Work-Life Challenges of Working Women in Kathmandu

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Article Info	Abstract
	In a developing country like Nepal, patriarchal beliefs dominated women's empowerment and opportunities for women were limited. Gradually, with the development of society and social attitudes, women took over diverse roles and women began to experience better autonomy and self-esteem. Despite social progress and increasing opportunities, traditional expectations add many challenges to the lives of working women. Seven working women from different sectors were selected for the convenience sampling which was a part of the qualitative approach to study to expose the challenges of working women in balancing work and life in Kathmandu district. For the collection of information, semi-structured interview guide was used which helped in the identification of key challenges for working women such as triple burden, family expectations, gender-based discrimination and abuse etc. The study was conducted fromDec 2023 to March 2024. The findings revealed that the women's difficulty in achieving work-life balance is intensified by social pressures, including reproductive roles and patriarchal norms. Trained relationships and internal family conflicts are the major outcomes of unbalanced work-life. The findings also highlighted the parameters that are needed for the support of the women in the Kathmandu Valley to achieve a fair and satisfactory balance in their work life. The critical need for comprehensive policy reforms, cultural change and legal protection to mitigate the 'triple burden' and promote gender equality in work-life is focused on the experience of Nepalese working women.

Introduction

Working women in the context of Nepal face unique challenges in balancing professional and personal lives due to the modernizing economy and traditional values. Various social and cultural expectations can come up as hurdles and make it difficult for women to move ahead and balance their work lives. Work-life balance refers to the equilibrium between one's professional responsibilities and personal life, ensuring that neither dominates the other excessively. It involves managing work demands while dedicating time to family, leisure, and self-care activities (Steele, 2019). In between the family duties and professional roles, work-life balance (WLB) poses a significant challenge for working women in the public sector of Nepal where societal norms and workplace discrimination further worsen the challenges and the situation for them (Shahi, 2023; Rijal & Wasti, 2018). Their qualifications, personal choices and organizational support enhance career advancement (Rijal & Wasti, 2018). To maintain WLB, they work under stress which is very harmful to the health (Nepali, 2018). All the organizations, both institutional and governmental, are encouraged to implement WLB initiatives like those in development banks to ease these issues and advocate for systemic changes such as task subcontracting and care centers in built-up settings (Parajuli, 2021; Shahi, 2023). To improve the WLB of Nepali working women, a serious effort from all societal sectors is essential (Nepali, 2018). To some extent, in some non-traditional fields, barriers like societal disbelief and badmouthing play a significant role in demotivation while the family and organisational support uplifts them and their confidence (Parajuli, 2021). Women deal with excessive workloads, job insecurity, and work-family balance in the tourism sector (Sony, 2012). Women entrepreneurs face hurdles in securing capital, managing schemes, recruiting labour and marketing (Manandhar, 2022).While women's participation in various sectors is on the rise, they still face various challenges in substantial societal, economic, and workplace. Despite, the minimal effort in poverty reduction, achieving decent work standards is an ongoing struggle educational attainment,

family background, and language proficiency continue to shape women's workforce engagement in the context of Nepal (Sony, 2012).

The conflict between work and family life low job satisfaction and increased stress occurs when women can do better professionally while being actively involved in the home (Shiva, 2013). The attempt to balance work and personal life is worsened by tons of workloads which adds up the stress (Lakshmi & Prasanth, 2018). Working hours, income and employer support are the key factors influencing work and family life balance (Pathak, 2018). Facing these kinds of challenges can lead to the damage of women's physical, emotional and social health. For the improvement of the overall situation, review of the practices and implement policies within the organization that facilitate work-life balance (Pathak, 2018; Shiva, 2013).

With various opportunities in leadership roles, the expansion of professional opportunities is diverging for qualified Nepalese women (Sony, 2012). Due to universal gender bias during the hiring process which often favors men, women encounter countless challenges in the workforce (Eichner, 1987). Noticeable conflicting demands of professional and traditional roles and social expectations further worsen the balance in work-life (Eichner, 1987; Pathak, 2018; Williams, 2001). Despite all the hurdles arising in the work-life balance, Nepali women continue to strive for financial independence and self-determination (Hillman & Radel, 2023). Their determination offers hope for future generations. Even though the progress is evident, the path to gender equality remains difficult. Although, systematic challenges continue the supportive initiative exists (Shields, 2020), ongoing efforts to eradicate gender discrimination, ensure equal opportunities, and recognize women's achievements are crucial. Uplifting the voices of empowered women and acknowledging their determination will lead to a future where professional success in Nepal is based on merit and not on gender.

The Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2018 reveals an ugly reality: 66 percent of women have suffered verbal abuse, with 77 percent of these incidents occurring within the family, indicating prevalent domestic violence (NDHS, 2022). These statistics not only reflect the prevalence of abuse but also the underlying pain and fear experienced by women. Empowerment through education, economic opportunities, and legal support is crucial for women to escape this cycle of violence and imitate their paths (UN Women, 2015).

Challenging the patriarchal structures that continue gender inequality and normalize violence against women is crucial, demanding awareness campaigns and community discussion (UNDP, 2014). A vigorous legal framework and effective enforcement are vital for accountability and prevention of possible violence in future. Support for survivors, including safe shelters, counselling, and medical care, is essential for their recovery(Bowen & Murshid, 2016). The One Stop Crisis Management Centers (OSCMCs) and the Mahila Sanjal Network's advocacy work, in collaboration with UN Women Nepal, are key to empowering women and driving systemic change (Dhungel & Ojha, 2012). Addressing violence against women is important in achieving sustainable development goals, as empowered women contribute significantly to stronger societies (García-Moreno et al., 2015). Working women in Kathmandu face significant challenges in achieving work-life balance due to societal expectations, workplace discrimination, and excessive workloads, which lead to increased stress and compromised well-being (Dhungel & Ojha, 2012; Sudarshan, 2023). Despite the growing participation of women in various sectors, the persistent conflict between professional and traditional roles continues to hinder their ability to balance work and personal life effectively (Sundaresan, 2014). Therefore, this study aims at investigating the work-life balance challenges faced by working women in Kathmandu and the consequences of imbalance.

Methodology

Using an exploratory approach, this qualitative study explored the experiences of working women in the Kathmandu district. The study time was from December 2023 to March 2024. Seven working women from different sectors: banking, education, healthcare, law, engineering, journalism and corporate offices were selected through convenient sampling. Their stories, reflecting the city's diversity, were collected through interviews with open-ended questions. The use of personal contacts for recruitment and data collection guaranteed active participation. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). The study provides an in-depth examination of the participants' experiences, emphasizing the importance of ethical research practices, including informed consent and confidentiality despite the small sample size and limited geographical scope.

Female's code: F1 for a cooperative employee, F2 for a bank employee, F3 for A lawyer, F4 for a college

teacher, F5 for a doctor, F6 for an engineer, and F7 for a journalist.

Findings and Discussion

Narratives from Nepalese working women reflect the challenges they face in achieving work-life balance and realizing their full potential for empowerment. Five key themes were developed by coding the narratives of the sampled Nepalese working women. I presented direct quotes from the participants to highlight their experiences and perspectives and organize the quotes thematically to emphasize common themes and differences. The findings and discussions are presented according to the themes developed from the stories of the participants of the study. The findings and discussions are presented below in the five themes:

Household Responsibilities and Time Management

F1 (women working in cooperative) expressed:

I am often busy with household activities and office work, which creates pressure to manage my time. My husband is not taking on more responsibilities for household activities and child care instead. He spends his leisure time outside the home rather than participating in supporting me with household tasks. The size of our family and the number of family members are also intervening factors that make it challenging for me to handle the workload. I am an empowering woman but I do not feel empowered due to the triple burden. These challenges are worsened by the patriarchal society and the predominant belief in male superiority. On a typical evening when we both return from work, my husband sits on the sofa and orders a cup of tea from me.

F2 (Bank employee)expressed:

Managing a full-time job, household responsibilities, and caregiving duties leave me constantly exhausted. I often feel like I'm giving it all to every role but never truly succeeding in any.

F3 (Lawyerer) expressed:

Balancing work, home, and family commitments means I rarely have time for myself. It's frustrating because I feel my ambitions and well-being are sacrificed for the sake of others.

F4 and F5 shared their stories on professional and personal sacrifices.

F4 (College teacher)expressed:

Teaching requires dedication, but the triple burden often means my studies and research are not prioritized to grading papers and cooking dinners. True empowerment would mean equal sharing of home responsibilities between me and my spouse.

F5(Doctor) expressed:

As a doctor, the triple burden is not just about time management; it's about life and death decisions at work, and then coming home to an unequal share of domestic work. Empowerment feels distant when you're saving lives but still expected to serve. The constant pressure to excel at work while managing domestic tasks and caring for family members creates immense stress. It feels like there's no space left for personal growth or relaxation.

F6(Engineer) expressed:

Engineering is demanding, yet the triple burden adds another layer of complexity. Balancing project deadlines with childcare and housework often feels like I'm solving problems everywhere but for myself.

Chasing stories as a journalist is thrilling, F7(Journalist) expressed:

The triple burden means the chase continues at home, with no respite. Empowerment is hard to achieve when you're always 'on duty,' both professionally and personally.

Findings showed that working women across various professions reveal a common thread: the triple burden of work, home, and childcare severely hampers their sense of empowerment. Despite their contributions to the workforce, they are attentive to a cycle of never-ending responsibilities that leave little room for personal growth or leisure. This systemic issue is rooted in patriarchal norms that undervalue women's labour and overburden them with expectations. The collective voice of these women underscores the urgent need for societal and familial shifts towards equitable sharing of domestic duties to foster true empowerment. Hence, my finding concluded and aligned with the finding of the literature that is already in existence that triple burden does affect the personal growth of working women in

the absence of support from the spouse in the household duties (Luke et al., 2014; Radhakrishnan & Solari, 2015). Financial independence, often seen as a key to empowerment, is undermined by societal ideologies that justify unpaid reproductive work and male-dominated power structures that limit women's financial control(Radhakrishnan & Solari, 2015; Samarasinghe, 1993). Economic development initiatives like microfinance are constrained by patriarchal norms that dictate the acceptability of women's work, limiting their true empowerment (Kabeer et al., 2018; Shohel et al., 2021). Support from husbands and family is crucial, yet economic progress alone is insufficient to dismantle gender inequality; a sustained policy commitment to equality is necessary(Coley et al., 2023; Gurusamy & Manochithra, 2013). Systematic changes addressing both family dynamics and cultural norms are required to bridge the gap between the ideal of gender equality and women's lived experiences(Orgad, 2019).

A Working Woman's Journey in a Patriarchal World

F2 shared:

> *Sometimes I have to leave my job for my children. There are instances where we face sexual harassment in the workplace and during transportation. Gender discrimination at work is a very painful situation for me. Male colleagues often assume that women lack an understanding of how to communicate and contribute effectively to plans and strategies. This is frustrating for me. If given the opportunity, I can excel in everything. However, I know that women often don't get the best opportunities because we live in a patriarchal society.*

F1 opined:

> *Every day, I navigate a maze of professional tasks and home duties. The patriarchal world I live in adds layers of expectation that stretch my capabilities to their limits.*

F3 expressed:

> *In the courtroom, I stand for equality, but at home, I grapple with the patriarchal norms that dictate my every move. My journey is a testament to the resilience required to walk this path.*

F4 shared:

> *Educating minds, I dream of a world where my professional achievements are not overshadowed by the domestic roles, I'm expected to fulfill due to deep-rooted patriarchal views.*

F5 expressed:

> *As a doctor, I heal and care for others, yet the patriarchal society expects me to bear the triple burden without faltering. It's a journey of constant juggling and little recognition.*

F6 said:

> *Solving complex problems is part of my job as an engineer, but the patriarchal expectations at home present a different set of challenges that require just as much ingenuity.*

F7 opined:

> *Unveiling truths is my passion as a journalist, but the patriarchal narrative often tries to rewrite my story, expecting me to conform to traditional roles despite my professional identity.*

The findings revealed that women across various professions face systemic challenges deeply rooted in patriarchal societies, which significantly impact their professional growth and empowerment. Despite their achievements, societal norms often restrict women to traditional domestic roles, diminishing their intellectual and professional potential. Kerber (2017) highlighted how such norms confine women to emotional and relational roles, undermining their intellectual pursuits. This issue has been further compounded by entrenched patriarchal power dynamics that pervade daily interactions (Soman, 2009). In developing countries, these challenges are particularly pronounced, as evidenced by female academics in Pakistan who struggle with work-family balance and workplace inequality (Fazal et al., 2019). Additionally, political participation is hindered by entrenched stereotypes and biases(Li, 2024), and the intersectionality of gender with other social categories in India exacerbates marginalization and restricts access to essential resources (Haq, 2013). To overcome these barriers, women are often compelled to develop entrepreneurial and strategic skills (Hilmiana & Alviani, 2023). However, achieving true empowerment also requires collective societal action, including investments in education and reforms in social norms (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012). The collective voices of these women underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive societal transformation to fully recognize and support women's

empowerment, moving beyond the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures.

Struggle for Gender Equality in the Face of Domestic Imbalance

F3 shared:

> *Patriarchal society is a significant obstacle to women's empowerment. Men often neglect to assist women with household responsibilities, wrongly believing that all chores are exclusively the responsibility of females. Women are expected to handle these tasks, balance them with work, and care for children and elderly family members. Family members may exert mental pressure on women to prioritize caregiving over their jobs. While women contribute to earning money, men often fail to recognize and reciprocate by helping with household chores. In this situation, it's challenging for women to feel empowered while also earning a living. Women often lack autonomy in decision-making, and there is a lack of proper respect for their capabilities. These challenges are rooted in the pervasive patriarchal mindset.*

F1 shared:

> *As I strive for professional success in the cooperative sector, I'm constantly reminded of the domestic imbalance that awaits me at home. The struggle for gender equality is an uphill battle when traditional roles are deeply ingrained in society.*

F2 shared:

> *In the banking industry, my efforts to progress are often overshadowed by the expectation to manage home and care duties. The fight for gender equality is not just in the workplace but also within the walls of my own home.*

F4 shared:

> *Educating future leaders, I hope to inspire equality, yet I face a domestic imbalance that challenges my empowerment. The struggle for gender equality must begin with changing the narrative at home.*

F5 shared:

> *Healing patients, I witness the impact of societal imbalance on health, and at home, I experience the same imbalance affecting my well-being. The struggle for gender equality is critical for the health of society and families alike.*

F6 shared:

> *Engineering solutions for the world, yet at home, I'm expected to conform to traditional roles. The struggle for gender equality is about redefining these roles to create a balanced life.*

F7 shared:

> *Reporting on the strides towards gender equality, I find myself battling domestic imbalances in my own life. The struggle is real and pervasive, cutting across public and private spheres.*

The shared experiences of working women revealed a significant challenge rooted in entrenched patriarchal norms, which continue to perpetuate domestic imbalance and hinder gender equality. Research shows that in patriarchal societies like Nigeria, male dominance and gender-based division of labour make work-life balance difficult for women (Adisa et al., 2019). Despite progress in women's workforce participation, gender imbalances persist in employment scale, form, and remuneration (Perrons, 2012). The "stalled revolution" continues, with women gaining opportunities in traditionally masculine fields, but men not comparably moving into feminine roles (Friedman et al., 2019). Poor work-life balance and unshared home responsibilities negatively impact women's gender-work identity integration, particularly when household duties are not shared with partners (Reverberi et al., 2022). Achieving gender equality requires redefining hegemonic masculinity and addressing structural barriers, as changing views of masculinity are critical for greater equality at work and home (Friedman, 2015). This issue is compounded by entrenched social norms that restrict women's agency and opportunities, as emphasized by Muñoz Boudet et al. (2013), who advocate for investments in innovations to reduce women's time costs. Literature such as Shashi Deshpande's work reflects how societal expectations and stereotypes continue to confine women, resulting in rejection when they deviate from normative roles (Singh & Kaur, 2022). Gender inequality persists in professional settings, where women often shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic duties even when employed full-time (De Vaus, 2009). This imbalance is exacerbated by gender stereotypes and organizational norms that favor men and undermine women's presence in leadership roles (Gupta et al., 2017).

Even in countries with progressive policies, such as Sweden, gender inequity in domestic work and childcare remains a challenge (De Vaus, 2009). These findings highlight the need for an important societal transformation in both mindset and responsibilities to achieve genuine gender equality, as entrenched stereotypes and biological determinism continue to obstruct meaningful legislative change and progress (Smith, 2015).

Barriers to Women's Empowerment

F4 shared:

> *Patriarchal society is a significant obstacle to women's empowerment. Men often neglect to assist women with household responsibilities, wrongly believing that all chores are exclusively the responsibility of females. Women are expected to handle these tasks, balance them with work, and care for children and elderly family members. Family members may exert mental pressure on women to prioritize caregiving over their jobs. While women contribute to earning money, men often fail to recognize and reciprocate by helping with household chores. In this situation, it's challenging for women to feel empowered while also earning a living. Women often lack autonomy in decision-making, and there is a lack of proper respect for their capabilities. These challenges are rooted in the pervasive patriarchal mindset.*

F1 shared:

> *Even with my role in a cooperative, I find that my contributions are often overshadowed by my male colleagues. The expectation that women should handle domestic responsibilities makes it challenging to advance professionally.*

F2 shared:

> *In the banking sector, I face the constant challenge of being underestimated due to my gender. Balancing work with societal expectations at home adds extra pressure, hindering my professional growth.*

F3 shared:

> *As a lawyer, I encounter persistent biases that question my competence simply because I am a woman. The lack of support for work-life balance further limits my ability to excel in my career.*

F5 shared:

> *In the medical field, despite my qualifications, I often face barriers due to gender stereotypes that undermine my authority. The expectation to manage home responsibilities on top of a demanding job creates significant obstacles.*

F6 shared:

> *As an engineer, I frequently encounter a lack of respect and recognition in a male-dominated field. The societal pressure to fulfill traditional roles at home limits my career development and professional satisfaction.*

F7 shared:

> *Working as a journalist, I struggle with being taken seriously in a field that often dismisses women's voices. The dual expectation to excel at work and manage household duties impedes my professional progress and personal well-being.*

The findings reveal that women's empowerment across various professions is significantly impeded by entrenched patriarchal norms and gender biases. Societal expectations place a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities on women, which hampers their professional growth and career advancement (Baruch et al., 1987). These biases, often implicit, arise from stereotypes that cast women primarily as caregivers and men as leaders, resulting in systemic undervaluation of women's roles (Bol & Fogel-Yaari, 2023). In the workplace, women frequently encounter assumptions about their management capabilities and insufficient support for balancing work and family obligations, affecting their progression and well-being (Baruch et al., 1987). This disparity extends to various fields, including medicine, where female doctors face implicit biases contributing to imposter syndrome, exhaustion, and underrepresentation in leadership roles (Baruch et al., 1987; Bol & Fogel-Yaari, 2023). These barriers are compounded by unequal opportunities for professional advancements, such as speaking engagements and honors (Sajid et al., 2024). Gender inequalities are also evident in academia and high-tech industries, where women remain underrepresented in senior positions due to gendered practices and socio-cultural expectations (Saifuddin et al., 2019). Moreover, in political spheres, gender stereotypes and institutional discrimination continue to restrict women's leadership opportunities (Li,

2024). Addressing these pervasive issues requires systemic reforms, including changes in organizational policies, governmental interventions, and a cultural shift towards greater gender equity to create equitable opportunities for women across all professional domains (Saifuddin et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2011).

Women in Professional and Personal life

F5 said:

> *In my role as a doctor, I bear witness to the formidable challenge women face in achieving work-life balance. This struggle, marked by various obstacles, begins with societal expectations that invisibly pressurize women to excel in both optimal careers and domestic roles. The absence of support at home, where men unknowingly neglect their fair share of responsibilities, leaves women juggling multiple roles. Moreover, the pervasive patriarchal mindset in our Nepali context intensifies gender disparities in workplaces, limiting women's access to equal opportunities. As a female doctor, I've experienced mental harassment even in my professional setting, highlighting the persistent biases. Balancing the demands of work and home becomes a complex task, with societal expectations dictating both professional and personal aspects of women's lives. These challenges underscore the urgent need for societal shifts, family support, and workplace reforms to empower women to thrive both professionally and personally, without compromising their well-being and ambitions.*

F1 said:

> *Balancing my role in the cooperative with personal responsibilities is challenging. I often feel that my professional contributions are undervalued because societal norms still expect women to manage most of the household chores.*

F2 said:

> *In the banking sector, I work hard to advance my career, but societal expectations at home create additional stress. Juggling professional demands with family duties often makes me feel stretched thin and underappreciated.*

F3 said:

> *Being a lawyer demands long hours and high performance, but societal pressures to fulfill traditional domestic roles limit my personal time. This dual burden often affects my work-life balance and personal well-being.*

F4 said:

> *As a college teacher, I face the challenge of managing both a demanding job and home responsibilities. The expectation to handle domestic tasks on top of my professional duties often makes it difficult to fully engage in either role.*

F6 said:

> *Working as an engineer, I strive to make significant professional contributions, but the traditional gender roles expected at home create additional pressures. This balance between work and personal life can sometimes be overwhelming.*

F7 said:

> *As a journalist, I face the challenge of meeting professional demands while also fulfilling traditional family roles. The constant balancing act between my career and personal responsibilities affects both my professional output and personal satisfaction.*

Women's experiences in balancing professional and personal spheres highlight the challenges posed by societal expectations and gender roles. Research indicates that women's dual responsibilities at home and work lead to stress and role conflict (Nagda, 2015; Saleem & Ajmal, 2018). Persistent gender stereotypes and societal norms affect career progression and personal choices (Correll, 2004), while professional achievements are often overshadowed by systemic biases and domestic burdens (Struffolino, 2017). In academia, inequitable treatment and the struggle to balance career with family life are barriers to advancement (Zhao et al., 2011). The 'glass cliff' phenomenon places women in risky leadership positions, intensifying these challenges (Glass & Cook, 2016). Organizational policies supporting work flexibility, childcare, and non-work commitments are essential (Buddhapriya, 2009). Gender equity and family-friendly policies in institutions are crucial for creating supportive work environments, allowing women to equitably manage their careers and personal lives (Zhao et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Due to rooted patriarchal norms and systematic gender biases, the research finding indicates that the working women face significant barriers for empowerment. Despite their professional achievements, they often shoulder the 'triple burden' of work, household, and caregiving responsibilities, limiting their potential. The challenge of balancing professional and personal roles is intensified by societal expectations and gender stereotypes, which limits career growth and well-being. The search for gender equality is delayed by insufficient support and discrimination, undermining women's roles in both domestic and professional spheres. Including policies for flexible work, childcare support, and fair domestic responsibility sharing comprehensive reforms are necessary. It is essential to create a helpful environment for both personal and professional growth recognizing and valuing women's contributions along with a commitment to gender equity. Systemic changes are essential to achieve true gender equality and empower women to overcome patriarchal barriers.

Implication

The story of Nepalese working women exposes thoughtful implications for both society and policy making committee. Firstly, the persistent 'triple burden' faced by women highlights the need for systemic changes in workplace policies, such as the introduction to flexible work hours and better childcare support, to ease the pressures of managing multiple roles at workplace and personal life. Secondly, the deep-rooted patriarchal norms that restrict women to domestic compasses call for cultural shifts and educational movements that promote gender equality and reframe societal perceptions of women's roles. Lastly, the emotional and professional sphere of workplace biases and discrimination requires stronger legal frameworks and implementation to protect women's rights and promote an inclusive work environment. These implications point towards a multidimensional approach that combines policy reform, cultural change, and legal protection to empower women and achieve true gender equality.

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