



Lived Experiences of Female Academics: How Social Support Shapes Work-Life Balance in Indonesian Higher Education

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Abstract: This study explores how social support influences the work-life balance of female academics in Indonesian higher education. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, twenty lecturers shared their experiences in balancing academic responsibilities (Tri Dharma) with family life. Thematic analysis revealed four key forms of social support: (1) family instrumental support, which enables academics to perform their academic tasks more effectively, (2) institutional flexibility, which reflects recognition and trust, creating a supportive work environment that accommodates the demands of both professional and personal life, (3) collegial emotional support, fostering a shared space of empathy, solidarity, and resilience among colleagues, and (4) the integration of instrumental and emotional support, which promotes personal growth, alleviates stress, and enhances work-life harmony. These findings extend Sarafino's theory of social support by revealing a culturally embedded hierarchy of support within the collectivist context of Indonesian academia, where family, colleagues, and institutions each play distinct roles in providing the necessary resources. The study highlights how social relationships and institutional structures co-construct the well-being of female academics, emphasizing the interdependent nature of both formal and informal support systems. By offering insights into how these dynamics shape work-life balance, this research provides valuable recommendations for gender-responsive policies and practices in higher education. Such policies can improve the work-life balance, career satisfaction, and overall well-being of women in academia, contributing to a more equitable and supportive academic environment.

Keywords: Lived Experience, Social Support, Work-Life Balance, Female Academics, Indonesian Higher Education.

Introduction

Achieving work-life balance (WLB) has emerged as a critical challenge for working women worldwide, particularly in professions that demand high levels of engagement and productivity. Female employees often navigate multiple responsibilities encompassing professional duties and domestic obligations, which can generate stress, role conflict, and potential burnout. In academia, these pressures are compounded by the expectations of research, teaching, and community service, making WLB a significant factor for personal well-being and career sustainability.

Female academics in Indonesia face a unique intersection of professional and familial responsibilities. According to BPS/PDDikti (2024), over 45% of 302,257 lecturers in 2023 were women, highlighting their substantial role in higher education. Indonesian female lecturers must balance the Tri Dharma responsibilities-teaching, research, and community service-alongside domestic duties, which situates them in a context of high role complexity. Understanding how they manage these overlapping obligations is crucial for fostering both individual well-being and institutional effectiveness.

The interplay of multiple roles often exposes female academics to a heightened risk of role conflict and burnout. Studies worldwide indicate that women balancing dual responsibilities-both at home and in their academic careers-experience elevated stress levels, which can negatively impact their psychological well-being and professional performance. Research by Akanji et al. (2020), Riyono & Rezki (2022), Jordan et al. (2024), Kurowska & Kasperska (2025), and Majumder & Biswas (2023) underscores the significant toll that these competing demands place on women in academia, pointing to an increased vulnerability to mental health challenges and reduced career satisfaction. The pressure to manage both spheres often exacerbates the stress, with detrimental effects on productivity, career advancement, and overall job satisfaction. These findings emphasize the importance of addressing role conflict in higher education policies and providing targeted support systems to mitigate its impact on female academics. Indonesian studies corroborate these findings, demonstrating that unbalanced workloads and insufficient support contribute significantly to fatigue and diminished job satisfaction among female lecturers (Situmorang & Sebayang, 2025).

Maintaining WLB is not only critical for personal health but also has direct implications for academic performance. Vitaningdyah (2023) found that WLB indirectly enhances work achievement through increased motivation, while Darmawan et al. (2015) reported a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.563$, $p = 0.000$) between burnout and WLB among female lecturers. Furthermore, studies indicate a positive relationship between WLB and affective commitment, suggesting that effective management of dual roles supports both individual and organizational outcomes (Aprilianto et al, 2025).

Social support has been consistently recognized as a key resource for mitigating the pressures of dual responsibilities (Kurtuluş et al, 2023). Theoretical frameworks, such as Sarafino (1998) model, classify social support into four functional dimensions: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. These dimensions provide a comprehensive lens for examining how female academics perceive, prioritize, and utilize available support to manage work and personal life.

Empirical evidence in Indonesia highlights the positive influence of social support on WLB. Ramadhan (2024); Manggaharti & Novianti (2019), Mariyani & Nurhayati (2024), Afrida (2025), Putri & Santoso (2021), Adjiputra (2023) demonstrated that support from family and colleagues significantly enhances perceptions of work-life balance, while Nurhabiba (2020) quantified that social support contributes 24.5% to work-life balance among educational staff. Institutional policies, including flexible working hours and childcare support, have also been shown to alleviate role pressures and reduce stress

(Kurowska & Kasperska, 2025; Aulia & Rasyid, 2024). Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of both interpersonal and institutional resources.

Despite extensive quantitative research, there remains a critical gap in understanding the lived experiences of female academics in Indonesia regarding social support and WLB. Previous studies primarily measure correlations and effect sizes, but they do not capture the subjective interpretations, priorities, and mechanisms through which support facilitates role management. Preliminary interviews with ten female lecturers in Jakarta indicated that instrumental support from partners and institutional flexibility were perceived as the most crucial factors enabling simultaneous management of professional and domestic responsibilities, highlighting the need for qualitative inquiry.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach with twenty female lecturers to explore how social support shapes their WLB experiences in Indonesian higher education. By bridging the divide between statistical evidence and lived experiences, the study aims to provide rich, contextually grounded insights into the mechanisms and functional priorities of social support. These findings are expected to inform gender-responsive institutional policies and practices, enhancing both the well-being and professional effectiveness of female academics.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach, aiming to explore and describe the lived experiences of female academics regarding the role of social support in achieving work-life balance (Creswell, 2021). Phenomenology was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of the subjective meanings, perceptions, and essences of participants' experiences in interpreting and utilizing social support amidst the dual demands of academic and domestic roles. The research focuses on the Indonesian higher education context, capturing diverse experiences across multiple institutions rather than being confined to a single geographic location. Data collection was conducted over a four-month period (March–July 2025).

Participants

Twenty female academics participated in this study, recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria to ensure data relevance and richness: permanent lecturers (public or private universities) in Indonesia, married or with domestic responsibilities (e.g., childcare or household management), and actively involved in teaching or Tri Dharma activities for at least five years, indicating significant workload and role complexity. All participants provided informed consent and agreed to have their interviews recorded.

Data Collection

The primary data collection method was in-depth, semi-structured interviews, guided by a protocol developed from the four dimensions of social support (emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal) and work-life balance. Interviews were conducted online via video conferencing platforms (Zoom/Google Meet) to accommodate geographically dispersed participants. In addition to interviews, non-participant observation and document analysis were employed to triangulate data and enhance validity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis in line with interpretive phenomenology principles (Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The analysis process involved verbatim transcription, initial coding, development of sub-themes, and formulation of essential themes that capture the core meanings of participants' experiences. Rich narrative descriptions were constructed and supported with direct participant quotations to illustrate the themes.

Trustworthiness

To ensure data credibility, triangulation of multiple data sources and member checking were employed. These procedures confirmed that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' lived experiences, enhancing the study's credibility, dependability, and transferability. This rigorous approach enables the findings to provide meaningful insights applicable to a broader population of female academics within Indonesian higher education.

Result and Discussion

This study revealed four interrelated essential themes representing female academics' lived experiences in utilizing social support to achieve work-life balance. These theme-family instrumental support, institutional flexibility, colleague emotional support, and work-life enhancement-function within a hierarchical and synergistic structure that mediates the dual responsibilities of Tri Dharma obligations and domestic duties. Collectively, these findings illustrate how social support operates not merely as an external resource but as an interactive and contextually nuanced mechanism that enables female academics to thrive both professionally and personally.

Family Instrumental Support

Family instrumental support emerged as the most fundamental and consistently emphasized enabler of work-life balance among participants. This support encompasses the tangible division of household labor, childcare responsibilities, and management of domestic routines, directly facilitating the allocation of uninterrupted time for academic tasks. Within the Indonesian context, where extended family structures are common and domestic responsibilities often disproportionately fall upon women, such practical support is vital.

Participant P-04 articulated: *"The most tangible support is not sweet words. My husband takes over school drop-offs and monthly shopping. That is the 'work time' he provides. If he just says, 'Good luck, Ma,' but lounges around, it only adds stress."*

This statement underscores that instrumental support is not merely symbolic or emotional; it is measured by its ability to create concrete time for professional engagement. Without such support, emotional encouragement alone may be insufficient, and the psychological burden of unshared domestic responsibilities can exacerbate stress levels. This finding aligns with Ramadhan (2024), who reported a positive correlation between family support and work-life balance among female employees in Indonesia. Moreover, Greenhaus & Allen (2011) emphasize that instrumental support is critical in mitigating time-based role conflicts, while Kurowska & Kasperska (2025) highlights the role of extended family members in collectively alleviating domestic burdens.

Interestingly, participants highlighted not only spousal support but also the contributions of extended family networks, such as mothers-in-law or older siblings, in providing childcare and domestic assistance (Mariyani & Nurhayati, 2024). This extended support system enhances resilience, providing a buffer against role overload, a concept supported by the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989). In essence, the allocation of time as a finite and valuable resource is central; family instrumental support enables female academics to reclaim this scarce resource, optimizing their capacity to fulfill professional obligations without compromising personal well-being.

In contrast, the absence of adequate family support often led to persistent role conflict, heightened stress, and in some cases, emotional exhaustion. Some participants described experiencing *"shadow responsibilities,"* where even after completing their formal work obligations, they remained mentally preoccupied with unfinished domestic duties. These observations suggest that social support from family is not a supplementary resource but a foundational necessity that directly shapes the capacity for work-life integration.

Institutional Support: Time Flexibility

Institutional policies providing flexible working arrangements emerged as a second crucial theme. Flexibility—such as the option to work from home, adjust teaching schedules, or submit academic outputs within negotiated deadlines—serves both practical and symbolic functions. Practically, it reduces temporal conflicts between work and domestic obligations; symbolically, it conveys institutional recognition and trust in female academics' ability to manage multiple roles.

Participant P-09 emphasized: *"Leaders who allow work from home and understand our lateness due to children are very helpful. It is a form of trust that motivates me to work harder."*

This testimony highlights that institutional flexibility is not merely a procedural accommodation but a form of organizational support that contributes to affective commitment and engagement. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model Bakker & Demerouti (2017) explains this phenomenon: institutional support acts as a resource that buffers job demands, reduces stress, and enhances professional efficacy. Similar patterns

were reported by Nurhabiba (2020) and Darmawan et al. (2015), who documented that structural support mitigates burnout and enhances performance quality.

Importantly, participants noted that flexibility alone is insufficient if not accompanied by mutual trust and understanding. Female academics highlighted instances where formal policies existed but cultural or managerial resistance rendered them ineffective. For example, a participant at a private university reported: *"The rule says I can adjust my schedule, but my supervisor constantly questions my output. It feels like flexibility exists only on paper."*

This insight indicates that institutional support must be coupled with a supportive culture to translate policy into lived benefit. In sum, the interplay between formal institutional arrangements and organizational culture determines the efficacy of flexible work policies in fostering work-life balance.

Mitigating Function: Colleague Emotional Support

Emotional support from colleagues, particularly female peers, emerged as a vital resource in managing psychological pressures arising from overlapping professional and domestic demands. Emotional support includes sharing experiences, providing empathy, validation, and encouragement in navigating academic stressors and family responsibilities.

Participant P-06 shared: *"I seek colleagues when stressed about accreditation or when a child is sick. They say, 'Be patient, you are already doing great.' This support makes me stronger."*

Such interactions create a safe emotional space and foster solidarity among female academics. They function as psychological safety nets, reducing perceived isolation and vulnerability to burnout. Manggaharti & Novianti (2019) similarly observed that emotional support enhances resilience by fostering adaptive coping mechanisms and social cohesion. Interestingly, emotional support often reinforced instrumental and institutional support. Participants reported that encouragement from colleagues legitimized the use of flexible policies and facilitated negotiation for domestic support from family members. In effect, emotional support serves as a catalyst, amplifying the benefits of other forms of social support and promoting a synergistic environment for work-life balance.

Outcome: Work-Life Enhancement

The culmination of instrumental, institutional, and emotional support is not merely the mitigation of role conflict but the enhancement of work-life quality. Participants described experiencing increased focus, motivation, and satisfaction in both personal and professional domains when supported holistically.

Participant P-11 expressed: *"Balance is achieved not only because tasks are shared, but because I feel fully present in both roles. When my children are cared for and my husband is supportive, I am more focused and enthusiastic. The guilt disappears, and dual motivation emerges."*

This phenomenon aligns with Fisher's (2009) conceptualization of work-life balance as a dynamic process, wherein energy and satisfaction flow from personal to professional domains and vice versa. Fully supported female academics do not merely cope with stress—they thrive, exhibiting higher engagement, productivity, and institutional loyalty.

Vitaningdyah (2023) similarly found that enhanced work-life experiences correlate positively with engagement and commitment.

Critically, the study demonstrates the synergistic effects of combined social supports. Instrumental support without emotional validation, or institutional flexibility without familial assistance, produced limited enhancement. Only the integration of all forms of support-practical, emotional, and structural-enabled participants to achieve sustained work-life enhancement. This suggests that interventions aimed at improving work-life balance should adopt a holistic approach, targeting multiple sources of support concurrently.

The thematic analysis conducted in this study revealed several essential themes that illustrate how social support facilitates work-life balance among female academics. Table 1 summarizes these findings, integrating the dominant type of social support, primary sources of support, and the mechanisms through which such support contributes to balancing professional and domestic responsibilities. By presenting the data in this structured format, the table not only highlights the hierarchical and functional nature of social support but also demonstrates the synergistic interactions between family, colleagues, and institutional policies. This approach provides a comprehensive overview of the lived experiences of female academics, offering insights into how instrumental, emotional, and structural supports collectively enhance work-life integration and professional engagement within the context of Indonesian higher education.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis

Main Theme	Subtheme / Category	Representative Participant Quotes	Contribution to Work-Life Balance
Family Instrumental Support	Household task division	<i>My husband takes over school drop-offs and monthly shopping. That is the 'work time' he provides.</i> (P-04)	Provides time and space for uninterrupted academic work; reduces role overload.
Family Instrumental Support	Childcare assistance	<i>My mother-in-law helps look after the children when I have teaching obligations.</i> (P-12)	Enables effective management of domestic responsibilities; alleviates stress.
Institutional Support: Time Flexibility	Work-from-home options	<i>Leaders who allow work from home and understand our lateness due to children are very helpful.</i> (P-09)	Reduces time-based conflicts; increases perceived control over work tasks.
Institutional Support: Time Flexibility	Flexible deadlines / schedule adjustments	<i>I can submit my research report later if family matters intervene, and my supervisor supports this.</i> (P-07)	Enhances adaptability and reduces burnout risk.
Colleague Emotional Support	Peer empathy and validation	<i>When stressed about accreditation or my child's illness, colleagues say, 'Be patient, you are already doing great.'</i> (P-06)	Provides psychological safety, strengthens resilience, mitigates emotional strain.

Main Theme	Subtheme / Category	Representative Participant Quotes	Contribution to Work-Life Balance
Colleague Emotional Support	Sharing experiences & mentoring	<i>My senior colleagues guide me through balancing academic expectations and home life. (P-15)</i>	Facilitates coping strategies; promotes knowledge transfer and social cohesion.
Work-Life Enhancement	Motivation & engagement	<i>Balance is achieved not only because tasks are shared, but because I feel fully present in both roles. (P-11)</i>	Improves professional focus, personal satisfaction, and overall quality of life.
Work-Life Enhancement	Psychological synergy	<i>With full support, I can thrive at work and at home simultaneously. (P-08)</i>	Converts support into positive energy and productivity; fosters sustainable work-life balance.

Source: Thematic Analysis, 2025

To provide a clear overview of the core findings from this study, a summary of the essential themes of social support and their roles in facilitating work-life balance among female academics is presented in Table 2. The table integrates the dominant type of social support, the primary sources of support, and the specific mechanisms through which these supports contribute to balancing professional obligations and domestic responsibilities. This presentation allows readers to grasp not only the hierarchical structure of social support identified in this study but also the functional interactions between family, colleagues, and institutional policies that collectively enhance work-life integration. By systematically organizing the findings, Table 1 offers a concise yet comprehensive snapshot of how instrumental, emotional, and structural supports operate synergistically to foster work-life enhancement in the context of Indonesian higher education.

Table 2. Summary of Essential Themes of Social Support and Work-Life Balance

Essential Theme	Dominant Type of Social Support	Primary Source of Support	Mechanism for Work-Life Balance
Prerequisite for Work-Life Balance: Family Instrumental Support	Practical assistance (domestic task-sharing, childcare)	Partner/Immediate Family	Creates physical work time; frees up allocation for Tri Dharma activities (research/publication)
Institutional Support: Time Flexibility	Instrumental-structural support (WFH policies, flexible schedules)	Institution/Faculty Leadership	Manages time conflicts: aligns academic demands with unexpected domestic roles
Mitigation Function: Emotional Support from Colleagues	Empathy, acknowledgment, listening, shared burden	Female Colleague Peers	Maintains psychological well-being; reduces burnout and guilt from dual-role conflicts

Essential Theme	Dominant Type of Social Support	Primary Source of Support	Mechanism for Work-Life Balance
Ultimate Impact: Work-Life Enhancement	Synergy of instrumental and emotional support	Family and Institution	Creates positive energy: transfers personal life satisfaction to work environment, enhancing engagement

Source: Essential Analysis, 2025

Cultural and Contextual Considerations

The Indonesian cultural context significantly shapes the manifestation and prioritization of social support. Collectivist values, extended family structures, and gendered expectations of domestic responsibilities amplify the importance of family instrumental support. Simultaneously, institutional hierarchies and bureaucratic norms influence how flexibility is perceived and enacted. Participants frequently contrasted their experiences in public versus private universities, noting variations in policy implementation, supervisor attitudes, and collegial networks.

Additionally, participants' disciplinary backgrounds influenced their experiences of work-life balance. Academics in research-intensive fields reported higher dependency on instrumental and institutional support due to greater time demands, whereas those in teaching-focused roles emphasized emotional support from colleagues to cope with administrative and pedagogical stressors.

Implications and Reflections

The findings provide several important implications. First, institutions should implement gender-sensitive and flexible policies that are reinforced by supportive managerial culture. Second, family engagement programs could strengthen domestic support networks, recognizing the pivotal role of spouses and extended family in enabling work-life balance. Third, peer mentoring and emotional support groups may serve as low-cost, high-impact interventions for stress mitigation and professional resilience. Finally, while this study captures rich lived experiences, it is limited by its qualitative scope and purposive sample. Future research could explore demographic variations, cross-disciplinary differences, and longitudinal effects of social support on work-life enhancement, allowing for more targeted interventions.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the purposive and snowball sampling may limit generalizability, as participants were mainly from urban universities. Second, reliance on self-reported experiences may introduce social desirability bias. Third, the cross-sectional design captures experiences at a single point in time, not accounting for changes over career stages or life events.

Future research could address these gaps by conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in work-life balance, comparing experiences across different university types, and

exploring demographic or cultural factors. Mixed-methods approaches combining qualitative insights with quantitative measures of well-being and productivity would also provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Conclusion

This study concludes that social support is a critical determinant of work-life balance among female academics. Successfully navigating the dual demands of Tri Dharma obligations and domestic responsibilities relies on a hierarchical structure of social support, where family instrumental support is the primary prerequisite enabling emotional and institutional support to function effectively.

Findings reinforce Sarafino (1998) social support theory and prior research showing that practical assistance and domestic task-sharing by family significantly enhance time management, allowing female academics to focus on professional productivity. Institutional flexibility policies further mitigate stress and strengthen work-life balance. Emotional support from female colleagues also plays a significant role in reducing burnout and psychological strain, acting as an adaptive social mechanism that promotes resilience and mental well-being.

The synergy of instrumental and emotional support produces work-life enhancement, improving motivation, work engagement, and overall life satisfaction. Practically, these results underscore the need for gender-sensitive institutional policies and the strengthening of social networks within both academic and family contexts. Future research could explore demographic and contextual variables to provide deeper understanding and more targeted solutions for supporting female academics.

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