WORK – LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance refers to a person's effort to be effective in his / her work life and in family life, as well. It is about effectively managing the juggling act between work and home. The topic of work-life balance connotes that work should not completely crowd out the other things that matter to people like time with family, participation in community activities, voluntary work, personal development, leisure and recreation.

Work-life balance does not mean an equal balance between the two roles, either. Setting up an equal number of hours for each of the roles will not lead to work – life balance. Individual work-life balance will also vary over time. The right balance for today will probably be different for tomorrow. The right balance when one is single will be different when one is married, or when one has children; when one starts a new career or when one is nearing retirement. In short, there is no perfect, one-size fit, for work-life balance.

The pressures of work have been intensifying in recent decades, for both men and women. Factors such as the advances in information technology demand for speedy response, existence of tight deadlines, importance attached to quality customer service - demand the time of those in the labour force, which frequently lead to tremendous stress and pressure. The evidence from this study shows that while the average number of working hours and days is steady and fixed the proportion of women professionals working more than eight hours and for six or even seven days of the week is not uncommon. Also, the respondents reported an ever-increasing intensity of work and work
overload. As a result, the demands of work dominate life and a sense of work-life imbalance ensued.

In Kerala, we live in an unparallel era in that a higher proportion of women from all social classes are engaged in paid employment than ever before. In addition, the pressures and demands of work reflected both in longer hours, more exhaustion and the growth of evening and weekend work leave less scope for ‘quality’ family time. The demand of work is feared to contribute to a reduced participation in non-work activities resulting in incongruity between the two roles. The dreaded consequences include unstable family life, unhappy couples and unhappy children, less willingness to take responsibility for care of elderly relatives as well as a reduction in community participation. In order to avoid such unpleasant outcome, working women necessarily adopt certain balancing acts.

Therefore women who want to be successful in both their roles, at home and in their work places, keep a balance - an organization of the two. Their lives become disciplined and they follow a synchronized path. They make a great level of accommodation and adjustment between the two roles of a woman. A similar idea is given by Melody Hessing (1994) in "More than Clockwork: Women's Time Management in their Combined Workloads," Sociological Perspectives 37(4) examines how women organize their lives to accomplish their many tasks. Hessing notes that, "Women with both paid and household responsibilities must appear to be successful in accomplishing both, or they risk censure or criticism as mothers and/or as employees." She found that, in general, the women in her research do not describe themselves as passive captives of societal inequities, but instead recognize and purposely manage the demands and constraints in their lives.
With this exposure of the significance of work–life balance in the lives of highly educated women professionals, let us turn to the focus of this chapter. The researcher is interested in examining how women professionals organize their lives to accomplish their dual roles simultaneously and thus to achieve work life balance.

What follows is a brief exposition of the coping strategies employed by the respondents of this study in their efforts to combat imbalances in dual role performance. Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events. Two general coping strategies could be distinguished from the replies of the respondents: 1. Problem focused strategies, which are efforts to do something to alleviate stressful circumstances, and 2, Prevention-focused coping strategies, which involve efforts to avoid the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events.

Hence, in order to arrive at clear idea of the strategies employed by women professionals to reach work–life balance, discussions were held with a few women professionals and that helped to identify two broad sets of overlapping influences as causing the problem of work-life imbalance; the demands stemming from family domain and those emerging from the work domain. The discussions also helped to identify the mechanisms adopted by workingwomen in their attempt to balance family and career.

9.1 Strategies to meet the demands of Career on Family

The strategies adopted by the women professionals to meet the demands of their career are given in table 9.1.
Table -9.1

Strategies to meet the demands of Family on Career

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Take career breaks</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2.9074</td>
<td>1.5932</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work only part time</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.3421</td>
<td>1.6320</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise on career growth</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>1.1829</td>
<td>.6330</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resort to informal work accommodation</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>2.5879</td>
<td>.7067</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place limits on work – time</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>2.1009</td>
<td>.6660</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Primary Data*

The Arithmetic Mean of the strategies reported by the respondents for achieving work life balance were computed and it is found that women professionals seem to maintain work-life balance mostly, by compromising on career growth. It can be inferred as the most prominent strategy since the arithmetic mean for it, is the lowest. The standard deviation being the minimum makes it the most consistent strategy too.

One of the respondents working in a software company said that women in general prefer to remain as programmer analysts or project managers, and they are hesitant to go beyond, for fear that it would lead to intrusion into family time. So also, a chartered accountant remarked that it was impossible to strike the balance between home and career unless one compromises on professional
growth. According to her, “Once you cross a particular level in your profession, more responsibilities will be thrust on you and you cannot always say ‘No’. It would mean working on weekends, and living out of suitcases for days and often it would also mean picking up calls at home after 11 p.m. This is something that most women are not willing to do”.

Earlier studies also suggest that women generally seek career patterns that do not demand much vertical mobility. According to Sanders (1965), women endeavor to adopt a career of ‘limited ambition’, by which they call up a new occupational role allowing elasticity to incorporate family responsibilities as an indivisible constituent of their work choice.

Concentrating their attention on dual – career couples, Sekaran and Hall, in their work titled, “Asynchronism in dual – career and family linkages” (1989) proposed a theoretical model to analyse the way in which men and women in dual career families handle their work and family roles. Accordingly, they suggested two models, the sequential and the simultaneous - to understand the career – family interface for dual – career couples. According to the sequential model, one of the partners, usually the woman, slows down, stops or, disrupts the career, to cope with parenting responsibilities as a result of which their career lags behind that of the partner. In the simultaneous model, both the partners enact their work and family roles concurrently.

The findings of this study support the sequential model. The career development of women professional is often slowed down to accommodate the needs of the family as well as to ensure the career prospects of the partner. In a culture where women are “supposed” to
care for children, home and husband, it is only natural that they impose more restrictions on career prospects than on family prospects. Hence it can be inferred that even though the respondents of this study are highly educated and are exposed to individualistic, equalitarian and achievement oriented philosophies, the impact of these have remained superficial and their outlook and ideas on the role of women remain in perfect harmony with the traditional gender roles of women.

‘Placing limits on work time’ is ranked the second among the coping strategies. It meant selecting jobs where one could follow a strict time-schedule with regard to hours of work and days of work per week. Managing time is a serious issue for all workingwomen. Having to combine a profession with rearing children, keeping up with hobbies and coping with domestic tasks can result in many women professionals feeling frustrated due to a lack of time. Being too busy to do things well can also give rise to a sense of dissatisfaction. Any lapse in planning and organizing activities according to the fixed time schedule is bound to create problems for them. Hence if women professionals throw them into work without putting any time limit, conflicts are bound to arise sooner or later. To steer clear of such unpleasant situations, women professionals in general place limits on work time in order to avoid problems and to achieve work-life balance.

‘Informal work accommodations’ is ranked as the third tactic and it refers to the set of behaviors in which employees adjust their usual work patterns in an attempt to balance their work and family responsibilities. This informal device may modify how, when or where work gets done, but, one’s output remains unchanged and one’s work structure remains unaltered.
Leaving work early in order to attend a family event, but coming in earlier or taking work home to accomplish the remaining work, arranging a co-worker to cover for oneself, working on a non-working day, using the break time to attend family matters, allowing children to come in to office after school, phoning or e-mailing family members from work place etc are the methods of informal work accommodation resorted to, by the respondents. Nevertheless, many respondents told that informal work accommodation prove to be stressful because no organizations encourage the employees to resort to such strategies.

Apart from these, the other trends noticed are, taking career breaks and opting for part-time work. These are ranked as fourth and fifth respectively among the coping mechanisms. These are formal techniques and included selecting jobs where one could follow a strict time-schedule with regard to hours of work and days of work per week, staying out of job for sometime, and, going in for part-time jobs. The CEO of a software company confirmed that the dropout rates of women at middle-management level are high. She said that in her section, though, women account for nearly 30% of the strength at the entry level, there were only 2 women out of 40 at the middle management level. According to her, women in general are reluctant, when it comes to extending or as she put it - to stretching out- the working hours and days.

Another respondent replied, “Women professional have to plan and evaluate continuously in order to balance both her roles at every point of time. There is no point in pursuing career without being accommodative. Women must realize that they cannot pursue career as the men do, since a career for women will entail sacrifices and
compromises, more at the career front unlike the men who will have to impose compromises more at the home front”.

The respondents of this study are well-educated and well-placed women professionals and it is seen that they willingly make such compromise on their career, which seem to be suicidal as far as their careers are concerned. On probing as to whether this sort of an accommodation is easy, one of the respondents replied, “the women of Kerala have the ability to adapt to any situation as a consequence of the social and cultural conditioning they receive all through their life. They grow up imbibing the ideas of ‘non compromise of family roles’ and, adjustment, sacrifice and adaptation in other situations and environments to safeguard the interests of the family and hence compromise at work becomes natural for them”.

What do we find here? It can be concluded that women professionals adopt several strategies in their professional roles to accommodate family demands. Long-term preventive strategies like switching to part time work, taking career – breaks, and placing limits on work time and career growth is resorted to by some with the intention of avoiding disequilibrium in dual role balance. Others engage in short term techniques to alleviate imbalance by making informal adjustments as and when the need arise.

9.2 Strategies to meet the demands of Family on Career

In order to accomplish dual role balance, the women professionals may resort to restructuring personal and family priorities. Reframing activities, modifying roles, and making use of the support systems are the usual mechanisms the women professionals engage in. The strategies adopted by the respondents to meet the demands of their family are given in table 9.2.
Table 9.2

Strategies to meet the demands of Career on Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leave domestic chores &amp; childcare to paid help</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>1.2609</td>
<td>.8467</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get the help of parents/relatives</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>3.3064</td>
<td>1.4671</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise on social activities</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>2.7653</td>
<td>1.0199</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move to ancestral home</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.3810</td>
<td>1.8296</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise on hobbies</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>2.7723</td>
<td>1.4892</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Primary Data

The data disclose that, consistent with their quest for dual role balance, the women professionals plan in advance to achieve work life balance by making decisions that set the stage for equilibrium. They have realized that the greatest stress for them, as women, is linked to their traditional gender role. Hence through early planning, if domestic chores and childcare could be taken care of, the biggest challenge against dual role balance could be prevented. ‘Leaving domestic chores and childcare’ to paid help achieve significance in this context. The Arithmetic Mean for it is the lowest among all the strategies in table 9.2 and it can be concluded that it is the most commonly resorted strategy of the respondents.

Clarifying and prioritizing the aspects of personal life is found to be another significant step in achieving dual role balance. The findings of the
present study unveil that compromising on social activities and hobbies have the second and third ranks respectively as polices undertaken by women professionals in their efforts to attain work life balance.

Making use of the support systems by either ‘getting the help of parents and relatives’ or ‘moving to ancestral homes’, are also strategies adopted by women professionals in preventing dual role disequilibrium. Although most of the respondents described their professions as highly demanding, they said they do not feel torn away, thanks to the support network that they have in their families. From what the respondents of this study shared, the saying that in Kerala, the families, though structurally nuclear, are functionally joint seem to be justified. Many respondents spoke of the assistance they get in childcare, in the running of the kitchen, payment of bills etc. The lean on the family is a prime benefit for these women professionals and proves to be effective in achieving work life balance.

9.3 Conclusion

As is evident from the previous chapters, women professionals face a host of problems in their efforts to combine family and career. Confronted with the conflicting gender role demands and the overt and subtle discrimination at work place throughout their careers, women professionals have resorted to various strategies of dual role management

All professionals manage their careers. While for men, career management is generally part of a larger process of career development, for a woman, it is different. She is forced to manage her career simply to maintain it, often not to improve it. The perceptions of self, family, fellow professionals and the society at large as to appropriate ‘female’ behavior and specialties must be taken into account while managing one’s career.
The reason for this state of affairs can be attributed to the predominant structure of the contemporary Indian family and its accompanying sex-role differentiation, whereby, the family and the home are assumed to be the primary responsibility of the women, irrespective of whether she holds a professional position or not. In short, as long as women are primarily responsible for the running of the household and rearing of children, they will have to work at managing their careers in order simply to maintain them, much less make it to the top.