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CAREER PROGRESSION AND WORK LIFE BALANCE: A STUDY OF FEMALE STAFF MEMBERS OF BAHAUDDIN ZAKARIYA UNIVERSITY, MULTAN

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Abstract

This study examines career progression and work-life balance among female non-teaching staff members at Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. Despite having appropriate qualifications and professional skills, working women often face family responsibilities, traditional gender roles, and organizational barriers that may affect their career growth and well-being. Grounded in Role Theory and Work–Family Conflict Theory, the study uses a quantitative descriptive survey design. Data were collected through structured questionnaires from 158 female staff members and analyzed using SPSS through frequencies, percentages, and descriptive statistics. The findings reveal that many respondents experience difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities, limited time for rest, and insufficient organizational support. Family responsibilities, traditional gender expectations, and inadequate workplace policies were identified as major challenges. The study concludes that flexible work arrangements, childcare facilities, and career development programs can improve work–life balance and support women's career progression.

1. Introduction

A career is a continuous process of professional development that includes paid and unpaid work, work experiences, learning, skills, and personal achievements throughout an individual's life (Patton & McMahon, 2001). Career progression refers to advancement in one's professional life through promotion, increased responsibilities, skill development, and access to better opportunities. Although men and women may possess similar qualifications and professional abilities, women often face additional challenges that affect their career progression. These challenges may arise from family responsibilities, traditional gender roles, workplace practices, and social expectations. Research suggests that women frequently experience gender-specific barriers and greater pressure in managing both professional and domestic responsibilities (Faizan & Haque, 2019).

Gender inequality remains an important obstacle to women's career advancement. Even where formal discrimination is prohibited, hidden or indirect barriers may limit women's access to

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promotions, leadership positions, professional development, and career opportunities (Gatrell et al., 2013). Family responsibilities can also interrupt career transitions and professional development, particularly for married women and mothers (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2001; Davey et al., 2005; Inandi et al., 2021). Women who take career breaks for childcare or other family responsibilities may face difficulties when re-entering the labour market and continuing their professional growth (Arun et al., 2004).

One major challenge is the unequal distribution of domestic and care responsibilities. Traditional gender roles often place greater responsibility for childcare, household work, and eldercare on women. As a result, women may have less time and energy to invest in career development, further education, training, and professional networking. This situation, sometimes described as a "domestic penalty," can slow career progression and increase stress (North, 2009; Strober & Chan, 2001). Family-related barriers, therefore, remain closely connected with women's opportunities for professional advancement.

Organizational barriers also play an important role. Workplace culture, values, beliefs, and practices can either support or restrict women's career development (Harvey & Brown, 1996). Lack of flexible working arrangements, childcare support, family-friendly policies, and equal opportunities may create additional difficulties for female employees. Workplaces may also be influenced by the "ideal worker" expectation, which assumes that employees should be continuously available and free from significant family responsibilities. Such expectations can disadvantage women, particularly those with caregiving duties (Ridgeway, 2001; Fuegen et al., 2004).

Work–life balance has consequently become an important issue worldwide. It refers to the ability of individuals to manage work responsibilities, family duties, and personal life with minimum role conflict and stress (Clark, 2000). International and organizational policies, including flexible working hours, leave arrangements, and care-support measures, can help employees balance work and family responsibilities. However, access to such support is not always equal or gender-neutral (Mills, 2002).

When work and family demands conflict, individuals may experience work–family conflict. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) identified three major forms of this conflict: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behaviour-based conflict. These pressures may be particularly significant for women who are expected to perform multiple roles simultaneously. Therefore, this study examines how work–life balance and related social, family, and organizational challenges influence the career progression of female non-teaching staff members at Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. The study aims to provide evidence that may help universities develop supportive policies, promote gender equity, and create better opportunities for women's sustainable career development.

2. Literature Review

A substantial body of literature shows that women's career progression is influenced by the interaction of personal, family, social, and organizational factors. Career advancement depends not only on employees' qualifications and abilities but also on the opportunities and support available within their workplaces. One of the most widely discussed barriers is the glass ceiling**,** which refers to invisible barriers that prevent qualified women from reaching senior and higher-paying positions. Studies have shown that women continue to face such barriers in management and other professional fields despite improvements in education and employment opportunities (Powell & Coltrane, 2010; Graves, 2003).

In Pakistan, work–life balance is a significant challenge for many working women. Research indicates that women often experience greater pressure because they are expected to manage professional responsibilities along with household and family duties. Studies of Pakistani women

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have reported difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities, particularly among urban working women and female professionals (Imtiaz, Shaikh, & Qurat ul Ain, 2018). Similarly, research on women academics and professionals has highlighted persistent problems related to time pressure, family responsibilities, and stress caused by competing work and domestic roles (Fatima & Sahibzada, 2012; Fazal & Khan, 2017; Farooqui & Alwi, 2023).

Organizational culture is also an important factor affecting women's career development and work–life balance. Unsupportive and male-dominated workplace environments may discourage women from seeking promotions, leadership positions, or even using work–life balance policies that formally exist within an organization (Wise & Bond, 2003; Mills, 2002). Women may also face social expectations that create pressure in both work and family settings. Mothers, for example, may be criticized at work for giving priority to family responsibilities while simultaneously being criticized at home if they give greater attention to their careers (Fuegen et al., 2004; Ridgeway, 2001; Jones, 2004). Such double expectations can increase stress and restrict professional advancement.

Research in higher education also provides evidence of these challenges. International studies have found that women working in academic and administrative positions experience additional pressure because of gendered expectations, heavy workloads, and limited institutional support (Rajagopal, Zanbour, & Al Kaaf, 2024; Tang et al., 2024). Similar findings have been reported in Pakistan, where women in higher education may face difficulties related to career advancement, family obligations, and unequal workplace opportunities (Silva & Samo, 2024; Iqbal, 2024). Studies in banking and other professional sectors likewise demonstrate that work–family balance can influence job satisfaction, performance, promotion, and career progression (Khan et al., 2022; Gunasekara, 2018; Haider, 2022).

The literature further identifies several strategies that help women manage work and family responsibilities. Flexible working arrangements, family and spousal support, cooperation from colleagues, and effective personal time management can reduce work–family conflict (Rehman & Roomi, 2012; Wani, 2023). However, individual coping strategies alone cannot solve the problem. Sustainable improvement requires supportive organizational policies, fair distribution of domestic responsibilities, and positive social attitudes toward working women (Lewis, 2007; Gul, Jahan, & Rehman, 2024).

The present study is guided by Role Theory and Work–Family Conflict Theory. Role Theory explains that individuals perform multiple roles, such as employee, spouse, parent, and caregiver, which may create pressure when their responsibilities compete. Work–Family Conflict Theory explains how incompatible demands between work and family can lead to time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). These theoretical perspectives provide a useful framework for examining how multiple responsibilities and workplace conditions affect the career progression and work–life balance of female staff members at Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative research approach using a descriptive survey design. The quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect numerical data systematically and examine respondents' views through statistical analysis. A cross-sectional survey was used to collect data at a single point in time and to describe the existing situation regarding career progression and work–life balance among female employees. The design helped identify patterns in respondents' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions concerning professional development, family responsibilities, workplace support, and personal well-being.

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3.2 Target Population

The target population of the study comprised female non-teaching staff members working at Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. The population included women employed in different administrative, clerical, library, and other support positions across various departments, offices, and units of the university. These employees were selected because they perform important professional roles while often managing family and household responsibilities, making them relevant to the study of career progression and work–life balance.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 158 female non-teaching staff members was selected for the study. The sample represented approximately 55% of the total target population. A stratified sampling technique was used to ensure representation of female employees from different educational and professional backgrounds. The population was divided into relevant groups based on factors such as educational level and job category, and respondents were selected from these groups. The sample included women working in administrative offices, clerical positions, library services, and other support roles in different departments and units of Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. This approach helped ensure diversity among respondents and provided sufficient data for quantitative analysis within the available time and resources.

3.4 Data Collection Tool

A structured questionnaire was used as the main tool for data collection. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section collected demographic and professional information, including age, education level, job title, job type, working hours, income level, and means of transportation. The second section focused on career progression and work–life balance. It included statements related to family responsibilities, workplace support, social expectations, gender-related challenges, career development, and strategies used by female employees to manage work and family demands. Responses were measured using a Likert scale, allowing participants to express their level of agreement or disagreement with the given statements.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were personally distributed and collected by the researcher from female non-teaching staff members of Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. Before collecting the data, participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study. They were also assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used only for academic purposes. Participation was voluntary. After collection, all completed questionnaires were carefully checked for completeness and accuracy before the data were coded and prepared for statistical analysis.

3.6 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistical techniques, particularly frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize and interpret the responses. Frequency distributions showed the number of respondents selecting each response category, while percentages helped compare responses and identify major trends and patterns. The analysis provided a clear overview of the challenges faced by female employees regarding career progression and work–life balance and their perceptions of family, social, and organizational support.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Profile

The demographic profile of the respondents shows that most female non-teaching staff members were in the early and middle stages of their careers. The largest group, 46.8%, was aged between 25 and 34 years, followed by 40.5% aged 35–44 years. Only 10.8% belonged to the 45–54

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years age group, while 1.9% were aged 55 years and above. This distribution indicates that the majority of respondents were at an important stage of their professional lives, where decisions regarding promotion, career development, and future advancement are particularly significant. The small proportion of employees in the older age groups also suggests that staff approaching retirement were underrepresented in the study.

4.2 Domestic Responsibilities and Work–Life Strain

The findings reveal that domestic responsibilities create a noticeable challenge for many respondents, although the experience of work–life strain was not the same for all women. A considerable number of respondents selected neutral responses on several items, indicating different experiences depending on individual family and work circumstances. However, strong minorities clearly reported difficulties in managing work, family, and personal responsibilities.

For example, 45.0% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had enough time to relax or engage in activities they enjoyed, while 37.4% agreed or strongly agreed that they had sufficient personal time. Similarly, 46.2% disagreed that their workload did not affect their personal time, whereas only 26.6% agreed. These findings suggest that limited personal time remains a significant concern for many working women. The results support previous literature showing that women often face pressure because of their multiple responsibilities as employees, wives, mothers, and caregivers. When professional and family demands compete for time and energy, women may experience stress and difficulty maintaining a satisfactory work–life balance.

4.3 Organisational Support and Gender-Related Challenges

The respondents expressed mixed views regarding organisational support. Overall, 59.5% remained neutral, 33.0% reported positive views, and 7.6% expressed negative views. The high proportion of neutral responses suggests that some formal support may exist, but it may not always be sufficiently visible, accessible, or effective in addressing the specific needs of female employees. This finding indicates the importance of strengthening workplace policies and ensuring that employees are aware of and able to use available support without fear of negative consequences.

Regarding gender-related challenges, the results also showed differing experiences. While 46.8% disagreed that they experienced gender-based discrimination or unequal treatment, 30.4% agreed or strongly agreed. Similarly, 33.6% believed they had opportunities for career advancement comparable to or better than their male colleagues, whereas 47.5% disagreed. These findings indicate that although gender discrimination may not be experienced by every respondent, a considerable proportion of women still perceive unequal treatment and limited career opportunities. This supports previous research suggesting that barriers to women's advancement are often subtle and embedded in workplace structures, organisational culture, and traditional gender expectations rather than being openly expressed (Powell & Graves, 2003; Ridgeway, 2001).

4.4 Coping Strategies and Career Outcomes

The findings show that female employees use several strategies to manage work and family responsibilities. These include planning and scheduling daily activities, effective time management, support from spouses and family members, and participation in training and professional development opportunities where available. Such strategies can help women manage competing responsibilities and reduce some of the pressure associated with multiple roles.

However, individual and family coping mechanisms do not completely remove the challenges faced by women. A significant proportion of respondents reported that family responsibilities negatively affected their career

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advancement and that they did not always receive equal opportunities for promotion compared with their male counterparts. These findings suggest that work–family conflict may influence career outcomes by limiting the time and energy available for training, professional networking, higher responsibilities, and promotion opportunities.

Overall, the findings support the theoretical framework of the study. Work–Family Conflict Theory explains that competing demands between work and family can create time-based and strain-based conflicts. The limited personal time and pressure reported by respondents reflect these forms of conflict. Similarly, Role Theory explains that women perform multiple roles, including employee, spouse, mother, and caregiver. When these roles involve competing expectations, stress and role conflict may occur. The findings therefore demonstrate that women's career progression is influenced not only by their qualifications and abilities but also by the support available at home and in the workplace.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between career progression and work–life balance among female non-teaching staff members at Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. The findings show that women's career progression is influenced not only by their individual ability, qualifications, and professional commitment but also by family responsibilities, social expectations, workplace conditions, organisational support, and opportunities for professional development. Many female employees face difficulties in balancing their professional duties with household, childcare, and caregiving responsibilities, as traditional gender roles continue to place a greater domestic burden on women. Consequently, they may have limited time and energy for rest, personal activities, professional training, and career-enhancing opportunities, which can delay or affect their long-term career goals. The findings also indicate that although some respondents experienced positive workplace support, existing organisational support was not always sufficient or easily accessible, while some women reported gender-related discrimination and unequal opportunities for career advancement. Despite these challenges, women use coping strategies such as family and spousal support, planning, scheduling, and time management; however, individual efforts alone cannot remove structural barriers. Therefore, supportive organisational policies, flexible work arrangements, childcare facilities, equal access to promotion and training, and an inclusive workplace culture are essential for improving women's work–life balance, promoting gender equality, and supporting their sustainable career progression without compromising their personal and family well-being.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Flexible Work Arrangements: Universities should introduce flexible and hybrid work options to help female employees manage professional and family responsibilities without negatively affecting their career progression.

Gender-Fair Career Policies: Management should implement transparent and gender-sensitive promotion, training, and career development policies and regularly monitor decisions to reduce hidden gender bias.

Childcare and Family Support: Institutions should provide on-campus or subsidized childcare and eldercare facilities to reduce the domestic and caregiving burden on working women.

Awareness and Training: Regular training programs should be arranged for managers and employees to promote gender equality, reduce workplace discrimination, and increase awareness of the importance of work–life balance.

Future Research and Social Support: Future studies should use larger and more diverse samples and compare different institutions and regions. Families should also be encouraged to share household and caregiving responsibilities more equally to support women's career development.

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