Women Leaders in Nonprofit Organizations: Work-Life Balance from a Life-Course Perspective

Farangis Azim[1], Muhammad Nouman[2], Syed Zulkifal[3]

ABSTRACT

In this research, it is the life-course theory that is examined on how it influences work-life balance tactics used by women leaders in those nonprofit-making organizations. The study focuses on how women leaders juggle between their professional and family demands in the light of identity, relational style, motivation, and adaptive style dimensions. Based on the qualitative data that includes semi-structured interviews and participant observations, the research points out some of the strategies that could lead to work-life balance in women, including mentorship, flexible work schedules, time management, and support systems. The results point to the critical role organizational flexibility and relational support play in helping women leaders balance their professional leadership responsibilities and personal life. The research adds to the body of knowledge on the gender, leadership, and the work-life balance, promising practical advice to nonprofit organizations that aim at helping gender leaders between the warring priorities of career and family duties. Using life-course theory, this study highlights how changing personal and professional identities influence the leadership experiences of women and their capacity to find a healthy balance between work and life.

Keywords: *Work-life balance, Women leaders, nonprofit organizations, life-course theory, identity, relational style, motivation, adaptive style, gender, leadership*

INTRODUCTION

The rising numbers of women in the workforce have been coupled with how to juggle between their roles as workers and other important responsibilities at the same time including family life all of which women have found much harder to do than men have because of traditional gender roles and expectations of society. Through history, women have been supposed to undertake domestic duties beyond childcare and housework and they have to work in the labor force (Frone et al., 1992; Shelton, 2006). Such gender division of labor can cause a heavy burden to women, so they have more complicated work-family relationships than their male counterparts

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[1] PhD. Scholar, Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar. **Corresponding Author's Email: farangisazim@gmail.com**

[2] Professor, Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar, Khyber Paktunkhwa, Pakistan

[3] Assistant Professor, Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar, Khyber Paktunkhwa, Pakistan

(Bird, 2006; Rodriguez et al., 2016). Nevertheless, women have gained entry into leadership roles, especially in nonprofit entities, which tend to be more accommodating toward female staff members compared to other areas (Lapovsky & Larkin, 2009; McLean, 2014; Rosa, 2022). Nevertheless, the path to the top in terms of women holding major positions in the non profit world remains embittered, not just because of societal norms but also the small numbers of the women in the highest order of the leadership (Gibelman, 2000; Bulger, 2024).

One of the areas where academicians have shown great interest is work-life balance, especially among women leaders at nonprofit organizations. Over the last several decades, many aspects of work-life balance have been examined, and much literature has noted the special issues related to the nature of work-life balance that women leaders are particularly subjected to. Work-life balance is about the individual skill to handle working and personal requirements in a sufficiently satisfying manner (Kossek et al., 2006; Sirgy & Lee, 2018). These obstacles are even more acute in the case of women in leadership as they have to take disproportionately more domestic responsibilities than their male counterparts (Soklaridis et al., 2017). These disproportionate family and work roles combined with the pressure of a leadership position regularly contributes to higher amounts of work stress, job dissatisfaction, and burnouts, especially in women within high-demanding fields like nonprofit organizations (Dev & Raj, 2017; Grzywacz & Bass, 2003).

There is no overestimation of the necessity to elaborate on the issue of work-life balance in the leadership of nonprofits. Nonprofit organizations play an invaluable role in community building and solving community problems and the position of women in non profit organizations cannot be ignored (Lapovsky & Larkin, 2009). However, even though women occupy a considerable percentage of the nonprofit workforce, their representation in leadership is still lacking, particularly at the executive level (Maier et al., 2016). Awareness of the unique challenges and approaches that women entrepreneurs take to adapt to work-life balance across nonprofit organization line of duty is crucial to an inclusive and friendlier approach to women in such sectors (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Although the research focusing on the challenges of work-life balance in any sector is considerable, there is not much thought regarding the particular dynamics of nonprofit organization especially concerning the viewpoint of women leaders (Gibelman, 2000; McLean, 2014).

As well, the study recognizes the importance of life-course theory in relation to how the female experience in leadership is evolving and their work-life balance. Of specific relevance to informing decisions and strategies utilized by women leaders to balance their careers and personal lives is the life-course theory that explores the manner in which the experiences and choices of individuals across different points in their life have psychological, physical and social impacts on the progression of their lives (Elder, 1985; Giele, 2008). The four dimensions of the theory i.e. identity, relational style, drive/motivation and adaptive style are also useful in a study of how women in leadership roles negotiate the competing necessities of professional as well as family life (Giele, 2008). Through their exploration, this paper seeks to provide contributions to not only the body of knowledge on work-life balance, but also to methods and approaches employed by women leaders in their endeavors to realize work-life balance.

The importance of the research is not only to women leaders in the nonprofit sector area but also to organizations out there who want to enhance their diversity in organization leadership and the provision of employee support systems. Learning the development and implementation of work-life balance strategies can assist organization to develop the policies and environments to make it easier on the organizational structure to have women in leadership roles especially in the high-stress occupation like in the nonprofit sector (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009). Moreover, the study will add towards the existing amount of information regarding the way women leaders cope with the issues of work and family challenges, providing other future leaders and HR professionals with the information they can use to sustain a more balanced workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The work-life balance has become a very important construct that both academics and organizations that employ women as part of the leadership bring up especially in the light of the fact that women have increasingly assumed leadership positions in many different professions. Whereas a tremendous progress has been achieved in terms of enhancing the presence of women in the labor force, the issue of career and family reconciliation is one of the most burning issues, particularly among women in top management. Female penetration in the nonprofit sector, which has grown, offers a special challenge and opportunity in this respect. This literature review will evaluate the major articles that revolve around women leaders in nonprofit-making organizations and how these leaders are experiencing work and living with balance and how they are coping with these competing interests.

Women in Nonprofit Leadership

Women have gained greater representation across the nonprofit sector, but women have continued to encounter obstacles to assuming leadership roles in the executive tier. A survey by Maier, Mayer, and Steinbereithner (2016) indicates that women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions even though they form a sizable workforce within nonprofit organizations. This gap has been linked to an interplay of organizational culture, gender biases and peculiarities of nonprofit work, which tends to involve employees in a tradeoff between mission-related objectives and constrained resources (Lapovsky & Larkin, 2009). This aspect of work-life balance presents women leaders in these sectors with even more challenges since they may need to combine taking care of their family unit and professional expectations at work (McGinnis, 2011).

Moreover, women working at the nonprofit sector are normally endowed with higher numbers of positions, compared to the corporate setting, but the leadership roles they are ascribed to tend to become peripheral to powerful executive boards or foundations (Gibelman, 2000). The absence of women in the highest leadership positions can also be worsened by the fact that the society (at least in most platforms that are still patriarchal) holds the values that women must place family above their career goals (Pynes, 2000). This also leads to fewer women dreaming about or gaining access to high-level jobs therefore leaving the gender gap in leadership in their nonprofit organizations wide.

Work-Life Balance and Women Leaders

The topic of life and work issue was properly covered in the research focused on life experience of women at the workplace, especially experiencing conflict between family and business demands. This is even more temperamental to women in leadership positions. Evidence suggests that female exhibit greater exposure to stressors related to work-family conflicts that expose them to job dissatisfaction and burnout (Grzywacz Many, Bass, 2003; Svedberg et al., 2018). The work-family conflict is not only one of the main stressors but also may stop the professional growth of women in the leadership position (Zhang & Liu, 2011).

Kossek, Baltes and Matthews (2006) study in their work the influence of culture in the organization where the employees can balance work and life and they touch upon the importance of accommodation policies in the company and flexibility. The authors state that organizations with a culture of work-life balance have a better chance of attracting top talent (female) especially at the top. Even then, a lot of nonprofit organizations still fail to provide the policies and support systems that can assist women in managing their work-life balance (Wang & Walumbwa, 2007).

Additionally, Wayne et al. (2017) also note that the experience of work-life balance should take into consideration individual differences, with women in leadership roles usually creating their coping mechanisms depending on their personal situations, professional objectives, and available support networks. Some of these solutions come in the form of time investments in family and personal health, to working with organizational assets, like the use of flex hours, or working at home. The effectiveness of these strategies, however, is largely influenced by organization culture and the level of support an organization would give to such arrangements.

Life-Course Theory and Work-Life Balance

Life-course theory presents an excellent understanding of the experience of women during their life as shaping their career and family choices. Elder (1994) and Giele (2002) indicate that people make decisions that are determined by the life experiences that people gather and life events that shape their choices depending on the time of occurrence and different aspects of the life situation as well as the interrelationships of different areas of life. The concept of life-course theory has gained momentum when dealing with work-life balance especially as it relates to the journeys of women leaders. This will focus on the effect of identity, type of relation, motivation, and adaptive style of women on making choices to balance their career and family decision (Giele, 2008).

Studies by Weber (2015) and Sandberg (2013) also point to the importance of life-course theory in understanding how women leaders in nonprofit institutions respond to the challenges of balancing the duties of the workplace and the ordinary lives. The life course theory model presented by Giele (2008) by breaking down the life experience of women into four dimensions: identity, relational style, motivation, and adaptive style provides a broad framework through which the various strategies women leaders use to achieve balance between their careers and lives can be studied.

Identity and Work-Life Balance

The concept of identity is one of the essential elements of the life-course theory that determines the way people define themselves and their position within the personal and professional domains. Capturing both the societal and the professional ambitions, women leaders usually negotiate their identities between a professional and a caregiver (Giele, 2008). This conflict of roles can have a substantial impact on their work-life balance. A study conducted by Black et al. (2009) examines the impact of how women define themselves professionally on their decisions regarding work and family, especially those who occupy their places in male dominated industries. Such women tend to self-define themselves as role models to other women and experience some peculiar difficulties when they have to negotiate both their professional, as well as their personal identities (Elder, 1985).

It has been found that women who adopt a more relaxed or non-traditional identity are able to achieve work-family balance more easily because they are more likely to find alternative ways of solving this situation, including options like flexible hours or source of domestic work (Giele, 2008). On the contrary, women that cling more to traditional identities and will tend to have more trouble balancing work and family life because they might feel duty bound to leave the career progression to one side in favor of the family roles (Marshall & Muller, 2003).

Relational Style and Work-Life Balance

The other important aspect of the life-course theory is called relational style, which means the manner of how people respond to others such as family, colleagues, and subordinates. The relationships at the workplace and at a domestic level largely influence the capacity of women to deal with work-life balance. A study conducted by Marshall and Muller (2003) highlight that women leaders who demonstrated an egalitarian relational style (more collaborative and inclusive leadership) have a better work-life balance as compared to deferent ones. Female leaders who adopt an egalitarian relation style tend to create nurturing work and home environments that can allow them to distribute both work and family responsibilities.

Moreover, work-life balance depends on relational supports by other employees and family (which is the key factor that makes women successful in work-life balance) (Hewlett, 2002). Research conducted by Taylor et al. (2009) recommends that professional networks and family support has the greatest chance of long-term preservation of female leadership and work-life balance. Nevertheless, insufficient support in either sphere may cause profound levels of stress and seriously impair the capacity of a woman to cope with her dual roles (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009).

Motivation and Work-Life Balance

Motivation is the key element that determines the career choice of a woman and her views on work-life balance. Motivation is classified under achievement-oriented motivation where a person is mainly interested in moving up the career ladder and nurturance-oriented motivation where family and personal well-being are prioritized (Giele, 2002; Black et al., 2009). The main

problem of women leaders is to reach a balance between these two types of motivation, which are in conflict on occasion.

According to research by Robert (2018), women who derive motivation at work through career success are most likely to put work before family, are likely to delay marriage or having kids to ensure that they continue to climb the work ladder. Conversely, those women driven by the need to nurture may opt to reduce their careers to attend to their families, thus missing out on leadership opportunities (Giele, 2008). Women who become leaders continually strike a balance between these motives to sustain some form of balance between career and family live.

Adaptive Style and Work-Life Balance

Flexibility of style means adapt-ability to the changing requirements and conditions, and it is very important to the women leaders as they have to struggle with the intricacies of work and family. According to the research conducted by Parsons (1955) and Giele (2008), it is stated that women possessing an adaptive style, or what can be regarded as being flexible with a change, conduct more effectively leadership and professional roles and demands, as well as that of their families. The women with less modernized adaptive styles that focus on values and family oriented and conforming to societal norms might show increased difficulty in balancing their roles, in comparison (Giele, 2008).

These adaptive approaches involve the sharing of responsibilities in the workplace, the use of technology to work remotely, or the dependence on networks of support to have family obligations (Elder & Giele, 2009). According to research conducted by Lopatta and Levy (2003), an adaptive strategy can increase the capability of a woman leader in attaining her work-life balance especially when she is confronted with demands posed by both leadership and parenthood.

Work-Life Balance Strategies

Women leaders make use of various strategies to attain work-life harmony, most of them enshrine a mix of individual and professional practices. Clark (2000) and Kirchmeyer (2000) argue that organizational support, including flex time schedules and childcare assistance, can assist a woman in achieving the work-life balance. Women also use individual interventions including time management, self-care, and prioritization to handle their duties (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009).

Contrary to this is a working model that involves career choices, that is, accepting less-responsible jobs or foregoing career advancement in favor of family (Olson, Frieze, & Detlefsen, 1990). A study conducted by Eagly and Carli (2007) implies that it is women who master work-life balance who develop such strategies as they live through their life course and learn to meet the demands posed to them as their lives change.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, which was most appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of women leaders in non-profit organizations, particularly their efforts to achieve work-life balance. Qualitative research is well-suited for examining complex, context-specific social phenomena such as balancing professional and familial roles that cannot be fully understood through quantitative approaches. The central aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies, perceptions, and coping mechanisms adopted by these women, using life-course theory as a conceptual framework.

The life-course approach emphasizes how identity, motivation, relational style, and adaptive capacity evolve over time, influencing an individual's experiences and decision-making. By exploring these dimensions qualitatively, the study sought to uncover not only the practical strategies but also the deeper meanings these leaders ascribe to their dual roles. The interpretive nature of qualitative research supported this goal, enabling the researcher to understand how participants construct and negotiate their realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Andrew & Karetai, 2022).

Research Approach: Multiple-Case Study

A multiple-case study approach was adopted to provide rich, contextual insights into the work-life balance strategies of women in leadership roles within non-profit organizations. According to Yin (2003), case study research is effective for investigating contemporary issues within real-life settings, especially where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred.

This study focused on non-profit organizations based in Peshawar and Islamabad, Pakistan two cities selected for their high concentration of active NGOs, diversity in organizational structures, and contrasting socio-cultural dynamics. Each case consisted of a primary participant (a woman in a senior leadership role) and was complemented with insights from two colleagues and one family member. This triangulated case design allowed for a holistic understanding of each participant's personal and professional challenges and the support systems influencing their strategies.

Sampling Strategy

A two-stage purposive sampling strategy was employed. In the first phase, non-profit organizations in Peshawar and Islamabad were identified based on the presence of women holding senior leadership positions (e.g., Chairperson, Executive Director, or Program Manager). The inclusion criteria required that participants must be women currently heading non-profit organizations in either of the two cities.

In the second phase, purposeful and convenience sampling was used to identify secondary participants for each case. For each female leader, two professional colleagues (peers or subordinates familiar with the participant's leadership style and work-life balance efforts) and one immediate family member (e.g., spouse, sibling, or adult child) were interviewed. This allowed

the study to gather multi-perspective data reflecting both professional and personal contexts. A total of 20 participants were included:

- 5 women leaders
- 10 colleagues (2 per leader)
- 5 family members (1 per leader)

This sample size is consistent with the goals of qualitative research, where thematic saturation and depth of understanding take precedence over numerical generalization.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through two qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and participant observations.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the 20 participants. This method allowed the researcher to guide conversations using pre-determined questions while also giving participants the freedom to elaborate on their experiences in their own terms (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Rehman, 2023). Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes and were held either in-person or via video conferencing, based on participant convenience.

The interview protocol was designed around four core dimensions of life-course theory (Giele, 2008):

- Identity: How participants perceive their roles as professionals and caregivers.
- Relational Style: How they manage relationships with colleagues and family.
- Motivation: The underlying values that guide their leadership and personal goals.
- Adaptive Style: Their capacity to adjust to changing life and work demands.

Questions were open-ended, encouraging rich narratives. Examples include:

- "How do you see yourself balancing your professional identity with your personal responsibilities?"
- "What forms of support do you receive at work and home that help you manage both roles?"

Participant Observation

In addition to interviews, participant observation was used to contextualize and corroborate the data. Observations took place during staff meetings, community events, and informal family interactions (with consent), enabling the researcher to note behaviours, communication styles, and informal support mechanisms. These observations added depth and

authenticity to the data, capturing non-verbal cues and cultural dynamics that interviews alone might not reveal.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using the Framework Method as outlined by Ritchie and Lewis (2003), a systematic approach suitable for applied social research involving thematic exploration across multiple cases.

The analytical steps included:

i. **Familiarization** – Interview transcripts and field notes were carefully read and re-read to gain an overall sense of the data.

ii. **Theme Identification** – Based on the research questions and life-course theory, key themes (identity, relational style, motivation, adaptability) were pre-defined while also allowing new themes to emerge.

iii. **Manual Coding** – Data segments were assigned to specific codes using color-coded labels. Sub-themes such as "role conflict," "time management," and "organizational flexibility" were also developed.

iv. **Charting and Mapping** – Patterns across cases were compared to explore similarities, differences, and unique narratives.

v. **Interpretation** – Final themes were interpreted in relation to the study's conceptual framework and research questions. This included examining how the interaction between personal motivation and external support structures influenced the women's ability to maintain work-life balance.

Findings were synthesized across cases to determine convergent and divergent experiences, with attention to the influence of organizational culture, gender norms, and individual agency.

Ethical Considerations

The research study was carried out ethically in line with qualitative research principles. Ethical standards were respected as all participants had informed consent before the interviews were commenced and they were assured confidentiality and anonymity. The identities of participants were concealed using pseudonyms in all written materials. Participants also indicated that they may exit the study without any penalty. All data were stored securely to maintain confidentiality and the study was conducted under the rights of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study emphasize the experiences of women leaders in nonprofit organizations and their work-life balance approaches, i.e. through the parameters of the four dimensions of life-course theory: identity, relational style, motivation, and adaptive style. The information retrieved during interviews and participant observations identified various themes and techniques that women leaders employed in order to deal with the intricacies of working on the various roles between their careers and their domestic lives. In the subsequent descriptions, the results along the following dimensions will be presented.

Identity and Work-Life Balance

The identity analysis as applied to work life balance showed that efficacy of women leaders regarding their visions of self-played an important role in determining how they would strike work family balance. As indicated in Table 4.1, the results show that women leaders who did not connect strongly with the professional identity (those who viewed themselves as strong and independent financially) and those who felt confident with their role, were able to handle work life balance better. They noted distinct work-life separation with many employing time management skills at effective work days and family time at the evenings or weekends.

The role of identity in shaping work-life balance experiences emerged as a central theme. Women who held a strong professional identity were more likely to set firm boundaries between work and personal life, enabling them to manage competing demands effectively. This supports prior research by (Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009), which emphasizes that a solid professional identity helps individuals integrate their caregiving and career roles. Similarly, Greenhaus and Powell (2006) note that such identity integration facilitates smoother navigation between professional and domestic spheres.

Conversely, participants who prioritized traditional caregiving roles often reported increased difficulty in balancing responsibilities, experiencing role conflict and emotional strain. These findings align with Lynch and Bennett (2016), who highlight the psychological toll on women trying to reconcile professional ambitions with entrenched societal expectations of caregiving. The conflict is further amplified in culturally conservative settings where gender norms are rigid (Schwartz, 2011).

Importantly, women who exhibited a synthesized identity balancing both professional and family identities demonstrated a greater capacity for achieving work-life balance. As Acker (2006) and Giele (2008) suggest, identity flexibility across the life course enables women to reframe and adapt their self-concept, supporting their ability to manage shifting personal and professional priorities.

Relational Style and Work-Life Balance

Relational dynamics played a key role in shaping participants' capacity for balance. Women who adopted an egalitarian relational style characterized by open communication and

shared decision-making with colleagues and family members reported greater success in managing work and home responsibilities. These results echo the findings of Halpern (2005) and Bianchi et al. (2000), who emphasize the critical role of gender equity in household duties and interpersonal cooperation.

Participants highlighted that supportive workplace relationships, including collegiality and understanding from supervisors, provided emotional and logistical support that helped them manage their dual roles. This aligns with Allen et al. (2013), who argue that positive workplace relationships contribute significantly to employee well-being. Furthermore, organizational support through flexible scheduling and an understanding leadership style helped create an environment conducive to balance (Kossek et al., 2011; McDonald et al., 2015).

Women with deferential relational styles prioritizing others' needs above their own were more vulnerable to work-family conflict, consistent with findings by Bianchi and Milkie (2010). These women often lacked assertiveness in negotiating personal time, resulting in emotional burnout and reduced job satisfaction.

Motivation and Work-Life Balance

Participants' motivational orientation emerged as a defining factor in their work-life strategies. Career-driven women often placed high value on professional success, sometimes at the expense of personal well-being or family time. This frequently led to heightened stress and a reduced sense of balance, echoing Greenhaus and Powell's (2006) assertion that career orientation can intensify work-family conflict. Kossek et al. (2014) similarly note that excessive focus on work can result in burnout.

In contrast, women motivated by family values prioritized work arrangements that accommodated caregiving, including part-time roles or flexible schedules. These women were more likely to achieve work-life enrichment, as described by Allen et al. (2012), by aligning their career roles with personal responsibilities.

A significant insight from this study is the importance of self-perception and confidence. Participants with high self-efficacy believed in their ability to balance roles, often reporting more successful outcomes. This resonates with the view of Gergen and Gergen (2000), who emphasize the role of self-perception in navigating competing social roles.

Adaptive Style and Work-Life Balance

Adaptability was a recurring theme among women who successfully balanced work and life. These leaders adjusted their routines, work commitments, and family responsibilities in response to changing demands. Flexibility, both psychological and logistical, emerged as a critical trait, in line with Hofstede's (2001) notion that adaptability is essential in managing complex work-family systems.

Key coping mechanisms included task delegation at home and work, use of technology for efficiency, and strategic disengagement (e.g., taking breaks or reducing commitments when overwhelmed). These practices mirror findings by Allen and Russell (2013) and Duxbury et al. (2014), who advocate for flexible work arrangements and digital tools to support work-life integration.

Adaptive women leaders showed greater emotional resilience, often navigating unpredictability with a problem-solving mindset. Their ability to recalibrate strategies over time contributed to a sense of control over their dual roles, enhancing well-being and leadership effectiveness.

Work-Life Balance Strategies: Organizational and Personal Dimensions

The findings underscore that effective work-life balance strategies are shaped by both personal agency and institutional support. Professional strategies included use of flexible work hours, time-blocking, delegation, and utilization of formal organizational policies. Personal strategies involved setting boundaries, prioritizing family events, engaging in counselling or mentorship, and openly communicating needs with stakeholders.

Crucially, the effectiveness of these strategies was closely linked to the presence of supportive organizational cultures. Women with access to telecommuting options, family leave, and understanding supervisors reported greater ease in balancing roles. This confirms the conclusions of Kossek and Ozeki (1998), who emphasize the role of institutional support in work-family coordination.

The findings also stress the importance of cultivating an inclusive organizational culture—one that recognizes the dual demands faced by women leaders and provides structural and emotional resources to address them.

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