



# Relationship Between Gender Discrimination, Work-Life Balance and Stress among Working Women in Klang Valley

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## Abstract

This study examines the relationship between gender discrimination, work-life balance, and stress among working women in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Analyzing data from 256 respondents, the study found a significant positive correlation between gender discrimination and stress ( $r = .245, p < 0.001$ ) and a strong link between poor work-life balance and stress ( $r = 0.864, p < 0.001$ ). The findings highlight the adverse effects of workplace discrimination and imbalance on mental and physical health. The study emphasizes the need for systemic workplace policies, such as flexible work arrangements and stress management programs, to promote well-being and productivity. Aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it advocates for equitable work environments to support women's mental health and economic participation.

## Keywords

Working women, Gender discrimination, Work-life balance, Stress

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, Malaysia has undergone substantial economic and social transformations, resulting in a significant increase in women's participation in the workforce, which reached 56.5% in 2024 compared to 83.1% for men (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). This heightened engagement has significantly contributed to both societal progress and economic development. The decision of women to work is influenced by a combination of financial, personal, and societal factors, as highlighted in recent studies (Iram et al., 2024). Financial independence remains a primary motivator, particularly in the context of rising living costs and economic uncertainties. Many women pursue careers to provide for their families and enhance their personal security. Furthermore, shifting societal norms and improved access to education have empowered women to seek professional opportunities traditionally dominated by men.

Research indicates that women are increasingly perceiving employment as a pathway to personal fulfillment and independence (Kraja & Berberi, 2023). Despite encountering numerous challenges, many women remain committed to working to secure improved futures for themselves and their families. Additionally, organizations are increasingly acknowledging the benefits of diversity in the workplace and are implementing more inclusive policies and opportunities, which appeal to women seeking career growth and stability. These trends signify a broader global shift in gender roles and workplace dynamics.

However, these advancements have also introduced challenges, particularly heightened stress among working women. The dual demands of professional responsibilities and personal obligations render many women susceptible to mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and burnout. Balancing career aspirations with caregiving and household duties remains a substantial source of strain, as cultural norms continue to assign a disproportionate share of

domestic responsibilities to women. This imbalance frequently compels women to prioritize external obligations over personal well-being, thereby exacerbating stress levels.

A significant contributor to workplace stress in Malaysia is gender discrimination and work-life balance, which persists as a widespread issue (Hoi & Xuan, 2023). Women frequently encounter unequal pay, restricted opportunities for career advancement, and underrepresentation in leadership positions. Implicit biases reinforce stereotypes portraying women as less competent or dedicated, particularly those who are married or have children. These biases influence hiring practices, performance assessments, and task assignments, compelling women to exceed the performance of their male colleagues to achieve recognition.

The emotional impact of discrimination is further intensified by hostile workplace behaviors, including microaggressions and harassment. Concerns about personal safety during commutes or at work amplify this emotional burden. The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles and decision-making processes not only hampers their career progression but also restricts organizational innovation and productivity. Studies highlight that ongoing inequities in workplace treatment significantly contribute to mental health challenges, perpetuating the difficulties encountered by working women (Illias et al., 2024; Jahan, 2024).

Socio-cultural factors in Malaysia further reinforce gender discrimination and contribute to stress (Mazlan, 2024). Patriarchal norms often portray men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, shaping workplace policies and societal attitudes. These norms influence hiring practices and limit women's career growth, especially in male-dominated industries. Traditional expectations regarding modesty and behavior can restrict networking and career advancement opportunities, while inadequate institutional support, such as insufficient childcare services or maternity protections, forces many women to accept lower-tier roles or leave the workforce altogether. However, the lives of working women in contemporary Malaysian society are marked by significant challenges, stemming not only from gender discrimination but also from difficulties in maintaining work-life balance and managing stress. Despite progress in policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, women continue to face workplace barriers that hinder their ability to achieve a balance between professional and personal responsibilities, leading to elevated stress levels (Molarius & Metsini, 2023).

Addressing work-life balance and gender discrimination in workplaces globally is both a moral obligation and an economic necessity. Such discrimination not only results in financial losses but also hinders innovation, thereby limiting the growth potential and competitiveness of organizations and nations (Dipboye, 2016; Ghowrui & Mukherjee, 2024). Consequently, the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations dedicated to sustainable development have identified gender inequality and discrimination as critical and persistent global challenges (George et al., 2016).

Effectively addressing the stress, work-life balance and discrimination experienced by working women necessitates systemic reforms, including fostering inclusive workplace cultures, implementing equitable policies, and offering comprehensive mental health support. Shifting societal norms to support gender equality is also essential for creating an environment where women can thrive professionally and personally. By addressing these challenges, Malaysia can harness the full potential of its female workforce, driving innovation, productivity, and societal advancement. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between gender discrimination, work-life balance and stress among working women in Klang Valley.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Stress

Stress has become a prevalent concept in contemporary society, frequently used to explain a broad spectrum of psychological and medical issues. Its meaning varies across individuals and contexts. In the behavioral sciences, stress is understood as the perception of a threat, leading to anxiety, discomfort, emotional tension, and challenges in adjustment. Sociologists view stress as social disequilibrium, reflecting disruptions in the social structures within which individuals live. Engineers conceptualize stress as an external force that induces strain in materials, while physiologists focus on physical stressors, encompassing a variety of harmful stimulus conditions affecting the body. Despite ongoing ambiguity regarding its precise definition, stress is widely acknowledged as a fundamental issue in human life.

### Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination encompasses any situation in which an individual is denied opportunities or evaluated unfairly solely based on their sex. It involves the practice of granting or withholding rights and privileges based on gender (Abid & Jafree, 2024). This form of discrimination often manifests as unequal benefits or advantages granted to individuals with differing attributes, despite possessing equivalent education and qualifications (Cohn, 2019). Stereotypes perpetuating the belief that women should earn less and that men should be prioritized throughout their careers further reinforce such inequities. Gender discrimination emerged as a significant issue in organizational contexts during the 1980s, though its roots can be traced back to the 1950s. It gained substantial attention as a critical concern in the 1980s and 1990s (Abass et al., 2011). This period is characterized by efforts to highlight and address issues related to gender discrimination, particularly in organizations where authority is predominantly held by men. Hearn and Parkin (2001) emphasized the importance of examining and addressing challenges faced by female employees in male-dominated workplaces. Reporting on such instances of discrimination against women is crucial for identifying strategies to mitigate these inequities and fostering an organizational environment that promotes equal employment opportunities.

## Relationship Between Gender Discrimination and Stress

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between gender discrimination and stress, highlighting the detrimental impact of stress on employees. Stress adversely affects workplace satisfaction, heightens the likelihood of burnout, and contributes to increased absenteeism and a higher risk of health complications (Lambert et al., 2009). Work-related stress represents a significant challenge to the health and well-being of the workforce.

Foremost, Uzma's (2004) research indicates that identity is shaped by societal influences, the environment, and parental attitudes. It is a bidirectional process, encompassing both how individuals are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves. According to Uzma, parental attitudes play a pivotal role in identity formation, with parents often viewing their daughters as weak, timid, and overly vulnerable, necessitating protection by male members of society. This perception limits women's ability to express opinions or protest, marking the initial stage of subjugation and suppression. Uzma also highlights that even educated women often navigate dual identities professional and private. Furthermore, her findings reveal that women's income is frequently regarded as supplementary to that of male family members rather than a primary financial resource. However, these results do not apply to upper-class or progressive families, where women are afforded greater freedom and autonomy.

Using a representative sample of South Korean women in the workforce, Kim et al. (2022) looked at how workplace gender discrimination correlated with the frequency of depressive symptoms. The researchers used the 2018 Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Families to gather data from 3,190 adult female employees. Respondents were asked to rate their level of workplace gender discrimination on a scale from high to low using a six-item questionnaire that examined their perceptions of WGD. Compared to the group with low WGD, those with high levels were more likely to experience depressive symptoms; the odds ratio (OR) was 1.87 (95% CI: 1.45-2.41), compared to the low WGD group.

Numerous psychological effects have been associated with gender discrimination in the workplace, including but not limited to higher stress levels (Hennein et al., 2021), emotional weariness (Trzebiatowski & Triana, 2020), negative psychological effects (Schmitt et al., 2014), decreased life satisfaction (Buchanan, 2002), and worse mental health (Velez et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies have shown a correlation between experiencing gender discrimination and unfavorable physical health outcomes, such as subjective symptoms of illness (Trzebiatowski & Triana, 2020).

The research conducted by Wang et al. (2019) sought to evaluate the learning environment of vascular residents and analyze the effects of gender-based discrimination and bias (GBDB) on their clinical experiences. A survey was developed to assess the experiences of trainees, including demographic information and a two-item burnout score. A total of 284 integrated vascular residents were invited to participate, with 212 (75%) successfully completing the survey. Results indicated that 79% of participants reported encountering a hostile workplace environment, while 30% qualified as high-risk for burnout. More than one-third (38%) of inhabitants indicated having directly experienced GBDB, revealing a notable gender disparity (14% of men vs 80% of women;  $P < .001$ ). Women were more inclined than men to report observing GBDB (76% compared to 56%;  $P = .003$ ). Sequel to the above literature, it is hypothesized that:

**H<sub>1</sub>.** Gender discrimination plays a significant role in stress among stress among working women in Klang Valley, Malaysia.

## Work-Life Balance

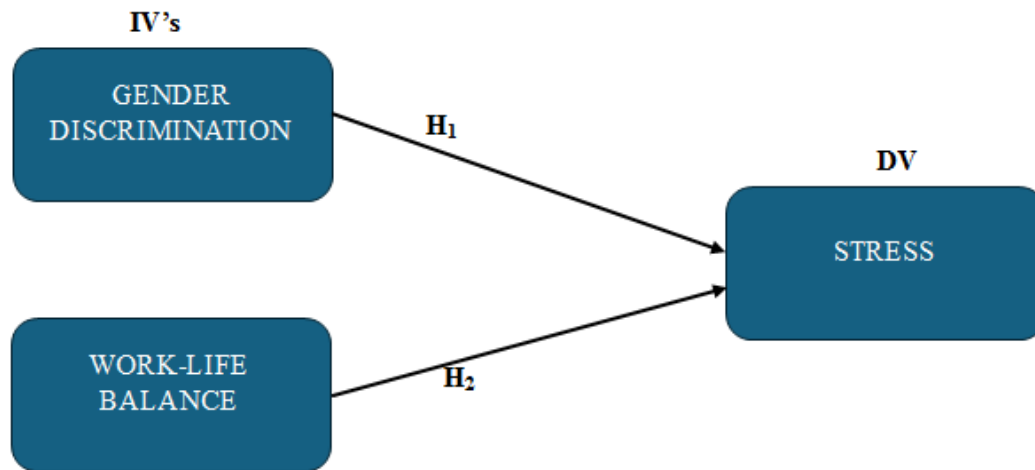
Work-Life Balance emerges as a pivotal mechanism for reducing job-related stress and fostering enhanced job satisfaction among working women. WLB, from an employee perspective, is the maintenance of responsibilities at work and at home. Work-life balance emerged as a significant research area when shifting workplace dynamics, driven by economic uncertainty, led organizations to struggle for survival. It refers to the level of control individuals perceive over the time they dedicate to work versus the time allocated to personal life outside of work. According to Reiter (2007), work-life balance is situational, as the concept is highly subjective. The way individuals achieve a balance between work and personal life varies, depending on their personal perception of satisfaction in both professional and personal aspects. Work-life balance is a top priority for governments and policymakers, as individuals play a crucial role in maintaining a healthy and functioning society. Over the years, growing reliance on information technology has resulted in an increased information overload for the workforce. Employees are often expected to extend their working hours, work on weekends, and always remain available, promptly responding to emails and calls beyond regular working hours. These demands have become significant sources of workplace stress.

## Relationship Between Work-Life Balance and Stress

Work-life balance is strongly connected to stress, influenced by the importance employees assign to maintaining balance in their lives (Ross & Vasantha, 2014). There is increasing concern that longer working hours, coupled with rising pressures and demands, are leaving little room for quality time outside the workplace. Work-life balance requires a collaborative effort from both individuals and organizations, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a fulfilling and well-balanced professional and personal life; research has always demonstrated workplace as the primary source of stress (Naithani, 2010).

A study by Ezzedeen (2004) highlighted that modern work has become increasingly knowledge-based, dynamic, and intellectually demanding, causing overworked individuals to constantly think about work. For many, work has become cognitively intrusive, leading to a preoccupation with job-related matters even outside of working hours. As a

result, employees often struggle to be fully present and meaningfully engaged with family and loved ones in non-work settings. Buddeberg-Fischer et al. (2008) emphasized that achieving a well-balanced integration of professional and personal life is a key priority for the new generation. Additionally, Burgess et al. (2007) highlighted the significance of informal arrangements and managerial discretion in facilitating a balance between work and caregiving responsibilities. Work-related stress arises when individuals feel unable to cope with or control the demands of their work environment. Over time, this can lead to maladaptive behaviors such as smoking and drinking (Stansfield et al., 2000) and can also contribute to physical and mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, nervousness, fatigue, and heart disorders (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002). Building on the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed: **H<sub>2</sub>**. Work life balance plays a significant role in stress among stress among working women in Klang Valley, Malaysia.



**Fig. 1** Conceptual Framework

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research Design

This study employs a quantitative correlational design, which aims to examine the relationships between variables and utilize these relationships for making predictions.

### Sample

The sample of this study consists of 256 working women in Klang Valley. The samples were recruited using convenience sampling. There are 131 respondents from Selangor, representing (51.2%), 84 respondents from Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, representing (32.8%), and 41 respondents from the Federal Territory of Putrajaya that representing (16%). Based on these, working women from Selangor 27 had higher participation in this study compared to Federal Territory in Klang Valley.

### Instruments

The study uses Swim et al., (1995), gender discrimination workplace scale to measure gender discrimination. The instruments consist of 6 items and were measured on a 4-point Likert scale. Fisher (2001) and Hayman (2005) enhanced work-life balance scale was used to measure work-life balance. It contains 24 items and was measured on a 6-point Likert scale. While Cohen et al., (1988) perceived stress scale was used to measure stress level of the participants. It contains 10 items and was also measured on a 4-point Likert scale.

### Data Analysis

The study's data were gathered by questionnaires, followed by data transformation and coding, and subsequently analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The Pearson Moment Correlation test was employed to examine the correlation between gender discrimination and stress among working women in Klang Valley.

## RESULTS

### Sample Characteristics

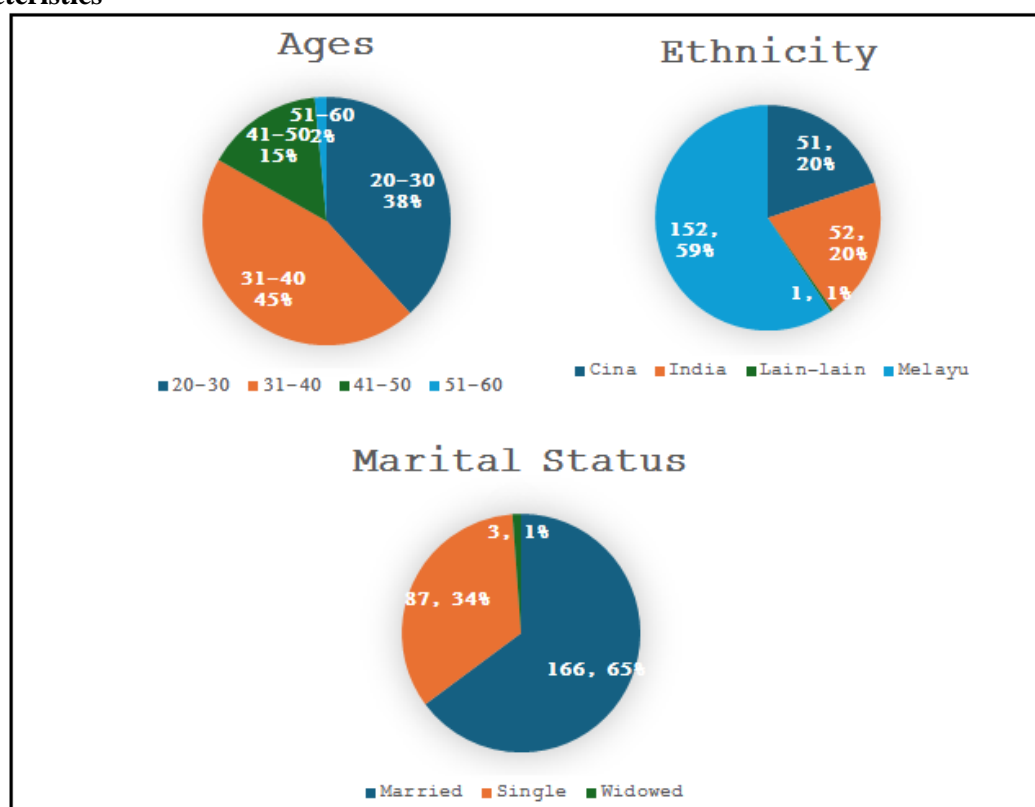


Fig. 2 Respondents' Charts Characteristics

Table 1 Stress \*Gender Discrimination Crosstabulation (n=256)

			Gender Discrimination	
			low	high
Stress	low	Count	22	21
		% within GD	47.8%	10.0%
	high	Count	24	189
		% within GD	52.2%	90.0%
Total		Count	46	210
		% within GD	100.0%	100.0%

The age of respondents ranges from a minimum of 20 years to a maximum of 60 years. 38% (98) of the respondent falls between the ages of 20 - 30 years of age, as much as 45% (115) of the respondent falls between the ages of 31 - 40 years, while 15% (39) of the respondent falls between the ages of 41 - 50 years, and the remaining 2% (4) of the respondent falls between the ages of 51 - 60 years of age. The majority are aged between 31 to 40 years, while the minimum number are aged between 51 to 60 years. While the percentage distribution by the ethnic group indicated that there are 152 Malay respondents, constituting about (59%). 52 Indian respondents, constituting about (20%), while 51 Chinese respondents (20%), and 1 other ethnic from Sabah which is Ubian respondent (1%) participated in this study. the percentage distribution by the marital status that a total of 116 married and 90 single working women respondents were recorded representing (64.8%) and (35.2%), respectively, in the study. 150 respondents work in the private sector, representing (58.6%), while 106 respondents work in the public sector, representing (41.4%).

The data also reveal disparities in perceptions of gender discrimination where 210 (82%) of respondents reported encountering significant gender-based discrimination, including issues like unequal pay and limited promotion opportunities, while 46 (18%) reported minimal discrimination, benefiting from fair treatment and workplace support (see Table 1). This result aligns with Berdahl and Moore (2021), who found that gender discrimination negatively impacts mental health and organizational commitment.

### Relationship between Gender Discrimination, Work-life Balance and Stress

#### Hypothesis Tested

**H<sub>a</sub>.** Gender discrimination and work-life balance plays a significant role in stress among stress among working women in Klang Valley, Malaysia.



**Table 2** Pearson's correlation matrix analysis between gender discrimination, work-life balance, and stress among working women in Klang Valley, Malaysia. (n=256)

		Stress	Gender Discrimination	Work-life Balance
Stress	Pearson Correlation	1	.245**	.864**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	256	256	256
Gender Discrimination	Pearson Correlation	.245**	1	.330**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	256	256	256
Work-life Balance	Pearson Correlation	.864**	.330**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	256	256	256

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

Data collected on gender discrimination and stress using a questionnaire was sorted, computed, and analyzed. The result shows that there a positive correlation between gender discrimination and stress among working women in Klang Valley,  $r = .245$ ;  $p < 0.001$ . The result shows that an increase in gender discrimination was associated with an increase in stress among working women in Klang Valley (Table 2).

Also, the result on work-life balance and stress among working women in Klang Valley, data collated on work-life balance and stress using a questionnaire was sorted, computed and analyzed and the result revealed that there is a positive correlation and significant correlation ( $r = 0.864$ ;  $< 0.001$ ), between work-life balance and stress (see Table 2). Therefore, reject the null hypothesis, that is, a significant relationship does exist between work-life balance and stress among working women in Klang Valley.

## DISCUSSION

This study examines the link between gender discrimination, work-life balance and stress among working women in the Klang Valley, involving 256 respondents from Selangor (51.2%), Kuala Lumpur (32.8%), and Putrajaya (16%). The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between gender discrimination and stress levels, indicating that greater experiences of discrimination are linked to heightened stress. These results align with prior research highlighting the association between gender discrimination and mental health issues among working women. This is in consonance with Kim et al. (2022) whose study found that high level of workplace gender discrimination is significantly associated with depressive symptoms. This is consistent with the research conducted by Hennein et al. (2021), which found that gender discrimination in the workplace is linked to various psychological outcomes in employees, including stress. Additionally, the findings of this study indicate that gender discrimination is associated with physical health outcomes, such as subjective health complaints.

These findings are supported by Smith and Brown (2018), who discovered that a decline in work-life balance is strongly linked to heightened stress levels. Additionally, Lee et al. (2020) identified work-life balance as a key predictor of stress among employees across various sectors. Williams and Taylor (2019) further emphasized that poor work-life balance contributes to increased stress, negatively impacting job satisfaction and performance. Sharma and Kapur (2022) highlighted that the challenge of balancing work and personal life significantly affects the mental health of working women, leading to stress and anxiety. These findings reinforce previous research, demonstrating that working women who struggle to maintain a balance between their personal and professional lives are more likely to experience elevated stress levels.

Stress among Malaysian working women arises from various interconnected professional and personal factors. Systemic changes are essential to alleviate these pressures, including improved workplace policies, support systems for working mothers, and increased awareness of gender equality. With women playing a pivotal role in Malaysia's economic development, fostering an inclusive environment is crucial for their well-being.

## CONCLUSION

This study concluded that gender discrimination at workplace automatically leads to stress, thereby giving rise to other issues such as dissatisfaction. Exploring the interplay of stress and gender discrimination among working women in Klang Valley is critical. The findings do not only guide actionable solutions to enhance workplace productivity and fairness but also advocate for women's health and equality. Addressing these interconnected challenges will enable Malaysia to advance toward a more inclusive and sustainable workforce, driving progress across multiple dimensions of development. The study also concluded that a well-balanced work-life dynamic helps individuals feel more confident in managing both work and personal commitments, reducing anxiety and minimizing the risk of mental and physical exhaustion. Moreover, those who perceive their work-life balance as positive experience a sense of harmony and optimal psychophysical well-being, enabling them to sustain the long-term demands of both roles, therefore, organizations must implement supportive practices and policies to mitigate turnover intentions.

## RECOMMENDATION

Stress in organizations has been rising over the years, affecting performance, yet proper stress management programs are often lacking. Managing stress is crucial for productivity, with individuals responsible for balancing work and life while taking steps to reduce stress. Organizations can support this by offering work-life balance practices and stress management programs. Despite these efforts, stress continues to negatively impact health and work-life balance, making it essential for both employers and employees to collaborate for improved balance and greater productivity.

The findings of this study provide actionable insights for companies to support working women effectively. Understanding the challenges of discrimination and work-life imbalance can inform strategies that promote well-being and productivity. Organizations can adopt inclusive policies, flexible work arrangements, and supportive cultures to mitigate the adverse effects of gender discrimination and work-life conflicts, aligning with the eighth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of decent work and economic growth.

Efforts to tackle gender discrimination in Malaysia include implementing gender quotas in certain sectors and initiatives promoting workplace equality. However, lasting change requires collaboration among employers, policymakers, and society to dismantle entrenched biases and structures perpetuating inequality. By cultivating equitable work environments, Malaysia can unlock the full potential of its workforce, fostering societal and economic prosperity.

Additionally, the research advocates for workplace policies that promote equality, including equal pay, fair promotion opportunities, and anti-discrimination measures. By addressing systemic barriers, stakeholders can create inclusive environments that empower women, contributing to the achievement of the tenth SDG reduced inequalities.

Lastly, the study also underscores the impact of gender discrimination and work-life imbalance on women's physical and psychological well-being. Heightened stress levels, fatigue, and declining health are significant risks. By understanding these challenges, targeted initiatives such as stress management programs, mental health services, and support groups can be developed to support women navigating these difficulties. These efforts align with the third SDG of good health and well-being.

## FUNDING INFORMATION

This study did not receive any specific funding.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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