

Work-Life Balance and Everyday Challenges Faced by Working Women in Urban Areas

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Abstract

The expansion of women's participation in urban employment has transformed households, workplaces, and city life, yet paid work has not been accompanied by an equal redistribution of unpaid domestic and care responsibilities. This paper examines work-life balance and the everyday challenges faced by working women in urban India through a narrative review of research, official statistics, policy reports, and legal documents. Work-life balance is treated not as a perfect division of time but as the capacity to participate in paid work, family life, care, rest, and personal development without persistent role conflict or serious harm to well-being. The review shows that women's daily difficulties emerge from the interaction of long and inflexible working hours, unequal household labour, childcare and eldercare, unsafe or costly commuting, workplace discrimination and harassment, digital connectivity, and the high cost of urban living. These pressures vary sharply by occupation, class, marital status, motherhood, family structure, and access to support. Flexible work can reduce commuting and increase control, but it may also extend paid work into domestic time and intensify women's availability for care. The paper argues that work-life imbalance is not primarily an individual failure of time management; it is a structural outcome of gender norms, employment practices, care deficits, and urban design. Sustainable improvement therefore requires shared care within households, family-supportive workplaces, safe and affordable mobility, reliable care services, effective enforcement of labour protections, and greater recognition of informal and precarious workers.

Keywords: Work-life balance; working women; urban India; unpaid care work; work-family conflict; gender inequality; urban mobility; workplace support

Introduction

Women's entry into paid employment is one of the most significant social changes associated with urbanisation, education, and the growth of service-sector work. In Indian cities, women work as teachers, doctors, nurses, administrators, factory workers, domestic workers, vendors, professionals, entrepreneurs, platform workers, and employees in information technology, banking, retail, hospitality, and many other fields. Paid work can strengthen income security, self-confidence, social networks, bargaining power, and participation in household decisions. It can also create a sense of identity and achievement beyond domestic roles. At the same time, urban employment often adds a new set of obligations without substantially reducing the responsibilities that women already perform at home.

The expression "work-life balance" is sometimes understood as an equal allocation of hours between a job and private life. Such a definition is too narrow. Balance does not necessarily

mean a fifty-fifty division of time, nor does it require that every day be free from tension. It is better understood as a workable and reasonably satisfying relationship among paid employment, family obligations, caregiving, health, rest, social participation, and personal aspirations. Balance exists when demands in one domain do not repeatedly prevent meaningful participation in the others. It also depends on control: two women may work the same number of hours, yet the woman who has predictable schedules, supportive family members, safe transport, and some autonomy over her time is likely to experience the situation very differently.

Official labour statistics show both progress and continuing inequality. The Periodic Labour Force Survey 2022–23 recorded an increase in the all-India female labour force participation rate for persons aged 15 years and above in usual status from 23.3 per cent in 2017–18 to 37.0 per cent in 2022–23. However, in current weekly status during 2022–23, the urban female labour force participation rate was 24.0 per cent, compared with 73.9 per cent for urban men (National Statistical Office [NSO], 2023). Participation figures alone do not capture women's unpaid labour. India's Time Use Survey 2019 reported that female participants spent far more time than male participants on unpaid domestic services, revealing the unequal temporal foundation on which paid employment is added (NSO, 2020). The question is therefore not only whether women have jobs, but also the conditions under which they are able to remain in employment and live a healthy life.

This paper examines the everyday character of work-life imbalance among working women in urban India. It brings together established work-family theories, national time-use and labour data, Indian empirical studies, and international evidence. Rather than presenting urban women as a uniform category, it emphasises differences of class, occupation, family stage, employment status, and access to resources. The central argument is that work-life balance cannot be achieved through personal discipline alone. It depends on the organisation of work, the distribution of care, the availability of public services, and women's ability to use the city safely and independently.

Objectives and Methodology

The paper has four objectives: to explain the meaning and theoretical basis of work-life balance; to identify the major everyday challenges faced by working women in urban areas; to analyse how these challenges affect health, family relationships, job continuity, and career development; and to suggest household, organisational, and policy measures that can support a more sustainable balance.

The study follows a narrative review design based entirely on secondary sources. It draws on peer-reviewed research on work-family conflict, flexible work, unpaid care, mental health, and the experiences of working women; official reports of the Government of India, particularly the Time Use Survey 2019 and the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2022–23; reports of the International Labour Organization, World Health Organization, UN Women, and World Bank; and relevant Indian legal provisions. Sources were selected for conceptual importance, relevance to urban women, methodological credibility, and usefulness in interpreting conditions in India. No primary survey was conducted, and the paper does not

claim that findings from a particular city, occupation, or sample represent all urban working women.

A narrative review is appropriate because the subject crosses sociology, labour economics, psychology, public health, gender studies, law, and urban studies. The evidence includes measures of conflict and well-being, time-use data, and studies of transport, organisational practice, and legal protection. The paper therefore synthesises recurring mechanisms rather than calculating a pooled effect. A limitation is that metropolitan, middle-class, and formal-sector experiences are documented more often than those of migrants, domestic workers, vendors, home-based workers, and women in smaller urban settlements.

Conceptual Framework and Review of Literature

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) defined work-family conflict as a form of inter-role conflict in which pressures from work and family are mutually incompatible. They distinguished time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based conflict. Time-based conflict occurs when hours devoted to one role leave insufficient time for another. Strain-based conflict arises when fatigue, anxiety, or irritation generated in one sphere reduces effective participation in the other. Behaviour-based conflict occurs when conduct valued in one role is difficult to reconcile with expectations in another. These distinctions remain useful for urban working women: a late shift may produce time conflict, an unsafe commute may create strain conflict, and the assertiveness rewarded at work may clash with expectations of self-sacrifice at home.

Work-family border theory views individuals as daily border-crossers between domains that have different rules, relationships, and meanings (Clark, 2000). Borders may be spatial, temporal, or psychological. A fixed office once produced a visible spatial boundary, while smartphones and remote work have made that boundary more permeable. Permeability can help a mother respond to a child during the day, but it can also allow messages, meetings, and unfinished tasks to enter evenings and weekends. Balance is therefore influenced not merely by flexibility, but by who controls flexibility and whether family members and managers respect boundaries.

The conservation of resources perspective explains why repeated demands can become damaging. People seek to obtain and protect resources such as time, energy, income, health, supportive relationships, and autonomy (Hobfoll, 1989). When demands consume resources faster than they can be restored, stress intensifies. A working woman who loses sleep, spends hours commuting, performs most domestic work, and lacks affordable childcare may face a continuing cycle of resource loss. By contrast, supportive supervisors, predictable schedules, shared care, reliable transport, and paid leave can act as resources that interrupt this cycle.

Gender analysis adds a critical dimension. Hochschild and Machung (1989) described the “second shift” of domestic labour performed after paid work. Indian time-use evidence shows that this is not simply a matter of individual preference. Women’s unpaid workload remains high even when they participate in paid employment, and much of the gender gap is not explained by measurable economic or demographic differences. Research using the 2019 Time Use Survey concludes that gender norms and practices play a crucial role in the unequal allocation of household and care work (Janiso, Shukla, & Reddy, 2021). Thus, a woman’s

earnings may improve her bargaining position, but paid employment does not automatically transform expectations concerning cooking, cleaning, childcare, eldercare, and emotional support.

Empirical research also shows that organisational and family support matter. A meta-analysis by Kossek et al. (2011), based on 115 samples, found that work-family-specific supervisor and organisational support are more strongly related to reduced conflict than general support. Indian studies similarly associate work-family conflict with role expectations, family demands, and psychological distress among married women employees (Reddy et al., 2010). Deshmukh's (2018) study of married working women in Pune found substantial difficulty in maintaining balance across academic, information-technology, and healthcare employment, although the study's local and non-probability sample limits generalisation. Together, the literature suggests that work-life balance is relational and institutional: it is shaped by the behaviour of spouses, relatives, managers, colleagues, clients, and public authorities.

Everyday Challenges in Urban Work and Family Life

The Double Burden of Paid and Unpaid Work. The most persistent challenge is the accumulation of paid employment on top of unpaid domestic and care work. Cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping, arranging school activities, supervising homework, caring for children or older persons, planning meals, remembering appointments, and maintaining family relationships require both physical labour and mental coordination. The “mental load” is often invisible because it involves anticipation and responsibility rather than a single visible task. Even where domestic work is outsourced, women commonly remain responsible for recruiting, instructing, monitoring, and replacing paid helpers. Outsourcing may reduce physical work for middle-class households but does not necessarily redistribute household management between women and men.

The NSO Time Use Survey 2019 provides a national picture of this inequality. Female participants aged six years and above spent an average of 299 minutes per day on unpaid domestic services for household members, compared with 97 minutes among male participants; women also recorded greater participation and time in unpaid caregiving (NSO, 2020). These averages include women with very different employment statuses and should not be interpreted as the schedule of every employed woman. Nevertheless, they demonstrate the social context in which urban women undertake paid work. The International Labour Organization (2018) similarly estimated that women perform 76.2 per cent of unpaid care work worldwide. The result is often a “double day” in which the formal workday ends but responsibility does not.

Working Hours, Work Intensity, and Schedule Control. Long hours, rotating shifts, overtime, targets, understaffing, and unpredictable rosters make it difficult to coordinate paid work with family routines. Teachers and office employees may bring assessment, preparation, or documentation home. Health workers face night duty and emergencies; retail and hospitality workers work when other family members are free; information-technology employees may coordinate with international time zones; and platform or gig workers may need to remain available during peak-demand periods. In informal employment, refusing

extra work or taking leave can mean losing income or future opportunities. The burden is not only the number of hours but their predictability and the employee's power to refuse.

Working longer than desired is associated with poorer work-life balance, while worker-oriented flexibility can improve it (International Labour Organization, 2023). Yet "flexibility" is ambiguous. Employer-led flexibility transfers scheduling risk to workers through on-call duty, variable shifts, or last-minute changes. Worker-led flexibility gives employees genuine influence over when or where they work. For women, the distinction is essential: an unpredictable roster may be called flexible by an employer while making childcare almost impossible.

Care Responsibilities Across the Life Course. Childcare is a major source of time pressure, especially when children are young, school hours do not match office hours, or reliable care is unavailable. Urban nuclear families may have greater privacy and autonomy but less everyday support from grandparents or relatives. Mothers often manage school transport, homework, illness, medical visits, and communication with teachers. The difficulty does not end as children grow; adolescents may require educational and emotional support. At the same time, population ageing and migration increase eldercare responsibilities. A middle-aged woman may simultaneously support children, parents, and parents-in-law while managing a full-time job. Care crises are unpredictable, and workplaces that treat them as personal failures intensify stress.

India's Maternity Benefit framework provides important protections in covered establishments. The 2017 amendment increased paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks for eligible women in specified circumstances, enabled mutually agreed work from home depending on the nature of work, and required crèche facilities in establishments with 50 or more employees (Government of India, 2017; Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2023). These measures are valuable, but statutory entitlement does not guarantee convenient, affordable, high-quality care. Coverage and enforcement remain especially difficult for informal, contractual, domestic, self-employed, and small-establishment workers. Moreover, a policy focused mainly on mothers may unintentionally reinforce the belief that care is women's responsibility unless fathers receive and use meaningful care leave.

Commuting, Mobility, and Safety. The urban journey to work is not a neutral interval. Congestion, crowding, unreliable services, multiple transfers, poor lighting, unsafe last-mile connections, and harassment consume time and emotional energy. Women may reject better-paid jobs that require late travel, choose work closer to home, spend more on safer modes, or depend on male relatives for transport. Such decisions reduce the geographic range of employment and can reproduce occupational segregation.

Evidence from Mumbai shows that women's mobility patterns reflect the household division of labour. Women's journeys are more likely to include shopping and transporting children, while men's journeys are more concentrated around paid work. Women may use slower modes or pay more to reach similar destinations, creating an implicit "pink tax" on mobility (Alam et al., 2021). A World Bank review of Indian cities also notes that safety and gender-insensitive transport design restrict women's access to employment and other opportunities

(World Bank, 2022). These constraints are particularly severe for shift workers, domestic workers travelling early in the morning, retail and hospitality employees returning late, women with disabilities, and residents of peripheral settlements.

Workplace Discrimination, Harassment, and the Career Penalty. Formal equality in recruitment does not eliminate everyday bias. Women may be perceived as less committed because they have or may have children, passed over for travel-intensive assignments, excluded from informal networking, or evaluated negatively for requesting flexibility. The same behaviour can be read differently by gender: assertiveness may be rewarded in men but criticised in women, while women are often expected to perform unrecognised emotional and administrative labour at work. Interruptions for maternity and care can slow promotion, reduce earnings, and weaken professional networks. Conversely, an “ideal worker” norm built around uninterrupted availability assumes that someone else is managing domestic life.

Sexual harassment, bullying, and fear of retaliation further damage balance because the effects travel home in the form of anxiety, sleep disruption, and avoidance. India’s Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 recognises the right to a safe work environment and establishes complaint and redressal mechanisms (Government of India, 2013). Effective protection, however, requires more than the formal existence of a committee. Women need awareness, confidentiality, procedural fairness, protection against retaliation, and trust that complaints will be handled by trained and independent members. Informal workers and women employed in private homes face additional barriers in accessing redress.

Digital Connectivity and Work from Home. Remote and hybrid work can reduce commuting, expand employment for some women, and allow greater control over the location of work. It can also blur temporal and spatial boundaries. Continuous messages, online meetings, monitoring software, and expectations of rapid response may create telepressure and make psychological detachment difficult. The home is not automatically a suitable workplace: many women lack a separate room, quiet conditions, reliable devices, or uninterrupted time. Indian research during the COVID-19 lockdown documented how working women negotiated paid work alongside intensified domestic demands and constrained household space (Jasrotia & Meena, 2021; Chauhan, 2021). Chauhan’s qualitative study described women’s unequal unpaid workload in urban centres, while later analysis emphasised that the absence of a room of one’s own affected concentration, privacy, and authority over work time.

Flexible work therefore has gendered and sometimes contradictory outcomes. Chung and van der Lippe (2020) argue that its effects depend on institutional and household contexts. When flexibility is accompanied by manageable workloads, boundary respect, and shared care, it can improve balance. When it becomes a reason to assign women more domestic work or to expect constant professional availability, it produces work-family interference rather than autonomy.

Economic Insecurity and Unequal Access to Support. Urban working women are divided by income and employment status. Salaried professionals may struggle with long hours and

career competition but can sometimes purchase childcare, domestic assistance, transport, or housing closer to work. Low-paid workers may have fewer buffers: a missed day can reduce wages, a child's illness can threaten employment, and a transport disruption can lead to penalties. Domestic workers, vendors, home-based workers, and platform workers may have no paid leave, predictable schedule, pension, or grievance mechanism. Their work-life problem is not simply excessive work but insecurity about whether work and income will continue.

Rent, education, health care, transport, and childcare costs can make two incomes necessary even when earning them is exhausting. Migrant women may lack trusted care networks, while crowded housing and weak basic services increase household work. Caste, religion, disability, age, marital status, and migration status further shape access to jobs and support. A universal description of the “urban working woman” must therefore avoid overlooking invisible and precarious workers.

Consequences and Coping Strategies

Persistent imbalance affects health, relationships, and employment. Time poverty reduces sleep, exercise, preventive health care, leisure, and social participation. Strain may appear as fatigue, irritability, guilt, anxiety, low mood, or a sense of never completing either role satisfactorily. The World Health Organization identifies excessive workloads, long or inflexible hours, low job control, harassment, discrimination, job insecurity, and conflicting home-work demands as psychosocial risks (World Health Organization, 2022, 2024). These risks do not affect women alone, but unequal care obligations can intensify their exposure and reduce opportunities for recovery.

Work-family conflict is associated with lower job and life satisfaction and with psychological and physical strain (Allen et al., 2000; Amstad et al., 2011). At home, chronic overload can create conflict between partners and reduce the quality of time available to children or older relatives. At work, fatigue and distraction may affect concentration, attendance, performance, and willingness to accept promotion. Some women reduce hours, move to less demanding roles, postpone motherhood, turn to self-employment, or withdraw from paid work. These choices may be rational responses to constraints, yet they can reduce lifetime earnings, retirement security, and representation of women in leadership.

Women manage daily demands through routines, combined journeys, family or neighbourhood support, domestic services, flexible hours, and boundaries on work communication. These practices can provide relief, but their effectiveness depends on resources. Advice centred only on individual efficiency becomes another burden when it asks women to optimise an unfair distribution of work.

The most sustainable household strategy is redistribution rather than occasional assistance. Shared responsibility means that partners and other capable family members take ownership of complete tasks—including planning and follow-through—not merely “help” when asked. Children can participate in age-appropriate household work, and families can openly discuss time, paid-work demands, and care expectations. Such change is cultural as well as practical because it treats men's caregiving and women's rest as normal rather than exceptional.

Policy and Organisational Responses

Employers influence balance through job design, scheduling, management behaviour, and workplace culture. Useful measures include predictable rosters; reasonable workload and staffing; employee-controlled flexitime where tasks permit; hybrid options with clear availability windows; limits on after-hours communication; paid sick and care leave; safe transport for late shifts; functional crèches or childcare partnerships; nursing facilities; and phased return after maternity or other extended leave. Part-time or reduced-hour arrangements should not automatically remove employees from career tracks. Performance should be evaluated through realistic outcomes rather than visible overtime or constant digital presence.

Policies succeed only when employees can use them without stigma. A formal flexible-work policy is ineffective if managers interpret its use as weak commitment. Supervisor training is therefore crucial. Managers should plan workloads, recognise signs of overload, respond fairly to care emergencies, and protect employees from harassment or retaliation. Kossek et al. (2011) show the particular importance of work-family-specific support. Confidential mental-health support may help individuals, but counselling cannot substitute for correcting excessive workloads, hostile supervision, or unsafe conditions. Organisational interventions should address the source of stress.

Care policy must extend beyond maternity. The ILO's care framework emphasises maternity, paternity, parental and other care leave together with childcare and long-term care services (International Labour Organization, 2022). Affordable neighbourhood crèches, after-school services, eldercare, disability support, and emergency care can reduce the private burden carried by households. Public investment is also an employment strategy because reliable care enables women to enter and remain in paid work. Care services must be accessible to informal and low-income workers, not limited to large formal establishments.

Urban planning is equally important. Safe, frequent, affordable public transport; well-lit stops and streets; usable footpaths; toilets; last-mile connectivity; complaint systems; and mixed land use can widen women's employment radius and reduce the daily cost of mobility. Gender-responsive transport planning should account for trip-chaining and off-peak travel rather than assuming a single home-to-office commute. Safety measures must avoid placing the burden on women to restrict movement; the aim is equal access to public space and work.

Government action should combine legal enforcement, social protection, data, and public services. Compliance with maternity and workplace sexual-harassment law requires inspection, awareness, trained committees, and accessible remedies. Informal workers need portable social protection, maternity support, health coverage, and grievance channels. Regular time-use data should be analysed with labour statistics so that unpaid work is visible in policy design. Public campaigns and school education can encourage men and boys to share care. Finally, organisations and governments should consult women from diverse occupations, because a measure designed for office employees may not serve a nurse, vendor, domestic worker, factory employee, or gig worker.

Discussion

The evidence supports two broad conclusions. First, work-life imbalance is produced by linked systems rather than a single cause. Workplace hours interact with domestic expectations; commuting interacts with childcare schedules; housing affects the feasibility of remote work; and employment insecurity limits a woman's ability to request flexibility. An intervention in only one domain may therefore have limited effect. A remote-work policy cannot create balance if workload remains excessive and care remains unequal. Maternity leave cannot ensure retention if childcare disappears when leave ends. Safe transport cannot secure employment if schedules are unpredictable, although it may greatly widen feasible opportunities.

Second, flexibility is beneficial only when it increases worker control and is supported by a culture of boundary respect. Flexibility that primarily serves organisational demand can produce uncertainty. Flexibility that assumes women will absorb care can reproduce inequality. The goal should be "bounded flexibility": reasonable control over time and place, predictable expectations, the ability to disconnect, and equal access for women and men. Men's use of flexible work and care leave is particularly important because it changes organisational assumptions about who is responsible for family life.

The concept of work-life balance must also move beyond the idea that women need to become more efficient. Women's coping skills are significant, but the continuous demand to cope can conceal institutional failure. A more just approach asks whether jobs are designed around human needs, whether the city supports safe mobility, whether care is treated as a social responsibility, and whether households recognise women's right to rest and personal development. Balance is thus connected to decent work, gender equality, public health, and the right to the city.

Conclusion

Working women make essential contributions to urban households, organisations, public services, and the economy. Yet paid work, domestic labour, care, commuting, and emotional management frequently overlap. Long or unpredictable hours, unsafe mobility, workplace bias and harassment, digital availability, care deficits, and insecurity can transform opportunity into chronic overload. Across occupations and classes, these pressures reflect an unequal distribution of time and care.

A sustainable work-life balance cannot be delivered by time-management advice alone. It requires men and other family members to share complete responsibility for care; employers to provide predictable, flexible, safe, and non-discriminatory conditions; cities to enable affordable and secure mobility; and governments to enforce rights and invest in childcare, eldercare, social protection, and gender-responsive infrastructure. Legal provisions on maternity and workplace safety provide an important foundation, but implementation and coverage must reach women in informal and precarious employment. When care, time, and safety are recognised as shared social concerns, women are better able not merely to remain employed but to pursue health, dignity, advancement, and a meaningful life beyond continuous negotiation between incompatible demands.

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