The Concept of Work-Life Balance: It’s Applicability for the Female Employees in Sri Lankan Context

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary world is organized in a way that employment is essential for survival. Intriguingly, work has become another sphere deviating away from family and living. The term Work Life Balance (WLB) has become an important phenomenon within this scenario. Balancing between working at an office, providing services for an organization and engaging in personal life including handling family matters is broadly termed “work-life balance”. Achieving this balance poses many benefits to the individual, organizations as well as to the society. Similarly much research has emphasized the downfalls of not achieving a proper work-life balance.

The concept of WLB is widely researched in organizational psychology as well as in business studies, covering many concepts within it. Flexiwork and telework are two of the most significant approaches that have been discussed in achieving WLB in the modern corporate world. Looking at gender based studies, a majority of them seem to be focusing on challenges faced by women in achieving WLB. However, these studies are very context specific and therefore it is difficult to generalize them to a standard population. Specifically within the Sri Lankan context, very few studies are found to be directly discussing WLB and its gender specific issues.

This study explores the basic concepts of WLB and a general situation of female workforce in Sri Lankan context. The research adopts a literature review as the main methodology where existing research work is looked into to find current research debates on work life balance and whether it has been researched in the Sri Lankan context.

Key words: Flexiwork, Teleworking, Work life balance, Women workforce

1 INTRODUCTION

The benefits of achieving a balance between work and home lives for employees are widely recognized in terms of enhanced job satisfaction, well being and health (Cooper & Lewis 1998), whilst the direct gains to business of supporting work–life balance initiatives are increasingly recognized by organizations (Dex & Scheibl 1999, Goff et al. 1990). Despite evidence of widespread efforts to address work–life balance through a range of organizational initiatives (Department of Trade and Industry, 2004), recent employee surveys suggest that many people still face great difficulties balancing work and family responsibilities. The effects of this slow implementation of a balanced culture are potentially huge.

Understanding and managing the balance between the work–family interface is of growing importance for employers, individuals and researchers. Competing demands between work and personal roles often result in conflict for employees (Grant-Vallone & Donaldson 2001). The spill-over effects from work to home environments have been widely documented (Burke & McKeen 1992, Jones & Fletcher 1996, Grzywacz & Marks 1999) and can be seen in the deterioration of the quality of partner- and parent-roles because of work-related stress (Langan-Fox 1998) and the impairment of social and non-work interests because of the difficulties in securing a regular work–leisure patterns (Maruyuma et al. 1995). Such findings parallel those highlighted within the shiftwork literature where employees working unsociable shifts and long hours have been consistently found to suffer from increased social isolation and impaired interpersonal relationships (Harrington 1994).

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The achievement of work life balance is crucial for success in work and life. Achieving this balance presents many benefits to the individual, organizations and the society as a whole. Flexiwork and telework being two of the most significant approaches that have been discussed in achieving WLB today’s day and age, in terms of gender based studies, a majority of them seem to be focusing the challenges face by women in achieving WLB. However, these studies are very context spe-
cific and most often cannot be applied to a standard population. Very few studies have been carried out within the Sri Lankan context which, focus on WLB and its gender specific issues. This study explores the basic concepts of WLB and a general situation of female work force in Sri Lankan context.

1.2 Methodology
The research method adopted is a content analysis through literature review while identifying key concepts in the current research context. The study is based on an exploratory inquiry aiming to find what, why and how of a particular concept. The study starts by investigating the concept of WLB and then looks at why it is important. It then concludes by outlining the strategies found in achieving them. Flexibility and teleworking are discussed as the key concepts and strategies, which could pave way to build further studies where they become variables.

2. The Concept of Flexibility
In this competitive day and age, organizations have come to the realization that people or human resource is absolutely critical to success as they initiate capital growth and technological expansion. People are all different and they have different profiles: they bring different life and employment experiences, qualifications, interests, skills, abilities and competencies (Wickramasinghe & Jayabandu, 2007). However, people need a certain degree of attention to efficiently and steadily perform at a high standard (Updegraff, 2004).

Innovative human resource management ideas, technologies and practices have been exchanged for the old ones (Noon and Blyton, 1997); for example, workplace flexibility (Johnson, 2004). Attempts to change the nature of employment in adopting flexibility have been viewed as an effort to address changing organizational and environmental necessities (Twiname et al, 2006); the use of workplace flexibility strategies has been increasing. Organizational flexibility strategies could be recognized as internal flexibility, external flexibility, quantitative or numerical flexibility and qualitative or functional flexibility (Johnson, 2004). Internal flexibility is related to the ability to cope with various changes in the labour requirements by using the prevailing workforce (for instance, overtime, flexible working hours). In contrast, external flexibility refers to making the maximum use of external labour when necessary (for instance by the use of temporary contracts). Quantitative or numerical flexibility depends on variation of the amount of work (for instance, number of workers, number of working hours). Qualitative or functional flexibility refers to varying the content of work in connection with the qualification of workers (job rotation, horizontal and vertical mobility) (Loosie et al, 1998). Each of these strategies brings various advantages and disadvantages for organizations and employees alike (Johnson, 2004). Yet, organizations need to have a vision of future organisation and future worker in order to manage necessary structural, technological and psychological changes involved in using any of these strategies (Strachan and Burgess, 1998; Huws et al., 1996).

3. The Concept of Teleworking
3.1 What is Teleworking?
Teleworking is generally defined as “working from anywhere at anytime” (Kurland and Bailey, 1999), or performing any work-related duties from a remote location. The term “telework” is used along with “telecommuting” and “virtual work” (e.g. Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Siha and Monroe, 2006). As a practice, it is becoming increasingly common around the world (Davis and Polonko, 2003). In fact, the remote worker population is predicted to increase from 758.6 million in 2006 to over 1.0 billion by 2011, representing 30 percent of the workforce internationally (Sudan et al., 2007). Telework is an extensive practical concern that deserves research attention.

3.2 How teleworking supports the achievement of work-life balance support
At its inception, telework aimed at cutting organizational costs related to the maintenance and lease of property but nowadays telework is being implemented to reduce work stress and enable WLB (Sparrow, 2000). Feldman and Gainey (1997) state that workers seek telework to better balance work and family; they turn to organizations which offer telework technology and are prone to leave companies that hinder them from balancing work and family. The flexibility model views telework as a method of balancing the difficulties of work and family (Huws et al., 1996; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). In support of this model, many studies identify telework as an effective strategy for workers to care for dependents (e.g. Hartig et al., 2007; Hill et al., 2003; Major et al., 2008; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). As childcare is extremely costly, working is not even an option for certain people apart from teleworking (Olson and Primps, 1984).

The results of various studies show that telework supports workers in accommodating WLB. For example, in qualitative studies, teleworkers state that telework better their WLB (Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Hill et al., 1998; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). Telework particularly provides workers the flexibility needed to balance both work and family, encouraging them to fulfill their responsibilities in their homes, strengthen relationships with their families, and also optimize time management (Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Hill et al., 1998). Hill et al. (2003) compared traditional office workers, mobile or virtual workers and home-based workers and discovered that those who were home-based displayed the highest level of WLB and the most success in terms of both work and family. In addition, review
of the results of 19 primary studies found a negative relationship between telework and work-family conflict (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007).

Paradoxically, however, telework can be a source of work-life imbalance. Working from home increases the welding of work and personal life domains (e.g. Hartig et al., 2007; Marsh and Musson, 2008). Particularly in high stress jobs, working from home may not allow workers to have respite from work, both mentally and physically (Russell et al., 2009). In qualitative research, subjects reported a breakdown of the psychological distinction between work and family (Hill et al., 1998; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). Telework allows workers to continue working for longer hours (Hill et al., 1998), resulting in increased stress and overload (Hill et al., 1998; Konradt et al., 2003; Russell et al., 2009; Towers et al., 2006).

4. Work life balance and women

The increased number of women within the labour force poses specific challenges in the balancing of work and family duties. In patriarchal societies this issue is further complicated; for example, in Pakistan, where women are assigned stereotypical domestic roles pertaining to that particular culture (Rehman et al. 2010). Results show that among other motivational drivers to own their own businesses, achieving work-life balance is one of the most important ones. Their own businesses ensure flexibility, control and freedom to manage both work and family. Lack of time, gender bias, social and cultural norms and family responsibilities are the biggest challenges women face in a patriarchal Islamic society. Calculated planning, organizing and delegation of work are the most effective methods women use to cope with handling work and family. Women have made remarkable progress over the last few decades. Social, economic, political, and technological developments have assisted in the introduction of a new social structure, which has facilitated the gradual movement of women to the public arena from the limitation of their homes. (Rehman et al. 2010)

Among other challenges, managing work and family responsibilities is one of the chief challenges women face (Frone et al., 1992; Guendouzi, 2006; Noor, 2004; Shelton, 2006; Welter, 2004; Rehman et al. 2010). In an effort to escalate work-life balance, women have turned to self-employment to achieve more flexibility and control over their work and personal lives (Baber and Monaghan, 1988; Machung, 1989; Ward, 2007).

Balancing work and family is often more problematic for women than for men due to the unequal burden of family responsibilities (Bird, 2006). Women face uneven distribution of childcare and other home responsibilities, which become key blockades in the development of their career (Cross and Linehan, 2006). Women entrepreneurs find it more difficult to manage both work and family in a patriarchal society such as Pakistan where women are expected to fulfill the greater responsibility of family care. There is also a belief that work-family roles are largely shaped by stereotypical gender roles (Gutek et al., 1991) due to the traditionally held belief that men are “bread-winners and women “house makers”. Therefore, the social edifice of gender makes motherhood less reachable as compared to fatherhood (Gronlund, 2007).

The notion of work-life balance is no longer merely a western phenomenon. Though the majority of research on this area focuses on western contexts, it is also spreading to the eastern culture due to globalisation which has significantly influenced administrative settings worldwide (Lewis et al., 2007). A broad review of the literature suggests that most research on work-life balance has been carried out in the western countries at management level (Lewis et al., 2007; Lewis and Cooper, 2005; White et al., 2003). Studies addressing work-life balance issues of women entrepreneurs are rare (Shelton, 2006) and much literature has comprised samples of both men and women (Gurvis and Patterson, 2005). Most of the research conducted is in relation to the resulting psychological results of conflict/stress as a result of imbalance (Bruening and Dixon, 2007; Smith and Gardner, 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2003), and very few studies examine the solutions and strategies that can alleviate the work-family struggle (Shelton, 2006).

According the World Bank report on “Country Gender Assessment”, 60 per cent of the women in the labour force are not reported and are either unpaid or underpaid compared to men (World Bank, 2005).

5. Sri Lankan Female Work Force

5.1 Women working in the Sri Lanka apparel industry

Socio Cultural factors such as traditional attitudes, social norm and practices restricted women participating in the labor force limiting women’s ability to make economic contribution. Majority of women were taking up household responsibilities including caring for children and elderly which take priority over working for wages outside home.

However, with the introduction of apparel industry, a large number of female workers engaged in manufacturing garments. However, a lesser number of female workers engaged in managerial positions due to various reasons. There was a common understanding that only the uneducated females are engaged in garment industry but not the educated ones. However, with the escalating number of factories in the country and due to unemployment in government and other sectors female participation in the garment industry was increased.
The main agriculture sectors of tea, rubber and coconut employ more women in labour positions as pluckers, tappers and coir workers respectively, while an insignificant number occupy management positions. The garment sector employs more women workers and also women in management positions. Sri Lanka’s biggest foreign exchange earners are migrant workers among whom, women comprise a large percentage, mainly in the form of domestic labour.

Distribution of Employed population by main industry & gender second quarter 2013 as per the Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey; The highest percentage of women is in the service sector accounting for 39.5% of the labour force, while women in agriculture and industry account for 35.3% and 25.1%, respectively.

A large portion of Sri Lanka’s factory work is provided by women. As of 2010, 350,000 women are employed in the country’s 850 apparel factories, or 85% of the industry’s workforce. Women’s contribution to the Sri Lankan economy is remarkable, as major foreign exchange earning sectors comprise larger proportion of women.

5.2 Political empowerment
Interestingly, the Government endeavor enabling 25 percent female representation in local government bodies is encouraging, as it could improve political, social and economic leadership role played by women significantly.

5.3 Women in the Sri Lankan Parliament
The World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, which ranks 136 countries on their ability to close the gender gap states that Sri Lanka has widened its gender gap on the Political Empowerment sub index.

Sri Lanka produced not only the world’s first woman Prime Minister in 1960, it also elected the country’s first woman Executive President in 1994. With such a legacy, it is a puzzle as to why there is such abysmally low political participation by Sri Lankan women. This phenomenon goes back to the first Ceylon State Council (1931-1936) in which there were only two women representatives accounting for 3.4% of the total representation. Now, 83 years later, the 14th Sri Lankan Parliament (2010-2016) has only 13 women representatives accounting for just 6% of the 225 Members of Parliament.

5.4 Women in the Judiciary in Sri Lanka
Of a total of 280 judges in Sri Lanka there are 64 women judges accounting for 23% of the cadre. In the Higher Courts i.e. the Supreme Court – out of 11 judges four are women (36%); in the Court of Appeal – out of 12 judges only two are women (17%); in the High Court of a total of seven judges three are women (43%) and from the balance judges comprising a total of 250 Magistrates, District Judges and Additional District Judges, there are 57 women justices (23%). This indicates that while the highest percentage of women justices is in the Supreme Court (36%), the lowest is in the Court of Appeal with 17%.

6. WLB and women in the Sri Lankan context
Sri Lankan women possess 92.6 percent of literacy rate which is above its regional peers and the share of female student enrollment in university undergraduate level is around 60 percent. Surprisingly, this remarkable educational achievement of Sri Lankan women is not portrayed in the economic participation highlighting a significant gap in transforming available human resource potential productively to generate economic outcome measured in GDP and the national wealth.

Furthermore, women being married and having young children reduces women’s participation in the labor force significantly in Sri Lanka. More women’s economic participation could be induced with the introduction of women positive cooperate environment, supportive human resource policies and working arrangements in view of relieving the pressure of care-giving responsibilities and balancing their career with family responsibilities.

Accordingly, flexible working hours, part-time jobs, working from home, establishing more day care centers both in urban and rural settings to provide quality of care at the affordable rates could be considered.

The first principle for all women and hopefully, for men as well, is that family life is just as important as your careers. These are some tips to enable you to strive for a work-life balance which will help you productive in the workplace and a member of a happy family.

Strive to avoid a burnout at the workplace, because the immediate effects of that are felt by your family. So you need to pace yourself out and make time for activities with the people who matter to you. In a highly demanding work environment, many people are expected to put in extra hours at work, without financial compensation, and even when they are at home, they are expected to be ‘on call’.

In Sri Lanka, fixed working hours have become a thing of the past. Working hours in banks are generally from 9am to 5pm, but there is no time limit so employees have to work for longer hours due to unpredictable work flows at a fast pace with tight deadlines compared to other jobs, which is a concern. As a result, stress and work life imbalance are prevalent in this sector (Adikaram, 2006). As of today, encouraging a gradual move towards WLB seems the best way forward.
Concluding remarks

As mentioned in the commencement of this research, there is unfortunately very little literature to provide statistical information on the relation between WLB and gender specific issues. If implemented in Sri Lanka and made to be a part of the local lifestyle, WLB will surely see development not just in the lives of individuals or organizations but for the entire country as well. Continued study into this area will further this goal.

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