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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED Academics' experiences of work-life balance and work-life conflict in a familialist state: The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

Background

This paper explores how women academics in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) navigate work-life conflict and the main strategies they deploy to balance their work and personal lives. It examines the range of institutional support available to them and assesses their effectiveness in facilitating work-life balance and reducing work-life conflict.

Methods

Drawing on 12 semi-structured interviews with female academics at various career stages from public and private universities across BiH, this study captures personal narratives of managing work and caregiving responsibilities.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed the respondents' personal strategies to find work-life balance while trying to achieve their career goals, alongside the institutional factors acting as either barriers or enablers. Findings highlight the normalization of work-life conflict, often perceived as a 'natural' and 'expected' feature of academic life. The broader socio-political context and informal support networks - particularly collegial and familial–emerged as pivotal in shaping the respondents' experiences and efforts to achieve work-life balance and to reduce work-life conflict.

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

Conclusions

This paper adds to research on BiH and work life balance via its illustration of the multilayered experiences of academic life in BiH. Analysis of the interviews highlights the strategies employed by the respondents and the barriers they encounter, including gaps in institutional support to scaffold academics to achieve work-life balance.

Keywords
Work-life balance; Work-life conflict; Women academics; Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH); Gender equality; Familialism; Thematic analysis.

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

The revised manuscript has undergone substantial restructuring and clarification in response to reviewers' comments.

First, the Introduction was reorganized to align with standard academic conventions. References to the EDIRE project were moved away from the opening paragraph, the study aim was consolidated to avoid repetition, and the overall flow was streamlined to progress from broader contextual and theoretical considerations to the specific research focus.

Second, the literature review was expanded and refined through the integration of recent quantitative evidence from *She Figures 2024*. These data were carefully interpreted and focused exclusively on women academics in higher education, providing structural context on gender representation and severe underfunding in the higher education sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and strengthening the link to work-life balance and work-life conflict.

Third, the Methodology section was strengthened by providing additional detail on the interview process and data analysis. Clarifications were added regarding interview setting, recording, transcription, and anonymization. The description of the thematic analysis was expanded to explain the coding process and how initial codes were iteratively developed into four overarching themes, following Braun and Clarke's approach. Ethical procedures were also clarified by specifying the approval date and confirming consent for the use of verbatim quotations.

Fourth, the Discussion and Conclusions were substantially revised. The discussion now more explicitly contrasts findings with prior literature, particularly on neoliberal academic cultures, gendered care responsibilities, and familialism. A synthesis table was added to improve readability and to summarize key themes, barriers, and implications. The Conclusions section was separated from the Discussion and expanded to include explicit limitations and directions for future research.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

Work-life balance is widely recognized as a key factor in fostering gender equality and well-being in academia. A substantial body of research highlights the increasing intensification of academic work, long working hours, blurred boundaries between professional and private life and the unequal distribution of care responsibilities, all of which contributing to work-life conflict (Bozzon *et al*., 2017; Brough *et al*., 2020; Lendák-Kabók, 2022; Rosa, 2022). These dynamics have been shown to affect career progression, job satisfaction and retention, particularly for women and early career scholars.

Against this backdrop, findings from an EDI survey conducted at the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology revealed that the majority of respondents did not view work-life balance challenges as a major obstacle to their career advancement. This finding stands in sharp contrast to dominant narratives in the literature and raises important questions about how academics understand, experience and negotiate work-life balance and work-life conflict in different institutional and socio-cultural contexts. Such discrepancies point to the need for closer qualitative examination of lived experiences, particularly in under-researched higher education systems.

Responding to this gap, the present study aims to explore how academics in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) experience work-life conflict and how they attempt to balance professional and personal responsibilities. Specifically, it examines the strategies academics employ, the barriers they encounter, and perceived gaps in institutional support. By focusing on lived experiences, the study seeks to contribute to the European literature on work-life balance in academia by offering insights from a context that remains rather invisible in existing research.

There is no universally accepted definition of work-life balance or work-life conflict. Work-life balance has been conceptualized in various ways: as the mere absence of conflict between work and personal life; as the degree of engagement and satisfaction an individual derives from both spheres; or as the successful negotiation and fulfilment of role-related expectations shared between the individual and their partners in work and family spheres (Greenhaus *et al.*, 2003; Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007; O'Driscoll *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, work-life conflict has been broadly defined as a tension between one's professional responsibilities and personal and family life. It includes conflict on how time is spent as well as role conflicts, that is, feeling pulled in competing directions by the multiple roles and duties an individual must fulfil (Jackson & Fransman, 2018; Jacob *et al.*, 2008; Li & Peguero, 2015; Netemeyer *et al.*, 1996). Considering this variety of definitions, in this paper, work-life balance and work-life conflict are understood as social constructs that are deeply ingrained in the organization of academic life. As social constructs, we understand these concepts as subjective and fluid (changing between individuals, contexts, and over time), while also agreeing with Rosa and other authors that how these concepts are both understood and experienced depends on one's gender (Rosa, 2022). In exploring how individuals attempt to balance an academic career with life outside of work in BiH, the study draws from and adds to the literature on both work-life balance and work-life conflict in the Higher Education sector in Europe.

The paper begins by providing brief contextual information on BiH, including a review of family policy instruments and a discussion of familialism. It then proceeds with a review of relevant literature, followed by a detailed account of the research methodology. The subsequent sections present and analyze the findings derived from the interviews, culminating in a summary of key insights and concluding reflections.

Gender, paid labour and care in BiH

BiH may be considered an outlier regarding social policy, not only when compared with other former Yugoslav countries but also in relation to EU member states. In this section, we first examine gendered perceptions of paid labor and care, before turning to family policy instruments in the following section, which are discussed in the context of *familialism.* Our intention is to situate to work and other facets of life in BiH within a broader context that may shape experiences of work-life balance and work-life conflict in this country.

Background

In BiH, formerly part of Yugoslavia, the current political structure consists of the decentralized Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), the centralized Republic of Srpska (RS), and the District of Brcko (DB). After the war ended in the 1990s, state-funded social protection benefits levels declined across all former Yugoslav countries, but the decrease was particularly pronounced in BiH and Croatia, both of which were severely impacted by the war (Puljiz, 2008). The transition from socialism to capitalism, combined with processes of nation and state building, was accompanied by a weak gender equality agenda and limited fiscal capacities. welfare, labor, and economic reforms introduced during the post-war transition period often reinforced gendered socio-economic injustice (Dobrotić, 2022; Kadić Abaz & Hadžić, 2020; Mulalić & Jeleškovic, 2022). In BiH, several legal instruments have been adopted to address women's subordinate roles, such as the Law on Gender Equality (adopted in 2003). However, the implementation of these laws is often regarded as insufficient (Kadić Abaz & Hadžić, 2020).

BiH society is widely characterized as both patriarchal and traditional (Majstorović, 2011). After World War II, women became increasingly equal and emancipated. However, this trajectory shifted after the war in the 1990s, when patriarchal regimes and norms were reasserted. Reform proposals during this period often privileged traditional, gendered forms of labor within both the private and public spheres, signalling a return to the hetero-normativity and patriarchal structures of the pre-socialist era (Dobrotić, 2022; Lai, 2020; Majstorović, 2011; Pavasović Trošt & Slootmaeckers, 2020). Within BiH families, women are typically regarded as the primary caregivers, while men are not expected to play a part in it (Arslanagić-Kalajdžić *et al.*, 2023). As in many countries throughout the world, women engaged in paid employment frequently shoulder the bulk of care and household task, although women in BiH spend more time on care work than their counterparts in the EU overall (Kadić Abaz & Hadžić, 2020; Obradović, 2021). Notably, perceptions of women's domestic role are not confined to men but are also widely shared among women. Between 2015 and 2018, support for egalitarian gender roles declined, reflected in a 24% drop in citizens who believed that men and women should be equal (Obradović, 2021). This trend suggests a broad consensus across genders regarding the traditionally prescribed each is expected to fulfil (Kadić Abaz & Hadžić, 2020).

Familialism

Familialism is a social system in which the family is considered as the primary locus of care and support (Javornik, 2014; Leitner, 2003). It operates both at the policy level and within everyday practices, sustained by a tacit consensus at macro and micro levels that family members are the most appropriate caregivers (Zaviršek & Fischbach, 2023).

Scholars distinguish between three forms of familialism: 1) 'Familialism by default,' where the state assumes that care is provided by the family; 2) 'Prescribed familialism,' in which legislation explicitly encourages family-based care, placing responsibility on relatives to provide and/or finance support; and 3) 'Supported familialism,' which recognizes the family as the main provider of care but introduces policies to assist caregivers, with the aim of promoting women's labor market participation and advancing gender equality (Saraceno, 2016). By contrast, defamilization refers to systems in which the state assumes primary responsibility for care provision (Savinskaya, 2024). Defamilisation strategies include 'supported defamilialisation' through the market, where the state provides cash benefits to enable to purchase care services, and secondly, 'defamilisation through public provision,' where care services are directly provided by the state (Verbakel *et al.*, 2023). Importantly, different forms of familialism and defamilization can coexist within a single welfare system (Verbakel *et al.*, 2023). BiH, alongside other Western Balkan countries, is often regarded as a society in which traditional values prevail, with the family serving as the dominant provider of care for children, older people, and persons with disabilities (Košarac & Kurteš, 2021; Obradović & Jusić, 2021). This reliance on family-based care has "serious consequences for gender equality in the country, as informal or family carers are usually women" (Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020).

Family policy instruments

In BiH, family policy instruments can be grouped into three main categories: 1) child and family benefits, 2) parental leave policies, and 3) early childhood education and care (ECEC) and long-term care (LTC) (Dobrotić, 2019). Child and family benefits are administered at the level of autonomous regions and remain among the least-funded schemes overall, accounting for only 2.5% of total social protection expenditure (Dobrotić & Obradović, 2020).

With respect to parental leave, BiH experienced the sharpest post-1990 erosion of maternity rights among post-socialist Western Balkan countries (Dobrotić, 2019). Decentralization in the late 1990s exacerbated territorial inequalities, with maternity benefits withdrawn in some areas (Dobrotić & Obradović, 2020). Fathers (excluding those in the Brčko District) may access maternity leave after the 42nd or 60th day following childbirth, but only with the mother's consent to transfer the leave, and only if both parents are employed and the mother returns to work while the father is on leave. This mother-centered approach, combined with entrenched traditional gender roles, reinforces gendered divisions of care and employment. For instance, in 2020, 256 women took maternity leave compared to just 11 men (Agency of Statistics Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2022). Efforts to increase fathers' participation began in 2000, largely in connection with EU negotiations and alignment with the EU parental leave directive (Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020).

ECEC provision has also declined since the socialist period, partly due to the destruction of facilities during the 1990s war. In 2019, there were approximately 7,000 fewer ECEC places than in the 1990s, leaving provision inadequate for the preschool population (Dobrotić, 2019). Public ECEC services remain underdeveloped and inaccessible to many children across post-Yugoslav countries, with Slovenia as an exception, having introduced a legal entitlement in 1996. In BiH, by contrast, mandatory ECEC programs are not uniformly regulated across cantons (Dobrotić, 2019). As a result, BiH ranks second to last globally in terms of the proportion of children enrolled in childcare services (Arslanagić-Kalajdžić *et al.*, 2023).

Long-term care (LTC) policies place legal responsibility on families to provide for dependent members, including persons with disabilities and older relatives, while public services remain limited (Obradović, 2021). Government-financed LTC allowances are insufficient, underfunded, and discriminatory. The scarcity of quality services means that families bear the primary burden of care, with institutional placement often becoming a last resort once home-based care is no longer manageable (Obradović & Jusić, 2021). Unsurprisingly, this reliance on family-based provision disproportionately affects women, constraining their participation in paid employment and shaping their labor market experiences.

In sum, coherence across family policy instruments (child and family benefits, parental leave, ECEC, and LTC) is essential for balancing care, employment, and gender equality. Yet such coherence is currently absent in BiH, partly due to fragmented provision across state, regional, and employer levels (Dobrotić, 2022; Moss & Deven, 2020). The lack of an integrated family policy contributes to underdeveloped care services and entrenched regional and occupational inequalities in maternity and other family benefits. As we argue later in this paper, this fragmented context directly shapes how academics in BiH experience and navigate work-life balance and work-life conflict.

Work-life balance and work-life conflict in academic settings

Debates on work-life balance in academia have shifted from a focus on individual choice and investment to structural and organizational determinants (Bozzon *et al.*, 2017). Neoliberal agendas and hegemonic work– centric models in universities significantly impact the work-life balance of academics. Within the neoliberal university, the everyday life of academics is determined by organizational practices and cultural norms modelled on the myth of the total availability of a solitary researcher (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Busso & Rivetti, 2014; Peroni *et al.*, 2015). This ideal is reinforced by precarious employment, competitiveness, high mobility, and expectations of hyper-productivity, all of which affect how academics plan and negotiate their private and professional lives (Rosa, 2022). While both men and women encounter challenges with work-life balance in the context of the neoliberal university, women are more likely than men to experience work-life conflict (O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). Female faculty members often report time- and strain-based conflicts, noting that parenthood and caregiving responsibilities reduce opportunities for research, travel, networking, and daily academic work (Bozzon *et al.*, 2017). Women are also more likely than men to experience frustration and guilt when forced to make difficult decisions, as care provision and family obligations are often perceived as detracting from full professional commitment (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017; Drew & Marshall, 2020). These dynamics reflect gendered organizational structures and entrenched societal gender stereotypes, with many women considering career interruptions or even leaving academia because caregiving responsibilities are still predominantly framed as women's work (Mulalić & Jeleškovic, 2022).

The struggle for women academics to achieve and sustain work-life balance is particularly acute in societies where women are expected to shoulder both paid labor and the entirety of domestic and care duties. BiH exemplifies such a

context (Hartig *et al.*, 2007; Lendák-Kabók, 2022; Pettigrew, 2021). Strategies used by female academics in BiH to achieve work-life balance and reduce work-life conflict include negotiating more equal sharing of caregiving within partnerships and adopting "double" or "split" shifts (alternating between paid employment and unpaid domestic labor) with heavy reliance on husbands and extended family (Mulalić & Jeleškovic, 2022). These micro-level coping mechanisms, however, leave intact the organizational structures that underpin academic work. Many women academics in BiH perceive that their male colleagues advance more easily, given their comparatively limited domestic responsibilities, and report not being taken seriously due to prevailing societal beliefs that a woman's place is in the home (Mulalić & Jeleškovic, 2022). Institutional arrangements and family and social policies are therefore critical to making work-life balance attainable for both men and women, yet significant improvements remain necessary in BiH (Mulalić & Jeleškovic, 2022).

Recent data from She Figures 2024 (European Commission, 2025) provide additional structural context for understanding these dynamics in higher education. At EU level, women represent approximately 48% of doctoral graduates, indicating gender balance at entry into academic careers. In BiH, however, women's representation at doctoral level has been less stable, declining from 42% in 2019 to 39% in 2020. At the same time, women are comparatively well represented among senior academic staff in BiH, and overall gender balance has been achieved at grade A positions, including in fields such as Engineering and Technology, where women account for over one third of senior academic staff. These patterns suggest that women's academic careers in BiH are not primarily constrained by exclusion from senior positions.

Women's academic careers in Bosnia and Herzegovina instead unfold within a higher education system characterized by severe resource limitations. R&I expenditure per researcher in the higher education sector remains among the lowest in Europe, at 35,748 PPS, compared to the EU-27 average of 107,493 PPS (European Commission, 2025). Such low levels of investment constrain universities' capacity to provide institutional support that is critical for mitigating work-life conflict, including reduced teaching loads, research assistance, temporary replacement during parental or caregiving leave, and the development of family-friendly working arrangements. Under these conditions, academic work becomes more intensive and less supported by organizational resources, increasing reliance on individual and familial coping strategies. For women academics -who continue to carry a disproportionate share of unpaid care work- these structural constraints heighten exposure to work-life conflict and undermine the sustainability of academic careers. Taken together, this body of research highlights how women academics in BiH pursue academic careers in a context shaped by demanding organizational cultures, strong gender expectations around care, and under-resourced higher education institutions. Building on these insights the present paper examines the lived experiences of women academics in BiH as they attempt to reconcile academic careers with life outside of work. It also explores their perceptions of the institutional mechanisms required to reduce work-life conflict, facilitate career progression, and advance gender equality. To this end, we identified key discursive frames through analysis of narratives gathered in a series of semi-structured interviews, to which we now turn.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews in October 2023 with 12 female academics from five universities in BiH, located across four cities: Banja Luka (one university), Sarajevo (two universities), Mostar (one university), and Tuzla (one university). Participants represented a range of disciplines and career stages (see Table 1 for respondent details).

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate method, as they enable the research to remain focused while allowing unexpected insights to emerge (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This format also facilitates the exploration of participants' experiences, understandings, and perspectives on specific topics (McGrath *et al.*, 2019). An interview guide was developed following a review of the literature and the formulation of the study's research questions.

Sampling was conducted using purposive snowballing, beginning with the authors' professional networks in Sarajevo, who were asked to identify potential respondents. All interviews were conducted face-to-face at the participants' respective universities, typically in private offices and meeting rooms, lasted between 40 minutes and one hour, and were recorded with participants' consent. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Transcripts were anonymized, with each respondent assigned a code (e.g., R1, R2), which is used throughout the Findings section.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Data were anonymized, and respondents are referenced in the findings using their assigned codes (e.g., R1). Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Technological University Dublin in August 2022 (REIC-21-181) following submission of the research plans.

Table 1. Respondent Information.

Respondent	Care Obligations	Marital Status	Gender	Career Stage
R1	Two young children and a sick mother	Married	F	Senior Teaching Assistant
R2	Two young children	Married	F	Senior Teaching Assistant
R3	Adult child	Married	F	Professor
R4	Two young children one with additional needs	Married	F	Professor
R5	Two older children and elderly parents	Married	F	Senior Teaching Assistant
R6	Yes	Married	F	Professor
R7	None	Single	F	Teaching Assistant
R8	Two young children	Married	F	Professor
R9	None	Single	F	Professor
R10	Two older children and a sick elderly mother	Married	F	Professor
R11	Two young two children	Married	F	Associate Professor
R12	Two young children	Married	F	Associate Professor

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis combined inductive and deductive elements: while the research questions and existing literature on work-life balance and work-life conflict informed the analytic focus, codes and themes were generated primarily from the data. Analysis began with familiarization through repeated reading of the transcripts, followed by open coding to identify meaningful segments related to experiences of work-life balance, conflict, support, expectations, and strategies. Initial codes were then compared across interviews and iteratively grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarity. Through a process of review and refinement, these categories were developed into overarching themes that captured recurring patterns across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The co-author author initiated the process, with the lead author independently reviewing the transcripts while remaining attentive to the research questions. The final themes reflect both the prevalence of patterns in the data and their relevance to the research questions. This process resulted in four overarching themes: socio-political context, support, expectations, and strategies.

Having outlined the methodological approach, we now turn to the key findings.

Findings

Guided by the research questions outlined earlier, our analysis identified four overarching themes: 1) socio-political context, 2) support, 3) expectations, and 4) strategies. While the normalization of overwork, the individualization of coping mechanisms, and reliance on informal support networks emerged as important issues for respondents, these patterns have already been extensively documented in the literature on academic labor, gender, and care. Accordingly, they are acknowledged here only briefly. Of greater significance, and central to this study's contribution, is the interplay between institutional inflexibility and informal familial support, as well as the ways in which academic labor, gender, and familialism intersect in BiH.

The themes and sub-themes derived from the analysis are discussed in detail below. The discussion proceeds in two stages: first, we examine findings that align with previous studies, particularly those related to expectations and strategies; second, we turn to the more nuanced insights generated by this research, focusing on the societal context and forms of support that highlight the distinctive dynamics of BiH.

Expectations and strategies

Although not entirely novel, respondents' narratives revealed that work-life balance and work-life conflict are often perceived as inherent to academic life. Many participants noted that struggles in this regard should be "expected" when pursuing an academic career. For most, these challenges were so normalized that they tended to minimize their significance; some even paused during the interviews to reflect on the concepts themselves, with a few requiring clarification of the term work-life conflict.

Respondents frequently described "choosing" to work in ways that demand evenings and weekends, emphasizing that such commitments are part of academic life and widely understood as necessary for career progression. These accounts echo findings in existing research, which highlight the extent to which difficulties in achieving work-life balance are normalized within academia (Fontinha *et al.*, 2019; Lantsoght, 2025).

In terms of strategies, several respondents reported feelings of guilt about not spending sufficient time with their children (R4) or noted that heavy workloads spilled into the domestic sphere, manifesting in frustration or anger directed at family members (R6). Nonetheless, many dismissed these challenges as manageable with proper organization. Strategies commonly mentioned included ensuring time for family meals and carving out space for leisure activities that provided relief from stress and a sense of personal time outside work.

R3 illustrates this approach:

- My goal is not to work after 5 o' clock in the evening. […] I try to finish everything, and what can be done tomorrow I will not do today. I joke with my husband when he starts to talk about work after 5 o'clock - I say 'No! Now we go out'. We have a walk, a dinner, or something [and] we meet our friends and family. No work after 5 o'clock, if possible […] that is my strategy (R3).

Similarly, R9 emphasized the importance of organization:

- If you organize yourself properly, you're not going to be in disbalance. […] The point is that I plan my work (R9).

Several respondents echoed this sentiment, suggesting that effective self-management makes work-life balance achievable. In sum, participants largely framed work-life balance as an individual responsibility, relying on personal strategies rather than questioning the organizational structures or policy frameworks that shape academic work. This individualization of coping mechanisms underscores the persistence of structural blind spots in addressing work-life conflict.

Socio-political context

Societal context emerged as a thematically significant dimension of the study. Particularly salient is the social policy landscape in BiH, characterized by limited state provision of care, a strong reliance on family-based caregiving, entrenched patriarchal norms, and a complex political environment shaped by the legacy of the 1990s war and the decentralization of the state. The extracts below illustrate how these broader societal conditions shape respondents' experiences of work-life balance and work-life conflict.

Several participants emphasized the importance of political connections in everyday life, ranging from access to childcare to securing employment opportunities. R4, for example, highlighted how political patronage influences academic careers:

- When they have a position, it is a political decision who gets the job, [and] you need to have political connections which I don't have. It's very difficult (R4).

For R4, who works at a private university where flexible arrangements such as remote work or flexible hours are not available, the absence of political connections meant that moving to another institution with more supportive conditions was not a viable option. In this way, the broader political context directly constrained her ability to achieve work-life balance.

Similarly, R1 described how political ties affect access to childcare:

- It's awful, you need connections to get into daycare (R1).

This observation underscores how access to childcare—critical for reducing work-life conflict—is mediated by political networks rather than transparent policy implementation.

Respondents also reflected on the gap between family policies as written and their practical application. R4 described many policies as "non-implemented," while R12 elaborated on the disconnect between rights on paper and their translation into practice:

- [Policies] mostly exist in legal documents, we have this rights-based operation, but most rights are not translated into procedures. Even if they are, they're not clear. They're very complex; you have a million documents, and they're not readily available on a service-based level for a person to use (R12).

When discussing care responsibilities, respondents consistently noted that the prevailing expectation in BiH is for families to provide care for children and elderly relatives. They also observed that institutional services are often oversubscribed and of limited quality. R3's reflection on elder care illustrates the cultural stigma attached to institutional provision:

- In this society, we feel really bad about putting our elderly into the elderly home, because it's kind of frowned on here. Let's say in other societies its normal, for us, it's not. I think it's a good thing because we believe that it's our duty to take care of our parents and our elderly, that's nice. Many families really dedicate themselves to family care (R3).

Taken together, these accounts highlight how the socio-political context in BiH - marked by political patronage, weak policy implementation, and strong familialism - shapes the conditions under which academics attempt to reconcile professional and personal responsibilities.

Support

Support emerged as a significant theme, with three salient sub-themes: institutional support, collegial support, and family support (including childcare and domestic labor). Respondents emphasized the importance of both formal and informal support, while also highlighting the consequences of its absence. A recurring pattern was the reduction of support—or lack thereof—to the individual level, framed as an inevitable aspect of academic life.

Many participants described feeling "lucky" to receive support, whether from colleagues, institutions, or family members. This framing suggests that support is perceived less as a right or entitlement and more as a discretionary favor. The repeated invocation of "luck" functions as a discursive tool that normalizes the absence of institutional structures and shifts responsibility for structural shortcomings onto individuals.

Institutional flexibility, such as the ability to work from home, was repeatedly mentioned as critical. Respondents working in universities that offered flexibility, particularly when combined with collegial support, reported greater capacity to balance professional and caregiving responsibilities. For example, R1 described how institutional flexibility, supportive colleagues, and a husband who shares domestic duties made work-life balance feel achievable, enabling her to meet both professional and caregiving obligations (children and a sick mother). Similarly, R8 noted that flexibility allowed her to "jump in" when unexpected situations arose, such as caring for a sick child.

By contrast, R4 worked in a university where flexibility was unofficial and contingent on personal disclosure. She described feeling uncomfortable when required to justify leaving early for caregiving responsibilities, recounting a dean's dismissive comment:

- Every time I have to leave work early, I have to ask my dean [for permission]. Once she said something like, 'Don't you have a husband?' I didn't say anything, but I wanted to say, 'You know, he makes most of the money. Why are you asking me that? This is a private thing. Then, I have to explain why I have to leave. I don't always feel like sharing that information. If I have to go, I have to go. It's usually a last resort that I have to go. It's difficult. So, I don't do it anymore. (R4).

This extract illustrates how the absence of institutional flexibility not only exacerbates work-life conflict but also undermines employees' sense of being valued. Onsite childcare was also identified as a potential institutional support, though respondents noted its absence. As R1 explained:

- University day-care would help a lot, but that isn't happening, but they do have a plan for that, which would help really a lot. It would be great to have (R1).

Collegial support was consistently described as vital. R1 emphasized the importance of supportive colleagues during periods of intense caregiving responsibilities:

- We have really amazing colleagues who they're very supportive. It has been really chaotic for the last two years, with my mother being sick and with a two-year-old. But it's always okay to call somebody and ask them to fill in for my classes […] I think that's very important. People have been amazing, which is great, because, with my mom, it's not something that has just happened […] it started eight years ago, people were really supportive then as well. I am well aware that we have really nice colleagues, and it helps a lot. (R1).

Family support was also central. Respondents described parents caring for grandchildren, adult children supporting elderly parents, and spouses sharing domestic responsibilities. R8 noted that in BiH, family care is the default solution after maternity leave:

- In Bosnia, the first solution, when you have a child, after maternity leave is if you have healthy parents, that they care for the children when you are at work. (R8).

R9 talks about returning to work after having a baby, thus illustrating how care and family support intersect. Reliance on family support for childcare points towards the prevalence of familialism in BiH and is evident in the quote below:

- My parents help me a lot; actually, a support network was kind of developed especially with my second child as I had to return [to work] after giving birth after only 42 days, because we had quite a low salary (R9).

Spousal support was often framed in terms of "luck," with women describing themselves as "managers" of household responsibilities even when husbands contributed. R10 explained:

- I have to handle the household and take care of my children. Yes, we try to divide the chores equally. But, in my opinion, it's never equal, at least I'm the manager (R10).

R11 echoed this sentiment, noting that while her husband was supportive, she remained responsible for organizing and managing domestic life:

- I was lucky enough to have a good husband […] We definitely help each other. I'm not the only one doing all the housework. But I am organizing and managing (R11).

Similarly, R1 described her husband as "amazing" and an equal parent, while acknowledging that this was unusual in BiH's patriarchal context:

- I have an amazing husband. I really do […] he's really like an equal parent, which to be honest is not really the most common thing in Bosnia. We are kind of a patriarchal society […] it's mostly women's job to take care of the kids, even though she's working and so on. (R1).

Finally, R5 highlighted the importance of parental support in enabling her to balance professional and family responsibilities:

- I need to balance my education, my stressful work, and my family because at the same time I want to be a good mother, to keep my family together […] When my children were smaller, they attended pre-care and post-care until I finished my work. I then arranged everything with my husband. I was also very lucky to have my parents, and they are in good health. They help me a lot, but without them, I couldn't make it at all (R5).

In sum, respondents' reliance on "luck" to describe support from colleagues, institutions, and family members underscores the normalization of inadequate formal support structures. This discursive framing shifts responsibility for work-life balance and conflict onto individuals, obscuring the structural and institutional dimensions of the problem. This issue will be explored further in the Discussion section.

To enhance readability and provide a structured overview of the findings, Table 2 below synthesizes the four overarching themes identified in the analysis (socio-political context, support, expectations, and strategies) highlighting key issues, lived experiences, and potential institutional and policy responses.

Table 2. Summary of key analytical themes, experiences and implications.

Analytical theme	Key issues identified	How experienced by respondents	Practical implications/ potential solutions
Socio-political context	Weak welfare provision; political patronage; entrenched familialism and patriarchy	Access to childcare and employment mediated by political connections; family-based care normalized; policies poorly implemented	Strengthen policy implementation; expand public childcare and eldercare services
Support – institutional	Lack of formal flexibility; absence of childcare provision	Flexibility dependent on individual negotiations; discomfort disclosing caregiving needs	Introduce formal flexible work policies; develop on-site or subsidized childcare
Support – collegial and family	Reliance on informal networks; support framed as luck	Colleagues cover classes informally; family provides care; women remain household managers	Recognize informal care burdens; promote shared caregiving norms
Expectations	Normalization of overwork; work-life conflict seen as inherent	Evening/weekend work accepted; struggles minimized	Challenge cultures of overwork; clarify workload expectations
Strategies	Individualization of coping; emphasis on self-management	Time management, boundary-setting; guilt over family time	Shift focus from individual coping to institutional solutions

Discussion

The analysis of the interviews illustrates the multilayered experiences of academics in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) revealing how work-life balance and work-life conflict are understood and negotiated within a specific socio-cultural context. Respondents' accounts highlight the strategies they employ, and the barriers they face—particularly the absence of institutional support structures that could scaffold academics in achieving balance. These experiences must be understood at the intersection of academic organizational cultures and broader societal conditions shaped by post-socialist transition, weak welfare provision and entrenched gender norms.

A salient finding was the widespread expectation that work-life conflict, or at the very least ongoing struggles with balance, is an inherent feature of academic life. Many respondents described working late into the evening and on weekends as congruent with the demands of academia. Similar patterns have been documented across higher education systems, where overwork and constant availability are normalized and valorized as markers of academic excellence (Peroni *et al.*, 2015; Rosa, 2022). In BiH, however, this normalization is reinforced not only by organizational expectations but also by societal conditions that limit alternative arrangements and support mechanisms.

Respondents' strategies for managing work-life balance must be understood within the concept of familialism, which positions the family as the primary locus of care and support (Leitner, 2003; Saraceno, 2016). Many women described working a "double" or "split" shift—combining paid labor with unpaid domestic responsibilities. While such strategies have also been observed among women academics elsewhere (Bozzon *et al*., 2017) they are particularly pronounced in BiH where family-based care is normalized and institutional provision remains limited (Kadić Abaz & Hadžić, 2020; Košarac & Kurteš, 2021; Obradović & Jusić, 2021). As a result, women's capacity to sustain academic careers is closely tied to their access to informal family support.

Work-life balance and work-life conflict were frequently framed as matters of individual responsibility. Respondents emphasized personal strategies such as time management, organization, or sacrifice of leisure as primary means of coping. This framing echoes research showing how neoliberal academic cultures recast structural constraints as individual choices or competencies (Bozzon *et al*., 2017; Brough *et al*., 2020). Several respondents noted that if one is unwilling to work long hours, sacrifice free time, and prioritize career over personal life, academia may not be a suitable path, reinforcing exclusionary norms that disadvantage those with substantial care responsibilities.

This individualization of responsibility is further reinforced through the discursive framing of support as a matter of "luck." Respondents described support from family, colleagues, or institutions as a matter of fortune rather than entitlement. This discursive framing conceals the structural absence of institutional and state support and aligns with familialist systems characterized as "familialism by default" in which care responsibilities are implicitly assigned to

families without adequate public provision (Saraceno, 2016). In this context, the burden of managing work-life conflict is displaced from institutions and policy frameworks unto individual women.

Barriers to achieving work-balance are deeply embedded in BiH's patriarchal and traditional social fabric. Respondents pointed to the dominance of family-based care, limited childcare provision, and a decentralized political system that complicates policy implementation. These findings resonate with earlier research showing that, despite existence of formal gender equality legislation, implementation in BiH remains weak (Kadić Abaz & Hadžić, 2020). Unlike contexts where flexibility policies exist but are unevenly applied, respondents in this study frequently described a near-total absence of institutional mechanisms to support work-life balance, including onsite chidcare and formal flexible working arrangements. Experiences of denied flexibility illustrate how institutional cultures can exacerbate conflict and undermine employees' sense of value.

While familialism structures expectations of care at a societal level, is effects are most visitble in the everyday reliance on informal support networks. Informal support - whether from colleagues, spouses, or extended family - was described as crucial. Yet even when husbands were supportive, many women positioned themselves as "managers" of the household, responsible for organizing and overseeing domestic life. This reflects persistent gendered norms around care and household responsibilities in BiH society (Arslanagić-Kalajdžić *et al*., 2023; Obradović, 2021) and highlights how institutional gaps are compensated through unpaid labour.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate the extent to which expectations of overwork and imbalance have been internalized as natural and unavoidable aspects of academic life. While similar processes of internalization have been identified in studies of academic identity formation under neoliberal conditions (Rosa, 2022), in BiH these dynamics are intensified by weak institutional support, entrenched gender norms, and familialist welfare arrangements. The result is a context in which work-life conflict is simultaneously normalized and individualized, limiting the visibility of its structural and institutional determinants.

Conclusions

This study examined how women academics in Bosnia and Herzegovina experience and negotiate work-life balance and work-life conflict within a higher education system shaped by weak institutional support, entrenched gender norms, and familialist welfare arrangements. Drawing on qualitative interviews, the findings demonstrate that work-life conflict is widely normalized as an inherent feature of academic life and that responsibility for managing balance is largely individualized. Academics rely heavily on personal coping strategies and informal family support, while institutional mechanisms to support work-life balance remain limited or absent.

By situating these experiences within the broader socio-political and welfare context of BiH, the study contributes to the literature on academic work and gender by showing how neoliberal academic norms intersect with familialism and patriarchy. While the normalization of overwork and the individualization of work-life balance reflect patterns observed in other higher education systems, this study highlights how these dynamics are intensified in contexts where state provision of care is weak and where family-based care is both expected and culturally reinforced. In doing so, the paper extends existing research by foregrounding how welfare regimes and gender norms shape the lived experience of academic work.

The findings underscore the need to move beyond individualized framings of work-life balance and toward institutional and policy-level responses. Universities have a critical role to play in challenging cultures of overwork and in developing concrete support measures, such as flexible working arrangements, transparent workload allocation, and access to childcare. At the policy level, strengthening care infrastructures and improving the implementation of gender equality legislation are essential steps toward reducing work-life conflict and supporting women's academic careers.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is small and limited to women academics, which restricts the generalizability of the findings and precludes direct comparison with men's experiences. Second, participants were drawn from a limited number of institutions, and experiences may vary across disciplines, institutional types, and governance arrangements. Third, the study relies on self-reported accounts, which may be shaped by retrospective interpretation and social desirability.

Future research could address these limitations by including male academics and by adopting comparative designs across institutions, countries in the Western Balkans, and European Union member states. Longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches would be particularly valuable in examining how work-life balance and work-life conflict evolve over the

academic life course and in response to institutional or policy change. Further research could also explore how different models of care provision and defamilization strategies influence academic careers and gender equality outcomes in higher education.

Ethics and consent

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Technological University Dublin in August 2022 (approval number: REIC-21-181). Written informed consent was obtained from all research participants prior to data collection. This included consent for the use and publication of anonymised verbatim quotations.

Data availability

The data underlying this article are available in Zenodo at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17643044 under the CC-BY 4.0 (Clavero & Delaney, 2025). The dataset includes anonymised and de-identified transcripts of interviews conducted for gathering data for the study.

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✔ **Paweł Larionow**
University College of Professional Education, Wrocław, Poland

For Authors: The manuscript has been improved according to my recommendations. Thank you for these revisions.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: psychometrics, psychological assessment, health psychology

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 13 January 2026

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✔ **Rachel Palmen**
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain

This paper provides an interesting overview of Academics' experiences of work-life balance and work-life confilct in Bosnia & Herzegovina. The paper could be improved with the following minor

revisions.
1) Include the key data that is available on gender (in)equalities in Bosnia & Herzegovina from the latest She Figures 2025. This could be a quick overview of the main findings (specifics of Bosnia & Herzegovina) and a quick overview of B&H in a comparative context.
2) I don't understand the sentence "benefit levels declined across all former Yugoslav countries" - does this mean state funded benefits? This needs to be explained better.
3) In the discussion on familialism - it might be interesting to locate this discussion within the gender regime literature.
4) There could be a bit more detail about the coding process and how the main thematic areas were generated.
5) I don't think the title "Societal context" sufficiently encompasses the three main concepts that this area deals with. Maybe Socio-Political Context is better.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Gender equality in research and innovation from a comparative European perspective.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 06 January 2026

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Paweł Larionow
University College of Professional Education, Wrocław, Poland

Please find the comments:

Abstract
Please indicate that females the sample comprises females.

Introduction
Starting the introduction with mentioning a specific project is uncommon.
The 2nd paragraph in the introduction should be moved below to the lat part of the introduction.
Overall, please restructure the parts before Methodology. For instance, the aim of the study was duplicated in different places of the introduction. Please see academic guidelines of how to structure a scientific paper.

Methodology
Please specify when the study was conducted.
Please specify the date and number of the ethical approval as well as the name of the committee.
The age of respondents was not indicated.
Please indicate how interviews were conducted (in what form, where, how recording was done).

Results
In my view, results are concise and clear.

Discussion and conclusions
In the discussion, there are only 1 reference. Please clearly contrast your findings with prior literature.

Please present separate conclusions.

Please create a table with main topics and provide issues, practical implications or potential solutions. Using a table, please synthesize the information about experiences of work-life balance and work-life conflict. This will definitely improve the readability of this paper.

Limitations and future directions should be provided.

Ethics
The data of approval should be provided.

Consent to publish verbatim statements of the respondents should be provided.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: psychometrics, psychological assessment, health psychology

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.