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Balancing The Equation: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Work-Life Struggles of Indian Women in Stem Careers

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Article History:	Abstract	
Received on: 13 Jan 2025 Revised on: 07 Mar 2025 Accepted on: 23 Apr 2025 Keywords: Engineering, Challenges, Mathematics, Science, Strategies, Technology, Women, Career, Work-Life Balance.	Career and family emerged as important topics for current and future researchers and managers due to the major demographic-technological-organizational shifts in modern society and the work environment. Even though women are educated and employed in STEM fields, they face challenges such as Gender stereotypes, unequal division of domestic workload, women's representation crisis, and career interruption. These challenges are compounded by the fact that STEM careers are usually demanding in time and require constant training. High levels of stress and worry, marital discord, job burnout, and an inability to reach one's full potential are all major effects of a poor work-life balance. A massive secondary data is collected from journals, research papers, and articles to explore the socio-cultural, workplace, and personal factors affecting Indian women in STEM careers, proposing strategies to enhance their career sustainability. It emphasizes the need for systemic changes to promote gender equity and retain talent in India's STEM workforce.	

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INTRODUCTION

Women's engagement in STEM fields has attracted much attention globally, and India has made laudable progress in this regard. The number of women enrolled in STEM programs has increased significantly in recent years, with many girls enrolled in STEM programs in India in particular. Some of the statistics show an upward trend in experience, education, and professional visibility of women in STEM occupations compared to their male counterparts. However, fifty percent of Indian women are enrolled in STEM courses, but only 27% of STEM professionals are women (Nair & Joshi, 2023) [25]. These facts imply the different forms of barriers that Indian women encounter in climbing through these industries, such as cultural norms, gender discrimination, and work-life balance (Sharma, 2024).

STEM careers in India, such as those in IT, engineering, and research, typically involve long hours and rigid schedules (NASSCOM, 2021) [27]. The IT sector, employing a large share of women, often requires extended workdays and tight deadlines (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2001) [1]. Research roles, meanwhile, may demand on-site presence, limiting flexibility (Sharma & Sehgal, 2017) [34]. These factors intensify work-life conflicts, contributing to higher attrition among women (Patel & Parmentier, 2020) [28].

Women have issues with social and cultural as well as organizational climate. These include poor work flexibility policies, limited opportunities to find a mentor, and poor provisions for a resource for handling the challenges of such careers (Verma, 2024). Day-to-day chores such as childbearing and rearing, cooking, and caring for the elderly at home are barriers that are anchored on women, leaving them unable to climb the professional ladder.

Despite these barriers, some Indian women have absolute endurance and the ability to navigate barriers and excel in professions like IT, engineering, and scientific production (Gupta et al., 2023) [12]. Therefore, for improved engagement and success of women in STEM, there is a growing appreciation for the involvement of men in support structures such as mentorship, flexible working, and pro-diversity policies (Soni & Mehta, 2023) [36]. Further, stress management, role conflict, and interventions for emotional regulation need to be done as part of psychoeducational interventions for Indian women to balance career and family life (Kapoor et al., 2022) [17]. Such efforts are now very important to catalyze changes for women to be recognized and valued in these STEM fields that are core to the development of these economies and the inclusive growth of India.

INDIAN WOMEN IN STEM FIELDS

India produces a significant number of STEM graduates, with women comprising about 43% of this group (All India Survey on Higher Education, 2020). However, their representation in the STEM workforce is only around 14% (UNESCO, 2019) [37]. A key contributor to this disparity is the difficulty in achieving work-life balance, exacerbated by cultural expectations and workplace demands. This article examines the dynamics and suggests interventions to support women in STEM careers in India.

Indian society often assigns women primary responsibility for domestic tasks, a norm rooted in patriarchal traditions (Desai, 2010). A 2019 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that Indian women spend nearly 352 minutes per day on unpaid household work, compared to 52 minutes for men (ILO, 2019). For women in STEM, these responsibilities conflict with the demanding nature of their professions, often leading to

career compromises or exits (Gupta, 2015) [11]. Likewise, women's representation reduces as one gains higher levels in the company hierarchy. According to the latest information available, women represent only 9 percent of fellows in the three Indian Science Academies, including the Indian National Science Academy (INSA), the Indian Academy of Sciences (IAS), and National Academy of Sciences, India (NASI). This raises additional concerns.

WORK LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance (WLB) refers to the equilibrium between an individual's professional responsibilities and personal life, encompassing family, leisure, health, and self-development. It involves effectively managing time, energy, and resources to fulfil work demands while maintaining personal well-being and relationships. For Indian women, WLB is particularly complex due to cultural expectations, where women often bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks alongside professional roles.

A widely cited definition by Clark (2000) describes WLB as "satisfaction and good functioning at work and home with a minimum of role conflict." In the Indian context, WLB also involves navigating societal norms, such as patriarchal expectations and the "double burden" of paid and unpaid work (Buddhapriya, 2019).

DETERMINANTS OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Flexible work hours, Work from home options (Allen et al., 2013 (Blau & Kahn, 2017)[3]); paid parental leave (Kossek & Ozeki, (1998) [18]); quality child care services (Perry-Jenkins, M., et al. (2007)[29]); proportionate sharing of work especially child care and elderly care; (Hochschild & Machung, 2012 [13]; Cohen & Single, 2013) [6]; Prioritizing Family

responsibilities (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) [9]; lessened economic pressure ((Parker & O'Reilly, 2012); mental health issues (Maslach & Leiter, 2008) [21]; Self Care (Kabat-Zinn, 1990); Partner & Family Support (Shelton & John, 2017) [35]; Social Support and Network (Cohen & Wills, 1985); Over use of digital tools and mobile communication(Chesley, 2005) [5] are considered as the most important factors that helps women to balance both personal and Professional life.

CHALLENGES IN MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance (WLB) is a critical issue for women in India, where traditional gender roles intersect with modern professional aspirations. A review of published literature on factors that contribute to women's career degradation shows that a lack of balance between career and family is the major issue preventing women from attaining executive positions.

This conflict mainly emanates from the fact that women are fully committed to their roles as wives and mothers, and this may slow down their promotion ladder at their workplace.

Some of the challenges women face in maintaining work-life balance are described below.

Social And Cultural Factors

Patriarchal Norms

Indian society is deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions, where women are primarily seen as caregivers. A 2019 study by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) found that women spend an average of 7 hours daily on unpaid domestic work, compared to 1.5 hours for men. This unequal division of labor limits women's ability to prioritize professional growth or personal time.

Marriage and Motherhood

Marriage and motherhood significantly impact WLB. A 2021 survey by LinkedIn India revealed that 68% of working mothers in India felt they had to prioritize family over career, compared to 42% of working fathers. The expectation to manage household duties and childcare often leads women to opt for part-time roles or exit the workforce entirely, a phenomenon termed the "motherhood penalty" (Buddhapriya, 2019). The results also show that female professionals agree with the fact that childcare responsibility (Varma & Sivarajan, 2024) hinders their job promotion.

Regional Variations

Cultural expectations vary across India. In urban areas like Bangalore and Mumbai, women in tech and corporate sectors face high-pressure work environments, while in rural areas, women balancing agricultural work with household duties face physical and time constraints. These regional differences necessitate context-specific solutions.

Lack of Availability and scope of formal Childcare and Support Services:

Societal expectations on Parenting duties of mothers and lack of an appropriate childcare support system at work significantly impact the work-life balance of women employees (Gupta, S., et al. 2023) [12]. One of the most frequent reasons why women leave academic science, Mathematics, Engineering, and Technology (STEM) is when they reach the post-doc or researcher level. The time that many female academics are raising young children corresponds with this stage of their careers. Women continue to perform the majority of childcare and household duties; therefore, a culture of long hours and a lack of flexible work arrangements would disadvantage them more than men because

they won't be able to put in the hours necessary to progress in their careers.



Figure 1 Challenges in work-life balance

Workplace factors

Strict Policies in Workplace:

Employers and organizations with stringent policies and a low rate of women's acceptance jeopardize women's ability to combine a career with a family (Nair & Singh, 2022)[26] and parental leave policies (Rao & Kumar, 2024) [30]

Absence of Adaptable Workplace Regulations:

The lack of flexibility in working from home or having irregular working hours also keeps women from managing work and family or other responsibilities satisfactorily (Sharma, R., et al. 2023).

Mentors: Working women need mentors who understand the unique challenges they undergo, which would help them to balance both the personal and Professional life (Verma, R., et al. 2024)

Long Working Hours

Long hours are frequently required by Indian business culture, especially in industries like

finance and IT. A 2022 report by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) noted that 45% of women in urban workplaces reported working over 50 hours per week, leaving little time for personal or family responsibilities.

Lack of Flexible Work Options

While remote work gained traction during the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations reverted to in-office mandates by 2023. A study by Catalyst India (2023) found that only 22% of Indian companies offered permanent flexible work arrangements, limiting women's ability to manage dual responsibilities.

Gender Bias and Career Progression

Gender bias in promotions and assignments further complicates WLB. Women are often overlooked for leadership roles due to assumptions about their family commitments. A 2020 McKinsey [22] India report indicated that women hold only 7% of senior leadership positions, despite comprising 29% of the corporate workforce.

REPERCUSSIONS OF POOR WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION

Although employed women may experience satisfactions from their numerous work and family roles due to many reasons (Crosby 1987), conflict, overload, and stress are common outcomes of attempting to manage both career and family (Frone, Russel, and Cooper, 1991; 1992) [7],[8]. Today's career women's lives are a tightrope walk involving multiple work commitments, demanding meeting schedules, disproportionate sharing of labour, and frequent business trips. A survey conducted at Tasmania University in Hyderabad reports that the majority of women work between 40 and 45 hours a week and claim they have difficulty in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

The struggle to balance work and life takes a toll on mental and physical health. A 2022 study published in the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* found that 53% of working women reported moderate to high levels of stress due to WLB challenges. Common issues include anxiety, insomnia, and burnout. Physical health is also affected, with women reporting higher rates of fatigue and musculoskeletal disorders due to prolonged domestic and professional work. The study by Kapoor et al. (2022) [17] reported that Working women are pressured to manage their home and workplace, hence they are prone to higher rates of stress and burnout.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS FOR UNDERSTANDING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance challenges for women have persisted since at least 1934, as evidenced by historical labor studies and feminist scholarship. Early 20th-century industrialization increased women's workforce participation, but societal expectations around domestic roles created ongoing tensions. The theoretical frameworks covered here provide the best analysis of the difficulties and potential solutions to work-life balance for Indian women in STEM disciplines.

Case Study 1

Lakshmi, a 35-year-old professor of computer science at a Chennai college, juggles a rigorous career with the upbringing of twins. She depends on her in-laws, a helpful spouse, a housemaid, and a babysitter.

However, because of the pressure from society to do well at work and at home, she claims to be "stretched thin." Since the infants are only 1.5 years old, she finds it difficult to concentrate on her teaching career, which requires more standards updating, because her twin girl gets sick frequently and looks for motherly care. She recently resigned from her

Table 1 summary of the review

Theory	Author	Perspectives
Role Theory	George Herbert Mead (1934)& Ralph Linton(1936)	Women perform various roles, such as an employee and a wife and/or a mother, and the conflict is when the two roles' requirements clash. From this perspective, the stress is more when culture commonly defines women's roles as being caregivers.
Work-Family Conflict (WFC) Theory	Greenhaus &Beutell (1985) [9]	Family conflict arises i) when the time demands of work and family roles interfere with each other, ii) when Stress or strain from one role impacts performance in the other role, iii) when Behavior expected from one role is incompatible with those required by the other role.
Gender Role Theory	Bem (1974)	In this theory, certain behaviors are expected of males and females in society towards people's performance in areas such as work, marriage, and friendships.
Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory	Hobfoll (1989)	Stress as a negative experience arises when resources such as time, energy are drawn on or lost (for example, working a lot at the expense of family time).
Social Exchange Theory	Homans (1958)	Employees estimate the rewards and costs of communication with employers, and these calculations keep employees' related commitment, satisfaction, and work-life balance in check.
Work-Family Enrichment Theory	Greenhaus and Powell (2016)[10]	participation in one role (work or family) can positively enhance performance in the other.
	(Bagger & Li, 2020)	Focuses on how women's incongruence with leadership roles due to family responsibilities creates WLB challenges. Women are expected to prioritize family, which conflicts with workplace demands for availability and commitment.

job because of her babies' ongoing health problems. She claims that even though she is sad about leaving the position, she is no longer guilty.

Case Study 2

Vani, a 29-year-old postgraduate teacher who has been working for three years, has experienced family relationship problems as a result of her failure to dedicate time to her fertility therapy. Her in-laws have demanded her to resign since she is unable to manage

her work and family responsibilities. Her stress level increased during her treatment process, and she was unable to continue working because the school's leave policy does not allow her to take extended leave for medical treatment.. She had to quit her job because of the pressure from her family and society to have a kid. She is currently taking tutorials at home within her schedule. Even though she is busy instructing at home and making money, she is unhappy with her work from home and has low self-esteem.

From the above two case studies, it is evident that despite strong support, Lakshmi experiences emotional burnout. Her resignation brought a sense of relief from guilt, showing how social narratives and work pressure from the teaching profession can influence a woman's perception of self-worth and duty. Vani's narrative highlights the emotional and professional cost of not conforming to traditional reproductive expectations and how a lack of organizational flexibility contributes to women leaving the workforce. Nevertheless, certain organizations implement measures to address these challenges.

Steps taken by the Organizations

Intel India is dedicated to offering tools and work environment solutions to lessen work and personal life challenges, maximise employee contributions, and enhance Intel's "Great Place to Work" value as a strategic response to the significant changes that have occurred in the work and family spheres. In addition to offering flexible work schedules and five days a week, it also offers several advantages to staff members and their families. These advantages consist of Hospitalization insurance policy, Business Traveler Medical Plan, and Group Term Life Insurance. Etc. Flexible workweek schedules, working from home, part-time employment,

family counselling, and leave of absence programs under WLBP are just a few of the alternatives that IBM India provides to its employees. According to IBM's policy handbook, the company takes assisting staff members in achieving professional balance seriously.

Additional benefits include study reimbursements, international possibilities, clubs, leisure pursuits, and assistance in coping with life transitions, such as marriage or a work pause. IBM uses work/life balance as a strategic strategy to draw in, inspire, and keep the top personnel in the tech sector.

The TATA Group, generally known as the most people-focused company, scores high on almost all the welfare parameters. Since TATA employs people from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, its programs are customised to meet their specific needs. Since there are more than 20 percent female employees, there is a childcare facility available. By incorporating their workers in social duties like community development initiatives, the TATA group of firms has expanded the scope of welfare activities outside of the workplace. Within the Tata group, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) is a new economy company with a pool of highly qualified executive-class workers.

Zensar Technologies offers its employees child care options like a crèche. Additionally, the company offers a round-the-clock service called "Madat Online" that allows employees to handle some of their daily tasks, like dropping checks, withdrawing cash, paying phone bills, and paying their children's tuition. It offers information services such as details on children's housing and educational facilities. It routinely plans social events like family days and fun days at work, as well as stress management programs.

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Despite efforts by some organizations to support women's work-life balance, more effective and sustainable strategies are still required. To address the challenges women experience at the workplace, the following strategies are recommended: i) development of a supportive organizational environment for women; implementation of guidance and funding programs to provide support for women; reconsideration of recruitment and promotion policies after returning to work; the partnership between academics, businesses, governments, and advocacy organizations to conduct exercises and campaigns (Lakshmidhevi & Geetha, 2023) [19].

ii) Work environment adjustments, including remote work options as well as schedule control in their plan of work, are some factors that improve work-life balance and career sustainability for women in STEM fields {Sharma et al in 2023 & Soni and Mehta, 2023}

iii) Another study done by Verma et al. in 2024 focused on how the overall structure of the mentorship program might assist Indian women STEM workers in coping with both personal and career challenges. The study reveals that handy role models who can advise on how to tackle work-related issues, such as family-career conflict due to having to balance a family with a technical or research job, significantly reduce work-life conflict. Women benefit from working with organizations that support their diversity, offer mentorship, and flexible working hours (Nair and Singh, 2022) [26].

iv) Gupta et al. (2023) [12] urge systemic adjustments like improved childcare assistance to enhance the work-life balance of Indian Women.

v) Even though more and more companies offer parental leave to their employees, they may also still be optimized concerning the staff to come back to work after having parental leave. It was pointed out that help during and after childbearing can go a long way in reducing career interruption for women (Rao & Kumar, 2024) [30].

vi) Psychoeducation as a Catalyst for Work-Life Balance in Indian Women in STEM

Psychoeducation plays a pivotal role in empowering Indian women in STEM fields by providing them with strategies to manage stress, establish boundaries, and navigate workplace biases. Workshops focusing on time management, prioritization, and relaxation techniques, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), have demonstrated efficacy in alleviating stress among professionals in high-pressure environments (Sharma & Rush, 2014) [31].

Addressing the "double-burden syndrome," where women juggle professional and domestic responsibilities, psychoeducational programs can offer tools to integrate or compartmentalize work and family roles effectively (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) [9]. Training in assertive communication empowers women to negotiate flexible work arrangements and decline excessive demands, fostering a healthier work-life balance. Role-playing exercises in group settings can further bolster confidence in setting and maintaining personal and professional boundaries (Buddhapriya, 2009).

Moreover, psychoeducation can aid women in recognizing and challenging workplace biases, enhancing self-efficacy, and encouraging pursuit of leadership roles (Gupta, 2015) [11]. Awareness of initiatives like WISE-KIRAN and Vigyan Jyoti, which provide fellowships and mentorship opportunities, can support career continuity in STEM fields (Ministry of Science

and Technology, 2020) [23]. Local support groups, facilitated by trained psychologists, offer safe spaces for women to share experiences and acquire psychoeducational techniques.

Studies indicate that psychoeducational interventions contribute to the persistence of women in STEM leadership roles despite existing barriers Long et al. (2019) [20]. Programs like IBM's STEM for Girls, incorporating life skills and career counseling, have been instrumental in building resilience among young women in India(IBM, 2020) [16]. , underscoring the potential of psychoeducation in this context.

Conclusion

By eliminating identified barriers and adopting gender-inclusive initiatives, women can shine in STEM fields irrespective of their age. Psychoeducation plays a critical role in enhancing work-life balance for Indian women in STEM by providing them with the tools, strategies, and knowledge to manage the dual pressures of career and family life. By focusing on stress management, role conflict awareness, time management, resilience, and emotional regulation, psychoeducation helps women navigate the challenges they face. Moreover, it empowers them to take control of their careers and personal lives, ultimately fostering improved mental health, job satisfaction, and career longevity. With Psychoeducation, formalized communication, women's welfare policies, including corporate policies that consider flexibility and gender equality in the labor market, flexibility in the working models that allow working from home, and provide room for women to balance working and having a family.

Ethical Approval

No ethical approval was necessary for this study.

Author Contribution

All authors made substantial contributions to the conception, design, acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work. They were involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content. All authors gave final approval of the version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring its accuracy and integrity.

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