

Work -Life Conflict and Coping Strategies among Staff of Higher Institutions in Imo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of work–life conflict (WLC) experienced by staff of selected higher institutions of learning in Imo State, Nigeria, and to identify the coping strategies adopted to reduce WLC.

Design/methodology/approach: Using a structured questionnaire, data were collected from 343 participants (teaching and non-teaching staff) employed in two selected institutions in Imo State, Nigeria. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection.

Findings: The study revealed that more females experienced WLC than males, largely due to caregiver strain and domestic responsibilities. Age, length of service, and educational status were identified as predictors of WLC. The coping strategies adopted by respondents included family-based, individual-based, and organizational strategies.

Research limitations/implications: The study covered a limited number of institutions and respondents; therefore, its findings may not be generalizable to all universities in Nigeria.

Practical implications: The study advocates for the implementation of flexible work hours, particularly for married staff, as a practical measure to reduce both work-to-family and family-to-work conflicts.

Social implications: Female respondents highlighted the use of domestic help, religious engagement, rest, extracurricular activities, and planning as individual coping mechanisms. Counseling services and maternity leave were identified as organizational work–life balance (WLB) initiatives that helped reduce WLC. The study recommends that spouses share domestic and family responsibilities to further mitigate WLC.

Originality/value: This research is the first to evaluate work–life conflict and coping methods among staff of higher institutions in Imo State, Nigeria.

Paper type: Research paper

Keywords: Work–life conflict, coping strategies, higher education institutions, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Dynamic changes in demography, employment, and organizational structures have increased the demands from both family and work domains, thereby intensifying experiences of work–life conflict (WLC) (Sanse' au &

Smith, 2012). Previous studies have modeled the relationships among work–family boundaries, WLC, workload, and employees’ turnover intentions (Kamboj, 2025). Similarly, recent research has examined the factors influencing WLC and the impact of pandemics on work–life balance (Dong, Xu, & Zhang, 2025).

Historically, scholars have sought to establish equilibrium between work and personal life—commonly referred to as work–life balance (WLB). However, perfect balance appears unattainable, as some degree of role conflict is inevitable. Consequently, rather than seeking complete equilibrium, it is essential to develop strategies to minimize or cope with WLC. Balancing the demands of professional and personal life has become a global concern for both employers and employees. Over the years, organizations in developed countries—and increasingly in developing nations—have introduced WLB initiatives designed to support employees’ ability to manage dual responsibilities. Such initiatives include on-site childcare, eldercare, flexible schedules, parental and maternity leave, employee assistance programs, and educational workshops, all of which have been shown to reduce WLC (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006).

The concept of work–leisure separation emerged in the mid-1800s (Burke, 1995; Die Methodologien des, 2014). Anthropologists have suggested that happiness arises from minimizing the divide between work and leisure (Krassner et al., 1963). WLB thus involves prioritizing work (career and ambition) alongside lifestyle domains such as health, leisure, family, and spiritual development (Tahir, 2024). WLB encompasses daily achievement and satisfaction across four life quadrants: work, family, friends, and self (Tahir, 2024; Bella, 2023),

Osterman (1995) described WLB practices as formal and informal organizational arrangements that enable individuals to manage the conflicting demands of work and non-work domains. Common statutory policies that promote WLB include maternity benefits, flexible work schedules, telecommuting, job sharing, and parental leave. Additionally, employee assistance programs—such as counseling and stress management—support WLB (Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). Baral and Bhargava (2009) further classified WLB supports into three categories: policies (e.g., flexible hours, job sharing), benefits (e.g., paid leave, health insurance), and services (e.g., on-site childcare and eldercare programs).

Globally, WLB initiatives are recognized as vital tools for preventing role conflict and enhancing employee well-being, regardless of family status. Consequently, human resource management has increasingly prioritized WLB as a strategic focus area (Alma, Colette, & Geraldine, 2010).

Recent global data underscore the importance of WLB. A 2024 global work–life balance index ranked ten countries—New Zealand, Ireland, Belgium, Denmark, Canada, Germany, Finland, Australia, Norway, and Spain—as the best performers based on indicators such as statutory annual leave, paid maternity leave, and average working hours (Global Work–Life Balance Report, 2024). This ranking guides individuals seeking employment abroad by highlighting nations with favorable WLB policies.

Furthermore, post–COVID-19 surveys indicate that employees now place greater emphasis on WLB than ever before. Many workers consider flexible work arrangements a stronger motivator than salary, and they are increasingly willing to resign from organizations that fail to provide such flexibility (Partridge, 2025).

Previous studies have shown that women are particularly vulnerable to WLC. Mathew and Panchanatham (2011) identified role overload, dependent care, health concerns, poor time management, and limited social support as major factors influencing WLB among female entrepreneurs. Similarly, Lakshmi and Gopinath (2013) reported that many female academic staff work 40–45 hours per week, with 53% struggling to achieve WLB. The dual responsibilities of work and home have thus turned women’s lives into a “juggling act.”

This study therefore seeks to investigate the nature of WLC among employees of selected higher institutions in Imo State, Nigeria, and to identify the coping strategies they employ to manage such conflicts.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study was to investigate the pattern of work–life conflict (WLC) and the coping methods adopted by employees of selected higher institutions in Imo State, Nigeria.

The specific objectives were to:

1. Identify the WLC index of the study population.
2. Assess the WLC index of respondents by sex.
3. Examine the WLC index of respondents by age.
4. Determine the distribution of work absences occasioned by family-related challenges.
5. Examine the extent to which respondents' workplaces permit religious activities.
6. Determine the distribution of respondents with domestic assistance (house help).
7. Assess the proportion of respondents with eldercare responsibilities.
8. Evaluate the distribution of organizational work–life balance strategies.
9. Determine the distribution of respondents expressing the intention to leave their jobs.

Research Questions

To guide the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is the WLC index of the study population?
2. What is the WLC index of respondents by sex?
3. What is the WLC index of respondents by age?
4. What is the distribution of work absences occasioned by family-related challenges?
5. To what extent do respondents' workplaces permit religious activities?
6. What proportion of respondents employs domestic help?
7. What proportion of respondents has eldercare responsibilities?
8. What organizational work–life balance strategies are available to respondents?
9. What proportion of respondents expressed the desire to leave their jobs?

Research Hypotheses

Based on the objectives and research questions, the following null hypotheses were proposed:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between work–life conflict and the dominant individual coping strategies used by employees.

H₀₂: Employee-driven coping strategies for managing work–life conflict are not significantly more effective than organizational strategies.

Conceptual Framework

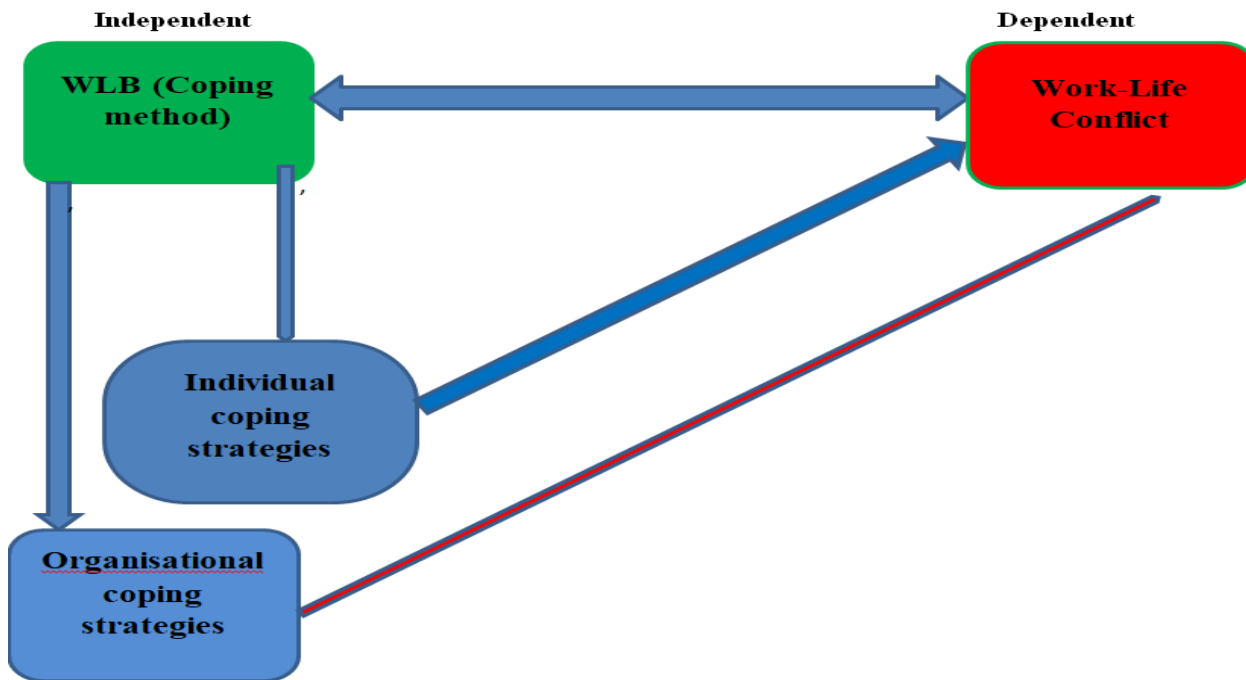


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Source: Researcher's Design (2025)

The independent variables include: Demographic factors (sex, age, marital status, educational qualification, and length of service); Family-related factors (caregiver responsibilities, household demands) and Organizational factors (workload, flexibility, institutional policies, and support mechanisms). While the dependent variables include:

Level of work–life conflict (work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict); Coping strategies adopted (individual, family, and organizational strategies)

This framework assumes that demographic, family, and organizational factors influence the degree of WLC experienced by employees, and that the coping strategies adopted can mediate or reduce the negative effects of WLC.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a survey research design, which involves the systematic collection of data from a defined population to describe and analyze existing conditions, practices, opinions, or behaviors. This design was appropriate for obtaining data from a large number of participants and for identifying patterns of work–life conflict and coping mechanisms among staff of selected higher institutions in Imo State, Nigeria.

Types and Sources of Data

Two types of data were utilized in this study—primary and secondary data.

Primary data were obtained through structured questionnaires administered to teaching and non-teaching staff of the selected institutions.

Secondary data were gathered from institutional records, reports, and relevant literature.

Population and Sample Size Determination

The study population consisted of all employees of two higher education institutions in Imo State—the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO) and the Federal Polytechnic, Nekede (FEDPOLY). The population distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table: Population of the study

Name of institution	Population	Married	Not married
FUTO	2210	1437	773
FEDPOLY	1590	954	636

Sources: FUTO Records and Federal Polytechnic Nekede Records (2024)

The sample size was determined using the Yamane formula (Yamane, 1967, as cited in Singh & Masuku, 2014):

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = total population

e = allowable error (0.05)

Applying the formula:

$$n = \frac{2391}{1 + 2391(0.05)^2} = \frac{2391}{6.98} \approx 343$$

Thus, a sample of 343 respondents was drawn.

Considering institutional proportions, 60% of respondents (206) were selected from FUTO and 40% (137) from FEDPOLY. The sample comprised both academic and non-academic staff across faculties, departments, schools, and administrative units.

Sampling Technique

A purposive (judgmental) sampling technique was used to select respondents, focusing specifically on married employees, who are more likely to experience work–family conflict. Research assistants from each institution assisted in identifying eligible participants.

Instrument for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was the primary instrument used for data collection. The questionnaire was divided into sections covering demographic information, work–life conflict indicators, and coping strategies. This method was appropriate because it allowed for confidentiality, ease of data collection, and inclusion of a large number of respondents.

Validity of the Instrument

Content validity was established through expert review by professionals in human resource management and psychology. In addition, a pilot test involving 20 respondents (excluded from the final sample) was conducted to refine the questionnaire and eliminate ambiguous or irrelevant items. The study also employed measurement

scales adapted from previous validated studies, including Netemeyer et al. (1996), whose work–family and family–work conflict scales demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach’s alpha > 0.7). Permission was obtained from the authors before adaptation.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient to evaluate internal consistency. Following Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998), a coefficient of 0.70 or higher was considered acceptable. Items with reliability values below 0.60 were excluded from analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 23.0 and Minitab 16.

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means) were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents and to answer the research questions.

Pearson’s correlation coefficient (r) was used to test the relationship between WLC variables and coping strategies.

Bi-serial correlation analysis was conducted to compare the effectiveness of individual versus organizational coping strategies.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Table 2: Distribution and return of questionnaire

Institutions	Number of questionnaires administered	%	Number of questionnaires returned	%	Number of questionnaires not returned	%
FUTO	206	60	188	55	18	5
FEDPLOY	137	40	106	31	31	9
Total	343	100	294	86	49	14

A total of 343 questionnaires were distributed to respondents, of which 294 were returned, representing a response rate of 86%. Respondents were drawn from the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO) and the Federal Polytechnic, Nekede (FEDPOLY), see table 2.

Table 3: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable/Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	129	43.9

Female	165	56.1
Total	294	100.0
Age group		
20-29years	33	11.2
30-39years	93	31.6
40-49years	114	38.8
50-59years	47	16.0
60years and above	6	2.0
Sub Total	293	99.7
Missing	1	.3
Total	294	100.0
Marital Status		
Single	10	3.4
Married	270	91.8
separated/divorced	7	2.4
Widowed	5	1.7
Sub Total	292	99.3
Missing	2	.7
Total	294	100.0
Educational Qualification		
O Level / Trade test	17	5.8
OND/NCE	61	20.7
HND/ 1st Degree	118	40.1
2nd Degree	53	18.0
Any other higher degree (like PhD)	43	14.6
Sub Total	292	99.3
Missing	2	.7
Total	294	100.0

Of the 294 respondents, 165 (56.1%) were female and 129 (43.9%) were male. The majority of participants (38.8%) were aged between 40 and 49 years, while only 2% were aged 60 years and above. Most respondents (91.8%) were married, and the highest educational qualification reported was a first degree (40.1%), followed by second degrees (18.0%) and doctoral degrees (14.6%), see table 3.

Table 4: Length of service of respondents

Length of Service		Frequency	Percent
Valid	1-10years	155	52.7
	11-20years	93	31.6
	21years and above	37	12.6
	Total	285	96.9
Missing	.00	9	3.1
Total		294	100.0

Table 5: Respondents with child's responsibility

Response		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	227	77.2
Missing	No	67	22.8
Total		294	100.0

Regarding employment history, 52.7% of respondents had worked for 1–10 years, while 31.6% had served for 11–20 years. About 77.2% of respondents had children living with them, suggesting active family responsibilities among the workforce, see tables 4 and 5.

Table 6: Assessment of respondents' work-life conflict index

Work Life Conflict		Frequency	Percent
	Low Work Life Conflict	103	35.0
	Average Work Life Conflict	151	51.4
	High Work Life Conflict	40	13.6
	Total	294	100.0

Table 7: Work Life Conflict index of respondents by Sex

WLC index		Frequency	Percent
Low Work Life Conflict	Male	50	48.5
	Female	53	51.5

	Total	103	100.0
Average Work Life Conflict	Male	62	41.1
	Female	89	58.9
	Total	151	100.0
High Work Life Conflict	Male	17	41.5
	Female	24	58.5
		Total 41	100.0

Table 8: Work Life Conflict index of respondents by Length of Service

Average WLC index			Frequency	Percent
Low Work Life Conflict		1-10years	57	55.3
		11-20years	31	30.1
		21years and above	13	12.6
		Total	101	98.1
	Missing		2	1.9
	Total		103	100.0
Average Work Life Conflict	Valid	1-10years	76	50.3
		11-20years	50	33.1
		21years and above	20	13.2
		Total	146	96.7
	Missing		6	3.3
	Total		151	100.0
High Work Life Conflict		1-10years	23	56.1
		11-20years	12	34.1
		21years and above	4	9.8
		Total	39	100.0

The analysis revealed that 35% of respondents experienced low WLC, 51.4% had average WLC, and 13.6% had high WLC. This suggests that work–life conflict was a moderate but prevalent challenge among the study population, table 6.

By sex, female respondents consistently reported higher WLC scores than their male counterparts, supporting the notion of gendered experiences of work–life strain, see table 7. Similarly, respondents with shorter work

experience (1–10 years) recorded the highest WLC index, indicating that younger or less tenured employees face greater conflict between professional and domestic responsibilities figure 8.

Table 9: Distribution of respondents whose spouse share domestic work

Response			Frequency	Percent
No		Male	100	73.5
		Female	36	26.5
		Total	136	100.0
Yes		Male	28	17.70
		Female	130	82.3
		Total	158	100.0

Table 10: Respondents with child's responsibility

Response		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	227	77.2
Missing	No	67	22.8
Total		294	100.0

Table 11: Distribution of respondents with elder caregiver responsibility

Response			Frequency	Percent
No	Valid	Male	45	42.6
		Female	62	57.4
		Total	107	100.0
Yes	Valid	Male	83	44.4
		Female	104	55.6
		Total	187	100.0

Table 12: Distribution of work absences occasioned by family challenges

Response			Frequency	Percent
Yes	Valid	Male	52	38.5
		Female	83	61.5
		Total	135	100.0

No	Valid	Male	77	48.1
		Female	83	51.9
		Total	160	100.0

Findings indicated that females were more likely than males to engage in domestic work. About 82.3% of females and 17.7% of males reported sharing household duties, table 9 while 77.2% of all respondents had children living with them, see table 10. Additionally, 55.6% of females reported eldercare responsibilities, compared with 44.4% of males, reflecting greater caregiving burdens on women (tables 11).

Work absences due to family challenges were more frequent among women (61.5%) than men (38.5%), indicating a stronger family-to-work conflict among female staff (tables 12).

Table 13: Distribution of Corporate Work-Life Balance Strategies

Work-Life Balance Programmes			Frequency	Percent
		On-site child care	48	16.33
		Counseling	129	43.87
		Elder-care	6	2.04
		Maternity benefit	62	21.09
		Parental/family leave	11	3.74
		Total	256	87.07
	Missing	.00	38	12.93
Total			294	100.0

Respondents reported limited institutional support for balancing work and family responsibilities. Among available programs, counseling services (43.9%) and maternity benefits (21.1%) were the most common. Eldercare programs (2.0%) and parental/family leave (3.7%) were rarely offered, suggesting weak institutional frameworks for promoting work–life balance, see table 13 above.

Table 14: Individual coping strategies used to reduce Work Life Conflict

Individual coping strategies		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Time Management	31	10.5
	Planning by Objective	62	21.0
	Prayer/Church activities	21	7.1
	Job Sharing among family members	29	9.8
	Rest/Extra curriculum activities	73	24.7
	High Moral standard/High Self Esteem	42	14.2

	Advocacy for better working condition	5	1.7
	Total	263	89.2
Missing	00	31	10.8
Total		294	100.0

Respondents employed a combination of individual, family, and organizational strategies to manage WLC. The most common individual coping strategies were:

Rest and extracurricular activities (24.7%),

Planning and time management (21.0%), and

High moral standards/self-esteem (14.2%), while the least reported strategy was advocacy for better working conditions (1.7%), see table 14.

Table 15: Correlation between average work life conflict and rest as individual strategy

		AVEWLC	Rest as individual strategy
AVEWLC	Pearson Correlation	1	.102
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.079
	N	294	294
Rest as individual strategy	Pearson Correlation	.102	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.079	
	N	294	294

AVEWLC: Average work life conflict

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 16: Correlation between dominant individual coping strategy and dominant institutional coping strategy

		Dominant individual coping strategy	Dominant institutional coping strategy
Dominant individual coping strategy	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.022
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.703
	N	294	294
Dominant institutional coping strategy	Pearson Correlation	-0.022	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.703	
	N	294	294

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Correlation analysis revealed no significant relationship between individual coping strategies and WLC ($r = .069$, $p > .05$), indicating that while individuals actively attempted to manage conflict; these strategies alone were insufficient to reduce overall WLC. Similarly, a negative correlation ($r = -.022$, $p > .05$) was observed between individual and institutional coping strategies, suggesting that when employees rely more on personal efforts, organizational supports tend to diminish, see tables 15 and 16).

Table 17: Mean Work -Life Conflict index of respondents by sex

Male	N		129
		Missing	0
	Mean		1.744186
	Median		2.000000
	Std. Deviation		.6763767
Female	N		166
		Missing	0
	Mean		1.825301
	Median		2.000000
	Std. Deviation		.6602742

Overall, female employees exhibited a higher mean WLC index ($M = 1.83$) compared to males ($M = 1.74$), highlighting the persistence of gender-based disparities in balancing work and family roles. These findings reinforce the view that women, due to their dual domestic and professional roles, face greater challenges in managing WLC, see figure 17.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the strategies for coping with work–life conflict among employees in selected higher institutions in Imo State, Nigeria. The findings indicate that work–life conflict is prevalent among academic and non-academic staff, particularly women, who experience greater domestic and caregiving responsibilities alongside their professional duties.

Consistent with previous research (Rendon, 2016; Ugwu, 2013; Shamir, 1983), respondents employed both individual and organizational coping mechanisms. Individual strategies such as rest, time management, and planning were frequently used to mitigate stress and prevent burnout. However, the low institutional support identified — particularly in areas such as eldercare and family leave — reflects the need for stronger workplace policies promoting work–life balance.

The gender disparity observed aligns with prior findings by Mathew and Panchanatham (2011), who noted that female employees face role overload and time management challenges. Similarly, Marks (1998) found that caregiving responsibilities lead to negative home-to-work spillover, which was also evident among the female respondents in this study.

Lakshmi and Gopinath (2013) further argued that women who work extended hours are more likely to struggle with balancing professional and domestic roles. This study's results also echo Gutek, Searle, and Klepa (1991), who reported that women experience higher work–family conflict than men.

Overall, the findings support spillover theory, illustrating that the pressures of family life negatively influence workplace performance (negative spillover). The results suggest that Nigerian women in higher institutions continue to face systemic barriers to achieving work–life balance, primarily due to limited institutional support and traditional gender role expectations.

Limitations

This study has several limitations:

1. The sample was limited to two public institutions in Imo State; therefore, generalization to all Nigerian higher education institutions should be made with caution.
2. Financial and time constraints limited the scope of data collection.
3. Some respondents did not fully complete their questionnaires, leading to minor data gaps.

Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Research

1. Policy Recommendations: Institutions should introduce flexible work hours, enhanced family leave, and counseling programs to help staff manage work–life pressures effectively.
2. Cultural Shifts: Spouses should share domestic and caregiving duties to minimize family-to-work conflicts.
3. Future Research:

Conduct comparative studies across regions (e.g., Northern and Western Nigeria) to explore contextual differences.

Examine private and faith-based institutions to assess how organizational culture affects WLC.

Investigate the long-term impact of institutional WLB programs on employee retention and productivity.

Explore the benefits of achieving work–life balance for institutional performance and employee well-being.

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Conflict of interest: There is no conflict of interest.

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