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Work Life Balance of Women Entrepreneurs

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Abstract- Work-Life Balance (WLB) as practiced by female entrepreneurs is one of the essential but understudied aspects of entrepreneurial wellbeing. This paper explores how women entrepreneurs in India balance the challenges of being the owner of a company and fulfilling their family responsibilities and the boundary management techniques that they apply. Using the theoretical frameworks of boundary theory and role accumulation theory, this research utilizes a qualitative phenomenological methodology based on semi-structured interviews conducted with Indian women entrepreneurs from both urban and semi-urban areas. The results show that women entrepreneurs use the strategy of integration more often than segmentation, due to the norms associated with gendered family roles and the fluid nature of entrepreneurship itself. Among other coping strategies, the techniques used by entrepreneurs include flexible scheduling, resource sharing via social networks, and positioning of work and domestic space close to each other. At the same time, it was found that women entrepreneurs have different boundary management preferences depending on the motherhood stage and the business stage, with mothers of young children and young entrepreneurs preferring integration over segmentation more.

Keywords- Work-Life Balance, Women Entrepreneurs, Boundary Theory, Role Integration, Coping Strategies, India

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I. Introduction

The relationship between entrepreneurship and family life has become an important field of study for management research and gender research in view of increased women participation in entrepreneurial activities all over the world [1], [10]. Women entrepreneurs have a special place in the economic system. They represent a contradiction in themselves – while being opposed to traditional structures of labor market, they also exist in the framework of socially well-established stereotypes related to family duties [8], [10]. This contradiction makes WLB even more necessary and complicated for women than for men [1], [8]. In India where the family is still organized on the principles of patriarchy and family members have traditional expectations towards each other, the issue of reconciliation of entrepreneurship and family life becomes especially important [1], [8].

WLB, as it is defined by modern researchers, involves more than just distribution of time between work and private life. It represents an experience of satisfaction and efficiency in both fields which is influenced by individual preferences, organizational context and cultural norms [6], [7]. For women entrepreneurs the lack of organizational boundaries – no working schedule, no separate workspace and no organizational control – brings new challenges to be faced along with benefits of freedom and flexibility [1], [8].

The available literature on WLB has mainly concentrated on organizational employees, while paying relatively less attention to the issue of self-employed women [2], [7]. Those works that have considered self-employed women in their research have relied heavily on the existing concepts used for studying organizational employees, which might fail to explain the unique situation of entrepreneurship [2], [7]. In addition to that, the existing literature on this topic has been mainly written in the context of developed countries where the culture tends to be individualistic and institutional arrangements exist for supporting working mothers that differ vastly from those prevailing in developing nations [8], [10].

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This research endeavor seeks to fill this gap by studying the WLB phenomenon among Indian female entrepreneurs using boundary theory [1], [6], [7]. According to boundary theory, "people actively engage in the process of differentiating and managing the boundaries between work and other life activities" using various techniques of either integration (fuzzy boundaries) or segmentation (clear boundaries) [6], [7]. Given the importance of individual autonomy and context-specific actions in boundary theory, this theory is very suitable for studying how women entrepreneurs cope with their dual identities [1], [6]. One key assumption underlying this research is that WLB is not a fixed outcome but rather a continuous process of negotiation influenced by various factors [1], [6], [8].

Apart from being significant academically, this research also holds importance due to its implications for the economy, employment generation, and gender equality [2], [4]. Government campaigns such as Yashasvini scheme and MSME schemes have been attempted in India to stimulate entrepreneurial activity among women [4], [9]. However, unless the WLB issues faced by women entrepreneurs are not addressed, such policies might not deliver the desired results [2], [4]. The understanding of how women entrepreneurs manage the work-life balance can provide insights on how to help them in this matter effectively [1], [2].

The review of the literature is an attempt at summarizing the knowledge available on the topic of work-life balance of women entrepreneurs. It covers both boundary management theories and the issue of WLB in the context of India. The section on methodology elaborates on the qualitative study conducted for the purposes of this research and explains sampling, data collection, and analysis techniques used in the process. Findings are discussed in terms of themes with supporting figures and table.

II. Literature Survey

It is important to note that the academic discussion surrounding the issue of work-life balance has changed greatly over the past decades, shifting from a more simplistic approach based on a conflict-oriented model to more elaborate ideas of role enrichment and role boundary management [6], [7], [10]. Initially, research into the relationship

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between work and family focused on the concept of inter-role conflict, which suggested that involvement in one sphere resulted in resource deprivation in the other sphere [6], [8]. Such approach, based on the assumption of time/energy scarcity, has been successfully challenged by the role accumulation approach, which suggests that multiple roles may result in positive outcomes due to increased resources, greater self-respect, and enlarged social network [6], [10]. Women entrepreneurs, who are engaged in several spheres of activity, including business ownership, family caring and social community involvement, are especially interested in this question [1], [8].

The boundary theory has proven to be especially fertile in the examination of WLB among self-employed people [6], [7], [8]. According to this theory, there are two different ways of boundary management – segmentation (people make distinctions both mentally and physically between their working role and family role) and integration (boundaries are blurry and roles are performed at the same time) [6], [7]. The crucial point of this theory is that people have different boundary management preferences and well-being depends on the degree to which these preferences match the reality of the situation [6], [8]. The study conducted by Banu and Baral using structural equation modeling and involving data about women entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu shows that norms connected with traditional female role in the family, combined with freedom offered by entrepreneurship, lead to integration being the way of boundary management [6].

Qualitative studies have been able to shed more light about the contextual uniqueness of boundary management [1], [8]. In their interviews with twenty-five well-educated and economically empowered women entrepreneurs in five cities in India, Banu, Baral, and Kuschel found that mothers who had younger children and those women who were at an earlier stage in the business exhibited greater preference for integration [1]. The strategies used included pooling resources (utilizing family help and hiring of domestic servants), flexible schedules, working lesser hours, and preferring workplaces that were close to their homes [1]. Social support proved to be critical when dealing with the pressures from several roles [1], [8].

Further research along this line has been carried out by Huq and Arenius, who used boundary theory to explore female entrepreneurs in patriarchal societies [8]. They

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discovered through their study on seventy-five high-level educationally qualified, urban women entrepreneurs running their businesses from their homes that work-family conflict is reduced in the context where entrepreneurial work takes place within the family structure rather than being segregated [8]. It does not mean that these women challenged the patriarchal norms; instead, they negotiated their boundaries in a non-confrontational manner consistent with the cultural norms so as to keep the permeability of the boundaries of work while maintaining the sacrosanctity of family roles [8].

Studies of mumpreneurs—women entrepreneurs—and their decision-making process under conditions of uncertainty have helped in understanding coping strategies used by such entrepreneurs [3]. In a study conducted on twenty-six entrepreneurs in UK having young children, four main strategies were found: Intuition, flexibility, confidence and dynamic balance between promotion and prevention regulatory focus [3]. Mumpreneurs faced multiple uncertainties that ranged from conventional business-related risks to those related to running business while taking care of families simultaneously [3]. The study emphasized the need for designing specific programs including coaching and mentoring and even policy measures like childcare subsidy [3].

The contribution of digital technology to the creation of WLB for women entrepreneurs is another issue being explored by scholars [5]. While technological innovations facilitate better access to markets and make operations more efficient, they may pose threats in the form of new vectors of work–family intrusion [5]. A study on female refugees who are entrepreneurs in Sweden found out that higher digitalization of their businesses resulted in work issues including stress due to WLB issues and ethical issues online [5].

The systematic review conducted by Suganya on the importance of WLB as a skill requirement for women entrepreneurs was concerned about the past discrimination against women in entrepreneurship in India as well as about their present-day problems with role balance [2]. It should be noted that WLB is viewed here more as a competence than as an end result [2]. Programs launched by the government of India to assist women entrepreneurs, such as Yashasvini program or particular measures in the framework of MSME schemes, take into account the peculiarities of women's difficulties [4], [9].

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Based on a synthesis of this literature, the following research gaps emerge. First, while boundary theory has successfully been used to understand women entrepreneurs, most studies have been largely quantitative and cross-sectional in nature, which constrains our understanding of the changing nature of boundary management throughout the life span of women entrepreneurs [1], [6], [7]. Second, there is increasing recognition of the importance of studying entrepreneurship in India; however, most research is based in the southern regions and large cities of India, overlooking semi-urban or smaller city entrepreneurs [1], [6], [7]. Third, the impact of information technology on WLB of women entrepreneurs in emerging economies is relatively unexamined [5]. The current research seeks to fill these gaps through a qualitative study where the aim will be to gain deep insights rather than achieve generalization.

III. Proposed Methodology

Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

The present study uses a qualitative phenomenological design, because of its effectiveness in capturing the experiential aspects and the meaning women entrepreneurs ascribe to work-life balance issues. The phenomenological design fits well in research studies seeking an understanding of how people construct their meanings of complex and emotionally charged phenomenon, which do not lend themselves to variable reductionism. The epistemology underlying the study is interpretivist, recognizing the process by which the knowledge of WLB is constructed within the relationship between researcher and the researched. The meanings attached to work and family roles emerge from the social, cultural, and individual context in which these take place.

Sampling Strategy

Selection of participants was carried out through purposive sampling involving maximum variation. The sampling frame consisted of women who

- Had run and managed a business for more than two years
- Had either currently been married or ever been married in their lifetime
- Had at least one dependent child

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- Lived in urban or semi-urban areas of India

The criterion for maximum variation included variation in business sector (manufacturing, service, retail, and digital businesses), level of business (start-up and established firms), stage of motherhood (children below six, school-going children, and adult children), and geographic area (metros and tier-two cities).

Recruitment was carried out through several avenues such as referral by industry associations, social media groups for women entrepreneurs, and snowball sampling from initial participants. The final sample comprised of twenty-eight women entrepreneurs whose number was in line with qualitative research practice of thematic saturation. Participants were aged between twenty-nine and fifty-four years and had operated their businesses for two to eighteen years. The sectors included apparel manufacturing, food processing, digital marketing services, educational services, retail boutiques, and wellness services. Fourteen participants had children who were below twelve years old, nine had school-going children, and five had adult children.

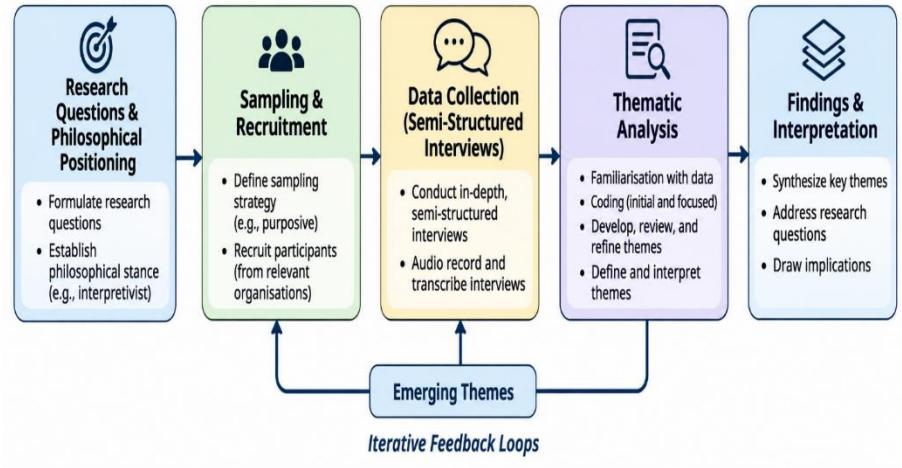


Figure 1: Research Design Flowchart

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Data Collection

Data collection took place through semi-structured interviews that were carried out from January through August 2025. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and took place either in person in locations specified by respondents (their offices or homes) or via video call when distance prohibited conducting interviews in person. An interview guide was created based on literature review and further refined based on a pilot study conducted among three entrepreneurs who did not participate in the actual data collection.

The interview guide was focused on four general areas:

- The participant's history of entrepreneurship and reasons for establishing her business
- Her regular activities and organization of both work and family life
- Her boundary management strategies
- Sources of support and barriers to achieving WLB

Probing techniques were used to get specific information and understand the rationale behind the particular strategy. In line with the principles of an emergent design, the guide was further modified as new issues were identified; thus, after discovering the importance of space management in the course of initial interviews, follow-up interviews had specific questions regarding the relationship between business and home space.

All interviews were audio-taped with the consent of the interviewees, who agreed to provide their transcripts verbatim. The transcripts were augmented with field notes that detailed observations made on the spot. The validity of the themes identified was verified through member checking.

Analytical Procedure

The data was analyzed using the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke with the inclusion of the phenomenological perspective. First, the process of data analysis required an in-depth immersion through repeated readings of the transcripts and field notes. Second, the next step entailed the generation of codes both

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in their semantic meaning (the explicit statements) and their latent meaning (the assumptions and emotions). Third, the collation of codes into emerging themes took place considering the interrelations between the themes and the narrative that was created as a result. Fourth, reviewing and defining themes occurred through comparing all the themes against the dataset, making sure that each one of them was clear and distinguishable from the others. Fifth, definition and naming of the themes took place, when each theme's scope and limits were clearly defined. Finally, the creation of the analytical narrative is described below.

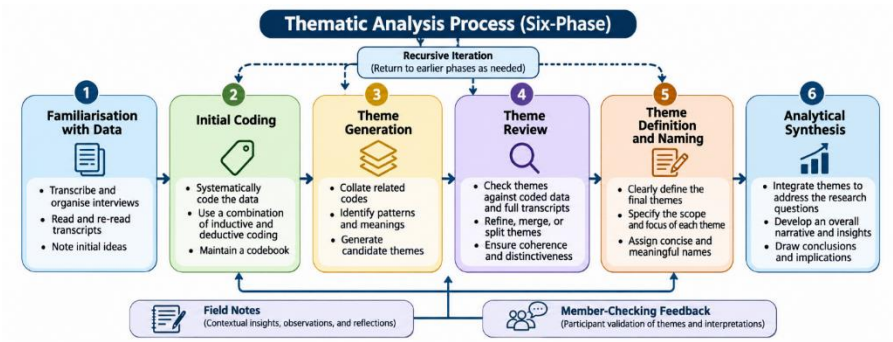


Figure 2: Data Analysis Process

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The study made use of Lincoln and Guba's guidelines to ensure credibility of the findings. Trustworthiness was increased by means of prolonged engagement, member checking, and data source triangulation (interviews and field notes). Transferability was guaranteed through thick description of the setting and participants. Dependability was ensured via documentation of analysis process in an audit trail. Confirmability was sought through reflexive journaling and debriefing by an outside colleague of the researcher.

Institutional ethical approval was received prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent in writing and were promised anonymity and freedom to

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withdraw at any stage of the research. The names of all participants have been changed to pseudonyms. Taking into account the sensitivity of the topics raised during interview sessions, participants were interviewed in locations which they found comfortable, and were offered to revise their transcripts if desired.

IV. Analysis

Boundary Management Preferences: Integration as the Dominant Strategy

This study shows that there was a strong bias in favor of integration over segmentation on the part of the involved women entrepreneurs. Instead of looking to establish a distinct demarcation between their business life and personal/family life, the vast majority of these individuals reported that their deliberate effort was to merge these two aspects of their lives so that they could meet the demands of family responsibilities while keeping their business running. It did not mean that all these individuals were content with this situation; most of them wanted some sort of segregation, but circumstances and cultural expectations prevented them from doing so. One of the respondents, a thirty-four-year-old owner of a digital marketing agency with two small children, stated: “I do not have the luxury of separating between my office hours and my family hours. My daughter’s school calls me, my mother calls me, and my client calls me – all at once.”

This is consistent with Banu and Baral’s observation whereby normative expectations concerning women’s role in the family and entrepreneurial autonomy together force integration as a boundary management approach in India. From the participants’ stories, it appeared that integration was not an option out of choice but a response to the realities of pressures arising from the business end and the family side. Indeed, some participants who had at first tried the segregation approach later abandoned it due to its impracticality considering uncertainties on both ends.

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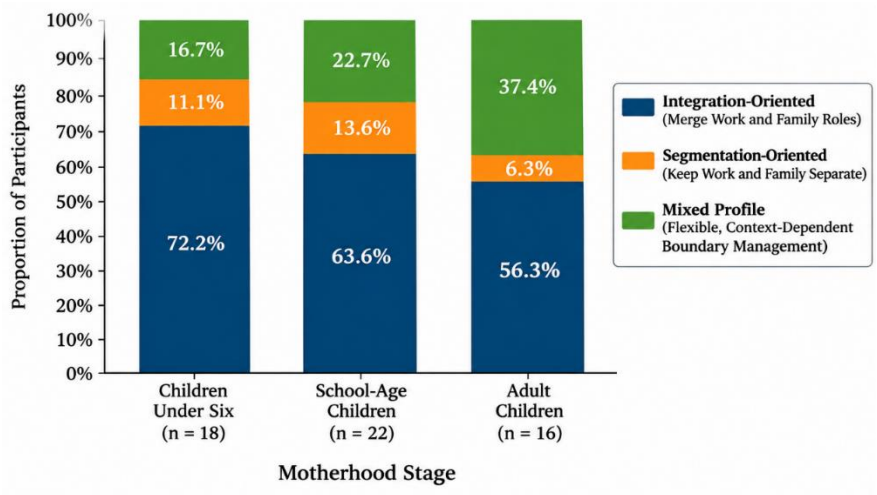


Figure 3: Distribution of Boundary Management Preferences by Motherhood Stage

Strategies for Managing the Work-Family Interface

In response, participants shared a number of ways of dealing with the pressures that accompany balancing one's work and family responsibilities. The different techniques can be categorized into four groups: time flexibility, space proximity, resource pooling, and cognitive reframing.

Time flexibility entailed the careful planning of business engagements to accommodate family responsibilities and not the other way around. Many respondents explained how they were engaged in sporadic business activities early in the morning before their children woke up, throughout the daytime when their children attended school, and late in the night after their children had gone to bed. For example, a forty-one-year-old owner of a food processing plant stated: "I do my accounts at five in the morning. By seven I prepare their breakfast. Then from ten to four, while they attend classes, I go to my business. Late in the night I do my emails."

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Proximity was established as an important, albeit not fully recognized, component of boundary management. People whose business activities were conducted either at home or very close to their place of residence noted increased convenience in handling family emergencies and performing care duties. This finding is consistent with the argument by Banu, Baral, and Kuschel that proximity of the workplace is a boundary management technique utilized by Indian women entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, proximity became the source of difficulties as well since increased permeability did not always allow for the separation between family and business affairs.

Resource pooling involved the effective use of social assistance, particularly from people within the family (husbands, mothers, mothers-in-law, and older children) as well as paid domestic help. It was clear that people had very complicated situations where their grandmothers took care of children on specific days, their husbands took responsibility for picking up children from schools, and their domestic assistants did all the cooking and cleaning. Resource pooling became a key factor distinguishing participants who found their WLB manageable from those experiencing constant stress. An example would be a fifty-year-old owner of a retail boutique who mentioned: “My mother-in-law was my strength; without her, I could not run this business. But now that she is old, I have to take care of her.”

Cognitive reframing was characterized by participants’ attempts to reframe the connection between work and family in such a manner that guilt would be minimized and satisfaction increased. Family commitments were no longer seen as disrupting productivity at work, but entrepreneurs viewed their work as being inherently related to family well-being by providing educational needs for children, teaching independence to daughters, and adding financial security to the household. Cognitive reframing is consistent with the theory of role enrichment, which suggests that role involvement produces positive outcomes.

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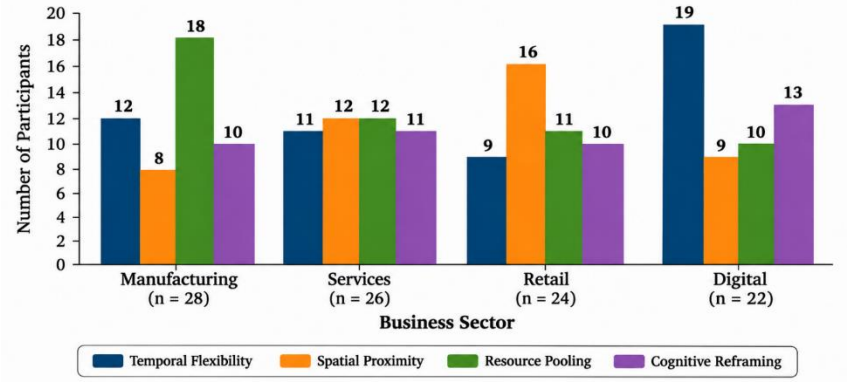


Figure 4: Frequency of Coping Strategy Utilization Across Business Sectors

Stage-Contingent Variations in Work-Life Balance Challenges

Systematic variations in the nature of WLB dilemmas were observed through two variables associated with the stage in question – motherhood stage and business stage. Participants who had kids aged below six faced the highest level of WLB tension because of the unpredictable nature of the children's needs, the overwhelming demands of caregiving, and the rigidity of the businesses at this stage of development. The participants experienced disturbances, sleepless nights, and feelings of failure on both fronts. One thirty-one-year-old woman who is a founder of an educational services company and has a two-year-old child said, "I feel that I am failing at everything. When I am at work, I think about him. When I am with him, I think about work that I need to do."

In the case of mothers of school-aged children, the situation was quite different. The regularity of school time allowed for more reliable work intervals, but additional academic support, participation in various activities, and emotional involvement in parenting older children became sources of additional stress. The participants at this stage often experienced a conflict between business development and their willingness to spend time on important events in their children's life.

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The participants of the group of mothers of adult children, despite of having fewer needs to look after their young children, faced issues related to caring for the elderly relatives who were previously providing assistance in childcare. A topic of care reciprocity appeared to be particularly poignant, since the participants talked about "a caregiving squeeze," when they had to provide both their children and parents/in-laws with needed care.

Interaction between maturity in business and motherhood stage was multi-faceted. Entrepreneurs who were at an early stage in their career cited that they suffered from work-life balance tension because of the need to develop a client base and source funding. Entrepreneurs who had reached a mature stage were challenged by new issues as their identity as businessmen had been cemented.

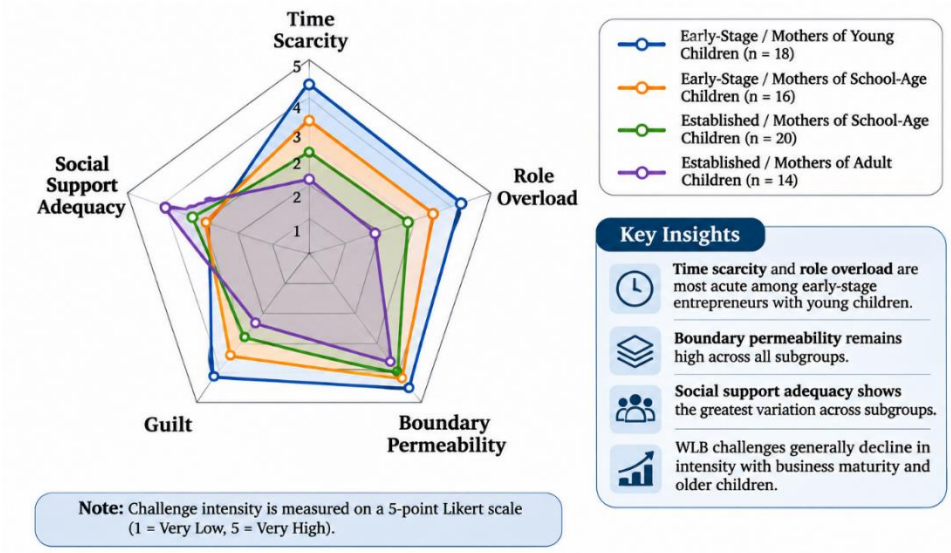


Figure 5: Comparative WLB Challenge Profiles Across Motherhood and Business Stages

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Comparative Analysis Table

Below is the table summarizing the most important traits that have been identified within each boundary management profile of the participants grouped into four categories of strategies.

Table 1: Comparative analysis

Strategy Category	Mothers of Young Children (n=14)	Mothers of School-Age Children (n=9)	Mothers of Adult Children (n=5)
Temporal flexibility	Fragmented work blocks; frequent night work; unpredictable schedule	More predictable scheduling around school hours; some evening work	Conventional work hours; flexible for elder care emergencies
Spatial proximity	Strong preference for home-based or nearby business; high permeability	Moderate preference; home-based when feasible	Less critical; business location chosen for operational reasons
Resource pooling	Heavy reliance on grandmothers and paid help; complex coordination	Continued reliance but with older children contributing; some withdrawal of grandparent support	Shift toward elder care responsibilities; paid help for domestic tasks

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Strategy Category	Mothers of Young Children (n=14)	Mothers of School-Age Children (n=9)	Mothers of Adult Children (n=5)
Cognitive reframing	Framing business as enabling presence; managing guilt through "quality over quantity" narratives	Framing business as modeling independence for children	Framing business as legacy and contribution to extended family welfare
Primary WLB challenge	Role overload; sleep deprivation; chronic interruption	Work-family conflict around children's activities; emotional labor	Caregiving squeeze; competing obligations across generations
Dominant boundary preference	Integration (strong)	Integration (moderate)	Mixed (integration with selective segmentation)

V. Conclusion

In this study, the goal was to explore the dynamics at play in the work and family interface among female entrepreneurs in India, with special emphasis on boundary management practices adopted by them as well as the factors that influence these practices. With twenty-eight qualitative interviews conducted with women

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entrepreneurs from various fields, various findings have emerged which are beneficial for theory and practice alike.

It has been established that it is integration rather than segmentation that represents the predominant boundary management strategy among Indian women entrepreneurs. Yet this strategy is not just a product of personal preferences. It is determined by the interplay of normative expectations about gender roles that place women into the caregiver category and features of entrepreneurship that make boundaries between work and family blurred both in time and space. However, participants of this study did not find integration as an easy solution. While having the wish to separate from their families, they could not afford doing it because family demands were persistent, and business ownership-imposed pressure. It becomes clear why it is crucial to differentiate what people want and what people have to do.

The strategies used by women participants in dealing with their dual identities—temporal flexibility, spatial proximity, resource pooling, and cognitive reframing—are useful in showing the kind of agentic activity that is performed by women entrepreneurs in trying to manage their dual identities. These are not just technical adjustments but rather continuous negotiations within the family, proper spatial and temporal arrangements, and the cognitive effort involved in negotiating competing responsibilities. The importance of social support, especially that provided by extended family members, in enabling adequate WLB reveals the nature of boundary management being an embedded activity within families and society.

The discovery that WLB problems depend on the life stage was another key finding in this research. The severity and nature of stress from work-life integration depended systematically on the stage of motherhood and the development stage of the business, with mothers of young children in an early development stage of their businesses facing the most severe problems. This finding is consistent with the observation by Banu, Baral, and Kuschel that WLB problems vary across life stage and supports the case for stage-specific approaches. A one-size-fits-all solution will not be effective in solving problems faced by entrepreneurs at various life stages and various business stages.

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The results of the study carry significance in terms of policy and practice. Government interventions such as the Yashasvini initiative and the MSME promotion campaigns have realized the importance of women's entrepreneurship as an important policy issue. Yet, their emphasis has been mainly on financial access, capacity building, and market linkages. The WLB aspect, which is identified as an essential element in the present study to facilitate women entrepreneurs in managing and expanding their ventures, has largely been ignored. Inclusion of WLB aspects in such programs can be taken up in several ways, including dissemination of information regarding childcare opportunities, formation of peer networks, flexible training schedules, and sensitization of the program facilitators regarding the special challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. The importance of spatial proximity is another significant finding of the study and can influence urban development and infrastructure policies.

Conceptually, this paper makes an important contribution to the theory of boundaries, emphasizing the need to take into consideration the normative and structural constraints involved in the process of boundary management. The data shows that integration can often be viewed as a forced reaction rather than a voluntarily selected strategy. Therefore, this study contradicts the voluntarism implied in many studies on boundary management and highlights the need to address power relations and structural inequality constraining the available strategies and their costs.

Several limitations should be noted. First, although the sample was quite diverse, it consisted of women entrepreneurs who had been involved in business for at least two years and were willing to talk about their work-life balance issues. Those women who abandoned entrepreneurship as a result of work-life balance problems or did not want to share their experience with family life are not considered. Second, the sample was quite limited geographically and included only urban and semi-urban women, leaving the rural population out of the scope of this research. Third, due to its cross-sectional nature, the study is unable to address the dynamics of work-life balance strategies and problems of women entrepreneurs over time.

The shortcomings of this study can be addressed in future studies through the use of longitudinal research design which would follow women entrepreneurs as they move from one stage of their businesses and lives to another, comparative research design

which would study WLB issues in different geographic/cultural settings in India, and quantitative research design which would examine the inter-relationships revealed in this study using a large sample. The relationship between digital technology and WLB is another issue that emerged during the course of this study but did not receive any systematic examination, and could be an important theme for future research. The incorporation of views of husbands, children, and other family members in future research can help gain further insight into the issue of WLB.

In essence, work-life balance for women entrepreneurs in India should not be seen either as a static process which can be attained or as a flaw in women's character which can be corrected. Work-life balance for women entrepreneurs in India is rather a continuous process of negotiation, which depends on cultural values, family structure, business realities, and the resources available to women. In other words, understanding of this complexity becomes a precondition for providing help to women entrepreneurs.

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