Work-Life Balance among Corporate Women: Findings from a Ten-Year Ethnographic Study

Kavitha Ezhilarasi
Founder & CEO
7M Group, Anakaputhur, Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

Preethi Subramanian
Head of Research & Training
7M Group, Anakaputhur, Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

Abstract--- Work-life balance is a challenging task which decides if a woman is successful or unsuccessful. The study explores the life of married and unmarried working women, problems of work-life balance and the strategies used by women who balance their work and family. One hundred women were chosen from various workplaces; however, all of them invariably stated work-life balance as a major issue. Quitting the job for taking care of home was not a reasonable solution as it had its drawbacks. The option that repeatedly surfaced in this study was the development of alternate careers.

Keywords--- Work-life Balance, Ethnography Study, India, Corporate Women, Alternate Careers.

Introduction

We are in an era where women are gaining equal importance to men in the society. Women in this generation are equally qualified as men and also get placed in reputed companies. However, the sad thing is that women joining the companies are forced into a situation where they fail to reach higher positions or quit the job and stay at home. In the past centuries, main role for women was to get married and take care of the family; only a handful of women, especially women in the higher society had opportunity for good education and concentrated on their careers. However, the current scenario has changed because of the economic and financial conditions which have increased the number of working women in the society. On the other hand, the society also wants women to take up good positions. Most of the private organisations are keen on maintaining the diversity ratio, which has led to introducing many benefits for the women employees. However, most of the working women fail to maintain the balance between family and job. Since most of the work comes under high pressure, and also on the other hand women have responsibility to maintain the family, many women fail to look after their health, job and their family, due to which they are forced to sacrifice one or more of the above. At times financial needs are too high that the couples are forced to work in different locations hampering the family life.

Work-life balance in fact is a challenging task which decides if a woman is successful or unsuccessful. Many women hesitate or fear to take a job as they feel their personal life would be affected by the job. Most of the literature has given more concentration on married women, especially young mothers. However, this study will also expose the difficulties of unmarried women, as unmarried women also face certain challenges which make them lose their interest in their career. Though equally
qualified as men, women always don’t get enough support from the family for pursuing their career.

This study is particularly aimed to understand what are the issues faced by married and unmarried women related to work-life balance. The secondary objective of this study is to provide strategies for women to balance the work and family without any difficulty, and also motivate more women to concentrate on their career without giving up prematurely.

Methods

This study explores the life of married and unmarried working women. Also, it shows problems that impact women in balancing work at office and home. This study will also explain strategies used by women who balance their work and family. Between July 2005 and June 2015, ethnography study (D A Snow et al., 2003) was done among 100 women. One hundred women were chosen from various workplaces through first level contacts in the following two categories: 1) working married women 2) working unmarried women. There were 50 in each category. Some of these women quit their jobs to take care of their family or due to personal reasons. They were chosen in such a way that they closely resembled regarding culture, tradition and social strata for comparability. Two out of three of these factors were similar in all of them to avoid too much variation. They were explained about the study, informed consent was taken and proper ethical procedures were followed. No data related to their identification was taken. They were interviewed informally once a while to understand how their lives were progressing, and they were documented to understand the work-life balance issues, how they face them, the strategies used by them to handle it, etc. All these were noted in the form of field notes and compared from time to time. After ten years, all the field notes were analyzed to derive the major ideas.

Results

All of the participants were between the age group of 31-34 years at the end of the study. Some of them got married during the ten-year course which was instrumental in understanding how their lives evolved before and after marriages. Table 1 shows the number of samples in each category when the study ended.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of them came from the upper middle strata of the society based on modified Kuppusamy scale. They were all from Chennai whose native was Tamil Nadu in India.

Findings

Reasons Why Women Fail in Work-life Balance

During the study, it was seen that majority of women take up jobs for financial back up for their family; very few, that too in the higher strata of the society was keen on developing their career. However, there is a thought prevalent among the middle class that higher society people have servants who can help them to achieve the balance between work, name, fame, money and family. Though women are known as weak
instruments, they are also multitalented but are reluctant and hesitant in seeking help from others when it comes to work-life balance.

**Marriage as a Hindrance for Working Women**

Most of the working women lose interest in work after getting married. Most of the married women take up jobs for their financial needs rather than for career growth. Marital problems are a major reason why women lose interest in work after marriage. On the other hand, unmarried girls face different issues like if they get a marriage proposal from a different location, girls are asked to leave the job and move in with the boy.

**Health Conditions**

Many women fail to take care of their health because of their hectic schedule due to which they are unable to continue their job. Especially in a developing country like India where the health of a married woman is still not considered important, poor physical health forces women to seek early retirement from work.

**Maternity Breaks**

Another issue faced by women is maternity break. Women who take maternity leave for a year re-join the same designation in their organization after the break. In the meantime, other employees get promotion and go on to higher designations, which is also one of the main reasons why women lose their interest in a career.

**Pressure in the Workplace**

One of the main complaints among all employees is work pressure, especially it impacts women more. Due to work pressure, some women fail to look after their family which results in broken relationships, affects the education of children and creates disharmony in the family, etc. Due to business criticality, they are also required to work for long hours.

**Harassment at Work Place**

From the olden days to modern age, lower level as well as higher level women always face sexual harassment in different forms. The harassment starts from their travel; women travelling in public transport usually face sexual harassment. Harassment at work place is highly controlled because of company policies in the formal sector, but in informal sectors it is still a major issue.

**Workplace Conflict**

Many women fail to maintain their relationship with other employees which results in conflict inside the organization.

**Family Conflict**

The family conflict between husband and wife, in-laws and parents is the primary source of stress for women which results in loss of interest both in family and at workplace. Lack of interest in the workplace ultimately leads to lower performance and productivity, which results in layoff.
Absenteeism

Most of the organisations face a problem when a female employee take leave on a regular basis, which not only affects the employee productivity but also in turn reflects on the organizational growth.

Domination by Men

When it comes to family, it is still dominated by men. For instance, when the male gets transferred to another city he relocates the entire family which leads to women sacrificing her career for the family.

Complaints of Married Working Women

Apart from the issues mentioned above, there are a few problems specific to married working women. Married working women feel bad that they do not have opportunity to spend time with their family, especially the young mothers who want to see their children grow, so they slowly stop seeing their job as a career and instead start seeing it as a burden.

Complaints of Women Post Quitting Work

Here are some of the issues stated by women who quit their jobs for taking care of the family.

Lack of Finance

Most of the family with a single person earning have financial lack compared to the working couples.

Dependent Upon Other Family Members

Most of the non-working women state that they are not able to support their family and are financially dependent on the spouse or parents or in-laws or guardian.

Apart from the above two reasons, low confidence and reduction in exposure to the outside world is stated as a major issue after quitting work.

What Organizational Benefits Help Women in Maintaining Work-Life Balance?

Many organizations have developed many schemes for the benefits of women employees which were stated by women in this study as beneficial.

Work from Home

Many companies have introduced work from home option with various benefits, which have motivated women. This has helped many female employees in balancing their profession and personal life.

Maternity Leave

The government has introduced many acts for benefits of women going on maternity leave and also updating the act.

Work Timings

Many organizations do not encourage women working late hours. They have flexible work timings.
Healthcare & Fitness

Training and conducting workshops for women health benefits, encouraging the employees to exercise by keeping treadmill or cycle set in office premises and also conducting competition among employees to motivate them to exercise.

Leaves

"Leave" as a benefit which involves casual leave, sick leave, sabbatical, etc.

Sexual Harassment

Organizations are very careful in protecting their female employees by introducing many rules and also set up a separate committee for female employees to address their issues.

Work-Life Balancing Strategies

The study revealed the following strategies outlined by women who have successfully managed to balance work and life.

Developing alternative careers like content writers, language teachers, freelance trainers and other work-from-home related projects are very helpful in maintaining the work-life balance even after marriage, relocation, childbirth and sabbatical. Having alternate career also ensures that financial needs are met, and the person is oriented to job and industry even after two to three years of break in career.

Discussion

The study explores the life of married and unmarried working women, problems of work-life balance and strategies used by women who balance their work and family. One hundred women were chosen from various workplaces through first level contacts in the following two categories: 1) working married women 2) working unmarried women. All of the participants were between the age group of 31-34 years at the end of the study. Some of them got married during the ten-year course which was instrumental in understanding how their lives evolved before and after marriages. All of them came from the upper middle strata of the society based on modified Kuppusamy scale. They were all from Chennai whose native was Tamil Nadu in India. The problems faced by working women differ between married and unmarried women. However, all of them invariably stated work-life balance as a major issue. The work-life balance challenge was further augmented post marriage. Quitting the job for taking care of home was not a reasonable solution as it had its drawbacks like lesser income to run the family and lack of exposure to the external world. Women should plan accordingly to ensure that they maintain the work-life balance. Women need to work for the following reasons:

Financial Benefits: The cost of living is increasing day by day where it drives every individual to work. Working women are an additional financial backbone for the family.

Confidence: The confidence level is high among the working women than non-working women.

Self-reliance: Working women are more self-reliant.
The best possible option that repeatedly surfaced in this study was the development of alternative careers. Alternate careers will help women work from home, do freelance projects like content writing, proofreading, copyediting, translation, language teaching, teach tuition classes for kids, etc. This will ensure that the women can make money as well as balance work with life. Moreover, they can get to work even after few years of break from the regular 9-to-5 job.

**Conclusion**

The study explored the life of married and unmarried working women, problems of work-life balance and strategies used by women who balance their work and the family. The problems faced by working women differ between married and unmarried women. However, all of them invariably stated work-life balance as a major issue. The work-life balance challenge was further augmented post marriage. Quitting the job for taking care of home was not a reasonable solution as it had its drawbacks like lesser income to run the family and lack of exposure to the external world. The best possible option that repeatedly surfaced in this study was the development of alternate careers.

**References**