

Institutions and organisational work-life balance (WLB) policies and practices

Exploring the challenges faced by Nigerian female workers

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the relationship between the institution's organizational work-life-balance (WLB) policies and practices and subsequent challenges faced by Nigerian workers. The paper argues that institutions shape WLB practices (and policies), and thus, constitute WLB challenges.

Design/methodology/approach – Relying on qualitative, interpretive approach, and the institution-based view of organizational practice, the study investigates the relationship between institutions, WLB practices/policies, and subsequent challenges that female workers undergo, using 25 semi-structured interviews.

Findings – The findings reveal Nigeria's unique institutional context frames and foster challenges for female workers. Also, it was identified that institutional and sociocultural pressures on female employees demonstrate that consequent challenges, while common to female workers in other countries, are more intense and challenging in Nigeria because of its peculiar institutions and context.

Research limitations/implications – This study offers an opportunity to unpick how institutions are important in understanding organizational practices as part of wider social structures, which influence organizational realities, including WLB. The qualitative, exploratory approach undertaken can limit generalizing the findings.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the emerging concept of WLB discourse from the developing countries' perspective. It also reveals how WLB discourse differs from nonwestern context and emphasizes previously identified challenges that female workers experience based on WLB practice. The study also sheds light on how institutions shape organizational practice.

Keywords Nigeria, Patriarchy, Institutions, Employee challenges, WLB practices/policies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Balancing work and family responsibilities is crucial for employees' wellbeing, commitment, productivity, sustainable work, and less stress (Voydanoff, 2004). This notion is central to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) globally, in particular, goal 3, which is about good health and wellbeing (KPMG, 2017). It also resonates with "a world with . . . greater survival prospects for mothers and . . . equal opportunities for women . . ." (United Nations, 2006, p. 3). Balancing work and social roles are regarded as work-life balance (WLB). It is a lack of conflict or opposition between work and social roles. Studies have been undertaken to investigate WLB in the west (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007). For instance, Voydanoff (2004) examined the effects of work demands and resources on work-to-family conflict and facilitation in the USA. Comparable studies have been carried out in other parts of western



countries (Voydanoff, 2004). Nevertheless, research on WLB in developing countries like Nigeria is at an embryonic phase (Ituma *et al.* (2011). Ituma and Simpson (2007) further contend that these regions constitute a research gap in relation to WLB and career studies. Therefore, the preoccupation of this study is to respond to wider calls in WLB discourse (Chandra, 2012) to understand and further widen knowledge about WLB for a more nuanced understanding of the country-specific aspect of the phenomenon. This study contributes to the literature by relying on an institution-based approach to explore institutional factors shaping WLB in Nigeria.

The institution-based approach considers various institutional frameworks within which societal and work-related phenomena are shaped (Paauwe and Boselie, 2003), including WLB practices and consequent challenges for female workers in a patriarchal society (Adisa *et al.*, 2016). It is hoped that this approach will “guide the development of career management theory and practice” (Ituma *et al.*, 2011, p. 3638) and WLB conceptualization. With few examples (see Adisa *et al.*, 2016), there is paucity of research on WLB of Nigerian female workers; most of the studies in this area focus on associated psychological outcomes of conflict emanating from work-life imbalance; and no known study, to the best of my knowledge, has taken institution-based approach to WLB in Nigeria. Although Adisa *et al.*'s (2016) work engages WLB concept, it rather relies on the constructs of work–family-conflict (WFC) and spill-over model. Therefore, this paper contrasts with prior literature. First, this study makes a contribution by unpacking the importance of institutions in understanding WLB. Second, it sheds light on how institutional factors shape WLB policies, practices, and challenges. Third, it develops and further broadens approaches to conceptualizing the WLB concept by applying the institution-based approach.

Therefore, the question that this study hopes to answer is:

- (1) What is the relationship between institutions, WLB practices, and challenges for Nigerian female employees?

The institution-based approach is taken here to avoid subjective generalization regarding the concept of WLB in which its meaning is increasingly accepted as socially constructed (Ituma and Simpson, 2011). The study is qualitative and exploratory. Semi-structured interviews with 25 interviewees involving male and female Nigerian employees in two organizations were used.

The rest of the paper is structured as: first, the relevant literature is presented that focuses on understanding WLB, institution-based view of the firm, and institution-based view of WLB practices and policies; second, Nigeria in context is presented; third, research methodology is highlighted; fourth, findings are presented; and finally, conclusions, implications, limitations, and future research.

Understanding WLB

WLB is generally understood as employees' satisfaction and good functioning of various roles between work and nonwork-related domains (Adame *et al.*, 2016; Chandra, 2012). According to Greenhaus *et al.* (2003, p. 513), it is “the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in – and equally satisfied with – his or her work role and family role.” In this paper, WLB is based on the concept that paid work and social life should be less seen as competing priorities than as complementary facets of a full life. This perspective goes beyond the individual factors and takes cognizance of social and contextual issues, including institution-based issues (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007), such as patriarchy (Adisa *et al.*, 2016). Evidence shows that the absence of WLB may jeopardize individual health and wellbeing, as well as impact productivity, commitment, job satisfaction, performance, and employee turnover. Beyond contributing to a person's wellbeing, it is fundamental to a healthy and productive society. Consequently, Felstead *et al.* (2002) have argued that work-family imbalance can

significantly impact an individual's psychological, physiological, and mental state. A number of studies have explored the concept of WLB. For example, [Adisa et al. \(2016\)](#) concluded that long working hours and job exhaustion trigger work-family imbalance and increase stress for employees ([Pasamar and Valle, 2015](#)). This observation is comparable to [Chandra's \(2012\)](#) work. WLB is commonly regarded as a western idea. Nevertheless, currently, this theorization is changing, as women in developing countries like Nigeria are taking up paid jobs given the pressure to contribute to family income and economic independence. Other factors triggering women's economic participation include changes in technology, globalization, and new forms of work. Although women's economic participation is associated with WLB challenges, it is more intense and challenging in developing countries like Nigeria, given the nature of institutions that shape and promote patriarchal values and norms ([Aluko, 2009](#)) that ultimately impact organizational practice.

An institution-based view of the firm

For a long time, organizational culture, actions, and strategies have been adapted to institutional and environmental pressures ([DiMaggio and Powell, 1983](#)). Institutions are both formal and informal mechanisms, which govern and regulate cultural, economic, political, and social exchanges ([Suchman, 1995](#)). They are a set of beliefs, values, instruments, myths, practices, systems, and relationships that help in maintaining relatively stable forms of human or organizational activity, for example, resource distribution, and policymaking. Institutions include the family, government, school, church, legal system, and a business system that govern human actions ([Giddens, 1984](#)). Institutions facilitate creating policies, strategies, and codes of conduct in organizations, including WLB policies that impact organizational practice ([Paauwe and Boselie, 2003](#)). Also, these institutions are closely connected with one another, creating, facilitating, and transmitting (women's) exploitation, inequality, and subjugation from generation to generation ([Kandiyoti, 1988](#)). Consistent with the notion of [North \(1990\)](#), I use the term—institutionalism—to refer to two distinct but related fields of research. The first, which is economics, focuses on formal and informal institutions as direct causes of transaction costs in an economy ([Paauwe and Boselie, 2003](#)). It also considers institutions as “background conditions” for choosing a specific governance structure, for example, markets versus firms, to reduce transaction costs for an organization. The second stream of research is sociological in nature and emphasizes the role of legitimacy, and its focus is to understand the role of institutions in understanding why organizations are similar or “isomorphic” ([DiMaggio and Powell, 1983](#)). From this perspective, the notion of isomorphism is premised on the need to conform to what specific resource providers deem legitimate or appropriate so that an organization can survive in its business environment. Therefore, an organization's response to the requirements deemed appropriate in the environment in which it operates is vital for its survival and success ([Suchman, 1995](#)). Institutions are thus a critical element in organizational success.

The institution-based view of WLB practice and policies

WLB policies and strategies are employed in organizations to advance a better quality of work and life of employees and increase workplace flexibility, as well as reduce the work-life imbalance. WLB practices are consequently those that, deliberately or otherwise, increase the autonomy and flexibility of the worker in negotiating their WLB. WLB policies are premised upon perceived or recorded employee preferences for specific kinds of work arrangements that relate to their time, effort, and presence. However, in today's policy discourse, these policies are frequently taken for granted that WLB practice should be formulated in relation to a win-win situation, where an employee's preferences correspond with his/her employer's aspiration for greater flexibility of working practices, specifically, working time ([Koehler,](#)

2016). For example, in the UK, although “high-performance” management is found to be linked to the formal practice of WLB policies, there is concern about the negative effect of such practices on the WLB of workers. From an institution-based view, organizational policies can thus undermine formal WLB practice, leaving those who take them up marginalized, undervalued, and discriminated against. For example, in Nigeria, which is a developing country, women face serious WLB challenges (Aluko, 2009), which obviously stem from the nature of human resource policies regulating organizational practices. Using exploratory, evolutionary framework focusing on seven countries—India, Japan, South Africa, the United States, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom—Chandra (2012) unpicks how institutions create and foster WLB issues for women. Similarly, Adisa *et al.* (2016) reported that Nigeria’s unique workplace culture derived from its institutional frameworks engenders work-life imbalance for female medical doctors, who do long, exhaustive hours at the hospital and still do a “second shift” at home (Turner, 2017). Sadly, the workplace regulatory environment in Nigeria creates and fosters a huge implementation problem of human resource management (HRM) policies and consequent challenges for female employees.

Consequently, WLB practices and initiatives that do not address organizational practice, which is institutionally framed (Mushfiqur *et al.*, 2018; Paauwe and Boselie, 2003), may also reinforce female exploitation, control, and marginalization (Kandiyoti, 1988) in the workplace, since the adoption of WLB practices is strongly gendered. Thus, institutionalized organizational practices tend to underpin the traditional separation of gender roles that leads to a polarization between the working experiences of men and women. As noted by Chandra (2012), women with dependent children face the challenges of balancing work and social pressures. Such WLB systems are established within and influenced by institutionalized, gendered values, and capitalism’s idea of exploitation and profit maximization. However, Paauwe and Boselie (2003) have argued that organizational behavior, including WLB practices, occurs via social exchanges, which are shaped by institutions. They further stated that context and institutions, for example, patriarchal institutions, in terms of varying statutory regulations, may moderate the relationship between the provision of practices and employees’ perceptions of them and organizational support. Patriarchal institutions entail various intuitions that promote the perpetuation of male dominance and subsequent subjugation of women (Pateman, 1988). Through such institutions, men as a social category, individually and collectively, control and exploit women as a social category, which helps in legitimizing and normalizing unacceptable WLB policies and practice (Pasamar and Valle, 2015; Paauwe and Boselie, 2003). From the institutional perspective, male domination is part of the tenets of patriarchal society, which reduces women to “second sex” status in Nigeria’s patriarchal society (Ituma and Simpson, 2007).

Nigeria in context: female employees and WLB challenges

With over 175 million people, Nigeria is the most populous country on the African continent and the second-largest economy. Given its massive population and natural and human endowments, it is often referred to as “the giant of Africa.” Nonetheless, Nigeria has been subjected to more military governments than civilian, which impacts and continues to impact its political leadership, and subsequently, organizational leadership and practice (Ubeku, 1983). As noted by Otoho (2016) Nigeria’s political climate pervades its economic, organizational, and social systems, which creates high power distance index (PDI) (Hofstede, 1980), unequal power relations (Ahiazu, 1989) and human rights violation at work (Fajana, 2006). It also marginalizes (female) employees’ voice and encourages a master-servant relationship in employment relations, a situation framed and sustained by institutional pressures (Paauwe and Boselie, 2003). In developing countries like Nigeria

with a patriarchal background, institutional pressures make it challenging for working women to take care of the family and be committed to professional life. Given that Nigeria's WLB practices are culturally and institutionally framed, implementation of HRM policies and legislations, which can address women's exploitation and subjugation, is problematic (Ituma and Simpson, 2007). For that reason, the work of Ituma *et al.* (2011) epitomizes a growing stream of researches illustrating developing countries' peculiar institutional environment that frames and fosters challenges for working women. Amongst other factors, Ubeku (1983) has noted that institutionalized ways of behavior, poor regulatory frameworks, and ineffective corporate governance system operative in Nigeria are central to this organizational culture.

According to Otobo (2016), Nigeria's labor laws and regulatory frameworks are poorly regulated. The provisions of the Nigerian Labour Act (1974) deal mainly with blue-collar jobs and are essentially basic with limited government intervention and regulation (Ituma and Simpson, 2007). Poor regulatory and corporate governance frameworks (Otobo, 2016) make the WLB concept and policies pro-male. Daily hours of work and work flexibility, as well as dependent care and related policies, are based on mutual agreement between an employee and his/her employer, which encourages discrimination, human rights abuse, and poor WLB practice (Adisa *et al.*, 2016). This also facilitates subjugation, exploitation, and control of female workers (Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women CEDAW, 2008). Consequently, Nigerian organizations are urged to reinvent their HRM practice and employment relations system to create an enabling environment, which fosters family-friendly policies, including flexible working, alternative work procedures, maternity leave policies/benefits, family care initiatives, and employee assistance programs. This also includes "improving employees' working conditions and asymmetric power relations" (CEDAW, 2008, p. 23) between male and female workers in the workplace.

Research methodology

Three main aspects of the research methodology adopted, including method and data collection, and analysis method, are presented below, starting with a method.

Method

In view of the dearth of research on WLB and the exploratory nature of this study, an inductive procedure was applied (Saunders *et al.*, 2012), as well as a qualitative, interpretive process (Silverman, 2006). The interpretive process helps to represent people's opinions about a phenomenon more accurately, as it takes into account historical and sociocultural situated interpretations of the real world by participants (Patton, 2015). This process can be applied in understanding and interpreting people's perspectives concerning an issue, such as the relationship between institutions and WLB practices/policies. Also, the principles of confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability were applied as proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1985). We identified some gatekeepers for ease of access (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Following this, calls were made to departmental head offices clarifying and detailing research objectives and requesting access. This process was to avoid the issue of access problems commonly associated with developing countries, where there is limited access to potential participants given the topic's sensitive nature.

In confirming *credibility*, we adopted purposive sampling in the selection of interviews. This process allowed the collection of data on "knowledge agents" or information-rich interviewees in key positions of responsibilities. Information-rich interview data are cases from where a researcher can learn sufficiently about issues of importance, and thus, worthy of critical, in-depth inquiry. Specifically, when purposive sampling is carefully carried out, a small sample size is considered enough to meet the research aim (Patton, 2015). Additionally,

we adopted a standard interview process—all interviewees were asked a set of common questions—that elicited answers relevant to research questions. This process permitted us to ask different participants in diverse instances where there appeared to be some inconsistency or for *confirmation* (Saunders *et al.*, 2012), for example, where we needed to clarify the issue of the intensity of work pressure on working mothers. Therefore, the process enabled us to arrive at “information-rich” sampling (Silverman, 2006). Also, *transferability* was achieved by linking interview questions to the extant literature on issues of WLB, institutions, and the like in order to ensure that potential findings were theoretically based. Guba and Lincoln (1985) consider this process as one of the features of transferability. *Dependability* was confirmed by adopting a standard interview brief, thoroughly recording the interviews, painstakingly taking detailed notes, and going back and forth on data and theories to derive themes. This approach not only reinforced transferability, but it also reduced bias considerably.

Data collection procedure

A total of 25 face-to-face semi-structured interviews were undertaken between January and March 2017 in Nigeria, with male and female workers in the banking, ICT, and petroleum industries. In the Nigerian context, these industries are habitually known for organizational practices that impact negatively on employees’ ability to balance work and social pressures (Oruh *et al.*, 2018, p. 1), which are institutionally framed leading to legitimized “managerial capture” of “employment relations in Nigeria.” Specifically, Chiekezie *et al.* (2016) stated that WLB challenges in these industries constitute work-life conflict stemming from too much “workloads,” “weekend work” and “irregular hours” (p. 45) of work. The sample size demonstrates my intention to do justice to the richness of the qualitative data by avoiding the pitfall of needlessly, including a large sample (Patton, 2015). Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 55 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English. Furthermore, to contextualize the research findings and enhance ecological validity (Guba and Lincoln, 1985), interviews were undertaken in the interviewees’ work environment. All interviews were recorded with interviewees’ consent, and no physical harm was caused. Participants were reminded that the process would be anonymized. They were also reminded of the objective of research, which is for academic purposes only (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed word-for-word. For ethics and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to represent the names of organizations and participants (see Table I for detail).

Furthermore, combining views from both male and female respondents was to get the perspectives of male workers, as well as establish triangulation of sources, further enhance confirmation, and avoid bias (Guba and Lincoln, 1985) culminating in what Saunders *et al.* (2012) refer to as “reported consensus,” for validity of findings and conclusion (Patton, 2015). Apart from the above data collection schedules, participants were also asked to raise additional issues pertaining to WLB practice and policies institution-based issues in their organizations.

Data analysis framework

Data analysis was operationalized by adopting Braun and Clark’s (2006) six-phase thematic content analysis framework. The framework enabled a rigorous data analysis process whereby relationships were established between data collected and theories. Coding schemes were arrived at by iteratively and painstakingly going through the data line by line and interview schedule. This process permitted identification of repetitive notions that were eventually drawn together into themes so as to gain a rich understating of the emergent key areas relating to institutional pressures and WLB practices and associated challenges for female workers in Nigeria. This process further materialized into codes (see Table II).

Pseudonyms	Positions	Gender	Years employed
<i>Banking sector</i>			
Interviewee 1	Employee	F	9
Interviewee 2	Employee	F	10
Interviewee 3	Team leader	F	14
Interviewee 4	Employee	F	11
Interviewee 5	Employee	F	9
Interviewee 6	Employee	M	7
Interviewee 7	Employee	F	6
Interviewee 8	Employee	F	7
<i>ICT sector</i>			
Interviewee 9	Employee	F	11
Interviewee 10	Employee	F	9
Interviewee 11	Employee	M	10
Interviewee 12	Employee	F	9
Interviewee 13	Employee	F	8
Interviewee 14	Employee	F	9
Interviewee 15	Team leader	F	15
Interviewee 16	Employee	F	9
<i>Petroleum sector</i>			
Interviewee 17	Employee	F	7
Interviewee 18	Employee	F	10
Interviewee 19	Employee	F	11
Interviewee 20	Employee	M	9
Interviewee 21	Team leader	F	15
Interviewee 22	Employee	F	6
Interviewee 23	Employee	F	7
Interviewee 24	Employee	M	8
Interviewee 25	Employee	F	8

Notes: Key guide: Interviewees in banking (Interviewee 1–Interviewee 8); Interviewees in Information and communications technology (ICT) (Interviewee 09–Interviewee 16); and Interviewees in petroleum (Interviewee 17–Interviewee 25)

Table I.
Interview brief

Key themes	Codes/nodes	Illustrative excerpts
Policies causing stress and work-life imbalance	Inflexibility, work intensity, long hours of work, and inequality	<i>“Nigerian system makes us face a lot of hurdles to balance work and home challenges. The men are immune”</i>
Policies on employee involvement, participation, and engagement	Disengagement, hierarchy, nonparticipation, power differentials, and subjugation	<i>“Women in particular hardly have input in decision-making here”</i>

Table II.
Notions/nodes and main themes with illustrative excerpts

By combining codes, which had similar essential notions, two main themes were identified. Next, findings are presented.

Findings

The findings from the interviews comprise two main themes, including *policies causing stress and work-life imbalance* and *policies on employee involvement, participation, and engagement*. These are analyzed accordingly.

Policies causing stress and work-life imbalance

From our findings, one of the key sources of work-life imbalance and stress is the policy on WLB. Interviewees explained that Nigerian WLB policies do not support female employees, and specifically, working mothers, which exerts pressure in their balancing work and family responsibilities. The following excerpt illustrates this:

“Every now and again, I come home tired and exhausted because of long hours of working and sometimes without break. I still do a second shift by taking care of my young children who need serious support as one of them is having physical disability. Most times I don’t have time to look at their school work” (Interviewee 5).

The above observation is echoed in the following cluster:

“I go through a lot of stress and challenges as a working mother. There are times I’ve got to stay up very late at night taking care of my children and looking at their school work. My husband doesn’t care. He’s the boss of the house . . .”(Interviewee 3).

“This is a challenging situation! I have been working in this organisation for upwards of 7 years, yet, all the complaints I’ve put forward have not been addressed” (Interviewee 7).

“I’m at the breaking point because of the nature of workload I do . . .” (Interviewee 25).

Central to the above observations is that female workers face a real challenge in managing work and family responsibilities (Turner, 2017). In concurring to this, a male respondent noted that “. . . given uneven nature of responsibilities between men and women, policies to deal with pressures from work and family realms should be in place, although we’re all workers” (Interviewee 20). Studies indicate that long working hours are associated with challenging WLB outcomes (Chandra, 2012), which can be institutionally framed (Paauwe and Boselie, 2003). In furthering this argument, Interviewee 14 noted that “Nigerian system makes us face a lot of hurdles to balance work and home challenges. The men are immune.” This position is supported by a male worker (Interviewee 6), who noted that “what happens in the workplace is a reflection of bigger picture in society.” According to Adisa *et al.* (2016), one explanation for this situation is the apparent lack of protection from the Nigerian government on the maximum number of hours employees, in particular, female employees’ work time. For example, in contrast with the United Kingdom, workers are protected by the European Working Time Directive 2003, which protects employees from working long hours. Under this directive, the EU workers have the right to at least four weeks (20 days) of paid holidays per year, rest period of at least 11 hours in any 24 hours; rest breaks; restricted excessive night work; a day off after a week’s work; and provision for a right to work no more than 48 hours per week. Since excessive working time is considered as a key trigger of stress, illness, depression, and noncommitment, the rationale of this directive is to protect workers’ health and safety.

Nonetheless, Nigerian (female) workers have to bear the brunt of weak legislation and regulations about designated break time, and they often exceed the official working hours without extra compensation (Ovuorie, 2013). A male worker in the petroleum sector acknowledged this: “I personally think HR policies here don’t enable our counterparts to cope with life and work pressures” (Interviewee 24). Analogous research by Adisa *et al.* (2016) illustrates the situation of Nigerian workers, who are encumbered by exhaustion, stress, and family pressure, as well as work demands because of long working hours. Interviewee 1 concurs: “In my department there is apparent skewed way of doing things about childcare and family support policy, and this adversely affects our commitment to work and triggers stress.” This view is supported by another participant: “we have weak policies on work life balance support and sometimes they are non-existent. My company seems not to realise the importance for our wellbeing and performance” (Interviewee 10). Thus, women undergo many WLB challenges. Related viewpoint is demonstrated here: “The nature and volume of

work we do as mothers are huge to say the least. It's about time the government looks into the issue" (Interviewee 17). Although advocacy of using legislative means urging organizations to have and implement ethical and flexible WLB policies has increased, specifically in the west, this is not the case in developing countries. Thus, [Chandra \(2012\)](#) argues that there is inadequate availability of WLB initiatives/policies to support employees, due to organizational and cultural practices. This explains why Interviewee 22 pointed out that her organization "hides under the umbrella of weak regulation when it comes to implementing employee-friendly policies."

Another issue raised by a majority of the participants was inflexible working policy, which elicits stress and related phenomena. This situation is illustrated by Interviewee 23: "I sometimes work over 16 hours a day and weekends, which is not easy for me as a mother of three young children. My spouse who works just part-time doesn't get involved in domestic chores and taking care of our boys." Interviewee 4 takes this perspective further: "My case is quite pathetic. I'm the one to drop off the kids to school, pick them up and sometimes work very long hours, . . . and weekends." For Interviewees 2, 9 and 13 their cases have severally led to illness and hospitalization. These findings are consistent with [Malik, Saleem and Ahmad's \(2010\)](#) work that explores how inflexible work structure can lead to a lack of job satisfaction and stress in the Pakistani context. Comparable perspective has been reported by [Mushfiqur et al. \(2018\)](#) in Nigeria. [Adame, Capliure and Miquel \(2016\)](#) have argued that such organizational situations can be triggered by institutional and normative pressures ([Paauwe and Boselie, 2003](#)), which affect WLB policies and practices in the Spanish context. Additionally, Interviewees 8, 15, and 21 concurred with this situation, as with most participants. Additionally, a male worker admitted that "it is difficult for our policies to grant women the needed freedom to balance work and family issues" (Interviewee 11). A team leader (Interviewee 3) and Interviewee 5 shared a similar opinion.

Policies on employee involvement, participation, and engagement

The findings reflect that Nigerian work culture is highly hierarchical and facilitates high power distance ([Aladejebi, 2018; Hofstede, 1980](#)), which potentially encourages a lack of employee voice, as well as lack of involvement, participation, and engagement ([Hirschman, 1970](#)). This perspective is instantiated in the below cluster:

"In this country, it is out of order to ask for a review of work life balance policies that might better our lots as women. Some people have got the sack because of this" (Interviewee 12).

"Women in particular hardly have input in decision-making here . . . Well . . . I think the reason is the society scarcely acknowledges such input in organisations" (Interviewee 16).

In addition, Interviewees 18 and 8 expressed comparable notion. However, Interviewee 10 took this observation further: "I'm personally thinking to leave Nigeria for better life abroad . . . I think the work environment is enabling and supportive." Accordingly, [Gipson-Jones \(2009\)](#) supports this observation, which reveals how a lack of support and participation stress employees to leave. Interviewee 20's observation dovetails with this state of affairs.

In a patriarchal society, participation and voice recognition is difficult to achieve for women ([Kandiyoti, 1988](#)). [Hofstede's \(1980\)](#) work illustrates the dynamics of power distance and women's voice marginalization following patriarchal arrangement that negates participation and engagement. Consistent with this observation, [Aladejebi \(2018\)](#) noted that in the Nigerian context, women pharmacists undergo marginalization and in the wake of traditional practices that subjugate them not to embark on entrepreneurship as it is seen as men's affair. In collectivist societies with a high degree of PDI, an expression of voice in the form of suggestions or opinions by employees regarding work-related issues is considered inappropriate. Silence is widespread as employees' jobs are culturally threatened if they

challenge work policies, including WLB practice and employer–employee engagement (Fajana, 2006). In instantiating this, Interviewee 16 confirmed that her organization “reads the riot act for employees that challenge policies,” including “engagement and employee representation policies” (Interviewee 14). Engagement is an individual’s involvement, participation, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for work. It also entails the intimate involvement with and processes of the work experience. When employees are engaged and their suggestions/opinions sought, they are emotionally connected to their work and collective goals of an organization and cognitively aware and supportive of the direction of such an organization. An Interviewee subscribed to this notion: “when we feel involved in making decisions that concerns us, we’re quite happy to do our best to support our organisation” (Interviewee 23). This process has the potential to lead to “collegial leadership and intrinsic motivation” (Sergiovanni, 2000), which can potentially reduce high power distance and enhance performance, wellbeing, and productivity in the workplace. However, such a work environment is hard to realize in a patriarchal culture like Nigeria, where operative institutional frameworks negate its materialization.

Implications for managers and policymakers

Through the analysis undertaken, it has been established that such “normalized” WLB policies/practices, help in naturalizing oppressive and suppressive workplace practices that celebrate masculinity and control and exploit female workers. Varying but parallel perspectives from both male and female respondents support these findings and conclusions. This study responds to the growing discourse on WLB discourse that advocates employees’ satisfaction and good functioning at work and nonwork-related domains due to limitations posed by policies that shape WLB practices, in particular, in the developing countries’ perspective, which is understudied. Correspondingly, this study further unpicks that institutions are important in understanding organizational practices as part of wider social structures, which influence organizational realities, including WLB. Consequently, there is the need to theorize WLB from the nonwestern perspective by focusing on peculiar contextual factors framing it. Therefore, this study maintains that WLB pressure is arguably a universal phenomenon; however, it is more intense and complex in Nigeria. This illumination can help in explaining how the WLB concept is framed by specific institutionalized rationality rather than universal logic. Policymakers, manager, and multinational enterprises (MNEs) can benefit from this research in the sense that insights gained from this paper can facilitate changing policies and practices for better HRM, as well as degenderized treatment of workers (Mushfiq *et al.*, 2018). This line of thinking will be instrumental in reducing the incidence of WLB pressures for equitable, sustainable organizational practice, and culture (United Nations, 2006). Therefore, the “. . . various areas addressed by the SDGs are not separate entities, but facets of a system which needs changing.” Furthermore, these areas should serve as a “holistic approach towards policymaking . . . Building on existing frameworks, it could make sense to associate the SDG areas with the domains that determine gender [and climate equity] . . . and a work-life balance” (Koehler, 2016, p. 12).

Conclusions, limitations, and future research

This study set out to examine the link between institutions and WLB practices, policies, and challenges in Nigeria for female employees. Two main themes were identified and analyzed, including WLB policies causing stress and work-life imbalance and policies on employee involvement, participation, and engagement. Part of the findings of this research is Nigeria’s institutional arrangement permeates public and private realms, including organizational policies and processes, as they mirror societal fiats and belief systems prevailing in Nigeria.

This situation is facilitated by institutionally sanctioned mode of behavior prompting “normalized” HRM policies and practices, which are apparently rigged in favor of men in a society where patriarchal, institutionalized hegemony holds sway (Sultana, 2011). The study further found that given the nature of Nigeria’s institutions and context, women undergo WLB challenges. It was also found that WLB policies are shaped by Nigeria’s unique institutions and sociocultural realities. Overall, the analysis has helped to shed light on the relationship between institutions and WLB practices and challenges for female employees in Nigeria.

From the preceding argument, the present study departs from similar studies in the area of WLB in Nigeria. This study draws from the institution-based view of WLB practices (and policies), as well as how institutions frame challenges for female workers, which has not been investigated in the Nigerian context. While Mushfiqur *et al.* (2018) have comparable focus, their study basically concentrates on the medical sector in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper epitomizes one of the few empirical studies, which have examined institutionally framed challenges that female workers undergo in a male-dominated society, in particular, in developing countries like Nigeria. It also responds to wider calls to broaden insights on the institution-based view of the firm (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In doing so, this paper has investigated the nexus between WLB practices, institutions, and challenges for female workers. Furthermore, while comparable studies set in Nigeria have investigated WLB and career issues from banking, educational, and medical sectors (see Adisa *et al.*, 2016; Ituma and Simpson, 2007), this paper has enriched scholarship by exploring the experiences of both male and female workers in the banking, ICT, and petroleum sectors.

This study is, nevertheless, potentially limited. As a qualitative approach, generalizing findings in Nigeria and extension in developing countries might be limited. There is the need, therefore, to undertake more research via different theoretical models and approaches to facilitate more insights into the phenomenon of WLB and generalizability. Additionally, further research can investigate case study implications of SDGs and sustainable organizational WLB policies and practices, as well as the sustainability of work culture based on normative, gender-free practices (Koehler, 2016). Further studies could employ quantitative and/or comparative analysis of different sectors.

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