

Factors that influence women's work-life balance

Factores que influyen en la conciliación vida-trabajo de las mujeres

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Summary

This article analyzes the literature on the factors that influence women's work-life balance, through six dimensions: gratifications, interference of personal and work time, partner and parenting, healthcare, household responsibilities and free time. In terms of remuneration, women give greater weight to the emotional salary than to the economic salary. Working mothers face great challenges in reconciling their time, because at work they have distractions from their personal lives, and vice versa. The gender roles established by society expect that raising children and household chores are their responsibility, regardless of whether they have a paid job. The overload of this "double shift" influences their physical and mental health. Finally, women have little or no free time, which allows them to prioritize their health or to practice a hobby.

Key words: work-life balance, gender roles, physical and mental health.

Introduction

In modern business environments, women face endless challenges in achieving a balance in their work and personal lives. This article, through six dimensions, analyzes the factors that affect this challenge: gratifications, interference of time between personal and work life, parenting, healthcare, household responsibilities and free time. In the first place, it is pertinent to highlight that, in the workplace, although women seek fair economic remuneration, they place great value on "emotional salary", that is, on the satisfaction and well-being they obtain in their work.

However, women face a constant struggle to reconcile their time, as they experience interference in their professional and personal lives. As a matter of fact, traditional social norms and gender roles assign women the primary responsibility for rising children and household chores, even when they have paid employment. Thus, this "double shift" generates an overload of work that negatively affects their physical and mental health.

Finally, the lack of free time limits women's possibilities to take care of their health, carry out leisure activities or simply rest. The reconciliation between women's work and personal lives is still a pending challenge today. Concrete actions are needed to break gender stereotypes, promote co-responsibility in household chores and childcare, and ensure that women can fully develop their potential, both professionally and personally. In the following sections, each of the previously mentioned dimensions is addressed in detail, presenting an extensive review of the literature about women's work-life balance.

1.1 Gratification

The purpose of this chapter is to address the issue of gratification, which is related to aspects such as motivation, comfort at work, mood, expectations, among others. Although this concept implies rewarding in monetary and non-monetary terms, in the case of this section it will focus on emotional salary, which is that gratification that does not involve money, but is closely related to job satisfaction and personal well-being.

In this context, recent studies in the field of psychology have concluded that non-monetary rewards tend to generate better results in terms of staff motivation in organizations. However, not all types of non-monetary rewards have a positive and significant impact on employees (Sureephong et al., 2022).

According to Sriram et al. (2022), it is essential to ensure that women feel comfortable and supported in the work environment, creating a safe and welcoming work environment, so that they decide to remain in their jobs. To keep employees, it is essential to understand their needs and desires in relation to other employees and the organization.

On the other hand, Sureephong et al. (2022) mention that monetary rewards tend to reduce teamwork performance, as employees focus mainly on money gains individually. In contrast, non-cash bonuses decrease stress, absenteeism, and staff turnover, while also improving morale, productivity, competitiveness, efficiency, income, and profits, as noted by Nelson (2001).

It is also important to highlight the study by Lim et al. (2021), in which the findings confirm a strong connection between work-life balance and effort-reward imbalance, variables that are closely related to the issue of employee depression. Considering the effects of depression on the family and social environment, it is crucial to highlight the importance of fair rewards that reflect effort and promote an adequate work-life balance.

Additionally, when there is an imbalance between the effort made and the rewards received, it can generate a state of "active anguish" by provoking intense negative emotions (Shimazu, 2009). This model suggests that the process is related to excessive commitment, so employees with a high level of commitment will respond with more tense actions to an effort-reward imbalance compared to those who are less engaged (Ge et al. 2021).

In conclusion, although there are several theories that explain why non-monetary bonuses produce positive results in different aspects, it is observed that their impact is usually greater than that of cash remuneration. Finally, the case of each of the employees will be different, as this depends on how people value certain rewards based on their own expectations (Sureephong et al., 2022).

1.2 Time interference

This text addresses the issue of interference, which refers to cases in which people are distracted from their paid employment to attend to personal issues and vice versa, which tends to have effects on the issue of satisfaction in their personal lives. To begin with, Tauraitė and Aleksandravičienė (2023) point out that a person is considered satisfied with their work, their personal life and is happy, when their levels of work, personal satisfaction and happiness are between 9 and 10 points on a 10-point scale.

Specifically, Lydeka and Tauraitė (2020) conducted research in which the findings concluded that men find it relatively easier to balance work and family life, compared to women, which is mainly attributed to gender role theory, where women are socially expected to oversee household chores and childcare. This is therefore the main reason why working women face more difficulties in reconciling work and personal life.

In addition, in a study conducted by Madsen et al. (2023), it was found that participants tried to manage various challenges in their job roles, such as long working hours and task overload. In this sense, some employees have implemented some strategies to cope with fatigue, which include taking consecutive days off to rest physically and emotionally, taking some breaks during the day and taking advantage of the vacation period to recover. Correspondingly, some employees chose to exercise as a key tactic to maintain their fitness and relieve fatigue, while others reported feeling exhausted enough to have the energy to exercise.

Aspects of the work challenges influenced how participants balanced their work activities as part of their daily routine. Despite these challenges, participants wanted to continue working and did their best to fulfill their job responsibilities, motivated by concerns about uncertain and competitive job prospects coupled with excessive worry about losing their jobs (Madsen et al., 2023).

According to Madsen et al. (2023), some employees report not having the energy to perform other activities outside of work, as they focus all their energy on their paid work, which complicates their daily lives. Some people reported having negative effects of this in their family and social life, because due to the excess of work commitments they frequently must cancel pleasant activities such as birthday parties, or spending time with family and friends, among others. Those employees who work full-time, usually 40 hours, expressed that, if they did not have so much economic need, they would prefer to have a part-time job, so that they could reserve their energy to carry out activities outside of work.

Finally, it is important to mention that the findings of some academic research that has been carried out in recent years have concluded that job satisfaction and satisfaction with personal life are key components of people's happiness. However, a person can only be happy if they can experience satisfaction at work and in their personal life, and at the same time are able to achieve a proper work-life balance (Tauraitė & Aleksandravičienė, 2023).

1.3 Couple relationships and parenting

This chapter explores various aspects related to the obstacles that women face, either when becoming mothers or simply because of their gender condition. The difficulty that these women have in progressing professionally is addressed, considering gender inequality in the workplace and the limited opportunities presented to them.

In addition, the imbalance between maternal responsibilities and professional expectations is analyzed, as well as the phenomenon of taking on an additional burden of domestic work. These topics are linked to life as a couple relationships and child-rearing, highlighting how they influence women's careers and professional development in academic and work contexts.

In the first place, various studies agree that the reconciliation between work and family life is perceived as a challenge for women. The authors Arzhenovskii and Artamonova (2007) argue that all other things being equal, family responsibilities place women at a competitive disadvantage in the workplace, forcing them to make difficult decisions between motherhood and their professional careers or to take on double working hours and household chores (Belekhova and Ivanovskaya, 2022).

Currently, female empowerment has generated workspaces for women. However, this seems more like a form of "modern slavery of women", because when they finish their workdays, far from being able to have free time to dedicate to themselves, they begin their "second shift" at home, which includes all kinds of household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, raising children, taking care of pets when they have, among others (Belekhova & Ivanovskaya, 2022).

In this context, the authors Buzzanell et al. (2005) propose the term "good mother" to refer to women who focus all their efforts on raising their children. Subsequently, these authors reconsidered this concept for that of the "good working mother", in which women can successfully organize themselves to fulfill their paid work, without neglecting the care of their children. In fact, Alegre (2023) highlights the relevance of women's monetary contributions to the family economy, and they consider that contributing money to the household is part of being a good mother. In other words, this author recognizes the importance of both aspects, childcare and professional development, in which women find a balance that allows them to be committed mothers and successful professionals.

It should be noted that inequality in the distribution of domestic and care work not only affects women's lives, but also has an impact on society. Indeed, several studies carried out in recent years have confirmed that women continue to assume a disproportionate burden of tasks, compared to men (Alegre, 2023). In the academic field, Gallardo (2021) points out that the discussion on gender inequality and women's rights has gained special relevance in recent years. This debate focuses on the "glass ceiling," which refers to the underrepresentation of women and the limitations they face in moving up the academic hierarchy.

Thus, the gender roles imposed by society in which women are responsible for raising children complicate their performance in the world of work, because in companies when there is a possibility of promotion, they often prefer to give the opportunity to men, because they generally do not have distractions in their working day because of the need to take care of their children. Thus, Gallardo (2021) highlights that for women, combining their professional career with their family responsibilities has an impact on their promotion opportunities.

Finally, it is pertinent to mention that Ysseldyk et al. (2019) state that women give more weight to emotional salary than monetary, since for them it is important to have flexibility in their schedules to "juggle responsibilities". In short, in today's world, it is essential that women have a support network that provides them with help when they require it, as the "double shift" can generate health problems for women, such as burnout syndrome.

1.4 Healthcare

This text addresses the issue of well-being and health, exploring the relationship between work commitment and health problems. It also discusses the tendency of many women to prioritize domestic and family responsibilities over personal self-care. In addition, it is highlighted that a higher economic income can facilitate better access and healthcare.

Considering the research of Ge et al. (2021), it has been widely documented that a reduction in employee job satisfaction is linked to an increase in their health problems. In a study conducted by Aazami et al. (2015) in Malaysia focused on

working women, the findings confirmed that job satisfaction is related to some physical health problems, such as headaches or gastrointestinal illnesses.

In addition to this, research by Ge et al. (2021) has revealed that work commitment is linked to the health conditions presented by the organization's employees. Specifically, studies by Hakanen and Schaufeli (2012) and Shu et al. (2018) agree that work commitment has a negative effect on depressive symptoms. Likewise, Shu et al. (2018) concluded that individuals who suffer from anxiety, depression, and work stress are those who show greater work commitment in the performance of their duties. Specifically, Keyko et al. (2016) point out that all these aspects of mental health are closely related to their job satisfaction and the person's general well-being.

It should be noted that, on the topic of healthcare, Krueger et al. (2023) have identified that married or cohabiting people tend to focus mainly on work and childcare, leaving other time-consuming activities, such as physical and mental health care, in the background (Campbell and Moen, 1992).

It should be noted that Krueger et al. (2023) have concluded in their research that women experience greater complications in taking care of their health and having a work-life balance. This is because when they are working mothers, in addition to the time and effort they spend on their formal jobs, they must dedicate a large part of their lives to solving daily tasks that cannot be postponed, such as taking care of their young children, cooking, washing and ironing clothes. They are often sleep-deprived because they must wake up at night to continue caring for their children, which also leads to other types of health problems (Bryant and Zick 1996; Burgard 2011; Gerstel and Clawson 2018).

In this context, it is pertinent to mention what Krueger et al. (2023) pointed out, researchers who state that it is more complicated for women to take care of their health, compared to men, due to socially established gender roles, because instead of having the possibility of dedicating part of their free time to activities that ensure their physical and mental health, they practically do not have free spaces in their agenda, as women are expected to spend their time caring for children or the home, instead of being able to sleep and exercise (Gerstel and Clawson, 2018; Schor, 1992).

Finally, considering all the above, it is worth highlighting what Aqab et al. (2023) conclude in their studies, where they state that mothers who invest time in exercising regularly are more likely to have a better quality of life. They also pointed out that women's quality of life is related to their monthly income, concluding that the remuneration they receive in their jobs is essential to ensure their physical and mental health.

1.5 Responsibilities at home

The objective of the chapter is to analyze responsibilities in the home from a gender perspective, considering the work context of women and their efforts to reconcile personal and professional life, based on recent research by various authors. It becomes clear that, due to entrenched social norms, women take on the bulk of household chores, and this unequal distribution of roles not only puts additional pressure on women, specifically when combined with their work responsibilities, but also highlights the lack of recognition of domestic work.

In contemporary societies, family dynamics have undergone profound changes, driven by factors such as the incorporation of women into the labor market, globalization and new technologies. These changes have transformed the traditional distribution of household responsibilities, generating new challenges and opportunities to achieve an effective work-life balance. In this context, research such as that of Hjalmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir (2021) indicates that the distribution of work in the home and society is strongly influenced by prevailing social structures and attitudes. It should be noted that household responsibilities are commonly perceived as invisible work, which is only visible when there are losses in it (Dotti Sani, 2014; Evertsson, 2014).

In this context, in couple relationships there is a tendency for women to assume a significant part, even most of the domestic responsibilities. This, consequently, translates into fewer non-work commitments for men and more free time so that they can perform better in their paid jobs. Indeed, although they continue to be the main economic providers of the household, the pressure on them to be the main caregivers of household chores is still less, according to Reverberi et al. (2022).

Similarly, Hjalmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir (2021) have shown that, on average, men have more control over their free time than women. This is because women often face greater demands on their time from family and household chores, considering the increasing demands of household members. As a result, women experience increased time pressure in their daily lives and are more likely to be assigned responsibility for household chores.

While research has shown that women have a disproportionate burden of domestic and work responsibilities, it must be recognized that this reality affects men. Sharing household chores not only benefits women, but also has a positive impact on men's physical and mental health, job satisfaction, and family relationships. In this sense, the study by Reverberi et al. (2022) provides a valuable analysis of how men's participation in household chores can influence their family relationships.

Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir (2021) agree that the responsibility for organizing and distributing household chores falls mainly on women. This exemplifies how the mental work described by Robertson et al. (2019), is a fundamental component of gender-related experiences. In her research, one woman referred to the fact that everyone must assume certain responsibilities at home for domestic life to be harmonious. Women themselves not only perform household chores, but also take on the mental burden of planning, organizing, and supervising those tasks. This mental load involves significant cognitive and emotional effort, which translates into women placing a high value on the equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities to maintain a harmonious home.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the role of women as protagonists in domestic chores was even more evident, since during this period women expressed feeling overwhelmed by the unequal distribution of household responsibilities. Specifically, they devoted a lot of time and energy to these tasks, taking on virtually all the mental load of organizing and managing the household (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). According to Bryson (2016), women state that, during this period, their available time was more restricted due to childcare responsibilities and household chores, which forced them to prioritize the needs of their children over their own work or free time. Overall, the pandemic intensified pre-existing inequalities in the distribution of domestic and care work, placing a greater burden on women, who experienced a sense of lack of time and energy due to their multiple responsibilities.

In other words, Çoban (2022) points out that the pandemic had a particularly significant impact on women, who disproportionately assumed responsibilities such as childcare, distance education, and household chores. Work at home, for example, instead of easing the burden on women, in many cases intensified it, as it added to the existing responsibilities in the home. Thus, this situation once again reproduced traditional gender roles and put women's participation in the labor market at risk, because it increased the risk of marginalization, and this represented a setback in gender equality.

Specifically, the study by Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir (2021) highlighted a worrying reality: women in Iceland continue to bear a disproportionate burden of domestic work and childcare in emotional work and mental work associated with the home. Of course, this inequality in the distribution of responsibilities within the household represents a significant obstacle to achieving gender equality, both in the public and private spheres. It should be emphasized that this problem of the division of domestic labor is not unique to Iceland but occurs to varying degrees in societies around the world.

To conclude, according to the research analyzed, it is confirmed that even in modern times the division of labor in the home remains unequal and women are taking on a disproportionate burden of household chores, childcare, and mental work associated with the home. These situations generate various negative consequences, such as physical and mental exhaustion in women, difficulty in reconciling work and family life and the preservation of gender stereotypes. It is important to remember that inequality in the division of domestic labor is not an individual problem but is rooted in broader social and cultural structures.

1.5 Free time

In this final chapter, the complex relationship between free time and the work demands that limit it is studied. It analyzes how the distribution of time has significant effects on women's work-life balance. In addition, this is increasingly limited by the pressure of work, being a fundamental element for individual and social well-being. All this implies addressing gender inequality, where women tend to dedicate a greater proportion of their space to domestic and care tasks, among others, making it difficult for them to spend time on themselves.

In today's world, leisure time has become a precious resource that is increasingly pressured by work demands. In this context, in 1993, Andrew Harvey already recognized the importance of understanding the distribution of time as a fundamental factor in measuring and predicting quality of life. This idea has become even more relevant in recent decades, promoted by the United Nations Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. This event marked a historic event by exposing the need to make visible and value unpaid domestic and care work that largely falls on women. Charmes (2022) highlights the relevance of conducting current research to obtain new ideas on the use of time, focused on women's well-being and understanding that the distribution of time in their daily schedules is a fundamental task to build societies with a better quality of life.

Considering the above mentioned, Westman and Etzion (2005), cited by Lott and Wöhrmann (2023), reveal that the unequal distribution of free time between men and women can be a problem. As a result, when women spend a greater proportion of their time on domestic and care tasks, they have less time available to de-stress and take care of their own well-being, which increases the risk of experiencing a work-life conflict, in addition to spreading this problem to their partner or to the people with whom they frequently live.

Similarly, Lott and Wöhrmann (2023) add another layer of complexity to the problem of leisure time and well-being, noting that high work demands not only negatively affect satisfaction with work-life balance from the perspective of the person experiencing them, but can also harm their partner's satisfaction. Indeed, this situation creates a vicious circle, since people with high levels of stress and little free time are less likely to be happy in their personal lives, which in turn can generate conflicts in the couple and make it even more difficult to reconcile. Charmes (2022), in the same vein, highlights the importance of early time allocation as a key indicator of well-being. In other words, how people use their first few hours of the day can have a significant impact on their mood, productivity, and overall life satisfaction.

Burda et al. (2007) propose a challenging idea: leisure hours may be more important than income for well-being and happiness. They argue that satisfaction comes from multiple sources, not just money. Income is important to cover basic needs, but it also facilitates access to resources such as free time to develop personal interests and take care of the family. This perspective explains why women often prefer a shorter workweek. Even though they collectively work as many hours as men, women with partners who work longer hours continue to take on the bulk of domestic and caregiving responsibilities. This means that they have less free time for activities that bring them satisfaction and well-being.

On the other hand, Gorry et al. (2018) and Shao (2022) add a crucial element to the discussion on women's free time and well-being in work-life balance. In their research, they observe that when women do not have sufficient opportunities to care for their children and family, nor an adequate salary, they choose to reduce their working hours to improve their well-being. This, while it may seem like an individual decision, reflects the pressures women face to reconcile their responsibility in different areas. Specifically, research concludes that retired older women with freedom to organize their time experience a higher degree of satisfaction and have better mental health. Thus, this suggests that free time is a fundamental resource for women's well-being, especially when they have the autonomy to decide how to use it.

On the other hand, the data presented by Lydeka and Taurait (2020) confirm the idea that free time is not an equal resource for men and women and that the gender gap in this area has a significant impact on individual and social well-being. Considering the study of free time in Lithuania, they found significant differences between men and women on the distribution of daily time. Specifically, their study highlights that women spend more time on paid work, while men spend more time on leisure activities, in addition to the fact that women prioritize childcare and household chores, which limits their free time. In contrast, men spend more time on sleep and other physiological activities. As a result, these gender gaps in time use reflect persistent inequalities in the part of domestic and caregiving responsibilities, leaving them with less time for themselves and for their personal development.

With the above, it is concluded that free time is not a luxury, but a fundamental right for the individual and social well-being of all individuals. However, the unequal distribution of leisure time between men and women, with women taking on a greater burden of domestic and care work, limits their access to this right and has negative consequences on their physical and mental health, personal development and participation in society. It should be stressed that to address this problem, an approach is required in contexts such as a culture of co-responsibility in the home, a retribution of domestic responsibilities, flexibility of working hours, among others. In this way, a society can be built where all people, regardless of their gender, can enjoy quality free time, harmonious family relationships, and greater general well-being.

In summary, there are several factors that have significant effects on women's work-life balance, such as the remuneration they receive for their work, the flexibility that their bosses have on occasions when they need to attend to personal activities during working hours, the support they receive from their partner in raising children and the shared responsibility to attend to household chores. All these factors have an impact on the free time they can spend on themselves and on their physical and mental health. The sections analysed above are summarised below in Figure 1.

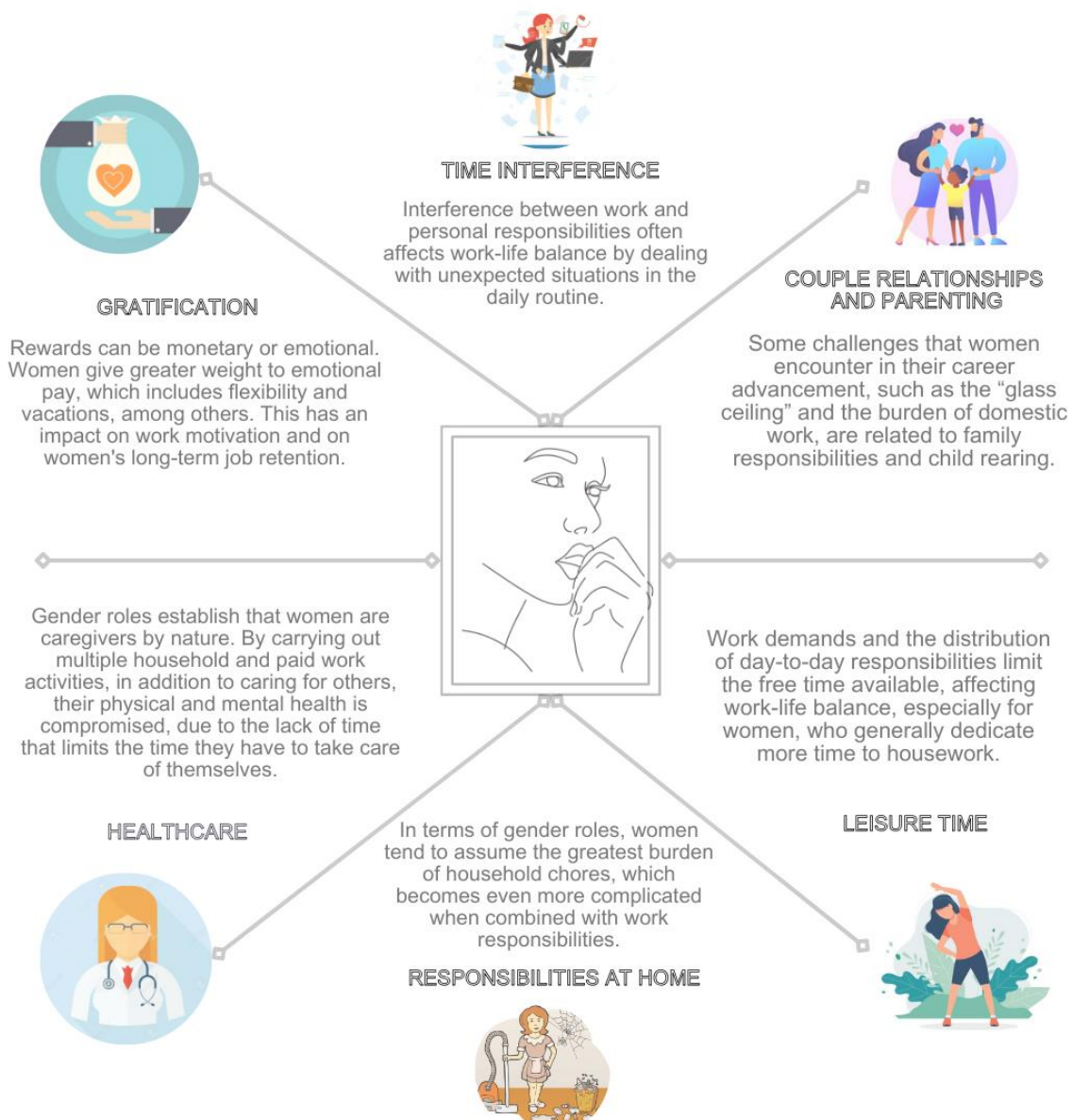


Figure 1. Work-life balance for women.
Source: Authors.

Conclusion

In the first place, it is convenient to emphasize that the six chapters presented in this article have deepened the challenges that women face to achieve a balance between their work and personal life through gratification, time interference, partner relationships and parenting, healthcare, household responsibilities and free time. In particular, the complexity of the problem and the multiple aspects that compose it have been highlighted.

Specifically, in the field of gratification, although women value both monetary and emotional salary, for them emotional salary is more important, due to the multiple roles they play in their homes and in their professional performance, which makes it difficult for them to reconcile their personal and professional lives. On the other hand, the constant interference of time between personal and work life, because of household responsibilities and childcare, generates stress, reduces productivity and reduces satisfaction on both sides.

Within this framework, it should be noted that deep-rooted social gender norms assign women most of the child-rearing responsibilities and household responsibilities, even when they have a paid job. Consequently, this double shift has a negative impact on their physical and mental health, limiting their opportunities, their free time for rest, leisure and personal care. Women's health is affected not only by the overload of work, but also by the lack of access to adequate health services and the prioritization of family responsibilities over their self-care. In this sense, a higher economic income could facilitate better access to health, but the gender pay gap remains a major obstacle.

In conclusion, women's work-life balance is a multidimensional challenge that requires concrete actions on various fronts. It is necessary to combat gender stereotypes, promote co-responsibility in household chores and childcare, guaranteeing equal opportunities in the workplace. Similarly, it is essential to implement public policies that guarantee equal opportunities in the workplace, provide support to working mothers, and promote a culture of physical and mental self-care. Finally, achieving a true work-life balance for women would not only benefit women themselves, but society, by creating a more just and equitable environment for all.

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