A temporal gaze on work-life balance in academia: Time, gender, and transitional episodes in Bangladeshi women faculty narratives

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Abstract
This article seeks to decentre the Global North knowledge production about ‘work–life balance’ (WLB) in academia by applying a temporal gaze to illuminate WLB possibilities in Bangladeshi academia where institutional WLB policies are absent. Drawing on Adam’s (2008) timescapes and Flaherty’s (2002) time work concepts, we focus on Bangladeshi women faculty’s experiences as an example of how a temporal gaze can help illuminate the interrelationships between time, gender, and life transitions underlying women faculty accounts of WLB in a Global South context. Drawing on the narratives of three Bangladeshi women faculty in different career stages and family statuses, we probe how women faculty manipulate, control, or customize their temporal experience (i.e. temporal agency) in response to local gendered norms and life transitional episodes (e.g. separation, academic mobility, illness, and/or retirement). We demonstrate how WLB is not a static outcome, but a work-in-progress, and that a temporal lens helps illuminate multiple time work strategies that emerge during life transitional episodes. We argue that a temporal lens troubles the outcome (quantitative, clock-oriented) and spatial orientation of WLB practices, as our participants constantly blurred work/home boundaries refracted across social positionality, gendered norms, and relationships. By examining the temporal dimensions underlying WLB, we contribute a comprehensive understanding of the interrelationships between academic/personal life, various roles, and temporality in a South Asian context.

Keywords Temporality · Work-life balance · Bangladesh · Gender · Faculty

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Introduction

This article seeks to decentre the Global North knowledge production about ‘work–life balance’ (WLB) in academia by applying a temporal gaze to illuminate the possibilities and constraints of WLB in a Global South context, such as Bangladesh. By a temporal gaze, we are referring to a conceptual frame that goes beyond clock-time to include any phenomenon tied to making meaning and related to time-related changes (Adam, 1998, 2004). Despite its widespread use in academia and popular culture, WLB evokes outcome-oriented practices (e.g. job satisfaction, gender parity in academic positions, and academic well-being) that seek to order or harmonize ‘work’ and ‘life’ (Roberts, 2008). In contrast, we refer to WLB as a transitional, emergent process, wherein individuals negotiate shifting roles, relationships, spaces, and/or one’s body. Most empirical WLB research in academia has focused on Global North conditions (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; Fetherston et al., 2020; Fontinha et al., 2018; Nikunen, 2012; Ren & Caudle, 2016). While recent WLB studies consider academic-fathers, disciplinary gender norms, fixed-term faculty, non-traditional family statuses, and people of colour (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; Nikunen, 2012; Szélényi & Denson, 2019), WLB research has mostly focused on Global North White women (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014). While Global North governments adopt WLB public health policies (Fetherston et al., 2020; Ren & Caudle, 2016), in other parts of the world such policies remain absent. The absence of WLB policies may explain why WLB among women faculty in the Global South remains understudied (Hossain & Rokis, 2014; Raburu, 2015). Furthermore, a temporal gaze underlying WLB among women faculty in Global South contexts remains untheorized. Given these gaps, we focus on Bangladeshi women faculty’s experiences as an example of how a temporal gaze can help illuminate the interrelationships between time, gender, and transitional episodes (e.g. separation, academic mobility, illness, and/or retirement) underlying women faculty accounts of WLB in a Global South context.

Few studies exclusively consider WLB, much less a temporal gaze, among South Asian (SA) women academics (Basak & Akter, 2022; Happy, 2021; Hossain & Rokis, 2014; Welmilla, 2020). While scholarship on SA women academics covers a wide range of issues, such as academic freedom, job satisfaction, academic identity, research contributions, and career experiences in male-dominated disciplines (Das & Parabhoi, 2020; Fakhır & Messenger, 2020; Safiullah & Sumi, 2014), most focus on SA women’s inability to access top levels of academic leadership due to gender inequality (Ali & Rasheed, 2021; Bhatti & Ali, 2020; Farooq et al., 2020; Gandhi & Sen, 2021). While some SA women require family support to pursue leadership roles (Ali & Rasheed, 2021), others forgo leadership treating work as part-time for family (Bhatti & Ali, 2020; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). SA studies on women academics warrant an analysis of temporality underlying WLB since women negotiate various work and life roles through socio-cultural gender norms where the family takes precedence and/or is the means for advancing women’s careers via resources, such as time (Welmilla, 2020). Despite mentions of temporal strategies in studies about SA women academics (e.g. career breaks in Gandhi & Sen, 2021), the timescapes underlying women’s

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1 We use designations such as Global North and Global South to refer to regions of the world who have benefitted (the former) from or were marginalized (the latter) by the geopolitical brunt of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change, leading to large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to material and symbolic resources today (Dados & Connell, 2012). We also acknowledge that Global South conditions can be located within Global North regions (e.g., indigenous peoples in White settler contexts) and vice versa in the case of a transnational elite class.
WLB remain ignored. By analyzing Bangladeshi women’s WLB from a temporal gaze, we address the above gaps, by probing how women faculty in the Global South manipulate, control, or customize their temporal experiences (i.e. temporal agency) in response to local gendered norms and life transitional episodes (Flaherty et al., 2020).

We first outline why Bangladeshi higher education (HE) context offers a significant setting to study WLB, temporality, gender, and academic life. We next delineate what we mean by *timescapes* and *time work* and their utility for our study. We next present our analysis by sharing narratives from three women faculty in different career stages and family statuses negotiating temporal constraints and agencies, such as work, family, me time, one’s past, futurity, and/or present. We argue that a temporal lens troubles the outcome (quantitative, clock-oriented) and spatial orientation of WLB practices, as our participants constantly blurred work/home boundaries refracted across social positionality, gendered norms, and relationships. We conclude with theoretical and empirical implications about WLB in academia based on a rapidly growing HE system in South Asia.

**Bangladesh, gender, and academic work**

Bangladesh offers a significant setting for examining temporality in a gendered academic Global South setting for various reasons. First, according to the World Bank (2020), as the world’s eighth-most populous country and one of the fastest-growing economies in South Asia, Bangladesh aspires to be an upper-middle-income country. ² Such global economic aspirations pose consequences as time is adapted for profits and efficiency rather than rest or care work. Such trends, in turn, shape local WLB practices in Bangladesh as more individuals, particularly women, occupy economic work spaces. While Bangladeshi women’s socio-economic mobility is increasing due to a rapidly developing economy, ‘working women’ are still expected to perform domestic tasks for their families (Basak & Akter, 2022; Hossain & Rokis, 2014; Tasnim et al., 2017; Uddin, 2021). Such middle-income aspirations assume that only paid activities constitute work, overlooking histories of shadow (care/nature) work, often done by but not restricted to women, who are then expected to also engage in paid work (Adam, 2002). Furthermore, Bangladesh’s rapidly growing economy has been accompanied by a growing HE system that remains gendered and classed.³ Since its first public university in 1921, more than 35 new public universities have been added in the past two decades to the HE sector. The number of private universities has grown exponentially since the first one in the 1990s to over 100 today (UGC, 2018). Currently, there are 49 public universities, 107 private universities, and three international universities (UGC, 2020). Amidst such a rapidly growing HE sector, women’s

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² According to the World Bank, an upper-middle-income country represents a gross national income (GNI) per capita between $4,096 and $12,695. Currently, Bangladesh is a lower-middle-income economy with a GNI per capita of $1,046 to $4,095 (The World Bank, n.d.). While we borrow from the World Bank’s, United Nations’, and Asian Development Bank’s reports to characterize Bangladeshi society and some of its gendered social relations, we also problematize such reports as they assume binaristic understandings of “gender,” failing to differentiate the intersectional social locations of “gender” in society, including their specific constraints and agencies. Our paper problematizes such closed notions of “women” or “gender” categories and/or human progress by providing a temporal analysis that accentuates the role of social difference and the resultant constraints and agencies.

³ For more background information about the Bangladeshi HE sector, please see Kabir and Chowdhury (2021), Monem and Baniamin (2010), and UGC (2018).
access to HE has been growing increasingly (Asian Development Bank, 2017). However, there are more women students in public universities and more women faculty in private universities (Asian Development Bank, 2017). Despite the growing enrolments of women, the Bangladeshi HE sector remains exclusionary. Higher education is still expensive and beyond the reach of many marginalized youths based on their class, gender, ethnicity, and religion (see ERD, 2021, p. 120).

Second, Bangladeshi gendered academia reflects larger temporal landscapes that shape WLB among women faculty, where official WLB policies or institutional practices are absent. Amid the absence of official WLB policies and practices, like other Global South contexts, Bangladeshi women rely on informal practices of temporal flexibility to address their WLB needs (Hossain & Rokis, 2014; Tabassum & Rahman, 2020). Among the 15,571 academic members in Bangladesh, only 4,472 are women (Abbas, 2017). Furthermore, most women faculty in the Bangladeshi HE sector mirror the broader SA HE sector, which draws faculty from upper- or middle-class families (Hossain & Rokis, 2014; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). While the number of women entering the academic profession grew recently (Alam et al., 2005; Tabassum & Rahman, 2020), one major reason Bangladeshi women join academia is to gain temporal autonomy (i.e. flexible schedule) to meet family needs (Hossain & Rokis, 2014; Tabassum & Rahman, 2020). Based on their study on women academics’ WLB strategies in a public university, Hossain and Rokis (2014) found gender norms regulating women faculty’s lives despite their well-regarded jobs as participants “still voluntarily prefer[ed] to care more for their families and domestic lives” (p. 100). Amid this care time emphasis, Hossain and Rokis (2014) also found women participants drawing upon their seniority roles to exploit junior faculty men to carry out invigilation when exam times conflicted with children’s school pick-up time. Family care time dominates the temporal landscapes among women faculty in both public and private universities (Basak & Akter, 2022; Hossain & Rokis, 2014; Tabassum & Rahman, 2020), with the former allowing more temporal flexibility and job prestige (Shahjahan et al., 2022).

Third, Bangladeshi women’s faculty careers vary temporally from Global North women academic career accounts (Garomssa & Yasmin, 2016). Many Bangladeshi women can enter academic careers with their Master’s. Some undergo academic leave for mid-career studies for their doctoral studies, and many experience promotion precariousness due to academic inbreeding (Garomssa & Yasmin, 2016)—a social phenomenon whereby certain academic alumni of departments and institutions are favoured for recruitment and promotion, rather than external or qualified candidates. In this paper, by providing a more fine-grained qualitative analysis of the daily and lifespan temporal structures of three

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4 Most WLB discussions in Bangladeshi academia have garnered attention due to growing concerns/trends related to the increased role of women faculty in HE, dual careers, gendered work-family conflicts, human resource productivity, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (see Banik et al., 2021; Basak & Akter, 2022; Happy, 2021; Hossain & Rokis, 2014; Tabassum & Rahman, 2020). We, however, did not find any evidence of any particular social force (i.e., academic or feminist networks) driving the WLB agenda in Bangladesh at the higher education policy level. Unfortunately, there are no “well-established work-life balance” policies in most Bangladeshi universities (Basak & Akter, 2022, p. 76), nor did we observe the development of such formal policies at the institutional or national level. While many have advocated for institutional WLB policies (e.g., ‘family’ friendly policy) in higher education (Banik et al., 2021; Basak & Akter, 2022; Happy, 2021), most Bangladeshi workplaces (e.g., education, banks, telecom, health care, civil administration) follow informal temporal approaches (e.g., flexibility in time, location, schedule, and leave provisions) to address WLB concerns (Hossen et al., 2018; Yang & Islam, 2021). Overall, WLB persists as a nascent concept, and many Bangladeshi managers, supervisors, and/or institutions are unaware or resistant to WLB practices (Hossen et al., 2018), and thus WLB policies remain absent in Bangladesh (Tasnim et al., 2017).
Bangladeshi women faculty, we contribute a temporal lens to the dominant Bangladeshi survey and business-management oriented academic job satisfaction and WLB literature (e.g. Banik et al., 2021; Basak & Akter, 2022; Happy, 2021; Mahbub, 2014; Nasima & Alam, 2015; Tabassum & Rahman, 2020)

**Timescapes, timework, and WLB**

To analyze participants’ WLB narratives, we first consider Adam’s (2004) concept of timescapes. Timescapes denote a temporal landscape—an assemblage of temporal categories implicating each other without being equally salient in a given context or moment (Adam, 2004). Temporal categories can range from personal time (body time, sleep time, me time) to more structured time (schedules, contract, deadlines) or work time (meetings, teaching, research) to past, present, future. Timescapes signify the inseparability of time, space, and context. Adam’s timescape helps us probe ‘the rhythms, timings, tempos, changes and contingencies of past, present and future practices,’ ‘the temporal features of living’, and the ‘time–space of everyday life’ (Liu, 2021, 356). Moreover, western clock time plays an important role in timescapes globally (Adam, 2004; Postill, 2002). By clock time, we refer to the patriarchal, abstract, disembodied, precise, and homogenous notions of time reckoning that ignore social differences (Adam, 2002). As a transnational force, clock time regulates (directly or indirectly) the daily rounds of most people, representations of the world (e.g. timezones, standard time), and constitutes gendered temporality necessary for industrial profits (Adam, 2004). Practices that promote ‘health, safety, security and well-being’ (Adams, 2002, p. 13) fall outside of clock time and are labelled as ‘women’s work’, regardless of whether women are performing such work. While clock-time has come to consume global timescapes, one may still resist such logics by appropriating clock-time to prioritize care work and one’s wellness. By considering clock time as part of timescapes, we can transcend methodological nationalism (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013) and account for gendered temporality in the WLB literature.

We also use Flaherty (2002, 2012) and Flaherty et al.’s (2020) notions of temporal agency. For Flaherty, temporal agency is considered as forms of *time work*, whereby one strives to control, manipulate, or customize their or others’ temporal experience. Here, temporal agency (e.g. an individual’s choices with time) is culturally and relationally situated, shaped alongside clock time and local time norms. Flaherty suggests that one can engage in temporal agency via time work, which involves the intentional self-determination of temporal experience (Flaherty, 2012, p. 240). Such temporal agencies could range from chronological sequencing and/or resequencing time (i.e. reordering when some temporal categories happen), recalibrating or syncing one’s time or trajectory (shifting the order or flow of temporal features to realign with an object (i.e. person or event), and/or allocating or prioritizing certain times (value-laden judgements on when something should happen) (Flaherty et al., 2020). Furthermore, amidst transitional episodes, such as a health scare, separation, job strain, or family disputes, time work could include dilating, stretching, splitting, or (re-)stitching ‘(differently) the strands of [an individual’s] temporal tapestry of life with…an emergent or experimental scripting of whom she is or can be’ (Jack et al., 2019, p. 139). Such temporal strategies often vary based on the site and/or source of temporal constraints. Drawing on Adam’s timescapes and Flaherty’s time work, we showcase three Bangladeshi women scholars’ narratives to illuminate how transitions in one’s academic life are shaped by timescapes and time work in relation to future self, future of others, past, and present relationships.
Narratives of WLB in Bangladesh

The narratives in this article emerge from a larger study examining the ways in which Bangladeshi faculty make sense of and experience time across various university types (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Data collected for the larger study took place between February and March 2020. The study included semi-structured interviews with 22 Bangladeshi academics, campus visits, and observations across four universities located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The 22 participants in the larger study included both female (9) and male (12), as well as both senior (full professor, professor emeritus, and associate professor) (12) and junior academics (lecturer, senior lecturer, assistant professor) (10). Most participants were Bengali Muslims (19), and two were Bengali Hindus, and one from an ethnic minority background. We conducted 60–80-min semi-structured interviews (either in Bengali or English) with each academic covering different aspects of their academic life, including perceptions of time, relationships and dilemmas with time in academic work and family, and the role of affect within such temporal contexts.

We rely on the narratives of three women faculty to analyze how timescapes and time-work manifested in their WLB. We foreground these women academics with varying social differences and power to share individual accounts of how one defines balance in their own terms (e.g. Ren & Caudle, 2016; Szelényi & Denson, 2019). Given our temporal lens, we avoid dispersing our participants’ stories in the form of a thematic analysis. A narrative analysis approach helps us present complex experiences of WLB spanning time/s (past, present and future) and ensuring their stories remain intact (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). We privilege three individuals to reflect the diversity among women in terms of seniority (junior vs senior faculty), family status (single vs separated vs married), parental status (whether they have children), and/or ethnicity, demonstrating different temporal rationales, constraints, and agencies of WLB. Their narratives help us theorize the diversity of temporal constraints and agencies in work-life balance, channelling faculty in particular directions (to prioritize health), and generating unexpected transformations in individual and collective lives.

Ayesha: timework and synchronicity

We first share Ayesha’s narrative to complicate notions of WLB because of her supportive institutional experiences, transitional episodes, and future aspirations. Ayesha is a junior faculty member in the social sciences at a small private university where she worked for the past ten years. Ayesha taught four courses every term. She has her master’s, and is currently a doctoral student at a public university, aspiring to one day study abroad. Recently separated from her former partner, Ayesha is a single mother to a young daughter, and they live with Ayesha’s mother. Ayesha’s family employs domestic help and a driver. Ayesha’s typical daily temporal landscape consisted of various temporal categories, including relational time (child care, colleagues), schedules (teaching and bus schedules), teaching prep, doctoral studies, me time, sleep time, and research time.

Ayesha drew upon clock time logic to customize her days, and her typical day began with waking up at 6:30 a.m. and going to bed around 12 a.m. At work, beyond Ayesha’s teaching time, she is engaged in socialization time with colleagues, doctoral studies (in between classes), reading time, student time (office hours), and/or meals (e.g. breakfast or lunch). Ayesha’s ‘me time’ fell between her daughter’s (10 p.m.) and her bedtime (12 a.m.).
She remarked that during ‘me’ time, she plans for her and her daughter’s next day, maybe reads a book, or socializes with friends and family by phone. For Ayesha, this latter window of time is the ‘best time for me.’ Ayesha shared that me and work times were possible due to domestic help and her mother’s support, or ‘it’d be very difficult for me. Probably impossible.’

Ayesha named her workplace a ‘second home.’ When probed further, she stated:

When I was separated, the institution was not this big. So my Pro-Vice Chancellor and my department head, they knew everything and they were very supportive. So., that is why I’m more comfortable here [at work] rather than a few family gatherings.. [Colleagues] are not very inquisitive about my life. Even sometimes I bring my daughter here and keep her in my room with some of my colleagues to take care of her. And I go to [teach] my class.

The typical boundaries between work and home were blurred for Ayesha, given the former was a safe space to embody her single-motherhood amid a transitional episode (i.e. separation). Ayesha’s case contrasts the Bangladeshi WLB studies that found women’s sense of home to unfold typically among familial relations and exclusively considered married women academics (Hossain & Rokis, 2014; Tabassum & Rahman, 2020). Collegiality was pivotal in her time work with teaching and mothering at work. Through collegiality, Ayesha appropriated clock-time to include care work. Unlike dominant accounts of negative spillover, Ayesha’s work and home were ‘positive spillovers’ as they positively enhanced each other (Santos, 2011). The work-space shielded her from societal constraints of being a single-mother, offering her temporal agency.

While Ayesha did not find daily work itself stressful, precarity with her future career trajectory consumed her. She expressed her concerns about the temporal blockages in her PhD progress, publication record, and her trajectory towards becoming an Assistant Professor. She lamented that despite teaching ‘for a long time’, she has yet to publish, or finish her PhD. She felt constant guilt for failing to allocate the prescribed minimum 3 h daily for her doctoral studies and publishing. She continued:

I was applying for a promotion because I had [worked in the institution for many years]. But eventually I found that that was not counted.. for promoting me. But [institution] did a great favor. Apart from having any publications, at least I got one promotion.

Ayesha was promoted to a senior lecturer due to her previous administrative service, but needed 3–5 publications for the assistant professor level. By relinquishing an administrative role to focus more on her teaching and research, Ayesha recalibrated her temporal allocations at work. Futurity thus impacted Ayesha’s wellbeing.

Ayesha also shared the temporal constraints and possibilities of being a single-mom. She managed a large share of childcare responsibilities including school drop-off, homework, and meals. Constantly negotiating her daughter’s time with her former partner’s family was another temporal constraint. Like many Bangladeshi women junior faculty (e.g. Tabassum & Rahman, 2020), Ayesha also aspired to study in the Global North. However, her aspirations for studying abroad reflected her ‘personal life,’ rather than ‘work life’, because she would embody a freer self (‘less social commitments’) and her daughter could attain quality education. But legal issues and Ayesha’s age were obstacles: ‘legally there are some constraints [with taking my daughter]… And if I don’t apply, I’m growing older. So I’m not going to get admission.’ For Ayesha, legal issues manifest as temporal blockages to academic mobility, thus attaining a future self (freer self) and future of others (i.e.
daughter’s education). Such study abroad timescape was further entangled with admission cycle temporal barriers (i.e. age). Ayesha’s conundrum echoed academics who feel more stuck and cannot afford global mobility due to one’s age (Acker & Armenti, 2004). Despite naming such temporal constraints, Ayesha recognized her temporal autonomy privileges as a single-mother as she could disengage in many social commitments (i.e. social gatherings) unlike her married counterparts. Ayesha’s narrative adds a Bangladeshi single-faculty perspective to the WLB literature on single faculty (e.g. Denson & Szelenyi, 2020).

Ayesha’s overall timescape encompassed relationality, care time, me time, work time (teaching), career trajectory, present angst, futurity (study abroad aspirations, daughter’s education), and/or gendered precarity. Yet, her time work derived from class privileges (domestic help, driver) and relationality (colleagues, mother, single-status). The entanglement between temporal blockages (e.g. career trajectory and academic mobility) and precarious futurescapes (career and daughter’s futurity) colonized Ayesha’s present. Ayesha’s WLB time work was thus embedded in the synchronicity of work and home, career trajectory and work role, legality and academic mobility, future self and future of others, ‘me’ time with other’s time, and future and present. Ayesha’s narrative complicated notions of WLB as her narrative blurred the boundaries between home and work via appropriating clock-time, and encompassed social positionality, transitional episodes (i.e. separation and legality), career trajectory, study abroad, and futurity.

Sukanya: time work as recalibration towards one’s body

Sukanya’s narrative complicates ‘me’ time in existing WLB literature (e.g. Roberts, 2008; Santos, 2011) by highlighting how academic mobility to the Global North introduces recalibration as a form of time work for transitions related to bodily and job strain constraints. Sukanya is single, one of three children, and an ethnic minority in Bangladesh, overseeing care for her parents. She has worked for the last 4 years as a senior lecturer in social sciences at a private university. Although Sukanya was socialized towards an applied science discipline, she found the field isolating for women. Eventually, she pursued her MBA in Bangladesh and a master’s in Finance in a Global North country on a government-sponsored scholarship. Prior to transitioning to academia, to fulfil the terms of her scholarship, Sukanya returned to Bangladesh to work in the corporate business sector for six years.

More recently, Sukanya’s daily timescape reflects her desire to ‘discipline’ time using clock logic. Sukanya’s daily timescape involves various temporal categories, namely course prep, morning routine, prayer, family time, meals, commuting, grading, advising, and her health-related activities. During the work week between Sundays to Thursdays, Sukanya wakes up at 5 a.m. and goes to bed by 9 p.m. Outside of teaching four classes, Sukanya organizes her work across meetings with advisees, administrative work, research, or class exams and grading. When at home, Sukanya makes time for family, meals, and her yoga practice. Sukanya’s orderly timescape emerged after she encountered transitions from bodily and job strain constraints.

While studying abroad, Sukanya was diagnosed with a chronic health condition. Sukanya started studying health, explaining ‘I watched those [videos] and learnt that our lifestyle impacts our health. I will try my best but not like considering my health as a second priority. My first priority is my health, my job comes in second.’ The transitional bodily event tore open Sukanya’s prior timescape, allowing her to re-stitch a disciplined timescape with recalibration to one’s health, a priority she observed in the Global North. Sukanya shared, ‘I should have a disciplined life, that segregation. That I learnt from
them. [Global North residents] are very modern.’ For Sukanya, reallocating clock-time for
health was noticeable while studying abroad, from observing how shopkeepers close stores
based on schedules to how families separate weekend leisure from work/studies. Through
her bodily constraint and academic mobility, Sukanya recalibrated her temporal resources
towards her health, which she practiced after returning to Bangladesh.

After returning to Bangladesh, Sukanya cited job strain (workplace stress) as a temporal
constraint she encountered in the corporate sector. While Bangladeshi HEIs are graduating
greater numbers of students today, students face a precarious market where jobs are
limited, competition is heightened, and workers encounter exploitative conditions (Islam,
2019). Describing job strain, Sukanya shared, ‘[I]n Bangladesh, the job-market is really
tough. When you start a job initially, that’s comparatively easy. But when you go to mid-
level. That’s not easy.’ Trying to keep up with corporate work pressures, Sukanya struggled
to practice the ‘discipline’ she learned abroad, working on Saturdays and sacrificing time
with her parents. Ultimately, Sukanya negotiated job strain by recalibrating her entire
career trajectory towards her bodily autonomy and relations, explaining, ‘I realised that
in any office, you are not an indispensable person. There will always be someone who can
replace you. So, the most important thing is to spend time with those people who care for
me.’ Drawn to greater flexibility in Bangladeshi academia (Hossain & Rokis, 2014), and
driven to appropriate clock-time, Sukanya employed time work by recalibrating her career
to open up temporal resources for her health (e.g. body time and relational time).

Although Sukanya’s time work shifted her employment, she still experienced job strain
but noted greater flexibility in academia than the corporate sector. Sukanya continuously
appropriated clock time logics to exercise her temporal agency amid academic job
strain. Sukanya shared, ‘When I joined, I had to take serious pressure from work. I had a
tremendous workload.’ Nonetheless, Sukanya sought to continue to recalibrate. She asked
her department chair to schedule her for morning classes. She continued investing in her
health through her daily yoga practice, weekends with parents, and movies. She refused to
give students her phone number, preferring email instead, continued to travel abroad for
leisure and surrounded herself with wellness mentors, like her yoga teacher. Further, she
recalibrated her administrative responsibilities towards her health by advising the triathlon
club. As her timescape grew to include research goals, she again recalibrated time for her
health by ending her involvement with the triathlon club and her administrative roles.
Instead of doing more, she appropriated clock-time logics to maintain the same volume
of academic work and prioritize her health alongside her new research goals. Instead of
balancing, recalibrating WLB towards life is important for Sukanya as time spent on health
leads to a positive spillover at work, clarifying:

I feel that if I want to do better in my career, I would have to be fit and good. Oth-
wise I can’t do better. I try to get up early and go to bed early. I observed that if I
sleep less that impacts my work.

For Sukanya, time for health is also time for work as her wellness allows her to bear job
strain.

Sukanya’s emergent WLB timescape encompassed transitional episodes, academic
mobility, bodily constraint, job strain, and recalibration of career trajectory. We demonstrated
how Sukanya recalibrated her whole life, leaving corporate work for academia, to accrue
temporal autonomy for her body and relationships. While some Global North WLB studies
consider transitional episodes in women academics’ careers (Jack et al., 2019; Santos, 2011),
none consider how academic mobility shifts an individual’s WLB timescape. The privilege of
academic mobility (Islam, 2019) exposed Sukanya to the clock-time practice of recalibration.
Through recalibration, Sukanya shifted her career trajectory towards academia for greater temporal autonomy, contrasting WLB studies driven by concerns over academic wellbeing (Lester, 2013; Denson & Szélényi, 2020). Finally, Sukanya’s narrative showed that work and life balance is variable, perhaps even undesirable as Sukanya primarily prioritized her health.

Hamida: timework and recalibration across the life-span

Hamida’s narrative complicates WLB, suggesting that attaining WLB is a gradual process spanning one’s life, and constituted by various temporal conditions (e.g. clock time, timescapes, time-work, etc.). Hamida spent the past four decades in academia. When we interviewed her, she was amidst retirement. She was a professor of applied science in a public university and an internationally renowned scientist. Like Sukanya, Hamida was involved in study abroad, as she received her PhD in the Global North. Through Hamida, we get a glimpse of a complete academic career across the lifespan. As opposed to younger faculty, like Ayesha and Sukanya, Hamida exemplified achieving WLB with greater work experiences, mirroring Acker and Armenti’s (2004) findings and contrasting Hossain and Rokis’ (2014), who found Bangladeshi women to place greater emphasis on their families over their academic careers.

When we interviewed Hamida, she mentioned how she lived a clock-driven life. Hamida lived on campus with her husband, and had a driver and car to transport her around the city. Hamida’s typical day began with waking up at 4:30 a.m. and going to bed around 9:30 p.m. Hamida’s work and home timescapes were separated between the work and home spaces. Her work timescape consisted of work time, research time, class time, me time, leisure and networking time. Her home timescape consisted of body time, meal time, sleep time, cooking time, partner time, and me time. Both timescapes were clock-driven and spatially bound. Hamida did not let work seep into her personal time. While she allocated spousal time and family time, Hamida also prioritized self-care. Like Sukanya, Hamida’s meal times, particularly breakfast and lunch, and sleep were fixed, whereas her lunch time often varied based on workload. Here, Hamida appropriated clock-time logic of ‘time is money’ to value her ‘time in terms of other measures such as stress levels, healthy eating and the capacity to maintain social relationships’ (Roberts, 2008, p. 448). Hamida’s time work involved sequencing temporal categories in her life to create WLB. However, WLB for Hamida was inadequate earlier in her lifespan.

The discrete boundaries between Hamida’s work and office timescapes were absent earlier in her career. She recounted that ‘a distance did grow’ between her and her young daughter, due to the negative spillover of work into the home arena. One particular transitional event was salient. Hamida became the Chair of a newly founded department when her daughter was 10. The new department was in bad shape when Hamida took charge. In fact, there were doubts about whether the first cohort of undergrads, which included some of the best students nationally, would graduate given insufficient resources (e.g. classrooms or teachers). Alongside being a mother, researcher, and teacher, she felt responsible for the students’ and department’s futures. This forced Hamida to take her work home, where she constantly discussed her worries with her husband. This work spillover into the home arena strained her relationship with her daughter. She recounted:

So one day, I was not feeling well. I asked my daughter, ‘Please come and sit by me’. She stomped out of the room and said, ‘You go call your students from department X’. She was so upset that...I was not giving her time...I decided I’ll not take any work home.
This exemplified Hamida’s struggle as a working mother in her mid-career. Additionally, the ‘emotional management’ caused Hamida to feel guilty for not devoting enough to academic work (Santos, 2011, p. 261). Moreover, she experienced time compression as she needed to finish more at work to avoid bringing work home, another example of appropriating clock-time. This incident marked Hamida’s time work to recalibrate her life by segregating work and home, which she continued to maintain at the time of her interview.

Like Batti and Ali’s (2020) observations on the critical role of familial support for SA women academics, Hamida’s familial support and career success were pivotal in her temporal agency, especially during her mid-career success. She said, ‘My husband has always been very supportive, so he would go and pick my daughter up at school.’ Although family and in-laws’ gendered expectations of women as homemakers are common in South Asia (Ali & Rasheed, 2021), Hamida recounted how career success alleviated gendered expectations:

Because, as a woman, you’re expected to have some roles in the family, with the in-laws. That expectation was gone, and that’s a very good thing... It has not always been the case. As I started getting recognition, my family is like [that].

Thus, in the past, Hamida’s work and home timescapes were blurred spatially. Her past daily timescape was entangled between work time, research time, childcare time, lunch, and networking time.

As Hamida’s retirement ushered in another life transition, she perceived her remaining time through a clock-logic of value. She explained, ‘My active life will also come to an end. So, shomoy [time] is like, a very precious thing ...especially now that I’ve retired, I think, “I’ve so much to do! Time is running out!”’ Even in retirement, Hamida maintained some teaching and departmental responsibilities, suggesting that an individual’s transition into retirement does not conclude their work timescape. Further, clock-time logic underlies Hamida’s increasing urge to accelerate work not only in her work timescape but also her life timescape. In this way, WLB may remain a force well into retirement.

Hamida’s current life serves as a potent example of how WLB is not an overnight process. Her narrative mirrored Acker and Armenti’s (2004) observations of older Canadian women academics ‘who did not have major current [WLB] concerns...[but] suffered from little attention to their needs in the past’ (p. 10). Many temporal conditions contributed to Hamida reaching and still negotiating her WLB across the lifespan: (1) allocating less time to motherly duties as her daughter grew-up, (2) a supportive husband, (3) career recognition and retirement, (4) dissolution of her in-laws’ expectation of her as a homemaker, and (5) geographical positionality of her home and her social positionality (she lives inside the campus and has a car and a driver, which saves her time). In short, Hamida’s WLB achievements unravelled throughout the life-span due to changes in timescapes and her time work.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Our narratives of three Bangladeshi women faculty in different career stages and family statuses highlighted the role of how life spills over to either enhance or stifle one’s academic work. We argue that a temporal lens helps foreground how WLB is a transitional
emergent process, rather than restricted to fixed spaces or outcomes. Further, a temporal
gaze allows us to capture the temporal agency of individuals in the face of transitional epi-
sodes that open up individuals to different time work strategies for WLB that they might
not otherwise consider.

Our paper extends the literature on WLB in HE, both theoretically and empirically. Our
analysis troubles the outcome (quantitative, clock-oriented) and spatial orientation of WLB
practices. By foregrounding the flux nature of WLB, a temporal lens helps illuminate mul-
tiple time work strategies, ranging from chronological ordering through and/or appropria-
tion of clock time logics, the role of transitional episodes in introducing recalibration, or
the role of one’s life-span. A temporal lens complicates and blurs the spatial boundaries
between work and life. We suggest shifting our notions of ‘balance’ in WLB from quantity
to qualities of time (how certain temporal categories are valued) as our participants con-
stantly negotiated balance between socio-cultural processes and constraints. We also sug-
gest reconsidering earlier works on quality of time in WLB (Roberts, 2008) by acknowl-
edging the role of lifespan as part of quality of time. Finally, by foregrounding the role of
clock time, our analysis highlights transcending the national container accounts of WLB
and considering the role of transnational forces in WLB logics.

While WLB research in the Global North is often driven by national/institutional poli-
cies and practices, amidst the absence of the latter, our Bangladeshi narratives showcase
how Global South women faculty rely on other temporal resources, such as relational and
social positional support (e.g. class, education, extended family). Furthermore, the role of
academic mobility to the Global North and clock time as a transnational force playing an
important role in our participants’ lives highlights aspects often absent in Global North
literature. Unlike the Global North WLB literature, the impact of acceleration via technol-
ogy was hardly mentioned. Rather, precarity with life outside the academy has an impact
on WLB (transitional periods/episodes). Our analysis leaves us with unanswered questions
that future research could explore. For instance, how do timescapes and time work among
women faculty look similar in other rapidly developing economies, like Central Asia or
Brazil? How do timescapes and time work look for gendered subjects who cannot/do not take up cis-heteronormative WLB norms in the Global South? Overall, how can we com-
plicate the scholarship of WLB among academics from Global South perspectives? We
argue that the temporal lens foregrounds new problems, connections, and entanglements
structuring WLB that could be explored in future research.

Our narratives also trouble simplistic representations of ‘women’ (or ‘Asian women’) in
higher education. We demonstrate how a temporal lens helps foreground the differ-
ences and diversity among seemingly homogenous groups bound by regional containers
(i.e. ‘Asian women’, or ‘South Asian women’, or ‘Bangladeshi women’) and engaged in
academic and WLB activities. Refusing to produce a normative epistemology about ‘Bang-
ladeshi women,’ we use narrative and temporal approaches to highlight marginal and dis-
-tinct agencies because they communicate the depth and arc of women’s lives. Our analysis
accentuates social differences (e.g. class, ethnicity, age, academic position, and/or family
status), including changes to one’s social location across time, among a seemingly homog-
- enous group of women (i.e. ‘Bangladeshi women faculty’). As such, a temporal lens can
provide an important entry point to illuminate the specific forms of social constraints and
agencies at work when women are leading academic lives. Such social heterogeneity has
implications for policy and practice that often fall under ‘individualistic’ time-management
approaches in WLB, which we turn to next.

Our analysis has implications for WLB HE policies and practices in the Global North
and South. Our Bangladeshi empirical example highlights how faculty around the world do
not enjoy the same temporal architecture privileges—i.e. WLB policies, programs, and/or resources—that their colleagues experience elsewhere (Sharma, 2014). For example, our narratives problematize oversimplified understandings of ‘wellbeing’ in WLB practices that do not attend to the structural (and temporal) conditions of women’s lives. As such, our analysis suggests that temporality tied to social positionality indeed makes a difference in who, what, where, and when one can engage in WLB practices. We highlighted the dynamic and processual nature of the WLB phenomenon, such as the interrelationships of time, gender, and life transitions, and the importance of a life-span perspective. Furthermore, our analysis problematizes individualistic ‘wellbeing’ discourses underpinning many professional development courses that are offered in some universities (e.g. ‘Manage your energy, not your time!’) (Loehr & Schwartz, 2011; Schwartz & McCarthy, 2007). Particular HE discourses suggest that institutional and policy changes need to centre an ethic of care in the academy to divest and dismantle the dominant temporality frames that are linear and outcomes-oriented (Carpintero & Ramos, 2018; Taylor & Lahad, 2018). However, our narratives complicate Global North situated recommendations of ‘encouraging practices that consciously translate institutional policies and practices for work-life balance—through clear communication, institutional and departmental discussions, role models, mentoring, and training—into the policies, practices, and cultures of individual departments’ (Szelényi & Denson, 2019, p. 652). Such narratives assume that institutions have resources, policies, or practices in place, and/or the notion of ‘WLB’ is even prevalent in certain contexts. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that WLB is not an outcome, but a life-span process, so such processes need to be considered when formulating WLB policies or practices at the institutional, national, or regional levels. In short, we hope our analysis inspires further conceptual and empirical research on gender in WLB in HE from temporal and Global South standpoints.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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