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BETWEEN CAREER AND CARE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES OF WORKING WOMEN BALANCING PROFESSIONAL AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

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Abstract

Background

The increasing participation of women in the workforce has significantly contributed to economic and social development. Despite these advancements, working women often experience emotional and psychological challenges while balancing professional responsibilities with family and caregiving roles.

Aim

This study aimed to explore the emotional experiences of working women in balancing professional and family responsibilities.

Methods

A qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design was adopted. Twenty working women employed in healthcare, education, and corporate sectors in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted until thematic saturation was achieved. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed five interconnected themes: (1) role conflict and emotional strain, (2) emotional guilt and social expectations, (3) workplace pressures and emotional well-being, (4) coping strategies and emotional resilience, and (5) personal fulfillment and identity. Participants described emotional fatigue, competing role expectations, workplace stress, and societal pressures, while also expressing resilience, empowerment, confidence, and personal satisfaction.

Conclusion

Working women experience both emotional strain and personal growth while managing multiple professional and domestic responsibilities. Supportive workplace policies, family support systems, flexible working arrangements, and mental health interventions are essential to promote emotional well-being and work–life balance among working women.

Keywords

Working women; emotional well-being; work–life balance; phenomenology; qualitative research; emotional resilience; mental health.

Introduction

Women's participation in the workforce has increased substantially across the globe over the past few decades. Their contributions to healthcare, education, administration, business, and social development have become essential to national growth and organizational productivity. However, despite increased workforce participation, women continue to experience significant emotional and psychological challenges while simultaneously fulfilling professional and family responsibilities.

In many societies, including India, women are traditionally expected to perform multiple caregiving and domestic roles in addition to their occupational responsibilities. Balancing these competing demands often results in role conflict, emotional exhaustion, stress, anxiety, and reduced psychological well-being. Previous studies have demonstrated that work–family conflict negatively affects women's mental health, job satisfaction, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life.

The concept of work–life balance has therefore emerged as an important area of research in occupational health, psychology, women's studies, and nursing research. Working women frequently experience emotional strain due to long working hours, childcare responsibilities, social expectations, workplace pressures, and inadequate organizational support. At the same time, employment contributes positively to women's independence, self-esteem, professional identity, empowerment, and financial stability.

Although several quantitative studies have examined work-related stress, job satisfaction, and burnout among women employees, fewer studies have explored the lived emotional experiences of working women in depth. Quantitative approaches often fail to capture subjective feelings, personal meanings, coping experiences, and emotional interpretations associated with balancing multiple responsibilities.

Qualitative phenomenological research provides an opportunity to explore these lived experiences in greater depth and understand how women perceive and emotionally respond to competing personal and professional demands. Understanding these emotional experiences is important for developing effective workplace policies, mental health interventions, family support systems, and gender-sensitive organizational practices.

Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the emotional experiences of working women balancing professional careers and family responsibilities using a qualitative phenomenological approach.

Need for the Study

The emotional well-being of working women has become an important public health and social concern due to increasing occupational demands, changing family structures, and persistent gender-role expectations. Although women actively contribute to economic development and professional sectors, they continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of caregiving and household responsibilities.

Understanding the lived emotional experiences of working women is essential to:

- Identify emotional stressors associated with balancing work and family responsibilities.
- Explore the psychosocial impact of workplace and societal expectations.
- Develop supportive organizational policies promoting work–life balance.
- Strengthen mental health and emotional resilience among women employees.
- Encourage equitable family and societal support systems.

Objectives of the Study

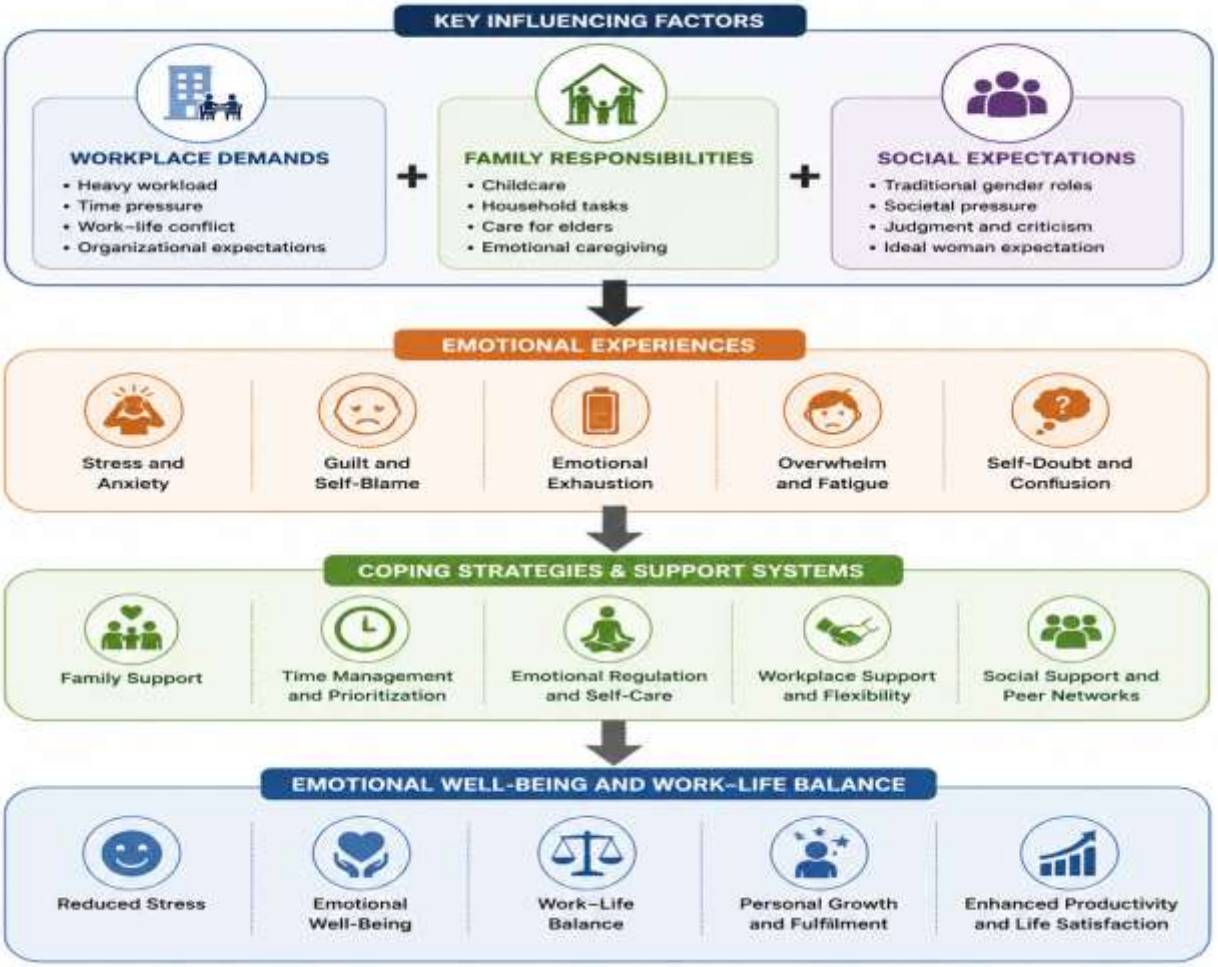
1. To explore the emotional experiences of working women in managing professional and family responsibilities.
2. To understand the impact of work–family roles on emotional well-being.
3. To identify coping strategies adopted by working women.
4. To examine the influence of workplace and family support on emotional well-being.

Research Questions

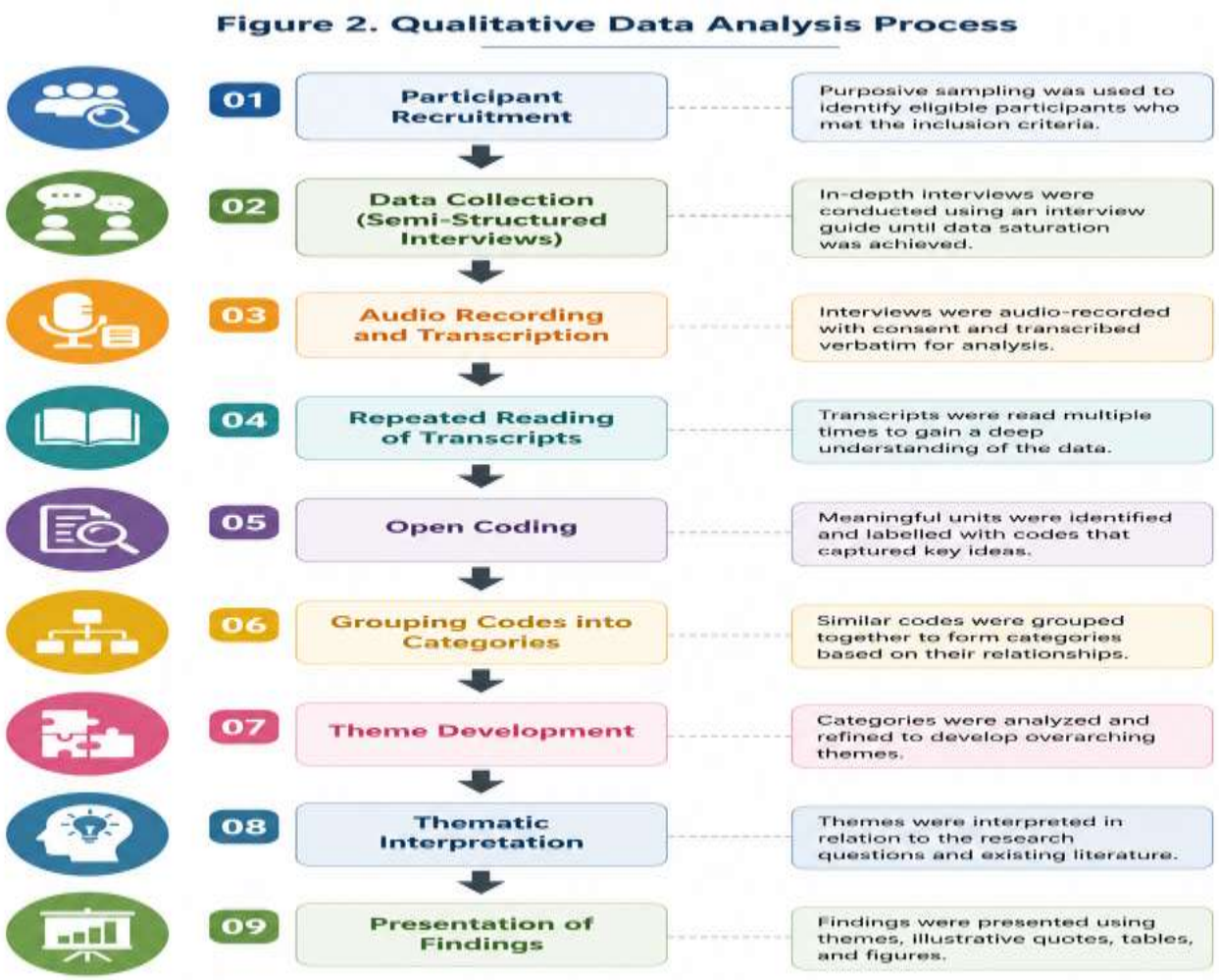
1. What emotional challenges are experienced by working women while balancing personal and professional responsibilities?
2. How do workplace and family expectations influence emotional well-being?
3. What coping strategies are adopted by working women to manage emotional stress?
4. What forms of support contribute to emotional resilience among working women?

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Emotional Experiences of Working Women Balancing Personal and Professional Life



Methodology



Research Design

A qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design was adopted to explore the lived emotional experiences of working women balancing professional and family responsibilities. Phenomenology was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, feelings, meanings, and interpretations of their experiences.

Study Setting

The study was conducted among working women employed in healthcare institutions, educational organizations, and corporate sectors in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

Study Population

The study population consisted of working women aged 25–50 years who were actively employed and managing family responsibilities.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select participants capable of providing rich and meaningful information regarding the phenomenon under investigation.

Sample Size

Twenty participants were included in the study. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, where no new themes or meaningful insights emerged from subsequent interviews.

Inclusion Criteria

- Women aged 25–50 years
- Currently employed in any professional sector

- Managing family or caregiving responsibilities
- Willing to participate in the study

Exclusion Criteria

- Women on long-term leave
- Women unwilling to participate

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on an extensive literature review and study objectives. The interview guide was reviewed by qualitative research experts to ensure content validity and appropriateness.

Areas Explored During Interviews

- Emotional experiences related to work–family balance
- Workplace stress and organizational pressures
- Social and cultural expectations
- Coping mechanisms and resilience
- Family and workplace support systems

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in a private and comfortable environment. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was performed using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for categories and themes
4. Reviewing and refining themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Interpretation and presentation of findings

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness:

- Credibility was maintained through prolonged engagement and member checking.
- Dependability was ensured through systematic documentation of the research process.
- Confirmability was maintained through reflexive journaling and verbatim quotations.
- Transferability was enhanced through detailed methodological descriptions.

Researcher reflexivity and bracketing techniques were practiced throughout the study to minimize researcher bias and maintain objectivity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and voluntary participation were strictly maintained throughout the study.

The study was reported according to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 20)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	25–30 years	5	25
	31–35 years	6	30
	36–40 years	5	25
	41–50 years	4	20
Marital Status	Married	16	80

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
	Single	4	20
Profession	Healthcare	7	35
	Education	6	30
	Corporate/Office	7	35
Work Experience	1–5 years	6	30
	6–10 years	8	40
	Above 10 years	6	30
Children	Yes	14	70
	No	6	30

Major Themes Identified

Five major themes emerged from the thematic analysis:

1. Role Conflict and Emotional Strain
2. Emotional Guilt and Social Expectations
3. Workplace Pressures and Emotional Well-Being
4. Coping Strategies and Emotional Resilience
5. Personal Fulfillment and Identity

Table 2: Themes, Subthemes, and Illustrative Quotes

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative Quotes
Role Conflict and Emotional Strain	Work–family conflict	*"Balancing work deadlines and family responsibilities makes me feel constantly pressured."*
	Emotional exhaustion	*"By the end of the day I feel emotionally drained."*
Emotional Guilt and Social Expectations	Family guilt	*"Sometimes I feel guilty that my job keeps me away from my children."*
	Societal expectations	*"Society still expects women to prioritize family over career."*
Workplace Pressures	Heavy workload	*"Work pressure increases my stress."*
	Lack of flexibility	*"Flexible working hours would help women manage better."*
Coping Strategies and Resilience	Family support	*"Support from my husband and parents helps me."*
	Time management	*"Planning my day carefully helps me maintain balance."*
Personal Fulfillment and Identity	Career satisfaction	*"Working gives me confidence and independence."*
	Sense of achievement	*"Managing both work and family makes me feel proud."*

Theme 1: Role Conflict and Emotional Strain
Subthemes

- Time pressure
- Competing responsibilities
- Emotional exhaustion

Participants frequently described emotional exhaustion and psychological strain resulting from simultaneously managing professional responsibilities and domestic obligations. Many women reported feeling overwhelmed due to constant multitasking and limited personal time.

Participant Quotes

"Sometimes I feel like I am running in two directions at the same time." (P4, Healthcare Professional)
"By the end of the day, I feel emotionally and physically exhausted." (P9, Teacher)

Interpretation

Participants described persistent emotional strain arising from simultaneous expectations to perform effectively in both professional and caregiving roles. Continuous multitasking contributed to emotional fatigue, role overload, and psychological stress.

Theme 2: Emotional Guilt and Social Expectations

Subthemes

- Maternal guilt
- Cultural expectations
- Self-doubt

Participants expressed feelings of guilt when professional commitments reduced the time available for family responsibilities. Traditional societal expectations intensified emotional conflict.

Participant Quotes

"If I stay late at work, I feel guilty that I am not spending enough time with my children." (P7, Corporate Employee)

"People often say that a mother should always be at home." (P2, Nurse)

Interpretation

Traditional gender expectations contributed significantly to emotional distress and self-doubt. Participants experienced internal conflict while attempting to balance professional aspirations with societal expectations of caregiving.

Theme 3: Workplace Pressures and Emotional Well-Being

Subthemes

- Heavy workload
- Lack of flexibility
- Organizational stress

Participants reported that demanding workloads, deadlines, and inflexible work schedules negatively affected emotional well-being.

Participant Quotes

"There are days when the workload is so heavy that I feel stressed." (P11, Corporate Employee)

"Flexible work schedules would make balancing responsibilities easier." (P15, Teacher)

Interpretation

Supportive organizational environments and flexible work policies played an important role in reducing emotional stress and improving work–life balance.

Theme 4: Coping Strategies and Emotional Resilience

Subthemes

- Family support
- Time management
- Emotional regulation

Women demonstrated resilience through practical coping strategies, emotional support systems, and self-management techniques.

Participant Quotes

"My husband supports me a lot, and that helps me cope." (P6, Nurse)

"I plan my schedule carefully and take small breaks to relax." (P13, Teacher)

Interpretation

Family support, emotional regulation, self-care practices, and effective time management strengthened emotional resilience and helped participants maintain psychological balance.

Theme 5: Personal Fulfillment and Identity

Subthemes

- Professional independence
- Financial empowerment
- Sense of achievement

Despite emotional challenges, participants described employment as a source of confidence, independence, empowerment, and personal satisfaction.

Participant Quotes

"My job gives me confidence and independence." (P10, Corporate Employee)

"I feel proud that I can manage both my career and family." (P18, Healthcare Professional)

Interpretation

Professional achievement contributed positively to participants' self-esteem, personal identity, empowerment, and emotional fulfillment.

Figure 3. Coding Tree / Thematic Framework



Discussion

The present study explored the emotional experiences of working women balancing professional responsibilities and family roles. The findings revealed that working women experience significant emotional challenges associated with role conflict, workplace stress, societal expectations, and caregiving responsibilities.

The theme of role conflict identified in this study is consistent with Role Conflict Theory, which explains how competing demands from multiple roles create psychological strain and emotional exhaustion. Participants described persistent multitasking, emotional fatigue, and difficulties managing professional and domestic expectations simultaneously. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies demonstrating that work–family conflict negatively affects women's mental health and emotional well-being.

Emotional guilt and societal expectations emerged as major emotional experiences among participants. Traditional gender norms continue to place caregiving responsibilities primarily on women, leading to feelings of guilt, self-doubt, and emotional stress when professional commitments interfere with family responsibilities. This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the influence of sociocultural expectations on women's psychological well-being.

Workplace pressures also significantly affected emotional well-being. Participants working in supportive organizational environments with flexible schedules reported lower emotional stress and improved work–life balance. Lack of flexibility, heavy workloads, and organizational pressure contributed to emotional strain and psychological burden.

An important finding of the study was the resilience demonstrated by working women. Participants adopted various coping strategies including time management, emotional regulation, family support, and self-care practices to maintain emotional balance. Family support, particularly spousal support, played a major role in reducing emotional stress and strengthening resilience.

The findings also highlighted positive emotional outcomes associated with employment. Participants reported increased confidence, independence, empowerment, financial stability, and personal achievement through professional engagement. These findings support Work–Family Enrichment Theory, which suggests that participation in multiple roles can also enhance psychological growth and personal fulfillment.

Overall, the study highlights the complex emotional experiences of working women and emphasizes the need for supportive workplace policies, equitable family responsibilities, and mental health support systems.

Implications of the Study

Nursing Implications

- Nurses can provide counseling and emotional support services for working women.
- Mental health nurses can develop stress management and resilience-building programs.

Educational Implications

- Educational institutions should organize awareness programs regarding work–life balance and emotional well-being.

Organizational Implications

- Organizations should implement flexible working schedules and family-friendly policies.
- Workplace counseling services, childcare support, and employee wellness programs should be strengthened.

Policy Implications

- Policymakers should strengthen gender-sensitive workplace policies.
- Shared parenting responsibilities and equitable caregiving practices should be encouraged.

Limitations

- The small sample size limits generalizability of findings.
- The study was restricted to urban working women in Chennai.
- Findings were based on self-reported experiences and may be influenced by response bias.
- Emotional experiences may vary across different occupations, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Recommendations

1. Future studies can include larger and more diverse populations.
2. Comparative studies between urban and rural working women can be conducted.
3. Mixed-method research designs may provide broader understanding.
4. Intervention studies focusing on emotional resilience and stress management may be beneficial.
5. Future research may explore the impact of remote work and hybrid working models on women's emotional well-being.

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the emotional experiences of working women balancing professional careers and family responsibilities. The findings revealed that women experience both emotional strain and personal fulfillment while managing multiple roles.

Role conflict, workplace pressures, societal expectations, and caregiving demands contributed significantly to emotional stress. However, family support, resilience, coping strategies, and professional identity helped women maintain emotional balance and psychological well-being.

The study emphasizes the importance of supportive workplace environments, equitable family responsibilities, flexible work arrangements, and accessible mental health support systems to improve the emotional well-being and quality of life of working women.

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