

Rethinking Work–Life Balance: A Conceptual Review of Mental Load and Its Implications for Stress and Job Satisfaction among Working Women

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Abstract: Work–life balance has long been recognized as a key factor influencing employee well-being; however, it is often understood primarily in terms of time management and role conflict. Such a perspective tends to overlook a less visible but equally significant dimension—the mental load associated with continuously planning, organizing, and managing responsibilities across work and personal life. This paper adopts a conceptual and literature-based approach to examine how mental load reshapes the understanding of work–life balance, particularly in the context of working women.

Drawing on existing studies, the paper explores the relationships between work–life balance, mental load, stress, and job satisfaction. The review suggests that balance is not determined solely by the allocation of time across roles, but also by the ongoing cognitive effort required to coordinate multiple responsibilities. This invisible dimension of work often remains unrecognized, yet it plays a crucial role in shaping psychological well-being and workplace outcomes.

The study further highlights how evolving work arrangements, including flexible and remote work, have redefined the boundaries between professional and personal domains. While such arrangements offer increased autonomy, they may also intensify role overlap and cognitive demands. In this context, mental load emerges as a central mechanism linking work–life balance with stress and job satisfaction.

By integrating insights from work–family theory, cognitive labor, and occupational stress literature, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that positions mental load at the core of work–life dynamics. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by working women and underscores the need for organizational and policy-level interventions that address both visible workload and underlying cognitive strain.

IndexTerms - Work–life balance, mental load, cognitive labor, working women, stress, job satisfaction, flexible work.

I. INTRODUCTION

Balancing professional responsibilities with personal life has become increasingly complex in contemporary work environments. As women’s participation in the workforce continues to grow, expectations surrounding their roles have expanded rather than diminished. Alongside formal employment, many women remain primarily responsible for managing household tasks and caregiving duties. This dual engagement has intensified the relevance of work–life balance as a critical area of inquiry in organizational and social research.

Traditionally, work–life balance has been conceptualized as the ability to manage competing demands across different life domains while maintaining satisfaction and effective functioning. Much of the earlier discussion has focused on observable aspects such as time allocation, workload, and role conflict. While these dimensions are important, they do not fully capture the complexity of everyday experiences, particularly for individuals who simultaneously manage multiple responsibilities.

In recent years, attention has shifted toward the cognitive dimension of managing work and personal life. This has led to the growing recognition of mental load, which refers to the continuous process of planning, organizing, anticipating, and monitoring tasks across different domains. Unlike physical or time-bound activities, mental load operates in the background, making it less visible yet persistently demanding. It requires individuals to remain mentally engaged even outside formal working hours, thereby extending the experience of work beyond measurable boundaries.

The significance of mental load becomes particularly evident in the context of working women. Despite increased participation in paid employment, the distribution of unpaid responsibilities within households often remains uneven. Women frequently take on the role of coordinating daily routines, managing schedules, and ensuring that both professional and domestic demands are met. This ongoing cognitive involvement creates an additional layer of effort that is rarely acknowledged in traditional discussions of work–life balance.

The changing nature of work has further complicated this dynamic. The rise of flexible, remote, and hybrid work arrangements has blurred the boundaries between professional and personal spaces. While these arrangements are often introduced to enhance flexibility, they can also increase the overlap between roles. When work and home responsibilities coexist within the same environment, individuals are required to constantly shift attention, which intensifies cognitive demands and reduces opportunities for psychological detachment.

Persistent cognitive engagement has important implications for well-being. Even when individuals appear to manage their time effectively, the underlying mental effort required to coordinate responsibilities can lead to stress, fatigue, and reduced job satisfaction. Over time, this hidden burden may affect not only individual health but also organizational outcomes such as productivity, engagement, and retention.

Given these challenges, there is a need to revisit the concept of work–life balance through a broader and more nuanced lens. This paper seeks to contribute to this discussion by examining the role of mental load as a central factor shaping the relationship between work–life balance, stress, and job satisfaction among working women. By adopting a conceptual and literature-based approach, the study integrates insights from existing research to develop a framework that captures both visible and invisible aspects of work and life responsibilities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Work–Life Balance: Concept and Evolution

Work–life balance has been widely examined as a key determinant of employee well-being and organizational effectiveness. Early conceptualizations describe it as the ability to manage competing demands between work and family roles while maintaining satisfaction in both domains. This perspective emphasizes the importance of role engagement and the need to minimize conflict between professional and personal responsibilities. However, subsequent research has demonstrated that achieving such balance is often complex, particularly for women who are expected to perform multiple roles simultaneously.

Work–family conflict has been identified as a major outcome of imbalance, with significant implications for psychological health and job-related attitudes. Conflicts between work and family roles can lead to stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced job satisfaction. Similarly, meta-analytic findings suggest that supportive workplace environments can mitigate these effects, although they do not eliminate underlying structural inequalities. These studies highlight that work–life balance is not solely an individual responsibility but is influenced by organizational and societal factors.

2.2 Gender Differences in Work–Life Balance

A substantial body of literature points to persistent gender differences in the experience of work–life balance. Women are more likely to encounter challenges due to their disproportionate involvement in unpaid domestic work and caregiving responsibilities. A recent systematic review confirms that gender-based disparities remain evident across different sectors and cultural contexts. Even in dual-income households, women tend to carry a greater share of household responsibilities, which limits their ability to achieve balance.

Empirical studies have also shown that women often experience a sense of time pressure and role overload. Women frequently report feeling rushed, reflecting the cumulative demands of managing both paid and unpaid work. This persistent pressure contributes to increased stress and reduces opportunities for rest and leisure. At a broader level, global reports indicate that gender inequalities in labor participation and unpaid work distribution continue to shape women’s work experiences.

2.3 Mental Load and Cognitive Labor

While traditional research has focused on time-based conflicts, recent studies have introduced the concept of mental load as an essential dimension of work–life balance. Mental load refers to the cognitive effort involved in organizing, planning, and remembering tasks across different domains. Unlike physical labor, this form of work is often invisible and difficult to measure, yet it plays a significant role in shaping daily experiences.

Cognitive labor includes processes such as anticipating needs, making decisions, and monitoring outcomes. These activities require continuous mental engagement and are often unevenly distributed within households. Similarly, research emphasizes that the mental effort of managing work and family responsibilities leads to spillover effects, where stress in one domain affects functioning in another.

Further research has highlighted the gendered nature of mental load. Women are more likely to assume responsibility for coordinating household activities, even when both partners are employed. This unequal distribution contributes to an additional layer of burden that is rarely acknowledged in organizational policies or performance evaluations.

2.4 Flexible Work and Emerging Challenges

The introduction of flexible work arrangements, including remote and hybrid models, has transformed the way individuals manage their professional and personal responsibilities. While these arrangements are often promoted as solutions to work–life conflict, their actual impact appears to be more complex. Flexible working can lead to increased unpaid overtime, particularly among women, as boundaries between work and personal life become less distinct.

Similarly, large-scale reports on telework indicate that working from home often results in extended working hours and greater role overlap. This overlap makes it difficult to disengage from work, leading to higher levels of stress and fatigue. Recent research further suggests that remote work may intensify mental load, as individuals are required to manage multiple responsibilities simultaneously within the same environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided additional insights into these dynamics. Studies observed that dual-earner couples adopted various strategies to manage work and family demands, yet gender inequalities persisted. Women were more likely to adjust their work schedules and take on additional caregiving responsibilities, highlighting the continued imbalance in role distribution.

2.5 Work–Life Balance, Mental Load, and Well-Being

A growing number of studies have examined the relationship between work–life balance, mental load, and well-being outcomes such as stress and job satisfaction. Evidence suggests that poor work–life balance is associated with increased mental workload and psychological strain. For example, imbalance can lead to higher cognitive demands and reduced coping capacity.

Similarly, working women in high-stress occupations experience elevated levels of anxiety and emotional exhaustion when they are unable to effectively manage their responsibilities. Workload and role conflict have also been identified as key predictors of burnout, emphasizing the cumulative impact of both physical and mental demands.

At a global level, policy-oriented studies highlight the importance of addressing mental health in the workplace. Unmanaged stress and excessive workload can negatively affect both individual well-being and organizational productivity. These findings reinforce the need to consider mental load as a critical factor in understanding work–life balance.

2.7 Research Gap Identified

Although existing literature provides valuable insights into work–life balance and mental load, most studies examine these concepts separately. Limited research has explored how mental load interacts with work–life balance to influence stress and job satisfaction, particularly among working women in contemporary work settings. Additionally, the impact of hybrid and remote work on mental load remains underexplored, indicating a need for further empirical investigation.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the relationship between work–life balance and employee well-being requires moving beyond visible aspects of workload to include underlying cognitive processes. Based on the reviewed literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework that positions **mental load as a central mechanism** linking work–life balance with stress and job satisfaction among working women.

Work–life balance is considered as the primary condition influencing how individuals manage competing demands across professional and personal domains. When balance is disrupted, individuals are required to invest additional cognitive effort in organizing, planning, and coordinating responsibilities. This continuous cognitive engagement contributes to the development of mental load, which represents an often-overlooked dimension of work.

Mental load, in turn, acts as an intervening factor that shapes key outcomes related to well-being. As cognitive demands increase, individuals are more likely to experience psychological strain, leading to higher levels of stress. At the same time, the persistent mental burden can reduce motivation and satisfaction with work, as individuals struggle to maintain focus and emotional stability.

The framework also recognizes the role of contextual factors such as work arrangements and organizational support. Flexible and remote work settings may influence the intensity of mental load by altering the boundaries between work and personal life. Similarly, supportive workplace practices can help reduce cognitive strain by providing resources and flexibility.

Overall, the proposed framework highlights that work–life balance does not operate in isolation but interacts with mental load to influence stress and job satisfaction. By incorporating both visible and invisible aspects of work, the framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by working women.

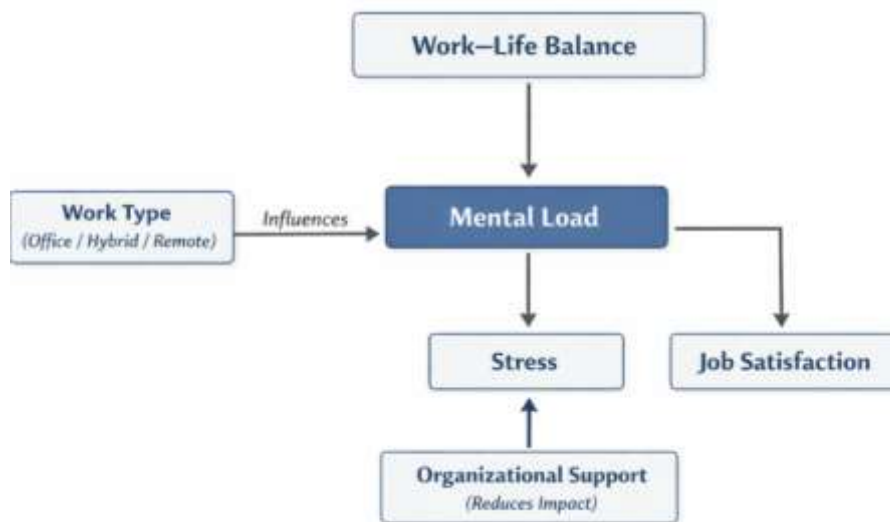


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

3.1 Theoretical Model Explanation

The proposed conceptual framework is grounded in established theories related to work–family interaction, cognitive labor, and occupational stress. It integrates these perspectives to explain how work–life balance influences stress and job satisfaction through the mechanism of mental load among working women.

At the core of the framework is the idea that work–life balance reflects an individual’s ability to manage multiple role demands effectively. Earlier theoretical work suggests that balance is not merely the absence of conflict but involves meaningful engagement and satisfaction across different life domains (Greenhaus and Allen 2011). However, when these roles become difficult to manage simultaneously, individuals experience work–family conflict, which has been consistently linked to stress and reduced well-being (Allen et al. 2000).

To extend this understanding, the framework incorporates the concept of mental load, which represents the cognitive dimension of managing responsibilities. Mental load includes activities such as anticipating needs, organizing tasks, and monitoring outcomes, all of which require continuous mental effort. This perspective aligns with the notion of cognitive labor, where the burden lies not only in performing tasks but also in thinking about them (Damingier 2019). Similarly, the idea of mental labor highlights how the constant need to coordinate work and family responsibilities can create spillover effects, leading to strain across domains (Offer 2014).

The inclusion of mental load as a mediating factor is particularly important in explaining why work–life balance does not always translate into improved well-being. Even in situations where individuals appear to manage their time effectively, the underlying cognitive demands may remain high. This hidden effort can contribute to emotional exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction, especially when it is unevenly distributed. Research on the gendered division of labor suggests that women are more likely to carry this invisible burden, which intensifies their overall workload (Dean and Churchill 2021; Sahni et al. 2025).

The framework also draws on role theory, which emphasizes that individuals occupy multiple roles that may compete for time and energy. When expectations from different roles overlap, individuals may experience role overload and strain. This is particularly relevant in contemporary work environments where boundaries between roles are less clearly defined. Flexible and remote work arrangements, while offering autonomy, can increase the likelihood of role overlap and extended working hours (Chung and van der Horst 2020). Evidence from large-scale studies on telework further suggests that the absence of clear boundaries can make it difficult for individuals to disengage from work, thereby increasing mental demands (Eurofound 2020).

Recent developments in work arrangements have further reinforced the relevance of this framework. The shift toward remote and hybrid work has altered how responsibilities are managed, often requiring individuals to handle multiple tasks simultaneously within the same space. Studies indicate that such arrangements may intensify mental load, particularly for women who continue to manage a larger share of domestic responsibilities (Moratti 2026). Observations from the pandemic period also show that, despite changes in work structures, traditional patterns of responsibility distribution persist, with women adapting their work routines to accommodate household demands (Shockley et al. 2021).

In addition to these factors, the framework acknowledges the role of organizational support in shaping outcomes. Supportive work environments can reduce the negative effects of work–family conflict by providing resources, flexibility, and understanding (Kossek et al. 2011). However, most organizational interventions focus on reducing time-based conflict and may not fully address the cognitive aspects of managing responsibilities. As a result, mental load remains a critical but underexplored factor in understanding employee well-being.

Finally, the framework aligns with broader perspectives on occupational health, which emphasize the importance of managing both workload and psychological demands. Studies on stress and burnout among working women highlight that excessive workload—both physical and cognitive—can negatively affect mental health and job satisfaction (Saroj 2025; Buzalova 2024). Global policy discussions also stress the need to address mental health in the workplace, recognizing that unmanaged stress can have long-term consequences for individuals and organizations (World Health Organization 2022).

In summary, the theoretical model integrates insights from work–life balance theory, cognitive labor, and occupational stress research to provide a comprehensive explanation of how mental load functions as a key mechanism linking balance with well-being outcomes. By doing so, it offers a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by working women and highlights the importance of addressing both visible and invisible aspects of work.

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

4.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by extending the traditional understanding of work–life balance. Earlier research has primarily focused on time-based and role-based conflict; however, the present framework highlights the importance of incorporating mental load as a key explanatory factor. By doing so, it shifts the focus from visible workload to the underlying cognitive processes that influence individual well-being.

The integration of mental load into the work–life balance framework offers a more comprehensive perspective on how multiple roles are managed. It suggests that balance cannot be fully understood without considering the continuous mental effort involved in planning, organizing, and coordinating responsibilities. This perspective adds depth to existing theories by emphasizing that cognitive labor operates alongside physical and emotional demands.

Another important contribution lies in highlighting the gendered nature of mental load. While previous studies have acknowledged gender differences in work–family dynamics, the current framework brings attention to the invisible aspects of these differences. It provides a conceptual basis for understanding why women may experience higher levels of stress and lower job satisfaction, even when formal work conditions appear similar.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the growing literature on flexible work arrangements by examining their indirect effects through mental load. Rather than viewing flexibility as inherently beneficial, the framework suggests that its impact depends on how it shapes cognitive demands and role boundaries. This opens new directions for future research to explore the complex relationship between flexibility, autonomy, and well-being.

4.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for organizations, policymakers, and working professionals.

For Organizations -Organizations need to move beyond traditional work–life balance initiatives that focus primarily on flexible schedules and leave policies. While these measures are valuable, they do not fully address the hidden cognitive burden experienced by employees. There is a need to design workplace practices that recognize and reduce mental load.

This can be achieved by:

- Encouraging realistic workload distribution
- Promoting clear role expectations
- Reducing unnecessary multitasking and constant availability
- Providing mental health support and counseling services

Managers also play a crucial role in creating supportive environments. Open communication, empathy, and flexibility in task management can significantly reduce cognitive strain among employees.

For Policymakers -At a broader level, policymakers should recognize mental load as a significant component of unpaid and invisible labor. Policies aimed at improving gender equality must go beyond employment opportunities and address the unequal distribution of responsibilities within households. Efforts may include:

- Promoting shared caregiving responsibilities
- Supporting childcare infrastructure
- Encouraging awareness about invisible labor

Such measures can help create a more balanced distribution of responsibilities and reduce the overall burden on working women.

For Working Women - The study also offers practical insights for working women themselves. Recognizing mental load as a legitimate form of effort is an important first step toward managing it effectively. Setting boundaries between work and personal life, prioritizing tasks, and seeking support when needed can help reduce cognitive strain.

In addition, developing strategies such as delegation and time-blocking can improve both efficiency and well-being. While individual efforts alone cannot eliminate structural challenges, they can help individuals navigate complex role demands more effectively.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper re-examines work–life balance by emphasizing an often-overlooked dimension of everyday experience—the mental load associated with managing multiple responsibilities. While traditional approaches focus primarily on time management and role conflict, this study demonstrates that such perspectives are incomplete without considering the continuous cognitive effort involved in coordinating work and personal life.

The analysis highlights that mental load plays a pivotal role in shaping well-being outcomes among working women. Even when time appears to be effectively managed, the ongoing demands of planning, organizing, and anticipating responsibilities can create significant cognitive strain. This sustained mental effort contributes to increased stress and reduced job satisfaction, establishing mental load as a critical link between work–life balance and psychological outcomes.

The study also underscores the impact of changing work structures. Flexible and remote work arrangements, although beneficial in terms of autonomy, have blurred traditional boundaries between work and home. Rather than eliminating conflict, these arrangements often intensify role overlap and increase cognitive demands, reinforcing the importance of mental load in contemporary work environments.

Furthermore, the paper highlights the gendered nature of mental load. Despite advancements in workforce participation, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of invisible labor within households. This imbalance not only increases overall workload but also contributes to persistent cognitive pressure that is frequently unrecognized in organizational practices.

Overall, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of work–life balance by integrating the concept of mental load. It suggests that improving well-being requires addressing both visible workload and hidden cognitive demands. Recognizing mental load as a legitimate aspect of work opens new avenues for developing more inclusive and sustainable approaches to work–life integration.

VI. FUTURE SCOPE

This study offers a conceptual foundation for understanding the relationship between work–life balance and mental load, while also identifying several avenues for future research.

A key priority is the empirical validation of the proposed framework. Future studies can employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches to examine how mental load influences stress and job satisfaction across different populations and work contexts.

Further research can explore variations across industries, organizational structures, and cultural settings, as the experience of mental load may differ depending on job demands and social norms. Comparative studies across sectors such as healthcare, education, and corporate environments could provide deeper contextual insights.

There is also scope to examine how mental load evolves across different life stages, including early career phases, parenthood, and later professional development. Understanding these transitions can help identify periods of heightened vulnerability and guide targeted interventions.

Additionally, the role of digital technologies and constant connectivity warrants further investigation. As work increasingly extends beyond traditional boundaries, it is important to understand how technological environments contribute to or alleviate cognitive burden.

Finally, future studies can evaluate the effectiveness of organizational policies and leadership practices in reducing mental load. Insights from such research can support the development of more effective strategies to enhance employee well-being and organizational performance.

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