RESEARCH PAPER

Assessment of Work-Life Balance of Female Academic Staff: Exploring Challenges and Coping Strategies- A Case Study on Ambo University

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Abstract

Maintaining a balance between personal and professional life is important for professionals, including academics. Work-life balance helps in achieving and sustaining a healthy work routine that enhances an academic's effectiveness and satisfaction. This study aimed to assess the work-life balance of female academic staff at Ambo University, focusing on the challenges they face and the coping strategies they adopt. The research involved 120 female academic staff across four campuses of the university. Both primary and secondary data sources were used. The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis methods. The findings highlight a range of challenges experienced by female academics, spanning professional, emotional, and personal domains. Professional challenges include difficulties in maintaining professional networks, updating expertise, and advancing their careers. On a personal level, managing dual responsibilities of professional and personal duties intensifies their workload, leading to dissatisfaction and emotional strain. The excessive time spent on house chores, inclination towards family responsibilities at the expense of professional responsibility, worry about work when not actually at work, low support levels from supervisors and subordinates, and personal and professional related factors are major challenges for female academic staff work-life balance. The study found that female academics use various coping strategies to manage their demanding schedules, including time management, prioritization, seeking support, outsourcing, and making personal sacrifices. The study's findings have important implications for university administrators, policymakers, and society. Academic institutions need to cultivate a supportive environment that recognizes the importance of family responsibilities. This study also has implications for Governments to collaborate with universities to design policies that recognize the additional emotional and caregiving burdens often placed on women, ensuring fair workload distribution and career advancement opportunities.

Keywords: Challenges; Coping Strategies; Female academic staff; Work-life Balance

Introduction

Work–life balance (WLB) has become a central concern in contemporary workplaces as employees increasingly struggle to manage professional demands alongside personal and family responsibilities(Lakshmi and Prasanth 2018). Rapid technological change, intensified workloads, and blurred boundaries between work and non-work domains have made achieving sustainable balance more challenging. Empirical evidence consistently shows that poor work–life balance leads to stress, burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and lower productivity. In contrast, effective balance enhances well-being, work engagement, and overall quality of life (Haar *et al.,* 2019).

Conceptually, work–life balance refers to an individual's perception of compatibility between work and non-work roles and the ability to allocate time and energy across these domains in line with personal priorities (Hasib *et al.,* 2022; Kalliath and Brough, 2008). Rather than implying equal time allocation, WLB emphasizes satisfaction, harmony, and the absence of excessive conflict between work and personal life (Bulger, 2014; Gervais, 2016). Both individual characteristics, such as gender, family responsibilities, values, and time-management skills, and organizational factors, including workload, job autonomy, leadership practices, and institutional support, significantly influence employees' work–life balance (Brough and Biggs, 2020; Goh *et al.*, 2022; Greenhaus and Allen, 2012).

Work–life balance is particularly critical for women employees, who frequently manage multiple and overlapping roles in professional and domestic spheres (Brough and Biggs, 2020). Despite increased labor force participation, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of household and caregiving responsibilities, intensifying work–family conflict and stress (Medina-Garrido *et al.*, 2023). Studies show that women's work–life balance is shaped by organizational policies, cultural norms, and gendered expectations, often resulting in greater role overload compared to men (Wani 2023; Tolera *et al.,* 2025).

In the higher education sector, work–life balance has gained increasing attention due to the complex nature of academic work, which includes teaching, research, publication pressures, administrative responsibilities, and career advancement requirements (Hasib *et al.*, 2022). Higher education institutions recognize that supporting work–life balance is essential for enhancing academic staff well-being, productivity, and institutional effectiveness (Dasaradhan and Kumaravel, 2024). However, inadequate work–life balance among academic staff has been linked to stress, burnout, job dissatisfaction, and reduced academic performance (Kalliath and Brough, 2022).

Female academicians face distinct challenges arising from the intersection of academic workload demands and persistent societal expectations regarding family and gender roles (Noronha and Aithal, 2020). Prior research indicates that women in academia experience significant conflict between professional obligations and family responsibilities, leading to emotional exhaustion and constrained career progression (Naz *et al.,* 2017). Even where supportive workplace policies exist, such as flexible schedules and parental leave, female academics continue to encounter work–life imbalance due to long working hours, inadequate managerial support, and unequal distribution of domestic labor (Goyal and Arora, 2012; Sharma and Mishra, 2023).

Despite extensive research on work–life balance, empirical studies focusing on female academic staff in developing countries remain limited. In particular, there is a paucity of evidence from Ethiopian higher education institutions, where contextual factors such as institutional support mechanisms, cultural expectations, and workload structures are likely to shape women's work–life experiences. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the work–life balance of female academic staff at Ambo University, with specific attention to the challenges they face and the work- and family-related factors influencing their balance. By providing context-specific empirical evidence, this study contributes to the literature and offers insights for institutional policies aimed at improving the well-being and productivity of female academicians.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted using a descriptive and exploratory research design. The exploratory design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of existing Work-life balance issues among female academicians, while the descriptive design allowed for a systematic description of the nature, extent, and characteristics of these challenges and the associated coping strategies.

The target population of this study consisted of all permanent female academic staff at Ambo University, ensuring that the study focused on individuals with sustained institutional experience. A census approach was adopted, involving all 131 permanent female academic staff members.

The study primarily relied on primary data, which were collected through structured questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs). The questionnaire was designed to capture detailed information on work- and family-related WLB challenges faced by female academic staff. Out of the 131 distributed questionnaires, only 120 were valid for data analysis. The questionnaire was evaluated through a pilot test conducted with a small group of female academic staff from similar institutions, ensuring that the items were clear, relevant, and understandable. In addition, FGDs were conducted with 12 female academic staff members from four campuses of Ambo University to gather qualitative insights. These discussions provided a richer understanding of participants' experiences and coping strategies related to work -life balance.

For data analysis, descriptive statistical techniques were applied to the quantitative data, and results were presented using tables. Qualitative data from the FGDs were analyzed thematically, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and key themes related to WLB challenges and coping mechanisms.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Background of the Respondents

This section presents the demographic information about the respondents who participated in the study. Table 1 shows the demographic background of the respondents. The study surveyed 120 female academic participants, predominantly aged between 22 and 30 years (50.8%) or 31-45 years (49.2%). A significant counts majority (91.6%) held master's degrees, while 90.2% were lecturers, indicating the predominant academic rank. The data also revealed insights regarding marital status, with 77.5% of respondents married, which is often associated with additional pressures related to work and family responsibilities. A considerable segment of the respondents (75.3%) also indicated they have children, suggesting implications for work-life conflicts. Demographic factors like age, education, academic rank, marital status, and work experience significantly impact women's work-life balance. Previous studies indicate that younger women often struggle with work-life balance due to career establishment and workload pressures, while older women face challenges related to caregiving responsibilities (Greenhaus and Powell, 2017). Higher education levels provide better job opportunities and flexibility, while lower education levels may face job instability and increased stress. Higher academic or professional ranks often face greater work demands, contributing to work-life conflict. Marital status also plays a crucial role, as married women, especially those with children, face difficulties in balancing professional and personal responsibilities (Singh and Chopra, 2019). Work experience also affects work-life balance, with more experienced women developing better coping strategies and stability, while less experienced women may struggle with time management and workload pressures (Kalliath and Brough, 2008)

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Respondents

Demographic	Specifications	Counts	Proportion (in %)
Marital Status	Married	93	77.50
	Unmarried	27	22.50
Age	22-30 years	61	50.80
	31-45 years	59	49.20
	Above 46	0	
Education level	First degree	7	5.80

Academic rank	Masters	110	91.60
	PhD	3	2.50
	Assistant professor	5	4.00
	Assistant lecture	7	5.80
	Lecturer	108	90.20
	Graduate assistant	0	0.00
Year of experiences	1-2years	9	7.50
	3-4years	14	11.50
	Above 5 years	97	80.80

Source: survey 2023

Work and Family-Related Work-Life Balance Challenges

This section explores the key findings related to how female academics navigate work-life balance, particularly in the context of family responsibilities, parenting, and the support system, presence of children, time spent on housework, prioritizing family responsibilities, concerns about work outside the academic, and spouse support.

Table 2 shows the parenting status of female academic staff. The analysis of the parenting and work-life balance landscape reveals significant insights into how family responsibilities and work-related obligations intersect for female academic staff. A majority of the surveyed individuals (75.3%) are parents. This indicates that parenting plays a significant role in shaping the work–life balance experiences of female academic staff. These results imply that work–life balance difficulties among female academic staff are not solely driven by workplace demands, but are also strongly influenced by caregiving responsibilities, including childcare, household management, and emotional labor. This indicates that professional roles are often intertwined with familial duties, creating a multitude of daily responsibilities that complicate the pursuit of work-life balance. Previous studies indicate that working mothers often contend with increased responsibilities at home, which can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and underprepared in their professional roles. Dapiton *et al*. (2020) explained that many working mothers find they need to sacrifice personal time, professional development, or even career advancement opportunities to manage childcare responsibilities.

The presence of children introduces numerous stressors that directly impact the work-life equilibrium for female academics. As established, working mothers frequently encounter heightened responsibilities at home, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed and impairing their professional readiness (Aga *et al*., 2025). The rigorous demands of academia, including research, teaching, and institutional commitments, often lead to mothers reallocating personal time and professional growth opportunities to fulfill childcare obligations (Russo and Carmeli, 2015).

Table 2. Parenting and work-life balance

Presence of children	Frequency	Percentage
No	23	24.70
Yes	70	75.30
Total	93	100.00

Source: Survey, 2023

Household Chore Support and Time Spent on House Chores

The result presented in Table 3 shows that Household Chore Support and Time Spent on House Chores. The findings reveal a critical intersection between household chore support and the time female academics devote to domestic responsibilities. Although half of the respondents (50%) reported having support in managing household chores, a substantial majority (68.3%) still spent more than six hours per day on housework. This suggests that the presence of support does not necessarily translate into a significant reduction in

domestic workload, highlighting the persistence

The lack or insufficiency of effective household support intensifies work–life imbalance by increasing stress, fatigue, and burnout among female academics. Those without adequate support face compounded challenges as domestic demands consume time and energy that could otherwise be allocated to academic activities such as teaching preparation, research, publication, and administrative responsibilities. Even among those reporting support, the excessive time spent on house chores indicates that women continue to bear primary responsibility for domestic work.

These findings reinforce the argument that traditional gender role expectations continue to shape women's experiences in academia. The expectation that women should simultaneously manage extensive household duties and

of unequal household labor distribution. demanding academic roles contributes to work–family conflict and emotional strain. This aligns with previous studies indicating that inadequate work–life balance support systems blur the boundaries between work and home, leading to spillover effects that complicate daily functioning (Medina-Garrido *et al*., 2023).

Furthermore, the results are consistent with earlier research by Naz *et al.* (2017), which found that women disproportionately shoulder domestic responsibilities even while engaged in full-time professional employment. The convergence of these findings across different contexts confirms that unequal domestic labor remains a persistent and systemic challenge, significantly constraining women's productivity, job satisfaction, and career advancement in academia.

Table 3. Household Chore Support and Time Spent on House Chores

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Support in Managing Household Chores	Yes	60	50.00
	No	60	50.00
Time Spent on House Chores (per day)	More than 6 hours	82	68.30
	3–5 hours	38	31.70
Total Respondents		120	100.00

Source: Survey, 2023

Family Support and Time Availability for Family

The findings presented in Table 4 reveal an important contrast between perceived family support and the actual time female academic staff are able to devote to their families. A substantial majority of respondents (77.5%) reported having understanding and supportive families, indicating that emotional and practical support is widely available. Such family understanding is crucial in alleviating domestic pressure and emotional stress, thereby facilitating improved work–life balance. Supportive families often contribute by sharing household responsibilities and offering encouragement, enabling female academicians to better cope with professional demands. This

finding aligns with Noronha and Aithal (2020), who reported that family understanding significantly reduces work–family conflict among women in academia.

Despite this high level of family support, the majority of respondents (66.6%) indicated that they do not have sufficient time for their family. This highlights a clear imbalance between professional responsibilities and family engagement. The inability to allocate adequate family time suggests that heavy workloads and institutional demands limit meaningful family interaction, even when supportive family structures exist. Such time constraints may lead to heightened stress, emotional exhaustion, and strained family relationships, ultimately affecting both personal well-being and professional productivity. Previous studies similarly note that insufficient

family time among working women is associated with burnout, emotional disengagement, and increased work–family conflict (Medina-Garrido *et al.*, 2023).

Table 4. Family Support and Time Availability for Family

Family-related factors	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Family understanding/support	Yes	93	77.50
	No	27	22.50
Sufficient time for family	Yes	40	33.40
	No	80	66.60
Total respondents		120	100.00

Source: Survey,2023

Prioritizing Family Life and Worrying About Work

The findings in Table 5 illustrate the complex interplay between family prioritization and psychological strain related to work among female academic staff. A substantial majority of respondents (75%) reported prioritizing family life, indicating a strong commitment to family responsibilities despite demanding professional roles. This reflects the reality that female academicians often navigate competing expectations between work and domestic responsibilities and frequently choose to give precedence to family life. Such prioritization is deeply influenced by social and cultural expectations placed on women, particularly in balancing caregiving and professional responsibilities. These findings are consistent with earlier studies by Naz *et al.* (2017), which report that women in academia often reorganize their professional commitments to accommodate family needs, sometimes at the expense of career advancement. Similarly,

Sharma and Mishra (2023) identified prioritizing family roles as a common coping strategy adopted by women to manage work–family conflict.

Despite this strong emphasis on family life, the results also reveal a high level of work-related psychological burden. Nearly half of the respondents reported that they often or always worry about work (49.2%), while only a small proportion (5%) indicated that they never worry about their professional responsibilities. This persistent concern about work beyond official working hours suggests blurred boundaries between professional and personal life. Continuous preoccupation with academic tasks, such as teaching responsibilities, research output expectations, and administrative duties, may significantly detract from personal and family time. As noted by Naz *et al.* (2017), the pressure to meet academic performance standards while fulfilling family roles can overwhelm female academic staff, leading to increased stress, anxiety, burnout, and a reduced sense of fulfillment in both domains.

Table 5. Prioritization of Family Life and Worry About Work

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Prioritizing family life	Yes	90	75.00
	No	30	25.00
Worry about work	Always	33	27.50
	Often	26	21.70
	Sometimes	55	45.80
	Never	6	5.00
Total respondents		120	100.00

Source: Survey, 2023

Spouse support for female academic staff

Table 6 shows female academic response on their spouse's support. Regarding analysis support majority of respondents explained the

limited support from their spouses in managing work and family responsibilities. Specifically, 46.3% indicated that they rarely receive spouse support, 35% reported receiving support sometimes, and 21% stated they never receive spouse support. This highlights that, for most female academic staff, spouse involvement in household or childcare responsibilities is minimal or inconsistent. Limited spouse support suggests that female academicians must shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities, even in dual-income or professional households. The lack of consistent partner support likely exacerbates work–family conflict, increases role overload, and negatively impacts psychological well-being, job performance, and overall work–life balance. Naz *et al.* (2017) found that female academicians experience stress and fatigue when household and childcare duties are not shared equally. Similarly, Kim and Shin (2013) emphasized that spousal involvement is a critical determinant of women's ability to maintain work–life balance.

Table 6. Analysis of Spouse Support

Spouse support	Frequency	Percentage
Never	20	21.00
Rarely	43	46.30
Sometimes	33	35.00
Total	93	100.00

Source: Survey, 2023

Challenges female academic staff are facing to balance work-life

Achieving a harmonious work-life balance is a multifaceted challenge shaped significantly by both personal and professional factors. The thematic analysis conducted in this study has shed light on the complexities that individuals, particularly women, face in managing their professional and personal responsibilities. Drawing on a survey that explored various dimensions of work-life balance, this article highlights the key personal factors affecting work-life balance, as well as the professional challenges faced by employees in today's dynamic work environment.

Analysis of Personal related challenges: Work-Life Balance

The analysis was undertaken through an inductive thematic approach, refined following the methodology outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcribed data revealed various themes that emerged from participants' experiences, with five primary themes highlighting the interconnected nature of personal circumstances and work-life balance.

Family Structure and Responsibilities: Family obligations, particularly those related to childcare, eldercare, and household chores, are predominant factors influencing work-life balance. The respondent explained that these responsibilities often extend their workday and create additional stress, making it challenging to balance their roles effectively. Supportive workplace policies that recognize these challenges can help alleviate the burden on employees (Allen *et al.,* 2020).

Location of Residence: The respondents expressed that there is a significant distance between their place of residence and their workplace, making commuting a challenge. The considerable distance between home and work may impact their work-life balance, reducing the time available for personal activities, family, or relaxation (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011). The respondents explained that the geographical location of the respondents affects work time.

Social and Cultural Expectations: Participants noted the significant impact of societal norms, which often place the expectations of caregiving and household management primarily on women, even if they hold full-time employment. They suggested that this cultural pressure can lead to a conflict between personal aspirations and professional ambitions, resulting in heightened stress levels for female academics. Prior research similarly demonstrates that traditional gender roles exacerbate work–family conflict and constrain women's career progression in academia and other professional settings (Eagly and Wood, 2016; Naz *et al*., 2017).

Parenting Issues: Balancing parenting duties specifically emerged as a central challenge for many respondents. The demands of parenting can interfere with work responsibilities and vice versa, highlighting the urgent need for workplaces to adopt more accommodating measures. They suggested that the institutions should prioritize understanding and supporting employee-parent needs to cultivate a healthier work environment. consistent with earlier studies, the findings suggest that inadequate institutional support for parenting responsibilities contributes significantly to work–family conflict and burnout among female employees (Allen *et al*., 2013; Noor, 2004).

Time Management Skills: Participants acknowledged difficulties in prioritizing tasks, adhering to deadlines, and allocating enough time for family life. They suggested that these challenges often lead to increased stress and burnout, emphasizing the importance of equipping employees with effective time management strategies.

Professional-Related Challenges of Work-Life Balance

The participants raised the concern that some non-desk jobs presented significant challenges. With irregular schedules, it's challenging to balance work and personal life. They explained that Long and Unpredictable Hours are spent studying at home, preparing for class, preparing teaching material, and conducting research at home. This added workload shapes the boundaries between professional and personal time, making it difficult to rest, engage in leisure activities, or spend quality time with family. Previous studies confirm that excessive workloads and the expectation of after-hours academic work significantly contribute to work–life imbalance, stress, and burnout among academics, especially women (Kinman and Jones, 2008; Winefield *et al.,* 2014).

Coping Strategies for Work-Life Balance Challenges

The study reveals that female academic staff utilize various coping strategies to achieve work-life balance, with time management being the most common approach (34%). Prioritizing tasks (27%) and seeking support from colleagues, supervisors, or family members (27%) also play crucial roles in managing professional and personal responsibilities. However, 12% of respondents reported not using any coping strategies, highlighting significant challenges in balancing their roles. The findings emphasize the need for institutional support, including professional development training on time management and prioritization, to enhance work-life balance among female academics. The previous studies also support this finding. For example, Jackson (2023) found that female faculty members experience greater service burdens and struggle with time management due to competing professional and personal demands. Similarly, Misra *et al*. (2012) emphasized that institutions should provide structured support, such as mentorship programs and workload redistribution, to help female academics manage their responsibilities more effectively.

Professional development training on time management and prioritization has been recommended in several studies as a way to empower female faculty members to navigate their roles more efficiently (Eaton *et al.,* 2020). Such training can improve their ability to balance research, teaching, and personal life, reducing stress and increasing job satisfaction.

The study highlights key organizational strategies that support work-life balance among female academic staff. Creating an appealing work environment (37.5%) emerged as the most effective approach, fostering collaboration, inclusivity, and employee well-being. Childcare facilities (33.3%) were also highly valued, easing the burden on working mothers and improving job satisfaction. While counseling services and flexible working hours were acknowledged by 5.8% of respondents each, they remain important tools for managing stress and promoting work-life integration. Additionally, 12.5% of respondents favored extended maternity leave, recognizing its role

in supporting new mothers and enhancing workforce retention. These findings underscore the need for institutions to implement supportive policies that promote a more balanced and equitable work environment. Prior studies indicate that access to on-campus childcare is a critical factor in supporting working mothers in academia. Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2016) highlight that affordable and accessible childcare facilities help female faculty manage their dual responsibilities, reducing stress and improving productivity. Similarly, Mason and Goulden (2002) found that the availability of childcare services directly influences career progression and job satisfaction for female academics.

In the focus group discussion, the participants also suggested that higher education should Reduce Teaching Loads compared to male academic staff. Temporary reduction of teaching duties after maternity leave is important. They argued that their teaching loads should be reduced compared to their male counterparts as a form of affirmative action, recognizing the additional family and household responsibilities that women often bear. By implementing temporary teaching load reductions, universities create a more inclusive, productive, and supportive environment for female academic staff. According to Misra *et al.* (2012), institutions with progressive maternity leave policies experience lower turnover rates among female faculty. Similarly, Cech and Blair-Loy (2019) argue that extended leave enables new mothers to transition smoothly back to work, reducing career interruptions and enhancing job satisfaction.

Conclusion

The study reveals the significant impact of work-life balance on female academic staff in higher education institutions. The majority of respondents are married women and mothers, indicating that family responsibilities significantly shape their experiences and challenges in balancing professional and personal life. Although most female academic staff report supportive family dynamics, a significant proportion experiences stress due to

dual expectations of work and home. This can hinder career advancement and contribute to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction.

Female academics face various difficulties in personal, professional, and emotional spheres, including updating skills, improving careers, and maintaining professional networks. Manipulating both personal and professional obligations increases workload, causing emotional strain and discontent. Major obstacles to work-life balance include excessive household chores, a preference for family obligations over professional ones, worry about work when not at work, lack of support from superiors and subordinates, and personal and professional factors. Female academics employ coping mechanisms such as prioritization, time management, outsourcing, seeking support, and making personal sacrifices.

Recommendations

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends work–life balance theories by highlighting the gender-specific challenges faced by female academics, particularly the interaction between caregiving roles, workplace demands, and well-being. It emphasizes that work–life balance is a gendered and context-dependent process influenced by both organizational structures and social expectations.

From a managerial perspective, universities should implement flexible work arrangements, such as adjustable teaching schedules, reduced workloads for staff with caregiving responsibilities, and hybrid work options where feasible. Establishing on-campus or subsidized childcare services, along with access to counseling and mentoring programs, would help reduce stress and improve productivity among female academic staff.

At the policy level, governments should enforce labor laws, regulate academic workloads, and ensure equal pay and parental leave for female academics. Increased funding for higher education institutions to support childcare facilities, research grants, and gender

equity initiatives is also essential. Additionally, awareness programs that promote shared household responsibilities should be encouraged to reduce the domestic burden on women in academia.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study offers valuable insights, it has certain limitations that future research should address. Firstly, it focuses only on female academic staff, excluding non-academic employees who may face different work-life balance challenges. Secondly, the study employs a descriptive research design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Lastly, the research is conducted only at Ambo University, making it difficult to generalize the findings to other institutions or sectors. Future studies can address these limitations by including both academic and non-academic female employees for a more comprehensive analysis. Additionally, using a mixed-methods or longitudinal research design could provide deeper insights into the factors influencing work-life balance. Expanding the study to multiple universities or organizations would also enhance the generalizability of the findings.

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