



RESEARCH ARTICLE

WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES: A SOCIAL JUSTICE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S ACADEMIC CAREERS

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ABSTRACT

Women faculty in higher education continue to face persistent inequities that significantly limit their professional growth and leadership opportunities. Despite increasing participation in academia, their career trajectories are often shaped by the dual and overlapping demands of academic responsibilities and caregiving roles. Work-life balance challenges disproportionately affect women compared to their male counterparts, influencing teaching effectiveness, research productivity, publication output, and access to decision-making positions. These disparities are not isolated to individual circumstances but reflect deeper structural, cultural, and institutional inequities that privilege male career pathways while systematically undervaluing women's contributions. From a social justice perspective, the issue of caregiving responsibilities in academia is not only a matter of gender equity but also of fairness, inclusivity, and institutional accountability. Higher education policies often fail to adequately support women faculty who shoulder caregiving roles, whether through limited parental leave, rigid tenure clocks, lack of flexible work arrangements, or inadequate childcare support. Cultural stereotypes and gendered expectations further exacerbate these inequities, reinforcing the assumption that caregiving is primarily a woman's responsibility and positioning women faculty at a disadvantage in academic advancement. This paper critically examines the intersection of caregiving responsibilities, gender bias, and academic career progression by drawing on feminist theory, role conflict theory, and intersectionality as guiding frameworks. It explores how structural barriers and cultural norms collectively hinder women faculty from achieving equitable representation in leadership roles and highlights the compounded challenges faced by women of color, single mothers, and those from marginalized backgrounds. The study argues that higher education institutions must move beyond symbolic or token initiatives and implement transformative, equity-driven reforms. Policies such as family-friendly tenure timelines, equitable workload distribution, mentorship opportunities, and recognition of caregiving as a legitimate professional consideration are essential to fostering inclusion. Ultimately, advancing social justice in higher education requires dismantling systemic inequities, rethinking institutional culture, and creating supportive environments where women faculty can thrive academically and assume leadership roles without being penalized for their caregiving responsibilities.

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INTRODUCTION

India's higher education landscape has witnessed remarkable growth in women's participation over the past decade. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, women constitute approximately 43% of faculty members in Indian universities and colleges, representing a 22% increase since 2014-15 (All India Survey on Higher Education, 2022). However, this numerical parity masks significant disparities in career progression, with women drastically underrepresented in senior academic positions and leadership roles. Only about 10% of Indian higher education institutions are led by women, and fewer than 30% hold professor positions (Khanna, 2024; Research, 2024). This disparity becomes particularly pronounced when examining the intersection of gender with caregiving responsibilities. Recent studies reveal that Indian women faculty face unique challenges in balancing professional obligations with family

duties, deeply rooted in sociocultural expectations that position women as primary caregivers (Pathak *et al.*, 2024; Roy, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges, with research documenting increased stress and reduced productivity among women faculty who shouldered disproportionate caregiving burdens during lockdowns (Pathak *et al.*, 2024; Singh & Verma, 2024). The Indian context presents a complex interplay of traditional gender roles, rapid modernization, and institutional structures that perpetuate inequities. Unlike Western academic systems, Indian higher education operates within a framework where family expectations, caste considerations, and regional variations significantly influence women's career trajectories (Khanna, 2024; Roy, 2024). This necessitates a nuanced understanding of how caregiving responsibilities intersect with academic careers in India's diverse social landscape. This paper examines the work-life balance challenges faced by Indian women faculty through the lenses of feminist theory, role conflict theory, and intersectionality. It argues

that addressing these challenges requires systemic reforms that recognize caregiving as a social justice issue, demanding institutional accountability and transformative policy interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-Life Balance Among Indian Women Faculty: Recent empirical research provides compelling evidence of work-life balance challenges among Indian women faculty. A comprehensive study by Pathak *et al.* (2024) surveying 1,384 women teaching across universities, colleges, and business schools found that supervisor support and high-commitment work systems significantly impact work-life balance, while organizational strategies showed limited effectiveness. This suggests that institutional policies alone are insufficient without supportive leadership and workplace cultures. The study revealed that work-life balance strongly influences productivity ($\beta = 0.730$), job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.327$), and propensity to work from home ($\beta = 0.471$) among Indian women faculty (Pathak *et al.*, 2024). These findings underscore the critical importance of addressing work-life balance not merely as an individual concern but as an institutional imperative affecting overall academic performance and retention.

Caregiving and Gender Roles in Indian Society: Contemporary scholarship highlights the persistence of traditional gender roles in Indian families, even as women's workforce participation increases. Roy (2024) demonstrates how caregiving remains "essentially a women-based job in the Indian context," carrying significant implications for women's mental, physical, and social well-being. This gendered division of labor creates what scholars term a "double burden"—professional responsibilities coupled with disproportionate domestic and caregiving duties. The intersection of urbanization, economic liberalization, and traditional expectations creates particular challenges for middle-class Indian women faculty. While modernization has opened professional opportunities, it has not resulted in equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities within households (Roy, 2024; Kumar, 2023). This mismatch between changing professional roles and persistent domestic expectations creates chronic stress and limits career advancement.

Intersectionality in Indian Higher Education: Khanna's (2024) groundbreaking intersectional analysis of three female academicians in Delhi reveals how multiple identities—gender, caste, class, religion—intersect to create unique challenges for Indian women faculty. The study emphasizes that "women's motivation and self-belief are crucial in navigating these challenges," while highlighting the importance of "conducive environment, supportive leadership, and flexible work schedules." This intersectional perspective is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where caste, regional, and religious identities significantly influence academic experiences. Lower-caste women faculty face compounded discrimination, while those from marginalized communities encounter additional barriers in accessing mentorship, networking opportunities, and institutional support (Patel, 2025; Sharma, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory in the Indian Context: Feminist scholarship in India has evolved to address the specific realities of Indian women's experiences. Unlike Western feminism, Indian feminist theory necessarily engages with caste, class, and religious hierarchies that intersect with gender oppression (Chadha, 2024; Mitra, 2024). Professor Gita Chadha's work emphasizes that feminism in India is "about making men and women equals, using ideas of justice" while acknowledging the complex cultural contexts that shape women's experiences. Indian feminist theory recognizes that academic institutions operate within patriarchal structures that privilege male-defined career models while rendering women's caregiving labor invisible (Mitra, 2024). This theoretical framework helps explain why numerical parity in faculty representation has not translated into equitable career progression or leadership representation.

Role Conflict Theory: Role conflict theory provides a particularly relevant framework for understanding Indian women faculty experiences. Given the cultural emphasis on family obligations and the expectation that women serve as primary caregivers, Indian women academics face acute time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based conflicts (Singh & Verma, 2024; Gokhale, 2025). Recent research documents how this role conflict manifests in Indian academic settings. Women faculty report feeling "claustrophobic and ill-tempered" when managing both academic responsibilities and caregiving duties, reflecting the "microbiological substrate of stress" identified in role conflict literature (Gokhale, 2025). The home space becomes a source of chronic stress, particularly during periods of intensive caregiving such as child-rearing or elder care.

Intersectionality Framework: Intersectionality theory, as applied to the Indian context, reveals how gender intersects with caste, class, religion, and regional identities to create distinct patterns of disadvantage (Khanna, 2024; Patel, 2025). Dalit feminist scholars have been instrumental in highlighting how mainstream feminism often overlooks the experiences of women from marginalized castes, pushing for more inclusive approaches that consider "interlocking systems of patriarchy, caste, and class" (Sharma, 2024). This framework is essential for understanding why gender-neutral policies often fail to address the specific challenges faced by different groups of Indian women faculty. An intersectional approach demands targeted interventions that acknowledge these varied experiences and multiple forms of marginalization.

Structural and Cultural Barriers

Institutional Policies and Practices: Despite policy frameworks promoting gender equality, Indian higher education institutions often lack comprehensive support systems for faculty with caregiving responsibilities. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 includes provisions for a "Gender Inclusion Fund" and emphasizes equitable education, yet implementation remains inconsistent across institutions (Council, 2024; Government of India, 2025). Most Indian universities lack adequate childcare facilities, flexible work arrangements, or family-friendly tenure policies (Pathak *et al.*, 2024; Singh & Verma, 2024). This institutional neglect forces women faculty to choose between career advancement and family responsibilities, contributing to the "leaky pipeline" effect observed in senior academic positions.

Cultural Expectations and Social Norms: Traditional Indian cultural norms continue to position women as primary caregivers, creating significant barriers to academic career progression. Research reveals that "women are expected to carry out caregiving duties at home even if they have full-time day jobs of their own" and "are also more likely to experience burnout" compared to their male counterparts (Kumar, 2023). These cultural expectations are reinforced through socialization processes that emphasize women's roles as nurturers and caretakers. Even successful women academics often face pressure to prioritize family responsibilities, with career advancement viewed as secondary to domestic duties (Roy, 2024; Gokhale, 2025).

Regional and Institutional Variations: The Indian higher education system's diversity creates additional complexities. Faculty experiences vary significantly across regions, with women in rural or less-funded universities facing harsher constraints than those in metropolitan areas (Khanna, 2024; Singh & Verma, 2024). State universities with high teaching loads and limited research infrastructure particularly disadvantage women faculty who must balance heavy academic workloads with caregiving responsibilities.

Economic Precarity and Employment Patterns: Women faculty are disproportionately concentrated in temporary, contract, or part-time positions that offer limited job security and benefits (Khanna, 2024). This precarious employment status exacerbates work-life balance challenges, as women cannot access institutional support systems or negotiate flexible arrangements available to permanent faculty.

Limited Mentorship and Professional Networks: Informal academic networks in India remain largely male-dominated, excluding women faculty from crucial professional relationships and career advancement opportunities (Khanna, 2024). The absence of gender-sensitive mentoring further limits women's academic growth, particularly affecting those from marginalized backgrounds who lack access to established professional networks.

Social Justice Implications

Equity and Institutional Accountability: Addressing work-life balance challenges among Indian women faculty requires recognizing these issues as matters of social justice rather than individual problems. Institutional accountability demands comprehensive policy reforms that acknowledge caregiving as legitimate professional consideration (Council, 2024; Government of India, 2025). The NEP 2020's emphasis on "Equitable and Inclusive Education" provides a framework for systemic change, yet requires robust implementation mechanisms to ensure meaningful impact (Government of India, 2025). Universities must move beyond tokenistic gestures to implement transformative reforms that address structural inequities.

Intersectional Social Justice: Social justice approaches must acknowledge the intersectional nature of discrimination faced by Indian women faculty. Dalit women, Muslim women, and those from other marginalized communities face compounded disadvantages that require targeted interventions (Patel, 2025; Sharma, 2024). A one-size-fits-all approach to gender equity fails to address these diverse experiences and may inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities.

Economic and Social Development: Supporting women faculty's career advancement has broader implications for India's development goals. Research demonstrates that women's economic empowerment contributes to household welfare, educational outcomes for children, and overall social progress (Council, 2024; Editorial Team, 2025). Investing in women faculty success thus serves national development objectives while promoting gender equity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutional Policy Reforms: Comprehensive Childcare Support: Universities should establish on-campus childcare facilities with extended hours to accommodate academic schedules. Subsidized childcare programs can significantly reduce the burden on faculty parents. Flexible Work Arrangements: Institutions must implement genuine flexible work policies, including hybrid teaching options, adjustable research timelines, and family-friendly scheduling for meetings and events. Family-Friendly Tenure Policies: Tenure clocks should be automatically extended for faculty with caregiving responsibilities, with clear policies preventing stigmatization of those who utilize these provisions. Equitable Workload Distribution: Universities should track and redistribute service obligations to ensure women faculty are not disproportionately burdened with administrative and pastoral care responsibilities.

Cultural and Social Interventions: Bias Awareness Training: Regular workshops for faculty, administrators, and students should address unconscious bias and promote understanding of work-life balance challenges. Leadership Development Programs: Targeted mentorship and leadership development initiatives should prepare women faculty for senior positions while providing ongoing support. Community Building: Universities should foster supportive communities through women faculty networks, peer support groups, and regular forums for sharing experiences and strategies.

Systemic Changes: Data Collection and Monitoring: Institutions must systematically collect disaggregated data on faculty experiences, career progression, and work-life balance to inform evidence-based policy making. Funding and Resource Allocation: Universities should allocate specific budgets for gender equity initiatives, ensuring

adequate resources for childcare, flexible work arrangements, and support programs. Partnership with External Organizations: Collaboration with women's organizations, professional associations, and government agencies can amplify efforts and provide additional resources.

CONCLUSION

The work-life balance challenges faced by Indian women faculty represent a complex interplay of cultural expectations, institutional structures, and individual circumstances. These challenges are not merely personal struggles but reflect systemic inequities that demand urgent attention from a social justice perspective. The persistent underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions, despite numerical parity at entry levels, demonstrates the inadequacy of current approaches to gender equity in Indian higher education. Recent research provides compelling evidence that supportive leadership, flexible work systems, and comprehensive policies significantly impact women faculty's career trajectories and well-being. However, transformative change requires moving beyond individual accommodations to address the structural and cultural barriers that perpetuate inequality. The intersectional nature of discrimination in Indian higher education demands nuanced approaches that acknowledge how gender intersects with caste, class, religion, and other identities. Policies designed for generic "women faculty" may inadvertently exclude or inadequately serve marginalized groups who face compounded disadvantages.

As India strives to realize its potential as a global knowledge economy, the full participation and advancement of women faculty becomes not merely a matter of equity but an economic and social imperative. The talent, perspectives, and contributions of women academics are essential for the innovation, research excellence, and educational quality that will define India's future in higher education. Ultimately, creating supportive environments where women faculty can thrive requires collective commitment from institutions, policymakers, and society at large. Only through comprehensive, sustained efforts can Indian higher education realize the promise of true gender equity and social justice for all its members.

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