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Navigating Work–Life Balance: Experiences of Female Academics at Malaysian Private Universities

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Abstract. As a result of increasing academic pressures in performance-based, digitally mediated and market-oriented contexts, work–life balance has become a crucial issue in the education sector. Despite increasing scholarly interest in work–life balance in higher education, few empirical studies have examined the subjective experiences of female academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions (PHEIs), where institutional demands and academic expectations are especially high. This qualitative study investigated the major factors that influence work–life balance of female academics employed by Malaysian PHEIs, by applying boundary theory as a guide. In total six female academics at Malaysian PHEIs were selected through purposive sampling and participated in phenomenological interviews to gather data, which were then subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurrent issues. The findings indicate that work–life balance is affected by a number of interconnected factors, such as the blurring of work–life boundaries, the demands of academic workloads, structural resource limitations and leadership and line-manager behaviours. Overall, the findings demonstrate how institutional, leadership and structural factors exacerbate problems with work–life balance and make it difficult for female academics to pursue long-term academic careers in PHEIs.

Keywords: work–life balance; female academics; challenges; private higher education

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1. Introduction

As academic work has become increasingly intensive, performance-driven and digitally mediated, the concept of work–life balance has become a significant concern in higher education (Eshun & Segbenya, 2024). Academics are required to fulfil multiple professional roles, including teaching, research, administration, assessment and student engagement, often within highly structured and accountability-driven institutional environments. When these professional demands extend beyond formal working hours and interfere with personal life, they can negatively affect individual wellbeing, job satisfaction and institutional productivity (Weinreich et al., 2023). Consequently, understanding work–life balance in academic contexts has become an important area of interest for higher education researchers and policymakers (Rosa, 2022).

The literature consistently highlights high workloads, role overload and blurred boundaries between the professional and personal domains of academics. Administrative demands, teaching-intensive workloads and ongoing performance monitoring frequently require extended working hours and contribute to unresolved work–family conflict (Nair et al., 2021). These challenges have intensified with the expansion of digital technologies, which have normalised constant availability and after-hours communication, which makes psychological detachment from work increasingly difficult (Griffin, 2022; Mukhopadhyay, 2023). Evidence suggests that female academics often experience greater challenges because of gendered caregiving responsibilities, domestic expectations and emotional labour, which intensify role conflict and psychological strain (Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021).

Despite increasing scholarly attention to work–life balance in higher education, research has predominantly adopted quantitative approaches and focuses largely on public universities in Western contexts. Limited attention has been given to private higher education institutions (PHEIs), particularly in Malaysia, where institutional environments are often characterised by market-oriented performance expectations. Private institutions often emphasise teaching quality, student satisfaction and institutional reputation, which may increase workload demands and performance pressures (Janib et al., 2021). However, the extent to which these institutional characteristics influence academics' daily experiences of work–life balance remains underexplored.

Furthermore, studies have largely concentrated on individual coping mechanisms while giving limited attention to institutional and leadership-related influences, such as workload distribution, managerial communication practices and organisational support systems. This gap is particularly significant for female academics whose work–life balance is shaped by the intersection of professional expectations and gender-based caregiving responsibilities. As a result, the lived experiences of female academics at Malaysian PHEIs remain insufficiently documented.

To address these gaps, this study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the work–life balance challenges experienced by female academics in

Malaysian PHEIs. Guided by boundary theory, the study examined how institutional structures, leadership practices and gendered expectations interact to shape boundary management and work–life balance outcomes. The findings are intended to contribute to theory advancement by extending boundary management literature to non-Western higher education contexts and offering practical recommendations for institutional policy development and supportive workplace strategies. Accordingly, this study addressed the following research question: What are the critical issues that influence the work–life balance of female academics at Malaysian PHEIs?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Boundary Theory as the Underpinning Framework

Work–life balance has emerged as a critical concern in higher education research, particularly given that academic work is increasingly characterised by intensification, boundary ambiguity and diminished delimitation. Academics must juggle teaching, research, administration, assessment and student engagement in performance-based institutional settings, which leads to extended working hours, role overload and compromised wellbeing (Adisa & Chang, 2024; Weinreich et al., 2023).

This study employed boundary theory to conceptualise work and personal life as distinct realms that are separated by psychological, temporal and physical boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2000). According to this framework, individuals could vary in their preferences for separating or integrating these domains; however, the extent to which such preferences can be implemented depends on organisational norms, job requirements and social expectations (Mellner et al., 2014). Role conflict and work–life imbalance intensify when boundaries become either excessively permeable or inflexible (Johnston et al., 2022).

Boundary theory holds particular relevance for higher education, where activities such as course preparation, evaluation and student consultation frequently extend beyond formal working hours, which makes psychological disengagement challenging. However, the theory must account for variations shaped by gender, organisational context and cultural factors – dimensions that create unique challenges for work–life balance, particularly regarding gendered boundary management and pressures in PHEIs.

2.2 Gendered Challenges in Private Higher Education Contexts

The intersection of professional demands, organisational expectations and sociocultural role obligations causes disproportionate strain for female academics and highlights the gendered nature of work–life balance issues in academia. In many ways, women face a ‘double burden’ of work and home caregiving: They consistently shoulder more teaching and service responsibilities than their male counterparts (Dinibutun et al., 2020); they bear a disproportionate amount of emotional labour, such as committee work and student mentoring (Miranda & Khan, 2022); and they bear the majority of the responsibility for childcare, elder care and household management (Ervin et al., 2022). The result is role overload, which is characterised by women lacking the

time, energy or psychological resources to effectively fulfil all roles expected of them (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This leads to intense role conflict between being an 'ideal mother' or carer (Aryee et al., 2005), and an 'ideal worker' who is fully committed and continuously available.

PHEIs operate under market-driven imperatives that create distinctive pressures, under which these gendered issues become even more acute. According to comparative studies, Malaysian private universities maintain high teaching loads while simultaneously demanding higher research productivity – a 'triple burden' when coupled with caregiving obligations (Dinibutun et al., 2020; Mohammadi & Karupiah, 2020). Financial compensation is a crucial performance determinant at private institutions (Mohammadi & Karupiah, 2020), whereas salary has no significant relationship with performance at public universities (where job security is greater). This suggests that lower job security exerts greater pressure on female academics, who may be more financially vulnerable because of career disruptions related to caregiving. According to boundary theory, female academics' ability to uphold segmented role boundaries is diminished by gendered caregiving expectations (Johnston et al., 2022).

The impact of organisational climate factors on women varies according to the type of institution. According to Dinibutun et al. (2020), cohesion among coworkers lessens emotional exhaustion among academic staff at public universities but, in private settings, primarily worsens depersonalisation. This suggests that supportive relationships function differently in different institutional contexts. These industry-specific trends have important ramifications for tactics female academics can apply to achieve work-life balance; women depend on social support to balance work and family obligations (Verma et al., 2024).

As a result of digital transformation, vulnerabilities are increasingly gendered. Digital technologies increase boundary permeability, normalise after-hours communication and prolong working hours, rather than promoting better balance (Griffin, 2022; Mukhopadhyay, 2023). According to studies, women, especially mothers, saw significant declines in research productivity when they took on more caregiving responsibilities during lockdowns, while male academics often saw increases in productivity. This suggests that technological flexibility alone, and a failure to address gendered divisions of domestic labour, may make work-life balance issues worse rather than better (Vaziri et al., 2020). Yeo and Li (2022) assert that the proliferation of digital communication technologies has led to a significant increase in boundary permeability. This is because work tasks can now be performed in domestic spaces, which makes it more difficult to distinguish between professional and personal roles in terms of time and space.

2.3 Methodological Gaps and Research Justification

Understanding how academics manage the dynamics of work-life balance is constrained by significant methodological limitations, despite the growing body

of research on work–life balance in higher education. According to a thorough bibliometric analysis of 921 work–family balance publications published between 2000 and 2024, the majority of studies used quantitative surveys to investigate stress, job satisfaction or work–family conflict outcomes (Fang et al., 2025). These approaches are useful for creating associations, but they do not reveal much about how academics actively manage work–life balance daily in their careers. Studies using in-depth qualitative methods to examine lived experiences were rare among the 921 examined publications, which indicates that qualitative and mixed-methods approaches are still significantly underutilised (Fang et al., 2025). This finding presents a challenge because boundary theory focuses on comprehending how people manage and subjectively experience boundary permeability (Clark, 2000).

Little cross-cultural and cross-institutional diversity is evident in current research (Fang et al., 2025). PHEIs have not received enough attention because of the concentration of research in Western and public university contexts. Research on work–life balance in Malaysia has not distinguished between public and private institutions, which obscures organisational demands specific to a given sector (Ramachandaran, 2024). As a result, little is known about how female academics at Malaysian PHEIs, specifically, view institutional pressures, workload pressures and boundary issues, or how these perceptions vary from those of their counterparts at public universities. Given that private universities account for a growing share of Malaysia’s higher education sector and employ a substantial number of female academics, the paucity of research analysing gendered work–life challenges in Malaysian PHEIs represents a significant gap (Yaakub & Mohamed, 2020).

Although boundary theory could be an effective framework for work–life boundary management, it has mainly been applied to the scope of Western settings and governmental organisations. Boundary management in these contexts remains under-theorised and under-studied. Although applicable, boundary theory has seldom been used to study gendered boundary negotiation in non-Western institutional settings of higher education institutions in a private setting (Ren & Caudle, 2020). This paper fills these gaps by applying qualitative research to explore work–life boundary management experiences of female academics in Malaysian PHEIs to produce rich, contextualised knowledge that is vital for the development of theories and institutional policymaking.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative research method was deemed appropriate for this study because this method facilitates a detailed examination of how female academics experience and view work–life balance at Malaysian PHEIs. A phenomenological approach was employed to understand the meaning of work–life balance as experienced and interpreted by female academics in their personal and professional lives. A phenomenological approach focuses on the nature and meaning of lived experiences as perceived by individuals (Amzat et al., 2021). This method enabled the identification of similar patterns and

common meanings in participants' experiences, to provide valuable insights into the challenges women face in balancing work and personal life (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

3.2 Population and Sample

This study employed two complementary sampling techniques: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used as the primary technique to deliberately select participants based on specific criteria directly connected to the research objectives. This approach is suited for qualitative research when the goal is to obtain detailed insights from a particular population rather than to make statistical generalisations (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

Snowball sampling was employed as a supplementary technique because of the difficulty of accessing female academics at PHEIs. Given the sensitive nature of work-life balance discussions and institutional constraints, initial participants referred other potential participants who met the selection criteria. This referral-based approach facilitated access to participants who might otherwise have been difficult to reach and helped establish the trust and rapport essential for gathering authentic accounts of lived experiences.

The selection criteria required participants to be female academics currently employed by Malaysian PHEIs, with at least five years of teaching experience and significant family caregiving responsibilities. All six participants met these criteria. Although the sample size may appear small, Kumar et al. (2020) suggest that three to 10 participants are sufficient for phenomenological research. Lyons et al. (2024) emphasise that, in phenomenological studies, the richness and depth of participants' insights are more significant than the number of participants.

3.3 Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their experiences freely while enabling focused exploration of key issues related to work-life balance. Semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility needed in qualitative educational research while maintaining focus on pre-established topics (Ruslin et al., 2022).

The interview guide was developed according to the research objectives, research question and key concepts from boundary theory, including workload demands, boundary permeability, role conflict and institutional support. To ensure face validity, the interview guide was reviewed by subject matter experts in work-life balance research, who provided feedback on the clarity, relevance and appropriateness of the questions. The guide was revised according to their recommendations before data collection commenced.

Interview questions focused on teaching workload, administrative responsibilities, digital expectations, institutional demands and family obligations. Interviews were conducted either in person or online according to participants' availability and preferences. Each interview lasted approximately 45-90 minutes. All interviews were conducted with participants' informed

consent, and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Fieldnotes were maintained throughout and after the interviews to document contextual observations and preliminary analytical reflections.

3.4 Data Analysis

In this study, qualitative data analysis followed the three-phase framework proposed by Mezmir (2020), comprising data reduction, data display and drawing conclusions. This framework provided a systematic and iterative structure for identifying patterns and themes across participants' accounts of work-life balance at Malaysian PHEIs.

During the data reduction phase, interview transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to establish familiarity with the data. Analysis began with open coding, in which each transcript was examined line-by-line to identify key concepts related to work-life balance without predetermined categories being imposed. This inductive approach allowed themes to emerge directly from participants' accounts. Initial codes that were identified through this process included workload pressure, institutional support and personal boundaries. These initial codes were subsequently refined through axial coding, whereby related codes were grouped together to form broader, more cohesive thematic categories. This iterative movement between open and axial coding enabled the progressive organisation of data into a coherent analytical structure.

In the data display phase, the coded data were organised and presented using visual tools, including tables and diagrams, to facilitate systematic comparison across participants and to make emerging patterns more readily identifiable. This visual organisation supported a clearer understanding of how different aspects of work-life balance, such as workload demands, boundary permeability and institutional support, were experienced across different career stages and personal circumstances.

The final phase involved drawing conclusions from the organised data. Themes and patterns were interpreted in relation to the research question, with particular attention to their significance for understanding work-life balance of female academics in Malaysian PHEIs. This interpretive process remained grounded in participants' own accounts, to ensure that conclusions reflected the lived experiences described rather than imposed external explanatory frameworks.

Data saturation was considered throughout the analytical process. Saturation is defined as the point at which incoming data cease to generate new insights, rendering further data collection redundant (Mwita, 2022). In phenomenological research, saturation is not determined by a fixed sample size but rather by the depth and richness of participants' accounts, given that reported sample sizes in such studies range widely depending on the nature of the inquiry (Stahl & King, 2020). In this study, six participants shared their experiences through semi-structured interviews. By the fifth interview, recurring themes, shared meanings and common emotional patterns related to work-life balance had become

consistently apparent across the data. The absence of substantively new themes in the sixth interview confirmed that data saturation had been achieved.

3.5 Validity and Trustworthiness

Several measures were implemented to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of this study. Prior to data collection, face validity of the interview guide was established through expert review by subject matter specialists in work–life balance research. The findings are presented with thick description that provides detailed, contextualised accounts of participants' experiences to enable readers to assess the transferability of findings to similar contexts. An audit trail of coding decisions and theme development was maintained throughout the analytical process to ensure transparency and rigour.

3.6 Limitations

This study acknowledges the absence of data triangulation through multiple data sources. While fieldnotes provided contextual insights, the study relied primarily on semi-structured interviews as the sole data collection method. This limitation is recognised as affecting the comprehensiveness of the findings. However, the depth and richness of interview data, combined with rigorous thematic analysis and validity measures, provide meaningful insights into the lived experiences of female academics in Malaysian PHEIs.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the study objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right of participants to withdraw at any time without consequences. All participants provided informed consent before data collection commenced.

Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and removal of identifying information from transcripts and reports. All data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional authority in accordance with established research ethics guidelines.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Description of Participants

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the six female academics who participated in the study. The data reflects the diversity of female academics across Malaysian PHEIs in terms of career stage, family circumstances and disciplinary backgrounds.

Table 1: Summary of Participants' Backgrounds

Participant ID	Age range (years)	Academic position	Years of academic experience	Marital status	Children Yes or no
1	30-40	Lecturer	6	Single	No
2	50-60	Associate professor	24	Married	Yes
3	40-50	Senior	10	Married	Yes

		lecturer			
4	50-60	Senior lecturer	23	Married	Yes
5	50-60	Senior lecturer	27	Married	Yes
6	40-50	Lecturer	11	Single	No

The participants' experience in academia ranged from 6 to 27 years, representing various career stages and role responsibilities that are typical of female academics in Malaysian private higher education. Four participants were married with children, while two were single without children, which provided diverse perspectives on work-life balance challenges and coping strategies.

4.2 Thematic Findings

The data reveal that several interconnected issues shaped the work-life balance experiences of female academics in Malaysian PHEIs. The thematic analysis identified four themes for defining the main challenges, namely 1) Work-life boundaries; 2) Academic workload demands; 3) Structural resource constraints; and 4) Leadership and line-manager behaviours.

4.2.1 Theme 1: Work-Life Boundaries

The most significant challenge affecting the participants was the erosion of boundaries between professional and personal life. The structural nature of academic work in Malaysian PHEIs constantly undermined intentional attempts to keep work and home domains separate. This pattern was a reflection of the boundaryless nature of modern academic work, rather than of personal failings.

Subtheme: Segmentation Attempts and Structural Resistance

Some participants talked about making deliberate efforts to keep work and personal life separate in terms of time. Participant 1 articulated this clearly:

"I am a person who really works within boundaries [...] I try to keep my work life at work during the day and on working days, and avoid bringing work home after 5 or 6 pm."

However, she immediately acknowledged the impracticality of this intention, by noting that:

"Being an academic it seems like there is a blur line between those two."

This conflict is an example of the main hypothesis of boundary theory. According to this theory, work and personal life are two different domains that are divided by physical, temporal and psychological barriers (Ashforth et al., 2000). Boundary characteristics, such as permeability (the ease of inter-domain breaks) and flexibility (the flexibility of boundaries) are shaped by individual preferences and organisational demands; however, people differ in their preferences for 'segmentation' (keeping domains separate) or 'integration' (allowing domains to combine) (Clark, 2000). This framework shows how structural factors that require boundary permeability consistently override segmentation preferences of participants. Academic responsibilities such as

preparation, assessment and student communication are not easily confined to fixed working hours.

Subtheme: Gendered Role Conflict and Cultural Expectations

Boundary maintenance proved to be particularly challenging for participants with caregiving responsibilities, which caused professional demands to intersect with gendered family expectations. Participant 3 described the ongoing tension between professional and family roles:

"The biggest problem to me is the constant juggle between my role in the university and my three children [...] I could easily be torn between being a complete mother and meeting academic demands."

Her story highlights the emotional burden of juggling conflicting, identity-defining roles simultaneously. The intersection of institutional demands and gendered cultural expectations is reflected in this struggle.

Malaysian cultural norms position women as primary caregivers (Sabri & Mahmood, 2025). Private universities, driven by market competition and prioritising teaching intensity and student satisfaction, provide little structural accommodation for these caregiving responsibilities. As a result, boundary erosion was perceived by female academics to be a clearly gendered phenomenon that involved clashes between caregiving responsibilities and professional obligations, which male colleagues did not experience (Tanimoto et al., 2023).

Subtheme: Cyclical Academic Demands and Family Disruption

Participants emphasised that peak academic cycles, such as marking periods, semester transitions and administrative reporting deadlines, exacerbated boundary erosion. Family routines were often disturbed during these times. Participant 3 pointed out that:

"Family time, including shared meals and kids' activities, was frequently sacrificed in order to meet marking and reporting requirements."

This account illustrates the personal cost of cyclical academic demand peaks, when family routines and shared domestic life are consistently displaced by professional obligations concentrated within short timeframes. From a boundary theory perspective, these cyclical demand peaks structurally override participants' efforts to segment work and personal boundaries, and force boundary permeability at times when the personal cost of doing so is at its highest (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). This finding highlights a structural characteristic of academic employment: Assessment responsibilities are concentrated within short time periods when lacking proportional increases in staffing. Maintaining consistent work boundaries is particularly difficult at private institutions that face heavy teaching demands and low staffing levels.

Subtheme: Physical and Emotional Consequences

Sustained boundary erosion produced tangible health consequences for participants' wellbeing. Participant 6 described needing to leave work because of stress-related symptoms:

"When you're stressed, you just tell your superior you're not feeling well and need to go back."

These experiences are confirmed in the literature on emotional labour and burnout caused by consistent role overlap (Misra et al., 2021). Continuous boundary erosion limited opportunities for recovery and rest, which caused chronic exhaustion and led to issues relating to long-term career sustainability.

Subtheme: Selective Engagement as Tactical Resistance

Several participants used defensive measures to counter boundary erosion. Participant 1 described intentionally avoiding administrative roles:

"As an academic, you have to know what you want to focus on [...] I don't want administrative duties because they don't really contribute to my career progression."

This reflects a pattern whereby female academics limit their engagement in non-promotable tasks to preserve time and energy for career-advancing work (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Nonetheless, these strategies were not equally distributed and mostly relied on participants' seniority or employment stability.

Subtheme: Boundary Erosion as a Structural Condition

Fundamentally, work-life boundary challenges stemmed from the structural organisation of academic work and not personal inadequacy. Academic labour is cognitively intensive, performance-oriented and temporally flexible, which makes clear boundary demarcation exceptionally difficult (Johnston et al., 2022). In privately owned higher education institutions, these structural conditions are aggravated by market pressure.

Competitive environments value teaching quality, student satisfaction and institutional reputation, which often result in lean staffing and high-performance expectations. Faculty are often expected to maintain high levels of availability to students and management, which normalises boundary erosion as a condition of employment. Digital technologies institutionalise this boundary erosion further. Learning management systems, institutional email and messaging systems bring about constant connectivity, causing academic requirements to stretch into evenings and weekends (Griffin, 2022). In the absence of policies governing after-hours communication, these technologies institutionalise the erosion of boundaries, instead of providing flexibility. Furthermore, cultural norms reinforce expectations of constant availability. In organisational contexts where responsiveness signals commitment, boundary-setting is often interpreted as lack of dedication. This conflict is compounded in the case of female scholars who are expected to be both available for their careers and to be at home. Boundary maintenance, therefore, becomes an ongoing negotiation shaped by institutional, technological and cultural pressures that collectively normalise boundary erosion.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Academic Workload Demands

The participants also described academic workload pressure as one of the most significant impediments that influenced their ability to achieve work–life balance. They emphasised the multi-layered and complex nature of academic work, such as teaching, assessment, administration, research activities and performance measures. This experience is confirmed by scholarly jobs that are characterised by cumulative, overlapping demands that recurrently surpass contractual hours (Houston et al., 2006; Misra et al., 2021). These interdependent functions cumulatively intensify workload and reduce the ability of academics, particularly women, to maintain consistent boundaries between work and personal life.

Subtheme: Multiple and Expanding Role Responsibilities

One of the causes that contributed to workload pressure, as explained by the participants, is the increase in responsibilities in different areas. Academic practice entailed constant switching between research and publication duties, administrative tasks and teaching responsibilities. Misra (2024) reports that the multi-role load is an issue that is regularly encountered by faculty. Participant 6 explained how these demands accumulate:

“I’m juggling with teaching you know and all those things that come into one short time like after pandemic.”

Business administration requirements, particularly regarding reporting of key performance indicators, were experienced as burdensome side effects that made peak demand times more complicated. Participant 6 elaborated:

“Another[other] challenges could be maybe at the same time we need to compile our KPI [key performance indicators] as well.”

These accounts confirm reports that administrative work at tertiary institutions of learning has been increasing steadily, albeit disproportionately, for teaching-oriented staff (Acker & Armenti, 2004).

Subtheme: Teaching and Assessment Intensity

Teaching took up a significant amount of the workload of participants. Most commonly reported issues were a great deal of lecture time, time constraints and the emotional stress of teaching. It corresponds with the literature, which has established that excessive teaching schedules are a key stressor of academic jobs (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Participant 1 mentioned the physical nature of lengthy lecture blocks:

“I am teaching [...] quite some subjects and ... if one day I have like two lectures back-to-back [...] I give like what two or three hour[s] [...] three hours lecture per setting and I need a break in between.”

Participant 6 reported feeling physically fatigued after teaching:

“After class I am telling you like you are a jelly, like you really have no energy.”

Academic pressure caused by the workload of evaluation was also a burden, particularly when large numbers of students were involved. Participant 6 gave an account of the marking load of one of their colleagues:

"I have [a total of] 500 students [across my modules this semester]. So, I do not know how to deal with this, especially [when it comes to] grading."

Big courses have been found to be an influential factor in tertiary education that adds to the burden and time constraints of grading (Ujir et al., 2020). Participant 6 mentioned various assessment dates converging:

"I have three major subjects [...] all three modules that I must prepare personal final exam deadline by fifth of December."

Such experiences align with evidence in the literature that assessment peaks lead to significant deadlines and congestion, which contribute to overload and excessive working hours (Ujir et al., 2020).

Subtheme: Cognitive and Planning Demands

Another facet reported on by participants is the planning and logistical tasks of academic work. Participant 4 reported the following:

"The need to do planning well in advance, to prepare contingency plans, to overcome distance travelling issues, responsibilities to handle/solve."

Achieving effective teaching and educational administration involved significant background preparation work that was rarely recognised as part of the academic workload (Staudt Willet & He, 2024). For participants with caregiving responsibilities, a high workload compounds family pressures and creates additional stress layers.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Structural Resource Constraints

Structural resource limitations also played a role in determining the ability of participants to manage work-life balance. Their stories implied inadequacies regarding physical space, staffing, childcare services and institutional practices, which contributed to stress. These restrictions exacerbated the stress caused by personal obligations and workload demands that created a context in which boundaries were difficult to maintain. Participants described that shortages of work-related resources reduced their work-life boundary strength, consequently, they found it difficult to separate work and personal life and switch roles with ease, as explained by boundary theory (Clark, 2000).

Subtheme: Human Resources

Participants identified structural staffing shortages as a direct cause of increased individual workloads. Insufficient lecturer capacity resulted in greater individual teaching loads, larger class sizes, and reduced time for meeting task deadlines (Rosa, 2022). Participant 6 referred to the consequences of understaffing:

"We are overload with subject [sic] ... maybe they need to get more lecturers to teach."

She also referred to ongoing recruitment issues that meant the problem was not addressed:

"We are recruiting new lecturers now [...] but some do not meet expectations because we try to reduce the burden of each lecturer."

Institutional staffing gaps impose greater demands on current academic staff, thereby increasing individual workloads and exacerbate the loss of work-life boundaries further (Redondo-Flórez et al., 2020).

Subtheme: Physical Resources

The departmental environment, in particular, hindered participants' capacity to maintain personal time boundaries during peak university examination and assessment periods, when the demands of teaching and grading tasks were at their highest. Beyond workload pressures, the physical structure of the departmental environment also failed to accommodate the basic personal needs of female academics, particularly nursing mothers. One participant referred to the inadequacy of workspace arrangements and reported that her office mate, who had recently given birth, was actively breastfeeding while sharing an office with a male colleague – a deeply uncomfortable and inconvenient situation.

"She just gave birth and she's currently actively breastfeeding, but we are also sharing a room with a male lecturer, so that's very uncomfortable and inconvenient for her."

From a boundary theory perspective, this illustrates how the physical departmental environment structurally prevented female academics from maintaining the necessary boundaries between their professional and personal roles, as the absence of designated private spaces forced the intrusion of personal physiological needs into a shared professional workspace (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). Rather than reflecting individual failings, this boundary violation was an institutional failure to provide structural support that recognised and accommodated the specific needs of female academics.

Subtheme: Family Resources

Family resources was a drawback for participants who had caregiving responsibilities. Participant 3 referred to insufficient and poorly organised childcare services and recommended the following:

"I think that it would be very meaningful to provide more structured assistance in childcare and that might be the childcare centre on campus or the subsidy of working mums."

The inaccessibility of trustworthy childcare services and the lack of institutional support caused participants to compromise on competing roles, which complicated the maintenance of the work-life balance. These gaps, according to social role theory, impose additional pressure on women, who tend to be the primary caregivers of families, and enhance the consequences of inadequate resources further (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Subtheme: Resource Allocation

In the absence of adequate institutionalised systems for equitable workload distribution or structural mechanisms to protect academics from boundary

violations, administrative work was identified as structural work that consumed considerable time and energy. Participant 3 commented:

"The administrative positions like work in a committee team are usually accompanied by strict deadlines and extra-hours [after-hours] meetings."

Administrative duties were unequally distributed and, therefore, some staff (mostly women) were required to take on additional responsibilities that resulted in longer working hours. Participant 3 suggested improvements to a structurally insufficient system:

"Better workload distribution policies might also be another improvement whereby the teaching, research and administrative work are more distributed among the staff."

Her comments reveal that structural constraints were part of a broader institutional pattern of unequal workload distribution (Sciotto et al., 2024).

Subtheme: Policy and Framework Gaps

The absence of formal institutional policies to regulate communication, division of work and after-hours work expectations was identified by participants as one of the main underlying problems. The participants believed that the absence of certain formal guidelines had caused individual supervisors or administrative units to have too much discretionary power. Participant 1 articulated this gap directly:

"There is not much policy ... my line manager still contacts me after hours."

Her case is a model of what happens in the absence of specific institutional rules: Employees have to establish their own boundaries, which can be dictated by managerial behaviour. The absence of formalised work-life balance frameworks can result in highly inconsistent practices and, consequently, inconsistencies could arise across various departments (Lendák-Kabók, 2022).

The participants also mentioned that there existed no formal ways of expressing grievances or finding support without feeling powerless and problematic. Considering the absence of such channels, the dilemmas concerning workload, health, and stress are not handled well. Participant 4 recommended the creation of formal channels for staff feedback:

"Anything... Provide platform[s]... where the stakeholders are provided with a chance to contribute towards challenges [...] issues or concerns met."

This gap between institutional demands and staff wellbeing highlights a critical absence of formal support structures, thereby leaving female academics to depend on informal networks and personal coping strategies to manage the compounding pressures of workload, stress and health concerns that formal channels fail to address.

Participants also reported experiencing systemic limitations that prevented them from using statutory or contractual leave. In spite of leave being officially

authorised, its usage was restricted by structural requirements such as classroom timetabling and staffing shortages. This contradiction was emphasised by Participant 6:

“Semester leave [...] can take leave but sometimes we cannot clear the leave due to classes.”

4.2.4 Theme 4: Leadership and Line-Manager Behaviours

The behaviours mentioned by the participants as leadership and line-manager behaviours were found to be determinants of work–life balance experiences. These behaviours were not restricted to official institutional policies, but were actualised in informal day-to-day interactions, which shaped emotional climate, expectations and permeability of work and home boundaries. Boundary theory explains that supervisors should support or discourage the work of employees and to maintain the boundaries between spheres; it also explains why women may feel even greater pressure to meet the expectations of supervisors (Vanesa et al., 2022). The findings of this study confirm the experiences that result from these dynamics in action. Participants reported a variety of leadership and communication styles and their managers having variable sensitivity.

Subtheme: Boundary-Violating Communication Practices

A predominant trend reported by the participants was shortages of personal time as a result of being constantly contacted by supervisors, even after normal working hours. Participants observed that the expectation of constant availability to supervisors outside normal working hours undermined their attempts to segment their professional and personal time, thereby intensifying role conflict and eroding work–life boundaries. Participant 1 explained:

“My line manager will text me on off hours [...] this interferes with my time at home.”

After-hours communication from supervisors structurally undermined her boundary-setting efforts and disrupted her attempts to establish clear demarcations between her professional and personal life domains (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). She explained that this communication disrupted her usual patterns of behaviour; she had to give the impression of being constantly alert, and it was difficult to fully shut out academic demands.

Participant 6 experienced this type of intrusion during working hours:

“Calls us, texts us, even at the time of classes [...] very stressful.”

These excerpts report a tendency of leadership practices to violate boundaries and heighten emotional stress.

Subtheme: Unsupportive and Toxic Leadership Styles

Behaviours resulting from unsupportive and toxic leadership styles heightened participants’ stress levels, restricted their professional autonomy and decision-making capacity, and contributed to a pervasive sense that their workloads were unsustainable. Participants identified leadership style, rather than institutional

policy, as the primary source of distress. Participant 6 explained the behaviour of a previous supervisor in some detail:

"I work with this former boss ... she's very toxic [...] she's the one who putting us into a stressful level."

She believed the behaviour of the former supervisor, who incessantly monitored, pressured and micromanaged her, had more to do with her stress than the academic task itself. These supervisory behaviours created work environments characterised by excessive scrutiny, undervaluation and perceived overload.

The absence of empathetic leadership was also raised as a major problem by some of the participants. They expressed that, sometimes, their superiors failed to appreciate the multiple pressures that afflicted female academics, especially when they had to teach, do research, do administration and deal with personal issues, all at the same time. Participant 4 explained this issue directly:

"Superior with empathy in understanding challenges faced [...] that support is needed."

These statements reveal that the participants were not only experiencing issues related to structural workload but also inadequate leadership support, which complicated the process of addressing workload. The absence of supportive leadership was translated into perceptions of being lonely, lacking proper guidance and lacking emotional security.

Subtheme: Inconsistent Management and Structural Gaps

The participants described the indirect impact of the lack of or inefficient leadership structures: It augmented or prolonged their working hours. These managerial behaviours made it hard for participants to plan work or negotiate deadlines or expectations with colleagues, which resulted in additional cognitive and emotional labour. Participant 1 said that:

"I still have my head of programme [...] texting me out of office hours [...] there is no fixed policy in place."

According to responses provided by participants, managerial practices sometimes sabotaged their efforts to prioritise tasks strategically, which indicates that shifting expectations and unpredictable demands thwarted their working processes. Vague direction and varying priorities by supervisors added to exhaustion and inefficiency.

5. Discussion

This paper examined the work–life balance experiences of female academics at Malaysian PHEIs. Four related structural and organisational themes emerged, namely the erosion of work–life boundaries, academic workload pressures, structural resource limitations, and executive and line-manager behaviours. The findings demonstrate that work–life balance difficulties are not merely individual coping issues but are embedded within institutional structures and academic labour systems. Overall, the results indicate that female academics in Malaysian PHEIs operate in highly demanding organisational environments that intensify role conflict and reduce opportunities for sustainable career development.

5.1 Work–Life Boundary Erosion as a Structural Academic Condition

The findings reveal that boundary erosion was the most prominent challenge experienced by participants. Although academics attempted to maintain segmentation between professional and personal domains, structural academic demands often undermined these efforts. This observation reinforces boundary theory, which conceptualises work and family domains as separated by psychological, temporal and physical boundaries that can become permeable under organisational pressure (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000).

Participants' accounts support the proposition that the temporal flexibility characteristic of academic work often produces role spillover rather than genuine autonomy. This finding is consistent with that of Johnston et al. (2022), who documented that contemporary academic work is increasingly demanding of cognitive and emotional labour outside contracted hours, thereby generating blurred work–life boundaries. Similarly, Misra et al. (2021) observed that academics often experienced chronic boundary overlap because of performance-driven institutional cultures.

Comparatively, however, boundary erosion seems to be expressed rather differently in different institutional types in Malaysia. A study of Malaysian higher education institutions reports that, in spite of female scholars, generally, struggling with workload pressure, public institutions have a relatively better protective structure, including more systematic allocation of research workload and more controlled management processes (Adha Hafit et al., 2025; Ani et al., 2025). In contrast, PHEIs tend to operate according to market-driven models that emphasise student satisfaction and teaching productivity, thereby intensifying expectations of constant academic availability. This suggests that the pressure female academics in PHEIs experience may be influenced more by commerce and performance demands than they are at public universities (Chiang & Cheng, 2019).

The gendered dimension of boundary erosion strengthens these findings further. The role of participants in caregiving increased work–family conflict, which is confirmed Zarzycki et al. (2023), who argues that women with collectivistic cultural backgrounds often have primary caregiving responsibilities in addition to professional duties. These trends have been observed for female scholars in South Asian nations, such as Malaysia, where some social-cultural values reinforce the belief that women should fulfil both domestic and professional roles (Islam et al., 2023; Ng & Indran, 2021). These cross-national similarities imply that boundary erosion for female scholars is an indicator more structural gender disparities than institution-specific problems.

5.2 Academic Workload Demands and Multi-Role Intensification

The study also confirms academic workload as a central contributor to work–life imbalance. Participants described academic work as being characterised by overlapping responsibilities, including teaching, research, administrative duties and institutional performance monitoring. This finding corresponds with findings of Kinman and Johnson (2019), who state that academic labour has

evolved into multi-role professional work that involves cumulative and interdependent performance expectations.

Consistent with Nakano et al. (2021), the participants explained workload intensification referred to the increase in administrative reporting and performance-measurement demands. Administrative tasks and, especially, key performance indicator reporting were seen as less important but time-consuming work that added pressure to work but did not contribute commensurate rewards.

Teaching and assessment intensity emerged as particularly significant workload stressors. The findings align with Urbina-Garcia (2020), who identified long teaching hours and emotional classroom labour as major contributors to academic burnout. Similarly, Ujir et al. (2020) report that large student cohorts and concentrated assessment deadlines significantly increase marking workload and contribute to excessive working hours.

Comparative research indicates that workload pressures are widespread across Malaysian higher education; however, differences exist between institutional sectors. Public universities often emphasise research productivity and grant acquisition as primary workload drivers, whereas private institutions prioritise teaching delivery and student management (Ani et al., 2025). This distinction suggests that female academics at PHEIs may experience workload pressure that is more teaching-intensive and time-compressed, resulting in fewer opportunities for research career progression.

Parallel evidence from Global South higher education systems reinforces these findings. Similar patterns of workload intensification for female academics are reported by studies in India and Indonesia, with the workload (teaching) and administrative requirements often taking the place of research productivity and personal wellbeing (Astuty et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2023; Joseph Jeyaraj et al., 2021). These similarities hint that workload intensification is a systemic feature of higher education growth in developing economies.

5.3 Structural Resource Constraints and Institutional Inequality

The problem of structural resource constraints was found to be a contextual factor that affects work-life balance to a considerable extent. Participants reported staffing shortages, lack of physical space, absence of childcare services and unequal distribution of work as being among the reasons for role overload. The results build on boundary theory by showing that organisational resources have a direct effect on the ability of individuals to sustain work-life boundaries (Clark, 2000; Martineau & Trottier, 2024). Understaffing effects observed in the present study validate the findings of Redondo-Flórez et al. (2020), who report that understaffing of academics usually results in increased teaching workloads and shorter recovery times for academics. Rosa (2022) makes the same point and reports that colleges that are undergoing a surge in student numbers often place disproportionate workload burdens on their academic staff, thereby eroding their work-life boundaries further.

Resource inequalities appear to be more pronounced at PHEIs than at public universities. Public institutions in Malaysia typically benefit from government funding structures that support research infrastructure, staffing capacity and faculty development programmes. In contrast, PHEIs often operate under financial sustainability models that prioritise student enrolment and operational efficiency, which has the potential to limit investment in academic support systems (Soon et al., 2021). This disparity indicates that structural resource constraints at private institutions may intensify gendered work–life imbalance by reducing institutional support mechanisms.

Cross-national comparisons in the Global South validate these findings further. Research conducted at Latin American and East and Southeast Asian universities highlights that inadequate childcare provision and insufficient institutional support often exacerbate the work–family conflict of female academics (Avolio & Chávez Cajo, 2024; Ho et al., 2024). While boundary theory constitutes the primary theoretical framework of this study, social role theory provides a complementary lens for understanding why institutional resource gaps disproportionately affect women – specifically by illuminating how socially constructed caregiving expectations shape the unequal distribution of family responsibilities (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Willert & Minnotte, 2021). Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight how structural and gendered factors intersect to intensify the work–family conflict of female academics across Global South contexts.

5.4 Leadership and Line-Manager Behaviours as Boundary Regulators

Leadership behaviour emerged as a critical determinant of participants' work–life experiences. Informal managerial practices, particularly after-hours communication and inconsistent supervision, significantly influenced boundary permeability. This finding supports the findings of Vanesa et al. (2022), who argue that supervisors function as boundary regulators who are capable of either protecting or undermining employees' work–life balance.

Participants' experiences of boundary-violating communication align with that reported by Griffin (2022), who observed that digital communication technologies frequently extended managerial expectations into employees' personal time. Comparative evidence suggests leadership pressure may vary across institutional sectors. Malaysian public universities often operate within more formalised administrative frameworks that provide clearer workload guidelines and grievance procedures (Mohammadi & Karupiah, 2020). Conversely, PHEIs may rely more heavily on individual managerial discretion, which can lead to inconsistent support structures and expectations of greater emotional labour from academic staff.

Global South scholarship corroborates these findings further. Research involving female academics at Middle Eastern and African universities indicates that unsupportive leadership and hierarchical managerial cultures often intensify workplace stress and limit professional autonomy (Al Jayyousi-Alsalm et al., 2024). These cross-context comparisons suggest that leadership behaviour

remains a critical institutional factor shaping gendered academic experiences internationally.

5.5 Integrated Interpretation and Contribution to Literature

Comparative evidence suggests work–life balance challenges faced by female academics in Malaysian PHEIs arise from the interaction of structural workload pressures, institutional resource limitations, leadership behaviours and socio-cultural gender expectations. Rather than representing isolated workplace difficulties, these challenges reflect systemic characteristics of contemporary higher education labour systems (Hwa, 2020).

The research makes an important contribution to the existing body of literature by offering context-specific knowledge on an under-studied aspect of private higher education settings. Although the literature often analysed work–life balance in higher education at public institutions, this study demonstrates how market-based institutional models exacerbate academic labour demands and gender disparities. Moreover, the results reinforce boundary theory by demonstrating the interplay of organisational structures, leadership practices and cultural expectations in intensifying boundary permeability.

The results, furthermore, extend boundary theory by illustrating how institutional policies and resource availability compound the challenges of gendered academic career sustainability, and highlight the structural mechanisms through which work–life boundaries are systematically eroded in private higher education contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study illuminates the structural nature of work–life balance challenges that female academics in Malaysian private higher education face. The findings indicate that work–life balance of female academics in Malaysian PHEIs is constrained by boundary erosion, intensified academic workloads, gendered caregiving responsibilities and inadequate institutional support. These challenges are embedded in organisational structures and leadership requirements that normalise constant availability and high-performance expectations, which render sustainable boundary maintenance a challenge for female scholars.

The research makes a theoretical contribution applicable to boundary theory to the context of non-Western higher education of the private type and demonstrates that institutional structures shape boundary permeability to a greater extent than individual preferences do. In practice, the results indicate that higher education leaders and policymakers should implement equitable workload distribution systems, communication practices that honour work–life boundaries, and gender-responsive support to enhance staff wellbeing and ensure the sustainability of academic careers. By highlighting the lived experiences of female academics, this study provides evidence to encourage the development of more welcoming and encouraging institutional environments.

Future research should extend this inquiry by incorporating comparative viewpoints for the genders and institutional types or countries. Longitudinal studies could also reveal how work–life balance challenges evolve in response to organisational policy shifts and digital work practices. These studies could enhance knowledge about boundary management in higher education and help build sustainable academic work environments.

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8. References

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