Managing Work-life Predicaments: A Study on the Selected Female Employees at Gulf University in Bahrain

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ABSTRACT: The twenty first century marks the raise of more emancipated women making an impression in every field of work. The concept of 'angel in the house' is no more a palatable option preferred either by the women folks or by the men community globally. The increasing number of working women acknowledge that the women are turning out to be experts in multi-tasking to serve in both their family and professional spheres. Kingdom of Bahrain is one of the Gulf countries that does not impose restrictions on women and is one of the pioneers in the region to let women work in public and private sectors. Identifying the factors that contribute to the work-life stress and the factors that help them achieve the targets in the work life as well as acquire some quality family time become the background of this study. As this kind of studies have not been carried out much in Kingdom of Bahrain, this study can contribute in improving the work culture of the region. The aim of the present study was to identify the factors affecting work-life balance among the selected women working at Gulf university in Bahrain as well as seek for the solutions to improve it. The responses were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed in the form of a survey to the selected full-time female employees at Gulf university. The interpretative phenomenological analysis method was adopted to examine the extracted data as it deals with the turmoil and tribulations undergone by the female employees. The result embodies that the administrative staff manage to strike a balance in their work-life demands whereas the faculty members with increased administrative responsibilities are struggling to achieve work-life balance. Monetary incentives, salary being paid on time, flexibility with respect to working hours and annual leaves, and team building activities were identified to be the significant work-life balance building factors.

Keywords: Work-life balance, female employees, Gulf University, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

As proposed by Delecta (2011), work-life balance is "an individual's ability to meet their work and family commitments as well as other non-work responsibilities and activities" [1]. This work-life balance is individual case specific as it varies depending upon the circumstances an individual is placed in. For example, a single male may have more of financial responsibility, but his parental family may not demand more of his private time. Whereas a man with wife and children is bound to bear the financial responsibility and spend a lot of time with them too. As cited in [2], Friedman puts it:

A one size fits all; mentality in human resources management often perpetuates frustration among employees. It is not an uncommon problem in many HR areas, where, for the sake of equality, there's a standard policy implemented in a way that is universally acceptable, even though everyone's life is different and everyone needs different things in terms of how to integrate the different pieces. It's got to be customized.

Hence, there is a need to know whether HR polices are to be customized and the various attributes that will contribute to such a policy. Plus, if the HR policies are to be customized, the necessary parameters should be identified keeping in mind the social milieu and the prevailing culture. There has not been any study in this regard pertaining to the existing social culture in

Bahrain. It was a challenge to convince the participants to express their feelings and opinion without hesitation as they were scared to speak with reference to work environment in their current workplace. With concurrent efforts, the data were collected for analysis. Therefore, the results of this study would play a magnificent role in identifying the cause and effect of work-related stress in the lives of the female employees.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-life balance refers to the equilibrium between the amount of time an individual spends at work and the amount of time spent outside of the workplace. In the past decades, as coined by Virginia Woolf and cited in [3], a woman was an 'angel in the house,' and she was celebrated by men for the fact thus:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming, she was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult art of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it-in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the mind and wishes of others. Above all- I need not say it- she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty…in those days…every house had its angel.

The inequities against women in terms of legal, economic, social and the fundamental rights of women

have existed throughout and in all civilizations. The early feminists didn't use the term 'Feminism.' Had they given any name to themselves, possibly, it would have been something like 'defenders' or 'advocates' of women. So, feminism is not a post-modernist concept, it is a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding an amelioration in their social position.

However, the credit for an organized movement for women's rights goes to America beginning with The Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions in 1848. The radical demand for suffrage at the Seneca Falls carried the social and political revolution for women's rights into a new era. Special support for this historic event came from Elizabeth Cady Stanton who believed that only through the exercise of the franchise; women would eradicate the existing legal, economic and social inequalities affecting them. The Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions went far beyond the expectations of most of the feminists present at the convention. The early feminists focused on gender, as, according to them, the sexes are culturally, and not just biologically formed. They directed their ideas against the notions of an inherently defective sex that flowed from the misogynous side of the debate, and against the societal shaping of women to fit these notions. Their immediate aim was to oppose mistreatment of women. Later in the 19th and the early 20th centuries, the feminists focused on the acquisition of a few basic political rights and liberty for women, such as the right of married women to own property and enter into contracts, the right of defendants to have women on juries, and the crucial right to vote. A campaign lasting a century ensued and culminated in the winning of the right to vote in England in1918 and in America in 1920.

In the nineteenth century, since the respectability of women was linked to their confinement within the domestic sphere, they were forced to get married. With reference to marital relationships, Caird (1888) expresses thus:

The man who marries finds that his liberty has gone, and the woman exchanges one set of restrictions for another. She thinks herself neglected if the husband does not always return to her in the evenings, and the husband and society think her undutiful, frivolous, and so forth if she does not stay at home alone, trying to sigh him back again. The luckless man finds his wife so very dutiful and domesticated, and so very much confined to her 'proper sphere,' that she is, per chance, more exemplary than entertaining. Still, she may look injured and resigned, but she must not seek society and occupation on her own account, adding to the common mental store, bringing new interest and knowledge into the joint existence, and becoming thus a contented, cultivated and agreeable being. No wonder that while all this is forbidden we have so many unhappy wives and bored husbands. The more admirable the wives the more bored the husbands [4].

Women were not allowed to acquire university education and so, not too many women ventured into the arena of taking up a job. Working women were not encouraged and working wives were not liked by the upholders of the middle-class morality, as it was felt, that it was a married woman's responsibility to be in the home, caring for her children and making things comfortable for her husband, when he returned after a hard day's work. As cited in [5], a weekly magazine of the 1860s called the *British Workwoman* cautions women to stay at home, "Wife of the labouring man! Take warning in time. Try to make your home happy to your husband and children. Remember your first earthly duty, and, whatever the temptations to go out to work, STAY AT HOME!"

In 1837, the renowned novelist, Charlotte Bronte wrote to the Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, for advice in pursuing her career as a writer. Southey was more than discouraging; as cited in [6], he advised her to give up any dreams of becoming a poet, "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life and it ought not to be." These words were like a death sentence to her and she tried to curb her imagination and conceal her gifts as cited in [7] thus:

I carefully avoid any appearance of pre-occupation and eccentricity which might lead those I live amongst to suspect the nature of my pursuits. Following my father's advice-who from my childhood has counselled me, just in the wise and friendly tone of your letter – I have endeavoured not only attentively to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfill, but to feel deeply interested in them. I don't always succeed, for sometimes when I'm teaching or sewing I would rather be reading or writing; but I try to deny myself, and my father's approbation amply rewarded me for the privation.

Virginia Woolf successfully proposes a fervent need for women to achieve for themselves both the naturalistic and social freedom and to overcome the tremendous obstacles of the exploitation, superstition and economic selfishness common to male-dominated societies. Contrary to what Virginia Woolf thought, it did not take long for women to get 'the Angel in the House' abolished and replaced by the sexual, sensuous and individualistic representation of emancipated women.

Nowadays, the increasing demands on women raise the concern about their ability to balance personal versus professional life as women are now expected not only to cope with responsibilities at work but also to manage family life. Interpretation with respect to work-life balance amidst female employees is rising these days as confirmed by [8, 9, 10]. Cohen (2015) opines that, "Today women speak of work-life balance as an ethical imperative; an aspiration that strongly influences how they think about and arrange their lives" [8]. Most of the literature examining work-life balance suggest that women experience greater difficulty than men when it comes to work-life balance which may result in tension, stress and even depression in women. According to [11], stress is the result of increasing demands of environment that are incompatible with the anticipated individual's coping resources and [12] highlights that the women often tend to be under stress as their efforts to maintain harmony in their lives go in vain.

Some researchers refer to work-family balance as an absence of work-family conflict or increasing levels of work-family enrichment while others prefer to define work-family balance as a juggling between paid work and everyday activities [13]. The idea of managing the domains of personal and professional life seem to suggest that work should not overshadow quality time with family, recreational activities and personal

development. It also suggests that the definition of an ideal balance in women's life may vary, for example, the perception of balance will be different for single and married women or childless women and women with children. Gaunt & Scott (2016) found out that the women tend to be in a state of flux because they want to prioritize children but at the same time, they are not ready to compromise with their career growth [14]. Nevertheless, [13] highlights the difficulty of women to achieve a work-life balance due to the "prevalence of gendered structure"; because domestic responsibilities still remain one of the primary concerns of women and they will keep struggling to question or challenge gender responsibilities, which strongly suggests that the balance between work and family cannot be achieved.

Moreover, it must be noted that over the past few decades the work pressure has been intensifying for women due to significant changes and expectations of women in the work force as women are in dilemma with societal expectations and demands [15, 16]. Many researchers have tried to examine how work-related stress and anxiety influence working women. Nowadays, although the number of employed women has significantly increased over the past few decades, women are still considered responsible for most of the household labor and management, child-care and elder care which makes employed women work to the equivalent of two full time jobs. As a result, working women tend to experience strain on their time as well as stress and anxiety. A study conducted by [17] suggests that working women are facing higher level of stress than men due to various stressors such as discrimination, lack of career progress, stereotyping and an attempt to jiggle between the various roles. Similar research by [18] has shown that women experience greater levels of work–family stress due to societal expectations and the findings of [19] indicate that high emotional workloads in the family and at work are associated with increased psychological distress and goal loss. Thus, women in professional job positions with high job demand are more likely to experience work-family conflict and work-related stress.

Moreover, another study conducted on occupational stress experienced by married and single working women has demonstrated that married women are experiencing more stress than single women; the root cause of stress is highly societal like the multi-faceted role and increased responsibilities and accountability [20]. However, Sundaresan (2014) discovers that women have hardly ever kept career as their priority over family [21]. Discrimination is another important issue that women encounter at work. Rehman & Roomi (2012) find out that the challenges owing to gender-bias, unfair treatment and discrimination in payment add to the stress [22]. As a result of the prevalence of gendered work structure, many women are not able to achieve equality even though they are educated and employed. A report by [23] suggests that gender discrimination is one of the most crucial factors against the human development in the Arab region; currently, women make approximately 49 per cent of total population in Arab countries and the fact that they may experience discrimination at work, increases the difficulty in job satisfaction as well as creates obstacles in the development of the countries.

Modhadam (2013) examines patterns and trends in women's employment across the Arab region since 1990. He claims that women in the Arab world have been suffering from issues regarding their participation in economic well-being. He argues that there is still room for optimism in relation to the status of working women and gradual changes are already happening in Arab contexts. Since changes at the political level are already happening, his aspiration to secure more freedom to disadvantaged societal classes are very much in progress [24]. In a study to find solutions at organizational level, [25] suggest that an organization should make proper use of the capacities of employees, keep employees motivated and make the organisation more amicable to the employees; organisational productivity, job and customer satisfaction as well as absenteeism costs are the factors which highly influence perceptions and attitudes of work-life balance, thus they should be taken into consideration for the improvement of the status of the working women as well.

The research study conducted by [26] discovers that there is a need for a dedicated HR policy in this regard as the respondents declared that there wasn't one such thing evident in their work sector. Some international companies have taken up work-life balance initiatives to help their employees to balance their work and family responsibilities by offering them flexible working hours, work-from home option, parental leave and on-site child-care facility [25]. It also suggests that mental and physical health of the employees can be improved if the company offers a range of health-related benefits such as extended health insurance, personal days, and access to fitness programs and services. To add to this, Brown & Yates (2018) suggest that workshops like career coaching and counselling sessions can help employees attain work-life balance and harmony in their social lives [27]. Whereas the findings of Tasnim et al. (2017) suggest that one cannot ignore the fact that the family should be supportive too [28].

To conclude, although a vast number of studies on work-family balance among women focuses on examination of issues that women encounter while trying to achieve a work-life balance, a limited research has been carried out to examine personal and work environment among female employees in the Arab countries especially in Bahrain. This study focuses on finding the reasons behind female employees experiencing conflict between work-life balance in Gulf University, Bahrain and seeks to find solutions to the problem.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A structured questionnaire was used as the research instrument to collect the primary data. The sample size consists of 7 female employees from academic and administrative sectors, aged in between 25 to 50 years. Purposive sampling method was employed so that intense responses could be commanded. To derive more clarification, telephonic interviews were organized so that each participant could express their feelings and expectations; spell out the difficulties faced, and the challenges overcome in detail. The data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis as this is the most suitable method by (Melrose, 2001) to examine an individual's perceptions and practices [29].

In the findings, each case is interpreted individually, and collective analysis is done in the discussion. In addition, appropriate research studies from various resources were also reviewed to make this study informative, appropriate and authentic.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As Saikia (2017) puts it, "Women were respected … not merely as mothers for bringing a new generation, but also as individuals with great potential to perceive the truth and contribute richly to human society [30]." The study has identified 7 such contributors who possess academic and administrative capabilities. Case 1 participant has been working at Gulf University for more than 6 years. Being assigned with teaching as well as on and off-campus administrative activities, her job gives her a sense of fulfillment, nevertheless, her work-life balance is yet very unsatisfactory. The reasons witnessing such evaluation are linked to the work overload due to the nature and responsibility of her position as well as the lack of quality work from fellow colleagues especially during the critical period which demands the ability to multitask and handle different responsibilities at the same time. Although Case 1 respondent perceives her job as a significant part of her identity, she has found a need to revisit the workload as there is no equal distribution of assigned responsibilities among the colleagues which has resulted in consideration of quitting the job. The inability to achieve work-life balance is reflected in her strong disagreement regarding the quantity and quality of time spent with family and friends. Although she has trouble in her attempts to strike a balance between her personal and professional life, her overall satisfaction with her job was rated 8/10 which shows a rather high level of job contentment. This respondent was very specific about providing potential solutions on how to enhance her work-place practices to achieve a work-life balance. One of the solutions suggested was providing the recruitment and training to the staff in a more professional way to contribute to strategic projects. Moreover, implementation of the "system-generated follow-up mechanism" that would send warning letters to the staff who did not follow the deadlines was also considered as an effective tool enhancing the work-life balance; delegation of a fair amount of work to avoid mental and physical distress was also recommended as a potential solution to the issue. Finally, she emphasised the significance of building relationships within the work community (e.g. organizing gatherings, parties) and appreciation in a work-environment (e.g. rewarding staff for their achievement). This, as per the opinion of Case 1, might contribute to the betterment of the work environment and help to achieve the work-life balance.

The experience of Case 2 participant also emphasises the difficulty to achieve work-life balance when having to manage teaching and administrative tasks. Case 2 describes her work environment as "not so professional" and seems to be struggling to find time not only for the research work to enhance her professional development but also the time for herself. According to her, nurturing a culture of dignity and respect would ensure a healthy working environment. For Case 2 respondent, even in the environment with cooperative and understanding colleagues, a work-life balance cannot be achieved due to the lack of "equal distribution of workload". The work has somewhat overshadowed the personal life and thus, Case 2 indicates that due to the immense workload, she does not spend enough time with her family and friends. The potential solution provided by the respondent to ensure the balance between personal and professional life is by revisiting job distribution within the work institution. Case 2 suggests that by reducing administrative work among the teaching staff and limiting the number of weekly meetings to 1 as well as giving the teaching staff more time to work on research would guarantee the accomplishment of work-life balance.

There is a strong sense of reduced accomplishment and mental distress felt among respondents who are assigned with both teaching and administrative tasks on campus. This is linked to job burnout, a special type of work-related stress that is predominant among female workers at the university. For example, Case 3 and Case 4 indicated that not being able to do the research work owing to the heavy workload and not having time for themselves have negatively influenced their perception of work. Their evaluation of work-life balance suggests a need for improvement on the organizational level. While Case 3 respondent refers to her work environment as "unprofessional" and "very unsatisfactory" in terms of work-life balance, Case 4 considers the environment at work as "not so professional" and states that to achieve a balance between personal and professional life, "minor improvement is needed". In the search for work-life balance, it is crucial to be surrounded by an emphatic and understanding team. However, when the work environment is toxic and unsupportive, it is hard to achieve a healthy work-life balance for female employees. To exemplify, Case 3 respondent strongly believes that there is a lack of understanding and cooperation from her colleagues and due to unfair distribution of workload, she is unable to view her colleagues as role models. Her mental distress is seen in a way that indicates her perception of work. Not only does Case 3 respondent notes not being able to balance her personal and professional life, she feels that she is not able to spend enough time with her family and friends. This explains well why she considers quitting her job and rates her overall satisfaction with a job only 2/10, the least satisfactory evaluation across all female employees at the university.

In addition, Case 4, in contrast to Case 3 shows how a friendly working environment contributes to a positive work-life balance. Case 4 views some of her colleagues as role models and even feels "recognized among them." Nevertheless, she does not consider leaving her job. Even though Case 4 does not seem to have enough time for her personal life, she views her job as a crucial part of her identity and responds more positively to the overall satisfaction with her job (7/10). There are many ways in which an institution could contribute to the betterment of their employees. Both Case 3 and 4 noted that offering "flexible working hours" and giving recognition to their employees would make a difference. There was also a suggestion to provide training to all staff on time management and create a sense of community by organizing fun trips.

This, once again, confirms that the management has a significant role to play to improve the work-life balance among their employees.

It is worthy to note that there is a visible correlation between the workload assigned to female employees and its relation to their work-life balance. It is noticeable how female employees assigned with "administrative tasks only" feel more satisfied with their overall work performance and personal life. For example, Case 5 respondent, being assigned with only administrative tasks expresses her satisfaction with a work-life balance. Case 5 considers her work environment as "professional" and indicates that only a "minor improvement" is needed to achieve a work-life balance. Working on a full-time basis and raising two children, she finds time to work on her research after working hours and yet highlights being able to have time for herself. For Case 5, the major reasons under work-related stress are lack of respect from colleagues and management as well as insufficient salary.Concerning the role of the colleagues in work-life balance, Case 5 has responded very positively about the teamwork. Not only she strongly considers her colleagues as very understanding and cooperative, but also, she feels recognized among them and enjoys engaging in teamwork with them. Such reflection is strongly linked to positive feedback about work perception. She does not have any intention to quit the job as she views it as a crucial part of her identity. This might be reflected in the overall satisfaction with the job which was rated 7/10 and yet shows the need for improvement. Case 5 listed shopping and time spent with family and friends as the best ways to manage work-related stress. Finally, like Case 1 respondent, she believes that the work-life balance might be achieved by reducing work pressure, distributing work equally as well as introducing recreational activities within the campus.

Case 6 respondent is also responsible for the only administrative tasks and like Case 5, she considers her work environment to be professional. Although she works on weekends "when the management persists" and does not get paid for extra working hours, Case 6 evaluated her work-life balance as "very satisfactory" and indicates having time for herself as well. Case 6 disagrees that there is an equal work distribution, but she feels both being understood and recognized among her colleagues. To add to this, some of them are even perceived as her role models. Nevertheless, the evaluation of job satisfaction (6/10) suggests a considerable need for improvement. Some of the aspects to be taken into consideration to enhance work satisfaction as recommended by Case 6 are providing a salary raise for employees which could be a valuable incentive for them, offering flexible working hours as well as providing options for more flexible annual leave possibilities for employees. It shows that as long as there is even distribution of nominal workload and realistic expectations, work-life balance would also be achieved.

Lastly, Case 7 participant has also responded very positively about her work environment. Not being assigned with teaching responsibilities and research work, she evaluates her work-life balance as very satisfactory and considers her work environment to be professional.

Her positive evaluation of the work community and the overall perception of work explains well why her work satisfaction is rated extremely high as 10/10. Going shopping is one of the best ways to manage work-related stress for Case 7 and she further suggests that providing flexibility in annual leave and working hours would help to achieve work-life balance. Finally, she adds that salary paid on time and an add on incentive pay could also improve the work-life balance. In a nut shell, this conforms the proposed idea of [31] that "a change in the perception is needed to give a significant status to women with honour and dignity," which should ideally start from home – family, relatives, neighbours and then the community. As Singh *et al.*, [32] mentioned that skilled manpower is an asset, it becomes very important to keep them stress free and more motivated to contribute.

V. CONCLUSION

Having discussed how selected 7 female employees respond to a work-life balance in their institution, convergence and divergence were identified. The study has shown that work-life predicaments have been managed more successfully among female employees assigned with administrative tasks only, whereas the ones assigned with both teaching and administrative job appear to be unable to manage work-life balance due to the immense workload and its inflicted mental distress. This suggests a need to revisit the workload distribution among female staff to ensure fairness and work-life balance within organization. While certain activities like shopping and spending time with family and friends were seen as the best ways to manage work related stress among all the female workers, the study has showed that the quality of work output can be considerably improved once the work institution takes into consideration the wellbeing of its employees. Salary increase, salary being paid on time, flexible working hours and flexible annual leave options as well as a need for the team building activities were listed as the most predominant factors that might add value for the betterment of a work-life balance. There was no substantial evidence proving that the presence of children and other dependents in the household increased the stress level among female employees. However, a sense of disappointment for not being able to spend time with family was expressed.

VI. FUTURE SCOPE

Since the present study did not emphasise how single and/or married female employees with children manage to balance their personal and professional life and how it affects their identity, this factor might be taken into consideration for future study. Whether work-life balance is better achieved by men than women can be taken up for further research. Longitudinal research can be carried out to find out whether the university employees across Bahrain have the same issue as to maintain harmony in managing domestic and professional front. Comparing the predicament of university staff with other countries can also facilitate more interpretations in this regard.

Conflict of Interest. No.

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