Paper Title: Balancing academia and family life: The gendered strains and struggles between the UK and China compared

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore and compare academics' experiences of managing work-life balance (WLB) in the British and Chinese contexts. We have three specific purposes. Firstly, to investigate whether there are marked gender differences in either context, given female and male academics' work is considered fully comparable. Secondly, to examine contextual factors contributing to gender differences that influence and shape decisions in WLB and career paths. Thirdly, to explore the gendered consequences and implications.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A cross-national and multilevel analytical approach to WLB was chosen to unpick and explore gender and contextual differences and their influence on individual academics' coping strategies. To reflect the exploratory nature of uncovering individual experience and perceptions we used in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Thirty-seven academics participated in the study, comprised of eighteen participants from six universities in the UK and nineteen participants from six universities in China.

Findings – This study reveals gendered differences in both the British and Chinese contexts in three main aspects: sourcing support; managing emotions; and, making choices, but more distinct differences in the latter context. Most significantly, it highlights that individual academics' capacity in cultivating and employing coping strategies was shaped simultaneously by muti-layed factors at the country level, the HE institutional level and the individual academics' level.

Originality/values – Very few cross-cultural WLB studies explore gender differences. This cross-national comparative study is of particular value in making the 'invisible visible' in terms of the gendered nature of choices and decisions within the context of WLB. The study has significant implications for female academics exercising individual scope in carving out a career, and for academic managers and institutions, in terms of support, structure and policy.

Key words - gender, work-life balance, British academics, Chinese academics

Paper Type - Research paper

Word count (excluding table and references): 9211

Introduction

Issues of balancing work and life have gained increasing societal, organisational, individual, and scholarly attention as a result of several social trends – including the changing nature of gender roles, family structures, working conditions, and careers. This has led to an explosion of work-life balance (WLB) research over the last five decades (Powell et al., 2019). Research that has examined work-life interface issues such as work-family balance, conflict, facilitation, and enrichment across a range of occupations has flourished (Greenhaus & Powell, 2017). Nevertheless, there are limited cross-cultural comparative studies of WLB.

This comparative study makes a detailed examination of individual academics' experiences of managing WLB in China and the UK, with an emphasis on the exploration of gender and contextual differences and the subsequent implications for academic careers. Despite a few China-West comparative studies on work-life issues (see Ling & Powell, 2001; Lu et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2000), none studied the Higher Education (HE) sector with the exception of Ren & Caudle (2016), and very few cross-cultural WLB studies explore gender differences. Also, they examine these issues at the aggregate rather than individual level. In particular, research on WLB conducted in the Chinese HE context is scarce, although in contrast research in the UK HE sector is abundant (Ren & Caudle, 2016). Increasing such cross-cultural understanding is important for three reasons. Firstly, we can illuminate an understanding of a phenomenon by examining it in different settings. Secondly, comparative studies have the potential to uncover hidden assumptions that underpin choice and action. An absence of cross-cultural comparative studies exploring gender and contextual differences may lead to flawed assumptions about how females and males balance work and life in differing cultural settings. Thirdly, it offers insights to alternative ways of doing things.

The present study focuses on academia for three reasons. Firstly, the HE sectors in both the UK and China have undergone significant changes but occurring in divergent national contexts, which have affected academics' experiences in different and distinct ways. Investigation into the ways individual academics cope with work-life imbalance is developing rapidly (see Acker & Armenti, 2004; Fu & Shaffer, 2001; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013; Ren & Caudle, 2016). However, the role of gender in the assessment of WLB and its effects on academic careers has had less attention. Indeed, the literature that examines the changing academic work is largely de-gendered (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Huppatz et al., 2019). Secondly, both male and female academics are highly likely to experience WLB issues, but female academics have cited family-related challenges that male academics generally do not, and women have reported to sacrifice more than men do (see Beddoes & Pawley, 2013; Fox et al., 2011; Huppatz et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2011; Thompson & Dey, 1998; Wilson, 2003). Finally, it remains important to examine the gendered differences in WLB at the occupational level. The recent investigation into WLB satisfaction undertaken by Dilmaghani & Tabvuma (2019) reveals mixed results, with positive and negative gender gaps, affected by type of occupation, and women employed in HE sectors were found to have low WLB satisfaction compared to their male counterparts.

Thus, the present study aims to investigate whether there are marked gender differences in each context given female and male academics' work is considered fully comparable (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). On this basis, it intends to examine the root causes of differences that influence and shape individual decisions in WLB and career paths. A burgeoning body of research examines how employees' experience of WLB is influenced and shaped by factors at the individual, organisational and state levels (see Allen, 2001; Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; Glavin & Schieman, 2012; Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Nevertheless, the interaction among the three levels is usually ignored (Ruppanner & Huffman, 2014). In the European context, Hobson et al. (2011) develops a conceptual framework to include institutional, societal and individual factors that shape people's choices of and capabilities for WLB. To further such understanding in culturally diverse settings, we examine how multiple factors on different levels may interactively influence individual academics' choice of coping strategies and subsequently carving out their career paths in the British and Chinese contexts.

This qualitative study aims to address three research questions:

Q1: Are there marked gender differences in academics' experiences of managing WLB in both British and Chinese contexts?

Q2: What contextual factors have contributed to such gender differences?

Q3: What are the consequences and implications?

This paper is structured as follows: firstly, an overview of the British and Chinese HE contexts is provided. The key literature concerning the notions of WLB and gender is critically reviewed, which is followed by the in-depth commentary of the main multilevel factors that influence WLB. Secondly, the research methodology is explained, justified and critiqued. Thirdly, the qualitative findings are analysed thematically followed by critical discussion. Finally, conclusions and implications are offered.

Research Context

WLB is perceived as a choice and a personal responsibility (Caproni, 2004; Lewis, 2003; Lewis et al., 2007; Ren & Caudle, 2016). Nevertheless, both choices and capacity to make choices are always contextually embedded and WLB is a social construct (Drobnic & Guillen, 2011; Lewis & Giullari, 2005). As argued by Bradley (2007), the most valuable way to explore any key concept is to locate it in the specific social contexts in which it is operating. This section provides an overview of the changing HE sectors in British and Chinese contexts in which this study took place.

Dramatic changes in HE since the 1980s are asserted as a main cause for growing WLB issues in the UK (Hunt, 2006). Changes in the policy environment: restructuring, commercialisation, expansion in student numbers, and major funding reductions (Kinman & Jones, 2008) have had a substantial impact on the context and content of academic work (Thomas, 2013). Rising student expectations caused by policy changes aimed at shifting the focus towards students being treated as fee paying consumers, have intensified the workloads of academics (UCU, 2016; Woodall et al.,

2014). Consequently, HE is increasingly viewed as a 'market commodity' (Lynch, 2015, p.190). There are implications both for the sustainability of universities and for academics facing demands for greater accountability, value for money, efficiency and quality (Thomas, 2013; Tytherleigh et al., 2005). The HE Employers Association produced a set of guidelines to assist institutions to develop policies and practices in support of flexible working and WLB arrangements (Manfredi & Holliday 2004), but their effectiveness remains contested.

Since 1985 Chinese universities have experienced radical reforms intended to raise educational quality and academic standing of HE institutions (Lai, 2010) in response to evolving economic and social conditions and ambitions for developing world-class universities (Ryan, 2010; Meng & Wang, 2018). Significant consequences include rapid expansion of enrolments, structural reforms, transformation of curricula, and increasing joint research and degree programmes (Min, 2004; Ryan, 2010). These changes have taken place in a rapidly developing national economy and increasingly competitive international arena (Min, 2004), resulting in long working hours, work overload and intensification (Joplin et al., 2003; Xiao & Cooke, 2012). In particular, the introduction of a new system of employment practices, including adopting performance appraisal mechanisms and emphasising competition and rewards, has posed new challenges for Chinese academics (Lai, 2010; Meng & Wang, 2018). In the Chinese HE context, Fu & Shaffer (2001) reveal the factors from both work and family mediating WLB and emphasise work-related factors as more influential. In particular, onerous research targets, demands for professional development, and administrative burdens have been confirmed as the most significant causes for widespread occupational stress among Chinese academics across all disciplines (Meng & Wang, 2018). Similar consequences identified in other studies include intensive work pressure (Lai, 2010), psychological health issues (Gillespie et al., 2001; Hui & Chan, 1996), and risk of burnout (Zhong et al., 2009).

Literature Review

Numerous definitions have been given to the term WLB but with significant variations to their meaning (Dilmaghani & Tabvuma, 2019). The present study adopts the position that WLB can be considered as a satisfactory level of involvement or 'fit' between the multiple roles in a person's life (Hudson, 2005). It reflects an individual's orientation across different life roles (Marks & MacDermid, 1996), and the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in and satisfied with all life domains with a minimum of role conflict (Clark, 2000; Greenhaus et al., 2003). This suggests that WLB is not merely work-family balance. However, Greenhaus and Powell (2017, p.3) emphasise that 'work and family are the two roles in many people's lives in which they have the greatest amount of involvement and with which they identify the most'. Indeed, the insights emerging from this study supports this view, with references to life beyond academia most frequently being associated with family-related activities (e.g. childcare, eldercare and housework). In the organisational context, the way to help employees achieve WLB is to adopt "a two way process involving a consideration of the needs of employees as well as those of employers" stated by Lewis (2000, p.105)

who also suggested that paid work and personal life should be seen more as complementary elements of a full life than as competing priorities. This optimum state is, however, difficult to attain as will be demonstrated in the findings.

WLB is often positioned as a gender-neutral concept that has challenged societally-embedded beliefs that women's place is at home and men's is in paid work (Rapoport et al., 2002). However, this has not changed the "reality of gendered spheres". Instead, gendered spheres are being exacerbated as global competition resulting in intensified workloads has forced a retreat to traditional gender roles (Lewis et al., 2007, p363). Thus, the role of gender in understanding both men and women's experiences of WLB and their individual choices of WLB strategy cannot be disregarded.

The concept of gender has been much debated since the 1960s. Among various interpretations, Ann Oakley's (1970) view of gender as the social-cultural aspects of being a man or woman and her introduction of linking gender to the theory of patriarchy, remains influential in the feminist and sociological literature. In her seminal book 'Gender', Bradley (2007) argues that the academic use of the term 'gender' has been politically informed and developed in tandem with the activities of the feminist movement. More importantly, she has critically compared and contrasted the different theoretical approaches to analysing gender. For example, gender is viewed by liberal feminists as a form of discrimination practiced against individuals on the basis of sex. Radical and Marxist feminists tend to analyse it as a structural base of inequality and oppression. Post-structuralists and post modernists see it as a social category of difference. For them, gender is more than biological difference, 'it is the social ordering of that difference' (Marshall, 1994, p.112). One of the most influential postmodern feminists, Judith Butler (1994), points out that gender should be seen as 'performance'. That is, people repeatedly 'do gender' in their daily lives by acting out being a man or woman that give the illusion of stability and fixity. Thus, gender is not a fixed identity. Butler's work has made an important contribution to recent thinking about gender that recognises how individual women and men are actively involved in 'doing gender'. Nevertheless, what Butler and her followers ignored in their work is a critical examination of the context which shapes and structures gender relations (Bradley, 2007). The process of gendering, as Bradley (2007) suggests, is operating at three levels – the micro-level that includes individual behavior patterns, the meso-level involving institutional processes, and the macro- or societal level. It appears to us that gender can be seen as both category and structure, and more importantly, as a dynamic construct contingent upon the context.

A multilevel analytical framework

We argue that individual academics' choices of coping strategy could not have evolved accidentally. Instead, it has complex antecedents that intertwine in context that require a variety of resources at different levels. Our review of the literature appears to suggest that the inter-related factors on the macro, meso and micro levels would have profound effects on individual academics' experiences of WLB and their resolutions. In the following literature, we aim to further explore WLB by examining several key multilevel factors through the lens of gender. They are: societal institutions and national

cultures on the macro-level; organisational practices and academic work on the meso-level; and, family resources and individual choices on the micro-level.

Macro-level

At a country's macro-level context, institutional settings in which people and their social positions are located (Bourdieu, 1977) construct individual options and preferences for reconciling family and employment (Folbre, 1994). On the one hand, societal institutions in the modern world remain structured around the 'separate spheres' model in which wives care for household activities and husbands act as breadwinners (Cha, 2010; Hochschild, 1989; Moen & Roehling, 2005). On the other hand, due to forces of globalisation women have been increasingly moving into arenas 'which have previously been confined to men. That is crucial to an understanding of the decline of traditional gender norms' (McNay, 2000, p. 26). This change creates a potentially 'emancipatory' situation for the restructuring of gender relations (ibid), which in turn influences people's perceptions and choices of WLB approaches. Government policy towards women, work and childcare leads to cross-national differences in terms of WLB strategies (Crompton et al., 2005; Windebank, 2001). However, the coping strategies individuals prefer are not static but shaped by shifts in economic opportunities and cultural values in their country (Hobson et al., 2011).

Despite globalisation facilitating a WLB discourse in diverse cultural contexts, WLB is not culture free (Lewis et al., 2007). Cultural differences play an important role in understanding WLB practices in non-Western contexts (Lu et al., 2010). Beşpınar (2010) argues that evaluating coping strategies through a Western cultural lens ignores the contextual meaning of their acts and does not fully explain WLB issues in the Chinese context (Ling & Powell, 2001; Ren & Foster, 2011). Western solutions to WLB exported to developing countries are sometimes considered in conflict with local cultural values (Lewis et al., 2007). In contrast, Hill et al. (2004) argue for a transportable rather than a culturally specific work-life interface model suggesting convergence in WLB perceived and experienced by employees from both individualist and collectivist countries.

Meso-level

Changing macro-level factors have shaped various organisational approaches to coping with work-life imbalance in different nations (Joplin et al. 2003). In countries where women have higher status and/or relevant legislation is in place, organisations are more likely to implement family-friendly initiatives (Ruppanner & Huffman, 2012). However, this conflicts with an assumption that 'ideal workers' in modern workplaces will fully devote themselves to work without the burden of family obligations (Mason et al., 2013), which is well reflected in academia as academics are more committed to career than most professionals (Jacobs, 2004; Misra et al., 2012), with consequent implications for WLB. Whilst academic work provides a great deal of flexibility and autonomy that supposedly facilitates WLB (Damaske et al., 2014; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013; Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008), its open-ended nature (Wortman et al., 1991) and growing, often conflicting, expectations, pressures and demands are

challenging academics (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Chandler et al., 2000; Deem, 2003; Doherty & Manfredi, 2006; Menzies & Newson, 2008; Ylijoki, 2013). High levels of commitment, long working hours and constant work demands have eroded time and energy for personal life and leisure (Lewis, 2003) creating blurred work-life boundaries and work-family conflict (Damaske et al., 2014).

Further, research shows that family-friendly practices are gendered (Burnett et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2007). The role of organisations in exacerbating or alleviating gender inequality is highlighted in Brady's (2009) theory of institutionalised politics as well as other work (see Hobson, 2011; Moen, 2015; Mun and Brinton, 2015). In her study of gendering in organisations, Acker (1990, p.146) interprets a gendered organisation as the one in which 'advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine'. Such changing nature of work and gendered organisational practices influence employees' agency to develop choices of WLB strategy (Lewis et al., 2007) and are often regarded as bringing both advantages and disadvantages (Fleetwood, 2007). Whilst employees may consider some practices as 'empowering', others are considered as limiting agency in balancing work and life, especially for women. Women's use of flexible working may be negatively perceived at work (Gatrell & Cooper, 2016; Joshi et al., 2015) and usually results in less favourable career prospects than men (Halvorsen, 2002). Thus, organisational context may act to sustain gender inequality at work.

Micro-level
Individual resources and choices are shaped by both broad institutional and socio-cultural contexts and specific, individual family contexts in which WLB decisions are made and remade over the life course (Fagan, 2001; Yee Kan, 2007). The family as the primary socialising unit determines each member's social practice, defines their duties, and affects their perceptions (Uppalury & Racherla, 2014). Therefore, the family is considered a "constitutive element within the habitus" (McNay, 2000, p.62). Family support networks have become an important WLB resource as a result of a dramatic rise in female participation in the workforce coupled with a marked preference for full-time employment in China. Despite Europe having three policy areas to support WLB – flexibility, rights to reduce hours, and parental leave – such flexibility does not necessarily translate into individual agency for WLB because of constraints from a range of individual factors (Hobson et al., 2011). These include gender, age, income and partner's resources. In particular, partner support, either instrumentally or emotionally, or both, has been found to influence their partner's experience of juggling family and job responsibilities considerably (Bröckel, 2018). Women usually feel lonely or stressed when such support is not available (Hennekam et al., 2019).

Compared to men, women who have strong career aspirations are more vulnerable to work-family conflict once they enter parenthood (Hennekam et al., 2019). This is due mainly to traditional gender roles in the home. Men tend to have more sources of household support which benefits their career, largely due to women's greater commitment to parenting and housework even when holding full-time jobs (Gaskell et

al., 2004; Leonard, 2003; Morrison et al., 2011; Nikunen, 2012; Thompson & Dey, 1998). As revealed by Huppatz et al. (2019), the family context can exacerbate women's experience in academia and academics who are also mothers in particular struggle to cope with the competing demands of work and home.   To achieve career success, more women than men choose to minimise or conceal family commitment through behaviours such as delaying childbirth, prioritising work once they have children, and discounting organisational WLB options (Bardoel et al., 2011; Drago, 2007; Fujimoto et al., 2012).   With less ability to separate the work-life boundary than their male counterparts, career women usually engage in reactive role coping behaviours (Kossek et al., 1999).

Methodology
This empirical study aimed to develop insights related to British and Chinese academics' experiences of WLB.   Thus, we pursued a comparative design to provide for analysis which could tease out both similarities and distinctions between strategies adopted by individual academics in the British and Chinese HE contexts.   We were particularly concerned to facilitate making the 'invisible visible'.   That is, in the analysis, to be in a position to surface influences which may be regarded as so 'usual' they do not ordinarily attract attention.   For example, in this study, we identified, the availability of part-time working arrangements in the UK and the availability of familial childcare support in China.

Participants comprised 37 academics, comprising 18 from six universities in the UK and 19 from six universities in China, with 11 female interviewees in each context, collected over the course of five years between 2013 – 2017.   A blend of snowball (chain referral) and convenience sampling techniques were used (Miles et al., 1994). Participation was by 'self-nomination' in response to our invitations to participate. The invitations, including a brief overview of the study, were distributed via email within twelve universities, which spanned across a number of young and old institutions, as well as diverse geographic locations, in both countries.   We recognise we cannot know in what way the individuals who agreed to participate differ from those who did not respond to the invitation.   Thus, we recognise there is bias in the selection to those interested in either the topic of work-life balance. The socio-demographic details collected from each interviewee are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Interviewee Background

Country	Gender	Age range	Relationship status (including children)	Academic role	Institutional orientation	Length of service

China	Female: 11 Male: 8	21-34: 7 35-49: 12	Single: 3 Married with child(ren): 12 Married without children: 4	Lecturer: 10 Associate professor: 7 Professor: 2	Research intensive: 9 Teaching intensive: 10	Ranging from 2 to 23 years
UK	Female: 11 Male: 7	21-34: 4 35-49: 13 50+: 1	Single: 2 Long term relationship: 6 Married with child(ren): 8 Married without children: 2	Lecturer: 9 Senior lecturer: 7 Reader: 1 Professor: 1	Research intensive: 11 Teaching intensive: 7	Ranging from 3 to 25 years

We chose in-depth semi-structured interviews as reflecting the exploratory nature of uncovering individual experience and perceptions. In-depth interviews can be valuable in exploring cultural issues (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Thein et al., 2006). This interviewing approach provided flexibility in terms of questions and prompts (Berg, 2009) as we sought to understand both the strategies and the intertwining nature of factors shaping the choice of coping strategies. The interview was designed to explore perceptions of the experience of WLB from an empathetic standpoint (Fontana & Frey, 2008). It solicited narratives (Czarniawska, 2004) of interviewee's experiences and personal stories, along with insights in to how they attempted to create a WLB that was acceptable, or otherwise, to their circumstances.

Ethical approval for the study was secured by the employing institution. All participants were made aware of the purpose of the study, with the participant information including the right to withdraw their participation from the study at any time. To protect anonymity of the participants, individuals are only identified by defining characteristics relevant to the nature of the study. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, during which detailed hand-written notes were made including capturing quotes in response to the interview prompts. The questions and prompts were devised in English and Chinese, with the interviews conducted in English

in the UK and in Chinese in China (with some participants responding in English). Transcriptions were always made within twenty-four hours, with the Chinese translated into English by us.

Our initial analysis sought to develop an understanding of the individual experience and coping strategies. We used thematic analysis, intent on surfacing emergent analytical themes through an inductive, open-coding approach. This builds on the tradition of grounded theory (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and does not impose a priori hypotheses (Rallis & Rossman, 2003), although we recognise we were familiar with ideas from the literature. We concentrated on themes related to: (1) the overall experience of balancing work and life in both contexts; and (2) contextual and gender differences in individual coping. Responses to these themes were then grouped and compared by us together, developing rich insights into similarities and differences between female and male academics in both contexts through a number of iterations.

Attention was paid to the validity, confirmability and dependability of our study as a way of enhancing the rigour and coherence of our research (Burr, 2015). Validity is concerned with the integrity of conclusions that are generated from a study (Bell et al., 2019). In order to ensure the interview data in our research study are accurate and credible, interviewees were asked for permission to contact them by email or telephone with follow up questions or to clarify specific points. Furthermore, we continued to read and re-read the transcripts and themes, discussing them together and in particular unpacking the individual, institutional and societal factors. In terms of dependability and confirmability, we developed this through the depth of enquiry and richness of evidence. These discussions took place over a number of weeks, which enabled us to develop consensus about what seemed most salient in response to the research questions and where we needed to return to interviewees to check our interpretation or to further clarify their position.

In terms of limitations, we acknowledge subjectivity related to an empathetic (Fontana & Frey, 2008) interviewing approach. Along with this, our experiences of working in HE in both contexts can be said to reflect a position of "engaged subjectivity" (Dhamoon, 2011, p.239) resulting in some shared experiences and observations. We were alert to this during our analysis and discussed it between ourselves to remain authentic to the accounts of our interviewees. In addition, we do not intend to generalise from these accounts, rather to offer perspectives that are "characteristic of the whole" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.43), and we present indicative vignettes from the interviews to illustrate individual's experiences of WLB along with their coping strategies.

Findings

Overview of WLB Experiences
Our interviews reveal significant contextual differences in the WLB experiences of academics. The nineteen Chinese academics described their experiences of WLB as demonstrating a clear gender division. Nine out of eleven female academics reported "satisfied", "happy", or "little conflict", whilst seven out of eight male academics reported "unbalanced", "dissatisfied" or "difficult". Women attributed a balanced life

to flexibility and freedom of academic work. A female professor with six-months experience as a visiting scholar at a British university explained:

> I am fairly happy with my life and I have maintained a good WLB ... I teach only half of the term ... we don't have so many meetings, emails and admin work as you [British academics] do during a term. Unlike your students, our students usually contact their advisors, not academic staff, for most issues. I supervise several postgraduates and PhD students. We would have a couple of meetings to discuss their plans or progress at the beginning of each term, and then they seem happy to carry on by themselves. With less disruption, I can focus more on my own research and spend plenty of time looking after my daughter and helping with her learning. This job suits me! (Chinese Female professor, 35-49, married with one child)

Men's difficulty in achieving a balance resulted from being career-orientated:

> I have a long-term career goal to be a permanent professor. So, my working life is much busier, and I have to socialise with research funding providers having tea or dinner together, often beyond the working hours. Sometimes I need to write papers on weekends. (Chinese Male associate professor, 35-49, married without children)

British academics had markedly different WLB stories. Fourteen out of eighteen reported an imbalanced life and generally described their situation as "not easy", "suffering", "no balance", or even "no life". Regardless of gender, British academics experienced a greater struggle to balance work and life. This supports the conclusion drawn by Kinman and Jones (2008) that the WLB satisfaction was generally poor among British academics. Long working hours, undertaking a multiplicity of tasks and blurred work-life boundaries were regarded as the main causes of work-life imbalance:

> The volume of e-mail is incredible! An additional pressure is that I am the contact for students on international placements. They will contact me in an urgent or important situation, such as robbery or a medical incident. This means I am more vigilant than I might otherwise be. (British male lecturer, 35-49, married with one child)

> Given the type of career i.e. teaching/research and also life projects such as gardening/managing distant farmland, it is difficult to know where the work-life edges are. These career/life projects are ones where 'one can never do enough, there is always more one can do' so boundaries are blurred. (British female senior lecturer, 50+, in long-term relationship)

Flexibility in academia had differing consequences in each context. On the one hand, it granted great autonomy to Chinese female academics who could manage family commitments alongside work commitments, and to Chinese male academics who could devote themselves fully to careers. On the other hand, it prolonged working hours and intensified work-family conflict for British academics regardless of gender.

When it comes to organisational WLB policies and practices, there are also marked contextual differences. British academics confirmed the existence of WLB related policies and they had either attended employer-initiated workshops related to WLB (for example, stress and time-management training) or elicited ideas from institution-wide WLB practices, despite mixed opinions as to how useful they were. However, the majority of Chinese academics indicated relevant policies were not available and WLB was a personal decision:

> No policy. The organisation is not responsible for balancing your work
> and life. It depends on your own choice, for example, how ambitious
> you are. (Chinese female professor, 35-49, married with one child)

Legislation and organisational policies were viewed as empowering British academics to make much more diverse choices in terms of their contractual arrangements. Negotiating with management regarding workload was a favoured strategy:

> I was initially supposed to do some evening sessions for adult learners,
> but I need to spend evening time with my son. I negotiated with the
> course director who agreed I could teach daytimes only. (British female
> lecturer, 21-34, married with one child)

Work rearrangement was often initiated by the academics themselves in British universities. This was unusual in Chinese institutions where employer-initiated arrangements, such as rearranging timetables for staff to undertake research appeared more common. Half of the British academics used part-time working as their key coping strategy. By contrast, Chinese academics viewed job security as crucial. Academics on part-time or non-permanent contracts were not considered as core employees:

> Over 95% of academics at our university are working full-time. Nobody
> really wants to work part-time which is seen to be inferior and insecure.
> (Chinese female professor, 35-49, married with one child)

Personal coping strategies
The interview accounts highlight how women's strategies differed from those adopted by their male counterparts. Further, a much more marked gender difference is found

in the Chinese than in the British context in the three aspects, namely, sourcing support, managing emotions, and making choices.

Sourcing Support

Relying on family networks for assistance to achieve WLB was the most common approach adopted by Chinese academics.   Our study finds that voluntary and constant grandparent support in childcare is normal, which was particularly noted by Chinese women:

> When I was doing a PhD while working full-time, my daughter was still a baby. My husband was busy and had limited time for household chores. My life was chaotic. Later, my parents' arrival was like 'sending charcoal in snowy weather' [give timely assistance]. (Chinese female professor, 35-49, married with one child)

Children and childcare (where they existed) were scarcely mentioned by Chinese male academics although frequently talked about throughout the interviews with Chinese female academics.   It seems that women's role in the home has changed little during the past decade.   The advent of the revision to China's one-child policy in 2016 has brought little ease to Chinese women.   Instead, this would put a strain on women because of aggregated caring responsibilities.   Even with readily accessible support for childcare, the implicit assumption is for women to shoulder the bulk of responsibility for raising children or at least, the role of chief organiser.   Further, the ending of the 'one child' policy at the end of 2015 may further exacerbate this tension for Chinese female academics due to its negative implications for gender roles. British academics were less able to secure support from extended family on an on-going basis.   Sharing family responsibility with their partner was seen to be helpful particularly by women and paid childcare services were cited as a source of care provision, although considered expensive in the UK:

> We send our child to nursery three days per week. Although costly, it has freed up lots of time for me to concentrate on my work. My husband and I usually share housework, and actually, he takes and picks [up] our child from nursery more often than me because he works locally. (British female lecturer, 21-34, married with one child)

Support from partners was perceived to be important and to enhance contentment with WLB by both British and Chinese academics.   Whilst British academics cited both emotional and physical support from their partners, Chinese female academics emphasised emotional over practical support from their husbands.   Damaske et al. (2014) observe that cultural norms continue to demand a time-intensive devotion of academics to work but are also shifting to expect an increased participation at home, especially for fathers, which is little evidenced in the Chinese context in this study as many Chinese male academics reported that they rarely engaged with house chores,

instead investing time into pursuing their career with the rationale that this would create a more favourable environment for their family:

> … I think it is still quite common that men are career-orientated, and women are family-centred in this society. (Chinese male associate professor, 35-49, married with one child)

Despite a dramatic increase of career women in China, a gendered ideology that associates women with domestic labour and men with a role of main breadwinner persists, especially in the mind-set of men. Such gender difference was not evident among British female academics, at least on the surface. However, acknowledging an appreciation for their partners' help in housework and/or childcare suggests that the burden remains with women.

Managing emotions
Academics increasingly considered effective time and emotion management as techniques to mitigate imbalance and learn to live with an inherent dissatisfaction (Ren & Caudle, 2016). In this study, managing emotions was a favoured coping strategy for female rather than male academics in both contexts, although differences remained in how emotion was managed. For British female academics, maintaining a positive outlook was considered useful. One strategy was to recognise that "all things pass" and "putting things into perspective". Expressing (negative) emotions and to "vent my anger to my husband" was another strategy. Some British male academics admitted they redefined their mind-set, for instance curtailing perfectionist behaviours and re-considering their roles beyond the work context were considered to improve WLB. A male professor described his identity as being multifaceted, saying "I'm only a professor at work".

For their Chinese counterparts, the approach appeared to be suppression or self-control. One interviewee said, "as an adult, you have to cope!". Chinese academics ascribed this to being raised in such a social environment, particularly influenced by their parents. Chinese society traditionally socialises children to control impulse responses (Ho, 1994), and moderating and controlling emotions is considered essential to mental and physical health (Koo, 1976). As a result, keeping an inner peace of mind to achieve harmony, a traditional Confucian tenet, remains prevalent. This was also seen as the key to maintain a balanced life.

Making choices
In response to significant life events such as marriage or having a child, it is usually the female academics that redefined their mind-set. This includes adjusting career expectations as indicated by some Chinese female academics. Reducing the desire for promotion and forgoing career advancement opportunities, often considered as personal compromise or sacrifice with little or no choice, also featured as WLB strategies. As consistently demonstrated in the literature, it is most often Chinese women who redefine their personal roles that involves lowering their career ambition and making

adjustments to their family and personal lives (Lo et al., 2003; Moen & Yu, 2000; Ng et al., 2002).   For example:

> He is a loyal husband but very macho [male chauvinist] and career-orientated. He often says his career is crucial to our family life as well as his own status. Chinese society still agrees that the man's career is the foremost one and women should take care of home and men. I love my job and hope to advance my career, but I need to devote most of my time to our son's education. (Chinese female lecturer, 35-49, married with one child)

The principle of 'work first' was followed exclusively by Chinese male academics, which echoes Gaskell et al.'s (2004) finding that Chinese male academics are more ambitious than female.   Prioritising work over family life was so ingrained in the mind-set that one male associate professor, despite his new wife's protestations, forwent the ten days marriage leave allowance.   Chinese male academics actively made significant sacrifices in their personal life to achieve career goals, which is rarely an approach adopted by British male academics.

Both male and female British academics considered family life as equal to, or more important than, their academic pursuits. They frequently talked about 'switching-off' to separate work and family life, designing their own 'rules' such as "avoiding viewing emails during the weekends", and "leaving work at work".   For them, WLB means having weekends and/or evenings free for family and setting up and sticking to the 'no work' policy beyond contracted, or at least self-imposed, working hours. Nevertheless, significant life events such as having a child were considered to affect WLB.

Consequences for Career
The study establishes that individual academics' orientation to work and life roles had a primary impact on their career.   The pressure to publish and achieve required research output was an additional challenge in both contexts.   Failure to publish means 'perish' (Neil, 2008).   Under the new employment reform, one of the key HE reforms in China, academics are pressured to increase their productivity measured by quantity of publications and research funds (Lai, 2010). A Chinese male associate professor described an acute pressure to earn "milk powder money" following the arrival of his daughter only three months prior to our meeting.   He asserted the necessity for him to work even harder in a labour market where the "employer chooses you, not you who chooses the employer".   He conveyed a sense of 'impending disaster' if he didn't continue delivering the required performance, asserting "if you are unemployed, your life is over!".   Another explained:

> This is the reality you face. At this research-led prestigious university, you won't have a chance to progress unless you focus on research and publish in

internationally influential journals. (Chinese male associate professor, 35-49, married with a child)

Whilst both male and female academics were facing challenges at work, there is an evident gender divide. Women, not men, emphasised marriage, and particularly childcare, led to shifting their focus from career to family. Consequently, both British and Chinese female academics reported slow career progression or career stagnation due mainly to the three main reasons – including work-family conflict, target-driven performance management and gendered organisational practices. Some of the representative responses are as below:

> My research output and quality has reduced, but I have to prioritise childcare over career development. A child's education depends mainly on a mother's time and effort. I don't want my son to lose at the starting line. (Chinese female associate professor, 21-34, married with one child)

> I have been perceived as research non-active. Each academic staff has to get four articles published in 3-star or above journals. I have two articles accepted, but I still failed to meet the target and was punished by doubling teaching load. What's worse, my research funding has been frozen. My mentor has not helped me much and he seems not bothered … I feel I'm not part of his 'network'. To avoid being punished again, I have to work harder which means I have to reduce the time spent with the family. (British female lecturer, 35-49, married with two children)

> The management has set publication targets for academics - to publish two articles in core Chinese journals within three years. This is very challenging as I already work at full capacity including 16 hours teaching each week and student management. (Chinese female associate professor, 35-49, married without children)

> My mentor has not helped me much and he seems not bothered … I feel I'm not part of his network." (British female lecturer, 35-49, married with two children)

> It is difficult in a somewhat male-dominated discipline. No matter how ambitious you are, you are still seen as a woman with major family responsibilities. (Chinese female associate professor, 35-49, married with one child)

Compounding these difficulties, changes in the HE context considered by British female interviewees as detrimental, led to the adoption of multifarious approaches. A female senior lecturer cited "increasing workloads, burgeoning administrative work,

pointless bureaucracy" along with "cultures of bullying and harassment" and "intrusive and authoritarian management" as evidence of deteriorating conditions in UK HE. Male academics were also aware of the situation:
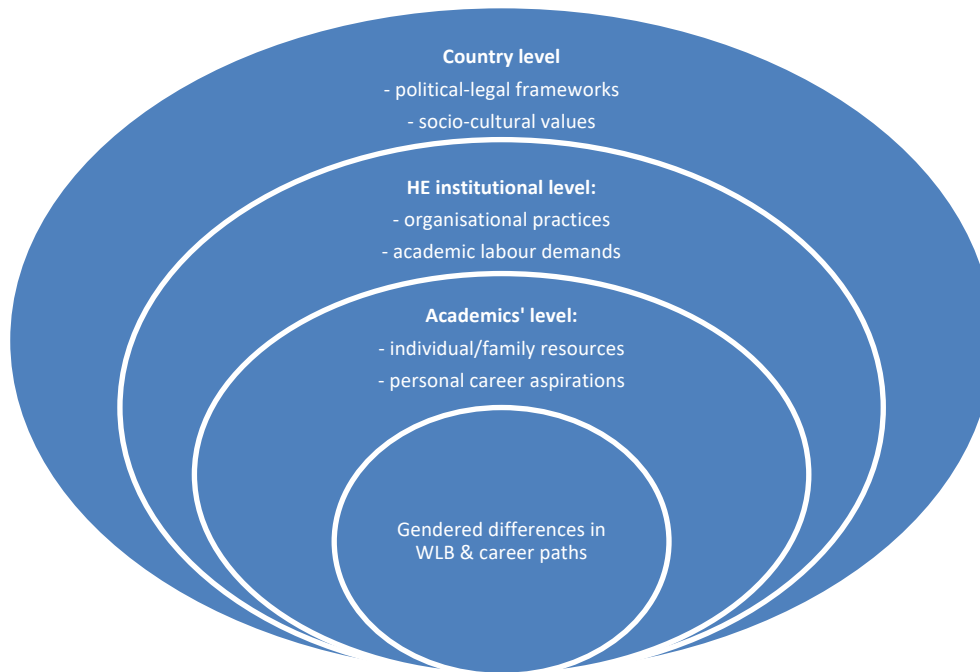
> My workload is overwhelming! Forget about research, I do not have time for it. I am now in charge of two new postgraduate courses… The department is facing teaching staff shortages but has no plan to address this issue. This is frustrating! (British male senior lecturer, 35-49, single)

Consequently, the requirements caused academics to look for the most effective ways, such as networking by attending conferences and socialising with gatekeepers of research funds. This has led to not only a lack of serious concentration on the quality of both teaching and research, but also the popularity of networking and socialising in academia especially among men, who often form an 'old boys network' (Davidson & Burke, 2000) or a 'brotherhood' which pushes women out (Ramohai, 2019). Some British and Chinese female academics indicated they were excluded due to their perceived dominant role at home and structural barriers that denied them access to professional academic networking. This is particularly evident amongst Chinese female academics, who attached overriding importance to their children's education for which they were willing to sacrifice career opportunities and make relentless efforts to provide parental guidance and supervision.

Discussion

Our study demonstrates that British and Chinese academics differed in their experiences of WLB. This manifests itself as gendered differences in individual academics' coping strategies, which is consistent with the existing claim that women worldwide tend to develop different coping strategies from men (Bray et al., 2001; Fielden & Davidson, 1999; Jennings & McDougald, 2007). We also found a much more marked gender difference in the Chinese than in the British context in terms of sourcing support, managing emotions, and making choices. More significantly, the findings reveal that such gender differences in WLB were induced by the factors and their interplay on the three levels as depicted in Figure 1. This also led to divergent career paths between male and female academics in both contexts.

Figure 1 The interplay of multilevel factors leading to gendered differences in WLB and career paths

Country level
- political-legal frameworks
- socio-cultural values

HE institutional level:
- organisational practices
- academic labour demands

Academics' level:
- individual/family resources
- personal career aspirations

Gendered differences in
WLB & career paths

At the country level, first of all, differing political-legal frameworks accounted for the divergence between the two contexts. Formal structural influences appeared to be greater for British rather than Chinese academics. In the UK，employees who have worked for their employers for 26 weeks have a statutory right to request flexible working. WLB is considered an important characteristic of being an 'employer of choice' (Gifford, 2007). In China, however, there is less interest in WLB and limited government-initiated intervention. Under the new two-child policy, the Chinese government no longer provides welfare benefits such as childcare subsidies or publicly funded kindergartens which may result in decreasing employment rates and earnings of working mothers compared to fathers (Qian & Jin, 2018). It is also worth noting that despite WLB policies in the UK, the emphasis remains with adults making personal decisions (Lewis & Campbell, 2007). Secondly, socio-cultural values, including different conceptions of WLB, changing status of men and women, and deeply embedded values and beliefs both constrained and enabled individual capacity. Our study shows that the term 'WLB' is used differently in the UK and China. In the UK, the term describes prioritising and separating work and life, and in China, it describes harmony and integration. This concurs with Russell (2008) in finding little evidence of Western solutions being adopted in China. Chinese academics tended to accept work-life imbalance as a 'fact of life' without feeling a need for the organisation to address it, instead utilising resources at societal and individual levels. Employment of domestic labour and drawing on family networks for support appear to play a key role in the personal coping process in of Chinese academics. This also reflects a strong collectivist orientation. In contrast, the diverse coping approaches adopted by British academics align with an individualistic orientation. Emotion management was identified as a coping strategy by both groups. Whilst open expression was seen useful by British academics, suppressing emotion was perceived to be culturally appropriate by Chinese academics. This accords with Russell & Yik (1996) and Soto

et al. (2005), who suggest that greater emotional moderation and control is valued in Chinese culture.   Furthermore, traditional norms surrounding women's responsibility for home and childcare appeared more deeply embedded in the Chinese than the British context.   Chinese men tend to hold a less egalitarian attitude than women (Tu & Chang, 2000). The Confucian doctrine that 'the best virtue of women is being an ideal wife subordinating to her husband' at least continues in part in modern China.   There are no exceptions for well-educated female academics who have to perform the roles of partner, mother and carer.   This is reflected in other collectivist cultures (see Uppalury & Racherla, 2014).   Despite the prevailing dual-career and dual-income family model in China, it is believed that men should take more responsibility for earning money and creating wealth for the family.   Consequently, confirming the findings of Chandra (2012) and Xiao and Cooke (2012), home responsibilities and childcare continue to disproportionately fall upon women who also work full-time.

At the HE institutional level, organisational practices and academic labour demand emerged as themes within the interview accounts.   British academics took advantage of organisational flexible-working arrangements and/or WLB programmes, rarely available to Chinese academics.   Chinese universities did not have any formal WLB policies and seemed less receptive to flexible working arrangements.   Consequently, WLB discourse usually resonates at the personal level and coping strategies are predominantly individually driven.   For both groups of academics, their options of coping strategies are also constrained by the structural conditions of their work, such as escalating job demands no longer bound by time or space, and changing organisational working culture which encourages the competitive production of research outputs as evidenced in both our study and existing studies (see Huppatz et al., 2019).   Fierce competition in academia, sophisticated technology and challenging research projects, along with time constraints in managing the three-fold academic functions of teaching, research and services (Ismail & Rasdi, 2007) is particularly evident in the British context.   Indeed, British academics have been found to work over 50 hours during a typical week, struggling with excessive and unmanageable workloads (UCU, 2016).   In our study, few gender differences in terms of coping strategies were surfaced in the British context.   However, the UK academic environment is found to have a strong gender divide (Fletcher et al., 2007).   Despite the continuing growth in the number of women working in UK HE, they still tend to be underrepresented in the higher grades within universities (Locke & Bennion, 2010).   Coping with increasing academic labour demands including teaching, research, administration and even student recruitment has disadvantaged women.   In both contexts, research and publication was a key indicator in the performance management of academics, and male academics seemed to perform better than their female counterparts.   The growing competition and 'publish or perish' culture in academia (Fanelli, 2010) thus poses an additional strain on women who are often marginalised from mainstream academic circles partially aggravated by the "structural male dominance of academia" (Ismail & Rasdi, 2007, p.157).   It seems that in our study that regardless of context female academics were disadvantaged in career development.

At the academics' level, there is evidence of both female and male academics negotiating desirable and significant personal and/or family resources in pursuit of WLB. Consistent with previous research (Aaltio & Huang, 2007; Ren & Foster, 2011; Xiao & Cooke, 2012), the study finds that grandparent support with childcare, less-readily available to the British academics, but considered as normal in China. With familial support widely available and some degree of informal organisational assistance, Chinese female academics had greater capabilities to maintain a balanced life than their British counterparts. Partner support was also seen to improve WLB experiences by both British and Chinese academics, which is congruent with previous studies (Aryee et al., 1999; Aycan & Eskin, 2005; Beutell & Greenhaus, 1983; Bröckel, 2018; Hennekam et al., 2019; Lo et al., 2003; Ren & Foster, 2011). At this level, another influential factor is that of personal career aspirations. Research conducted in the Western context shows that male academics continue to place work ahead of family commitments (Damaske et al., 2014) since they have more control over their own time and more ability to divide their time between family and work than their female counterparts (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). This is little evidenced in the British context in our study. But it is certainly evident that ambitious Chinese male academics were more willing to tolerate work-life imbalance. This suggests the traditional Chinese work ethic, in which career achievement is privileged over family life or leisure, prevails. This also may also account for Chinese male academics overwhelmingly reporting work pressure and an imbalanced life. On the other hand, most Chinese female academics privileged home and family roles, sometimes a choice whilst at other times a cultural expectation. Nonetheless, unequal family responsibilities was recognised by female academics in both contexts as constituting the main obstacles to their WLB and career development. This concords with what Kinman and Jones (2008) found that female academics were disproportionally affected by the complexities of juggling between childcare and an academic career. Career-oriented men and women differ in negotiating their roles, with women considering themselves as juggling a variety of roles whilst men focus on their careers (Emslie & Hunt, 2009).

Conclusions and implications

This study highlights the importance of critically examining contextual factors in order to better comprehend gender differences in WLB and implications for careers. Six multilevel factors – including political-legal frameworks and socio-cultural values at the country level, organisational practices and academic labour demand at the HE institutional level, and individual/family resources and personal career aspirations at the academics' level – and their constant intertwining were found to shape individual academics' choices of WLB strategy which in turn, resulted in diverging career paths.

Comparing the two contexts, there was greater political-legal influence on British than Chinese academics, but social-cultural values impacted more directly on Chinese than British academics. The increasingly competitive HE institutional environment in both contexts was perceived to have detrimental effects on academics. For individual academics, whilst it is quite clear that the availability of individual/family resources determined their experiences of WLB in both contexts, personal career aspirations

appeared to be more influential to the Chinese than British academics. Most significantly, we have found that the coping strategies adopted by male and female academics differed with a much more marked gender difference in the Chinese than the British context.

Gender, as a lived socio-cultural phenomenon, permeates the three levels and plays a core part in analysing the root causes of men and women's experiences of WLB. We offer three concluding observations and their implications:

Firstly, individual academics' choices and decisions were made as a result of persistent gendered assumptions in society and in workplaces. This echoes Moen (2015, p.177) who argues that individual choices are constrained by "social relationships and institutional arrangements that reproduce gendered choices and inequalities in people's lives, at work and at home". This gender inequality reflects constraints at the political and societal level, demands and expectations at the workplace, and economic pressures at the household level (Hobson, 2011). This is particularly acute in the Chinese context due to a greater perceived economic responsibility for family upon Chinese men, as well as to the centuries-old patriarchal, gendered roles in the Chinese society. Looking ahead, the two-child policy may exacerbate a vicious circle of gender inequality with women having fewer resources and diminishing bargaining power in the labour markets (Qian & Jin, 2018). Chinese companies have been reported to avoid hiring young women because of reluctance to pay for multiple episodes of maternity leave (The Economist, 2018).

Secondly, the flexibility and freedom of academia afforded academics scope to exercise personal agency in terms of coping strategies. Interestingly, this has different consequences for each context and each gender. For British academics, this flexibility did not improve their WLB. Instead, it often led them to feel trapped between the 'two greedy institutions' - the family and the university (Currie et al., 2000; Devine et al., 2011). For Chinese female academics, this flexibility legitimised and accentuated their chief role at home. Nevertheless, by taking advantage of readily available family/social support and few non-academic demands they appeared to avoid feeling trapped in quite the same way and considered their WLB as acceptable. This reasserts the individual choice, shaped by the socio-cultural norms and organisational practices, can both prevent and promote gains in women's agency in the context of WLB. For Chinese male academics, flexibility and mobility at work means greater agency to make better and more effective choices of their work and career pursuits than their female counterparts.

Thirdly, in both contexts, gendered career paths were obvious. They were fostered by individual behaviours as well as being institutionally embedded. For some academics, especially male academics, intensified academic labour, which led to a work-life imbalance, appears to be self-imposed and based on individual's career aspirations. For others, especially female academics, this was seen as the outcome of structural constraints under the expectations of universities as well as cultural barriers in progressing within academia. Both groups of women were experiencing a non-linear, challenging career path with slower progression and fewer career achievements in comparison to their male counterparts. This has wider implications for female

academics carving out a career in academia amongst their many other roles. As Dickens (1998) and Doherty & Manfredi (2006) point out, associating organisational commitment with long working hours, often necessary for career progression, operates as indirect gender discrimination. Marketisation of HE emphasising performativity and outputs, leads to intensification and pressure that disproportionately impacts female academics (Asirvatham & Humphries, 2019). Both negative stereotypes and feelings of powerlessness can reduce women's performance. Huppatz et al. (2019) suggest that women can compete with men for top positions in academia only when women release themselves from caring duties. Nowadays, it seems easier to choose to be single or childless, 'but once the choice to have children is made, the old processes of gendering set in once again' (Bradley, 2007, p.136).

Political-legal changes alone would be inadequate. As Bradley (2007, p.199) states, 'a broader social movement is needed, which keeps up the struggle to change 'hearts and minds''. Turning to practice, greater gender equality could be promoted through networking that influences career advancement in academia (Acker, 2006), such as women's committees and collaborative research, to confront the structural barriers that denied them access to professional academic networking (Ismail & Rasdi, 2007; Asirvatham & Humphries, 2019). Women's collective and more focused activity can bring about transformation, but progress can be limited by the institutional environment. Therefore, there seems a significant role for institutions in terms of providing structural scaffolding that can empower women. To support female colleagues in developing their professional identity and greater self-confidence an effective mentoring system could be established. Further, identifying female role models who do not submit to prevailing norms may make women feel more comfortable challenging those norms.

We view our study as contributing to understanding the lived experience of academics seeking to balance work and life in culturally diverse contexts. We have achieved this through a comparative analytical approach to uncover the intertwining nature of the factors in the country, HE institutional and individual academics' levels. These contextual factors have contributed to the gendered nature of choices and decisions made in WLB and careers. Future research could explore how individuals can reflexively examine their ingrained beliefs and assumptions to enhance their individual and collective capacity in regard to WLB and career choices.

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