

Navigating the Balance: Exploring Nurses' Perceptions of Work-Life Balance in a Tertiary Hospital Setting

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Abstract

Work-life balance (WLB) is a critical concern for nurses in tertiary hospitals due to the demanding nature of their roles. This study explored the lived experiences of 15 nurses regarding WLB through a qualitative phenomenological approach. Key themes identified included the impact of work schedules, emotional labor and burnout, organizational support, and personal coping strategies. Nurses highlighted challenges such as long hours, insufficient staffing, and emotional stress, while emphasizing the importance of flexible scheduling, family support, and self-care practices. The findings underscore the need for organizational reforms and wellness programs to enhance nurses' well-being and improve patient care.

Keywords: Work-Life Balance, Nurses, Tertiary Hospital, Qualitative Study, Burnout, Emotional Labor, Organizational Support, Coping Strategies

Introduction:

Work-life balance (WLB) is a significant issue for healthcare professionals, particularly nurses, given the high demands and stress associated with their roles. In tertiary hospitals, nurses face the dual challenge of delivering high-quality care while managing personal and family responsibilities. Studies have shown that poor work-life balance can lead to burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and high turnover rates among nurses (Suresh & Kodikal, 2017). Moreover, hospitals that fail to address these challenges may face negative impacts on patient care due to decreased nurse engagement and well-being (Azeem & Akhtar, 2014).

The work-life imbalance in nursing is often exacerbated by long shifts, night duty, and emotional demands of patient care. These factors contribute to stress, fatigue, and ultimately, dissatisfaction in both professional and personal spheres (Maiya, 2015). Nurses' ability to manage work-life balance effectively is influenced by both organizational policies and personal coping mechanisms. Hospital policies that provide flexibility in work schedules, adequate rest periods, and supportive family leave provisions have been linked to improved job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions (Poulose & Sudarsan, 2017).

Despite the increasing recognition of work-life balance issues, there remains limited qualitative research that explores nurses' personal experiences with balancing work and life, particularly within the unique and challenging environment of tertiary hospitals. This study aims to explore the perceptions of nurses in a tertiary care hospital regarding their work-life balance, identifying the factors that facilitate or hinder their ability to balance their professional and personal lives effectively.

Literature Review

Work-life balance (WLB) has been extensively studied in the context of healthcare professionals, especially nurses, due to the demanding nature of their roles. The literature highlights that achieving an equilibrium between work and personal life is crucial for enhancing job satisfaction, reducing burnout, and ensuring high-quality patient care.

1. Concept of Work-Life Balance in Nursing

The concept of WLB for nurses involves managing professional responsibilities alongside personal commitments. Azeem and Akhtar (2014) noted that a positive work-life balance is essential for maintaining organizational commitment among healthcare workers. Their study indicated that hospitals with supportive WLB policies tend to experience lower turnover rates and higher job satisfaction among nurses. Similarly, Maiya (2015) explored the challenges female nurses face in maintaining WLB and emphasized the critical role of hospital management in mitigating work-life conflicts.

2. Impact of Work-Life Imbalance

Work-life imbalance is a significant issue in nursing, with several studies linking it to adverse outcomes. Suresh and Kodikal (2017) identified that work-life conflicts among nurses negatively affect their productivity and increase their intention to leave the profession. Long working hours, irregular shifts, and emotional labor were found to be the primary contributors to WLB challenges. Additionally, a study by Poulouse and Sudarsan (2017) revealed that insufficient support from employers exacerbates work-life conflicts, further highlighting the importance of institutional policies that promote flexibility and well-being.

3. Organizational Policies and Work-Life Balance

The role of organizational support in achieving WLB is a recurring theme in the literature. Poulouse and Sudarsan (2017) identified three key dimensions of WLB for nurses: time balance, role balance, and satisfaction balance. Their findings emphasized the need for flexible scheduling, adequate staffing, and supportive leave policies to foster better WLB. Hospitals that implemented open-rota systems or family-friendly policies observed improved job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism (Pryce et al., 2006).

4. Individual Coping Strategies

In addition to organizational support, individual coping strategies play a crucial role in managing WLB. Studies by Tanaka et al. (2011) and Makabe et al. (2015) found that nurses who actively engaged in self-care practices and time management reported lower levels of stress and burnout. These findings suggest that empowering nurses with skills to manage their work-life priorities can significantly enhance their overall well-being.

5. Regional and Cultural Variations

Work-life balance experiences can vary across regions and cultural contexts. For example, Tanaka et al. (2011) observed that Japanese nurses prioritized collective family and workplace harmony, which influenced their perceptions of WLB. Similarly, cultural expectations and societal norms impact how nurses

navigate work-life demands, as seen in studies conducted in South Asia (Poulose & Sudarsan, 2017; Maiya, 2015).

6. Research Gaps

While the literature provides valuable insights, several gaps remain. Most studies focus on the quantitative aspects of WLB, such as working hours and organizational policies, with limited exploration of nurses' subjective experiences. Furthermore, there is a lack of qualitative research that examines how nurses in tertiary hospitals perceive and navigate work-life balance in their daily lives. This study aims to address these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of nurses working in a tertiary care setting.

Conclusion

The existing body of literature underscores the critical importance of work-life balance for nurses and its impact on their professional and personal well-being. Organizational policies, cultural factors, and individual coping strategies all play a role in shaping WLB. However, the need for qualitative insights into nurses' experiences remains unmet, particularly in the context of tertiary hospitals. This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of this issue by focusing on the perceptions and experiences of nurses in a high-demand healthcare environment.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of nurses regarding work-life balance in a tertiary hospital. A phenomenological approach was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of nurses' perceptions and experiences in managing professional and personal responsibilities.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in a tertiary hospital located, which provides advanced medical services and caters to a diverse patient population. Participants included 15 registered nurses (RNs) with at least three years of experience working in various units, including intensive care, surgical wards, and emergency departments. Purposive sampling was used to ensure participants represented a range of professional and personal circumstances, including different age groups, marital statuses, and caregiving responsibilities.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over a four-week period. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet and private setting within the hospital premises to ensure confidentiality and comfort. The interview guide included open-ended questions to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to work-life balance. Examples of questions included:

- "Can you describe how you balance your work and personal life?"
- "What challenges do you face in managing work-life balance as a nurse?"
- "What support mechanisms, if any, are available to help you maintain this balance?"

- "What suggestions do you have for improving work-life balance for nurses?"

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** Reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify initial patterns.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Systematically coding significant data segments across the dataset.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Collating codes into potential themes that reflected participants' experiences.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Refining themes by checking against the data to ensure coherence and accuracy.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Finalizing clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. **Producing the Report:** Synthesizing findings into a coherent narrative with supporting data excerpts.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures before providing written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without repercussions. All data were anonymized to protect participants' identities, and audio recordings were securely stored and destroyed upon the study's completion.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability:

- **Credibility:** Prolonged engagement with participants and triangulation of data through field notes.
- **Transferability:** Providing a detailed description of the study setting and participants to allow for context-specific interpretation.
- **Dependability:** Maintaining a comprehensive audit trail of the research process.
- **Confirmability:** Ensuring findings were grounded in the data through iterative reviews and peer debriefing.

Findings

The analysis of the interviews revealed four key themes and associated sub-themes, which highlight the complexities of work-life balance among nurses in a tertiary hospital setting. Participants' verbatim responses are included to illustrate each theme.

Theme 1: Impact of Work Schedule

Sub-theme 1.1: Long Working Hours

Participants emphasized the challenge of balancing personal responsibilities due to extended shifts and unpredictable working hours.

- *"Sometimes I work 12-hour shifts, and by the time I get home, I'm too exhausted to spend time with my family."* (Participant 3)
- *"The irregular shifts make it hard to plan anything outside work, even for important family events."* (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 1.2: Night Shifts and Sleep Deprivation

Night shifts were described as particularly disruptive to personal life and health.

- *"Night shifts leave me drained. I struggle to recover, and it affects my time with my kids."* (Participant 10)
- *"I often sleep during the day after night duty, and my family feels I'm not present."* (Participant 6)

Theme 2: Emotional Labor and Stress

Sub-theme 2.1: Emotional Toll of Patient Care

Nurses shared how the emotional demands of their work impacted their mental health and personal interactions.

- *"Dealing with critically ill patients is emotionally taxing, and I sometimes take that stress home."* (Participant 4)
- *"There are days when I'm so emotionally drained that I have no energy left for my family."* (Participant 8)

Sub-theme 2.2: Coping with Burnout

Burnout was a recurring issue, with participants discussing the lack of resources to address this challenge.

- *"There's so much pressure to perform, and it feels like there's no time to breathe or relax."* (Participant 1)
- *"I've considered leaving nursing because the stress is becoming unbearable."* (Participant 12)

Theme 3: Organizational Support

Sub-theme 3.1: Inadequate Staffing

Participants highlighted the impact of insufficient staffing on their ability to balance work and personal life.

- *"We're often short-staffed, and that increases the workload for everyone, making it harder to leave work on time."* (Participant 9)

- *"When there are fewer nurses, it feels like we're always running to catch up."* (Participant 2)

Sub-theme 3.2: Need for Flexible Scheduling

Many participants expressed the need for more flexible work schedules to better balance their responsibilities.

- *"If we had some flexibility in our shifts, it would be easier to manage family commitments."* (Participant 5)
- *"Other industries offer remote work or flexible hours, but we don't have that luxury."* (Participant 13)

Theme 4: Personal Coping Strategies

Sub-theme 4.1: Support from Family and Friends

Participants acknowledged the importance of a strong support system in managing work-life balance.

- *"My husband helps a lot with household chores, which makes it easier for me to focus on work."* (Participant 14)
- *"Having supportive friends who understand my schedule has been a lifesaver."* (Participant 11)

Sub-theme 4.2: Self-Care Practices

Engaging in self-care activities was highlighted as a key strategy for maintaining balance.

- *"I make sure to take some time for myself, even if it's just a walk or a cup of tea."* (Participant 15)
- *"Yoga has helped me a lot in managing stress and staying grounded."* (Participant 8)

Summary of Themes

1. **Impact of Work Schedule:** Highlighted the challenges of long hours, irregular shifts, and night duties.
2. **Emotional Labor and Stress:** Focused on the toll of patient care and experiences of burnout.
3. **Organizational Support:** Addressed the need for adequate staffing and flexible scheduling.
4. **Personal Coping Strategies:** Explored the role of support systems and self-care practices.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of nurses in a tertiary hospital regarding work-life balance (WLB), shedding light on the challenges and coping strategies they employ. The findings reveal a complex interplay of professional demands, organizational factors, and personal strategies that shape nurses' perceptions and experiences of WLB. These insights are discussed below in relation to existing literature.

Impact of Work Schedules

The study highlighted that long working hours, irregular shifts, and night duties significantly disrupt nurses' ability to balance work and personal life. This finding aligns with Suresh and Kodikal (2017), who identified extended work hours as a major contributor to stress and reduced job satisfaction among nurses.

Participants reported feeling physically and emotionally drained, which negatively impacted their ability to engage with family and social commitments. Night shifts, in particular, were described as highly disruptive, corroborating Tanaka et al.'s (2011) findings that night duties adversely affect sleep quality and personal time. Addressing these issues through policies such as shift flexibility and adequate rest periods could enhance WLB for nurses.

Emotional Labor and Burnout

The emotional demands of nursing, particularly in a tertiary hospital setting, were evident in participants' accounts of stress and burnout. Nurses frequently described the emotional toll of caring for critically ill patients and managing end-of-life situations. This resonates with Azeem and Akhtar's (2014) work, which emphasizes the role of emotional labor in exacerbating stress and work-life conflicts. Participants also expressed concerns about the lack of resources to manage burnout, echoing Poulouse and Sudarsan's (2017) findings that institutional support is crucial for mitigating burnout. Interventions such as counseling services, mindfulness programs, and resilience training could be beneficial in addressing these challenges.

Role of Organizational Support

Organizational factors emerged as critical determinants of WLB. Participants highlighted inadequate staffing as a key issue, leading to increased workloads and reduced personal time. This aligns with findings by Pryce et al. (2006), who reported that understaffing contributes to work-life conflicts and diminished job satisfaction. Additionally, the need for flexible scheduling was a recurrent theme, with participants suggesting that more adaptable shift systems could help them manage their responsibilities effectively. These findings reinforce the importance of supportive hospital policies, including sufficient staffing levels, flexible scheduling, and employee well-being programs, in promoting WLB.

Personal Coping Strategies

Despite the challenges, participants demonstrated resilience through personal coping strategies such as support from family and friends and engaging in self-care practices. This finding complements Makabe et al.'s (2015) research, which emphasized the role of individual agency in managing work-life demands. Nurses in the study highlighted the importance of strong familial and social support systems in alleviating work-related stress. Moreover, self-care practices such as yoga, meditation, and time management were cited as effective tools for maintaining balance. Encouraging these practices through hospital initiatives could empower nurses to better manage their work-life priorities.

Implications for Practice

The findings underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to address work-life balance challenges in nursing. Hospitals should prioritize:

1. **Policy Reforms:** Introducing flexible scheduling and adequate staffing to reduce workload burdens.
2. **Emotional Support:** Providing counseling services, stress management workshops, and peer support groups.
3. **Self-Care Programs:** Offering wellness initiatives, such as fitness programs and mindfulness sessions, to promote personal well-being.

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study lies in its qualitative design, which provided deep insights into the personal experiences of nurses in a tertiary hospital. However, the study is limited by its focus on a single hospital, which may not capture the diversity of experiences across different healthcare settings. Future research could explore WLB in various hospital types and regions to develop a more comprehensive understanding of this issue.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on work-life balance in nursing, particularly in the context of tertiary hospitals. The findings emphasize the pressing need for organizational reforms and enhanced support systems to mitigate the challenges faced by nurses. By addressing these issues, hospitals can not only improve nurses' well-being but also enhance the quality of patient care.

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