

Vietnamese Female Faculty in Higher Education Institutions with Work-life Balance: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Vietnamese female faculty members with regard to their work-life balance (WLB). By adopting a qualitative approach through interviewing 15 Vietnamese female faculty members (FFMs), we expect to obtain data and identify themes related to WLB. These themes will be used to make recommendations to university leaders and policymakers so that favorable policies and programs can be offered to faculty in general and female faculty in particular to help them balance their work and life.

Keywords: work-life balance, Vietnamese female faculty, higher education institutions

In recent years, work-life balance (WLB) has been studied so extensively that it has become an emerging area with a broad body of literature. To date, WLB has been reported in areas such as the management field (Beigi & Shirmohammadi, 2017), economics, management, and psychology disciplines (Kuschel, 2017), among employees in

organizations (Beigi & Shirmohammadi, 2017; Kuschel, 2017; Wood et al., 2020), dual-earner couples in India and the United States (Munn & Chaudhuri, 2016), mother counselors (Hermann et al., 2013), and academics (Beigi et al., 2018). However, research that focused on female faculty's WLB in higher education institutions (HEIs) is limited in volume. Female faculty members (FFMs) play a crucial role in the workforce but they still remain underrepresented in academia (Cama et al., 2016; Dapiton, Quiambao, & Canlas, 2020; Fancis & Stulz, 2020; Hertlein et al., 2018; Misra et al., 2012; Pascale et al., 2022; Ruan, 2021; Subbaye & Vithal, 2017). They have fewer opportunities to pursue tenure track and promotion compared to male faculty. Vietnamese FFMs are not an exception. They have to live with socially expected responsibilities such as taking care of children, parents-in-law, siblings, and domestic chores (Dang, 2012; Truong, 2008; Vu, 2018). These domestic responsibilities put Vietnamese FFMs under pressure of negotiating and balancing their work and family commitments. Through this qualitative study, we explore WLB experienced by Vietnamese FFMs, an important yet under-represented group in the existing literature.

This study aims at exploring the lived experiences of Vietnamese female faculty members with regard to their work-life balance. To address this purpose, we adopt a qualitative approach and the following research questions will guide this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of the Vietnamese female faculty members in balancing their work and family?
2. What are the strategies that have been applied by these Vietnamese female faculty members to get a balance in their work and family?

Literature Review

A review of empirical studies published in English, peer-reviewed journals on WLB of FFMs between the years 2010 and 2021 indicates most of WLB articles were conducted in the Western context. Another review of empirical research published in peer-reviewed Vietnamese journals on WLB of Vietnamese FFMs during the 2010-2021 period also produces the same result: there is no single study conducted in the Vietnamese context, which reinforced the need for our study. Two most *facilitating factors* that help FFMs achieve WLB include organizational support and family support. While organizational support can take different forms such as having a supportive supervisor, dean, mentor, colleague or a workplace with a family-friendly environment, family support comes from the spouse, partner, parents, or even a relative in the family (Akram & Ch., 2020; Baker, 2010; Francis & Stulz, 2020; Hwa, 2020; Lendák-Kabók, 2020; Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010). Also from the literature, two major *inhibiting factors* hindering FFMs from achieving WLB include workload and family responsibilities. The more teaching duties with a fuller and more demanding workload during the outbreak of COVID-19, the nonflexible and tough work schedule led to higher levels of workload pressure, which negatively impacted the WLB of female university teachers (Akram & Ch., 2020; Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2021; Dunn, 2020; Gallardo, 2021; Pascale et al., 2021; Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010).

There are some *strategies* women faculty members have used to navigate their work and life. At the *individual level*, FFMs adopted different strategies including social support, time management, and recreational and religious activities. Among these strategies, *social support* is the most frequently used strategy, which comes from the partner, spouse, parents, friends, relatives, or hiring domestic workers (Baker, 2010; Hwa, 2020; Lendák-Kabók, 2020; Muasya, 2016; Pritchard, 2010). At the *organizational level*, leave arrangements, flexible work arrangements, wellness programs, and childcare and eldercare support are some strategies that have been implemented to help women professors navigate their W&L. The leave arrangements include maternity leave, paternity leave, and compassionate leave (Gallardo, 2021; Muasya, 2016) while flexible work arrangements include flexible working hours such as part-time working, shift working, working at night, and working from home (Gallardo, 2021; Lendák-Kabók, 2020; Muasya, 2016; Neale-McFall, 2020; Smidt et al., 2017; Watanabe & Falci, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Work-family border theory (WFBT), social role theory (SRT), and intersectionality theory (IT) are the three theories guiding this study.

Work-Family Border Theory (WFBT)

Proposed by Clark, WFBT describes the nature of W&L domains, on which humans are centered, and that people are considered "border-crossers" (2000, p. 748) between the two spheres of work and family on a daily basis. WFBT is relevant to this study because it looks at both work and personal life – the two important aspects of individuals (Kanter, 2006). Regardless of the differences in behaviors, ends, and means, these two important domains interact with each other within

an environment with the presence of humans (Clark, 2000). Therefore, WFBT helps to explain how Vietnamese FFMs interact within and across the borders of work and family spheres.

Social Role Theory (SRT)

Developed by Eagly in 1987, SRT argues that widely-shared gender roles and stereotypes originate and develop from the gender division of expectation and labor that characterize society (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012). According to Eagly and Karau (2002), the socialization and personality of individuals are developed through participation in the diverse and complex social roles that are “socially shared expectations” (p. 574). SRT is applicable to this study because it helps to explain the different roles women take based on the socially shared expectations set for men and women. In Vietnam, females are expected to take more responsibilities than males in taking care of children, being a daughter-in-law, taking care of the husband’s parents and siblings, and so on (Dang, 2012; Knodel et al., 2004; Teerawichitchainan et al., 2010; Truong, 2008; Vu, 2018).

Intersectionality Theory (IT)

First coined by Crenshaw in 1989, IT originates with black feminist theory and describes that people born with different identities (e.g., race, gender, class, and religion) are more likely to have different experiences because of their multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1989). IT posits that identity is experienced, understood, and interpreted within various contexts. Therefore, individuals’ experiences should be understood in relation to multiple identities that interact and intersect with one another (Crenshaw, 1989; Ticknor et al., 2020). IT is applicable to this study because Vietnamese women are often expected to assume multiple responsibilities associated with their various roles such as an employee, a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law. Therefore, IT helps to explore and interpret their lived experiences with WLB, which goes in line with our qualitative study.

In short, no theories by themselves can fully encompass the WLB concept, as one may focus too much on one aspect and overlook others. Although these theories are Western-centric, they are still able to explain the context of Vietnam in which women live under socially shared expectations (supported by the SRT), holding various identities including gender, class, and culture (supported by IT). Therefore, these three theories and concepts make a firm basis for understanding WLB and its theoretical applications to the education sector.

Research Method

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Vietnamese FFMs with WLB. To address this purpose, we adopt a qualitative approach and the following overarching research question will guide this study: What are the lived experiences of the Vietnamese FFMs in navigating work and family life?

Participants

In this study, we are interested in understanding how Vietnamese FFMs navigate work and family life, therefore, participants for this study must meet the following criteria. *First*, they must be female lecturers working in universities and/or colleges in Vietnam at the time of data collection. *Second*, they must be responsible for teaching, research, and service but not hold leadership or managerial positions. *Finally*, they must be married with a child(ren). Based on the research purpose and question, we purposefully interviewed 15 Vietnamese FFMs, who are teaching at different universities in Vietnam (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Data Collection and Analysis

60 to 90-minute semi-structured interviews with an interview guide are the primary data collection method of this study because they help us to “uncover the essence, the invariant structure, and the meaning of the experiences of those involved” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 87). Semi-structured interviews also allow the “conversation to develop, exploring new topics relevant to the interviewee” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 91). All interviews are conducted and recorded via zoom. Each interview will then be transcribed before we move to the next participant. To analyze collected data, we will use thematic analysis through the aid of MAXQDA 2022 to organize and code the data from interview transcripts. Thematic analysis is used to analyze data because it aligns with our methodological choice and fits our research purpose and questions. MAXQDA 2022 is selected as our data analysis software because it allows us to conduct creative coding with a production of a diagram that shows the interaction between codes and themes.

Expected Findings

We have interviewed six participants so far. We are transcribing the interviews and familiarizing ourselves with the data collected so that we can identify some similar patterns or themes before we will move on to the next interviews. Tables 1 and 2 are work and personal information of the six interviewed participants. Once themes are identified, we will present and discuss these themes with what we found in the existing literature.

Table 1

Demographic – Work Information of Six Participants

Work Information								
Details	Type of University		Type of Contract		Years of teaching			Highest Level of Education
	Public	Private	Permanent	Contract	Less than 5 years	From 5 years to less than 10 years	From 10 years to 15 years	
Number	4	2	4	2	1	3	2	6 - Masters

Table 2: Demographic – Personal Information of Six Participants

Personal Information								
Details	No of Children			Age of child(ren)		Type of Family		Age Range of Participants
	2 children	1 child	more than 2 children	Less than 5 years old (number & age range)	From 5 years to 10 years (number & age range)	Nuclear (their own Family)	Extended (live with parents-in-law)	
Number	4	1	1	2 (7.5m to 4y)	4 (5y to 9y)	4	2	31-36

Implications

This research paper is of great significance to the field of Human Resource Development (HRD) and the literature on WLB of female professors. *First*, the topic of WLB has been hardly discussed in the HRD field. By exploring how faculty members navigate their work and life, this study will contribute to both HRD research and practice. Specifically, HRD professionals can assist organizations by offering supportive programs for faculty members at work. This will enhance women's academics performance at work and hopefully help them to maintain a satisfactory life at home (Polach, 2003). *Second*, the work-life issues of female faculty members in HEIs is an under researched area. There is no single research on how Vietnamese female faculty members navigate their work and life, published in peer-reviewed journals in English in the existing literature. Therefore, our study contributes to the WLB literature by looking at WLB experience by an understudied context and population – Vietnamese female faculty members, who are married with children under ten years of age. *Finally*, through presenting challenges facing these women academics, this study also has significant implications for principals and department heads in offering WLB strategies for their women professors.

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