

**ASSESSING THE EFFECT OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE ON CAREER FEMALE PROFESSIONALS: THE CASE OF FEMALE UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS IN GHANA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study examines the effect of work-life (im)balance among female administrators from three selected public universities in Ghana. Adopting a case study design within qualitative research approach, a total of 74 respondents are selected. Elite interviews and focus group discussions are the main research instrumentations. The study observes one positive effect of work-life (im)balance on respondents which is the building of resilience to withstand any demands and pressures of work overtime. That notwithstanding, the study observes numerous negative effects which include slowing down career progression, deterioration in health, reduction in job performance, breakdown of marriages.*

**KEYWORDS:** work-life balance; educational institutions; career progression; job satisfaction; job stress

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Scholars maintain that many institutions of higher learning tend to carry on a gendered order in their structures and operations which tend to affect females in the organization (see Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier, 2017). The authors contend that the old structure of many universities relied and premised on ‘a masculine persona’ who appeared knee-deep engrossed in the work and did not have to contend with anything in their respective households (domestic chores) because they had other people to absorb the latter. The issue of work-life balance remains an especially important issue that confronts many employees, especially, females. This phenomenon has even become more crucial in the wake of COVID 19 which has increasingly propelled a more intermingling between the office space and home domain as the already thin line between the duo has been broken (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). The idea of increased working hours poses an enormous stress on the everyday life of a great number of people, creating work-life imbalance and stressful lifestyles for employees both at the workplace and at home (Giurge & Bohns, 2020). Any imbalances in the work-life relationship do have cascading impact on the quality of role performance in both domains, which also has socio-cultural and economic implications on workers (Mudrak et al., 2018).

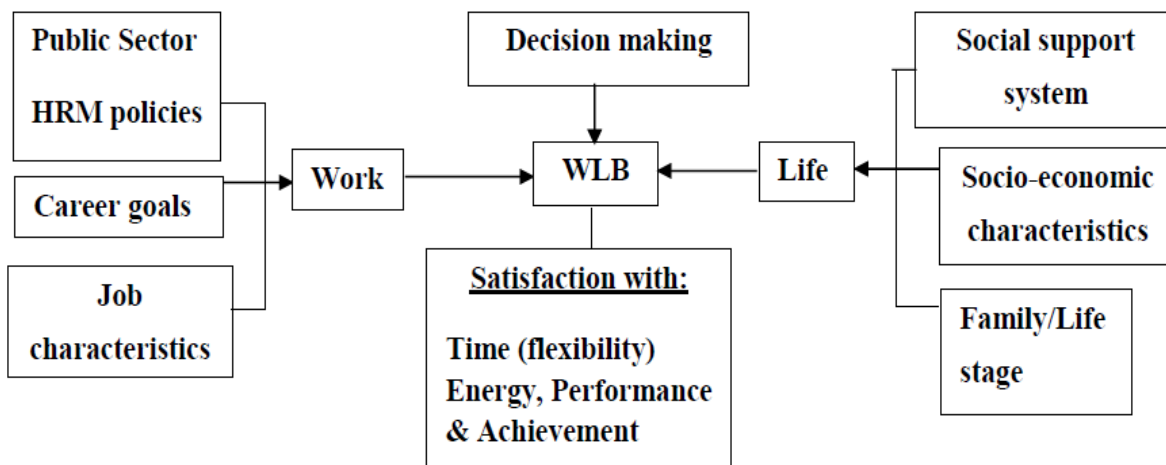
That regard, work-life balance remains a major concern for people and institutions concerned about the quality of working life in relation to the broader quality of life (Guest, 2002). This is because a balanced work-life score offers an organisation with a creative employee (Moore, 2007), while disparity in the work-life balance brings about depressed staff (Sandhya et al, 2011). The situation becomes more problematic for females who as human beings almost always have to juggle between the economic and social imperatives with parallel expectations from both pulling with a centrifugal force. In other words, the whole idea of work-life balance

among female professionals is centered on their different critical roles as both economic and social beings (Powell et al, 2019; Greenhaus & Powel, 2012). The woman at the centre of the concept of work-life balance, is perceived as an economic resource at the workplace, and as a social resource to family and community development. As a result, the interplay between the economic and social roles of this employee always generates imbalance, where the dominance of the functionality of one role over the other affects the overall performance of the individual in both ends. More problematic is that the inter-role stressors from work and life domains are mutually dissenting (Lewis, Gambles & Rapoport, 2007). Whereas employers demand the maximum concentration, innovativeness, and experience from individuals as employees within a defined time, families and communities require the attention, care and guidance of these same individuals who are parents and relatives at certain time periods.

Organizations in their quest to enhance work-life balance have been admonished to institute many human resource interventions including flexible and alternate work schedules. Meanwhile, without an adequate knowledge on how work-life balance really affects female administrators, organizations in many cases have appeared hesitant in their response to these issues. It is instructive to gain adequate insight into how specific sectors and industries are affected by work-life balance to guide how policies could be formulated to mitigate the plight of employees. Thus, Leonard et al. (1994) contends that 'being a mother [female] in academic life [institution] is a challenging one as the struggles that a mother needs to overcome, the compromises she needs to grapple with as well as the solutions to deal with these appear not recognized by society. *To what extent are female administrators in public universities affected by work-life conflict?* An assessment of how the social and economic spheres of female administrators get affected by work-life imperatives appear to be at the backburner of empirical literature. Meanwhile, without such knowledge, it becomes difficult for the 'policy window' to be opened for educational institutions put in place policies, mechanisms, and structures to address these effects. This paper assesses the effect of work-life conflict on female administrators in higher educational institutions using the experience of three public universities in Ghana.

### **Conceptual framework**

From the review of concepts and guided by the work-life border theory, the study has developed the conceptual framework below to guide the study.



**Figure 1: Conceptual framework for managing work-life balance among female administrators**

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework**

**Source:** Developed by author

Figure 1 indicates that work and life role activities are iterative in a continuum as suggested by the work-life border theory. In an educational institution just like many others work demands are mainly determined by the job descriptions and human resource policies which detail out the expected roles and responsibilities of employees in the organisation. The role scarcity theory explains that individuals may not have the time and energy to effectively perform their roles from both work and life domains and as such, require some human resource management policies to promote flexibility and permeability of roles to enable them to meet the demands from the two domains. According to McCarthy et al. (2010), the utilisation of work-life balance strategies by employees is partially propelled by their perceptions and career progression goals. Those employees who perceive organisational work-life balance policies as compatible with their career development goals adopt them and whilst the reverse also holds.

Another element that tends to affect the working environment of employees is the *job Characteristics* or nature of the job. Job characteristics include the operational approach of an organisation and its operational structures. The operational approach considers the performance target system. Is performance measured based on the time one spends at work or operational targets? If it is the former, it mostly may compel workers to overstay at their workplaces to demonstrate their commitments to their superiors which may inadvertently breed an imbalance with their family demands. On the other hand, over ambitious operational targets could also compel workers to work at home, which disrupts the boundary between working time and family time as well as influence one's expected roles in the family.

Operational structures, as part of job characteristics, examine working characteristics where some employees could step in for others when they are absent without any serious disruptions in operational processes. It also shows the supervisory roles in helping workers to manage their

work and family demands to avoid conflicts. Here, the personality and management style of superiors come to play. The extent to which superiors are flexible, empathetic, compassionate and adopt the human relations approach to management would help strongly encourage work-life balance whilst the reverse also holds.

The framework also provides that family environment in relation to maintaining work-life balance is largely influenced by the available social support systems, socio-economic characteristics, and life stages of workers (Ungerson & Yeandle, 2005). Life stage refers to the complex association between age, number of children, marital status, ages of children, and career development plan.

According to McElwain et al. (2005), socioeconomic characteristics of workers that influence their work-life relationships include gender, age, income levels, social class, job positions, marital status, and level of education. These elements influence work-life balance because they all come with different roles and expectations in family life as well as present various levels of resources to enable workers to meet demands from both work and life domains.

## **METHODS**

The study was carried out within the interpretivism research paradigm which informed the choice of research design. Consequently, the case study design was selected for the study. The case of three public universities (UG, KNUST, and UCC) was purposively selected and studied. Both primary and secondary data were adopted. The purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select a total of 74 respondents for the study. Out of the 74 respondents, 22 were sampled from each institution (making a total of 66 from the three institutions), while eight (8) were selected from national institutions and associations relevant to female welfare and affairs. It included one (1) representative each from the human resource departments of the selected universities, one (1) representative each from the Social Welfare Department and Ministry for Gender, Children and Social Protection, 18 executives of women caucuses in the three selected universities, six (6) National Executives of the Ghana Association of University Administrators (GAUA), and 45 female administrators. Purposive sampling was used to select the institutional representatives because of their in-depth knowledge and unique roles in the enactment and implementation of policies and practices regulating work-life balance among female administrators in public universities. Semi-structured interviews focus group discussions were used as instruments for primary data collection. Separate interview guides were developed for the female administrators, representatives of the human resource departments, social welfare department, and Ministry for Gender, Children and Social Protection (MGCSP). Data was analysed using the thematic analysis to ascertain the themes emerging from similarities and variations in responses given by participants.

### **Data Analysis**

From the data on effect of work-life balance issues on respondents, the following themes have been derived and discussed thematically in details below:

***Slowing down career progression.***

The study found that one of the major effects of issues surrounding work-life balance of female administrators in public universities in Ghana was the slowing down of their career progression. From the study, most of the female administrators reported that the excessive demands on them from the family domain makes it difficult to put themselves together on time to progress through the promotional rungs of the universities. A respondent from UG narrated,

*“you always get home tired and always trying to manage kids and other family roles... so you don't even get the zeal and strength to write papers for promotion”.*

The narration shows that the socio-cultural demands on female administrators in public universities in Ghana from the family domain cause deterioration in their strength to perform other roles that could enhance their career progression.

In an academic institution, one is expected to possess up to date knowledge regarding their areas of specialization usually gained through conferences which may take few days and outside one's jurisdiction. Without an optimal work-life balance, it becomes quite challenging for most females to get involved in these ventures which inadvertently affects their career progression and profession. This point was forcefully brought home by a female administrator from UCC who posited:

*I am unable to attend conferences [and] capacity building programmes to enhance my performance and fast track my promotions because i had young kids and cannot leave them to attend to such programmes outside Cape Coast for over a day. As a result, I am unable to present conference papers and learn new and emerging issues on the job, which has slowed down my career progression at the university.*

The results show that the socio-cultural roles in the home expected of professional women take too much of their time, energy and attention required to focus on their career progression and professional lives. This point was corroborated by a female administrator from UG who alluded to the fact that:

*women spend too much time, energy and attention with childbirth and childcare, especially catering for children under five, while the males get time to put their documents together for promotion.*

A female administrator from UG, therefore, recommended that the promotion requirements for females should be made lower than the males to enable female administrators in public universities in Ghana to effectively combine the family roles with their job demands to achieve a balance.

A female administrator from KNUST also narrates:

*Some of my colleagues are now senior assistant registrars and deputy registrars, but I'm still an assistant registrar... this is all because I have to spend some time giving birth to two children and taking care of them... there is nothing I can do because the*

*kids are very important to me and demand more time and attention to ensure proper upbringing... this is one of the reasons why some Heads do not want young female administrators... they think you will leave in the process to go and deliver and take some long leave to take care of the children... meanwhile, they wish their wives get more time and attention for their children”.*

### ***Deterioration in health***

Another negative effect of the work-life relationship as reported by the female administrators across the three sampled public universities was deterioration in health. From the study, this was largely attributed to stress resulting from poor sleeping habits. The study found that most of the female administrative staff had poor sleeping habits of less than six hours a day. This situation was worse for female administrators with children under five years of age, and even worst for female administrators in UG with children under five years of age and living outside the university’s campus. A female administrator from UG with a child of less than one year of age reported:

*“I sleep less than five hours a day due to the workload in the house... I mostly experience headaches in the afternoon and take pain killers... because of that I always have pain killers in my bag... I get good sleep only during weekends, and because of that I don’t attend church or any other programmes”.*

This point was given support by another participant from KNUST who put it this way:

*“I was diagnosed of hypertension after my third born, and it’s all because of the stress I go through to manage my kids and attend to my roles at work without the support from my husband... sometimes I think I will be better off being single than staying under marriage and giving birth to many children”.*

### ***Reduction in job performance***

From the study, reduction in job performance was also identified as a negative effect of work-life balance imperative on female administrators of public universities in Ghana. Many of the female administrators across the three sampled public universities in Ghana reported of a dip in their job performance due to strain and stress from family responsibilities and the investment of part of the working hours to attend to family roles. A respondent from UCC indicated:

*“I observed a reduction in my job performance after my firstborn... this was because I had divided attention... I will come to work alright but my mind will be at home... this is normal and natural due to the affection between mothers and their kids”.*

### ***Breakdown of marriages***

Another negative effect of the work-life balance of female administrators in public universities in Ghana has been the separation of marriages and issues related to divorce. The study found that some of the female administrators had either been separated from their marriages or divorced. The main argument advanced to explain the separation of marriages and phenomenon of divorce among the female administrators in public universities was a work-life imbalance.

Many of such respondents complained of lack of support from their husbands and continuous increase in workload from the family domain.

A female administrator from UG indicated:

*I realised that it would be impossible for me to achieve my career goals with marriage... this was a person who doesn't come home early and you have to do everything all by yourself and attending to the demands of the children... it was having a huge toll on my health and job performance... so I decided to opt out of the marriage send my children to my mother... and I'm okay now... sometimes if you think so much on what people in the society will say about you, you will die or not achieve anything in some marriages”*

### **Capacity building to handle occupational pressure.**

Whilst the stress females do go through in the home and at the workplace has generally recorded negative outcomes, this study reveals that the situation over time builds up the adaptive and responsive capacities of females who go through such experiences. In other words, the only positive effect from the work-life balance imperative of female administrators in public universities in Ghana has been its tendency to build their capacity to handle occupational pressures. From the study, some of the sampled female administrators from the three public universities reported that their ability to perform the dual roles of work and family demands has built their capacities to respond to occupational pressures. One of such respondents from UCC indicated:

*“I have become used to waking up at 4:00 am and prepar[ing] myself for work... I'm always the first to report to work in my office... because of that I hardly have backlogs on my desk... I make sure I always clear issues on my desk”.*

It is indicated from the above extract that work-life balance could build the capacities of female administrators to increase their job performance. However, this occurred to female administrators who had matured children and those who have family support to take care of part of the responsibilities from the life domain. This point was corroborated by another female administrator from KNUST who posited:

*I feel comfortable working at my department because of the high volumes of work... I get bored when I come to work and there is nothing much to be done... and I think it is largely due to the difficult times I spent to raise my kids while attending to job demands at the same time.*

## **DISCUSSION**

The study observed one positive effect of work-life balance imperative on female administrators which over time tends to build their adaptive and responsive stimulus. This is because as they succumb to pressures and stress from both the home and workplace, this enhances their coping mechanisms and can withstand any challenging situation which may confront them in the workplace. That notwithstanding, the study uncovers numerous negative effects associated with work-life imbalance which involve performance, health, and career progression issues.

The quest to effectively respond to work duties and home duties mostly puts undue stress, reduces the quality time to spend on rest and sleep which over time has health implications on female administrators. Greenhaus and Powell (2006) posit that there is a negative relationship between energy and time in work-life balance, the more time female administrators spent on attending to family issues, the more their energy deteriorates, which affects their stress and health status. In other words, the negative relationship between time and energy spent in meeting work-life demands explains the deterioration of health in the female administrators as they strive to achieve work-life balance.

The results of the study bring to the fore that as female administrators have to juggle between home and office duties often coinciding with one another, they tend to mostly get divided attention and the situation could have the tendency to reduce their job performance. Thus, divided attention does not enable them to give maximum focus and attention to their job roles which may make them make some errors or pile up office work unattended to. The result further shows that efforts to measure the performance of workers, including female administrators in public universities should go beyond regularity at work to actual productivity levels and quality of work done. This is because workers could be physically present but psychologically absent.

The study again uncovers how the phenomenon could have a debilitating effect on the overall career progression of female administrators who in line of duty are intermittently required to respond to home and cultural responsibilities which may take some time off work. When females become pregnant, it tends to slow their activities and even when they are due to write entrance exams for promotion, they may want to postpone it and more problematic is when they are already on maternity leave during which they may miss 'the promotion window' depending on the school's calendar on taking promotion exams. More problematic is when overwhelmed with home care duties and other family related pressures which make some female administrators unable to attend relevant periodic conferences and symposia which may be relevant for career promotion purposes. McDowell and Lindsay (2014) posited that choices over certain socio-cultural roles and responsibilities are non-negotiable for professional women that they need sacrifice some roles and elements in their job roles to meet the expectations of the society. Over time, those without many home obligations and/or with other relevant support as well as male counterparts easily rise on the job and get successive progressions whilst their counterparts facing work-life imbalance tend to be somewhat stagnant which could lead to frustration and other negative consequential outcomes.

Following from the above, when the pressures of home care duties unduly interfere with the workspace and frustration builds over time, it leads to breakdown of marriages and separation especially if the husband is not supportive. If the latter holds true, females are likely to quit the marriage and put particular focus on their corporate lives. This observation affirms the argument by Goode (1960) that in the role scarcity theory individuals have limited resources in terms of time and energy, and as a result, one's involvement in multiple roles implies



competition over these scarce resources to meet demands from different domains, which creates conflicts.

According to Meyer and Parfyonova (2010), individuals make work-life decisions throughout their lives that affect demands and benefits associated with work and life domains. In other words, the slowing down of career progression of some female administrators in public universities in Ghana as well as the decision to breakdown the marriage and to reduce stress from that side is also a result of the choice, they make concerning work-life demands to engage in the work activities. The difficulty expressed by female administrators with children under a year old agrees with the finding of Cinamon and Rich (2010) that the life-stage of a professional woman plays a crucial role in determining a balance or imbalance between work and life demands and relationships. In situations where the issue becomes clearly unbearable especially when the spouse is not supportive enough, females are more likely to let go off the marriage and focus on their career as they cannot share their energies on the two again. This observation synchs with an argument by Greenhaus and Powell (2012) that there is always a conflict between time and energy and as a result, one could not get the same time and level of energy used to execute roles and functions in one domain to perform the functions and responsibilities in another domain.

Our current study observes that, when the situation becomes so unbearable and without effective support system from the husband, females have high propensity to ‘quit the home’ and exert maximum energy and time to work demands. The finding provides support to an observation by Anyidoho and Manuh (2010) that work-life imbalance is the underlying cause of many marriage breakdowns in the twenty-first century. This is due to the changing trends in organizations and excessive demands from employers on employees for organizations to remain competitive. It is against the foregoing that Haar and Roche (2010) suggest that issues about work-life balance should critically be considered at both the national policy level and organisational policy level to maintain cohesion in society as there is empirical evidence to suggest that the availability of work-life balance initiatives tends to lead to increased affective commitment and decreased turnover intentions among employees (Wood & de Menezes, 2008).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Although predominantly negative, this study contends that females who know how to withstand the demands of both work and life domains over time build their resilience and coping mechanisms which becomes a quality that would help them in meeting demands and pressures at the workplace. This suggests that whilst work-life imperative experienced by female administrators necessarily poses negative outcome, an inconsequential result is the provision of ‘thick skin’ for women to be able to withstand any stress that their current job or future job would require from them.

The above notwithstanding, if work-life issues are not professionally managed they cause far reaching negative consequences on the being of the female administrator, her health, career life, home life and overall job performance and productivity.

Public universities ought to put in place flexible work policies so that as far as practicable will help reduce the stress female administrators go through in juggling between work and social responsibilities between short intervals amidst intense traffic congestion on the roads. If nothing at all, COVID 19 has demonstrated to the world that many jobs can be done without being always physically present in the workplace. Context-specific flexible policies could be instituted to help prevent or mitigate the extreme health and family breakdowns female administrators would face because of work-life imbalance.

From the study findings, it is not enough to whip up employees to be physically present at the workplace as this does not necessarily drive them to put up productive work attitudes. In other words, people can be physically present in the workplace comfortably by their office desk but emotionally and intellectually they are far away because of an unfinished business or pressing issue needed to be fixed. The study concludes that organizations and human resource management outfits need to deploy sufficient systems and measures for ascertaining employee productivity and performance. It is also prudent to place particular emphasis on target setting and meeting such targets which suggests a need to have a second look at their performance management strategy.

The study concludes that apparent slower rate of career progression among females could be traceable to work-life balance imperatives. It is crucial to look out for tailor-made approaches to meet these ones to reduce employee burnout, job dissatisfaction and many negative consequences.

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