Public Sector Employees' Perception of Work-life Balance Policies in the Kingdom of Bahrain

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Abstract

The imbalance between job demands and job resources creates strain on employees. Work-life policies address one aspect of this imbalance by contributing to job resources. Most of these policies are relatively new for most individuals and organizations in the Kingdom of Bahrain, and not all policies are applied. This study explores public sector employees' perceptions of work-life balance policies in the Kingdom of Bahrain. An online survey examining work-life balance levels among public sector employees collected 415 responses. The findings showed that employees perceived the current policies adopted in the public sector to be convenient but insufficient. Some participants mentioned that the legislated policies were not implemented in their organizations, while others stated that they hesitated to utilize the policies because doing so would affect their chances of career progression. Females, millennials, and younger employees showed a higher interest in more flexibility and support to maintain a healthy work-life balance. The study recommended raising awareness of the importance of work-life balance among policymakers and leaders and enforcing the implementation of existing policies for applicable jobs.

1. Introduction

1.1 Bahrain Public Sector and Work Policies

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large number of office workers around the world

switched to working from home. The experience was relatively new for most people and the organizations, but it proved successful at different levels. When offices reopened, some employees chose to remain working from home after finding it easier to balance between their work and personal lives, and some organizations adopted the remote work system after experiencing its benefits. The concept of work-life balance became more valued, and more employees began requesting greater flexibility and support in their work arrangements.

In the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Civil Service Bureau (CSB), which oversees the human resources of public sector entities, legislated several policies to support the work-life balance of employees. The CSB has not enforced all policies and left the decision of implementing the policies to the organizations. Among these policies were flexible working hours, sabbaticals, and different types of paid leaves, which included but was not limited to study, maternity, marriage, bereavement, and pilgrimage leaves (Civil Service Bureau, 2022). Moreover, starting January 2023, the CSB legislated a remote work policy; however, not all public sector entities chose to implement it.

The public sector in Bahrain consists of 49,878 civil servants (Social Insurance Organization, 2022), 53.6% of whom are females and 46.4% are males. The number of females in the workforce has significantly grown, as has the number of dual-career couples due to the increased efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment and inclusion (Kingdom of Bahrain's National Portal, 2017). As a result, maintaining a balance between personal life and career has become more challenging for employees of different social conditions, and hence more initiatives and policies are required to enable employees to balance the demands of their various roles in life.

1.2 The Emergence of the Work-Life Balance Concept

The concept of work-life balance has gained importance in the past decade due to various factors, including cultural and technological changes (Osoian, Lazar and Ratiu, 2009). the number of partners both working outside the home has increased, as well as the number of women in the labor market (Osoian, Lazar and Ratiu, 2009). As a result, individuals find it challenging to balance their responsibilities inside and outside of work as the entrance of females into the workforce has required some males to increase their contribution domestically to alleviate the females' burden resulting from their dual responsibilities (Carlson, Petts and Pepin, 2021). It is important to note that the concept of work-life balance is not limited to couples or parents, and hence the word "family" in earlier versions of the term was replaced with the word "life" to include single employees and non-parents who seek a balance between work and other areas of life such as sports, travel, and private study (Kalliath and Brough, 2008).

The growing number of millennials joining the workforce has also contributed to the emergence of the work-life balance concept. This is because employees born between the early 1980s and 2000 rely heavily on technology in their lives and therefore value a non-monotonous and flexible work atmosphere (Susaeta et al., 2013). Studies assert that millennial and Gen Z employees expect greater work-life balance components from their employers (Schroth, 2019). According to a study conducted in 2012 by the Mental Health

Foundation, more than 40% of employees to some degree neglect different areas of their lives because of work commitments, something which increases their chances of experiencing mental health problems (Fapohunda, 2014). Therefore, the need to maintain a work-life balance has become vital to avoid health issues related to overworking and to improve employees' performance and productivity.

1.3 Definitions of Work-Life Balance

Although there are early studies about the relationship between work and family life (such as Wilensky, 1960 and Parker, 1971), the term 'work-life balance' was first introduced in the United Kingdom by Kanter in 1977, when she challenged the notion of "separate worlds" between work and family (Kanter, 1977). the notion was only applied in companies in the United States during the late 1980s because of the increased neglect of the employees of their families due to growing work responsibilities (Lockwood, 2003) and the lack of control they had over their time (Fapohunda, 2014). Bakker (2007) proposed the job demands-resources model (JD-R model), which suggests that imbalance between job's expectations and the resources made available result in strain. Different definitions of the term work-life balance are used in literature, and there is no consistent and generally accepted definition among researchers.

According to the review done by Kalliath and Brough (2008), the term has been defined in literature according to six different factors. Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw (2003), for example, defined the term as a multiple-role conflict as they recognized that the demands of the personal sphere of an individual's life can carry over to the professional sphere thus affecting health and performance (Kalliath and Brough, 2008). Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw (2003) proposed three components of work-life balance: work, time, and satisfaction balance, and accordingly defined the term as "the extent to which an individual is engaged in – and equally satisfied with – his or her work role and family role" (Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw, 2003, p. 513).

Some researchers focused on the aspect of satisfaction (e.g., Kirchmeyer, 2000; Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw, 2003; Grady, 2008), while other researchers (e.g., Clark, 2000; Clutterbuck, 2003; Greenblatt, 2002) refer to the term as a way of diminishing the conflict between an individual's personal and professional role. Some researchers consider the term to refer to the need to balance multiple roles. It is important to mention that multiple roles in an individual's life are not static and may vary over time with life changes such as the arrival of a new baby, a work promotion, or a sick parent (Kalliath and Brough, 2008). In fact, multiple roles can be a source of enhancement (Voydanoff, 2002), enrichment (Brough, Hassan and O'Driscoll, 2014; Carlson et al. 2006), or facilitation (Wayne, Musisca and Fleeson, 2004).

1.4 Benefits of Work-life Balance

Achieving work-life balance is a two-way system that accounts for the needs of employees as well as employers; and to initiate this system, employers need to recognize the benefits of work-life balance policies to the organization (Lewis, 2008).

1.4.1 Benefits to the Employer

Several studies have demonstrated that implementing work-life balance policies positively impacts organizational performance and productivity (Konrad and Mangel, 2000; Meyer, Mukerjee and Sestero, 2001; Perry-Smith and Blum, 2000; Mañas and Garrido, 2007; Yamamoto and Matsuura, 2012). Research identified a relationship between several work-life balance policies and lower absenteeism (Gray, 2002; Mohamed et al., 2016). Additionally, several studies asserted that work-life balance is a critical factor that is related to employee motivation (Rahman, 2020; Chastukhina, 2014), and that motivation is closely related to employee performance (Amalia and Fakhri, 2016; Astuti et al., 2020; Pancasila et al. 2020). Work-life balance was also found to be positively related to employee engagement (Iqbal et al., 2017; Siswanto, Maulidiyah, and Masyhuri, 2020).

In terms of financial performance, Dex and Smith (2002) found that out of 10 companies applying work-life balance policies, 9 were profitable, but the authors could not confirm whether the policies were directly causing profitability. Furthermore, according to a study by Gray (2002) in the United Kingdom, 97% of companies with work-life balance policies had above average financial performance, whereas only 55% of companies with no work-life balance policies exceeded that mark. Moreover, Perry-Smith and Blum (2000) concluded that firms with more work-life balance practices attained greater sales growth, while Meyer, Mukerjee and Sestero (2001) found that work-life balance practices positively affected organizations' revenue. However, according to Benito-Osorio, Muñoz-Aguado and Villar (2014) it is important to note that the financial effects of implementing work-life balance policies are not attainable in the short run, but rather in the medium to long run.

1.4.2 Benefits to the Employee

Studies show that there has been an increase in the problem of job burnout, especially in high pressure fields such as banking and technology industries (Li et al., 2015; Jia et al., 2014). Burnout refers to a state of fatigue, exhaustion, and frustration due to the failure of achieving the anticipated results in one's professional activities (Edú-Valsania, Laguía and Moriano, 2022). Burnout can also lead to job dissatisfaction and higher levels of occupational stress, something which in return would reflect on lower performance and productivity levels (Hsu et al., 2019).

Drawing on the Work-Life Spillover Theory by Zedeck, (1992, cited in Bell, Rajendran and Theiler, 2012), a person's emotions, attitudes, behaviors and skills developed in one sphere, either career or private life, can transfer into the other sphere, and the transfer can be bidirectional (Bell, Rajendran and Theiler, 2012). Long working hours can result in poor health (Virtanen et al., 2012; Bauer et al., 2009), including poor mental health (Sjöberg et al., 2020; Amagasa and Nakayama, 2012).

Thus, work-life balance is important to both prevent job burnouts and achieve healthy work environments (Mensah and Adjei, 2020). Other further benefits of implementing work-life balance policies are higher levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and loyalty (Hsu et al., 2019; Garg and Yajurvedi, 2016; Melayansari and Bhinekawati, 2019; Mwangi, Nzulwa and Kwena, 2016).

1.5 Options of Work-Life Balance Policy

Bakker's JD-R model (2007) recommends decreasing job demands while increasing job resources. Work-life balance policies should aim at one aspect of this model, which is to contribute to the resources jobs can provide Building an organizational culture that emphasizes the importance of work, family, and personal life values. Among the different policies that aim at optimizing work-life balance are the following options, which were obtained from studies by Benito-Osorio, Muñoz-Aguado and Villar (2014), Garg and Yajurvedi (2016), and CIPD (2021):

- Job-sharing is a system where two employees share the same job but split the hours, benefits, and payments. This system allows employees to have more time off-work to attend personal activities and maintain a work-life balance (Garg and Yajurvedi, 2016).

- Part-time work is when employees' contracts entitle them to work for a specific number of hours less than the full-time hours (CIPD, 2021).

- Compressed working hours policy is a system where employees work their total hours during a shorter period (Garg and Yajurvedi, 2016).

- Teleworking is a system that allows employees to use modern technologies (like cell phones and laptops) to work from a location remote from the office (Garg and Yajurvedi, 2016).

- Day nursery facilities policy is when the organization provides a facility for childcare.

- Flexible working hours policy is a policy that allows employees to select their start or end times for the working day, ensuring that a certain number of hours are worked (Garg and Yajurvedi, 2016).

- Sabbaticals are prolonged periods of leave where an employee is allowed to take time off work up to five years or more depending on company policy (CIPD, 2021).

1.6 Challenges of Utilizing Work-Life Balance Policies

Building an organizational culture that emphasizes the importance of work, family, and personal life is vital to maintain work-life balance (Idrovo-Carlier et al., 2012; Lockwood, 2003; Osoian et al., 2009). Management support and attitude towards balancing work and personal lives is also important and encourages employees to make use of the policies because they will most likely be unwilling to benefit from the policies if they feel that their chances of career progression, such as being promoted or receiving training will be affected (Fapohunda, 2014). When leaders at organizations work for extremely long hours and rarely take time off, organizational norms regarding working overtime will be shaped, and employees will start to believe that working long means working hard and will therefore be very careful before making use of work-life balance policies to avoid being seen as uncommitted (Fapohunda, 2014). Interestingly, some employees are concerned that using work-life balance policies may result in stigma mechanism, which may result in

repercussions from the organization for using these policies (Perrigino, Dunford and Wilson 2018). This is because employees who utilize work-life balance options are usually perceived as less dedicated, which in turn affects their opportunities of receiving promotions and being rewarded (Allen, 2009).

1.7 Research Goal and Objectives

To explore the perception of the Kingdom of Bahrain's public sector employees of work-life balance policies, the research set three objectives:

- To measure the level of work-life balance among public sectors employees in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

- To infer how public sector employees in the Kingdom of Bahrain perceive the implementation of work-life balance policies.

- To assess how demographic characteristics of employees associate with their preferences about work-life balance policies.

1.8 Conceptual Framework

This study has two conceptual frameworks. The first is a descriptive framework, which describes the perception of the public sector employees in the Kingdom of Bahrain of the implementation of work-life policies. The second is an associative framework, and it consists of constructs and variables. It assesses if the demographic characteristics of employees are associated with their perception of work-life balance policies. The dependent variables are the ones mentioned in the study of Benito et al. (2014).

Independent Variables   **Dependent Variables**

| Genger |
| Age group |
| Social status |
| Higher education qualification |
| Number of children |
| Age group of children |

Perception of Work-Life Balance Policies

- Telework
- Flexible working hours
- Sabbaticals
- Job sharing
- Part-time work
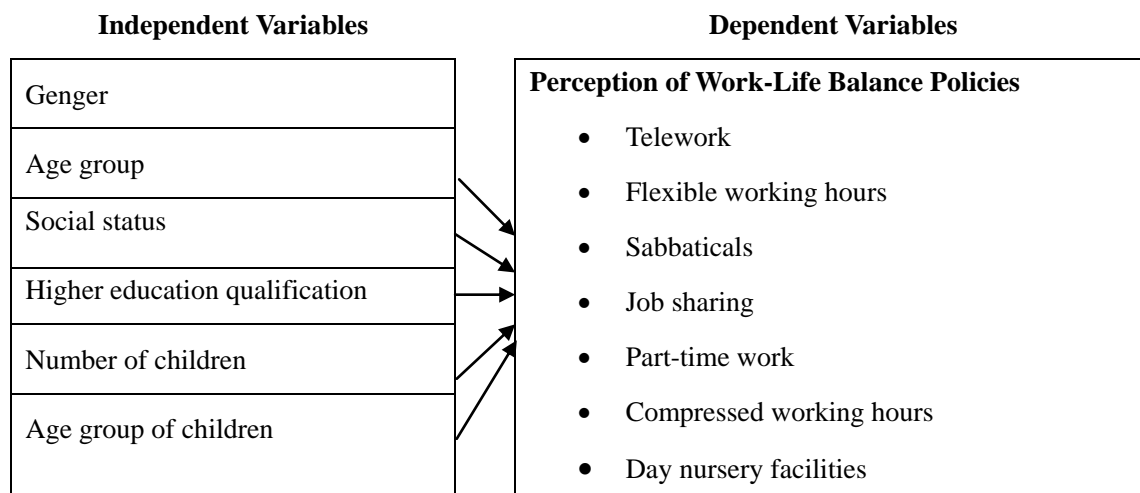- Compressed working hours
- Day nursery facilities

Figure 1. Conceptual framework on the relationship between employee characteristics and their perception of policies

In this conceptual framework (Figure 1), the demographic characteristics of employees are the independent variable, whereas the perception of policies is the dependent variable. The relationship between the two variables is tested to assess how demographic variables

associate with the employees' perception of policies (i.e., if participants of specific demographic characteristics find certain policies more convenient than others).

2. Method

The study employed a quantitative method and followed a deductive research approach, by which the existing theories regarding work-life balance policies and performance were tested.

2.1 The Research Instrument

An online survey was developed to address the study's goal. The survey was divided into three sections. A total of 34 items in all the sections were multiple choice items. They were divided into the following sections as follows:

- Participants' demographic characteristics (7 items) and information regarding the implementation of the new remote work system in their organizations (2 items)

- Participants' opinions on their current work-life balance (7 items)

- Participants' levels of convenience on current and proposed work-life balance policies (7 items)

- Participants' perception of their performance in case work-life balance policies were implemented (4 items)

- Participants' ranking of the policies according to their priority (7 items).

The last part of the survey was an optional open-ended question which asked for participants' comments regarding the topic.

The survey was translated into Arabic and was piloted. Two separate versions (Arabic and English) of the survey were created on SurveyMonkey.com. Two hyperlinks were created and then the survey was activated.

2.2 Sampling Method and Collecting Data

Hyperlinks to the two versions of survey (Arabic and English) were distributed through the first researcher's messaging platforms and social media channels (WhatsApp, Instagram, and LinkedIn) in February 2023. The survey links were further shared by the researcher's family, friends, and colleagues to reach a wider audience. Since the population size was the number of public sector employees in Bahrain, which is around 49,878 (Social Insurance Organization, 2022), the sample size targeted was 400 respondents (±5% margin of error). A total of 415 completed responses (73% response rate) were obtained for this study.

2.3 Analyzing Data

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to present the findings. Before running correlation tests, the 5-point Likert scale responses were reduced to 3-point scale by merging the responses of "Strongly Agree" with "Agree" and merging the responses of "Strongly Disagree" with "Disagree".

Then the responses were coded, and the Excel sheet was saved as a .CSV file. Using JASP

0.14.1.0 software, Spearman's rank correlation was calculated to assess the correlation between demographic characteristics of employees with their perception of work-life balance policies. Then the correlation between the age groups of the children of those who mentioned that they had children (a total of 263 out of 415 participants) and how convenient they found each of the seven work-life balance policies was calculated using Spearman *rho*.

3. Results

3.1 Demographics

A total of 415 participants responded, of which 71% were females and 29% males. As for their age groups, 71% of participants were between the ages of 30-49, while 17% of participants were younger and 12% were older. Most of the participants (63%) were parents (3% were separated and 60% were married) whereas 27% of the participants were single or separated, and 9% were married without children. Regarding the highest education qualification held by the participants, 53% of them had a bachelor's degree, 34% had post graduate degrees, 8% had a diploma and 4% had a high school degree.

A total of 62% of parent participants had 2 or 3 children, 21% had 1 child, whereas 17% had 4 children or more. Out of the 263 parents who participated in the survey, at least 48% had children between the ages of 7-12, 41% between the ages of 3-6, 27% between the ages of 0-2, and the rest had older children.

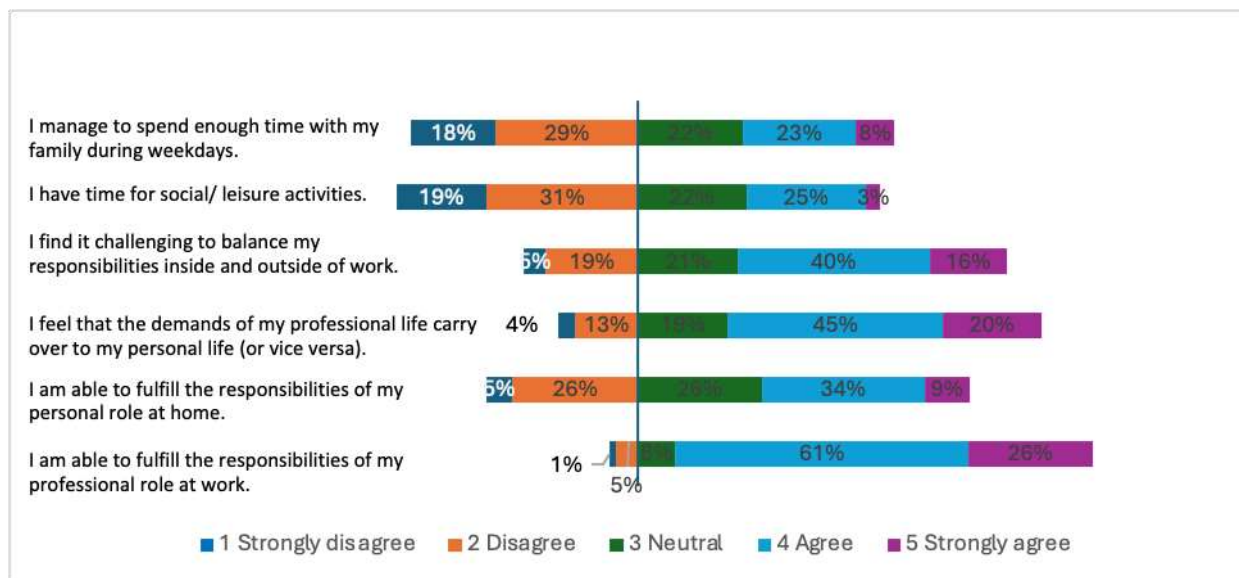### 4.2 Participants' Current Work-Life Balance

Figure 2. Assessment of participants of their level of work-life balance

Figure 2 illustrates participants' assessment of their level of work-life balance. When asked about managing to spend enough time with their families during weekdays, 29% of participants disagreed and 18% strongly disagreed. Also, 50% of the participants disagreed when they were asked about having enough time for social and leisure activities and only 28% of them agreed with the statement. Moreover, 40% of participants agreed that it is

challenging to balance their responsibilities inside and outside of work, and 45% of participants felt that the demands in one domain of their life carry over to the other domain. When asked about being able to fulfill their responsibilities at home, 34% of participants agreed, 26% disagreed, 26% were neutral; whereas when asked about being able to fulfill their responsibilities at work, 61% of participants agreed.
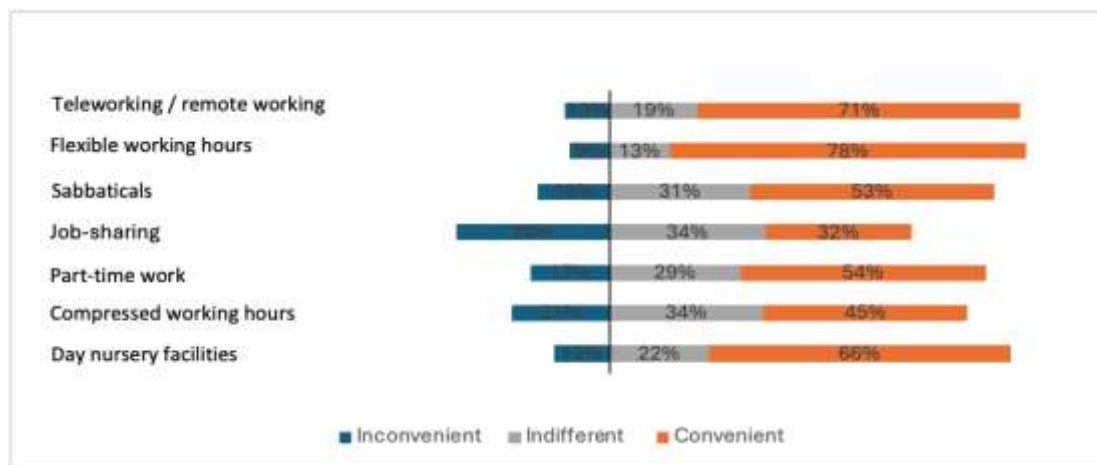

Figure 3. Assessment of participants of work-life balance policies

The participants' satisfaction with existing and proposed work-life balance policies is demonstrated in Figure 3. More than half of the participants found the existing policies convenient, as 71% of them appreciated teleworking, 78% appreciated flexible working hours, and 53% appreciated sabbaticals. As for the proposed policies, participants divided into almost equal thirds for the job-sharing policy; 34% of them thought it would be inconvenient, 34% were indifferent, and 32% thought it would be convenient. Participants found the remaining proposed policies mostly convenient, and the results were 54% for part-time work, 45% for compressed working hours, and 66% for day nursery facilities.

4.5 Participants' Perception of Performance if Work-Life Balance Policies Were Implemented
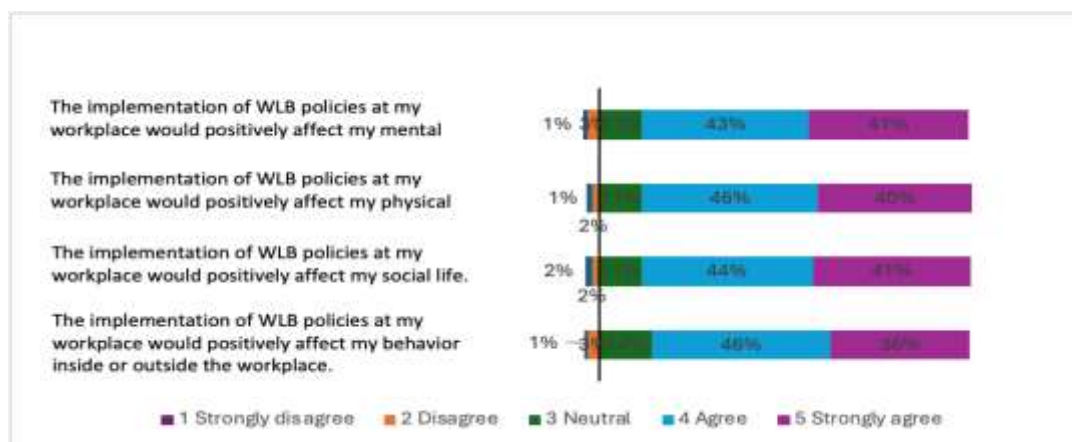

Figure 4. Participants' perception of their performance if work-life balance policies were implemented

The final section of the survey explored the participants' perception of their performance if work-life balance policies were implemented in their workplace (Figure 4). They first assessed their agreement with statements that were derived from the literature definition of performance. A significant percentage of participants agreed that the implementation of policies in their workplace would positively affect their mental health (84%), their physical state (85%), their social life (85%), and their behavior inside and outside of work (82%).

Then participants ranked seven work-life balance policies based on their priority to them. The results revealed that the participants prioritized the policies in the following order from highest to lowest:

1. teleworking

2. flexible working hours

3. compressed working hours

4. part-time work

5. job-sharing

6. day nursey facilities

7. sabbaticals

Responses to the open question mainly revolved around the following six themes:

- The need for reduced working hours (5 inputs).

- The need for more flexibility for women (8 inputs).

- The need to focus on employee productivity instead of attendance or the number of working hours (4 inputs).

- The need to change the organizational culture (8 inputs).

- Acknowledgments regarding the relationship between health issues and the lack of work-life balance (3 inputs).

- Expressing interest in the compressed working hours/ 4-day week (9 inputs).

4.7 The Correlation between Demographic Information and the Perception of Work-Life Balance Policies

When testing the correlation between the demographic characteristics and the perception of work-life balance, correlations were found between the following pairs:

- Gender and day nursery facilities: Females showed more interest than males, $R2$ (414) = 0.162, $p < .001$.

- Gender and sabbaticals: Females showed more interest than males, R^2 (414) = 0.139, $p = 0.005$.

- Age group and sabbaticals: the younger, the more interested, R^2 (414) = 0.196, p < .001 (Table 5).

- Age-group and teleworking: The younger, the more interested, R^2 (414) = 0.127, p = .01.

- Age group and compressed working hours: The younger, the more interested, R^2 (414) = 0.131, p = .007.

Interestingly, social status, educational level, and number of children had no correlation with preferences

4.7.1 The Correlation between the Age Group of the Children and the Convenience of Work-Life Balance Policies to Employees

- **Age group of children and sabbaticals:** A negative correlation was found between the age group of the children of those who stated that they had children and their preference for sabbatical leave.

- **Age group of children and teleworking:** A negative correlation was found between the age group of the children of those who stated that they had children and their preference for teleworking.

In other words, the younger the children were the more convenient these two policies were to the parents. As for the rest of the policies, no significant correlation was found between their convenience to the employees in correlation to the ages of their children.

4. Discussion

4.1 Current Work-Life Balance of Public Sector Employees

In the study, it was evident that more participants were able to fulfil their responsibilities at work than at home, implying that their work-life imbalance could have negatively impacted their personal lives more than their professional lives. This could be alarming since some of these consequences are lower quality of family life on the one hand and on productivity and work performance level on the other. This imbalance between work and life is caused by an increase in job demands and/or a decrease in available job resources. Work-life balance policies should contribute to increasing job resources. One advantage of starting with these policies among other resources and before addressing job demands is that policies are general and require less detailed work to define and apply, while the other resources and job demands are job- and employer-specific.

4.2 The Perception of the Implementation of Work-Life Balance Policies

Participants expressed high convenience rates on the existing work-life balance policies legislated by the CSB. The policy with the highest participant convenience rate was flexible working hours (78%), followed by teleworking (71%), and sabbaticals (53%). This was expected as flexible working hours reduces pressure of arriving on time and finding a parking spot on employees, especially with the issue of morning and after work traffic jams in

Bahrain, something which causes tremendous pressure on employees forced to be at work at a very specific hour and minute. The high convenience rate of teleworking could be attributed to employees' satisfying experience of remote work during the COVID-19 outbreak (Abdulla and Al-Ubaydli, 2020). However, sabbaticals scored a lower convenience rate than the other policies; this is understandable because sabbaticals are normally unpaid leaves in Bahrain, something which can be problematic for most employees. This may conform to other studies on sabbatical leave, most of which focus on the academic and medical field and did not reach definitive conclusions supporting a positive impact of sabbatical leave on work-life balance (Leung et al. 2020); apparently, each institute should address this option individually.

Almost equal numbers of participants found the job-sharing policy convenient, neutral, or inconvenient, with responses divided into almost equal groups. This could mainly be due to the participants' unfamiliarity with the policy since it is not very popular in Bahrain in comparison with other suggested policies. Moreover, the fact that utilizing the policy involves receiving lower pay and less benefits may be the main reason for inconvenience for many employees.

A significant percentage of employees (66%) found day nursey facilities convenient. A female participant commented that she ranked this policy Number 1 because she believed that it would be very impactful although she is not married and does not have children at the time of responding to the questionnaire. This policy should particularly be helpful for mothers who do not have anyone to look after their young children while they are at work, as many of them are forced to either quit their jobs, take sabbaticals, or put their children in daycare centers, which are costly.

4.3 Perception of the Implementation of Work-Life Balance Policies

More than 80% of participants believed that the implementation of work-life balance policies would positively affect their performance. The two policies that were ranked the highest were teleworking and flexible working hours. This could be because these policies have a daily and hence a more direct impact on employees than other policies. However, despite them being legislated by the CSB, neither policy is adopted in all public sector organizations, and therefore many employees do not enjoy their benefits. This could be clearly linked to participants' comments in the open-ended question regarding organizational cultures, where participants expressed the need for change because their organizations either do not adopt the policies or do not encourage utilizing them. These comments are supported by the arguments in literature by Idrovo-Carlier et al. (2012), Lockwood (2003), and Osoian et al. (2009).

Furthermore, regarding organizational cultures, a participant commented that many employees were hesitant about utilizing work-life balance policies because their decision of benefiting from these policies could negatively affect their chances of career progression. This point too is supported by Fapohunda (2014), who stated that adopting policies alone is not enough and that management support is needed to ensure utilization and to reap the work-life balance benefits of these policies.

Participants also commented on the compressed working hours policy and a 4-day workweek

policy. The researchers believe that based on the comments, there could be confusion between the two policies because some participants mentioned the compressed working hours policy but referred to the 4-day workweek applied by the State of Sharjah, UAE. The policies differ in that the 4-day workweek has fewer working hours, while applying the compressed working hours policy would mean increasing the daily number of work hours. Moreover, some participants suggested adopting a policy of reduced working hours, which could somehow be linked to the 4-day workweek policy as both policies have fewer weekly working hours.

Some female participants expressed their need for more flexibility and work-life balance policies to be able to manage the responsibilities of their dual roles. One participant noted that both single and married women need these policies given their important roles in their families. It is worth mentioning that in Bahrain, as well as in other Middle Eastern countries, unmarried women usually stay with their families and do not move out of their homes like in most Western cultures. This is why also single women in Bahrain have responsibilities towards their homes and families and hence need work-life balance policies to balance their roles at work with their roles as women in the society.

4.4 The Correlation between Demographic Information and Perception of Work-Life Balance Policies

Three of the independent variables were related to the perception of life-work policies. The three independent variables were gender, the age group of the participants, and the age-group of the children of the participants. Gender differences particularly were found to affect the perception of two policies: day nursery facilities and sabbaticals. The age group of the participants was correlated to the perception of three policies: sabbaticals, teleworking, and compressed working hours. As for the age group of the children, it was specifically correlated with the perception of two policies: sabbaticals and teleworking. Accordingly, the following three relationships were confirmed:

- a relationship between the gender of employees and their perception of work-life balance policies.

- a relationship between the age group of employees and their perception of work-life balance policies.

- a relationship between the age group of the children of employees and their perception of work-life balance policies.

4.4.1 Gender Correlation with Day Nursery Facilities and Sabbaticals

This study demonstrated a correlation between gender and day nursery facilities, where females were more interested in the policy than males. This result was expected as females are the primary caregivers of children.

Gender was also correlated to sabbaticals, as females were more interested in the policy than males. This was expected because many females may intend to utilize this policy during maternity, especially that the maternity leave in Bahrain is sixty days long only, starting from

the day of birth (Civil Service Bureau, 2022). Females would benefit from sabbaticals when they have young children who need care, or when they relocate for example, when accompanying their husbands in official missions or scholarships abroad (Basu, 2020).

4.4.2 Age Group Correlation with Sabbaticals, Teleworking and Compressed Working Hours

Younger participants were more interested in the sabbaticals policy than older ones. This could be because younger employees are more likely to take sabbaticals for reasons such parenthood, study, travel, or for new experiences. Millennials and younger employees proved to put work-life balance in higher regard than older generations and hence use policies, such as sabbaticals to maintain this balance (Bannon, Ford and Meltzer, 2011).

Younger participants were also more interested in the policy of teleworking than older ones. This is very likely because younger employees are tech-savvy and are more comfortable using technology to accomplish their tasks remotely from the office. Also, since millennials prefer casual and flexible working environments (Bannon, Ford and Meltzer, 2011), teleworking provides this opportunity for work outside formal offices. However, it is worth mentioning that this does not automatically mean that the younger ones would perform better if this policy was approved. A study by Scheibe et al. (2024) found that older workers better navigated the "blurred work-nonwork boundaries" when they worked from home. Thus, to apply this policy, prior training would be useful.

A third policy that was correlated to age group was that of compressed working hours. Younger participants were more interested in the policy than older ones. As discussed earlier, millennials value a balanced life more than the older generation and compressed working hours would provide them with an extra day on the weekend, which means more personal time. Compressed working hours also mean less travelling to and from work and hence less stress related to traffic jams. This policy might also be preferred because it entails energy savings for both the organization and the employee, where organizations reduce their energy usage and employees save transportation fuel costs. This policy, however, should not be rushed into. A systematic literature review of the four-day compressed work hour by Campbell (2023) concluded that although it increased morales and job satisfaction while reduced turnovers, there were issues with productivity and scheduling and with the continuity of the benefits.

3.4.3 Age Group of Children and Preference of Sabbaticals and Teleworking

The younger the children were, the more parents preferred sabbaticals and teleworking. This can be because young children need the physical presence of their parents at home more than older ones, particularly before they enroll in schools.

In summary, there is a need for proactive measures to enhance work-life balance. By addressing the identified challenges through practical recommendations, employers can foster a healthier workplace culture that benefits both employees and the overall performance of the public sector.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Summary

JD-R model (Bakker, 2007) suggests that the imbalance between job demands from individuals and job resources can lead to strain. Work-life balance policies contribute to increasing job resources. This study has explored the perception of the Kingdom of Bahrain's public sector employees of work-life balance policies. Using an online survey on this topic, responses from a total of 415 employees in the public sector in Bahrain were collected. The results of this study suggest that employees positively perceive the current policies adopted by the CSB, such as flexible working hours, teleworking, and sabbaticals convenient. However, some of the participants stressed that these policies were not being applied in their workplaces, and others mentioned that they hesitated in utilizing them due to the lack of managerial support and attitudes towards these policies, as some managers consider employees who utilize these policies not hard workers or uncommitted, something which might be an obstacle to career progression.

Furthermore, the data gathered from participants revealed that certain groups of employees, such as younger employees, females, and parents of young children, were more vulnerable than others and needed more flexibility and support to maintain a work-life balance. It is noteworthy that some participants expressed their disapproval of policies that entail reductions in their salaries (such as job sharing) or an increase in the daily number of working hours (such as compressed working hours). Moreover, some participants suggested decreasing the number of working hours, or adopting a 4-day workweek, which proved its success in the neighboring State of Sharjah, UAE. The younger generation appear to be more concerned about maintaining work-life balance, and the idea of being a successful employee at the cost of health (mental or physical) and the cost of social life is not viewed as a measure of success, particularly to younger age groups. This is a trait of employees to whom the work environment needs to be readjusted to secure the best performance.

Applying these policies should be one major step towards creating a balance between job demands and job resources, something which can create a more supportive work environment that aligns with the evolving needs of their workforce.

4.2 Limitations of the Study

As with any study, this study has a few limitations, mainly the following:

- Due to space and data accessibility limitations, the researchers did not support the quantitative method used with qualitative data. Interviews with officials in charge of policy making could have been conducted to elucidate the reasons for whether the policies were applied.

- Ideally, the policies' implementation should be assessed in correlation to actual performance. This was, however, out of scope for the researchers.

- The sampling method used involves a risk of bias and inability to generalize results. The researchers were obliged to adapt this sampling method because they did not have the sampling frame and did not have access to a database of public sector employees to perform a simple random sampling method. However, to offset this

limitation, the researchers were able to obtain 415 responses to the survey, which exceeds the number of responses needed for data to be statistically valid. Ideally, the same survey should be sent by employers to their staff via formal email channels.

4.3 Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this study and could be implemented in the short to medium term:

- Workshops for policymakers, leaders, and human resource managers should be conducted to explore employees' needs for achieving a better work-life balance. It is essential to achieve a paradigm shift that recognizes the importance of adopting work-life balance policies in the workplace.

- The Civil Service Bureau (CSB) is encouraged to consider enforcing flexible working hours and teleworking in all public sector organizations, including relevant job categories. Furthermore, instead of leaving the decision of policy implementation solely to the top management of public sector organizations, an independent work-life balance support committee could be formed within these organizations to study employee applications and make decisions regarding their utilization of policies. The support committee should include representatives from various employee groups, particularly those more vulnerable to work-life imbalance.

- Policymakers are encouraged to consider the feasibility of implementing a 4-day workweek in the Kingdom of Bahrain, as this policy has proven successful in other countries.

- As a step towards diversity management and inclusion, policymakers should focus on the specific needs of the following employee groups:

  o Millennials and younger employees possess characteristics and attitudes that may conflict with the traditional work environment. However, if properly harnessed, these traits could become valuable assets (Bannon, Ford, and Meltzer, 2011). Implementing policies that support the work-life balance of these employees would make them feel more valued and help organizations retain and benefit from their unique talents.

  o Females, who comprise 53.6% of the labor force in Bahrain, have multiple roles in society and therefore require more work-life balance policies to manage these responsibilities effectively. This should help dismantle the glass ceiling that hinders women's development, promotion, and retention in the workplace, while enhancing the mental and psychological well-being of women who are both employees and caregivers at home.

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