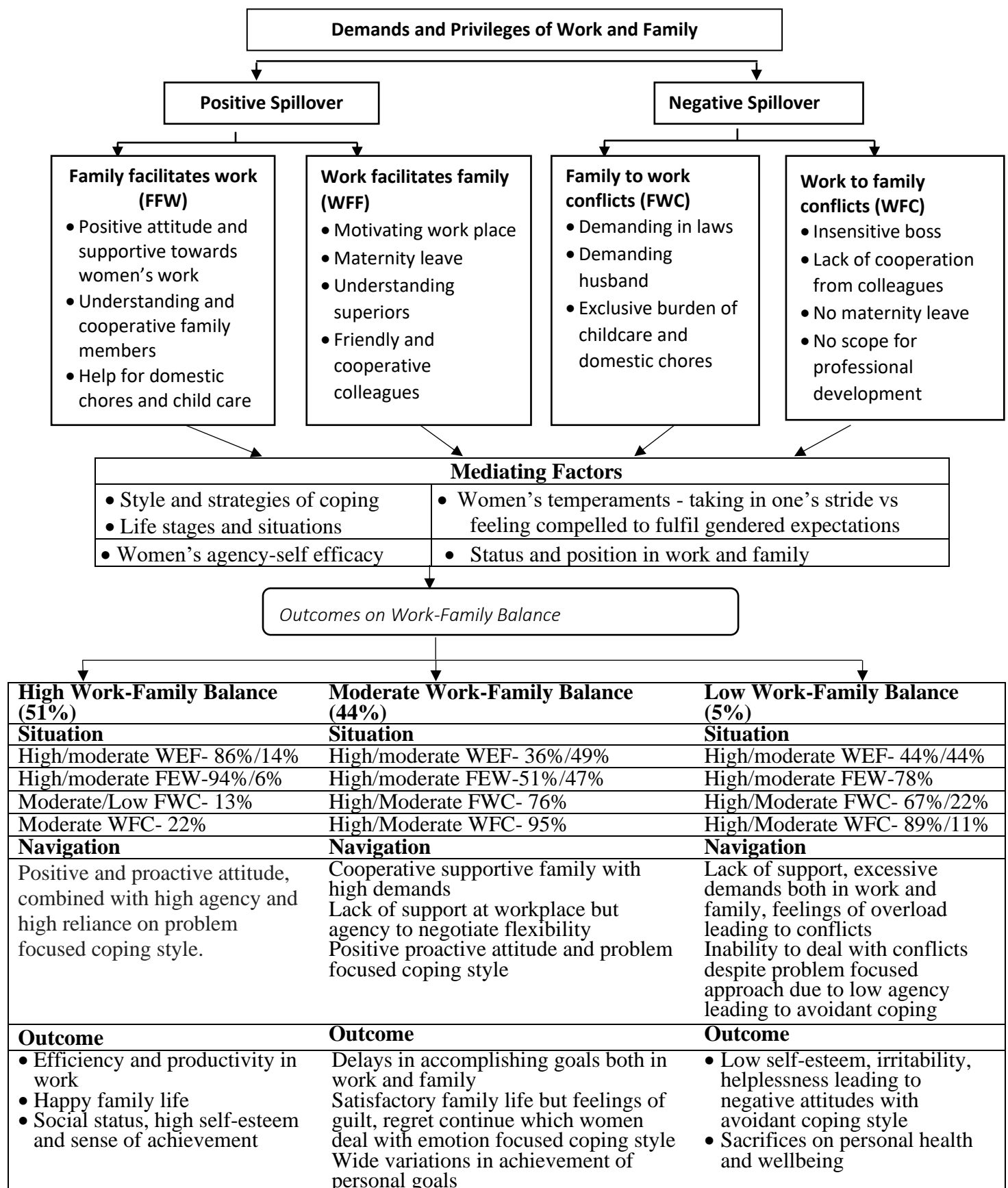


Figure 5.1 Trajectories of women's work-family balance

Almost all women reported that work and family enhanced each other, though the level of enhancement varied. About 71% of women reported high family to work enhancement and 61% reported high work to family enhancement and the rest reported moderate enhancement. Many women experienced positive spillover from family to work. Ninety-seven percent women felt that family added to their self-esteem and the major resources of the family reported by women included husbands who understood the investment of women in the family and his willingness to support them in every walk of life including errands and caring for children. In addition, women expressed that motivation and encouragement (for women's progress) and support (childcare and household) received from parents and in-laws gave them a sense of acceptance and security. When children understood, accepted and cooperated in maintaining everyday schedules women felt less burdened about their mothering roles. The support from family enables them to concentrate at their workplace and they can work efficiently without any delays. As reported by more than 85% of women such an environment always helped them to be more dedicated, sincere, efficient and punctual at work, maintain better interpersonal relations and acquire managerial skills that supported their personal life. Almost all felt that family acts as a stress buster for work tensions leading to catharsis to prevent residual carry over.

With reference to work enhancing family, ninety-eight percent women reported that work leads to positive personality development and eighty-seven percent reported that their workplace acts as a source of emotional catharsis which itself was a positive benefit. The provision of maternity leave, opportunities for upward mobility and positive work environment including sensitive boss and cooperative colleagues were the key features that supported their family roles. Seventy-five to 90 % reported that being an employed woman helped them to provide better care for their children, spouse and elders due to wider exposure. Managing multiple responsibilities and acquiring skills helped them be more efficient with the family roles. The positive moods from a supportive work environment get carried back to their families and enabled them to enjoy family life better.

Having high and moderate work-family balance as reported by 90% participants of the study does not necessarily indicate the absence of conflicts between work and family. On the family front, role overload was experienced by a little more than one third of the participants. More than 55% reported issues with care responsibilities and about 17% were unable to deal with societal expectations. These came in the form of increased expectations from in-laws, husband and children, conflicting ideologies, and non-supportive family

members. This led to lack of concentration in work for 75% of women, delays and postponement in work for 30% and inefficiency of work for 15% of women.

Work to family conflict was created due to hectic schedule and work timings as reported by a third of women and insensitive boss and non-supportive colleagues as reported by a quarter of women. The findings of Aryee, Srinivas, & Tan (2005) revealed that work overload was positively related to work-family conflict. During the interviews, women narrated that limited opportunities, no flexibility, gender discrimination, lack of facilities, communication and appreciation added to increased work to family conflicts. As a result, women were unable to fulfil family demands and responsibilities. Almost 60% were unhappy about lack of attention to parents and in-laws, 40% were concerned about lack of attention to children and 20% lack of attention to the spouse. They also reported that they feel guilty, frustrated, irritated and annoyed with the conflicting situations that emerged due to the mismatch in the timings of work and the demands of care from family. Women, especially with young children in preschool or in daycare, felt like a mess. Close to 45% had to forego social functions. About 28% felt that work-family conflicts resulted in diminished family happiness. As reported by White (1999) females in two-earner families have lower work-family balance and lack of clarity in roles to be performed by husband and wife and the importance placed on individuality makes it difficult for both husband and wife to fulfil their marital obligations (Gani & Ara, 2010).

Interference and enhancement from work or family occur differently for different women which depends on several factors listed as mediating factors, as presented in the third set of boxes in figure 5.1. The way the negative and positive spillover gets integrated affects the level of balance as seen in the fourth line of boxes in the same figure. Study findings show that more than 50% of women reported high work-family balance, 44% could balance to a moderate extent and only 6% reported low work-family balance. The results (three-way ANOVA) show that years of women's work experience, family type and their sector of employment do not result into significant differences at the level of work-family balance of women. However, women's narratives do reveal that several personal and situational factors such as women's motive of employment, nature of their work, their occupational designation, age of children, type of family and most importantly their own attitude and approach towards the situation did have some effect. All these elements get summarized in the final set of the three boxes that profile the key factors and processes that lead to high, moderate and low

levels of work-family balance. In addition, the three case illustrations provide evidence to show how all this plays out in the everyday lives of employed women.

Fifty-seven percent of participants interviewed reported that the prime reason for their employment was to support the family economically. The economic need sometimes compelled them to continue with their existing jobs despite the hectic work timings and negative work environment. Almost 42% reported that they worked to contribute back to society in the form of services like treatment of patients and teaching children in schools. By doing so they put their education into practice. These women also reported that it was their voluntary decision to work. The status of employed woman provides them with a sense of pride and satisfaction in life. Women working for economic need reported fewer instances because the constant stress to earn a living and support the family did not provide them with personal space and made them feel less satisfied with their life situations.

It can be noted that 17% of women with high work-family-balance reported that they had the power to delegate tasks at work to their colleagues and could negotiate and communicate for work timings. The power at workplace to delegate enabled women to have control over the tasks in family like domestic chores and childcare. They even sought support from their husbands for adjustments with their schedules, shared childcare responsibilities through communication and negotiation. Women with moderate and low work-family balance had less scope to exercise control over situations at the workplace or to negotiate for matters that eventually lead to work to family conflicts.

Age of children cannot be noted as a factor leading to conflicts but the fact that lack of support and women's inability to meet the increased needs of children created difficulties. The availability of support for childcare and women's initiative to train their children to be independent smoothened the process for them.

Almost 55% of 201 participants live in nuclear families and 45% in joint families. The study reveals no statistically significant relationship of work-family balance with type of family but interview data highlighted a few aspects related to the type of family. Women reside in nuclear families for several reasons. One conflicting ideologies of in-laws for child rearing and caring, negative attitudes and non-acceptance of women's work; second making women feel compelled to complete domestic chores; third in-laws are no more; which increased expectations of the family; non-supportive for domestic chores and childcare. For 28% of women interviewed it was a mutually voluntary decision to get separated from in-

laws due to their non-supportive attitudes. The in-laws of 42% of the participants either lived in their native places/village or were deceased. Twenty-eight percent of women interviewed lived with their in-laws. In-laws of fifty percent of women were supportive and for 50% they were non-supportive. Rajadhyaksha (2012) in the research *Work-life balance in South East Asia: The Indian experience*, stated that Indian joint family is assumed to be providers of support but the findings of the study does not prove it to be completely true for all women living in joint families.

It can be noted that women with high and moderate work-family balance could maintain a positive attitude towards the work-family conflicts or family-work conflicts, compared to women with low work-family balance. This enabled them to navigate and fulfil their aspirations and goals and achieve a balance between work and family.

An important factor contributing to work-family balance is their agency-self efficacy. Pearson's correlation coefficient indicated a significant positive relation between women's agency- self- efficacy and their level of work-family balance (0.336- Significant at 0.01 level). Women with higher agency-self efficacy were able to maintain high work-family balance but women with moderate to low agency- self-efficacy exhibit moderate to low work-family balance.

Greenhaus & Powell's (2006) explanation about multiple roles and responsibilities resulting in enhancement aligns with findings of the current study. One being the instrumental path where the skills from one domain get transferred and applied to the other. Second affective path, where the transfer of skills leads to high performance and positive effect i.e. facilitation and enrichment of women's balance process. Psychological and physical resources included resources like self-efficacy and self-esteem, personal hardiness, positive emotions like optimism and hope; flexibility i.e. the timing, space and location at which one meets the role requirements. It can be noted that work and home resources increase personal resources and personal resources can be utilized to improve home and work outcomes as reported by Brummelhuis & Bakker (2012). Frone's (2003) explanation that social support like supporting boss and colleague, supportive spouse or other family members reduce the family to work or work to family conflict which was also evident in the current study.

In the dynamic process of achieving work-family balance, there is a demand on women to cope with emerging situations on an everyday basis. Participants responses in the in-depth

interviews provide a clear insight into the fact that strategies and styles of coping do impact their level of work-family balance.

High reliance on problem focused coping style was more evident in women with high work-family balance- 93%, in comparison to women with moderate work-family balance which was 79% and women with low work-family balance which was 73 %. Women with high work-family balance respond to the conflicting situation positively by employing ways of preventive measures where they try to directly deal with the stressor and avoid delaying it or ignoring it. The most important elements that they incorporate in their daily lives to overcome the conflicts are time management and prioritization. Forty-eight percent women with high and 38.5% women with moderate and 2.5% of women with low work-family balance reported that they have the scope/power to prioritize the demands of work or family as per their need.

They maintain a planned schedule on a daily basis by maintaining a to-do list, delegating tasks and deal with emerging unplanned situations with communication and negotiation to seek support. In addition, they engage in decisions that increase their control. They attended to family and children's needs by taking time off or on holidays, thus compensating for their absence. Cunningham & Rosa's (2008) findings endorse that an individual's proactive personality benefits when a person places control over the occupational stressors. This indicates general use of selection, optimization and compensation behaviour to reduce conflicts between work and family (as also found by Baltes & Heydens, 2003).

Despite using problem focused coping style women with moderate and low work-family balance reported that it didn't bring the expected result all the time. So, at such instances, they adjusted to the need of the situations, gave into other's expectations or sought emotional catharsis, as reported by 17% of women with moderate work-family balance and by 10% of women with low work-family balance. Such behaviours helped them to alter their own negative emotions such as frustrations, anger, guilt and anxiety arising out of conflicts.

Participants also reflected an attitude of "what can't be cured has to be endured" as a coping strategy falling under the purview of 'avoidant coping'. Such coping was reported in 18% responses of women with low work-family balance; 5% in high work-family balance and 3.5% in moderate work-family balance. From these responses, it is clearly evident that women make their decisions based on evaluation of cost and benefits as proposed in the social exchange framework (White & Klein, 2002).

To summarise, we have noted that participants' responses clearly indicate that work and family are integrated and run parallel on one track and cannot be considered as two separate spheres. Role overload arising out of lack of support for childcare responsibilities and other workplace benefits, limited scope for progress, demanding and non-flexible working timing were related to the conflict component. Spousal and family support, motivation for work and family friendly supervisors and co-workers had a positive effect on the facilitation component of work-family balance. Proactive personality, agency and self-efficacy of women moderated the relationship between controllable and non-controllable stressors arising out of work-family conflict.

I now present three case illustrations from the extensive data to illuminate the complex process of achieving work-family-balance which is a dynamic process for employed women. A brief overview of the components that go into the process is summarized in the three boxes at the bottom of figure 5.1.

### **Case-1: Saanvi's Story tells us about the Trajectory towards High Work-Family Balance**

Saanvi is 39 years old with a post-graduate degree and works as a freelance blood bank officer and a pathologist in one of the renowned hospitals of Vadodara. She is married for more than fifteen years and has a work experience of close to 10 years. Her son is a primary grader and her daughter is in her teenage and therefore does not require constant hands-on care. Formerly, she had a government job, but as her husband got transferred to be posted in Saudi Arabia, she was asked to quit her job, so that they could have the family living together. She quit her job temporarily by choice for some-time, so that she could plan to have children and also spend time caring for them until they went to school. Later she came back to Baroda, as her husband also was travelling between the two places. On her return, she started freelancing as a pathology officer and blood bank officer. Her husband and she decided to live separate from his parents to avoid any conflicts with in-laws due to attitudinal differences, and as they observed that the in-laws did not offer any practical support to them. Her husband stays out of the country and visits them every alternate month, so now she is adjusted to the situation where none of the family members are available to take care of family responsibilities or offer support to children. She feels – *“after all, what can't be cured, has to be endured”*. She is not compelled to work and earn, but it is her own belief to



contribute to society because she is educated for a reason; or else what's the use of her education?

She gets up early in the morning, exercises, gets children ready and sends them to school, winds up the domestic chores with the help of a maid and reaches the office by 8 am. She is in the office from 8 am till 3 pm and comes back in time to be there for children when they come home from school. She feels managing work, children, her own demands and other responsibilities is not an easy task. The challenge for her is to seek paid help for domestic chores and childcare because that is the only factor that keeps her daily routine efficient and smooth without disturbance. She feels adjustments during the initial stage of marriage are demanding and take time, but a part of life; things are settled now between husband and wife in terms of expectations routines and roles. When her husband is home, she gets great support as he looks after the kids, who are also understanding and cooperative. He looks after the house but is not much involved in household chores. During the presence of husband at home, she can work free from the tension of home and children being left alone. Such a family environment and her own personal attitude facilitate her work, which is also expressed by 94 % of participants in the sample. She is the major decision maker in daily matters of family and discusses with her husband for major concerns and decisions. It's her fixed working hours, delegation of childcare and domestic chores to paid help that enables her to focus at her work. She shared

*"See the day is just of 24 hours and everyone can't do everything in it and the capacity of an individual to work is also important. When I am tired, I want to just relax and at that point of time, I want to forget everything else. You must devote time to yourself too like I sleep whenever I want. If I keep moving and stretching myself when I am not able to, I will suffer."*

*"You must also set your own priorities, if you set your own priorities and decide what you want to go with and what you want to discard. Of course, there is a long list for it, but one must do it. So, it is the priorities that matter."*

Ten years of work experience and with a social circle at the workplace that is an outcome of 10 years of her committed contribution brings her happiness at workplace that cannot be provided by the society; she feels,

*"If you don't work, you have to just be with women who gossip and waste time in kitty parties".*

This shows that work is enhancing family not only by resources but also her sense of self. Such a trend was reported by 84 % of participants. Other women who maintain '*high work-family balance*' are totally not devoid of conflicts but its prevalence is lower (22% report moderate and 78% low level of work to family conflicts). Only 13% face moderate levels of family to work conflicts and the rest report a low level of family to work conflict.

However, this process of seeking support and of achieving a balance between multiple things is not easy and not free of sacrifices. As Saanvi puts it, it is her own control over decisions, support from husband, her own personal commitment and passion, efficient use of time with a positive attitude, growing with each experience and constant learning that has helped her navigate the difficulties. It is a feel-good factor that she is able to contribute to society that too in ensuring people's health.

'*Time for self*' is a major sacrifice in the process of balancing: she would like to stitch, read books and spend more time at home. Somehow, she manages half an hour in the morning to read newspaper and exercise but cannot devote time for self-care and grooming; but feels it's okay as it doesn't cause much problem, or affect her sense of self.

### **Case 2- Steering through Work-Family conflicts to achieve Moderate WFB: Aashi's Story**

Aashi is 35 years old and works in a private school as a secondary section educator. She is married for more than 5 years and has work experience of more than 10 years. She has a son of preschool age. She clearly expresses that in the initial stages, she could not find a balance between family and work life but eventually learnt to navigate her paths more effectively. They lived in Anand along with her in-laws where she had to commute every day to Vadodara. It used to be like 6 am to 6 pm job. It was a bit difficult to deal with in-laws as they had high expectations from her. So, she decided to shift to Baroda with her husband. It was a period of struggle, where both had to earn, so there was no luxury of the thought of leaving the job. Now she has that choice but feels she will never think of leaving the job, which adds so much value to her life both at an economic and personal level, indicating work to family enhancement. She heads her area of specialization which is an additional burden, making her job very demanding and challenging, but she feels if she is paid high, they would expect her to perform well, which she has accepted. The ethos of the workplace is very demanding where she sometimes is given two shifts in a day, one in the morning and again in

the evening which becomes hectic and difficult to manage. The work environment also generates a lot of negativity leading to unpleasant interactions. She has developed her own mechanism to deal with the problems at the workplace by way of becoming selectively 'deaf and blind' to the negative situations and avoid certain reactions, arguments and confrontations. She also seeks support from her head who helps her understand the mechanisms of the workplace and acts as a role model to her. She says

*"So, then I tell myself that I am here to work and not maintain relations so I have learnt to look at from a professional angle without emotional attachment, which I could not do initially. I have made demarcations in personal and professional life and deal with emerging daily issues in a calm and reflective manner better than before, and learnt to overlook/ ignore trivia. It's now that I don't trust people easily and when I do trust them it's not blind faith".*

Demanding work schedules make it difficult for her to attend social/family functions with in-laws due to leave issues, as she has reserved the available leave for emergencies. She has learnt to deal with clashes with the in-laws and their complaints without feeling bad or guilty.

Ninety-five percent women like Aashi experience work to family conflict, and 76 percent experience family to work conflict. To deal with the negative spillovers created by work and family, she forgets about the home at work and forgets work when home. She tries to complete the school work at the school itself so that she can give time to her family especially her son who waits for her the whole day. She seeks cooperation from her son, so that he can learn to adjust in her absence, but compensates for it by spending time at night, reading stories which keeps him and her somewhat happy. She has constant support from her husband. Her husband became involved caring for their son after looking at her struggling to manage between the two. When she gets late, he would manage everything including domestic chores and some cooking. This is a major factor that helps her stay balanced. They both have agreed by consensus to give priority to finishing pending tasks on weekends, rather than always visiting the in-laws which helps her function efficiently. Her planning is meticulous by making to-do lists. She says,

*"At night I write the tasks to be done the next day, so it becomes easy to manage the next day. I look at this and mark the tasks done and follow up*

*for the ones not done". So, things do not remain unattended causing tension due to pile up".*

She has chosen to manage domestic chores at her own convenience, as paid maid help does not match with her timings, and no one else is available at home to take care of it. She at times gets frustrated when she is not able to achieve what she wants, especially the incomplete domestic tasks which stare at her. She says –

*I have nobody else to share, so I talk to my husband; or write a dairy, where I express everything, so negative feelings are expressed but do not harm anyone. But sometimes this does not work if levels of frustration and anger are high, then I vent out everything on him. Feel bad later, but what can I do?*

She clearly says, family is her priority, as she is working for them, and due to which she is able to provide good education to her child and has an improved lifestyle. The work gives her a sense of achievement and satisfaction along with money reflecting mutual enhancement. Of the women who fall in Aashi's profile, 51% report high family to work enhancement and 47% report moderate enhancement, whereas a slightly lower percentage report work as an enhancing factor for the family (36% high and 49% moderate).

So, in her case, the problem lies in insufficient support for domestic chores and childcare. She focuses more on practical problem-solving strategies which works for her effectively. Handling the politics at the workplace is a continuous process, where she uses emotion focused coping style as some of it can only be dealt at an emotional level, simultaneously attempting problem focused coping style, where she opted for personality changes, that is not to be emotionally attached to the issues at the workplace. She still feels at times that the child is getting neglected and certain issues of work to family conflict are left unaddressed leading to negative effects on her. She says –

*"When I strive for perfection at both the places, I developed sleeping issues and was not able to sleep and felt very tired. So, I was advised by doctors to do as much as I can and not keep high expectations from own self.*

She strives to get out of this 'superwoman mode' and is trying to learn but at present experiences a moderate work-family balance.

### **Case 3- Feeling Sandwiched between the Pressures of Work and Family: Darpana's Story of Low Balance**

Darpana works in the government sector as a teacher and has a low work-family balance. She feels that both her workplace and family are full of problems creating difficulties in everyday life. She stays with her in-laws and has a daughter who is in a preschool. She does have a paid help for domestic chores but her own beliefs make her feel compelled to fulfil all the responsibilities of the family single-handedly. Her words –

*“you know as a woman, we are required to do everything. I do have a mother in law who is supportive to some extent, but I feel it's my responsibility as a daughter in law to fulfil all the responsibilities, and I feel guilty, if I fall short of it in some way”* - are indicative of it.

She works as a teacher and is also pursuing B.Ed to upgrade herself for a primary teacher's job. She needs to do many things apart from teaching in her job which along with her studies take much time of her daily schedule. The lack of support and understanding of the supervisors at the workplace makes life difficult. Though working till late is appreciated, late arrival at the workplace is never accepted and sometimes treated with a salary cut which is very demotivating. The school principal is a male, and is reluctant to accept women's schedules and does not have a positive attitude towards employed mothers, and hence he does not accommodate their needs. When she started looking for a job, she first checked if she could enrol her daughter there, so as to reduce pick up and drop off time, but the workplace didn't pay heed to her requests to accommodate kids there. All women with her profile face such work to family conflicts.

In general, the family is supportive to her working and also upgrading her education, but in practical terms, her husband is not available at home as he runs a business; in addition to that his total focus is on the business where he expects everyone's involvement as and when needed. But he is insensitive to her and child's situational needs, thus not taking initiative to support her on a daily basis. In-laws, though at home, are not in a position to do much for the child because of their old age and their own limited capabilities. Despite the presence of domestic help, she has many household duties like she needs to cook, take care of her in-laws, and daughter without any support, thus creating a role overload for her. Her day overflows with work and family responsibilities, making her often irritable towards the child

and thus affecting the relationship between them. She does not get time for her own self and is unable to give time to her husband or fulfil his sexual needs. This annoys him and he blames her for being inefficient in managing her time and tasks, about which she feels helpless, causing arguments between them. About engaging with her child, she says –

*“My daughter sees her friends playing with their mothers and feels deprived that I don’t do the same with her. I try to plan and take her out on weekends, but something else comes up in the way of these plans and I feel bad about it but can’t do anything! In addition, I have taken up further studies with passion and intention to further my career, and I can’t give it time due to family demands, which frequently upsets me”.*

Ninety percent women with low balance report such family situations that give rise to family to work conflict. In terms of family and work enhancing each other, three-fourths of the participants report moderate and a quarter report low enhancement from family to work despite conflicts, while 44 % report moderate or low enhancement from work to family.

Darpana tries to negotiate at her workplace for relaxation in timings but is not successful, and so the conflicts continue and work and family intrude each other. She has tried to communicate and negotiate with her principal and colleagues, but no one seems to cooperate or give an ear to her needs. She cannot leave it even temporarily, as she does not want to get tied to total financial support from her husband as an obligation. On the family front, she tries to address the issue, by systematic planning and seek assistance for some tasks from her husband, but it often fails due to unexpected contingencies, because other matters related to visitors, social and business obligations assume priority over the women’s needs.

This creates extreme anger and frustration, which she vents out in the heat of the moment, but regrets later. The main reason for her low work-family balance is her unfriendly and unsupportive work environment, and lack of sensitivity of family towards her needs. At a personal level, her need to maintain the ‘normative social image of an ideal family woman’ comes in the way of giving priority to herself over domestic tasks and family needs; hence it puts her in a situation to always go beyond her limits to achieve- *“Aadarsh bahu- biwi syndrome (ideal daughter-in-law and wife)”*. She is away from her extended social group causing her anxiety and makes her afraid about taking any action that increases her risk of isolation from family. I could see that she was totally physically and emotionally exhausted, and not feeling good about herself and her situation! Unable to deal with it actively, she is

resigned to her situation by saying “let it be! I cannot do anything more for it!”, thus continuing to live in a situation of low balance.

These illustrations point to the fact that work-family balance is an evolving, volatile and dynamic process shaped by the contours of changing life situations. Though one advocates for a supportive workplace as a mandate to reduce work-family conflicts which was most predominantly observed in the study, and also reflected in the results of Sethi (2019), it can be treated as only one of the solutions, which has to operate along with many others.

The study is an opportune moment to reflect on the emerging changes in family and gender roles that impact women's lives.

On the family front, it is observed that women's ability to communicate, negotiate and to take control plays an important part along with the changing contours of family life, that is observed to be more supportive with full acceptance of the employed status of women. The study also shows that though middle-class women's lives have changed substantially due to education and employment; family's failed adaptations to release women from the exclusive burden of caretaking roles and restrictive gendered attitudes still sometimes become roadblocks for exercising their agency and self-efficacy, making it difficult to achieve balance. I take an opportunity to reflect on certain observations that emerge from the experiences of the study which also raise some significant questions: -

### **Are Women Able to Break Away from Gender Stereotypes?**

The study highlights a mixed picture of women's conformity to gender stereotypes. It can be observed that women have entered into higher positions and different occupations that provide them with a higher status and respect, but the set notions that women as primary caretaker and homemaker have not been completely wiped away.

Most women had non-gendered expectations and beliefs towards work and family, except three participants who still believe women to be primary caretakers and to be responsible for the family affairs. These women had a belief that women are a part of this system where women perform their family roles of mother, daughter in law and daughter without anything in expectation, they are dedicated to their families than their work to get special recognition of “*superwoman*”. These women were not able to and didn't want to question or go beyond these expectations resulting in *superwoman syndrome*. As a result, they accept and become

submissive to the situations and make every attempt to fulfil those. These women believe that it is them who have to cook, feed the family, take care of children and elders and please the family with their efforts. They tried to achieve everything on their own and dependence on help was not something that they liked.

On the other hand, a group of women rejected the gendered expectations like fulfilling the chores by themselves, mothers as prime caretakers, and women's submissive role to accept the family expectations without questioning. In response to these expectations, women sought paid help for domestic chores and childcare, used electronic appliances for chores and whenever needed and were flexible in their schedules, unlike the expectation that everything has to be perfect with no diversions. They accepted the fact that '*flexibility with discipline*' is essential and not every time one can achieve everything, so if needed to seek help is not an issue. However, this is not to say that family was not important to them, but they rationally and logically think of the role divisions and negotiate for equality in role divisions.

**Spotlight-** Gender roles are predefined but acceptance and rejection of it is a dynamic process based on women's own social orientations.

### **Is Family Support Free of Cost?**

Past research on work and family highlight the importance of the support of family for employed women. The current study reveals that gender roles expectations and support extended by family operate parallel to each other. Most women had family support in terms of involvement of husband and in-laws in childcare and domestic chores, motivation and encouragement for their work, the cooperation of children, in-laws and husband towards their work schedule. However, the support for women results because of women giving back to their families in terms of economic contribution towards family, acceptance and adjustment to family culture, work benefits like maternity leave, opportunity to travel to a foreign country, better lifestyle and better educational facility to children. However, it cannot be generalized that this is true for all women.

It can be observed from women's responses that though their family culture did not allow women to work, they managed to convince their family to let them work. Moreover, women found the means to take care of their children while they worked by either depending on their spouses, in-laws, hired help or day-care centres. They also adjusted to the restrictions laid down by the family regarding their choice of occupation, location of



workplace and the duration of working hours. Domestic help was another facility that allowed women to work and simultaneously manage their daily chores.

On the other hand, there were families who were supportive of women and their work and the families didn't expect anything in return. Women proved themselves to efficient managers, thus ensuring the well-being of the family and being a competent employee, despite the struggles and complications in both the domains.

Family support was reported by all women to be the most important factor to succeed in professional and personal life. Work and family both are important parts of women's lives but family is usually the topmost priority. Not all women are able to seek support from their families due to the non-supportive beliefs and attitudes for employed women and that's the reason they stay separate because the cost is higher than benefits. It can be noted that women who didn't receive support from their families felt helpless and felt like their lives were stuck in a glitch. This shows us that women analyse the cost and benefit to seek support from family, and if needed can sacrifice on their personal front to seek and sustain family support.

They could compromise on their work front like forego promotions, transfers, take a job with less working hours and demands. On the personal front, they just ignore their own self, compromise on their health, make sacrifices and just give their everything to their family as they feel obliged to return back to them.

**Spotlight-** Family support is an asset for employed women but the costs need to be negotiated or analysed.

### **Spouse's Contribution to Women's Success**

It can be observed that most women report that their husbands support and share domestic chores and childcare responsibilities. The support enables women to meet the requirements of work and family. The research on men's involvement in family (Sriram, 2019a, b; Sriram & Navalkar, 2012,2013; Sriram & Sandhu, 2012) show that men as fathers are involved with children in several ways which holds true for the current study as well. To state that men are completely absent from family roles would be incorrect. In the current study, it was observed that women always negotiated and sought their husband's support and were successful to a great extent. It was only in the cases where the husband had a touring job, had long duration of working hours, had no respect for women's work, or when their involvement was deliberately not expected then the husband's role was a miss which caused difficulties for

women. But largely women reported that their husbands to be supportive and understanding towards them.

The responses of most women stated the importance of support from the spouse. Women feel they can be independent and manage everything, but the marriage involves the husband along with his family, so they need to plan everything accordingly. Even if they had high agency-self efficacy, somewhere in the responses it was subtly reflected that the importance of husband's *marzi* mattered (willingness of husband). Women's belief is that if a husband is supportive, they can navigate through the conflicts efficiently without regrets and guilt.

The involvement of husbands in household chores and childcare is evident but still lags behind the efforts by women. It is very essential to carefully craft men's role as fathers and husbands because they act as role models for future generations in terms of their behaviours.

**Spotlight-** Men can be caregivers as well as homemakers but there is a need of acceptance and understanding to help men move beyond their gendered stereotype roles of provider and protector as also supported by (Ahmad, 2012 ; Lirio, et al., 2007) in other countries.

### **What are the Features of a truly Supportive Workplace?**

Workplace for employed women becomes like the second family away from home. This necessitates that the second family is supportive and motivating just like their own family. However, the scenario is different in reality. The sector of employment does not make much difference to women but the attitudes of people working together and the consideration of the fact that women are also working just like men and also taking care of their family roles becomes an important component to tell if the workplace is conducive for women. Most women employed report difficulties of childcare arrangements, lack of flexibility in work timings and lack of time off, but the workplace takes hardly any initiatives to address or even listen to women's concerns and difficulties. It can be expected that the workplace maintains professional etiquettes with no interference from family, but in reality, both are important parts of women's lives, and it is not easy for women to separate both. Most difficulties of women can be resolved if they receive support from their bosses and colleagues by just being a little sensitive to their dual roles. Flexibility with responsibility could be a viable option made available to women. Non-judgemental attitude towards women is very essential. This is because it was observed that those women who had younger kids were looked down at their

work and were made to feel that they cannot work after marriage and having kids. It is very essential that workplaces become sensitive towards parental roles and make the workplace stress free. Women report increased physical and mental stress due to the increased workload for which workplace can set compulsive limits for workers like 8 hours a day and then they can leave. There has to be an intervention from workplace to help women handle work and family differently without mixing them up. Women can be given a compulsory family vacation period which can provide them family time together to can for the loss of time with families. Women's experience highlight workplace to be a stressor than enhancer, especially who do not receive support in any form from their workplace.

Another important element that gets highlighted is women's pay scale. They are paid very little as compared to the limitless hours they spend at work. Recognition and acknowledgement of women's time towards company's outputs should be practised. This can motivate and develop trust in the organization. There should be a scope to recognize family needs and provide support in any form which they otherwise cannot afford. Some women earn so less that they can't afford paid help and money is essential to survive. To get the expected returns and retain women's interest in the job, it is essential to motivate, encourage and provide them opportunities for personal and professional growth.

The expectations from employees to be available 24/7 distresses a lot of women and even leads to frustrations, anxieties and incompleteness. They look forward to stress-relieving techniques by way of attending stress management therapies or sessions, by practising yoga or work out if time permits. The study provides an avenue to come up with not counselling but just sessions with employees where they can release their tension and frustration by talking to each other. Women's responses express the need for them to be at least heard. Employees at times feel left behind or feel the insensitivity of the workplace towards them. There is a need to come up with support services based on the needs of employees, instead of just set patterns of public holidays or casual leave. Life of an employee includes aspects of family, work, self, friends and recreation, but most of the times their lives revolve from work to family and family to work. There is a need for employees to spare time for their own selves, entertainment and with their friends to socialize. It is observed that employees themselves create support systems for themselves, which could be within or outside family like their neighbours, relatives or their colleagues for childcare especially. The most important need for employees in the current competitive era is developing and sustaining their motivation and interest in their personal and professional activities. Most employees

report of having depression but it is left unattended by them. There is a lack of understanding among colleagues and insensitivity of bosses towards employee's family role, which makes it essential that even the bosses should develop sensitivity towards employees and colleagues should be given sessions to develop a cordial relationship with other colleagues. There is a lack of scope to communicate or even get the things heard at the workplace due to the stubborn and rigid attitudes of bosses. The support from bosses and supervisors itself relieves most tensions arising from work and can motivate the employees to retain interest in the institute. Support from the workplace is an essential component for work-family balance.

It is also important that employees pay special attention to their health as the stress of work and family takes a toll on their health most of the times.

### **Is Work-Family Balance Important? Personal Reflections**

Work-family balance is a continuous process which demands maintenance. A slight avoidance or disturbance in the process disrupts the cycle. The study initially raised a question if work-family balance is essential. I personally feel work-family balance is not something that is mandated but it evolves gradually with time and practice. It is a process that is a part of every individual directly or indirectly. Once an individual gets an idea of handling things, it gets inculcated in their routines and it automatically becomes a routine for them to balance work and family. It should be noted that the levels of work-family balance in women do not define women. It is just an element inclusive in their daily routines. We cannot conclude that women with high work-family balance are better compared to those with low work-family balance because women who reported high work-family balance have also gone through the various walks of life and have been challenged by multiple ups and downs and turbulence. So, work-family balance is a process that evolves with time and not overnight. It is something achievable and manageable but not something that defines the status of employed women.

**In my words - Work-family balance** is a modus operandi to deal with the expectations of work and family by exercising personal agency-efficacy.