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

Ekezie, Keyna Nkeiruka[1*], Chukwuocha, Chidinma[1,] Obieche, Precious Nkechi[2], Nwoko, Nnenna Mercy[2]

[1]Department of Entrepreneurship and Innovation, School of Logistics and Innovation Technology, Federal University of Technology Owerri Nigeria.

[2]Department of Logistics and Supply Chain Management, Federal University of Technology Owerri Nigeria.

[*]Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

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. Data were collected from 343 participants (teaching and non-teaching staff) working in two specific institutions in Imo State, Nigeria, using a standardized questionnaire. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained. Data were analyzed descriptively and correlation analyses were deployed to test the hypothesis. The study found that domestic chores and caregiver stress were the primary causes of WLC in more females than males. Age, length of service, and educational attainment were found to predict WLC. Family-based, individual-based, and organizational coping strategies were employed by the participant to reduce WLC. The study promotes the adoption of flexible work schedules as a workable solution to lessen tensions between work and family, especially for married employees. Female respondents identified planning, relaxation, extracurricular activities, domestic help, and religious involvement as personal coping mechanisms. It was demonstrated that organizational work-life balance (WLB) measures, such as maternity leave and counseling services, contributed to a decline in WLC. The study recommends that partners split domestic and family responsibilities to further reduce WLC. This research is the first to analyze work–life conflict and coping techniques among staff of higher institutions in Imo State, Nigeria.

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

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, shifts in demographics, job structures, and employment patterns have raised the expectations from both work and family spheres, thereby increasing instances of work–life conflict (WLC) (Anttila & Salin, 2025). Prior research has looked into the complex interactions among work–family boundaries, workload, WLC, and employees' intentions to leave their jobs (Bellini, 2025). Likewise, current studies have investigated the factors contributing to WLC and the impact of global events, such as pandemics, on employees' capacity to achieve work–life balance (Dong et al., 2025).

Historically, research has aimed to find a state of equilibrium between work commitments and personal life, often referred to as work–life balance (WLB). Nonetheless, complete equilibrium is mostly unachievable, as some level of conflict between professional and personal roles is unavoidable. As a result, the focus has transitioned from striving for flawless balance to creating effective strategies that assist individuals in minimizing or managing WLC. The difficulty of reconciling professional duties and personal responsibilities has emerged as a worldwide issue for both workers and employers, leading organizations to implement WLB

programs that facilitate the management of these dual obligations. Such programs, prevalent in developed nations and progressively embraced in developing countries, encompass flexible working arrangements, on-site childcare, parental leave, eldercare support, counseling services, and educational workshops. These initiatives have demonstrated effectiveness in alleviating WLC and enhancing employee well-being (Jack et al., 2025).

The concept of distinguishing between work and leisure emerged in the mid-19th century. Insights from anthropology suggest that happiness is often connected to minimizing the gap between professional responsibilities and private life. Work-Life Balance (WLB) thus means giving equal importance to career ambitions along with other areas of life such as health, family, leisure, and spiritual enrichment (Bhatt & Pathak, 2024). It highlights daily fulfilment and success across four vital aspects of life, work, family, friends, and personal well-being. WLB practices encompass both formal and informal arrangements within organizations that allow employees to manage conflicting role demands effectively (Perrigino et al., 2018). Typical statutory support mechanisms that encourage WLB include maternity benefits, flexible working hours, remote work options, job sharing, and parental leave. In addition, employee assistance programs offering counseling, mental health services, and stress management workshops are crucial in supporting WLB. Baral and Bhargava (2009) classify WLB supports into three categories: policies (such as flexible hours and job sharing), benefits (like paid leave and health coverage), and services (including on-site childcare and eldercare).

Worldwide, WLB initiatives are increasingly acknowledged as vital tools for alleviating role conflicts and improving employee well-being, regardless of family or marital status. As a result, human resource management (HRM) strategies are progressively emphasizing WLB as a key focus area (Hasyim & Bakri, 2024). The significance of WLB has been highlighted by recent global reports. The Global Work–Life Balance Report (2024) has ranked countries such as New Zealand, Ireland, Belgium, Denmark, Canada, Germany, Finland, Australia, Norway, and Spain as leaders based on factors like paid maternity leave, statutory annual leave, and average working hours. These rankings illustrate the importance given to WLB in international labor markets and affect the employment choices of skilled professionals.

Moreover, the work environment post-COVID-19 has changed employee expectations. Research shows that employees now value WLB more than ever, often considering flexible work options more motivating than monetary compensation alone. A significant number of workers are now willing to leave positions that do not offer such flexibility (Ko & Kim, 2018). Studies indicate that women face significant challenges in achieving WLB. Mathew and Panchanatham (2011) pointed out that factors like role overload, caregiving responsibilities, health issues, lack of social support, and ineffective time management are major contributors to WLB difficulties for female entrepreneurs. Similarly, Lakshmi and Gopinath (2013) discovered that many female academics work between 40 and 45 hours weekly, with over half expressing challenges in maintaining work-life balance. The combination of professional and domestic responsibilities has consequently turned many women's lives into a continuous "balancing act."

In light of this context, the present study aims to explore the nature and degree of work-life conflict experienced by staff at higher education institutions in Imo State, Nigeria, as well as the coping mechanisms they utilize to navigate such conflicts. The study seeks to offer evidence-based insights that could guide institutional policies and HR practices aimed at promoting healthier and more effective work environments.

Objectives

The broad objective of this study was 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 the respondents expressed the desire to leave their jobs?

Research Hypotheses

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

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between work–life conflict and the dominant individual coping strategies used by employees.

H_{02}: Employee-driven coping strategies for managing work–life conflict are not significantly more effective than organizational strategies.
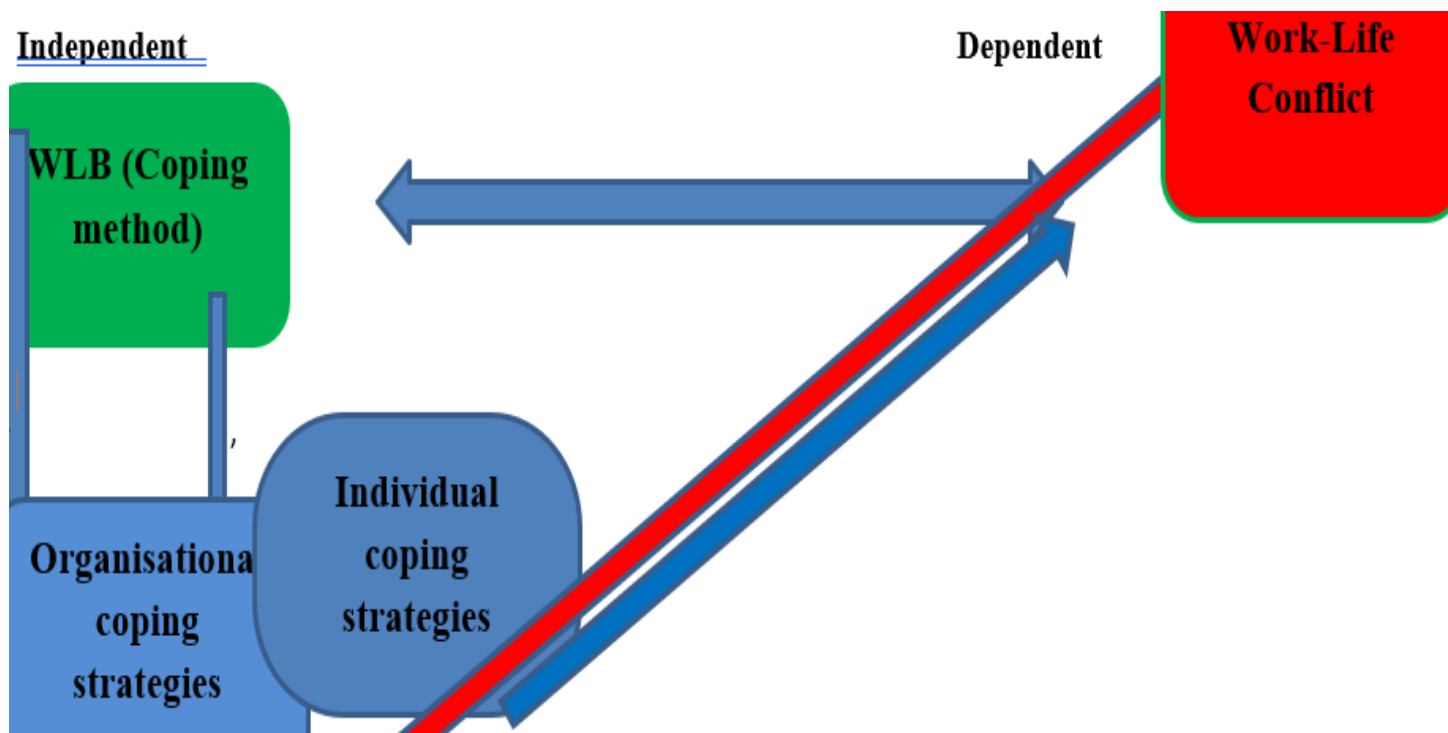
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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 analyse existing conditions, practices, opinions, or behaviours. 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

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, see tables 4. About 77.2% of respondents had children living with them, suggesting active family responsibilities among the workforce, table 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 ($r = .079$, $p > .05$), 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			166

N	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), 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 et al., (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 size was limited to two public institutions in Imo State; therefore, generalization of findings 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:

Comparative studies across regions (e.g., Northern and Western Nigeria) should be conducted to explore contextual differences.

Private and faith-based institutions should be examined 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.

Conflict of interest: There is no conflict of interest.

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