

Exploring Work–Life Balance Challenges Faced By Women Leaders In The Zambian Business Sector: A Case Study Of Women In Leadership Positions In Lusaka

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Abstract

This study examines work–life balance (WLB) challenges faced by women leaders in Lusaka’s business sector, with particular attention to coping strategies, implications for career progression and leadership effectiveness, and organizational and policy responses. A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was employed, combining quantitative data from structured questionnaires (n = 120) and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews (n = 20) with women leaders across multiple industries. Quantitative findings indicate that family responsibilities, high job demands, and unsupportive workplace cultures constitute the most significant WLB challenges. Regression analysis revealed weak statistical associations between WLB challenges and career progression. However, qualitative findings provided deeper insight into the lived experiences behind these patterns, highlighting emotional strain, burnout, missed leadership opportunities, and persistent gender bias shaped by societal expectations. Coping strategies were predominantly individual-driven, including time management, boundary-setting, and reliance on family support, while formal organizational support mechanisms such as flexible work arrangements and childcare services were limited. The study underscores the need for gender-responsive organizational policies, inclusive workplace cultures, and supportive social infrastructure to enhance sustainable leadership pathways for women in Zambia’s business sector.

Keywords: work–life balance, women leaders, gender, leadership, Zambia, mixed methods

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I. Introduction

Work–life balance (WLB) has become a critical issue in leadership studies, particularly for women navigating professional advancement within gendered organizational and socio-cultural contexts. While women’s participation in leadership roles has increased globally, women leaders continue to experience disproportionate work–life conflict due to entrenched gender norms, unequal caregiving responsibilities, and limited institutional support (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These challenges are especially pronounced in low- and middle-income countries, where formal family-friendly workplace policies remain underdeveloped.

In Zambia, Lusaka serves as the country’s economic and corporate hub, hosting a growing number of women in managerial and executive positions. Despite this progress, women leaders face persistent challenges balancing professional demands with domestic and caregiving roles, shaped by strong societal expectations around femininity, motherhood, and family responsibility. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these pressures by collapsing boundaries between work and home, increasing unpaid care work, and amplifying stress and burnout among women professionals.

Existing literature on work–life balance in Africa remains limited and often focuses on employees rather than women in leadership positions. Empirical evidence capturing both the measurable patterns and lived experiences of women leaders in Zambia is particularly scarce. This study addresses this gap by examining the prevalence of Work Life Balance challenges among women leaders in Lusaka’s business sector, the coping strategies they employ, and the perceived impact of these challenges on career progression and leadership effectiveness. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study generates context-specific evidence to inform gender-responsive organizational practices and policy interventions that support inclusive and sustainable women’s leadership.

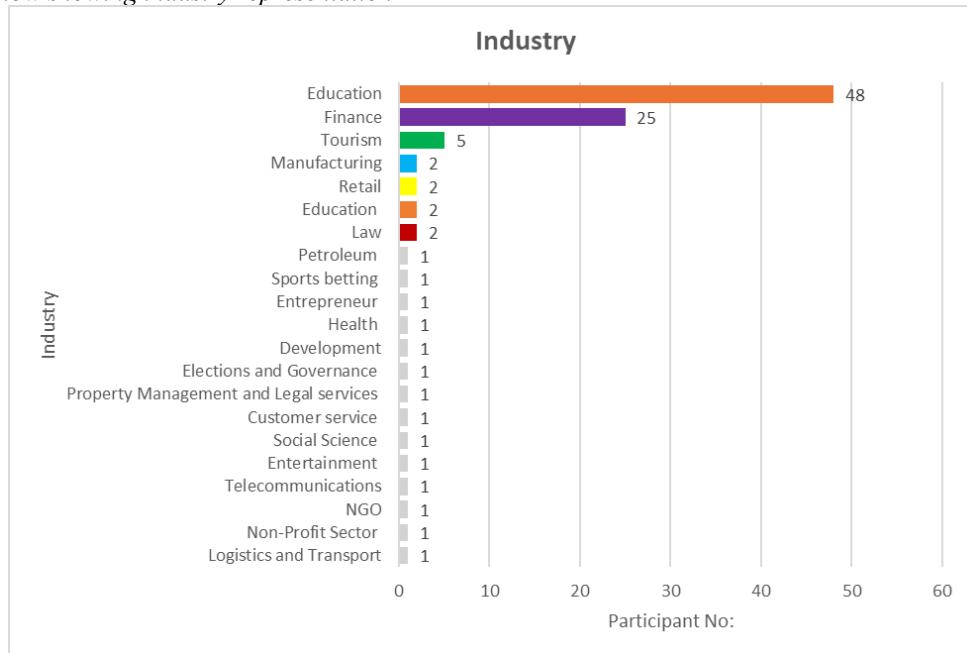
II. Methods

The study adopted a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide both breadth and depth in understanding work–life balance challenges. This design enabled the identification of statistical trends followed by in-depth exploration of women leaders’ lived experiences.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase involved an online structured questionnaire administered to 120 women leaders across key sectors, including finance, education, retail, telecommunications, and manufacturing. Stratified random sampling ensured representation across industries, while the sample size was calculated using the Cochran formula at a 95% confidence level.

Figure below showing industry representation



The questionnaire captured demographic characteristics, leadership roles, work-life balance challenges, organizational support mechanisms, coping strategies, and perceived impacts on career progression and leadership effectiveness.

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase consisted of 20 semi-structured virtual interviews purposively selected from survey respondents to reflect diversity in age, sector, and leadership level. Interviews explored participants' experiences of work-life conflict, societal expectations, organizational cultures, coping mechanisms, and recommendations for support.

Data Collection

Data were collected entirely online using Google Forms, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, accommodating participants' demanding schedules and ensuring flexibility and accessibility.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics and inferential analyses, including chi-square tests and regression analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using Atlas.ti, following systematic coding, theme development, and interpretation. Integration of findings occurred during the interpretation stage to enable triangulation.

Ethical Considerations

Approval to conduct the study and analyze the data were given by the **University of Zambia Biomedical Research Ethics Committee (UNZABREC)**. Informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and participants' right to withdraw were strictly upheld. All participants consented verbally or in writing prior to taking part. No participants withdrew from the study.

III. Results

This study examined the work-life balance challenges faced by women leaders in Lusaka's business sector, the coping strategies they employ, the effects of these challenges on career progression and leadership effectiveness, and the organizational and policy measures needed to better support women in leadership roles.

Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the findings provide both breadth and depth, combining statistical trends with lived experiences.

Participant Characteristics

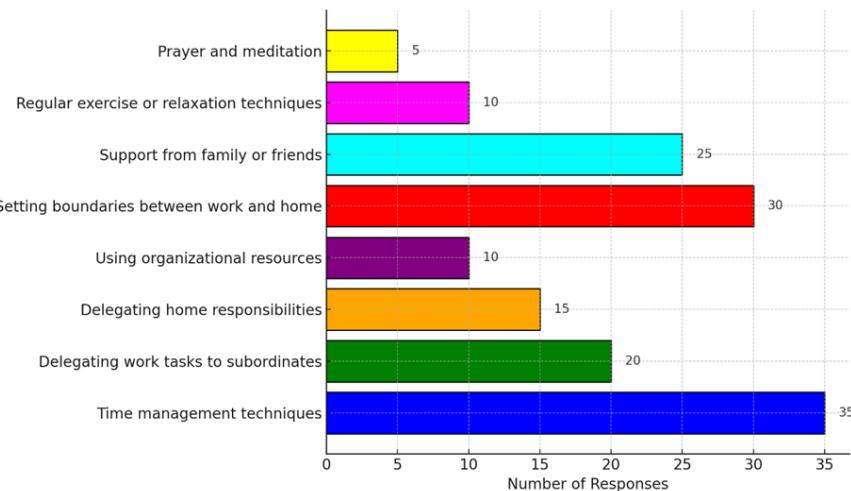
The study sample comprised mid-career women leaders, with the majority aged 31–40 years and possessing advanced educational qualifications, predominantly at Master's level. Participants were mainly drawn from the education and finance sectors, and most had substantial leadership experience, with over two-thirds reporting more than seven years in leadership roles and supervising large teams. This profile reflects a cohort of highly skilled and experienced women operating in demanding professional environments.

Work-Life Balance Challenges

The findings reveal that work-life balance challenges among women leaders are pervasive and multifaceted. Family obligations emerged as the most dominant challenge, underscoring the continued expectation that women shoulder primary caregiving responsibilities alongside leadership roles. High job demands, long working hours, rigid workplace cultures, travel requirements, and limited access to flexible working arrangements further compounded these challenges. Quantitative data showed that these challenges often overlapped, creating cumulative pressures rather than isolated difficulties. Qualitative narratives reinforced these findings, illustrating how constant availability, crisis management, and inflexible schedules constrained women's ability to meet both professional and personal responsibilities.

Coping Strategies

Women leaders predominantly relied on individual coping strategies to manage work-life balance challenges. Time management, boundary-setting between work and home, delegation of tasks, and support from family and friends were the most commonly used approaches. However, fewer participants reported using organizational support mechanisms, such as formal wellness programs or institutional resources. While frequent use of personal coping strategies was associated with moderate perceived effectiveness, the findings suggest that these approaches place a disproportionate burden on women, highlighting gaps in organizational support structures



Impact on Career Progression and Leadership Effectiveness

Quantitative analysis indicated no statistically significant relationship between work-life balance challenges and career progression, suggesting that measurable career outcomes may be influenced by factors beyond those captured in the model. However, qualitative findings revealed substantial indirect and experiential impacts. Participants reported missed career opportunities, delayed advancement, burnout, reduced focus, and strained leadership effectiveness due to competing demands. Gender bias and assumptions about women's family responsibilities further limited access to promotions and high-impact roles. These findings demonstrate that while career progression may not always show immediate statistical effects, work-life balance challenges meaningfully shape leadership experiences and effectiveness.

Organizational and Policy Recommendations

Participants strongly emphasized the need for systemic and structural reforms. The most widely supported recommendations included flexible and remote work arrangements, improved delegation and

leadership support systems, mental health and wellness services, flexible working hours, enhanced parental leave, and childcare support. Cultural shifts toward performance-based evaluations, reduced emphasis on long working hours, and deliberate efforts to address gender bias were also highlighted as critical enablers of sustainable women's leadership.

Integrated Insights

Overall, the integrated findings underscore that work-life balance challenges faced by women leaders in Lusaka are not merely individual issues but are deeply embedded in organizational practices and societal norms. While women demonstrate resilience and adaptability through personal coping strategies, these measures alone are insufficient. Sustainable improvement

IV. Discussion

This study examined work-life balance challenges faced by women leaders in Lusaka's business sector and discussed their implications for leadership effectiveness and career progression within existing scholarly literature. The findings indicate that work-life balance challenges are primarily shaped by structural, cultural, and societal factors rather than individual limitations.

Family responsibilities emerged as the most significant challenge, reflecting entrenched gender norms that position women as primary caregivers despite their leadership roles. This aligns with existing literature on the "second shift," where women shoulder disproportionate domestic and emotional labor alongside professional obligations. High job demands, long working hours, limited flexibility, and unsupportive organizational cultures further intensified these challenges. Leadership roles often required constant availability, reducing time for personal and family responsibilities and increasing stress levels.

Although quantitative analysis showed no statistically significant relationship between work-life balance challenges and career progression, qualitative findings revealed substantial indirect effects. Participants described missed opportunities, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and reduced leadership effectiveness linked to persistent work-life imbalance. These experiences suggest that conventional quantitative indicators may fail to capture nuanced impacts such as diminished focus, confidence, and decision-making capacity. Industry-specific demands, particularly in sectors requiring extended hours or frequent travel, further exacerbated these challenges.

The psychological and emotional toll of work-life imbalance was evident, with participants reporting guilt, stress, and feelings of inadequacy that influenced their leadership performance and workplace relationships. Some women demonstrated resilience through adaptive strategies such as delegation and team empowerment; however, these strategies often shifted the burden of coping onto individuals rather than organizations.

The discussion highlights the need for systemic organizational and policy interventions. Flexible work arrangements, supportive parental leave policies, childcare support, mental health services, and performance-based evaluation systems were identified as critical enablers of sustainable leadership. Addressing workplace cultures that reward excessive overtime and reinforcing gender-inclusive leadership norms are essential for promoting equity and enhancing organizational effectiveness. Ultimately, improving work-life balance for women leaders requires coordinated action at organizational and policy levels to foster inclusive and sustainable leadership environments.

V. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence on work-life balance challenges faced by women leaders in Lusaka's business sector. While women demonstrate resilience and adaptability, persistent organizational and societal constraints undermine sustainable leadership pathways.

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