



Working Women in Pursuit of Work-Life Balance: an Overview

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ABSTRACT

Over the years there has been a steady increase in the number of working women across the globe. Even in countries like India, the number of women obtaining higher education and contributing to national economic growth has amplified. However, women are faced by a perplexing situation where they are required to balance between their job demands and the family responsibilities. In an attempt to create a perfect equilibrium between these two domains of life, the women are susceptible to stress and anxiety. Job pressure accompanied by additional errands of fulfilling family roles are root cause of stress among working women. In fact, empirical evidence reveals that in women levels of stress-related illness are nearly twice as high as for their male counterparts. Imbalance between work and family life could arise due to a number of factors. Work-related stress is understood to occur when there is a mismatch between the demands of the job and the resources and capabilities of the individual worker to meet those demands. When to such a situation the family responsibilities are added, it automatically will cause stress among the women. Early detection and management of stress is required as it is found to be linked to a variety of physical and mental disorders, either by directly contributing to ill-health, or by increasing the tendency for those affected by stress to engage in behaviours that lead to illness and disease. Specific stress management strategies need to be imparted to working women so that they are able to overcome this problem.

KEYWORDS

Working Women, Stress, Work-Life balance, Stress Management

Working women in pursuit of Work-Life Balance: an Overview

Around the world there has been a tremendous increase in the number of working women. Today, more than ever before a large segment of female population is receiving education and hence participating in the work force. Work and family are the two most important aspects in people's lives and, contrary to the initial belief that they are distinct parts of life; these domains are closely related. Therefore balancing work and family roles has become a key personal and family issue for many societies. In all countries the economic development requires an integration of both male and female into the labor (Jones and Bright, 2001). Both men and women have to contribute to the economic development process in order to ensure economic growth and poverty reduction. In societies like India, traditionally, the major responsibility of women has been perceived to be the maintenance of the family including home and childcare and breadwinning was the main responsibility of men. However, here also with the changing times more and more women are nowadays entering the workforce and pursuing careers. Most women do not have responsibility only in one domain anymore; but they have to balance the competing demands of both work and family domains. This complexity of balancing both the work as well as the home leaves working women susceptible to stress and anxiety. Empirical evidence reveals that in women levels of stress-related illness are nearly twice as high as for men (Hobfoll, 1998).

The term stress is commonly used today; however, there is ambiguity about its meaning and definitions. Organizations vary in their operational definitions of stress and this in turn produces the differing responses and contractual arrangements used to address it. Social scientific researchers are no more unified in their definitional approaches. Indeed, it would seem that the wider its usage, the more elusive its meaning. 'Stress arises when individuals perceive that they cannot adequately cope with the demands being made on them or with threats to their well-being' (Lazarus, 1966). 'Stress is the psychological, physiological and behavioural response by an individual when they perceive a lack of equilibrium between the demands placed upon them and their ability to meet those demands, which, over a period of time, leads to ill health' (Palmer, 1989)

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as an 'adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'. Work-related stress is thus understood to occur when there is a mismatch between the demands of the job and the resources and capabilities of the individual worker to meet those demands. This definition emphasizes the relationship between individuals and their working environment, and helps to explain why a situation that one person regards as a stimulating challenge causes another to experience a damaging degree of stress.

The degree of stress an individual experiences is, to an extent, dependent upon his/her own appraisal of the demands of their work. Such a subjective appraisal will in turn be affected by a range of socio-economic factors, many of which may not be directly work-related. For example, gender, race and age all play a part, as do geographic location, housing, health, number of children, family arrangements and community networks. In addition, more specific psychological factors must be considered, including past experiences and personality traits. Finally, stress levels seem to depend on what a person interprets as threatening or challenging, and whether that individual believes him or herself able to cope with it. All of these social and psychological variables may profoundly affect individual experiences of stress, so much so that stress appears, ultimately, to be 'in the eye of the beholder'. For this reason, it is arguable that subjective and self-reported evaluations of stress are just as valid as objective data such as statistics on accidents or absenteeism.

A recent report by the National Association of Mental Health confirms that the individual worker's 'personality and coping strategy' can have direct, moderating or perceptual effects on stress outcomes. For example, an extroverted person might find a socially isolating job more stressful than an introverted person, who conversely, might find a job with greater levels of social interaction more difficult and stressful. Moreover, a worker's past experience, individual characteristics and personal resources appear to influence how she or he interprets and manages the specific conditions and demands of the job.

The National Association of Mental Health report also draws an important distinction between stress and pressure. Pressure is defined as a subjective feeling of tension or arousal that is

triggered by a potentially stressful situation. Because it stimulates mental alertness and motivation, pressure may have a positive impact on employee performance and satisfaction. However, when this pressure becomes extreme, persistent and unrelieved, it may lead to irritability, fear, frustration, aggression and stress, and may even contribute to a variety of short or long term physical and mental illnesses. When pressure exceeds an individual's ability to cope, the result is stress.

Although the experience of stress is subjective, and is mediated by the personal evaluation of a situation by the individual, there are nevertheless a number of substantive factors that can be identified as potential causes of work-related stress. These, of course, will vary in degree and importance depending on the particular job, but the HSE has identified six categories of potential stressors :

Demands: This includes factors intrinsic to the job such as working conditions (for example noise, temperature, lighting or ventilation), shift work, long or unsociable hours, workload.

Control: How much say and autonomy a person has over the way in which he carries out his job; low levels of job control are typically linked to high levels of stress.

Relationships: Relationships with superiors, subordinates and colleagues can all play a part in an individual's stress levels; low levels of trust and support are likely to increase stress. Also, conflict, harassment and bullying in the workplace are all linked to heightened stress.

Change: The way in which change is introduced, managed and communicated to staff can impact on levels of stress, as unnecessary or badly planned change results in excess pressure on workers.

Role: Stress may be triggered when an individual does not have a clear understanding of his role within the organisation, when there is conflict between roles or ambiguity with regards to position and degree of responsibility over others.

Support: The amount of support and job training available, as well as encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by colleagues and management.

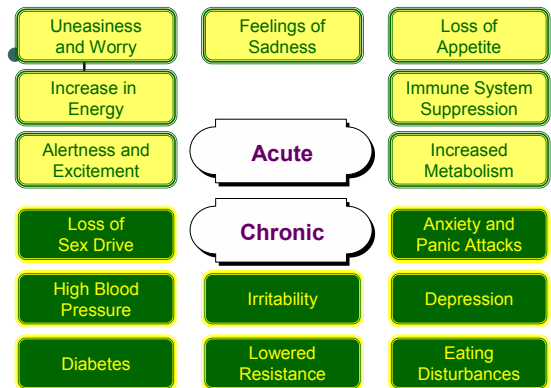


Figure1: Work Related Stressors

Another potential risk factor not included in the six HSE categories of stressors is the interface between work and home, often referred to as the work-life balance. Individuals who work long, uncertain or unsocial hours may find it difficult to juggle the competing demands of work and domestic pressures, particularly if they have children or other dependants. This can lead to a 'vicious cycle' in which mounting stress in one area of life spills over and makes coping with the other yet more difficult.

Consequences of Stress:

Work-related stress is widely held to be linked to a variety of physical and mental disorders, either by directly contributing to ill-health, or by increasing the tendency for those affected by stress to engage in behaviours that lead to illness and disease. It can be difficult to prove a direct causal link between work-related stress and physical and mental ill-health, as the majority of diseases and syndromes commonly attributed to stress have multiple causes; that is, they are caused by the interaction of a wide variety of factors. The effects of work-related stress on ill-health operate in a number of ways:



Adapted from Exhibit 7-1: Some Stress-Related Conditions

Figure2: Some Consequences of Stress

Physiologically: nervousness, endocrinal or immunological reactions within the body can lead to symptoms of physical and mental illness.

Cognitively: working conditions and situations are interpreted by the individual as 'stressful' and therefore pathogenic.

Emotionally: seemingly trivial incidents are experienced as debilitating, dangerous, or even life-threatening.

Behaviourally: excessive work strain encourages potentially damaging behaviours, such as smoking, alcoholism, eating disorders, or self-harm.

Causes of Stress Among Working Women:

There are many facets in working woman's life that makes her prone to stresses. They deal with home and family issues as well as job stress on a daily basis. Imbalance between work and family life arises due to a number of factors. Various factors appear to strengthen the brunt of pressure on women. Work-family spillover' is result of the performing multiple roles and can interfere with women's ability to perform effectively in the workplace. Several researches such as those by Zhan, 2010; Ugwa, 2010; Abdullah and Saha, 2008; Fang and Wu, 2009, have indicated that work-family difficulties can make negative influence for individual mentality and physiology. Studies have shown that, compared with their male counterparts, women report higher level of stress in work/family conflicts, gender barriers and career development.

Household Responsibilities: House and family remains the constant and primary responsibility of women. Working women are expected to continue to responsible for their children and welfare of other family members. The household activities like cooking, cleaning, washing clothes are seen as a women's domain. Frequently household duty involves protecting family members: children, the sick and the elderly (Rani and Bhuvneshwari, 2014). Even where men play role in the caring function, usually it is the woman who is the initial career, although she may suffer additional health risks.

Workplace culture: though more and more women are today joining the work force and there is hardly any work arena where the presence of women cannot be felt, yet, women

may continue to face hostile workplace environment. The men find it hard to visualize women as boss. Researchers have indicated that having women at lower levels of organizational hierarchy is more easily accepted than accepting them at the higher order. Many women may also be sufferers of 'sexual harassment' at the work place (Rajasekhra and Sasikala, 2013).

Technology: The last decade has seen a tremendous change in the technology and its usage for occupational and other purposes as well. However, many of the workers may find it difficult to accept this technological advancement. Women may especially be not very confident when it comes to technology, mainly because of the social prejudice that women cannot learn a technical stuff (Tyagi and Sen, 200).

Lack of Support System: When women are confronted with situation where they find themselves without a supportive family, spouse, friends or colleagues they tend to stress out more. These support systems within as well as outside the home make the women vent out their emotions and hence relax. Companionship and support from significant others acts as a major source of stress relief.

Apart from these factors other issues like lack of job security and fear of transfer could also possibly lead to stress among women (Das, 2016)

There is an urgent need for the women themselves to realize that they can be under stress due to the dual nature of their work both inside as well outside their homes. Simply by denying the existence of stress the women make themselves more vulnerable and susceptible to stress. Acceptable of it can be the first step in its management. Secondly, women also need to find out what causes them stress and resolve the causative factor. In many cases it may not be feasible to eliminate the stress or its causative factor, in such a situation strategies such as better time management, use of relaxation techniques along with cognitive strategies, use of technology, eating right and exercise, distribution of labour both inside as well as outside the home, may prove useful.

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