Work-Life Balance Of Women Faculty In Rural Higher Education Institutions - A Case Study

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Abstract: This study explores the complex interplay of organizational, personal, societal, and technological factors influencing the work-life balance (WLB) of women faculty in rural higher education institutions (HEIs) in Konaseema district, Andhra Pradesh, India. Through purposive sampling, qualitative research was conducted using data gathered from 10 semi-structured interviews with women faculty in these institutions. Institutional challenges such as excessive workloads, rigid policies, lack of flexible work arrangements, and insufficient institutional support contribute significantly to job-related stress, consistent with the Spillover Theory. Additionally, gender and caste biases restrict leadership opportunities and contribute to pay disparities, further intensifying WLB struggles. Role overload, where women juggle professional and domestic responsibilities, exacerbates these challenges, reflecting Role Theory. Societal norms rooted in patriarchal structures reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting career progression for women. Furthermore, while digitalization of education offers benefits, it has blurred the boundaries between work and home, leading to increased stress and emotional fatigue, in alignment with Ecological Systems Theory. To address these challenges, gender-sensitive policies, equitable career opportunities, flexible work arrangements, and mentorship programs are essential. Additionally, fostering a cultural shift toward shared domestic responsibilities and recognizing women's professional contributions are crucial for achieving sustainable WLB and long-term career growth in rural HEIs.

Keywords: Work-life balance, women faculty, rural HEIs, gender inequality, role overload, institutional policies, digitalization, Spillover Theory, Role Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, leadership opportunities, qualitative research.

1. INTRODUCTION

India, the fifth-largest economy globally (Forbes India, 2025), has witnessed significant progress in female participation across various sectors, including education and the workforce. Women constitute 48.41% of the total population (World Bank, 2023), yet their presence in the labor market remains relatively low. The Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) for the prime working-age group stood at only 32.8% in 2021-22 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2023), highlighting the persistent gender disparity in employment. In contrast, the education sector has seen a remarkable shift, with female teachers comprising 53.3% of the school education workforce (India Today, 2025). Additionally, female enrollment in higher education has reached 18.2 million, reflecting a growing trend of women pursuing academic careers. The percentage of female faculty in higher education has also increased by 4.35%, now constituting 42.2% of the total teaching workforce (Venkat et al., 2022).

Despite these advancements, gender disparities in leadership positions remain a critical issue. India has 725 universities, including 47 public central universities, 329 public state universities, 295 private universities, and 123 deemed-to-be universities (Gandhi & Sen, 2021). However, as per the University Grants Commission (UGC) report from 2015, only 13 universities have ever had a female vice-chancellor, representing a mere 0.024% of the total. Notably, six of these universities are women-only institutions, where the position of vice-chancellor is exclusively reserved for women by ordinance. This indicates that while more women are entering academia, their representation in senior leadership roles remains disproportionately low. Gandhi and Sen (2021) emphasize that women in academia are predominantly concentrated in assistant professor roles rather than advancing to positions such as deans or vice-chancellors.

Research further suggests that women in India, particularly in rural areas, are often confined to middle management roles and face significant barriers to career progression in higher education institutions (HEIs). While female participation in higher education has increased globally and in India over the last two decades (Venkat et al., 2022), challenges such as work-life balance continue to persist. In rural regions, most women begin their academic careers in private institutions due to the limited availability of government universities and the influence of societal and personal constraints. Several factors contribute to the glass ceiling and work-life imbalance among rural women faculty members, including the need to prove themselves twice as competent, greater emphasis on male opinions, limited commitment to research, absence of diversity and inclusion policies, and a lack of gender diversity in leadership positions. Additionally, family responsibilities, adolescent children, social and familial obstacles, lack of spousal and family support, complete responsibility for household chores, and negative societal attitudes toward women in leadership further hinder their career growth (Gandhi & Sen, 2021).

Beyond these challenges, broader structural issues exacerbate gender disparities in academia. Caste discrimination, pay disparities, lack of maternity benefits and paid leave, skepticism toward women in leadership, gender stereotypes, lack of extrinsic motivation, and overall gender inequality create additional stress and work-life imbalance among rural women faculty members from various private engineering and degree colleges. Addressing these barriers through supportive policies and systemic interventions is crucial for bridging the gender gap in leadership roles and fostering an inclusive academic environment in rural India.

Given these challenges, this study aims to explore the specific issues faced by rural women faculty members in IHEs in the rural Konaseema district, Andhra Pradesh (AP), particularly regarding their work-life balance. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Spillover Theory, Role Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory, the research will examine how organizational, personal, societal, and technological factors collectively influence women's ability to balance professional and personal responsibilities. Additionally, the study will provide insights into potential strategies for improving work-life balance policies in private institutions, particularly in rural areas.

To address the research gap and explore these issues in depth, the study will focus on the following research questions   (RQs):

RQ.1: *How do organizational, personal, societal, and technological factors collectively impact the work-life balance of women faculty in rural HEIs?*

RQ.2: *How do workplace policies, workload, and family responsibilities shape the work-life balance of women faculty in rural HEIs?*

This study adopts a qualitative, single-case study approach with an inductive research design. Data will be collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively selected women faculty members. Ethical considerations will be strictly adhered to, ensuring that participants' rights and privacy are respected. Through this analytical approach, the study seeks to provide meaningful insights into the challenges faced by rural women faculty in HIEs and propose effective strategies for improving work-life balance within these institutions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Work-life Balance (WLB) and Glass ceiling

Achieving a balance between work and family responsibilities has become a growing challenge across various professions. University employees, in particular, frequently experience strain between their professional and personal roles, making it difficult to maintain a stable work-life balance (Fatima & Sahibzada, 2012). According to a study by Anderson et al., 2002), HEIs report greater dissatisfaction with their work-family balance compared to those in corporate settings. This imbalance leads to heightened stress levels, negatively impacting their psychological well-being and, consequently, their job performance. Addressing these challenges requires targeted policies and institutional support to foster a more inclusive and equitable work environment for HEI employees, particularly women in rural areas.

In the Indian context, deeply embedded gender roles significantly influence societal expectations and workplace dynamics. Traditional patriarchal norms have long assigned women the primary role of caregivers within the household, while men are expected to be the primary earners. Despite progress in women's education and workforce participation, these conventional beliefs continue to shape both social and professional environments (Gandhi & Sen, 2021). As a result, women often face pressure to prioritize family obligations over their careers, limiting their prospects for professional development, career progression, and leadership opportunities.

This deeply rooted bias is a major factor contributing to the glass ceiling effect, which represents the invisible barriers that hinder women from reaching senior leadership positions, regardless of their qualifications, experience, or accomplishments. The commission's 1995 report defines the glass ceiling as "an unseen and unreachable barrier that keeps women and minorities from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements" (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where women faculty members in private institutions face additional challenges. Societal expectations often discourage them from aspiring to leadership roles, increasing workplace stress and leading to work-life imbalance. The existing literature explores various theoretical perspectives on the challenges faced by women faculty in rural educational institutions.

2.2. Factors Influencing WLB

The work-life balance of women teaching professionals has become a significant concern in today's world. The workload of teachers extends beyond their time at the institution, often spilling over into their personal lives as they prepare for the next day, manage student records, and handle various institutional duties. To meet the higher expectations and navigate the challenging environment, teachers often find themselves spending additional hours each day to remain effective and productive in their profession (Umma & Zahana, 2021). Several researchers have examined the various factors influencing WLB, hence this study categorized them into personal, social, organizational, and technological dimensions. Personal factors play a crucial role in determining how individuals manage work and family responsibilities. Personality, well-being, and emotional intelligence significantly influence an individual's ability to maintain a healthy balance between work and personal life (Poulose & Sudarsan, 2014). Effective time management, awareness, and self-regulation contribute positively to WLB, helping employees handle multiple responsibilities efficiently (Samson & Sareena, 2019). Conversely, work stress and job-related anxiety negatively impact psychological well-being, disrupting work-family balance (Fatima & Sahibzada, 2012). Additionally, age, gender, marital status, and parental responsibilities shape how individuals navigate their work-life demands (Pathiranage & Pathiranage, 2020).

Social support plays a vital role in fostering a healthy work-life balance. Studies suggest that spouse, family, and social support positively influence employees' ability to balance work and family life (Samson & Sareena, 2019). In contrast, responsibilities such as childcare, elderly dependency, and personal family demands are negatively associated with WLB, particularly among working women (Pathiranage & Pathiranage, 2020). Family conflicts and societal expectations further complicate work-life integration, particularly in cultures where traditional gender roles dictate work and caregiving responsibilities (Gandhi & Sen, 2021).

Organizational factors such as Work arrangements, flexible schedules, and organizational support significantly contribute to improved WLB (Poulose & Sudarsan, 2014). Superior support, colleague support, and leadership policies help create a work environment where employees can effectively manage both professional and personal commitments (Kumar & Priyadarshini, 2018). However, barriers such as job stress, role overload, role ambiguity, and unclear career growth opportunities hinder achieving a healthy balance (Samson & Sareena, 2019). Furthermore, the absence of WLB-friendly policies, such as parental leave, childcare facilities, and employee wellness programs, exacerbates work-related stress (Pathiranage &

Pathiranage, 2020). Technology has a dual impact on work-life balance. On one hand, digital tools and remote work solutions provide employees with greater flexibility, enabling them to manage personal commitments more effectively (Kumar & Priyadarshini, 2018). On the other hand, excessive social media usage, after-hours work emails, and constant digital connectivity blur the boundaries between work and personal life, leading to burnout and increased job-related stress (Poulose & Sudarsan, 2014).

2.3. Theories of WLB

2.3.1. Spillover theory
Spillover theory, as explained by Staines (1980), highlights the interconnected nature of work and family, where positive experiences in one domain contribute to positivity in the other, and negative experiences create adverse effects. Spillover occurs when "work-related moods or attitudes are carried to home or family-related moods or attitudes are carried to work" (Illies et al., 2009, p.87). For example, workplace stress from a challenging shift can extend into home life, while personal struggles, such as marital conflicts, may negatively influence job performance. Conversely, achievements like promotions can enhance family well-being, just as a supportive home environment can improve workplace engagement (Rincy & Panchanatham, 2014). This study explores the role of supportive workplace policies in boosting job satisfaction and overall family well-being. However, negative spillover, often caused by excessive workloads, can result in stress that disrupts the personal lives of women faculties working in rural private institutions.

2.3.2. Role Theory
Role Theory explains the multiple roles individuals take on and how these roles can either create conflict or enhance work-life balance. It provides a framework for understanding role overload and conflicts, which are common challenges in maintaining balance between work and personal life (Zulkiflee et al.,2024). Applying this theory helps explore how women faculty members navigate their responsibilities, balancing roles as professionals, parents, and caregivers.

2.3.3. Ecological Systems Theory
Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory identifies five environmental layers that influence human development: the microsystem (direct surroundings like home and workplace), mesosystem (interactions between multiple environments, such as the relationship between family and work), exosystem (external influences that indirectly affect individuals, like a spouse's job or childcare facilities), macrosystem (societal and cultural norms), and chronosystem (life changes and transitions) (Yang & Sanborn, 2021). In the context of work-life balance for women faculty in rural private institutions, this theory provides insight into how workplace policies (microsystem) contribute to family well-being, while societal expectations (macrosystem) shape domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, the mesosystem highlights the significance of strong support networks between family and workplace, and the exosystem emphasizes how external factors, such as an employer's policies on parental leave or a child's schooling, indirectly impact work-life balance. Major life transitions (chronosystem), such as parenthood or career shifts, further shape the balance between professional and personal life.

Figure 1 below illustrates the dynamic relationship between various influencing factors and WLB, highlighting the theoretical connections that contribute to improved work-life integration. This interaction is analyzed through the perspectives of Spillover Theory, Role Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory, offering a comprehensive understanding of how these factors shape the experiences of individuals in balancing professional and personal responsibilities.
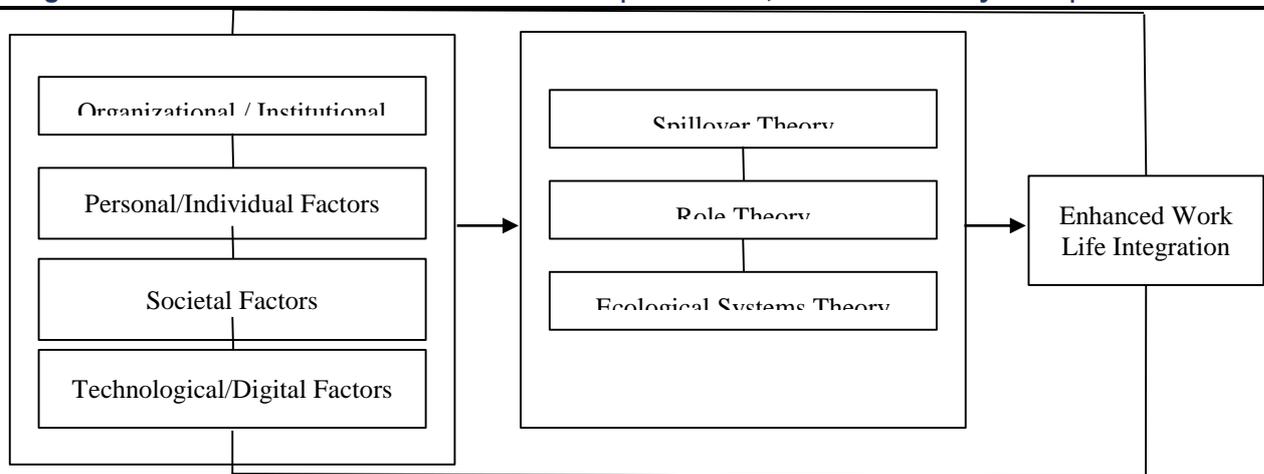
Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: Influencing Factors and Work-Life Balance (WLB)

3.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Paradigm

Grounded in Relativistic Constructionism, this study acknowledges that perceptions of reality are shaped by individual experiences and societal norms, emphasizing the subjective nature of WLB challenges (Saunders et al., 2009). The research considers women faculty's personal and professional contexts, recognizing the influence of social interactions on their lived experiences.

3.2. Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the complex interplay of organizational, personal, societal, and technological factors influencing the WLB of women faculty in private colleges. Focusing on participants' lived experiences, it aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced and coping mechanisms employed by women educators (Malterud, 2001).

3.3. Research Method and Design

A single case study approach is employed to examine the specific context of private colleges in rural areas. Case studies allow for an in-depth investigation of real-life phenomena within their natural settings, capturing the impact of workplace policies, workload, and family responsibilities on WLB (Yin, 2009; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Given the limited research on work-life balance barriers for women faculty in rural HEIs, this study follows an inductive research design to address the knowledge gap (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

3.4. Data Collection Method

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors relevant to addressing our RQs, we employed primary data collection methods. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, which provided both structure and flexibility in exploring participants' perspectives (Elo et al., 2014). A purposive sampling approach was employed to select ten women faculty members from five private engineering, management, and degree colleges in the rural Konaseema district, AP, all of whom had firsthand experience balancing work and personal responsibilities. To ensure diverse insights, preliminary interviews were conducted to refine the selection criteria (Morse, 2007). Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, ensuring accessibility and convenience for participants.

The sample size was carefully determined to ensure sufficient data for a rigorous qualitative analysis, following the recommendations of Guest et al. (2006). This study examined five privately owned HEIs in the rural Konaseema district, focusing on women faculty members across various departments, including CSE, Physics, ECE, Commerce and Management Studies, Science and Humanities, Mathematics, Chemistry, and IT. A total of 10 participants, consisting of Assistant Professors, Associate Professors, and Lecturers, were interviewed to explore glass ceiling challenges and work-life balance experiences. This approach enabled us to reach data saturation, ensuring that the collected data was comprehensive enough to analyze key themes and patterns related to our research questions. Ethical protocols were strictly followed, maintaining participant confidentiality and obtaining informed consent. A detailed overview of the sample design is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of Sample Design (Sample Size, Sample Selection) and Primary Data Collection

Sample Size	Date	Interview	Designation	Institution	Duration (Mins)
1	02-01-2025	A	Associate Professor - CSE	V	90
2	09-01-2025	B	Lecturer- Physics	W	65
3	20-01-2025	C	Associate Professor - ECE	X	80
4	25-01-2025	D	Sr.Lecturer Commerce	Y	92
5	27-01-2025	E	Assistant Professor - Management Studies	Z	108
6	27-01-2025	F	Assistant Professor - S&H	V	95
7	31-01-2025	G	Lecturer - Mathematics	W	108
8	02-02-2025	H	Associate Professor - EEE	Z	85
9	04-02-2025	I	Sr Lecturer - Chemistry	Y	67
10	05-02-2025	J	Assistant Professor - IT	X	72

3.5. Data Analysis

The collected data is analyzed using inductive content analysis to identify key themes and patterns related to work-life balance challenges and coping strategies (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This process includes transcribing interviews, identifying recurring themes across organizational, personal, societal, and technological factors, and categorizing responses to generate practical policy recommendations for private educational institutions. By systematically examining participants' experiences, this study offers valuable insights for enhancing work-life balance frameworks for women faculty in rural academic settings.

4. FINDINGS

Our qualitative study identified four key factors influencing the work-life balance of women faculty in rural higher education institutions. Additionally, we explored how workplace policies, workload, family responsibilities, and technology contribute to shaping their work-life balance:

4.1. Institutional Policies and Workplace Environment

Through our interviews and data analysis, it is evident that institutional factors and the workplace environment significantly impact the WLB of women faculty in rural HEIs.

4.1.1. Workload and Institutional Expectations

One of the primary concerns affecting WLB is the excessive workload placed on women faculty. Private institutions, in particular, prioritize academic results, leading to increased teaching hours. Faculty members are often assigned additional administrative responsibilities, such as accreditation-related tasks (e.g., NBA, NAAC), along with expectations to engage in research publications and other scholarly work.

"We are expected to handle multiple responsibilities—teaching, administrative duties, research, and student mentoring—without any reduction in our workload. The pressure to publish research articles while managing a full teaching schedule is overwhelming."- Assistant Professor - Management Studies (Institution Z).

4.1.2. Lack of Flexible Work Arrangements

Rigid work schedules and the absence of remote work options further contribute to the WLB struggles of women faculty. Institutions mandate in-person teaching, and virtual classroom training is generally not accepted. As a result, faculty members are required to be physically present on campus at all times, with strict consequences   for   absence.

"There is no flexibility in our work schedules. If we are unable to come to campus due to personal reasons, our salary is cut. Even during emergencies, there is no option for remote work or recorded lectures."- Assistant Professor - Management Studies (Institution X).

4.1.3. Limited Institutional Support

Women faculty in rural HEIs have minimal essential institutional support, such as parental leave, childcare facilities, and wellness programs. The absence of these resources creates additional stress, making it difficult to balance professional and family responsibilities.

4.1.4. Gender and Caste Bias in Leadership

Our findings indicate that most rural HEIs are privately owned, where gender and caste biases influence leadership roles. Women faculty members face barriers to promotions and decision-making positions, leading to a "glass ceiling" effect. There is also limited representation of women in leadership roles such as Principal, Vice Principal, and Head of Department (HOD). Furthermore, disparities in pay structures exist, as institutions have the autonomy to determine salaries without standardization. Very Few policies exist to promote gender equality and create an inclusive work environment.

Some respondents expressed concerns that pay scales are not equal for all employees, with private institutions often offering lower salaries to women faculty.

"There are no clear policies to ensure equal opportunities for women. Leadership roles are often dominated by men" - Associate Professor - CSE (Institution V).

4.2. Role Overload

One of our findings is that role overload significantly impacts the work-life balance of women faculty in rural areas. They are tasked with balancing multiple roles, such as being a teacher, mother, wife, and caregiver. Many of these women come from joint families, where they are responsible for not only their children but also their in-laws, husbands, and other household duties. In addition to their teaching responsibilities, they must also manage the care of school-going children after work, which further increases their workload and negatively affects their WLB.

"Being a teacher is just one part of my day. After work, I have to help my children with their studies, take care of household duties, and look after my in-laws. With so many responsibilities, there is little time left for me, making it difficult to maintain a balance." - Lecturer Mathematics (Institution W).

4.3. Patriarchal Systems and Societal Norms

4.3.1. Limited Spousal and Family Support

A common struggle faced by women faculty in rural HEIs is the unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities. Many women reported that household chores, childcare, and caregiving duties fall almost entirely on them, with little or no contribution from their spouses or other family members. This lack of support not only increases their burden but also limits their ability to focus on careers.

4.3.2. Societal Skepticism and Role Conflicts

Rural women faculty also encounter skepticism from their communities regarding their commitment to their careers. Traditional rural mindsets often question a woman's professional ambitions, reinforcing the belief that her primary role should be within the household. This societal pressure creates a constant internal conflict, where women feel torn between their job responsibilities and societal expectations. Some participants expressed that their professional achievements were often undervalued or dismissed by their own families and communities.

"People often ask why I need to work when my husband earns. They don't see my job as a necessity, but as a choice, I shouldn't prioritize over family."- Sr. Lecturer Chemistry (Institution Y).

4.3.3. Marriage and Motherhood Pressures

Marriage and motherhood pressures make it difficult for rural women faculty to sustain a WLB.

"After having my child, my in-laws insisted I quit my job. They believe a mother's place is at home, not in a classroom."- Assistant Professor - S & H (Institution V).

4.4. Technological and Digital Impact

Many faculty members expressed that digital tools have added to their workload rather than alleviating it, encroaching on their personal time and increasing stress. The expectation to remain accessible beyond work hours has disrupted their personal lives. Also, the constant need to stay connected has led to mental exhaustion and burnout.

"Managing work and home is already challenging, but even after office hours, I am expected to check emails and prepare lessons, leaving me with little time to unwind." - Associate Professor - EEE (Institution Z).

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The WLB of women faculty in rural HEIs is influenced by a complex interplay of organizational, personal, social, and technological factors. The theoretical underpinnings of this study are based on Spillover Theory, Role Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory, which help in understanding how these factors shape the experiences of women faculty.

5.1. Organizational Factors and Spillover Theory

Organizational factors such as institutional policies, workload, and the work environment have a significant impact on the WLB of women faculty in rural HEIs. According to Spillover Theory, experiences in one domain whether work or family can spill over into the other, affecting overall well-being (Staines, 1980; Rincy & Panchanatham, 2014). Our study reveals that in rural institutions of IHEs, women faculty face excessive teaching hours, administrative duties, and research expectations, which often extend beyond regular work hours. These demands result in both positive and negative spillover effects: while professional engagement may enhance skills and career growth, the overwhelming workload detracts from personal life, leading to stress and exhaustion. Rigid work schedules and a lack of remote work options further hinder flexibility, making it increasingly difficult for women faculty to balance family responsibilities. Additionally, insufficient institutional support such as a limited representation of women in leadership roles, gender, and caste bias, limited parental leave, childcare facilities, and wellness programs exacerbates job dissatisfaction and stress. This imbalance amplifies work-to-home spillover, ultimately affecting overall well-being and hindering women faculty's ability to achieve a sustainable work-life balance. Workplace involvement, including employee engagement, decision-making autonomy, and task significance, plays a crucial role in shaping work-life balance among female employees in higher education institutions. Furthermore, self-efficacy acts as a critical mediating factor, strengthening the positive influence of workplace involvement on achieving a balanced work-life dynamic (Fayaz et al., 2024). Therefore, there is a need for strong institutional support for women faculty working in IHEs in rural areas to enhance work-life integration.

5.2. Personal Factors and Role Theory

Personal characteristics, particularly role overload, are strongly connected to Role Theory, which emphasizes the difficulties individuals face when balancing multiple, sometimes conflicting, roles. As noted by Zulkiflee et al. (2024), individuals often manage a variety of responsibilities in both their professional and personal lives, leading to significant strain. For women faculty in rural HEIs, this struggle is particularly pronounced as they juggle roles such as educators, mothers, wives, and caregivers, creating substantial role strain and disrupting the balance between work and personal life. Our study indicates that the continuous pressure to meet both professional and family expectations increases stress and negatively impacts overall well-being. Family support plays a crucial role in accommodating each other's commitments. This support has been shown to reduce work-family conflict, improve satisfaction in both work and family roles, and enhance overall well-being (Fayaz & Gulzar, 2025). This fosters resilience and helps alleviate work-related stress for women faculty working in rural higher education institutions.

5.3. Social Factors and Ecological Systems Theory

The broader social and cultural context, particularly gender norms and societal expectations plays a pivotal role in shaping the work-life experiences of women faculty, as outlined by Ecological Systems Theory. As Rincy and Panchanatham (2014) suggest, work and family dynamics are influenced by a web of interrelated factors, including personal circumstances, social context, and time, which collectively impact an individual's work-life balance. In rural settings, patriarchal norms often dictate that women prioritize family responsibilities over their careers, leading to feelings of guilt and societal pressure. The unequal distribution of household duties further burdens women faculty, exacerbating the challenge of balancing professional and personal lives. Moreover, societal pressures related to marriage and motherhood, along with skepticism toward working women especially those in leadership positions create additional barriers to career advancement. However, emotional and instrumental family support plays a crucial role in helping women navigate these pressures. Emotional support, characterized by empathy, encouragement, and understanding, fosters resilience and effective coping strategies in the face of workplace stress, promoting determination rather than resignation. Instrumental support, such as assistance with daily tasks, serves as a protective factor, allowing women faculty to focus on their professional goals and mitigate the challenges they face at work (Fayaz & Gulzar, 2025). Together, these social, cultural, and familial influences shape the complex work-life balance dynamics for women faculty in rural contexts. Improving work-life balance for women faculty

requires addressing societal pressures, enhancing institutional support, and promoting shared domestic responsibilities.

5.4. Technological Factors and Spillover Theory & Ecological Systems Theory

Technological advancements, particularly digital tools, have transformed the educational landscape but have also disrupted work-life balance, as highlighted by Ecological Systems Theory, which underscores the role of environmental factors (exosystem) in shaping individual experiences (Yang & Sanborn, 2021). While these technologies offer benefits such as improved time management and the flexibility to work remotely, they also blur the boundaries between work and personal life. This aligns with the Spillover Theory, as our study reveals that the constant expectation to stay connected, along with additional demands like resource preparation, student engagement, and administrative tasks, increases stress and emotional fatigue. Ultimately, digital tools have the potential to enhance work efficiency (Fayaz & Gulzar,2025). Furthermore, their adaptability can further complicate the balance for women faculty members in rural higher education institutions by encroaching on personal time and exacerbating work-life challenges.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explores the diverse challenges affecting the WLB of women faculty in rural HEIs, highlighting the interconnected influence of organizational, societal, personal, and technological factors. Institutional constraints, including heavy workloads, inflexible policies, and inadequate support systems, contribute significantly to job-related stress, while gender and caste biases further limit career progression. Additionally, individual attributes such as resilience, adaptability, and self-efficacy play a crucial role in how women faculty cope with these challenges. For many, role overload stemming from the simultaneous demands of teaching, research, administration, and household responsibilities intensifies stress and complicates work-life integration.

Moreover, the pressures of traditional gender norms, combined with the increasing digitalization of education, further exacerbate these difficulties, aligning with Spillover Theory, Role Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory. The study reveals both negative and positive spillover effects. Negative spillover arises when excessive work demands, multiple responsibilities, and digital overuse encroach on personal life, leading to heightened stress, burnout, and strained relationships. On the other hand, positive spillover occurs when professional achievements, institutional support, and career advancement enhance self-confidence, job satisfaction, and overall well-being, helping women better manage role overload. Recognizing these contrasting effects is essential in designing strategies that reduce negative consequences while fostering positive work-life interactions.

To establish a sustainable WLB, it is imperative for institutions and policymakers to introduce gender-inclusive policies, ensure equitable leadership representation, and facilitate flexible work arrangements. Additionally, promoting a cultural transformation that encourages shared domestic responsibilities and values the contributions of women faculty is crucial. By addressing these structural barriers and acknowledging the role of personal characteristics in work-life management, HEIs can cultivate a more inclusive and supportive environment, ultimately enabling women faculty in rural areas to achieve both professional success and personal fulfillment.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The study is confined to women faculty in rural private colleges in the Konaseema district, Andra Pradesh, India, limiting its generalizability to other regions or urban areas.
- The study excludes male faculty and administrative staff, limiting a broader understanding of gender dynamics in the workplace.
- The study is focused solely on private HEIs, which limits its applicability to government HEIs and public universities.
- Data was collected within a limited period (January–February 2025), which may not capture long-term changes in policies or societal attitudes.

8.　SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

● Future research could explore work-life balance challenges for women faculty in government HEIs and public universities, comparing them with private institutions.
● Expanding the geographical scope to include various rural areas across India or comparing rural and urban settings could provide a broader understanding of the socio-cultural factors affecting work-life balance.
● This study was limited to qualitative research; future studies could use a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative insights with statistical analysis for a more comprehensive understanding.
● Quantitative data analysis could be used to validate and explore the qualitative findings from interviews.

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Appendix 1
Interview Questions

We are conducting qualitative research on the **"Work-Life Balance of Women Faculty in Rural Higher Education Institutions: A Case Study"** This study aims to gain valuable insights from professionals like you to deepen our understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by women faculty members.

Our research focuses on the following key questions:

1: *How do organizational, personal, societal, and technological factors collectively impact the work-life balance of women faculty in rural HEIs?*

2: *How do workplace policies, workload, and family responsibilities shape the work-life balance of women faculty in rural HEIs?*

To ensure ethical integrity, we strictly adhere to principles of informed consent, transparency, honesty, and mutual benefit, in compliance with GDPR requirements. We prioritize confidentiality and participant well-being, fostering trust and respect throughout the research process.

We sincerely appreciate your time and willingness to share your experiences. Below are the interview questions that will guide our discussion.

Interview Questions

1. Can you share some details about your background?
   a. What is your educational background, and which department do you belong to?
   b. What is your job designation?
   c. What key responsibilities do you handle in your role?
2. What motivated you to pursue a career in academia, and what challenges have you faced in balancing work and personal life?
3. How does your institution support work-life balance for women faculty members? Are there any policies in place?
4. What organizational factors (such as workload, job demands, or institutional policies) impact your work-life balance the most?
5. What personal and societal factors influence your ability to balance work and family responsibilities?
6. How do technological advancements, such as online teaching and digital tools, affect your work-life balance?
7. Have you encountered any gender-specific challenges, such as glass ceiling effects or limited career growth opportunities due to the caste system, or institutional policies?
8. How do you manage work-related stress while fulfilling personal and professional commitments?
9. What kind of support system (family, colleagues, or institutional) do you rely on to maintain a work-life balance?
10. Have you ever considered leaving academia due to work-life balance challenges? If so, what were the main reasons?
11. What strategies or policies do you think would help improve work-life balance for women faculty in private colleges?
12. How do maternity benefits, paid leave, or flexible working hours (if available) impact your experience in academia?
13. Do you feel that your contributions are equally valued compared to your male colleagues in terms of career progression and recognition?
14. What recommendations would you give to institutions to create a more inclusive and supportive work environment for women faculty?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience managing work-life balance in your academic career?