CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the literature by exploring the issues faced by women working in paid employment within the rural and urban areas of Sikkim. The data revealed that gender is interwoven in the management of work and family issues irrespective of age, occupation, income level or type of family of the respondents. Respondents from both rural and urban areas narrated their perceptions and experiences regarding balancing their work and family domain. They also talked about the various conflicting and cooperating factors which were responsible for managing both the domains. Different family and work-related issues were also discussed by the respondents. Respondents also stated that they used various techniques or strategies for coping with the pressures of work and family life. Various literature has been reviewed by this study which explained that work-family issues varies across various countries as they are influenced by factors at the micro and macro level, which differ across countries. The macro level variations include differences in the social, economic, legislative and technological systems. These factors provide certain implications for employees who attempt to juggle their work and family domains. Apart from these macro level variations, differences at the micro level also exist across regions. The micro-level differences refer to the variations in the individual variable which include the levels of role demands assumed by individuals. In both Western and non-Western countries, the pressure which induces work-family conflict tends to be similar, but people’s responses to these pressures differ and tend to be governed by their cultures. Literature on work-related issues suggested
that women across the globe have to face obstacles and barriers in order to secure top-positions jobs and in the process they experienced glass walls in addition to glass ceiling by which they were denied training and high positions. The predominance of male values and gender roles was regarded as another factor that prevented women from reaching top level jobs. In India, the root cause of the problem is the patriarchal structure of the society where women are expected to give the highest priority to the needs of the family, irrespective of whether they work outside the house or not. Their primary role is considered to be looking after the home and children, and their employment outside the home is still regarded as secondary. When working women try to manage both home and job along with the demands of child-care, they are bound to experience role conflict. One of the greatest drawbacks resulting from being focused on their career is the high chance of disharmony in their family life, where modern educated husbands too expected their wives to serve them and the household despite the women working outside the homes. In other Asian countries, the task of managing work and family roles became even more difficult due to the limited work arrangement available to them. The majority of women employees worked for longer hours along with their male counterparts, since the number of working hours is fixed as being from nine to five by the labor laws. Along with work-related issues, women also faced family related issues with regard to child-care and performing household activities. In India, the identity of an individual is linked to the identity of the extended family. Women are still entirely and solely responsible for performing household chores, child-care and other aspects of family responsibilities. Another important aspect in balancing work and family is the care for the elderly which is considered as women’s primary responsibility,
but nowadays full-time working women are facing difficulties in fulfilling the role of primary caregivers to the elderly due to the ageing population. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is lack of time and flexibility in terms of balancing work and family.

In recent years, research on work-life balance suggests that individuals are able to achieve personal and professional goals with the help of successful work-life balance. Earlier, the nature of work was viewed as a necessity for everyday survival but in today’s society, work is perceived as a source of personal satisfaction by the employees. When a person is able to devote time to both work and family life, without neglecting either of them, a balanced life is said to be achieved. Congenial conditions are required in the organisation in order to balance work with the family needs of the employees. Even in the family domain, such efforts are desirable. There is a significant relationship between work-life balance of female employees and variables like age, working environment, training programs, fringe benefits and family support. In comparison to the younger respondents, women above 40 years were capable of balancing work and family life much better. It was also mentioned that the ability to create a better work-life balance depended on a motivating work environment. Suggestions that were given by respondents in order to achieve better balance were time management, sharing workload, maintaining a positive approach and better communication with superiors and colleagues. Organizations across cultures are known to implement various work-life balance practices which are beneficial in reducing work-life issues as well as in enabling employees to be more effective at work and in performance of various roles.
Organizations are pressurised increasingly in order to design various kinds of practices which will facilitate the efforts of employees to fulfil their personal and professional commitments. Several work-life balance initiatives have been initiated by organizations which will assist employees to balance their work and family responsibilities efficiently, gain improvements in well-being and provide organizational benefits. There are variety of family-friendly policies such as flexible working hours, part-time work, job-sharing, compressed work weeks, telecommuting, parental leave and on-site child-care facility.

A rapid change has taken place in the concept of work-life balance with the help of technology. Nowadays, the home and work domains are not considered as separate entities. With the introduction of mobiles and WiFi, the merging of home and work domains has been possible where contact with home life can be maintained despite a busy working day, and the work can be completed even away from office. On the other hand, there are numerous disadvantages of technology such as increased expectations from employers and colleagues, workload increase and a sense of never being off duty. Family life can also be affected in a negative manner as technology can increase the length of the working day leading to encroachment on family life, which in turn leads to conflict with family members. In addition, technology was also responsible for increasing the stress levels of employees and putting them at risk of developing mental health problems. The employees felt that they were being monitored by their employers through technology, which in turn increased their level of stress. Employees can be challenged by the fact that their organizations expects them to remain available 24 hours a day. Problems could also arise from the inability to separate the work and family
domains. For the well-being and stress prevention of employees, it is essential to segregate home and work life.

Gender roles and work-family relationship needs to evolve and reciprocate in several ways. The association and separation of men with paid work and women with family life has led to assumptions about men being ideal workers and women being ideal carers. Psychological, physical and emotional demands are experienced by men from paid work and women from domestic sphere. Thus, gender role assumptions are not static and it tends to be deeply rooted in an individual’s identities and wider expectations from the society. Several countries have witnessed a dramatic change in women’s role over a period of time. In fact, attitudes and behaviour of men have also undergone some changes with regard to sharing the burden of housework with women. However, in comparison to women, the pace and intensity of this change has been slower with regard to men. However, there are several barriers related to reciprocal change in gender roles and work-family relationship. These barriers can be understood in terms of power and competition experienced by men and women. Different perspectives have been discussed in order to determine how power plays an important part in holding back change. One important perspective that highlights the significance for men to focus on paid work and women on family care is wage difference between men and women. Another perspective emerges from the reluctance on making dramatic changes to ways in which men and women combine various life aspects due to the power given to men by paid work, and the status offered to women in family involvement. Both men and women are provided with a wider range of opportunities for
equitable relationships through reciprocal change rather than developing competition between them. Men and women face difficulty in accepting change in their existing roles and the relationship which in turn can occur at the individual level, within the family, in their workplace and in the society at large. Personal beliefs and identity of people are likely to get challenged when they try to change their ways of thinking and believing.

Literature suggested that there are numerous negative consequences encountered by employees who undergo extensive work-family conflict such as deteriorated physical health and emotional well-being, as well as reduced performance and lower satisfaction in the work-family domain. Due to the difficulties experienced by employees with health issues, the connection between health outcomes and work-family conflict is quite disturbing. In order to be considered as possessing good health, both physical and psychological components of health and well-being are essential for an individual. Reports of physical symptoms and overall health problems along with specific physiological condition assessment i.e. cholesterol, blood pressure are some of the indicators of physical health problems which are responsible for causing overall physical health problems. Likewise, health-related behaviour which are unhealthy in nature such as lack of physical exercise, unhealthy diets, excessive tobacco and alcohol consumption, also contribute to overall physical health problems. On the other hand, the experiences of dissatisfaction and negative emotions are considered to be psychological health problems. Along with specific emotions such as anger, depression and frustration, the indicators of a variety of negative emotions comprises of overall psychological
strain and life distress, while dissatisfaction includes negative evaluations of specific life roles i.e. work and family dissatisfaction along with one’s overall life dissatisfaction. Even though physical and psychological components of health and well-being cannot be completely separated, there are numerous causal linkages explaining the different pathways through which health and well-being is impeded by work-family conflict.

Various organizations provide their employees with different measures in order to balance their work and family life which has been highlighted by a number of studies. With this regard, the provision of child-care was provided to employees based on the following three reasons: First, it was argued that child-care provision was beneficial in eliminating problems of child-care that interfered with work efficiency, as well as enhancing the control of management over the workforce. Secondly, child-care provision was given due to the government or society’s coercive pressure to the organisation. Lastly, child-care provision was adopted in order to highlight the progress achieved by the organisation in taking into consideration the needs of their employees. While implementing work-family policies, variations across firms was observed as policies were related to the strategy adopted by organisations in recruiting employees. Work-family policies were effected by those organizations whose employees were professional or technical workers in comparison to organisations that comprised service workers or blue-collar employees. In other words, work-family policies were adopted by those organisations which demanded having high commitment and high performance work systems. The introduction of work-family policies appeared to be greater in those
organizations where women were holding top executive positions in larger proportion. In addition, companies also made investments in measures such as flexible time, off-time practices, job sharing, child-care and part-time work who had women working in larger proportion as a workforce. On the other hand, work family policies were less often offered by those companies who employed workers on an hourly basis or where employees were paid relatively less for the amount of work that they were assigned to complete.

The study also reviewed several theories that seek to explain the relationship between work and family. However, these theories have not been integrated into a comprehensive theory that can serve as a guide to research on work-family issues. The academic body of knowledge depends on different theoretical approaches with regard to work-family interface. These theoretical framework includes spill-over, compensation, work-family conflict, resource drain, enrichment, congruence, segmentation, integration and ecological theories. In addition to the above mentioned theories, researchers in recent years have tried to explain work-family relationship through theories such as border theory, boundary management theory, gender inequality theory, work-life management theory etc. All these theories provide insights into the relationship between work and family domain. Role theory has been considered as the most common perspective for explaining the nature of work-family relationship which is evident in the literature. Role theory has been discussed from two different perspectives- the scarcity perspective (or conflict perspective) and the enrichment perspective. The scarcity perspective argues that individuals have a limited amount of psychological and
physiological resources to enhance their role performance. The enrichment perspective posits that resources acquired from participation in one role may directly or indirectly improve and enhance performance in another role.

The study then analysed the data collected from the respondents living in rural and urban areas of Sikkim. The manner in which respondents of this study perceived work-family balance depended on their feelings on how they manage the different responsibilities of work and family domain. Several respondents of this study who were working in various lower-level jobs such as casual workers and office clerks did not prioritise balancing their work and family life. In fact, they were unable to articulate whether they were out of balance or not despite their concern at their lack of time for other activities. Almost every respondent experienced difficulties in coordinating different facets of their lives. However, the concept of work-family balance is not static. Work-family balance comprises of several components such as reports of balance and imbalance, flexibility at workplace, coping strategies etc. There was a variation in the responses given by respondents from both rural and urban areas of Sikkim when asked about their perception of work-family balance. In several instances, respondents who had younger children at home particularly from the urban region mentioned that childcare activities was mainly responsible for being the shortage of time on other spheres of life. Even though the broad vision of work-family balance was seen among respondents from both urban and rural regions, the definition in general focussed on work-family sphere and coping techniques for balancing and peaceful existence of two domains whether it meant separating or integrating the two spheres. For a handful of respondents
residing in the rural areas of Sikkim, sharing or taking the responsibility of doing the household chores by family members who stayed with them helped in achieving balance between their work and family domain. On the other hand, respondents living in the urban areas experienced imbalance due to lack of support and help from family members since they were away in their native place which in turn resulted in stress, strain, fatigue and lack of time to socialise with their friends and neighbours.

Respondents from both the urban and rural areas also discussed the various challenges which they encountered when trying to balance their work and family domain. For majority of the respondents belonging to the younger age group, the biggest challenge arose from the difficulty they had in allocating time to complete their tasks. They also mentioned that their children tend to suffer when they do not get enough time to compete their tasks. These respondents also mentioned that their work commitments deprived them from participating in their children’s school activities or meetings and as a result they feel guilty due to the fact that they cannot be present in places or situations simultaneously when the need arises. Respondents of this study complained of having insufficient time for their family or leisure activities due to the hectic schedule in managing their work and family domain. Respondents from the urban areas mentioned that advancement in technology helped them in managing their work and family domain more effectively in which personal computers and cellular phones made their lives much more easier and they were able to communicate with their family members and children constantly as well as become available during the time of emergency at their workplace. Respondents living in the urban areas stated that facilities like car-pooling,
public transport and day-care centres for the children helped them in better management of work and family domain but these facilities were available only in the urban region and respondents residing in the rural areas had to rely on their family members and relatives to look after their children when they were away at work.

The impact of paid work on the lives of working women were also discussed by the respondents. Respondents narrated how they were concerned about work tasks while they were at home and they also mentioned about how work demands made them exhausted while performing other household tasks at home. As a result, there was a negative influence on their health. Respondents working in urban areas occasionally took sick leaves due to the stress caused by demands at their workplace. Nonetheless, paid work was also explained in positive terms. Respondents mentioned that when they faced issues in their personal life, their workplace proved to be a place a refuge for them. Statements like work was therapeutic or work prevented them from getting into psychological problems suggested that paid work helped in relieving stress from other areas of life. Respondents mentioned that their socio-economic condition influenced the way in which they managed their work and family domain. Women belonging to middle class families described how busy their schedule were and expressed their desire to have more time for themselves. In addition, women belonging to upper-middle class families had the privilege to reduce their working hours in order to enhance their work-family balance. However, this option was not available to women with limited source of resources particularly belonging to middle and lower class families. Majority of the respondents chose to participate actively in the paid workforce and they cited various
reasons for their participation. The most important reason for choosing paid employment was financial in nature. Respondents working as office clerks and casual workers felt that they had no choice but to work outside their home due to the pressure of contributing towards the household expenditures by their spouses. Respondents working in higher positions were satisfied with their job as it gave them the opportunity for advancement or progress in their careers which in turn resulted in better pay scales and promotions.

In this study, the respondents discussed the usage of different coping strategies by combining them which included outsourcing of household chores including child-care activities. Respondents belonging to middle and higher income group chose outsourcing mainly to avoid any kind of conflict with their spouses with regard to performing household chores or child-care activities. Even though there was cost involved while outsourcing the household activities, it allowed the respondents to have time for themselves which they barely received when they had to manage all by themselves. However, using outsourcing as a coping strategy to achieve work-family balance was a privilege denied to many respondents who had limited amount of resources and who were undergoing financial constraints. Thus, the strategies used by these respondents belonging to rural regions and who were working as casual workers were management of time, planning, prioritising, and goal-setting. Majority of the respondents having caring responsibilities and who were dealing with health issues employed one form of coping strategy or the other in order to achieve work-family balance. Respondents working in private companies also went to the extent of creating their own strategies in
order to balance their work and family domain. For example, they chose to work from home in order to save commuting time and in some cases, they changed their workplace when they did not get the flexibility for work-family balance or when it did not cater to the child-care issues. This, in turn, resulted in applying for another job which allowed them to work on part-time basis so that they could look after their children. A small portion of respondents with younger children at home mentioned about undertaking certain tasks by which they could utilise their time efficiently and achieve better work-family balance.

It has been observed in this study that conflict in work and family life is caused by perceived stress which in turn results in decrease of balance in both the domains. Work-family structure can be influenced by the context in which the work and the family domain operates in a particular environment. The work timings, descriptions of work along with work schedule varied among respondents. Thus, it is understandable that demands arising from work and family roles differs in various settings. What is considered as a demanding factor in one setting might not be seen as an issue of concern or demanding in another setting. Work and family roles are viewed differently by respondents working in different occupations. There were variations observed in terms of reasons for working, spouses’ preferences towards their employment and the extent to which their work role is perceived, although women of different countries do not differ greatly in their perceptions relating to work and family roles. Respondents working in different professions are caught in a dilemma with expectations and ideologies of traditional societies at home and demands conforming to the modern code.
of conduct at the workplace. Thus, they are seen as struggling their personal and professional lives in order to achieve a balance between these two domains. As a result of prevalence of gendered work structure, respondents are not able to achieve equality despite being educated or employed. In addition, domestic responsibilities still remains a primary role of respondents irrespective of their employment status. Respondents were not able to question or challenge gender role assumptions despite being highly educated and moreover they utilised their education keeping their family’s interest in mind. In order to ensure work family balance and to challenge gender relations, changes should be introduced in the prevailing social system which relegates women as an inferior group both at home and at work.