Work–Life Balance among Working Mothers in the Context of Dual Roles: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract:

Working mothers commonly experience competing demands arising from paid work and family caregiving responsibilities. Although a growing body of research has examined work–life balance among working mothers, existing findings remain fragmented across occupational sectors and cultural contexts. This systematic literature review aims to synthesize empirical evidence on how dual role demands shape work–life balance among working mothers. Following the PRISMA guidelines, a systematic search was conducted across selected academic databases to identify relevant peer-reviewed studies. Sixteen empirical studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using thematic synthesis. The findings indicate that work–life balance among working mothers is primarily challenged by work–family role conflict, gendered caregiving expectations, and unsupportive organizational structures. Family and spousal support, flexible work arrangements, and individual coping strategies emerge as key protective factors. Overall, this review highlights that work–life balance is a dynamic and relational process embedded in family systems, organizational contexts, and socio-cultural norms. The findings underscore the need for multi-level interventions to support sustainable work–life balance among working mothers across diverse contexts.

Keywords: work–life balance; working mothers; dual roles; work–family conflict; systematic literature review

1. Introduction

The increasing participation of women in the labor force has fundamentally transformed contemporary work and family arrangements. Despite these changes, caregiving and domestic responsibilities continue to be disproportionately assigned to women, particularly mothers, resulting in persistent challenges in balancing paid work and family life (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Craig & Mullan, 2011). For working mothers, the simultaneous demands of professional responsibilities and caregiving roles often generate tensions that complicate efforts to achieve work–life balance.

Work–life balance is commonly understood as the extent to which individuals are able to effectively manage and integrate work and non-work roles in ways that support well-being and role functioning (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011).

However, for working mothers, work–life balance is not merely a matter of time allocation but involves emotional regulation, identity negotiation, and responses to competing social expectations (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Research has consistently shown that mothers experience higher levels of work–family conflict than fathers, particularly in contexts where traditional gender norms remain influential (Shockley et al., 2017). The persistence of gendered caregiving expectations plays a critical role in shaping work–life balance outcomes. Even in dual-earner households, women tend to assume primary responsibility for childcare and household labor, which intensifies role overload and constrains career development (Acker, 1990; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016). Organizational structures often exacerbate these challenges by privileging an "ideal worker" norm characterized by uninterrupted availability and minimal family responsibilities, a standard that disproportionately disadvantages working mothers (Williams, 2000).

In response to these challenges, prior research has highlighted the importance of social and organizational support in facilitating work–life balance. Supportive partners, family members, and supervisors can buffer the negative effects of work–family conflict and enhance psychological well-being (House, 1981; Kossek et al., 2011). Similarly, flexible work arrangements, such as remote work and flexible scheduling, have been associated with improved work–life balance, particularly for working parents (Allen et al., 2013). Nevertheless, access to such arrangements remains uneven, and their effectiveness is often contingent upon organizational culture and managerial support.

Although a growing body of literature has examined work–life balance among working mothers, existing findings remain fragmented across disciplines, occupational sectors, and cultural contexts. Many studies focus on specific professions or national settings, limiting the ability to draw integrative conclusions regarding common patterns and contextual differences. Moreover, research frequently emphasizes individual coping strategies, while broader structural and relational factors receive comparatively less systematic attention.

To address these gaps, the present study conducts a systematic literature review of empirical research on work–life balance among working mothers in the context of dual roles. By synthesizing findings across diverse settings, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how work–life balance is shaped by role conflict, gender norms, family support, and organizational conditions, as well as the implications for mothers' well-being and career trajectories.

2. Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) design to synthesize empirical evidence on work–life balance among working mothers. The review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines, ensuring transparency and methodological rigor throughout the stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion.

Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted using **Scopus** and **Google Scholar**, with the latter accessed through **Publish or Perish** software. The search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles written in English. To ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant studies, the following Boolean search string was applied: ("work-life balance" OR "work family balance" OR "work-life integration") AND ("working mother*" OR "employed mother*" OR "working women with children") AND ("dual role" OR "multiple role*" OR "dual burden" OR "work-family role*"). The initial search yielded 423 records, consisting of 418 records from Scopus and 5 records from Google Scholar via Publish or Perish.

Study Selection and Screening

After removing 11 duplicate records, 412 records remained for title and abstract screening. During this stage, 300 records were excluded because they were not relevant to work–life balance among working mothers. Subsequently, 112 records were identified for full-text retrieval. However, 66 articles could not be accessed due to full-text availability limitations.

Eligibility Assessment

A total of 46 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Articles were excluded for the following reasons: not indexed in Scopus or SINTA (n = 20) and not meeting the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (n = 10). No studies were excluded based on quality appraisal.

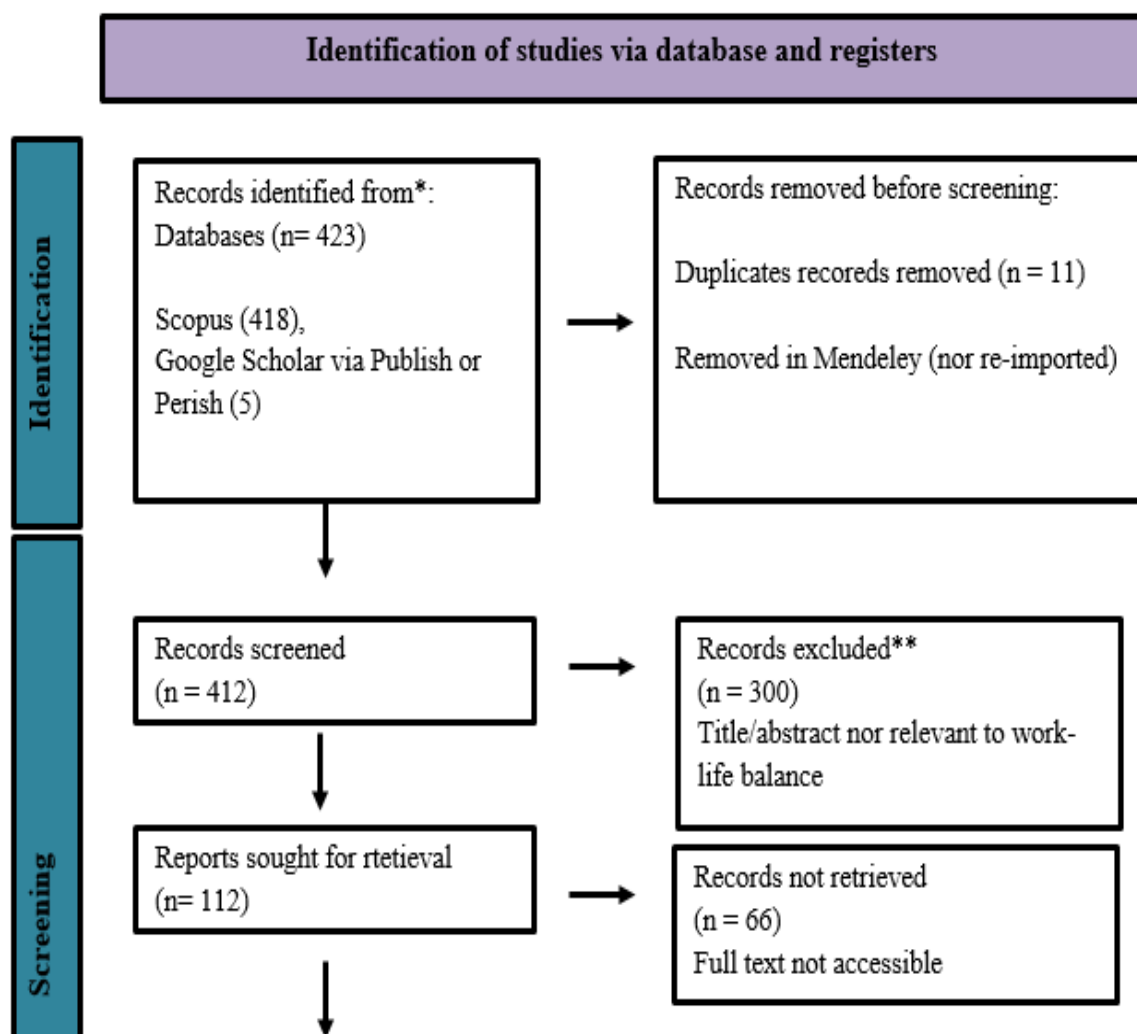**Inclusion Criteria**

Studies were included if they:

1. Focused on working mothers or women with dependent children.
2. Examined work–life balance or closely related constructs.
3. Addressed dual or multiple role demands involving work and family.
4. Employed empirical research designs.
5. Were published in peer-reviewed journals with accessible full texts.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted using a structured form capturing authorship, year, context, participants, research design, and key findings. A thematic synthesis approach was used to identify recurring patterns and themes across studies.

Included Studies

Following the eligibility process, 16 studies were included in the final review. The study selection process is summarized in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).
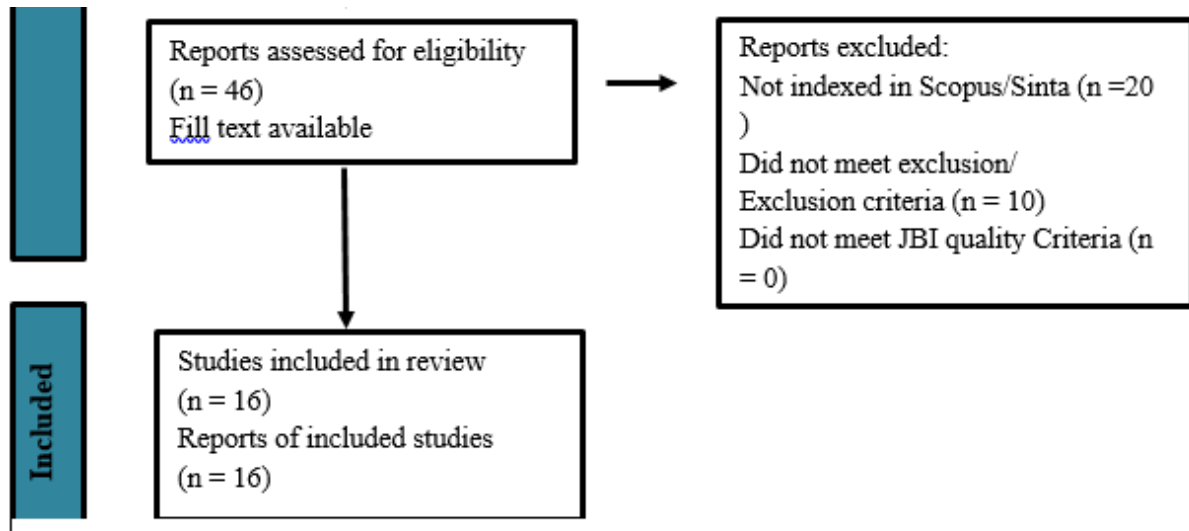
Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

3.   Results

Based on the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 16 empirical studies were included in this systematic literature review. The included studies were published between 2021 and 2025, with the majority appearing in the last three years, indicating increasing scholarly interest in work–life balance among working mothers. Geographically, the studies were conducted across multiple regions, including Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America, highlighting the cross-cultural relevance of the topic.

Regarding research design, approximately half of the studies employed qualitative approaches, while the remainder used quantitative or mixed-method designs. Sample sizes in quantitative studies ranged from small to moderate, involving working mothers with dependent children, including mothers of young children, single mothers, and primary breadwinners. Most studies focused on women employed full time, although several included participants with flexible or non-standard work arrangements.

Across the reviewed studies, work–life balance was predominantly examined as an outcome variable, often in relation to work–family role demands, social support, and organizational conditions. Overall, the distribution of study designs, participant characteristics, and contexts provides a sufficiently heterogeneous yet coherent evidence base for synthesizing patterns related to work–life balance among working mothers, as summarized in the table of included studies below.

No	Authors	Participants	Main Findings
1	Henkel (2025)	Working mothers with children in the German consulting industry.	Working mothers experience higher levels of work–family conflict, primarily due to the unequal distribution of childcare responsibilities, which are more heavily borne by mothers than fathers. Mothers tend to reduce working hours or adopt flexible roles to manage caregiving, while fathers generally adjust schedules without reducing working hours. This imbalance increases stress and hinders women's career progression. Emotional support and a more equitable division of household labor reduce conflict and enhance job satisfaction and work–family balance.

No	Authors	Participants	Main Findings
2	Ristiana and Bantam (2024)	17173 married working mothers with young children (0–6 years) in Indonesia.	A significant positive relationship was found between spousal social support and work–family balance (r = 0.481, p < .01). Spousal support accounted for 32.9% of the variance in work–family balance. Most participants reported moderate levels of both spousal support and work–family balance.
3	Syahirah and Hendriani (2025)	Full-time working mothers with preschool-aged children (3–6 years) employed for at least 7 hours per day as civil servants, teachers, or employees in state-owned enterprises.	Working mothers employ diverse work–life balance strategies depending on personal capacity, job type, and child and family conditions. Identified strategies include alternating, outsourcing, bundling, tech-flexing, simplifying, stress coping, and assertive communication with children. These strategies support effective management of dual roles.
4	Huq and Arenius (2024)	75 female entrepreneurs who are also mothers in Bangladesh.	Female entrepreneurs face substantial challenges in balancing motherhood and entrepreneurship within a patriarchal society. Family support, particularly from husbands and in-laws, is essential to enable home-based business activities. Strategies include boundary management between work and family roles and role adaptation to achieve social acceptance.
5	McGrath (2022)	10 frontline female professionals with children in the United States.	Single mothers working in student affairs face significant challenges in balancing professional roles and motherhood. They experience unpaid domestic labor, emotional exhaustion, and role conflict. Institutional support and inclusive leadership are crucial for enabling authentic professional and maternal identities.
6	Miller (2022)	Working mothers, most with children under 18, many of whom are primary breadwinners, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Working mothers experience heightened work–family conflict, increased stress, and strained family relationships. Invisible emotional and domestic labor negatively affects psychological well-being and relationship satisfaction. Structural barriers and workplace discrimination, including the motherhood penalty, limit income and career opportunities.
7	Bhaumik and Sahu (2021)	29 married, full-time working mothers in private-sector organizations in Kolkata.	The study emphasizes the need for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of motherhood and work–life balance to empower women and promote social change toward gender equality.

No	Authors	Participants	Main Findings
8	Heydarikhayat, Heydarikhayat, Salehian, Heydarikhayat, and Rohani (2025)	Full-time employed women in various positions across 10 centers affiliated with Iranshahr University of Medical Sciences.	Participants experience difficulties maintaining work–life balance due to challenges at home and work, including childcare demands, unequal role distribution, emotional strain, discrimination, and lack of organizational support. These challenges negatively affect physical and mental health, family relationships, and career development.
9	Fannell (2022)	Working mothers in the restaurant and food service industry.	Although participants demonstrate strong job commitment, they must establish boundaries and make personal sacrifices to balance work and family. All participants expressed a desire for flexible scheduling. Flexible policies and emergency childcare resources can foster inclusivity, reduce turnover, and improve employee engagement and profitability.
10	Eddins (2024)	Female military officers (Captains and Majors) in the United States.	Work–life balance is perceived as difficult to achieve due to long working hours, sudden deployments, and limited organizational flexibility. Time management and family support are key coping strategies. Improved balance is associated with higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and retention among military mothers.
11	Adekoya (2023)	Working mothers in the banking and healthcare sectors in Nigeria.	Unsupportive work cultures characterized by long hours, mandatory physical presence, and high workloads hinder work–life balance. Limited professional and personal support networks, combined with patriarchal norms and religious influences, reinforce gender stereotypes and intensify role imbalance.
12	Loidy and Handayani (2023)	Working mothers with young children (0–8 years) residing in Jakarta, Indonesia.	During the COVID-19 pandemic, mothers experienced difficulties achieving work–life balance, accompanied by sadness and guilt related to limited involvement in children's development. Dual roles and caregiving demands contributed to role conflict and imbalance.
13	Gunathilake (2025)	Working mothers in Sri Lanka.	Work–life balance is understood as a continuous effort to harmonize professional responsibilities and caregiving roles. Gendered social expectations and career aspirations create tension, while flexible work arrangements enhance autonomy and reduce emotional and physical strain.

No	Authors	Participants	Main Findings
14	Bismilla (2021)	Female physicians who are also mothers.	Work–life balance among registrar mothers is complex and dynamic. Participants face high pressure, maternal discrimination, and perceived inequities in academic advancement, yet strive to balance professional and maternal identities through strong support systems and identity negotiation.
15	Camilleri and Spitteri (2021)	Working mothers in executive or managerial positions in Malta.	Mothers face pressure to compromise between family responsibilities and career development. Social and cultural expectations contribute to stress and limit career realization. Workplace and family support are essential for achieving balance and maximizing professional contribution.
16	Shipmon-Friedli (2022)	Working mothers.	During the COVID-19 pandemic, women professionals experienced difficulties achieving work–life balance due to increased work and family demands. Social and organizational support, flexible work policies, and self-care practices were critical in reducing work–family conflict. Findings align with spillover and social exchange perspectives and emphasize responsive organizational policies during crises.

4.   Discussion

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of sixteen empirical studies examining work–life balance among working mothers across diverse cultural, occupational, and institutional contexts. The findings demonstrate a high degree of convergence in identifying work–life balance as a complex and dynamic process shaped by intersecting demands from work and family roles, rather than as an attainable static state. Across contexts, working mothers consistently report navigating persistent tensions arising from competing expectations, limited resources, and structural constraints embedded in both family systems and organizational environments (Henkel, 2025; Heydarikhayat et al., 2025; Camilleri & Spitteri, 2021).

Work–Family Role Conflict as a Persistent and Multidimensional Challenge

One of the most robust and recurring findings across the reviewed studies is that work–family role conflict constitutes the central challenge undermining work–life balance for working mothers. Mothers frequently encounter overlapping temporal, emotional, and cognitive demands that cannot be fully satisfied simultaneously, resulting in sustained stress and exhaustion (McGrath, 2022; Miller, 2022; Loidy & Handayani, 2023). These conflicts are particularly salient among mothers of young children and those engaged in full-time employment with high performance expectations (Syahirah & Hendriani, 2025; Eddins, 2024).

Several studies emphasize that work–life balance is experienced as a continuous negotiation rather than a resolved outcome. Mothers describe balance as fragile and temporary, requiring constant adjustment in response to changes in children's needs, work demands, and organizational expectations (Gunathilake, 2025; Bismilla, 2021). This ongoing negotiation intensifies emotional strain and reinforces the perception that achieving a stable balance is structurally constrained rather than individually determined.

Gendered Care Responsibilities and Structural Inequality

Beyond individual experiences, the review highlights the pervasive influence of gendered divisions of labor in shaping work–life balance outcomes. Across both Western and non-Western contexts, caregiving and domestic responsibilities remain disproportionately assigned to mothers, even when women contribute equally or predominantly to household income (Henkel, 2025; Miller, 2022; Adekoya, 2023). Fathers are often described as maintaining uninterrupted work trajectories, with minimal adjustments compared to the extensive accommodations made by mothers.

Cultural norms rooted in patriarchy and traditional gender roles further intensify these inequalities. Studies conducted in Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Malta demonstrate that societal expectations regarding motherhood constrain women's career aspirations and normalize self-sacrifice as an inherent aspect of maternal identity (Huq & Arenius, 2024; Bhaumik & Sahu, 2021; Adekoya, 2023; Gunathilake, 2025; Camilleri & Spitteri, 2021). Consequently, work–life imbalance is reinforced not only through organizational practices but also through deeply embedded cultural narratives surrounding women's primary responsibilities.

Family and Spousal Support as a Critical Buffer

Despite these structural pressures, family support emerges as a consistently protective factor across the reviewed studies. Emotional support, shared caregiving responsibilities, and practical assistance from spouses significantly reduce perceived work–family conflict and enhance mothers' sense of balance (Ristiana & Bantam, 2024; Henkel, 2025; Huq & Arenius, 2024). In contexts where partners actively participate in domestic labor and childcare, mothers report greater psychological relief and improved job satisfaction.

Conversely, the absence of spousal support exacerbates stress and intensifies feelings of isolation and overload, particularly among single mothers and primary breadwinners (McGrath, 2022; Miller, 2022). These findings underscore that work–life balance cannot be understood independently of household power dynamics and relational arrangements, highlighting the importance of examining family systems alongside workplace conditions.

Organizational Context, Flexibility, and Institutional Support

Organizational structures and workplace cultures play a decisive role in shaping mothers' experiences of balance. Rigid schedules, long working hours, mandatory physical presence, and unpredictable job demands are consistently identified as major contributors to work–family conflict across sectors such as healthcare, military, hospitality, banking, and academia (Eddins, 2024; Fannell, 2022; Adekoya, 2023; Bismilla, 2021). These conditions disproportionately disadvantage mothers by limiting their capacity to respond to family responsibilities.

In contrast, flexible work arrangements, including remote work, adjustable schedules, and autonomy over task management, are associated with improved work–life balance, higher job satisfaction, and stronger organizational commitment (Gunathilake, 2025; Shipmon-Friedli, 2022; Fannell, 2022). However, several studies caution that flexibility alone is insufficient if organizational cultures implicitly penalize its use. When flexibility is perceived as incompatible with career advancement or leadership roles, mothers experience heightened anxiety and ambivalence, which undermines the potential benefits of such policies (Camilleri & Spitteri, 2021; McGrath, 2022).

Maternal Agency and Coping Strategies

In response to these constraints, working mothers demonstrate considerable agency through the development of diverse coping strategies. Identified strategies include time management, outsourcing childcare, boundary-setting between work and family roles, leveraging technology, and engaging in intentional communication with family members (Syahirah & Hendriani, 2025; Huq & Arenius, 2024; Shipmon-Friedli, 2022). These strategies reflect adaptive efforts to maintain functionality and emotional stability amid competing demands.

Nevertheless, the sustainability of individual coping strategies appears contingent upon broader contextual support. Several studies indicate that reliance on personal resilience without adequate institutional and

relational backing may lead to cumulative emotional fatigue and burnout (Miller, 2022; Heydarikhayat et al., 2025). This finding challenges narratives that frame work–life balance as a matter of individual choice or self-management, emphasizing instead the need for systemic interventions.

Implications for Well-Being, Identity, and Career Trajectories

The consequences of work–life imbalance extend beyond immediate stress responses to affect long-term well-being, identity formation, and career development. Prolonged imbalance is associated with deteriorating mental and physical health, strained family relationships, and constrained professional advancement (Heydarikhayat et al., 2025; McGrath, 2022; Miller, 2022). Conversely, improved balance is linked to greater job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and a more integrated sense of self as both professional and caregiver (Eddins, 2024; Bismilla, 2021).

Several studies further highlight the identity-related dimensions of work–life balance, illustrating how mothers engage in continuous identity work to reconcile professional aspirations with maternal expectations (Bismilla, 2021; McGrath, 2022). This process often involves redefining success, renegotiating boundaries, and reconstructing personal meanings of achievement and fulfillment.

Integrated Interpretation

Taken together, the findings of this review indicate that work–life balance among working mothers is a systemic phenomenon embedded within gendered social norms, family dynamics, and organizational structures. While individual coping strategies contribute to short-term adaptation, sustainable balance requires coordinated support across multiple levels, including equitable household arrangements, supportive organizational cultures, and broader social recognition of caregiving labor. The consistency of these findings across cultural and occupational contexts underscores the global relevance of work–life balance challenges faced by working mothers.

Theoretical Implications

This review contributes to the literature by demonstrating that work–life balance among working mothers should be conceptualized as a relational and structural phenomenon rather than an individual outcome. Across the reviewed studies, work–life balance consistently emerges from the interaction between work demands, family arrangements, and socio-cultural expectations, indicating that balance cannot be reduced to personal time-management skills or coping capacity alone. This synthesis advances existing scholarship by integrating findings from diverse occupational and cultural contexts, thereby highlighting the cross-contextual consistency of role conflict as a central mechanism shaping mothers' experiences.

Furthermore, the review underscores the importance of incorporating gendered role expectations and caregiving norms into analyses of work–life balance. Several studies reveal that imbalance is reinforced not only by workload intensity but also by deeply embedded expectations that position mothers as primary caregivers, even in dual-earner or female breadwinner households. By foregrounding these structural patterns, the review moves beyond individual-level explanations and emphasizes the need for more contextualized and gender-sensitive frameworks in future research on work–life balance.

The findings also extend the conceptual understanding of work–life balance by illustrating its identity-related dimensions. Multiple studies highlight how working mothers engage in continuous identity negotiation as professionals and caregivers, suggesting that balance involves meaning-making processes alongside behavioral adjustments. This insight enriches the literature by positioning work–life balance as a dynamic and evolving experience rather than a fixed equilibrium.

Practical Implications

The findings of this review have important implications for organizations, policymakers, and families. At the organizational level, the consistent association between flexible work arrangements and improved work–life balance indicates that policies such as flexible scheduling, remote work options, and autonomy over work tasks are critical for supporting working mothers. However, the reviewed studies also caution that flexibility must be

accompanied by supportive organizational cultures. Without explicit encouragement and protection against career penalties, flexible policies may inadvertently increase stress rather than alleviate it.

Organizations are therefore encouraged to move beyond symbolic flexibility and actively foster environments in which caregiving responsibilities are recognized as legitimate and compatible with professional commitment. Leadership practices that normalize flexible work use, provide emotional support, and evaluate performance based on outcomes rather than physical presence appear particularly relevant across sectors.

At the family level, the review highlights the pivotal role of spousal and familial support in mitigating work–family conflict. Equitable division of domestic labor and active involvement of partners in caregiving emerge as key factors that enhance mothers' capacity to manage competing demands. These findings suggest that interventions aimed at improving work–life balance should not focus solely on women but also engage partners and family systems.

From a broader policy perspective, the evidence points to the need for institutional and societal reforms that recognize caregiving as shared responsibility. Policies that promote family-friendly workplaces, protect against discrimination related to motherhood, and support affordable childcare may contribute to more sustainable work–life balance outcomes for working mothers across diverse contexts.

5. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the reviewed studies employ diverse methodological approaches, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs, which limits direct comparability across findings. While this diversity enriches understanding, it also constrains the ability to draw definitive conclusions regarding causal relationships.

Second, the majority of studies focus on mothers' perspectives, with limited inclusion of fathers' experiences or dyadic analyses of family dynamics. Future research could benefit from incorporating comparative or couple-based designs to better understand how shared caregiving arrangements influence work–life balance outcomes. Third, although the reviewed studies span multiple countries and cultural contexts, certain regions and occupational sectors remain underrepresented. Additional research in low-income settings, informal employment contexts, and non-traditional family structures would help to further contextualize work–life balance experiences and address existing gaps.

Finally, many studies capture work–life balance at a single point in time. Longitudinal research designs would provide valuable insight into how work–life balance evolves across life stages, career transitions, and changing family needs. Future research could also explore how organizational changes and policy reforms influence work–life balance trajectories over time.

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