

Gender Differences in Work-Life Balance/Career Opportunities/Health

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Although gender roles no longer clearly define who is responsible for home care and who is responsible for job duties, some research shows that the conflict between family and work life appears to be a greater problem for women than for men. For women, the relationships between career opportunities and work-life balance and between career opportunities and the perception of general health have significantly lower values compared to results from the group of men, while the perception of work-life balance affects well-being more significantly when compared to the male counterpart.

Keywords: work-life balance ; career opportunities ; well-being ; gender

1. Introduction

Work-life balance occurs when the time spent on the job role does not limit the time dedicated to personal life (for example, engaging in leisure or family activities). It is an important antecedent of job and life satisfaction and a critical job resource that makes work demands be experienced more positively, for example, by creating a work-family climate where workers feel they do not have to sacrifice effectiveness in their family role to perform their jobs ^[1]. In fact, work-family balance is presumably composed of three elements: (a) time balance, consisting in dedicating an equal amount of time to both work and family roles; (b) involvement balance, consisting in dedicating an equal amount of psychological involvement in the said roles; (c) satisfaction balance, consisting in being equally satisfied in both work and family roles ^[2]. The emphasis on equity included multiple times in this definition, however, has been questioned. Work-life balance may largely depend on how this balance is perceived. For example, it is possible to work long hours and still not perceive any negative consequences from the inequality between working hours and time left for non-working activities ^[3]. Either way, the satisfaction with the balance between work and personal life can be influenced not only by individual perceptions, but also by other job characteristics such as organizational culture, significance of the work, and the presence of work-life initiatives ^[4].

Recently, work-life balance has been profusely linked to job and life satisfaction ^{[3][5][6][7]} and the well-being of individuals and families ^{[8][9]}, and it has been negatively associated with psychological strain ^[3] and work-related stress ^{[7][10]}. In fact, having to balance multiple roles (worker, parent, husband or wife, brother or sister, and so on) forces them to compete for the same resources (for example, time and energy), which can lead to strain, stress symptoms, or health problems ^[11].

1.1. The Gender Factor in Work-Life Balance

Traditionally, men and women have occupied different social roles, in terms of the amount of time spent on work and family duties; stereotypically, men work full-time outside their homes, while women take care of domestic and family duties. Gender-based role divisions are actually part of the collective culture ^[12]. Females are associated with caring, listening, and kindness skills, while males are associated with authority, aggression, domination, and autonomy ^[13]. Consequently, although these clearly differentiated roles may be now anachronistic, the likelihood that family responsibilities still pertain to the charge of women remains high ^[14]. Studies have found that women tend to spend more hours on family activities than men, but that the hours spent on work activities were the same for men and women ^{[9][15]}.

The evidence for gender differences in work-life balance is mixed. According to some studies that have examined both Western and Eastern cultures (Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and East Europe), there is no evidence of real or significant gender differences ^{[16][17][18][19][20]}. According to these studies, the experience of work-life balance is related to job and life satisfaction equally in both men and women. On the contrary, according to other cross-cultural studies, the effect of gender remains significant, with men reporting higher levels of work-life balance than women ^[21], and women experiencing higher levels of conflict between work and family life ^{[10][22][23][24]}. Women report significant difficulties in balancing their work and family life due to the lack of sufficient time, support from their husbands, and cultural norms and

gender biases in the workplace ^[25]. Work–life balance issues can also affect women’s health, causing stress, depression, headache, muscle tension, and weight gain ^[26], and can become a barrier to their career advancement compared to their male counterparts.

1.2. Work–Life Balance and Career Opportunities

Research indicates that gender is still a common barrier to career development in many contexts. Women are under-represented in many sectors and roles ^{[27][28]} and are less likely to be employed full-time ^[29].

Work–life conflict is often cited as a contributing factor to these issues since household and childcare responsibilities might severely and negatively influence women’s career advancements ^[30].

Women are less satisfied with their career opportunities ^[28], with their job, and their work–life balance in general compared to their male colleagues, who report higher job and life satisfaction levels and lower work-related stress levels ^[31].

It cannot be taken for granted that career opportunities lead to well-being. Usually, women have to work harder than men if they want to reach higher positions (the so-called “glass ceiling” ^[32] and “gender segregation” ^[33]). In turn, working harder would lead to an increased conflict between work and life ^[34], and in fact, accepting a higher position very often leads to a lower work–life balance. A positive relationship between perceived work–life balance and career advancement motivation was found ^[35].

2. Research Findings

The female sample showed lower scores both in the perception of work–life balance and in the perception of career opportunities. Furthermore, the relationship between career opportunities and the perception of well-being was significantly weaker compared to the male sample. On the contrary, the link between work–life balance and the perception of well-being appears to be stronger among women than among men. It can be deduced that both variables seem to be equally influential on men’s perception of general health, but that among women, work–life balance seems to have a greater weight, also considering the perception of fewer career opportunities.

Differences in terms of perception of their own career opportunities would lead one to think that women are inclined to foresee fewer career opportunities for themselves than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the greater significance of work–life balance in generating well-being for women may justify the interest of researchers and organizations in studying what the ideal work–life balance consists of and what employers can do to ensure that women reach better levels of well-being. Additionally, the results show that achieving an adequate balance between private and working life can be closely linked to career opportunities. On the one hand, it could enable women to accept career advancements without these having an impact on their free time. On the other hand, women with better psychophysical conditions, as a consequence of a good work–life balance, may also be better and more empowered workers, who would therefore tend to be promoted.

Considering goal number 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals ^[36], these results lay the foundations for an in-depth study of gender equity in the workplace. In many countries around the world, domestic and care work excludes women from the workforce ^[36]. In order to ensure equal opportunities and the full participation of women at all levels of work, it is perhaps neither useful nor sustainable to cancel these duties. Instead, it is necessary to recognize and value family duties through the promotion of shared responsibility within the family—as appropriate and based on national culture—and the provision of adequate social protection policies, infrastructure, public services, and organizational policies aimed at protecting the work–life balance of all employees.

3. Conclusions

The results show that a good perception of work–life balance has the potential to guarantee excellent results in terms of well-being for both women and men. Although this research cannot draw causal relationships, it can certainly offer several insights for practitioners. For example, career opportunities alone are not sufficient to create satisfied employees because career advancements at the expense of the balance between work and family life may not be a sustainable prospect. Furthermore, given the strong interest in the issue of gender equity, evaluating the link between the perception of career opportunities, work–life balance, and well-being is the first essential step in designing interventions that support women in the workplace. Interventions that acknowledge, accept, and enhance gender differences are needed, as well as actions by organizations and practitioners that do not translate, for example, into privileging male candidates to avoid problems, given that work–life balance generates well-being when combined with career development opportunities in both males

and females. Although the impact of work–life balance on the lives of men and women could be different, what is certain is that it is a job resource that goes beyond gender ^{[2][37]}, since the progressive abandonment of the idea of the “traditional family”, the steady increase in dual-career couples, and the increase in the number of single parents—regardless of their gender—mean that workers have to juggle more and more responsibilities outside of work ^[38].

As all the changes that generate well-being in people’s daily lives could in turn generate positive changes in their workplace, in the same way, work–life balance practices and policies could generate positive effects on organizations in general. From a broad perspective, work–life balance practices promote employees’ motivation and good performance, make the companies more attractive, and help to achieve better corporate social responsibility ^[39]. From a female perspective, they increase women’s full participation, make good use of their skills, and encourage more women to retain and advance in their career. For example, flexible hours, childcare services, telecommuting, compressed workweek arrangements, and job sharing are all practices that research has shown to have positive benefits in terms of employee satisfaction and improved organization productivity ^{[39][38]}. These practices are associated with the reduction of turnover and absenteeism, the retention of valuable employees, the enhancement of organizational image, and the increase of employee loyalty and commitment, thus proving to be a sustainable Human Resource Management decision.

Valuing gender differences at work and acknowledging the existence of different needs is an important starting point. If every company worked towards this goal, the cultural models of entire organizations, their management strategies, and even the whole of society could be positively influenced. Recognizing diversity helps to capitalize on differences, as better understanding creates better management, which in turn has the potential to increase productivity, motivate, engage, and improve physical and mental health conditions, obtaining positive effects at both individual and organizational levels.

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