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Spring 3-30-2021

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Manzoor, Shazia and Hamid, Shamikhah, "Work Life balance during Covid-19 Lockdown: Experiences of Women Academicians of Kashmir" (2021). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 5270.  
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## **Work Life Balance during Covid-19 Lockdown: Experiences of Women Academicians of Kashmir**

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### **Abstract**

Work-life balance has always been a challenge for all the working class but during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has added to the already existing challenges because the work life too has shifted to home through online mode. COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown throughout the world have diminished the boundary between the workplace and the home place. The work life and family life are to be lived and managed under the same space at the home. In a patriarchal society like India, within the working class the work-life balance of the working women has been a constant challenge. This is because of the gendered roles at the home which are principally considered to be the responsibility of the women of the family. Whether it is the house maintenance, childcare or the elderly care, these responsibilities have been associated with the women of the house only. Since after the lockdown in India, the work was shifted to online mode working women have faced numerous problems while delivering the dual duties of office and home simultaneously at the same time and same place. The paper aims to gain in-depth understanding of the experiences of women academicians regarding their work-life balance during COVID-19 pandemic.

We have used the qualitative research approach to explore and analyze the challenges faced by the women working in higher education department to balance work and life during COVID-19 pandemic. Female academicians having at least one kid below the age of 15 years were taken into the study. The study used interview method for data collection. Both face to face and telephonic interviews were conducted with the participants keeping in view the social distancing rules and other lockdown measures. The study used inductive thematic analysis for the generation of the results. Three main themes emerged from the study. The themes along with the respective sub themes are : 1. Work related issues ( need to learn the online teaching tools for digital classes, erratic work schedule, stretched working hours, screen fatigue, camera consciousness, interrupted classes due to internet and connectivity problems) 2. Family Issues (elderly care issues, role conflict and guilt, children's educational issues, maintenance of social relations, house help problems) 3. Personal Issues (burnout, lack of downtime, feelings of isolation).

### **Key Words**

*Women academicians, experiences, work-life balance, covid-19*

## **Introduction**

The lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the people. It has posed unprecedented challenges to all the section of population belonging to whatever demographic or class/category profile all around the world drastically. It has affected the working conditions of billions of people where the work shifted to the online mode for many and many others were left jobless. It has been discovered that the lockdown has different connotations and has affected men and women differently through increased burden of unpaid work on women (Burki, 2020). It has worsened the gender inequalities of the women. Working women had to face various challenges including the stress, sleeping problems, mood swings because of the burden (Latha, 2020). For working women the disparities have increased and the load of the childcare and home responsibilities in the absence of schools and domestic helps have increased the burden on the women and especially those who are working from home (Chauhan, 2020). The working women during the pandemic found it difficult to in terms of the workload of their home because of without the support of their partners, monotonous routine, stress etc. Not having time for themselves and fulfill the familial expectations are the two prime factors which affect their work-life balance (Kansal, 2020). Among the working women class is the women academicians whose work has been doubled during the lockdown period because the class work was shifted to the online mode. Among these academicians, the women who have children are found to be more significantly affected by the lockdown due to the as compared to those who have no children. (Yildirim & Eslen-ziya,2020). In this backdrop, our study intends to explore the experiences of the women academiciansof Kashmir during the covid-19 lockdown.

## **Methodology**

We have used the qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of women academicians working in higher education department to balance work and life during COVID-19 lockdown. Purposive sampling technique was used to recruit and enlist the participants. The women academicians who work in the department of higher education ( both college and universities), having at least one child below the age of 15 years were taken into the study and who were willing to be a part of our study. A total of 25 were taken into the study. The study used interview method for data collection. Keeping in view the social distancing rules and other travel restrictions, face to face interviews were not possible so telephonic interviews were conducted with the participants. With informed consent, the interviews were recorded. The details of the participants are provided in the table below. The questions were kept open-ended to get deeper insights of the experiences of these women. During the interview process, the participants were explained the purpose of the study and consent was taken by them to audio record their interviews. Each interview lasted for almost 30-60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in both Urdu and English languages. The interviews were transcribed and then read several times to get in-depth insight of it. Hand coding was done independently by both the researchers to develop the codebook. The codebook was again independently refined on subsequent coding and re-coding. Then the codes were generated inductively from the codebook. After identifying the pattern in the codes, themes were generated. Any changes needed in the themes were done and finally the naming of the themes was done.

## **Findings**

Three main themes emerged from the study which reflected the issues faced by these women during covid-19 lockdown. The themes were categorized into sub-themes. The first theme *Work related issues* include those challenges which these women faced while working from their home. The second theme *Family Issues* describe the issues faced by them while delivery their familial duties and the third theme personal issues describe the challenges faced by them which are personal in nature pertaining to these women only. (Parenting issues, elderly care issues, role conflict and guilt, children's educational issues, maintenance of social relations, house help problems) 3. Personal Issues (burnout, loss of interest in personal things, lack of motivation, lack of downtime, feelings of isolation).

### ***Work Related Issues***

These comprise the challenges which women faced due to their work. The sub- themes of this themes include need to learn the online teaching tools for digital classes, erratic work schedule, stretched working hours, screen fatigue, camera consciousness, interrupted classes due to internet and connectivity problems.

#### **Need to learn the online teaching tools for digital classes**

As the teaching and learning process for all the educational institutions was shifted to the online platforms, the academicians found it difficult to switch to the online teaching platforms. The women in our study asserted that they had never used the virtual platforms for teaching and learning purpose before but COVID-19 and the associated lockdown compelled them to learn these things. *Nousheen, who is working in the University of Kashmir, asserted that, 'I faced difficulty to switch to the online teaching mode. I couldn't do it by myself as it felt very difficult and complicated. I don't have proficiency in the technical and smart gadgets related matters. When the order to have virtual classes was passed, I missed the first classes because of this issue. I then went to the campus where assistance was provided by the administration for those who were lacking the technicality to do so.'*

#### **Erratic work schedule**

One more issue which the women academicians faced was that of the uncertain duty hours. These women told that the class timing was changed based on the availability of the students and the internet connectivity which would disturb their whole day time schedule. *Rahilawho works as a college assistant professor said that, 'I used to get calls or messages from my office and students to shift my class to a particular time slot based on the availability of the internet in the area where my students belong to. For some days there would be no classes due to internet shutdown and then we had to compensate for those classes by taking six to seven classes in a day.'*

#### **Stretched working hours**

The ladies asserted that the working hours have been stretched. In the normal days the working hours were limited to 6 hours daily but, now there hours are stretched now. They also asserted that they had to be available around the clock for their students.

*Mankeet who works as a Hindi lecturer in college says that, 'Our office hours are stretched around the clock. We used to work for 6 hours a day then come to home and that would be our home time but now that is not possible. We have to be ready around the clock to take classes. Our students can call us anytime. A six hour shift is stretched to 12 hours and more.'*

#### **Screen fatigue**

This was one of the other issues which these women faced. The women in our study expressed that they had to face the repercussions of being continuously facing the screen. The remote online teaching process has been causing digital eye strain and the associated problems like headache, blurred vision and discomfort to stare at the screen in these women. They explained that some of them had to consult ophthalmologists for this fatigue. *'I have*

*been a screen lover since the time smart phones came. I am active and update almost on daily basis on most of the social networking sites but this online teaching has decreased by affinity towards the screen in these months. I had to spend a considerable amount of time working on the laptop, taking classes, updating study material and evaluating the online exam scripts of students. This substantial increase in the screen time has caused problems with my eyes. I can't bear screen for long now. Everything is good as long as it is used within limits. This kind of teaching is exhausting.'* (Shaheen)

### **Camera consciousness**

Camera related consciousness and anxiety was another issues reported by the academicians. These women said that they sometimes felt camera conscious as they were not able read the body language of the students as that of the physical classes which would increase the awkwardness. They were anxious about their position, posture, background and family privacy concerns etc. Simran says, *'I have become very camera conscious off late. In a normal classroom we are seen by our students only but in online classroom we could be seen by the family members of our students also. The presence of the family members of students during the classes makes me uncomfortable.'*

### **Interrupted classes due to internet and connectivity problems**

Women in our study expressed that the speed of the internet caused a lot of problems for conducting the online classes and examinations during the COVID-19 lockdown. As the highspeed mobile internet services remained suspended for the lockdown period in all the districts of Kashmir except for Ganderbal, it has created problems for the academicians. It takes more time and efforts to upload the lectures to the online teaching platforms. They had to repeat one class several times in case any of the students missed their classes due to internet shutdown in any area. The low 2G speed internet and constant internet shutdowns has rendered them helpless. Haleem says, *'Our online classes didn't run smoothly during the COVID-19 lockdown. It would take hours to upload a small recorded video. Most of the academicians and students do not have broadband services and rely on mobile hotspot for their laptops. At 2G speed it is becomes difficult to upload the videos, study material and take classes. It added to the already existing workload as we have to take extra classes of the students who are not able to attend the classes due to internet shutdown in their respective areas.'*

### **Family related issues**

There has been distinctive issues related to the family life of the women academicians as the major responsibilities of the families lies with the females of the family in our societies. The issues which emerged from our study include elderly care issues, role conflict and guilt, children's educational issues, maintenance of social relations, house help problems

#### **Elderly care issues**

The women of our study asserted that they faced the issues of elderly care within their families. They said that the household work, elderly and childcare is usually considered a job of women of the family only. *'I have elderly mother-in-law at home who is bed ridden. We had kept a house help who would assist in caring for my mom-in-law. During lockdown in the absence of house help, in addition to the other household works this too automatically shifted to me. I am glad that I could do that but I must tell you it was really difficult to manage work, family, self during this period.'* (Nasreen)

#### **Role conflict and guilt**

Conflict in the roles of these women and the associated guilt was another issue pertaining to the lockdown. The women said that they were never in a position to fulfill all of their roles

properly. They were not able to fulfill the role of a mother, a caretaker, a house maker and an employee. They had to compromise the other roles for their job and neither of their roles gave them full satisfaction. Samreen says, *'Before the lockdown, there was a boundary between our family life and professional life. I used to go to university, perform my duty there and come to home with no baggage to perform my role as a mother, daughter in law, house maker and wife at home. That is totally changed now. Even being at home I can't give time and care to my family when they need me. I barely get time to spend with them. Not being able to perform my roles properly is a constant guilt.'*

#### **Children's educational issues**

Education was one of those sectors which were least affected by the lockdown due to its shifting to the online platforms. In the traditional societies it has always been the women or the mothers who are more concerned about their children's education. The participants in our study found it very difficult to strike a balance between their online classes and the online classes of their children. Nazima says, *'I have two children in two different classes and I have to take my three classes a day. It becomes very hectic for me to orient my classes with their classes. My whole day gets consumed in taking my own classes and making my children to learn through their online classes. They are becoming weak in their studies because I cannot get time to check on their studies which I used to do before COVID-19.'*

#### **Maintenance of social relationships**

Social relationships can deteriorate if we do not invest in them. The participants found it difficult to maintain the social relationships because they could barely get any time out of their packed schedule of home and work life to invest in their other relationships. Nasreen says, *'I am good at maintaining the social relationships with friends and relatives. I would often visit them whenever anyone from my relatives/friends are ill or are in some sort of problem. But now I am not able to make a call to my relative who has faced very difficult times in the recent past. Relations need you to invest your time and feeling but I have no time. 24 hours seems less for me. Many of my relatives are very upset with me that I didn't bother to check on them but they won't understand my position. Managing home and office at one place is not easy.'*

#### **House help problems**

Almost all the participants agreed on that their problems and issues were doubled in COVID-19 because of the absence of house help in their homes. The women assert that the house help acts as a major support system in the functioning of a working woman. It plays a very important role in the work-life balance of the working women. *'I was in complete mess once the lockdown was imposed. I usually share my household work with my house help. I do some of the work then I leave for my job and rest would be done by the help. She serves as my backbone. She makes my life easy. In her absence I was not able to manage my home properly.'*

#### **Personal Issues**

These are the issues which have affected the women academicians at the individual level, outside their work and family life. The personal issues which emerged from our study were burnout, lack of downtime and feelings of isolation.

#### **Burnout**

The physical and emotional exhaustion due to the persistent balancing of the work life and home life has been a major concern for them. Long duty hours at home, inability to separate work life from family life, lack of social interaction with their relatives/friends and uncertainty

about the lockdown were the major causes of burnout. Lack of concentration in work, mood swings, anxiety were the issues faced by them.

*'I have been so much exhausted that I want a break from all my roles. It sometimes feels that I will not be able to continue my job, I am so much burdened that I do not get time for myself. It has made my life very stressful.'* (Samreen)

### **Lack of downtime**

Due to the continual online work and familial responsibilities it has become difficult for these women to find any free time for themselves. It has affected their mental as well as physical wellbeing. *'I am continuously busy with work from dusk to dawn. I wake up as early as possible. I prepare breakfast, lunch and then take my classes. Then after breakfast I get busy with children's classes and other cleaning and maintenance chores of house till the lunch time. After that I again take my classes. I do so much in a day and seldom get some free time where I could be relaxing and just be me'* (Nida)

### **Feelings of isolation**

The participants in the physical absence of their relative, friends felt isolated. The workload has kept them busy but they were missing their dear ones whom they couldn't meet in person. Shaheen said, *'I may do all the chores at my home, attend the elderly and kids, do my work from home but at the end of the day I find myself very alone and missing my parents. Juggling this is becoming very difficult. I too want to meet my parents and siblings. I miss them a lot.'*

### **Conclusion**

Our study draws on the depth of the lived experiences of women academicians during COVID-19 lockdown. We identify that the lockdown and the consequent work from home policy has affected women academicians in complex ways causing problems in their work life, family life and the personal lives. The dilution of the demarcation of the work space and the family space has created challenges for these women. These women had to live their work life, family life and personal life at the same space and same time which has been difficult for them. Managing many roles and balancing work and life at the same time and space is a concern. It has also been identified that the role which these women have compromised upon are personal and familial in nature rather than work related.

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