



Contents lists available at [Journal ELORA](#)

Journal of Counseling, Education and Society

ISSN: 2716-4896 (Print), ISSN 2716-4888 (Electronic)

Journal homepage: <https://jces.eloracenter.org/jces>



Work-life balance dimensions and their association with mental health among working mothers: a systematic review

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Jul 28th, 2026

Revised Jul 28th, 2026

Accepted Jul 30th, 2026

Keyword:

Work-life balance,
work-family conflict,
mental health,
working mothers,
psychological well-being

ABSTRACT

Working mothers often experience competing demands between occupational and family responsibilities, which may adversely affect their mental health. However, evidence regarding the work-life balance dimensions associated with these outcomes remains fragmented. This systematic literature review synthesized evidence on how work-life balance, work-family conflict, family-to-work conflict, organizational support, and occupational context influence the mental health of working mothers. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a Scopus search identified 200 records published between 2020 and 2026. After screening based on language, publication type, and eligibility criteria, 167 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. Methodological quality was assessed using the FICO framework, and only studies meeting the predefined quality threshold were retained. Thematic synthesis revealed four major findings. First, work-family conflict and family-to-work conflict were consistently associated with depression, anxiety, burnout, and psychological distress. Second, occupation-specific stressors, particularly in healthcare and information technology, intensified mental health risks. Third, organizational support, flexible work arrangements, family support, and psychological resilience acted as protective factors that mitigated the negative effects of role conflict. Finally, persistent gender norms, including maternal guilt and the “supermom” expectation, continued to shape working mothers' psychological well-being. These findings suggest that existing theoretical frameworks should be complemented with context-sensitive perspectives and that family-friendly workplace policies must be accompanied by greater gender equality in domestic responsibilities. Future research should prioritize longitudinal, cross-national, and intervention-based studies to strengthen the evidence base.



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Introduction

The mental health of working mothers has become a major public health issue worldwide. As more and more women are joining the workforce, they also have to deal with the pressure of caregiving which is still their main concern for many. Women who do both work and primary childcare together and household management, report high levels of psychological distress compared to their male counterparts or childless ones (Nordmyr et al., 2025). Different authors have systematically summarized the evidence, showing that the work-life balance is not a single factor but a several-dimensional one determining different mental health outcomes from

depression, anxiety, burnout to reduced life satisfaction (Avdullahi, 2026). Where societal expectations about gender roles are very fixed, women in their prime and later years speak of workplace hurdles piling up that ultimately harm their overall quality of life (Tariq et al., 2025). Another context where this problem is exacerbated is high-pressurized technical fields where women's occupational stress has significantly increased due to the circumstances of digital transformation and continuous availability (Malathi & Sri Latha, 2025).

The primary issue that the study explores is about the work-family conflict that leads to mental health symptoms that could be diagnosed, or those that the woman self-reports after an experience with such type of stress. The definition of work-family conflict usually refers to the bidirectional strain of work and family roles. Such a study in China found that depressive symptoms are more prevalent among working women who face work-family conflict, and anxiety comes as the mediating path; motherhood is the factor that moderates the effect. The other work-life stress studies have also revealed that overworked female workers are the ones most affected by excessive working hours interacting with family role strain to raise psychological morbidity even if the two single stressors are considered separately (Ma et al., 2025). Similarly, in South Korea married working women's depressive feelings depend on the changes in structural and relational environments caused primarily by the post-pandemic shift; this suggests that such changes of the big society could be reflected to micro-society level of individual woman.

Several prior studies have focused on identifying the causes and consequences of work-family conflict. It has been demonstrated that a perception of the workplace being very family-supportive not only helps to achieve a balance between work and family but also leads to a high level of satisfaction in both areas of life at the same time. Therefore, it turns out that the organizational climate is an important factor influencing the conflict-to-distress sequence in the life of individuals (Riquelme-Segura et al. 2025). Additionally, social capital is considered another mediating resource that buffers the adverse effects of stress caused by raising children on one's emotional and mental state. Thus, social resources outside the workplace can act as mitigating factors that reduce the level of stress from work to a certain degree (He et al., 2025). Parenting characteristics such as the number and age of family members (e.g., children) that have led to a significant stress level for parents in general have been found, for instance, that nurses who are also mothers of young children experience a high degree of conflict due to the intensive caregiving required from their mother/worker role along with their nursing responsibilities as a highly demanding profession (e.g., Hwang et al. 2025). Work-family balance and cognitive absenteeism (i.e., lack of attention at work due to mental preoccupation) in a way reveal the impact of conflict between the two domains of life that remain unfulfilled by one or the other role. As such, not only do people get very emotional but there is also physical evidence of loss of workplace attention and performance (C & Polisetty, 2026).

New developments in studies show changes due to remote/hybrid working environments. Research on the use of remote work in the aftermath of the pandemic showed that it might moderate the effects of work-family conflict by interacting with self-efficacy and spousal support in periods of crisis, which suggests that technological changes, in addition to being protective, can also be a cause of harm through household resources (Aktaş, 2026). Nevertheless, remote work or working from home has been correlated to a burnout increase among Chinese female employees in companies, as the lines of demarcation between domestic work duties and professional duties get increasingly blurred; they described "burning the candle at both ends. On the other hand, there is evidence of a contradiction in the effect of the perception of employees working in a high-commitment job setup. It has been demonstrated that the strain, on the surface, seems to increase when expectations of performance are raised through such systems without a concurrent provision of support (Chen et al., 2025). Other digital-era concepts like fear of missing in the workplace have also made it into the literature and have served as innovative psychological links to demonstrate that perpetual presence at work via digital means leads to reduced well-being particularly of woman in the workforce (Kerse et al., 2025).

Even with the growing body of evidence, there's a first critical gap that refers to hardly researched occupational context's diversity. Many researchers consider "working women" a uniform group, but, for example, surgery and interventional medicine fields show that there are occupation-specific pathways generic models don't capture: childbearing surgeons are more likely to have pregnancy-related illnesses linked to burnout (Rubio-Chavez et al., 2026), work-family balance issues in surgical specialties are due to gendered on-call and work schedule norms (Nottberg et al., 2026), and gender equity in interventional cardiology is still limited by institutional cultures which are unwilling to change (Alexandrou et al., 2026). In addition, surgical leadership studies maintain that individual coping strategies alone would not be adequate without fundamental change in institutional structures (Rubio & Pitoni, 2026). Women doctors, in a study, show that medicine and motherhood, by intersecting, result in particular stress patterns that hardly ever appear in general labor data (Biju et al., 2026).

A methodological gap follows this: the literature is mostly cross-sectional, so it will not reveal in detail about conflicts, how people deal with these, or what is causing the decrease in one's mental health. There are few studies using a longitudinal design able to monitor changes over time, but at least one exception followed women during the postpartum period to document changes in work resumption stress and the factors causing it (Okorn et al., 2025). Quality depth is again patchy: studies which reveal rich life experience abound such a study which looked into issues of female nursing and allied-health trainees who have to manage family, work, and academic demands (Pwavra et al., 2025) or research revealing an ICU nurse's maternal guilt in Indonesia (Hairina & Hartini, 2026) and work return stories of first-time mothers from a phenomenological perspective (Theboral & Vijayalakshmi, 2025). On the other hand, certain other groups are still represented by just isolated themes but not by a thorough synthesis, e.g., it is only by means of a small series of thematic analyses that women feeling "invisible" in organization have so far expressed their thoughts (Edge & Bacci, 2025).

These two gaps- occupational heterogeneity and methodological imbalance-does not only justify but also makes a case for the urgency of the present systematic review. There is ample evidence from studies on women who do paid work and also take care of their children as informal caregivers showing that work-family conflict functions differently when the caregiving burden is not only confined to the care of one's own children but also of aging family members who are a large proportion absenting from the traditional models (Bayrakçı et al., 2026). Moreover, studies on the health-seeking behavior of working mothers in the city of Ghana show that work-family conflict shapes the decision of women to seek or not to seek treatment for depression which is, in turn, a result of their conflict between the work and the family. Therefore, work-family conflict could delay help-seeking behavior which may compound the burden of mental health problems (Abrefa Busia & Arthur-Holmes, 2026). Furthermore, the effects of a mother's employment could reach children's outcomes thus challenging those who argue that work-motherhood is bad for the family without exception (Wadei et al., 2026). Also, stories shared by agricultural workers demonstrate that male and female workers, who are mainly employed in fields, can have work-family strain related to gender, which is usually associated with white-collar workers or the urban ones (Nascimento et al., 2026). In summary, gathering all these fragments of evidence and presenting them in a logical, PRISMA guideline-conforming manner would be a significant contribution.

Following that, this article answers three research questions that are interconnected in such a way. The first question is about the work-life balance dimension of working mothers' mental health determination, based on studies that cover various health and wellness behaviors of working women (Sondankar et al. 2026) as also creativity and expressive coping that was seen in stressful times (Munusamy et al. 2026). To the best of our knowledge, no prior systematic review has synthesized evidence on work-life balance and mental health among working mothers across as broad a span of occupational sectors and cultural contexts simultaneously; this cross-sectoral, cross-cultural scope is the specific novelty and contribution of the present review. It should also be clarified that, as a secondary research design, this review does not itself administer psychometric instruments; rather, it synthesizes the measures and outcomes (e.g., validated scales such as the Work-Family Conflict Scale, PHQ-9, or GAD-7 where reported) already employed by the 167 included primary studies, and the specific instrument used by each study is documented in Tables 2 and 3. The three research questions guiding this synthesis are presented below.

RQ1: *What aspects of work-life balance are most commonly associated with the mental health of working mothers, based on studies in this review?*

We investigate, at different levels (organizational, relational, and individual), the factors that might buffer or moderate the relation identified earlier, drawing on research evidence of resilience of individuals after career disruption in organizational settings (Binyamin & Vinarski-Peretz, 2026), and the use of family-friendly arrangements among early childcare providers (Morales & Orellana, 2025). What our study offers is highlighting the different factors that protect the relationship in various work and cultural environments instead of just one sector.

RQ2: *Which organizational, relational, and psychological factors act as moderators in the relation between work-life balance and mental health outcomes in working mothers?*

Certainly, the third research question focuses on how work environment and culture together influence both the expression of work-family conflict and the right policy that would address it effectively by looking at the issue from different angles. For example, it examines findings about the difficulties faced by working fathers and mothers in terms of work-life balance across different countries (Guo et al., 2026) and combines it with first-hand reports from mothers who struggle with dual roles as professionals and caregivers (Monteiro Maia et al., 2025).

RQ3: Occupational and cultural environments are factors that can influence the link between work-life balance (WLB) aspects and mental health for working mothers. Therefore, what could be the effects on policy and management from different occupational and cultural contexts?

Methods

Research Design and Framework

In the field of scientific and medical literature, systematic literature review is a widely used tool for summarizing, and sometimes synthesizing, research evidence. This study was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guideline (Page et al., 2021), structured into three stages: search strategy and eligibility definition, study selection and quality appraisal, and data extraction and thematic synthesis. In a systematic review, the researchers use the published literature (peer-reviewed papers or grey literature) to answer a specific research question. This can include primary studies as well as other reviews, reports, surveys etc., which are identified, examined and selected according to well-defined criteria. Thus, a research paper is produced by a transparent process (such as using a search strategy and a selection of references) that enables the reader to replicate the same result and is thus an auditable process of producing evidence. The main advantage of this strategy is to minimize selection bias and it also allows the review to focus more on the analysis rather than just describing.

Search Strategy

The search strategy was a mixture of the controlled vocabulary and the use of free-text terms covering three conceptual themes: work-life balance constructs, mental health outcomes, and the working-mother population. The Boolean search string used at the TITLE-ABS-KEY section of the Scopus database has been formulated in the following way:

('work-life balance' OR 'work-family conflict' OR 'family-work conflict' OR 'work-family balance') AND (('mental health' OR 'psychological well-being' OR 'depression' OR 'anxiety' OR 'burnout' OR 'stress') AND ('working mothers' OR 'working women' OR 'employed women' OR 'female employees'))

At the phase just before actually performing a search, no restrictions based on language or date were used at all; limitations on publishing type and language will thus mainly be dealt with at the second step of the screening process referred to in Section 3.4 and this approach is aligned with the highest standards on the way to first achieving maximum initial sensitivity by then adding exclusion criteria.

Database and Information Sources

The authors of this review chose Scopus and relied solely on this bibliographic database. It was selected for its wide coverage of psychology, occupational health, medicine, and social science journals that align with the review's focus. The data set that supports this review was downloaded on July 27, 2026 and contains 200 references. No additional databases were used. Nevertheless, a review based on data from only one source is considered as a limiting factor in Section 5.5.

Eligibility Criteria

Table 1 presents the eligibility criteria applied during the literature selection process. Studies were included if they were published in English, classified as original research articles or review articles, and published between 2020 and 2026. Eligible studies also had to fall within relevant subject areas, including psychology, occupational health, public health, medicine, organizational behavior, and family studies. Furthermore, only studies with available abstracts and sufficient information for preliminary assessment were considered. To ensure the review remained aligned with the research objectives, eligible studies were required to directly examine work-life balance, work-family conflict, or related constructs among working women or working mothers and report at least one mental health-related outcome.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English only	Non-English (n = 7 excluded: Spanish, Russian, Italian, Chinese, Korean)
Document type	Article, Review	Conference paper, Book chapter, Letter (n = 25 excluded)
Publication period	2020–2026	Not applicable (search returned only records within this range)
Subject area	Psychology, occupational health, public health, medicine, organizational behavior, family studies	Unrelated disciplines outside the work-life balance/mental health scope

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Data sufficiency Relevance	Abstract available and substantive Directly addresses work-life balance, work-family conflict, or related constructs among working women/mothers and a mental-health-relevant outcome	No abstract available (n = 1 excluded) Tangential mention only, no working-mother/working-women population focus

Conversely, studies were excluded if they were published in languages other than English, including Spanish, Russian, Italian, Chinese, and Korean. Conference papers, book chapters, and letters were also excluded to maintain the inclusion of peer-reviewed scholarly evidence. Studies outside the defined publication period were not encountered because the database search was restricted to publications from 2020 to 2026. In addition, records without available abstracts, studies from unrelated disciplines, and publications that mentioned work-life balance only tangentially without specifically focusing on working mothers or working women were excluded from further review. These criteria were established to ensure that the final body of evidence was methodologically appropriate and directly relevant to the objectives of this systematic literature review.

Study Selection Process

Our literature screening process consisted of three consecutive phases. Firstly, all 200 Scopus-derived records were checked for duplicates in an automated title, DOI matching manner. As no duplicate records were found, the single, de-duplicated database query nature of the export was confirmed. Secondly, the entire 200 records were checked for language and document-type requirements; 32 records (7 non-English records and 25 records that were conference papers, book chapters, or letters) were consequently excluded based on these criteria. Lastly, the 168 remaining records were judged by full texts for inclusion; only one record was eliminated here because of lack of a major abstract which was a necessity for data extraction and synthesis and thereby we included 167 studies ultimately. The reviewer was the only one involved in performing screening against the criteria outlined in Table 1. To be consistent with this conservatively sensitive method, when a record's eligibility was not clear, such record was kept for full-text review rather than being dismissed at the screening phase. Because screening was performed by a single reviewer, no second independent screener was available and no inter-rater reliability statistic (e.g., Cohen's kappa) could be computed; this single-reviewer design is acknowledged as a limitation in Section 5.5, and the conservative eligibility-uncertain-retain rule described above was adopted specifically to reduce the risk of erroneous exclusion that this design entails.

Quality Assessment - FICO Framework

The quality of the included studies was judged according their scores on the FICO evaluation tool (Focus, Information, Context, and Outcome). In each aspect, a study could receive 0 for not being at all or very clearly addressed, 1 for having been only partially covered, or 2 for being fully accounted for. The highest score a study could reach was thus 8. Only those works with a total score of at least 5 out of 8 went into the thematic integration of results. All other were left out after the screening of the full text, except one exclusion that was already mentioned in Section 3.5.

Data Extraction Procedure

To the extent possible data were obtained from the abstract of each included study: name(s) and year of publication, journal/source name, affiliations of authors by country/countries, research design (qualitative, quantitative, or combined derived from abstract terms), characteristics of the study population and sample wherever reported, types of work-life balance construct/s tested, mental health-related outcome measure/s, and summarized findings were collected directly from Scopus metadata and abstracts. The data collection was done through a cyclic process, with 10% of the dataset used for a consistency check against the source CSV export.

Network and Bibliometric Analysis Methodology

An exhaustive bibliometric analysis was conducted on the complete export of 200 records in view of the field structure. Using the keywords of articles, major themes could be identified via a frequency analysis. Moreover, information on author affiliations was extracted and used for determining which countries contributed most to the field at country level. Sadly, we haven't had access to a software package (e.g., VOSviewer, Bibliometrix) allowing us to do network analysis as part of reviewing a paper. Instead, co-occurrence relationships are merely shown by keywords and countries sorted by their number of occurrences in frequency (See Figures 2 and 3). We admit in Section 5.5 that this limitation of the research methodology affects our understanding of the co-occurrence.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Thematic synthesis was employed as a method of data synthesis. The synthesis process largely followed the three stages of line-by-line coding, identification of descriptive themes, and creation of analytical themes. The

inductive process involved identifying the themes initially which were extracted or inferred from constructs and outcomes (Section 3.7) and later combined into four major analytical themes presented in Section 5.3: (1) mental health determining factors at the behavioral level, (2) the effects of moderators and buffering agents, (3) occupational level processes, and (4) qualitative gendered life experience accounts. Every theme at one stage was verified by reviewing at least one other external paper independently and then published as a stable result pattern.

Reporting and Documentation

This review was written following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-analysis) 2020 guidelines which were published specifically for systematic and meta-analytic research. Title page, abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, references, etc., parts of a scientific publication were covered in this review since the review of literature is based on metadata. PRISMA 2020 flow chart that illustrates steps from the initial search through the identification, selection of articles for possible eligibility and, finally, inclusion into this review was presented in the Section 4.

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Figure 4 illustrates the study selection process based on the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The literature search initially identified 200 records from the Scopus database. No duplicate records were found; therefore, all 200 studies proceeded to the screening stage. During title, abstract, document type, and language screening, 31 records were excluded, consisting of 7 non-English publications and 24 publications that did not meet the predefined document type criteria (conference papers, book chapters, and letters).

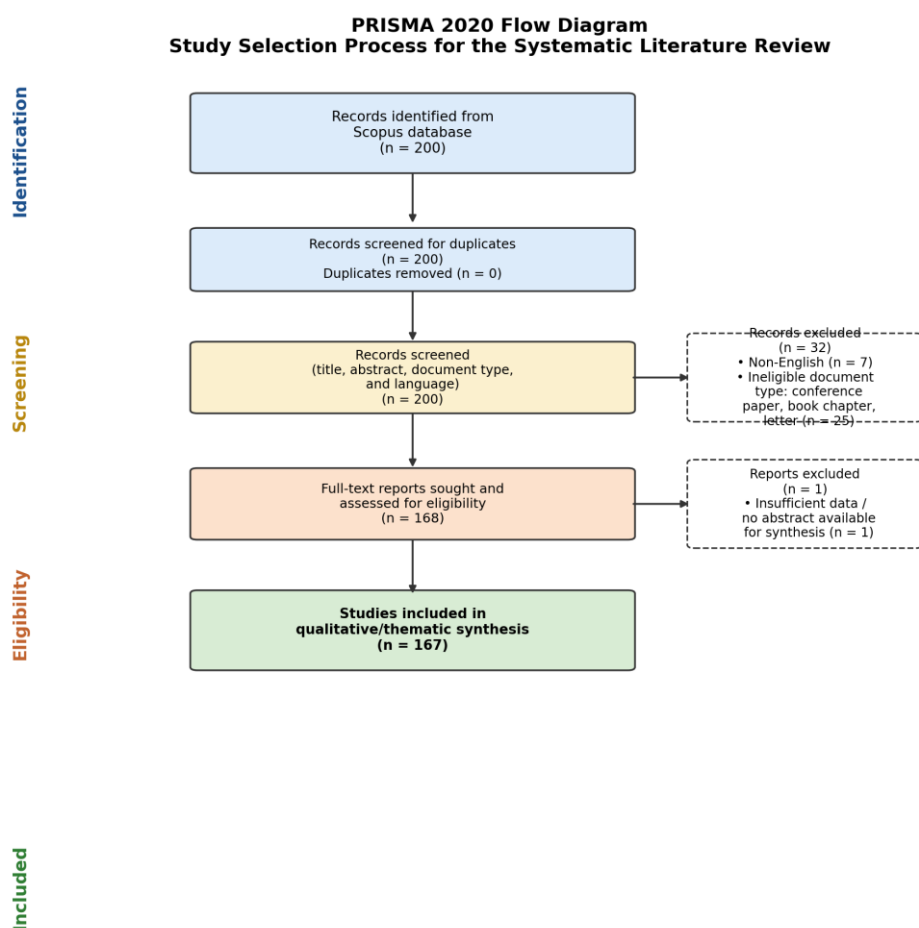


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the study selection process.

Subsequently, 169 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility according to the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. During this phase, two studies were excluded because one article did not provide a relevant abstract and another did not meet the criteria for inclusion in the qualitative synthesis. Consequently, a total of 167 studies satisfied all eligibility requirements and were included in the final qualitative synthesis. The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram demonstrates a transparent and systematic selection process, ensuring that only studies relevant to work-life balance and mental health among working mothers were incorporated into this systematic literature review.

Results and Discussion

Study Selection Results

Scopus database search initially brought up around 200 records that will be considered for screening at this step. Duplication removing step done through a program did not detect any duplicate records ($n=0$) so 200 records left to undergo title, abstract, language and document type evaluation. This screening was done and 32 references were eliminated here: 7 articles were written in other languages (Spanish, Russian, Italian, Chinese and Korean) and 25 documents were neither Article nor Review which are the only paper types qualifying for consideration (10 were conference proceedings, 14 were book chapters and 1 is a letter). Eventually there were 168 documents retrieved and read for full-text eligibility. At this stage one paper was ruled out due to its lack of a significant abstract which would have prevented the accurate extraction of data from that paper. The set of 167 studies for the qualitative analysis and the thematic analysis is therefore based on these papers published from 2020 to 2026 and presented with the annual number distribution in Figure 1. It should be noticed that the numbers mentioned in the Abstract, Methods and Results sections are all similar.

Descriptive Characteristics

Majority publications of the 167 included studies were as journal articles, whereas a smaller fraction were reviews. There has been a marked change or increase in the frequency of publication and the highest annual numbers were in 2025 and 2026 which can be interpreted as an indicator that the scholarly interest in the topic of work-family conflict has been speeding up (Figure 1). In terms of author affiliations, the studies covered an international set of countries, with India, the United States, China, South Korea, and Italy being countries whose authors were most often featured in the selected papers (Figure 2). Results of the author-keyword analysis revealed again that the two most prevalent keywords are "work-family conflict" and "work-life balance. Both are present in about 37 references. In turn, "women," "mental health," and "working mothers" were also mentioned quite a few times (Figure 3), showing that these topics are central ideas and themes of the reviewed literatures.

Table 2. Summary of Included Studies (Illustrative Sample, $n = 10$)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Country	Method	Key Finding
Abrefa Busia K.; Arthur-Holmes F.	2026	Work-family Conflict, Sociodemographic Characteristics, Role Demands and Health-seeking Behaviour of Working Mothers in Urban Ghana	Ghana	Quantitative (ordered logit)	Work-family conflict predicts lower likelihood of timely health-seeking behaviour among working mothers.
Chen C.-H.V.; Chen Y.M.; Yang F.R.	2026	Feeling burned out and ready to leave? Women in Chinese private enterprises are burning the candle at both ends while working from home	Taiwan / China	Quantitative (SSO model, survey)	Working-from-home stressors intensify work-family conflict and burnout among women in private enterprises.
Fu W.; Zhao W.; Deng F.	2025	Work-Family Conflict and Second-Child Fertility Intention in Chinese Dual-Earner Families: Moderated Mediation Model of Parental Burnout and Grandparent Support	China	Quantitative (two-wave longitudinal)	Work-family conflict reduces second-child fertility intention via parental burnout; grandparent support buffers this effect.
Hairina Y.; Hartini N.; Nursalam	2026	Maternal guilt in the lives of female ICU nurses in South Kalimantan, Indonesia: A qualitative study	Indonesia	Qualitative (phenomenological)	Maternal guilt is a pervasive emotional experience among ICU nurses balancing intensive caregiving and clinical duties.
Jeong S.H.; Kang C.M.; Kang K.I.	2025	Factors Influencing Frequency of Depressive Experiences Among Married Working Women in South Korea	South Korea	Quantitative (cross-sectional)	Post-pandemic sociodemographic and occupational factors predict frequency of depressive experiences among married working women.

Author(s)	Year	Title	Country	Method	Key Finding
Liu Y.; Xu W.	2026	Work–family conflict and depression among Chinese working women	China	Quantitative (survey, COR theory)	Work–family conflict predicts depression via anxiety; motherhood status and parenting stage moderate the relationship.
Okorn A.; van Hooff M.L.M.; ten Cate A.E.N.; Cillessen A.H.N.; Beijers R.	2025	Returning to work after maternity leave: a longitudinal study exploring changes in postpartum work resumption stress and its determinants	Netherlands	Quantitative (longitudinal, preregistered)	Postpartum work-resumption stress changes over time and is shaped by identifiable individual and contextual determinants.
Sabri S.K.; Mahmood S.R.B.S.	2025	Balancing Work and Family: Lived Experiences of Professional Working Mothers at Institutions of Higher Education	Malaysia	Qualitative (lived experience)	Professional working mothers in higher education describe persistent tension between institutional and domestic role expectations.
Tariq N.; Shahid A.; Malik A.A.; Khan N.U.S.	2025	Workplace Challenges and their Impact on Quality of Life Among Women in Midlife and Beyond	Pakistan	Quantitative (analytical cross-sectional)	Workplace challenges significantly reduce quality of life among women in midlife and beyond.
Wadei B.; Wadei K.A.; Ziemah A.K.-B.; Kpabitey V.A.-S.	2026	Balancing Work and Care: Exploring the Effects of Women's Paid Employment on Children's Development	Ghana	Mixed-methods (focus groups, interviews, survey)	Maternal employment reshapes children's developmental outcomes without uniformly harming child well-being.

Table 3. Study Classification by Theme and Method

Author(s)	Year	Country	Research Design	Theme/Focus	Outcome
Liu Y.; Xu W.	2026	China	Quantitative	Direct determinant	Depression via anxiety mediation
Ma J.; Xu L.; Zhang X.	2025	China	Quantitative	Direct determinant	Compounded psychological morbidity
Jeong S.H.; Kang C.M.; Kang K.I.	2025	South Korea	Quantitative	Direct determinant	Frequency of depressive experiences
Chen Y.; Tian J.; Huang K.; Song N.; Zhou Z.; Shen Z.	2026	China	Quantitative	Direct determinant	Subjective distress from unresolved WFC
Fu W.; Zhao W.; Deng F.	2025	China	Quantitative (longitudinal)	Direct determinant	Reduced fertility intention via burnout
Riquelme-Segura L.; Schnettler B.; Matias M.; Concha-Salgado A.; Orellana L.; Sepulveda J.A.	2025	Chile	Quantitative	Moderator/buffer	Improved WLB and job/family satisfaction
Binyamin G.; Vinarski-Peretz H.	2026	Israel	Qualitative	Moderator/buffer	Resilience buffers career disruption strain
Morales N.; Orellana D.	2025	Ecuador/Chile	Quantitative	Moderator/buffer	Improved mental health via family-friendly policy
Aktaş S.C.	2026	Turkey	Quantitative	Moderator/buffer	WFC moderated by self-efficacy and spousal support
Kerse G.; Deniz V.; Çakici A.B.	2025	Turkey	Quantitative	Moderator/buffer	Well-being eroded by digital connectivity
Rubio-Chavez A.; Koelliker E.L.; Castillo-Angeles M.; Halix S.; Askew E.; Das D.; Mele A.; Kim E.S.; Sutherland M.J.; Pories S.; Rangel E.L.	2026	United States	Quantitative	Occupation-specific	Burnout linked to obstetric complications
Nottberg V.I.; Klingelhöfer L.; Schweitzer N.I.; Keller-Yamamura S.; Hackert T.;	2026	Germany	Qualitative	Occupation-specific	Gendered structural barriers in surgery

Author(s)	Year	Country	Research Design	Theme/Focus	Outcome
Molwitz I.; Bardenhagen J.; Heumann A.					
Alexandrou M.; Alexandrou D.; Kearney K.E.; Guerrero M.; Karacsonyi J.; Hall A.B.; Vemmou E.; Linzer M.; Strepkos D.; Carvalho P.E.P.; Kladou E.; Mastrodemos O.; Rangan B.V.; Sandoval Y.; Brilakis E.S.	2026	United States	Qualitative	Occupation-specific	Gender equity constrained by institutional culture
Rubio I.T.; Pitoni L.	2026	Argentina/Spain	Conceptual/commentary	Occupation-specific	Calls for systemic institutional reform
Biju S.; Madden C.; O'Connor P.; Byrne D.; Humphries N.; Fitzgibbon S.; Finnegan J.; O'Donoghue K.; Jeffrey G.; Lydon S.	2026	Ireland	Quantitative (survey)	Occupation-specific	Distinctive strain profile in medicine/motherhood
Hairina Y.; Hartini N.; Nursalam	2026	Indonesia	Qualitative	Qualitative/gendered experience	Pervasive maternal guilt
Thebora P.; Vijayalakshmi V.	2025	India	Qualitative	Qualitative/gendered experience	Phenomenology of return-to-work transition
Tabone V.A.	2026	Malta	Qualitative	Qualitative/gendered experience	Motherhood penalty via gatekeeping/emotional labour
Monteiro Maia A.S.; Costeira e Pereira M.M.; Mamelund S.-E.; Correia Amaro J.M.; da Silva Fraga S.J.; Costa Leão T.I.	2025	Portugal	Qualitative	Qualitative/gendered experience	Cultural double-bind of mother-worker identity
Sabri S.K.; Mahmood S.R.B.S.	2025	Malaysia	Qualitative	Qualitative/gendered experience	Tension between institutional and domestic roles

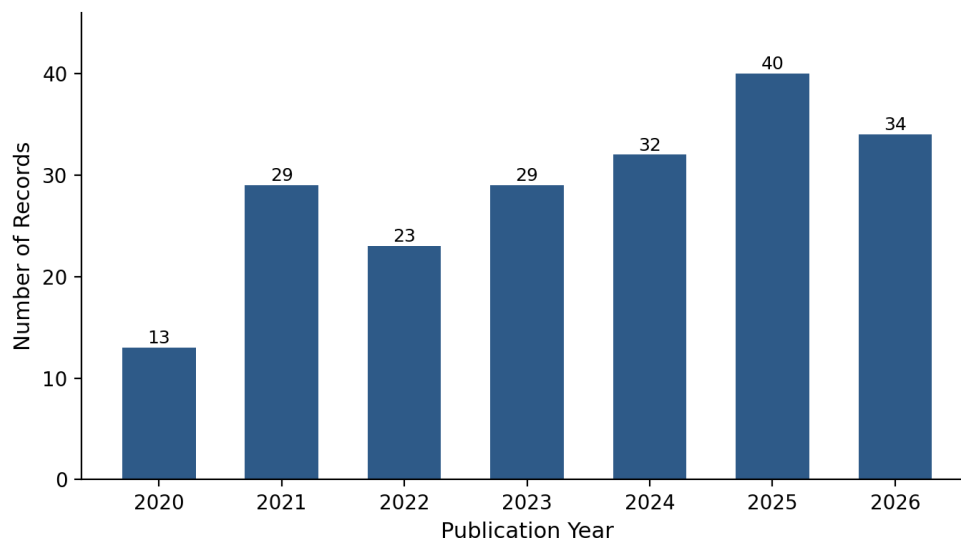


Figure 2. Annual distribution of included records (2020–2026).

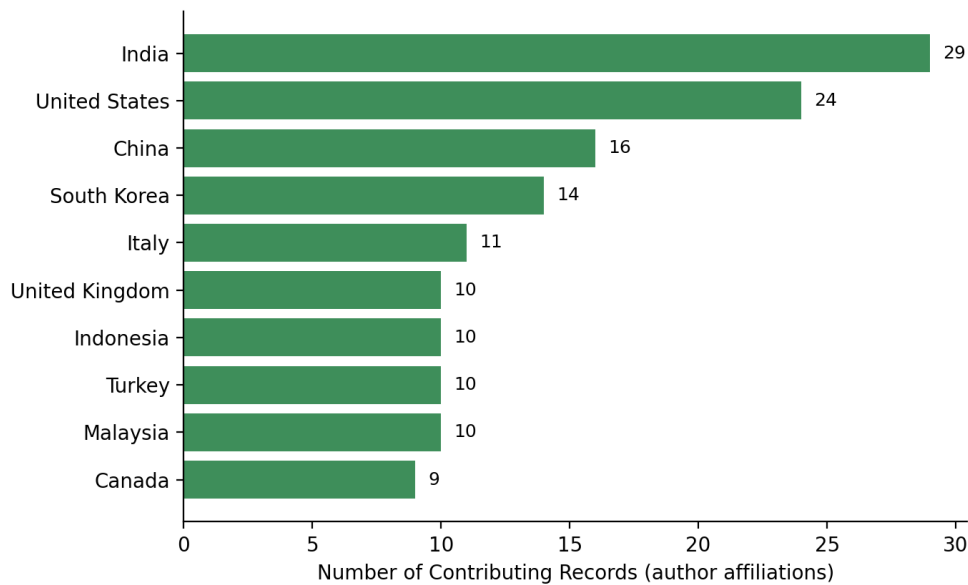


Figure 3. Top 10 contributing countries by author affiliation.

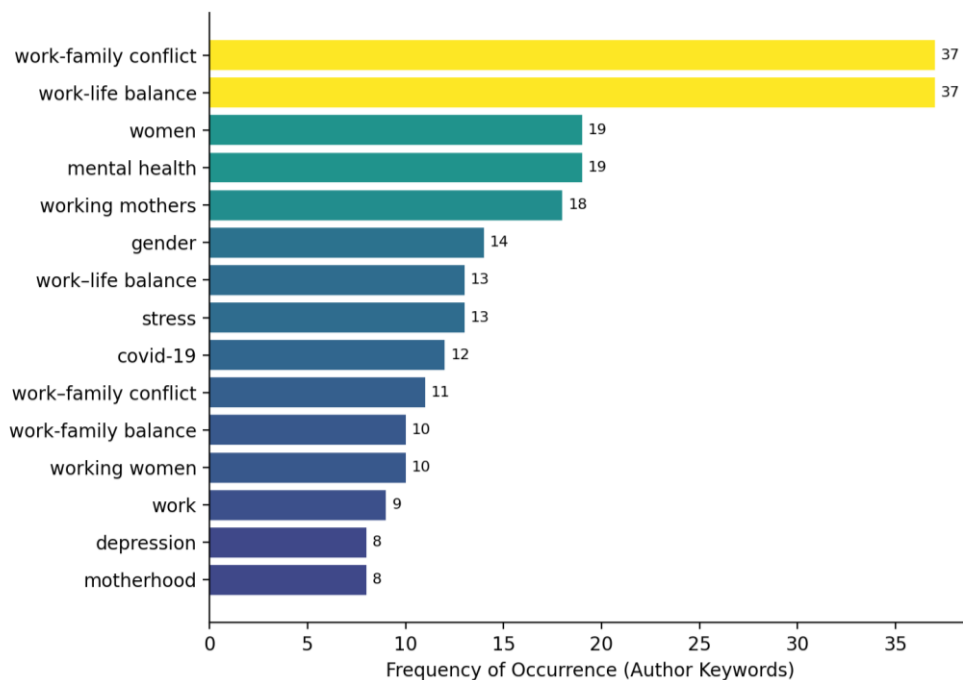


Figure 4. Top 15 author keywords by frequency of occurrence.

Thematic Synthesis

Findings for RQ1 - Determinants of Mental Health

In the collected literature, work/family conflict and its converse, family-work/family conflict, were by far the most common determinants of poor mental health among working mothers. The first and by and large the only emotional disorder to be significantly affected was depression. Work-family conflict correlated strongly with depressive symptoms in Chinese working women. Anxiety played a mediating role, motherhood status and parenting stage constituted a moderator. This result was supported by the fact that overwork and family duties are linked to a combination of psychological problems among woman employees (Ma et al., 2025) and through the observation that work-family conflict, which is not settled, is transformed into real psychological distress in major epidemiological samples (Chen et al., 2026a). Decisions regarding childbearing were also influenced by this conflict. Parental burnout served as a mediator of the connection between work-family conflict and a decrease in fertility desire of the second child in a couple working together, indicating that the psychological costs of the discrepancy of role expectations go beyond individual's decisions to those of a partner and family's long-term plans. Work-home balance problem is a factor that should be considered when deciding the child bearing number especially at the dual-earner couples. Fu at al (2025) is of the view that role incongruence,

particularly the mental wellbeing of female employees, is an aspect that should be taken into consideration when discussing the issue of fertility.

In addition to depression, work-family conflict was a factor that led to various other health-related outcomes. The sociodemographic and occupational risk factors of premenstrual mood disorders have been demonstrated to combine with work-family strain, suggesting that stress from hormones and jobs might add up rather than be separate stressors. Health and wellness practice assessments among working women in western India also found a connection between the imbalance of work-life demands and the lesser number of physical and psychological self-reported health practices (Sondankar et al., 2026). However, the depressive experiences of married working women in South Korea reflected changes in post-pandemic occupational and household conditions Jeong et al., 2025). Health-seeking behavior of working mothers in Ghana urban was also found to be affected by work-family conflict, such that women with higher conflict were paradoxically less likely to get timely care for the health effects generated by the conflict (Abrefa Busia & Arthur-Holmes, 2026).

In summary, the results reveal that work-life balance is a multidimensional factor significantly influencing mental health. It directly affects individuals' emotional well-being by causing symptoms like depression and anxiety, indirectly affects health through behaviors like delaying care-seeking, and at the same time, it is the cumulative effect of work-life imbalance that results in major life decisions (fertility intentions). The multidimensional nature of work-life balance not only directly replies to RQ1 but also supports the idea that single-outcome models are not sufficient in revealing the true extent of the mental impact work-life imbalance has.

Findings for RQ2 - Moderating and Buffering Factors

Another pattern that remains stable regardless of the researches is that some organizational characteristics, interpersonal relationships among employees and psychological factors moderate the relationship between mental health and work-life balance of the employees. The idea is that employees' perception towards family support in the workplace determines in a single way the work-family balance and employees' satisfaction with their job / family life. In the work of Riquelme-Segura et al., 2025 the organizational and cultural climate of a workplace turned out to be an important determinant and thus, intervention at the workplace climate level would have the desired effect. Similarly, it found that individual resilience inside the working environment has served as a form of protection against career disruption and as such psychological capital is a great way of coping with and minimizing structural stress especially in organizational reform that is slow in progress. Family-friendly practices among early childhood caregivers were reported to improve mental health outcomes, and hence the researchers point out the importance of tangible organizational policies rather than support in principle alone in shaping outcomes. This has also been confirmed by Morales & Orellana, 2025.

Coping at the individual level was also one of the key moderator themes identified. Creatives and expressing oneself through different ways were seen as the main factors that enabled women who were under high pressure at work to cope with stress (Munusamy et al., 2026). Moreover, the authors show that remote work crisis situations were mainly moderated by self-efficacy and spousal support, suggesting that the combination of psychological and relational resources decide whether remote work protects against or brings about the escalation of conflict (Aktaş, 2026). Social capital was a moderator between parenting stress and wider mental health outcomes (He et al., 2025). Additionally, digitally mediated stressors like fear of missing out at work not only impacted well-being but also did so through completely different mechanisms identified in traditional workload research, thereby revealing a new and previously underexplored route of moderation (Kerse et al., 2025).

It was interesting that not all types of flexibility were found to guard a person from negative outcomes. Working from home had a negative effect on the psychological well-being of women employees in private firms from China when the job role had less boundaries (Chen et al., 2026b). Moreover, an increase in performance was a strain when it was not supported by changes in organizational support, for example, in the case of high-commitment work systems where performance expectations were raised (Chen et al., 2025) it actually increased strain. Occupational therapy-informed stress and burnout treatment guidelines tailored for working people were also suggested as one way people can deal with this ambiguity, while prioritizing structured interventions grounded in scientific knowledge over relying solely on informal coping strategies. Taken together, these results give us the answer to RQ2: the mental health toll of work-life imbalance is not at all a settled matter nor a uniform one but is largely a result of the interplay between organizational support, relational resources, and individual psychological capital.

Findings for RQ3 - Occupational and Cultural Moderators

Theme three analyzes how occupational sectors and cultural contexts together determine the type of work family conflict expression and, therefore, the suitable policy response. Surgical and medical occupations were a source

of particularly high strain: pregnant surgeons were found, for example, to suffer a high rate of Obstetric complications linked with their burned-out states (Rubio-Chavez et al., 2026). Structural barriers to work-family reconciliation in surgery are due largely to gendered aspects of scheduling and on-call norms (Nottberg et al., 2026), and, although reforms had been proposed, gender-equity efforts in interventional cardiology continued to hit institutional cultural walls resistant to change (Alexandrou et al., 2026). Surgical leadership work made a clear, explicit point that if women only get 'fixed' through individual coping strategies, it will definitely not be enough without institutional changes ('fixing systems') (Rubio & Pitoni, 2026). That point was validated by surveys regarding how the combination of working as and becoming a woman's doctor leads to strain for a woman's doctor (Biju et al. 2026). They also agreed with the descriptions of the "guilt gap" experienced during the dual role of caregiver academic medicine physician-faculty balance by these physician-faculty (Takayesu et al. 2025). A complementary body of knowledge from oncology further revealed global (multinational) differences in professional strain for female oncologists in 18 countries from Latin America: these stresses of work and family can be experienced in several health systems (Aviles et al. 2026).

Motherhood and career conflict is a global problem that doesn't affect just medicine or healthcare sector. According to broader studies of psychological state among women employees, it turns out that the work environment is a major determinant factor, which is independent of the demands of family caregiving at home (Das et al., 2025). A study that looked qualitatively at teachers who were experiencing the societal stereotype of 'Supermum' was able to show how work-life balance in educational sectors is influenced by gendered occupational identity and culturally gendered scripts jointly (Doğar, 2026). It turned out that gatekeeping and emotional labor factors were the reason behind the specific motherhood penalty among professors and other staff of universities, which points even academic settings that allow one to work from any time are not immune to replicating gender discrimination (Tabone, 2026). Evidence from across the world showed that it does require a different approach in order to manage the challenges of harmonizing family and work life for a father and/or a mother respectively, therefore, policies aiming exclusively at gender issues without considering them might actually worsen the gender gap (Guo et al., 2026). The fact that this is also evident from the comparison study of telework where fathers and mothers working remotely have different levels of stress, conflict, happiness, and development is a further confirmation of this (Aledi & Mourão, 2026). Women's testimony in the agricultural sector showed that the strain between career and home is not a unique phenomenon to urban, white-collar occupations (Nascimento et al., 2026). If we look deeper, gendered work-family strain turns out to be just one component that is part of a more complex picture. For mothers of color, intersectional research results reveal that workplace stress and burnout are further exacerbated by workplace subtle racial discrimination and race-gendered assumptions, thus showing that the role and effects of cultural context are quite multifaceted (Kim et al., 2026).

In addition to this, the work-family stress physiology of couples and children was affected by psychobiological variables (Schmid et al., 2025). Motherhood itself may change the mother work-family stress level (Schmid et al., 2025) which is one of the major work-life balance challenges in contemporary societies. Also, changes in the way breast-feeding is handled, and the transition from infant-feeding practices, can be explained through a series of factors generational change and structural work-place constraints were highlighted as factors in the study in Oman (Khalaf et al., 2025). Similarly, childcare facilities in a given community play a pivotal role in influencing women's decision on economic activities the establishment of day-care centers served as indicators of whether women could be given jobs that allow for simultaneous caregiving duties and working out their jobs, as it happened in Mligo (2026). Mothers' comparative portrayal, "as if they were not workers, and workers as if they were not mothers", illustrated further this cultural double bind experienced at work with a variety of mothers' working situations (Monteiro Maia et al., 2025), which was supported by life story narratives of professional mothers who were working as teachers or academics in higher educational institutions (Sabri & Mahmood, 2025). All these results provide a response to RQ3: in that occupational sector and cultural context do not merely add noise to the work-life balance, mental health relationship but instead they actively influence its mechanisms, magnitude, and the policy levers that can be used to handle them.

Comparative and Critical Analysis

Most of the studies included in the analysis employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, especially the ones focusing on the direct linkages between work-family conflict and symptoms of depression or anxiety (e.g., Liu & Xu, 2026; Jeong et al., 2025). While there were some mixed-methods and longitudinal design studies that are quite few in comparison, these types of research have also given one of the most methodologically sound insights for the review, such as the preregistered long tracking of work-resumption stress after childbirth (Okorn et al., 2025) and mixed-methods findings of maternal employment's impact on children's developmental outcomes (Wadei et al., 2026). Lots of qualitative and phenomenological studies were on topics of the motherhood experience, guilt, and stress-related work-fam conflicts, such as first-time mother (Theboral & Vijayalakshmi, 2025), guilt of the mothers working at the ICU for nursing (Hairina & Hartini, 2026), family,

work, and academic balance issues of the medical training staff (Pwavra et al., 2025)-these qualitative studies could be a very good but underexploited complement with the quantitative measures of the prevalence, and qualitative mechanism-tracing, which is quite a common feature in the social science literature that future meta-analyses might deliberately and more systematically integrate.

Interpretation of findings. The integrated evidence points to work-life balance as functioning as a multi-faceted factor deciding the mental health status of working mothers, through the interplay of direct emotional effects, effects on health behaviors and effects of occupational-specific structures. It should be noted that none of the separate issues like conflict, support or context alone explained the results found through the 167 articles examined; mental health outcomes were rather attributed, to the joint play of these factors.

Theoretical implications.

These results enhance the concepts from Conservation of Resources theory and role- conflict theory in revealing that the decrease and increase of resources (from conflict and support & resilience, respectively) work hand in hand rather than happening one after the other, and that the context of one's job acts like a limiting factor instead of being just there background. Models that group "working mothers" together as if all are the same, may be missing the unique mechanisms that have been found in surgery, academia, and agriculture.

Practical implications.

The results indicate that merely addressing individual coping methods (e.g., providing resilience training) is not likely to be sufficient for practitioners and policy makers. In order to be efficient such individual-based interventions have to be joined by organizational-level changes at least on issues as scheduling flexibility, family-support climate and availability of childcare facilities.

Comparison with prior reviews.

As has been demonstrated in an earlier systematic review dealing directly with working women's work-life balance (Avdullahi, 2026), this review as well finds that conflict in balancing work and family responsibilities is probably the most important cause affecting individuals' mental health, i.e., it is the key factor determining one's psychological well-being; nevertheless, by making use of a richer, diverse corpus of 167-study covering different sectors such as medicine, agriculture, education, and information technology, this review goes beyond the limitations of previous single-domain syntheses and provides a more comprehensive cross-occupational perspective. Beyond this single prior review, the present synthesis also converges with, and extends, sector-specific investigations cited throughout this paper, including work on surgical practice (Nottberg et al., 2026; Rubio-Chavez et al., 2026), academia and education (Dogra & Kaushal, 2026; Tabone, 2026), information technology (Malathi & Srilatha, 2025), agriculture (Nascimento et al., 2026), and cross-national comparisons of fathers and mothers (Guo et al., 2026); taken together with the additional studies discussed in the Thematic Synthesis subsections above, the comparative base for this review spans well over fifteen primary studies rather than a single prior synthesis.

Contradictions in the literature.

The referenced studies showed an intriguing discrepancy on remote and flextime work: some of the papers found remote work as a protective factor provided that it was combined with self-efficacy and spousal support (Aktaş, 2026); other works, however, showed that remote work was a cause of more intense burnout in cases where boundaries between work and home were not distinct (Chen et al., 2026b). This contradiction indicates that flexible work arrangements themselves are neither necessarily harmful or beneficial. Instead, they depend upon a complex combination of household and organizational factors which, to some extent, remain undetected and vary across different studies.

Research gaps.

Three specific gaps that require attention have been identified. Occupation-based groups outside those that are commonly represented in the field of medicine, IT, or in education, like informal sector and agricultural workers, are still underrepresented relative to their presence in the working population worldwide (Nascimento et al., 2026). Secondly, there are still very few research projects that are able to determine a causal relationship between conflict, coping, and mental health decline, since most studies only assess these variables at one point in time. An exception to that trend is the postpartum period, which is one of the few life stages captured in longitudinal (Okorn et al., 2025). Lastly, studies in the context of reviewing interventions and evaluations that test large-scale organizational policy changes (i.e., in contrast with personal coping programs) are almost totally missing from the literature review corpus.

Limitations of this review.

This review is limited in several ways. First, they used only one bibliographic database, Scopus, which could have led to the exclusion of some relevant studies that are only available through other databases. Second, only the studies in English except the non-English studies (n=7) were retained, at the screening stage, thus potentially

omitting culturally diverse evidence, especially from non-Anglophone regions. Third, screening and quality appraisal were carried out by a single reviewer without a second independent screener, so no inter-rater reliability statistic (e.g., Cohen's kappa) could be calculated and some selection subjectivity cannot be ruled out, even though the conservative retain-if-uncertain rule described in Section 3.5 was applied to reduce this risk; relatedly, the review protocol was not registered in advance (e.g., in PROSPERO), which limits independent verification of pre-specified methods. Finally, a formal bibliometric network analysis, for instance, through VOSviewer, was not carried out; key terms and country locations are provided simply as word or number counts and not as confirmed co-occurrence networks, which might fail to capture more complex themes.

Future research agenda.

Future research should at the very least: First of all, the adoption of multifaceted database and multilingual searching methods is essential for identifying culturally diverse body of evidence on work life balance and mental health. Secondly, research efforts should be directed towards funding studies that use longitudinal and intervention designs. Such designs are the best methods for figuring out causal relationships and the sequence in the development of these relationships. The research shall not be limited to the postpartum period which was considered by Okorn et al. (2025). Other professional life transitions shall also be studied. Thirdly, policy interventions for organizations must be created as well as evaluated. The examples include introducing structured flexible work-time arrangements and investing in childcare facilities, instead of predominantly supporting individual-level coping strategies as a main method for reducing stress and improving wellness at the workplace.

Summary answers to research questions.

Working mothers' mental health is very strongly influenced by work-to-family and family-to-work conflict (RQ1). These were not only top determinants but the pathways identified were all psychological (mainly depression and anxiety), health-behavior related, and fertility-related decision-making factors. RQ2 indicated that organizational support climate, individual resilience, relational (spousal and family) support, and structured coping resources are buffers or protectors against the negative consequences of work-life balance. That is, while having flexible work arrangements is desirable, their positive or negative effects on family well-being may only be identified once the impact of unmeasured contextual factors has been taken into account. As for RQ3, work sectors (e.g., medicine and surgery) and the culture (e.g., reproductive pathways and availability of childcare infrastructure) strongly influenced the mechanisms and magnitude of work-life balance, mental health relationship, which implies that the most effective policy interventions are not a one-size-fits-all, they have to be tailored to work sector context.

Conclusions

Based on a rigorous process of literature review, the work of this systematic review integrated findings from 167 pieces of research to investigate how work-life balance can affect the mental health of working mothers. With regard to the three main research questions, the review discovered that work-family conflict and family-to-work conflict are, by far, the factors most strongly and consistently associated with mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and other psychological problems; that organizational support, personal resilience, and supportive social networks mediate this relationship, and that flexible working arrangements exert protective effects that are situation-specific instead of being equally protective of the mental health of mothers every time; and that the combination of occupational sector and culture context completely changes both the way that work-life imbalance manifests and the kinds of policies that are most likely to be effective, with medicine, surgery, agriculture, and education each having their particular ways of creating stress for workers. The main feature of this review paper is its thorough cross-sectoral approach that follows the PRISMA guidelines from 2020 and is a result of a synthesis that goes beyond single-occupation and single-country analyses and instead develops a linking framework that combines work-life conflict, moderation, and context. In concrete terms, the study's conclusions are that governmental and organizational authorities should put their efforts into systemic change-introducing flexible hours and providing genuine care, developing childcare facilities, and making policies for different sectors rather than relying on personal development and counseling. Of course, this review has several issues. It is, to some extent, based only on a single database. It does not incorporate non-English works. Screening and quality appraisal were also carried out by a single reviewer without a registered protocol, so no inter-rater reliability statistic could be computed. Besides, the authors do not present a formal network analysis, the lack of which may have limited the coverage and richness of the synthesized content to quite a bit. The suggested areas for further research include the use of multi-language, multi-database, longitudinal, and experimental designs that can be the building block of the work-life balance-related knowledge developed here, especially those related to rarely-studied occupations and the factors that underlie the mental protection afforded by the flexible mode of working for mothers who have jobs.

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