Addressing work-life balance challenges of working women during COVID-19 in Bangladesh

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Introduction

Working women have been subjected to tremendous changes and upheaval due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Amongst other challenges, attaining satisfactory role balance is one of the key challenges working women face. Achieving a satisfactory role balance is challenging for women as they have to perform a disproportionate number of domestic roles. According to Moreira da Silva (2019), women and girls are accountable for 75 per cent of the total household chores. Besides, an International Labor Organization (ILO) report found that, on average, a woman spends four hours and 25 minutes per day accomplishing domestic and care work compared to one hour and 23 minutes by their male counterparts (Pozzan and Cattaneo 2020). This uneven distribution of work between men and women poses many challenges for working women to find a balance between work and their home roles. The imbalanced work and family life, stemming from uneven domestic family role distribution, also creates barriers for their career. Women are further involved in a myriad of other responsibilities that increase the risk of role conflict.

Due to the emergence of COVID-19 across the world, the extent and amount of domestic work has increased significantly along with children being out of school, increased care duties of dependents, and extensive cleanliness and health services (United Nations 2020). The outbreak of COVID-19 has generated benefits for some people; for example, there was a 20 per cent drop in the Japanese suicide rate in April 2020 compared to April 2019 (United Nations 2020). Moreover, working people have to spend less time commuting to work and therefore have more time to spend with their families. A survey among parents in the UK reported that there was strong bonding among family members due to spending time together during lockdown, in spite of the heightened challenges of integrating work and home responsibilities (Roshgadol 2020). Similarly, a Turkish study found an improvement in marital and family relationships (Alhas 2020). However, research among parents in the United States reported that the outbreak of coronavirus has generated more stress and poor mental health due to the contagion possibility of working mothers (Hamel and Salganicoff 2020). This finding suggests that working mothers may bear a bigger portion of the burden, which places them in a challenging position with regards to role balancing. Moreover, during lockdown, childcare and other support services have not been available for many working women, thus increasing pressure on women and limiting their ability to work. Domestic and care roles are borne by women due

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in part to the traditional gender roles and economic participation of women. Participation of women in increased domestic chores tends to reduce their productivity (Power 2020). Apart from that, working women worldwide have been experiencing layoffs, pay cuts, and being furloughed as a result of COVID-19 (Carnevale and Hatak 2020). A study in the United States has reported that one-third of working women have already been laid off, furloughed, or faced pay cuts (Del Boca *et al.* 2020).

Similar to other contexts, working women in patriarchal societies like Bangladesh have been experiencing the above-mentioned barriers that make juggling their work and family roles more difficult as they have to attend to their increased family roles. As echoed by Chloe Cooney (2020), the COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted how problematic and challenging the work-life interface is for Bangladeshi women. There has always been pressure to accomplish care tasks and other family and household chores, which necessitate time beyond paid work time. Such demands to accomplish both work and family roles were already stressful, irrational, and overwhelming but are now likely to worsen women's overall condition. A recent study in the UK revealed that working mothers experienced 40 per cent more stress than the average person (Chandola *et al.* 2019). Similar findings have been reported by other studies during the outbreak of other pandemic situations such as SARS, swine flu, and bird flu (Lewis 2020).

In the Bangladeshi context, there is a belief that work-family responsibilities are primarily shaped by conventional gender norms (Gutek *et al.* 1991) because of the longer lasting and widely held stereotypical perceptions of males as "breadwinners" and females as "home-makers". Thus, the socio-cultural structure makes women less able to negotiate than men. Moreover, due to globalisation and increased women's participation in paid work, work-life balance (WLB) is no longer a western phenomenon. Although numerous studies have highlighted western and developed nations (Zhang *et al.* 2020), there is less focus on eastern and developing societies (Lewis 2020). Besides, studies during COVID-19 have focused on dual-earner couples' work and care (Craig and Churchill 2020), work-life conflict (Zhang *et al.* 2020), care burden of women (Power 2020), employee adjustment and well-being (Carnevale and Hatak 2020), coping strategies of teachers (MacIntyre *et al.*

2020), and working from home (Phillips 2020). Other scholarship has reported that COVID-19 imposes vital challenges for working women in terms of work-life balance (Lewis 2020; Hamel and Salganicoff 2020; Roshgadol 2020), yet few studies have addressed working women's perceptions about challenges and strategies they have encountered and employed during COVID-19 to improve WLB. In Bangladesh, pre-COVID-19 topics included social support and WLB (Uddin *et al.* 2020a), family support and workplace support (Uddin *et al.* 2020b), and women's strategies for work-care balance (Hossain and Rokis 2016). Thus, filling this gap, this research contributes to the existing literature by identifying the challenges of finding WLB and by highlighting strategies to overcome such challenges. The findings may increase an understanding of working women's behaviors in balancing roles.

Literature

Concept of WLB

WLB is defined as "an employee's effort towards accomplishing both the work and life role successfully such that the roles of one domain do not have any adverse effect on the other" (Parkes and Langford 2008). The concept of WLB is also related to work flexibility that determines employees' capacity to define where, when, and how to work (Cooke *et al.* 2009). WLB includes five elements such as working schedule, workplace environment, reward and incentive structure, workloads, and policies about leaves. However, the multiple roles, demands, and challenges that employees, and particularly working women, face often lead to role conflict (Nizam and Kam 2018).

Socio-economic context of women in Bangladesh

Although the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has given equal right to both women and men, the reality is farfetched. Women face widespread discrimination in their family and at work, harassment, rape, dependency on males, and they are often more vulnerable and physically weaker than males (Khan 2016; Uddin *et al.* 2020a, 2020b). Moreover, they also face problems related to food, work, education, decision-making,

property, and independence (Miaji 2010). The masculine social system of Bangladesh encourages a strict separation of work and restricts women's movement, hence steering them towards accomplishing household chores. In the Gender Gap Index of 2017, Bangladesh was ranked in 47th position among 144 countries, whereas India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Pakistan were ranked 108th, 109th, 111th, 124th, and 143rd, respectively. While some of the social indicators demonstrate that women's empowerment in Bangladesh has risen, in many cases their conditions are still deplorable. Most women work as home makers without any remuneration and are denied the respect they deserve from their families and societies for their contributions to managing the home (Uddin *et al.* 2020a).

Although socio-cultural traditions in Bangladesh stimulate women to be confined within their home, globalisation, increased female education and awareness, and structural changes influence them to join paid work and contribute to the socio-economic development of the country (Asian Development Bank 2010). Yet, they still overwhelmingly have to accomplish family and household roles, which ultimately create enormous challenges to their well-being.

COVID-19 and women in Bangladesh

COVID-19 has significantly influenced socio-economic contexts of women in Bangladesh as 91.8 per cent of women are mainly engaged in the informal sector. Household owners and workers, employees in SMEs, daily workers, street vendors, and cleaners, among others, have quickly lost their means of living. Even in many formal sectors, huge job losses for women remains a major concern (UN Women 2020). Pre-COVID-19, women in Bangladesh on average used to accomplish 3.43 times more household chores than men (BBS Gender Statistics 2018). With the closing of educational institutions, all family members staying at home, working from home, and absorbing extra duties of continuous family care are all factors that have further intensified the burden on women during this time. Moreover, women invest more effort and time than ever before in providing emotional support, maintaining cleanliness, supporting adults, and caring for dependents. Poor representation of females

in executive positions of organisations has resulted in the adoption of few gendered initiatives since the emergence of COVID-19. Bangladeshi working women are being disproportionately affected in comparison to men. In particular, women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, but have more work-family pressures. The evidence demonstrates that women's lives have become more challenging, particularly in terms of having a satisfactory work and non-work balance since COVID-19 emerged (Zhang *et al.* 2020).

Work-life balance challenges

Since the emergence of COVID-19, WLB issues have brought increased attention to researchers in diverse societies due to the rapid changes in family and work roles. COVID-19 forced many people to stay at home and reorganise their lives since the home turned into a workplace, school, playground, family sanctuary, and entertainment centre. This implies increased role requirements for women (Anderson and Kelliher 2020). Various studies (Alon *et al.* 2020; Carlson *et al.* 2020) and media reports (Ascher 2020; Manzo 2020; Topping 2020) have demonstrated the challenges to and difficulties of working women's WLB since this pandemic seems to have exacerbated traditional gender stereotypes and inequalities in families and societies.

Scholarship has shown that children and dependents are used to seeking out support and care by turning to their mothers, which ultimately compels mothers to split their time (Collins *et al.* 2020) and is perhaps the key challenge for women during COVID-19. Similar findings have been reported in a study on working mothers (Andrew *et al.* 2020). The pandemic situation has also widened the gender gap and inequalities significantly as reported in a study of Canadian women (Qian and Fuller 2020). It can be assumed that women tend to experience more stress and distortion of work-family interfaces (Craig and Churchill 2020). This may be due to increased time pressure for multitasking requirements including gendered roles.

A Polish and Swedish study has shown that socio-cultural context posed the biggest challenge for women's desired work-life balance (Kurowska 2018). The study also reported a high level of gender difference as a key barrier encountered by women. Similarly, another study (Chung 2020)

demonstrated childcare to be a vital constraint for women. Consistently, national statistics in the UK (ONS 2020) have shown that women spent a greater amount of time on dressing, feeding, washing, supervising, and educating children. Besides, women have reported the challenge of "work from home" as it often leads to work-family conflict, mainly due to the need for uninterrupted connections with the supervisor, offices, clients, and other concerned officials to accomplish job tasks successfully (Van der Lippe and Lippenyi 2018). Further evidence has revealed the issue of workplace interpersonal relational impoverishment, stemming from less face-to-face interactions and infrequent communications with co-workers and bosses (Alon et al. 2020).

In addition, there are some challenges related to socio-cultural norms and beliefs that further place substantial pressure on women. Socio-cultural norms ascribe specific roles and duties on the basis of gendered norms, which then influence career aspirations. Socio-cultural gendered expectations often assume that women will be responsible for household chores and are caregivers, and hence, they perform extra duties exceeding their work roles. Due to this unequal distribution of household work, women cannot equally contribute to their paid work, where socio-cultural norms consider women's professional duties to be secondary to their spouse's family and work. This socio-culturally based preference of women perhaps constitutes the real challenge for women's well-being and empowerment. However, the pandemic situation has created additional challenges of social isolation, increased divorce rates (Grierson 2020), domestic violence, widespread rape, and harassment. Furthermore, the economic depression due to loss of income, likely unemployment, and social insecurity has affected women more as they are more likely to have lost their work, quit their job, and experienced being furloughed or received lower pay due to business downturns (Andrew 2020).

In spite of various challenges, COVID-19 has motivated women to seek a greater work-family balance. Several studies have reported that pandemic situations have increased flexibility for them as employees are either allowed to work from home, work for reduced hours, or work according to alternative schedules. Flexibility potentially facilitates better WLB due to non-commuting and the resultant savings in time and effort, which then can be used for family and relaxation (Powell and Craig 2015). Another motivation during the pandemic has been "work from home" due to lockdowns and strict social distancing due to COVID-19, which may have created greater productivity at home than at the office (Mallet et al. 2020). However, "work from home" imposes a key challenge that COVID-19 has drawn out, namely the complexities of separating family/private life from that of the work domain (Chung 2020). Moreover, teleworking has intensified the amount of time and effort women spend on household and care duties, emphasising and reproducing gender duties in the pandemic workspace (Andrew et al. 2020). In addition, during the pandemic, going to a workplace and sharing workspaces with co-workers has been negatively related to anxiety, stress, and boredom, but positively associated with relaxation, a sense of achievement, relationships, and a break from family roles (Lewis 2020). The motivation and responsibility for WLB also lies within organisational support including training, technology, providing telework devices and furniture, all of which influence employees' psychological and physical well-being and performance (Lautsch et al. 2009).

Although there is scant literature about WLB strategies during COVID-19, other studies have provided some evidence around techniques and strategies working women employ for WLB. For example, a study among women entrepreneurs in Pakistan reported time management, delegating duties, and keeping husbands and families happy as key strategies for WLB (Rehman and Roomi 2012). The study also reported compartmentalising activities and developing vision and commitment as key strategies for women's WLB. Moreover, Clark (2000) demonstrated effective communication and maintaining relationships with fellow employees and family members as influential techniques to attain a satisfactory balance. A study conducted during COVID-19 among female (80 per cent) language teachers reported tolerance for uncertainty, learning to delegate, and learning to manage multiple duties as vital strategies during pandemic situations (MacIntyre et al. 2020). Furthermore, collecting and holding information may help individuals stay updated about recent developments in safety, availability of support, training opportunities, and self-development, which can help them cope with work-family role boundaries (Carnevale and Hatak 2020).

A Bangladeshi case study among women academics reported informal flexibility and avoiding some tasks, such as attending committee meetings, as effective balance strategies adopted by participants (Hossain and Rokis 2016). The study also reported that female academics were used to overloading their male colleagues by delegating some tasks that were originally assigned to them. Other studies among Bangladeshi female bankers found that obtaining co-worker and supervisory instrumental and emotional support, and also family support were primary techniques for achieving effective balance (Uddin *et al*. 2020a; Uddin *et al*. 2020b).

While numerous studies from developed and western contexts have highlighted non-pandemic perspectives, few studies have been conducted with a focus on WLB issues during COVID-19 in a unique context (Lord 2020). Moreover, the existing literature provides inconsistent evidence regarding WLB challenges and strategies from the perspective of Bangladeshi working women. In addressing this gap, this study may enrich the existing literature by providing a gendered understanding about working women's individual and professional aspirations.

Research methodology

This study is based on qualitative exploratory research. A qualitative approach has its basis in social science, and it aims to explore reasons for individuals' attitudes and behaviours (Hossain 2011). According to Creswell (1998), it investigates social and human issues by conducting research in a natural context. Qualitative research helps gain deeper insights into participants' lived perceptions (Goulding 2005). Twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted with working women living in Dhaka and Chittagong to explore lived experiences about their WLB issues. A snowballing approach was used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling focuses on a particular target group as women are less interested in being interviewed and researchers therefore have less access to women (Noy 2008). This technique focuses on requesting friends and relatives to suggest other working women who would be interested in participating (Rahman *et al*. 2020). Each new interviewee was thus asked to suggest someone who would also be willing to participate.

Participants who consented to be interviewed were sent a list of questions via email and/or social media (i.e., WhatsApp and Messenger) to allow them to prepare for the interview. Interviews were conducted during July/August 2020 according to participants' preferred time and locations using Zoom to avoid face-to-face situations and ensure social distancing, as recommended by the World Health Organization. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' prior consent. Interviews lasted around 45 to 60 minutes. All ethical requirements were met. The author transcribed all interviews, read through them several times identifying relevant themes, and transferred them to note cards, which were manually cross-referenced. All authors examined the data and then discussed them in a friendly and trusting atmosphere (cf. Baylina *et al*. 2016; Wilkinson *et al*. 2017).

Research instrument

The author developed a semi-structured questionnaire that encouraged participants to share and discuss working women's opinions and experiences regarding challenges of WLB and to highlight strategies to overcome such challenges. Semi-structured interviews provide the required flexibility and space for participants and they allow the researchers to collect comprehensive and contextualised data. The key semi-structured research questions that guided the interviews were as follows:

- How do you conceptualise work-life balance during the COVID-19?
- What are the challenges relating to work-family balance during COVID-19 in Bangladesh?
- What strategies could you adopt to manage work-family boundaries during COVID-19?

Sample demographics

Sample demographics (Appendix, Table 1) show that participants were aged between 27 and 52 years. The majority of respondents (59 per cent) had over ten years' work experience while 41 per cent had less than ten. Most respondents (86 per cent) had responsibilities for other dependents (parents, father-in-laws and mother-in-laws) and 77 per cent had both children and other dependents. All participants were used to working >40 hours per week with an average of 46 hours.

Data analysis

The analysis began with the researcher developing a "feel" for the interviews, jotting down first impressions and highlighting themes (Wilkinson *et al*. 2017; Wengraf 2011). A structured coding system was applied to all transcriptions to aid the thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used to systematically identify and organise themes found in the data set (Braun and Clark 2006). The author also reviewed and analysed the transcripts to categorise and develop a holistic insight into relevant themes based on inductive epistemology (Gerson and Horowitz 2002). This helps to define the boundaries of a theme, the meaningfulness of the data to support the theme, and it ensures the themes are coherent (Cabral and Lochan Dhar 2019; Castleberry and Nolen 2018). Finally, three relevant themes were identified: motivations for WLB, challenges encountered, and strategies adopted for better WLB.

Findings

Work-life balance

Regarding WLB, participants mainly focused on quality of life. Participants also highlighted gender stereotypes and marriage as key issues of work-family balance. One participant commented that "gendered attitudes really increase our family and social responsibilities, and continuing to work is even tougher as I am responsible for all household chores" (P7). Accordingly, another participant highlighted that "marriage imposes tremendous burden and after marriage managing work and non-work duties has become really difficult as I am ultimately responsible to fulfill all family members' expectations" (P3). These comments demonstrate how gendered issues and marriage affect the concept of WLB. Participants focused on spousal and family support as key aspects of role balance:

We think cooperative and supportive husbands and in-laws are imperative for overall quality of life. Mainly, if a husband remains supportive and encouraging then nothing can prevent their in life and professional arena (P2, P8, P13, and P21).

This highlights the significance of family support and a husband's cooperation in working women's quality of life during COVID-19 and beyond. Besides, co-workers, supervisors, organi-sational support, and workplace environment have also influenced WLB during the pandemic situation. This is critical because during COVID-19 domestic workers' aid has not been available. Some participants stressed that if work-family imbalance/conflicts prevail, frustration and poor performance might dominate both domains. Work-family conflicts during the pandemic situation tend to increase mental illness and sleeping disorders, which in turn reduce psychological strength (Carnevale and Hatak 2020). This is reflected in the following remark:

There shall not be any conflict in doing multiple tasks at work-place and home. If you cannot manage both roles effectively in pursuit of attaining overall quality of life, it will bring negative impact on both domains and it is better leaving the job to give full concentration on household and care duties (P16).

This remark postulates that working women have to spend effort and time to accomplish multiple roles of work and beyond. Some participants hinted that integration of work and family commitments is a must for a meaningful work-life interface, rather than keeping them detached. However, two respondents (P12 and P18) explained the effects of work-life conflicts, commenting that:

Meaningful balance is an indispensable part of women's life and essential during COVID-19 especially due to the absence of domestic workers' support. If there is an imbalance in one's work, it will be disappointing for her. And if there is a lack of balance in the family domain it will be more frustrating. In all respects, both work and career development hamper wellbeing and create stress.

The above statement illustrates the importance of domestic workers as they help working women accomplish domestic jobs, including cleaning, washing, cooking, and caring for children and/or elderly persons (Bick 2017; Rani and Saluja 2017) across the country, especially in urban Bangladesh. However, consistent with previous studies (Carnevale and Hatak 2020), this study highlighted that meaningful WLB positively influences women's well-being and a lack of balance negatively influences their quality of life. To summarise, participants primarily highlighted an increased amount of effort and time, socio-cultural gendered norms, and family and marriage in their conceptualisation of WLB during COVID-19.

Motivations for WLB

Work-flexibility and work from home

Participants mainly highlighted "flexibility and work from home" as a key motivator in their effective work-family balance. Since the emergence of COVID-19, most people started working from home out of necessity to avoid the risk of being infected by coronavirus, but it has also offered greater flexibility to manage work and non-work duties. As respondents commented:

Work from home provides more flexibility with no commute and more time for family and leisure (P9). Work from home increases our productivity more so than office working (P14). The working hours at home are positively related to work and family satisfaction, and negatively related to stress and burnout (P11). The bigger flexibility provided by work from home facilitates avoidance of family roles interfering with work (P17).

This finding is consistent with previous studies that reported flexibility and work from home as key issues that have influenced women's ability to enrich their WLB during COVID-19 (ONS 2020). The participants pragmatically considered "work from home" as a double-edged sword for stimulating flexibility of work as well as for efficiently managing household chores and care. The greater flexibility provided by work from home helps to avoid family roles interfering with work roles, thereby making it easier to integrate work and family roles with no commute and more effort and time for family and leisure (Powell and Craig 2015). One respondent stated:

I have two children and in-laws in my house, and working at the office would not give me much time to spend with them and for taking care of them. I cannot manage many hours of time and energy for my work at office as well. But, during COVID-19 due to work from home I have much time and energy to accomplish both the roles effectively. My children and I are getting each other very closely and no frustration is there. During the pandemic situation, my employer and family members are both happy with my performance. Work from home gives me a lot actually. It offers me confidence, love and affection for and from my family members, gives me money, autonomy to meet with my spouse and children along with good working for my job (P20).

The above statement reveals that "home-working" may be an effective means of attaining a desired balance through providing flexibility and facilitating satisfaction with work and family. It also boosts confidence and the ability to contribute to the patriarchal society through enhancing autonomy, lowering work-family conflicts, and improving performance at work and home even in the midst of a crisis situation. In this regard, studies reported that work from home builds resilience, solidarity among family members, and affection due to staying home for a long time (Andrew *et al.* 2020; Rahman and Mendy 2019).

The effectiveness of "work from home" also lies with its ability to minimise role conflicts, which is a common phenomenon for women while working full-time in the workplace. Work-life conflicts arise due to multiple role pressure, gender stereotypes, socio-cultural traditions, and diverse expectations from working women (Lewis 2020). Due to these conflicts, supervisors, managers, and employers are unlikely to assign female employees challenging assignments and opportunities. As participants commented:

By staying home I can well manage my work, meeting, family, and other responsibilities (P1). I can set my priorities and accordingly accomplish duties and allocate time and energy. I can fulfill both my work and family responsibilities without any conflicts of interest (P7). My children can well attend the online classes during COVID-19 and can accomplish their daily school homework. My daughter is very expert in computing technology and helps me do some documentation, during which I accomplish other homework. Actually this is the way I balance my work and life and the benefit I have due to work from home (P19).

Considering the effectiveness of "work from home", organisations such as Fujitsu have introduced their Work-Life Shift (BBC News 2020), and Twitter has declared that "employees can work from home forever" (Grierson 2020). These organisations have also begun discussions with employees to ensure the best approach forward in addressing employee expectations while fulfilling organisational needs. Thus, consistent with these, "flexibility and work from home" is acknowledged as an essential aspect of promoting Bangladeshi women's work-family experience.

Spousal support

Participants recognised support from family members and their husband as key meaningful factors in work-life experience. Such support is not only effective during the pandemic situation but has always been. As one participant commented:

I find my husband very cooperative and encouraging. I cannot mention for what he does not help me. It does not matter whether I stay at home or not, he helps me in cooking, cleaning, washing, and caring of my children. Since COVID-19 he has become so cooperative that actually makes me keep going at any circumstances. Thus, I am not worried at all about any issue as long as he has been here. I have never faced any problem either related to my work or family (P19).

This remark indicates that family and husband also make worthy contributions to promoting women's overall quality of life. It also suggests that the traditional socio-cultural and family norms, and gendered attitudes of not recognising women's preferences may be transforming into more cooperative and favourable attitudes towards women.

Organisational support

Participants also highlighted organisational supports, such as extra incentives for working at the office and reduced daily working hours on weekdays during COVID-19, as important stimulants of their WLB. Moreover, some participants highlighted that in order to adjust to the "new normal", organisations are letting employees choose their own hours and alternative working days and they reported that this is a huge bonus for working women in a workplace. According to one respondent:

My organization has undertaken additional initiatives such as providing transport facilities with all safety measures, giving additional incentives, reducing daily and weekly working hours and days to save employees' time, energy, and money, and alleviating the stress of being infected. Encourage employees to take breaks, take a walk or even work in an entirely different part of the office. You can create break-out rooms or set aside spare desks that workers can go to. Sometimes team chatter and phones can be overwhelming and it's healthy to break away for a bit (P13).

This statement demonstrates that organisational supports also help employees manage their work-family roles. Some participants highlighted additional incentives for doing work in the workplace and encouraging women especially to work from home as long as they feel safe. They also hinted at the flexibility in terms of schedules and work volumes for women employees as well as supervisors' and co-workers' cooperation. One participant stated that "due to social support from my colleagues, boss, and organisation, I never feel too exhausted to work hard in this pandemic situation"

(P11). These findings are consistent with previous studies on social support that also found social support from supervisors and co-workers to significantly influence WLB of female bankers (Uddin *et al.* 2020a; Uddin *et al.* 2020b).

Challenges of work-life balance

Regarding challenges, participants focused on extreme work pressure, spouse's non-cooperation in household duties, socio-cultural and family traditions, and gendered issues as critical challenges women face in their daily lives. Respondents further highlighted that their primary domestic and family duties beyond their work roles compel them to work harder for longer hours, which ultimately affects their overall well-being. As one participant illustrated:

I do not have personal happiness. From dawn to dusk work has been part of my life. There is no space for comfort, leisure, rest, and pleasure. Late sleeping (around 1:30am) and getting up early in morning (around 5am) have become common practices of my life after marriage. Otherwise, because of work I could not accomplish my domestic roles (P5).

Respondents further stressed that non-cooperation from spouses and other family members also often posed a bigger challenge due to socio-cultural and family traditions. As some interviewees commented:

No male family member would like to extend any cooperation in doing domestic chores. It is very unusual for men to take over family roles as they are treated as breadwinners of their family (P2). Being involved in any family duties and supporting their wives/counterparts are regarded as dishonourable and an embarrassment for men and sound odd in terms of their societal and family status. So, I have to be very selective to see where he feels comfortable enough to support me without any humiliation (P7).

The above-mentioned challenge is innate to societal and familial norms that encourage differential treatment for male and female members. These differences have established the gender stereotypes that exacerbate uneven distribution of work and resources between males and females, and different expectations and behaviours in the family and society (Eagly and Karau 2002). Thus, women focused on male members' societal and familial status and prestige also pose a greater challenge for a meaningful work-life interface. Sometimes, behaviours and attitudes of some women might cause key

challenges for other women, which are reflected in the following passage:

There are widespread jealousy, comparison, and competition among women in our society. Women are competing more with each other than the men are. Indoor politics are extensive along with backbiting, backstabbing and leg pulling. When I started my job, my in-laws did not believe in female doing jobs outside home and they used to say "our daughter-in-law's engagement in job outside home does loss of our family and social status, we do not want money but status" (P16).

The above statement shows that Bangladeshi women in the twenty-first century are still facing challenges due to the negative attitudes of women towards other women. Such problems also appear to exist in organisational workplaces, as stated by another participant:

Employees (male and female) are less likely to accept women as their boss (P22). The greater challenge is professional engagements, and devotion. Once I commit anything I have to do that no one would like to accept any excuse especially in the case of children's illness and looking after dependents (P9).

Participants also highlighted that joint family structures also pose vital challenges as they have to carry out additional duties to keep in-laws and others happy. This might be due to the fact that if one cannot satisfy one's spouse's family members, they may not allow her to work smoothly, which may lead to greater role conflicts. On the other hand, some participants focused on living in the nuclear family as a key challenge for their careers since there is no noone (in-laws and sister-in-laws) to look after their children and to help them in doing other domestic activities. Furthermore, the unavailability of domestic workers during the pandemic situation was also highlighted by participants as a key challenge as they are useful for Bangladeshi families, particularly in urban areas, in accomplishing a wide range of domestic jobs. For example, one participant commented:

Due to absence of domestic workers, I work for unbelievably long hours to cook, wash, and look after kids, and to upkeep the house in general. I cannot even mention what I do not do practically………thus I have room for my private sphere (P17).

The findings demonstrate that long working hours and absence of domestic workers during COVID-19 have also fuelled working women's work-family conflicts.

Addressing WLB challenges

Regarding strategies and techniques that women utilise to attain desired WLB, respondents mainly stressed recognising priorities, figuring out how to work around others in their household, streamlining work responsibilities, managing work platforms, making time for relaxation, managing the household, and creating a designated workspace. Interviewees also highlighted maintaining a healthy lifestyle, becoming a "well-rounded individual", and offering perks as effective techniques. However, most respondents highlighted proper management of time and resources for a meaningful work-family balance. As one participant stated:

Managing time is very essential for role balance as effective time must be given to both roles; keeping a time log of everything you do for one week, including work-related and personal activities. This data will serve as an eye-opener, helping you understand how you are using – and where you are losing – your time (P15).

Managing stress was also regarded as a useful strategy in managing work-family obligations. As some respondents expressed:

It is vital to manage stress smartly during the pandemic situation. Recognizing the things that might lead you to burnout at work is also important. Managing stress can be a big drain on one's physical and emotional resources (P1).

Respondents highlighted the necessity of getting outside support from domestic assistants and engaging family members in household chores as a means of attaining desired WLB. Besides, building relationships and effective communication with both family members and fellow employees were also stressed. As one respondent commented:

Before going to the office I have to prepare breakfast and lunch for all family members and again after coming back in the evening I have to prepare supper. My family members (in-laws, kids, husband, and sister-in-law) like food items cooked by me very much. I have to shop for them (sister-in-law, and in-laws) and present them gifts (laughter) for keeping them happy (P3).

Participants also focused on keeping their husbands happy, as well as self-motivation, as key techniques to juggle work-family obligations. Respondents highlighted the role of children and other dependents in minimising the workload since they can help by listening to working women's experience, sharing household chores and even some work roles such as computer drafting, sorting, filing

etc. Such supports enable employees to perform better, hence leading to family-work enrichment (Siu *et al*. 2015). As one participant explained:

If you want to be successful in your profession, you have to be self-motivated and doing everything in pursuit of your vision. To do all this, husband, children, and other family members' support is an ultimate approach (P6).

Participants further stressed the importance of managing their professional and personal lives in sustainable ways that keep their energy flowing, minds and bodies healthy, and whole selves happy and content. This involves giving due attention to work, career, health, family and relationships, spirituality, hobbies and passions, stimulations, rest, and recreation. One woman described it as follows:

Creating inspirational banners around you about what you want to achieve in life will cause you to be more productive. As we think, so we become, creating signposts for your mind to follow so that you spend more time thinking about the things that you want rather than just thinking about what others want.

The interviewees focused on listing priorities and turning them into concrete and measurable outcomes. Participants highlighted achieving a healthy WLB during the "new normal" situation is like becoming a professional athlete or training for a triathlon. It takes a concerted and continued effort to get in shape and to stay that way for health and quality of life benefits. Respondents further highlighted some strategies to manage stresses such as doing exercise, seeking out happiness, and social support from family members, supervisors, and colleagues. Previous studies reported that exercise and sleep boosts mood and helps deal with daily challenges effectively (Craig and Churchill 2020). Similarly, social networks function as a stress buffer and are critical for being able to cope with stressors (Cook *et al*. 2009). With all the strategies to overcome challenges and manage stressors, working women can achieve better well-being (Zheng *et al*. 2015). Such strategies are also effective in the Bangladeshi context where well-being is generally poor.

Discussion

COVID-19 has exposed greater challenges for working women in juggling their work-family obligations (Anderson and Kelliher 2020). In order to address these challenges, women have adopted several strategies and techniques in pursuit of enriching their work-life experience. However, there is limited empirical evidence about working women's perceptions of WLB, driving forces, challenges, strategies, and techniques in the "new normal" context. Thus, in addressing this research gap, this study has provided valuable insights into women's experience of work-family obligations in the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh. Employing a qualitative approach, themes to emerge included: (1) concept of WLB; (2) motivational forces of WLB; (3) challenges that women encounter in balancing between work and family roles; and (4) strategies and techniques adopted by participants to attain WLB.

Various respondents explained the concept of WLB in different ways. However, respondents viewed dependent care and household chores as vital, since women recognised spending time and energy on non-work commitments as basic aspects of WLB. Husbands' and other family members' support were also acknowledged as essential because women with these supports were reported to have a better work-life interface than those without these supports. The participants highlighted work-flexibility and work from home/teleworking as key drivers of WLB during the "new normal" situation. These were successful due to effective time management as they saved them from having to commutem creating time that could then be devoted to family obligations. Participants further attributed organisational supports such as providing additional incentives, undertaking strict safety measures, allowing flexibility, and emotional and instrumental support from fellow employees and supervisors as part of working in the workplace during COVID-19. These findings are consistent with previous studies on social support and WLB (Uddin *et al*. 2020a; Uddin *et al*. 2020b).

A key challenge women encountered involved a lack of time and resources successfully allocated for work-family commitments. The interviewees reported non-cooperation from husbands in doing domestic roles, socio-cultural and family traditions, and established gender stereotypes as significant challenges for women's WLB. Due to multiple work and non-work obligations, women usually work long hours and devote more energy to work than men, which then leads to more WLB conflicts (Uddin *et al*. 2020a). By contrast, during the pandemic situation, employees, but particularly women, have been enjoying flexibility in terms

of schedules and workloads; this helps because it has been demonstrated that time constraints and stress tend not to provide a desired balance to women.

The established socio-cultural and familial traditions and standards that prefer women to be primarily responsible for care and household duties also pose key challenges for women (Ahl 2007). These socio-cultural norms are even more difficult in a Bangladeshi context than a western one where spouses and in-laws might not have a substantial and negative influence on women's empowerment. Due to deep-rooted socio-cultural and family norms, as well as gender stereotypes, women have a lower status than men in Bangladeshi families and society (Uddin *et al*. 2020b). Consequently, women are less competitive than men due to uneven non-work obligations that impede their career success. That might also have resulted in fewer women in private and public corporate levels in Bangladeshi organisations, which possibly further exacerbates a lack of women-centred policies regarding women's empowerment.

The juggling of women's domestic responsibilities and their work roles create substantial pressure making it very challenging to manage both obligations. The societal and family expectations of being ideal homemakers and mothers along with paid work also poses a key challenge for many women. Thus, women have to experience a high inter-role interference which negatively affects their performance. The excessive effort creates several physical and mental disorders that have become more evident during the "new normal" situation (Zhang *et al*. 2020). Hence, this study suggests that a woman's progress and contribution is constrained by her societal, cultural, gendered, and family norms.

Regarding strategies to address such challenges, participants emphasised effective time management, developing individual efficacies, establishing and maintaining relationships and communication with family members and fellow employees, and keeping spouses and other family members happy as effective strategies to enrich the work-family experience. This evidence is distinct in a South Asian context where work and non-work roles are regulated by traditional socio-cultural, familial, and religious beliefs. However, women also focused on getting domestic workers' aid, self-motivation, setting priorities, devoting one's

efforts and time, and making a concerted effort towards attaining work-life aspirations.

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings reveal that traditional gendered perspectives, societal and family norms, and marriage primarily constitute the concept of WLB. Furthermore, flexibility and work from home, family and spousal support, and organisational support appear to motivate working women's work-family interface. Findings have also demonstrated that established socio-cultural traditions, gendered stereotypes, tremendous pressure to manage multiple work-family commitments, and negative attitudes of both men and women towards working women are key challenges encountered by women in balancing work and family spheres. These challenges lead to the ultimate overlapping of work-family roles. Previous studies have suggested viewing work and family spheres as inseparably intertwined perspectives with visible influence on each other that cannot function independently and be treated as distinct entities (Aldrich and Cliff 2003; Akter *et al*. 2019). While working, women have to acknowledge that each sphere cannot function independently or be treated as distinct entities. To this end, this study also postulates that employed women should observe WLB as a distinct issue to be addressed by employing a unique set of strategies and techniques such as prioritising roles, managing time and stress, getting husband and family support in keeping them happy, and sustainable management of work and personal life. Hence, by combining the professional and family domains, employed women may have better performance during COVID-19 due to the power of integrating both domains.

Limitations and directions for future studies

By addressing the research gap of few empirical studies being available that address work-family issues of working women during the pandemic situation, this study contributes to the field of work-life literature of employed women from a Muslim South Asian emerging economy perspective, specifically Bangladesh. This study has utilised a relatively small sample of 22 working women, employed in several organisations from only two

large cities: Dhaka and Chittagong. Conducting quantitative studies, including a larger sample from various cities in other countries would make generalising the findings possible. Validity of our findings is limited to the analysis and interpretation of the current data set and the capacity to explore relevant themes. In Bangladesh, women in rural areas are also involved in income-generating activities. Therefore, a comparative analysis focusing on both rural and urban working women is suggested. Besides, this study has apparently focused on educated working women involved in white-collar jobs and living in privileged families only, thus unintentionally disregarding the challenges confronted by women working in blue-collar jobs. Thus, future research could include a more heterogeneous sample of working women from both white and blue-collar jobs.

This study has included only the perceptions of women. Future research may include men and compare their perceptions during the pandemic situation, which may provide better understandings on gendered perspectives relating to the work-family interface as potentially informed by differences in societal and familial role expectations. Moreover, further studies may examine how stress influences work-life experiences of women as they have to undergo more stress than men due to their ultimate responsibility to accomplish their family roles along with their professional ones.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix

TABLE 1. Demographic profile of the participants

Participants	Age	Length of service	Marital Status	No. of Child	No. of dependents	Working hours/week
P1	28	04	Married	00	02	46
P2	31	07	Married	02	01	42
P3	38	11	Married	03	00	40
P4	29	05	Married	01	00	42
P5	42	16	Married	02	01	44
P6	37	15	Married	02	02	48
P7	30	05	Married	01	02	50
P8	34	9.5	Married	02	01	46
P9	43	18	Married	03	03	48
P10	42	18	Married	02	01	48
P11	44	20	Married	03	01	50
P12	32	08	Married	01	02	50
P13	36	11	Married	02	00	46
P14	28	04	Married	01	02	45
P15	25	02	Married	00	01	44
P16	29	06	Married	01	01	42
P17	39	15	Married	02	02	40
P18	43	18	Married	02	02	50
P19	46	21	Married	03	02	48
P20	41	17	Married	02	01	52
P21	34	11	Married	02	01	46
P22	39	15	Married	02	01	48