

Work–life balance among public-sector mothers in Ethiopia: social, economic, and organizational determinants

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ABSTRACT

Work–life balance (WLB), a long-standing central focus of policy and academic debate in industrialized countries, is increasingly becoming a pressing concern in developing nations, such as Ethiopia, particularly in rapidly growing urban areas. Persistent poverty, rising inflation, and inadequate infrastructure intensify these challenges, especially for working mothers who must simultaneously manage paid employment, childcare, and social responsibilities. This mixed-methods study explores the determinants of WLB among Ethiopian public employee mothers, focusing on those with children under the age of four. Drawing on qualitative interviews and quantitative survey data analyzed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the study examines how economic, organizational, and social factors interact to shape mothers' ability to balance professional and family roles. Grounded in the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model, Ecological Systems Theory, and Role Theory, the findings reveal that economic strain, organizational rigidity, and gendered social expectations collectively constrain women's capacity to maintain balance. Evidence from both qualitative and quantitative analyses converges to show that financial hardship, high living costs, and limited access to childcare exert the strongest pressures on mothers' work–life experiences. Organizational barriers, including inflexible schedules, lack of institutional support, and long commutes, further exacerbate these difficulties, while traditional gender norms continue to assign domestic responsibilities primarily to women. The study calls for integrated and practical interventions, such as subsidized childcare, flexible working arrangements, inflation-adjusted wages, and community-based childcare support, that address economic, organizational, and social barriers simultaneously. Beyond its empirical findings, this research contributes to extending established theoretical frameworks on work–life balance to the realities of developing countries. In the Ethiopian context, the findings offer valuable insights for shaping economic welfare and labor policies, as well as guiding the efforts of governmental institutions, private sector actors, and international organizations. Addressing these challenges is essential not only for improving women's empowerment and children's well-being but also for strengthening community development and social equity.

Keywords: Economic Factors, Employed Mothers, Organizational Factors, PLS-SEM, Social Factors, Work-Life Balance

I. INTRODUCTION

Work–life balance has become a critical issue in contemporary societies, as individuals navigate professional responsibilities alongside family and social obligations (Begum et al., 2024). Although extensive research has explored these dynamics in developed economies, empirical evidence from developing countries remains limited (Mahirah et al., 2021; Pennings, 2022). Ethiopia, characterized by rapid economic growth and an evolving labor market in the past two decades, provides a unique context to examine how working mothers negotiate the challenges of balancing work, family, and societal expectations. Historically, Ethiopia's economy was predominantly agrarian, and strict gender roles confined women to household duties. In recent years, however, the economy has expanded beyond agriculture, with growing contributions from the service and industrial sectors (Table 1). Consequently, women's participation in areas such as banking, healthcare, education, and government services has increased significantly (Yesuf et al., 2024).

Table 1
Sectoral Composition of Ethiopian Economy 1985 to 2025 in 5-year Intervals

Year	Agriculture (%)	Industry (%)	Services (%)	Year	Agriculture (%)	Industry (%)	Services (%)
1985	58	10	32	2010	42	13	40
1990	53	11	36	2015	36.06	16.30	39.55
1995	51	12	37	2020	35.56	23.10	36.83
2000	47	13	40	2025	32.82	27.28	36.0
2005	44	13	43				

Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/ethiopia>

Women's enrollment in higher education in Ethiopia increased by 40% between 2017 and 2021, compared to a 36.8% increase for men (Ministry of Education, 2021)). Despite these educational gains, only 50.2% of women were employed in 2021, compared to 69% of men (Figure 1). National data indicate that between 2015 and 2023, female labor-force participation rose only slightly, from 37% to 38% nationally and from 27% to 28% in urban areas, while women continued to perform nearly two-thirds of all unpaid family work (Wassie et al., 2024). Moreover, 65% of unemployed women were married, and more than half had left paid employment to care for their families (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021).

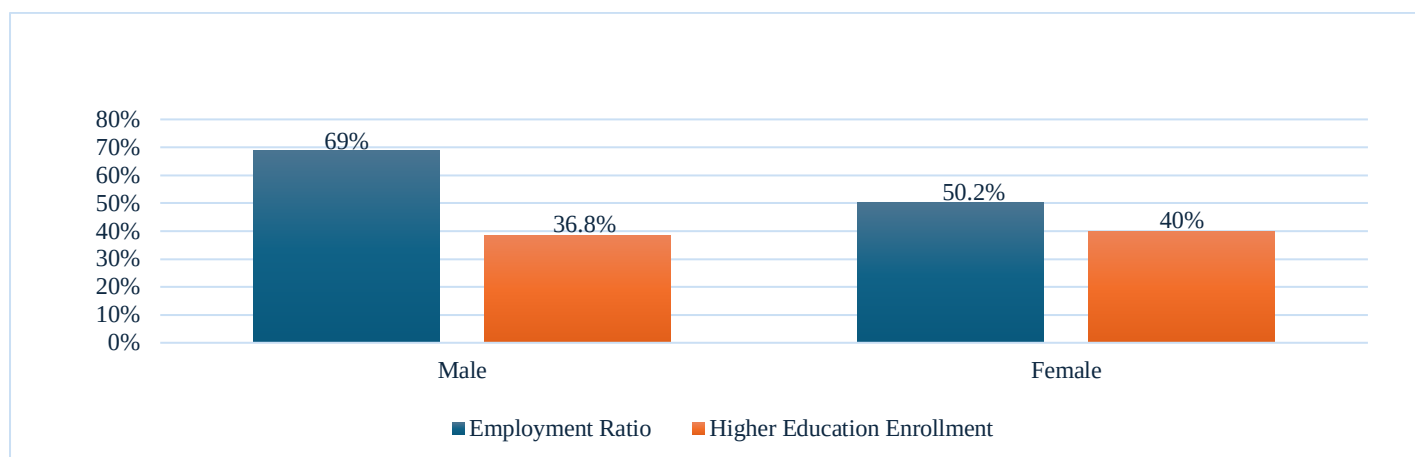


Figure 1

Employment and Higher Education Enrollment Ratios for Both Genders in Ethiopia, 2021

These statistics illustrate a “triangular trap” in Ethiopia, in which cultural norms assign women primary caregiving responsibilities while they simultaneously navigate professional and social roles. Economic pressures push women toward paid work, yet institutional systems often fail to provide adequate support, resulting in persistent gender disparities in employment and the recognition of women's labor. Urban married women face even greater strain: unemployment rates for this group are approximately 15% higher than those of their rural counterparts (Ewerling et al., 2020), and women in Ethiopia spend an average of 5.2 hours per day on unpaid domestic tasks compared with 2.1 hours for men. Although federal institutions employed around 220,000 women in 2022, 60% reported moderate to severe work–family conflict, with 25% describing it as “high.” Organizational support remains limited: by 2023, only 12% of federal offices offered flexible schedules, and just 8% provided subsidized daycare services. In the absence of such support, women often juggle rigid work hours alongside caregiving responsibilities, leading to absenteeism, lateness, or burnout (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021).

Economic pressures further intensify these challenges in Ethiopia. Although the country's Gross Domestic Product [GDP] grew by 9.2% annually between 2009/10 and 2019/20, poverty declined only modestly, from 30% in 2011 to 24% in 2016, with the poorest decile experiencing no income gains (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Planning and Development Commission, 2021). According to the Ethiopian Energy Authority, a 20% increase in fuel prices in early 2024 raised transportation costs by nearly one-third, pushing the average daily commuting expenses for working mothers in Addis Ababa from 50 birr in 2022 to 65 birr in 2024. Consequently, many working mothers relocate to peri-urban areas with cheaper housing, sometimes enduring five-hour commutes that reduce family time and personal well-being (Yesuf et al., 2024). Moreover, organizational support, such as childcare services, remains very limited in Ethiopian federal government institutions, with significant intergenerational consequences. A 2022 United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] report found that 42% of urban Ethiopian children aged six months to five years were not enrolled in any formal care or early education, and among children of public employees, this figure increased to 51% (Wassie et al., 2024). As a result, children of mothers experiencing high work–family strain often lag behind national benchmarks in both nutrition and cognitive development.

Although academic interest in work–life balance (WLB) in Ethiopia has grown since 2015, most studies remain limited in scope. Prior research has often emphasized organizational outcomes, such as employer support and employee performance, while giving less attention to the broader social and economic factors shaping WLB challenges. For example, Abebe and Assemie (2023) explored factors influencing WLB among university staff, and Yesuf et al. (2024) investigated the spillover of work–family resources at the Ethiopian Agricultural Research Institute. Despite public organizations being the largest employers in Ethiopia's service sector, prior studies have largely focused on sectors such as banking, education, and healthcare, overlooking the broader public workforce.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a comprehensive approach that examines how economic, social, and institutional factors collectively shape the challenges faced by women working in Ethiopia's federal government organizations in Addis Ababa. Using a mixed-methods design that integrates qualitative insights with quantitative analysis, the research identifies key determinants of WLB and provides evidence-based recommendations to enhance policies and organizational practices. The findings have important implications for improving women's economic participation, promoting gender equity, and supporting overall well-being in Ethiopia. Moreover, they contribute to global academic literature and policy discussions by highlighting the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and the professional dilemmas faced by employed mothers in the Global South, particularly in sub-Saharan African contexts, where demographic, socio-economic conditions, and infrastructure differ substantially from those in developed countries.

1.1 Research Objectives

- i. Identify the key organizational, social, and economic determinants affecting work–life balance.
- ii. Determine which of these factors has the most significant influence on work–life balance.
- iii. Explore the coping strategies that mothers adopt to manage competing demands across work, family, and social responsibilities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

Work–life balance of employed mothers in the context of Ethiopia is influenced by a range of organizational, economic, and social variables. Mothers can be subjected to demands from their work, child, and other roles simultaneously, and the existence of resources such as support can moderate the impact. For this reason, the study draws on three theoretical backgrounds namely: the Job-Demands – Resources Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Role Theory. The JD-R theory is used to understand how job demands and opportunities at the workplace can affect the work-life balance of employed mothers. Ecological Systems Theory provides an in-depth understanding of the work–life balance of mothers by looking at the context in which it takes place. Finally, the Role theory aids the analysis by looking at how different roles can conflict with each other to affect the work-life balance of working mothers.

2.1.1 The Job-Demands – Resources (JD-R) Model

The Job-Demands – Resources theory (Demerouti et al., 2001) was developed based on the understanding that different job characteristics can affect employees' well-being, attitudes, and behaviors. Job demands refer to work characteristics that require workers to expend effort, which in turn can result in negative emotions. On the other hand, job resources are work attributes that enable employees to exert effort and reduce the likelihood of experiencing negative emotions while performing their tasks. This implies that when the demands of a particular job outweighs its benefits, workers may develop unfavorable emotions while trying to balance their professional and personal lives, especially dealing with tight deadlines to meet professional expectations. For example, working mothers who face increased professional demands are unable to take care of their children due to insufficient time. However, resources such as day care centers, flexible work schedules, safe working conditions, parental leaves, and lactation support would allow mothers to perform their work while also taking care of their children. In Ethiopia, employers offer fewer resources such as parental leaves and day care services due to organizational factors such as working hours and low labor force utilization caused by lower wage rates. Therefore, the theory will be used to show how the lack of organizational resources can affect the work-life balance of working mothers.

2.1.2 Ecological Systems Theory

The Ecological systems theory focuses on how people's behavior is determined by systems and their interactions. The theory was pioneered by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and later used in different studies to analyze people's experiences in the context of their personal and working lives. The theory's premise is that people do not live independently but rather interact with their immediate and outer environments. When considered within this framework, the work-life balance of working mothers can only be understood from the characteristics of these individuals and their interactions with their household members, broader community, and the economy. For example, the high inflation rate in Ethiopia makes it difficult for middle-class mothers to provide essentials for their children. High rental fees and the lack of proper infrastructure make it impossible for the working class to provide stable dwelling for their children. It implies that the work-life balance of working mothers in Ethiopia depends on personal, family-related, and environmental factors. Therefore, Ecological Systems Theory will be utilized in the study to examine the interactions between factors affecting the work-life balance of working mothers.

2.1.3 Role Theory

Role Theory highlights the influence of social and cultural expectations on work–life balance. Disproportionate unpaid care work, multiple social roles, and entrenched gender norms often place additional burdens on mothers, intensifying work–family conflict and limiting opportunities for professional development. Integrating these three perspectives provides a coherent lens for this study and establishes the foundation for the conceptual framework that follows. This framework underpins the study’s hypotheses by linking social, organizational, and economic determinants to expected work–life balance outcomes. In this integrated model, macroeconomic factors, such as income, inflation, and infrastructural constraints (Ecological Systems Theory), intensify job demands, which interact with organizational resources (JD-R Model) and socially prescribed roles and expectations for women (Role Theory) to shape work–life balance outcomes.

2.2 Empirical Review

The empirical review is organized around the study’s research objectives, with a focus on factors that determine work–life balance among employed mothers and the coping mechanisms employed by mothers. It begins with a historical and conceptual foundation for understanding work–life balance and inter-role conflict. It then presents empirical evidence on organizational, social, and economic determinants of work–life balance, followed by evidence on the relative influence of these factors, and finally, the coping strategies employed by mothers to manage competing demands. This structure provides a basis for identifying what is already known, where evidence is limited, and how the present study contributes to the literature.

2.2.1 Historical and Conceptual Foundation of Work–Life Balance and Inter-Role Conflict

Work–life balance (WLB) is a social construct which is historically bound and consequently bound in its turn to particular contexts. Although the challenges in reconciling paid work with family life have been present for an extended period, it has undergone transformation alongside shifts in employment, familial, and gender dynamics. In Europe, the development of contemporary understandings of WLB was influenced by major historical changes, including the Industrial Revolution, labor movements, the two World Wars, and changing social attitudes towards women’s employment. The Industrial Revolution saw a shift of substantial amounts of productive work from households to factories, while women continued to carry significant domestic responsibilities. During the First and Second World Wars, women’s participation in paid employment increased as they took up occupations previously dominated by men. For example, women’s employment rose from 23.6% in 1914 to 46.7% by 1918 during World War I, and from 26% in 1939 to 36% by 1943 during World War II (Kaushik & Nair, 2021). These changes led to the development of debates and policies concerning women’s employment, family responsibilities, and organization of work. At the same time, WLB remains culturally contingent, as expectations of women’s paid work and family roles vary across societies with different gender norms and patterns of labor-force participation (Fleetwood, 2007).

The notion of WLB is also linked with inter-role conflict. Individuals hold multiple roles in their everyday lives, and the expectations attached to these roles may, at times, compete for limited time, energy, and other resources. Role conflict arises when demands associated with different roles are incompatible, so much so that meeting the demands of one role undermines its performance. Fathima and Helan (2019), for example, describe role conflict as the occurring of pressures from two or more roles where compliance with one makes compliance with another more difficult. In the context of employed mothers, such conflict may arise when workplace requirements compete with childcare, household responsibilities, and other family or social obligations. This is an important conceptual foundation for the study: the next sections present the empirical evidence on organizational, social, and economic determinants of WLB, their relative influence, and the coping strategies employed by mothers in managing competing demands.

The historical and conceptual discussion provides the basis for the empirical review that follows. The subsequent sections focus directly on the study objectives, exploring the organizational, social, and economic determinants of WLB, their relative influence, and the coping strategies employed by mothers in managing competing demands.

2.2.2 Determinants of Work–Life Balance

2.2.2.1 Organizational factors

It is plausible to assume that organizational conditions could influence the ability of mothers to reconcile employment and family commitments. Workload, working hours, flexibility, supervisor and organizational support, and workplace childcare are among the features associated with work–life balance (WLB) (Yesuf et al., 2024). In relation to this, research conducted on mothers in employment has demonstrated the importance of workplace conditions and support, particularly in terms of reconciling employment with childcare and other commitments (Abebe & Assemie, 2023). Thus, organizational factors are likely to exert a significant influence on the WLB of mothers in public sector employment.

2.2.2.2 Social factors

It is possible that a woman's network of family and friends, gender expectations, the allocation of responsibilities within the family, and the accessibility of domestic support are additional determinants of WLB. According to Ethiopian research, mothers could rely on the support of partners, relatives, as well as broader social networks in terms of childcare and other family commitments (Teshome et al., 2019). In the context of Addis Ababa, family and extended social networks have been identified as essential contributors to childcare support, whereas changes in residential status, migration, or the perceived accessibility of relatives could diminish the availability of such services. In a similar vein, Bahiru and Mengistu (2018) identified family responsibilities and social and cultural expectations as barriers to the conciliation of work and family commitments among women in Addis Ababa. As a result, it is possible to suggest that WLB of mothers in terms of public sector employment is embedded in a framework of familial and social relationships in addition to the role of organizational conditions.

2.2.2.3 Economic factors:

It is possible that economic circumstances could influence the ability of mothers to combine employment and family commitments. A range of studies have identified the impact of a mother's income, financial commitments, housing, and the affordability of childcare and other services on the WLB of mothers (Kurtuluş et al., 2023; Opoku et al., 2022). For instance, in the context of Ethiopian employment, financial constraints could prompt an inclination to continue working while diminishing the ability to utilize paid childcare or other support services. In addition, research conducted on mothers in employment has identified a range of economic and employment-related conditions which are relevant to the conciliation of employment and family commitments (Yesuf et al., 2024). Thus, it is necessary to consider economic factors in conjunction with organizational and social determinants of WLB among mothers.

2.2.3 Coping Strategies

In addition to the aforementioned factors, mothers employ various coping strategies to deal with the competing demands of work, family, and social life. These strategies include relying on family members and social networks for childcare support, sharing domestic responsibilities, juggling between work and home duties, and utilizing available organizational interventions (Telayneh, 2019). Studies conducted in Addis Ababa showed that family and social networks can be relied upon to provide childcare services as a means of intervening in the absence of formal childcare options (Mulugeta, 2021). In addition to this, organizational childcare and other support services could be considered in bridging the conflict between work and home (Matias & Recharte, 2021).

2.3 Work–Life Balance in Ethiopia: Research Gaps

The interaction between social, organizational, and economic factors is a central theme in work–life balance research. Prior studies (Kurtuluş et al., 2023; Opoku et al., 2022) suggest that strengthening one dimension, such as organizational support, can indirectly alleviate pressures in other areas, such as social expectations. However, the interconnectedness of these factors has been little explored in the Ethiopian context. Existing research is limited in both number and scope, often focusing on job satisfaction, employer costs, or specific sectors such as banking and higher education (Yesuf et al., 2024; Getahun et al., 2023; Gebrekidan et al., 2021; Teshome et al., 2019). Consequently, these studies largely overlook the challenges faced by mothers in public sector roles, even though the public sector is the largest provider of wage employment in Ethiopia's service sector (Hundera et al., 2019; Bahiru & Mengistu, 2018; Telayneh, 2019; Teshome et al., 2019).

Furthermore, these studies, which primarily focus on employer-related factors such as organizational support, rarely distinguishes between mothers and non-mothers, and the intergenerational impact on children remains largely unexplored. Abebe and Assemie (2023) investigated factors influencing work–life quality and its effect on organizational commitment among academic staff in Ethiopian universities. Similarly, Yesuf et al. (2024) explored how the work environment and family–work resource spillover affect employees at the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research. Recognizing these gaps, the present study adopts a holistic framework that integrates social, economic, and organizational factors, with a particular focus on mothers employed in the federal public sector, the largest provider of wage employment in Ethiopia's service sector.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the determinants of work–life balance among female federal government employees in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, specifically mothers with at least one child under four. Guided by the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model, Ecological Systems Theory, and Role Theory, the quantitative component applied Partial Least Squares Structural

Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to test hypothesized relationships among economic, organizational, and social factors and their influence on work–life balance. Simultaneously, the qualitative component involved in-depth interviews with employees and key informants (KIIs) to explore coping strategies and the everyday challenges they face in balancing work, family, and social responsibilities.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. The study focused on selected federal government institutions located in Addis Ababa, where a substantial number of working mothers are employed and reside. As the administrative and political center of the country, Addis Ababa hosts a large concentration of federal government institutions and public-sector employees. The city therefore provides an appropriate setting for examining work–family experiences among mothers employed in the federal government sector.

3.3 Target population

The study population included female employees across twenty federal ministries and agency offices headquartered in Addis Ababa. According to Federal Civil Service Commission records, there were approximately 168,000 female employees in early 2024. The exact number of female employees with children under four was unavailable; therefore, the total workforce of 168,000 served as the sampling frame. Using the total population as a proxy is supported by survey sampling principles when the target subgroup size is unknown, provided inclusion criteria are applied during data collection to ensure only mothers with young children are included in the final sample (Kalton, 1983). Ethiopia's demographic profile, 41% under fifteen years, 55% between fifteen and sixty-five years, over 70% under thirty-five years, and a total fertility rate of 3.99 children per woman (Central Statistical Agency [CSA], 2016), indicates that a substantial proportion of female employees are likely to have young children. Selecting mothers with children under four aligns with Ethiopian preschool policies, as children cannot enroll in preschool until age four. Unlike older children who attend school during the day, children under four remain at home, increasing their mothers' caregiving responsibilities.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

A two-stage stratified random sampling technique was used for the quantitative component, while purposive sampling was applied for the qualitative component to ensure representativeness and reduce selection bias. In both phases, respondents were employed mothers with children under four. For the quantitative phase, stratification was applied across the 20 federal ministries, grouped by sector (e.g., finance, labor and social affairs, urban development). Within each sector, participants were randomly selected using employee identification numbers and a computer-generated random number sequence to ensure fairness and objectivity. For the qualitative phase, a smaller group of mothers with children under four was purposively selected to explore their experiences in balancing work and family responsibilities. Key informants from gender offices, human resources, and logistics departments were also included to provide institutional perspectives.

Using Yemane's formula ($N/[1 + Ne^2]$) with a 5% margin of error, the final quantitative sample comprised 400 respondents ($168,000/[1 + 168,000(0.05^2)] \approx 400$). For the qualitative component, 20 mothers were purposively selected for in-depth interviews, complemented by five key informants from the Gender Office, Human Resources, and Logistics departments to provide institutional perspectives. Inclusion criteria required participants to be actively employed in a federal office, have at least one child aged 0–4, and provide voluntary informed consent. Exclusion criteria encompassed part-time employees and those on extended leave during data collection.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

A structured questionnaire was developed to measure latent constructs, including Economic Factors (income adequacy, housing costs, inflation), Organizational Factors (flexible hours, daycare availability, transportation support), Social Factors (gender role expectations, family support, marital status), and Work–Life Balance (family life, social life, work life). Items were adapted from validated scales in prior WLB research (Kurtuluş et al., 2023) and pretested with 30 federal employees to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly Disagree” to 5 = “Strongly Agree”). For the qualitative component, semi-structured interview guides and open-ended questionnaires were used to explore participants' experiences with work–family conflict, coping strategies, and perceptions of organizational support. Key informants provided insights into institutional policies, perceived barriers, and potential interventions. Data collection occurred between March and April 2024. Quantitative questionnaires were self-administered during office hours in designated conference rooms, with trained data collectors available to clarify any items. Qualitative interviews were conducted in private meeting rooms, lasting 45–60 minutes each, audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim in Amharic, and subsequently translated into English for analysis.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were initially entered into SPSS 26 for cleaning, including handling missing values and detecting outliers, and subsequently imported into SmartPLS 4.0 for structural modeling. The analysis followed a two-step procedure. First, the Measurement Model Assessment evaluated indicator loadings, composite reliability ($CR > 0.70$), Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.70$), average variance extracted ($AVE > 0.50$), and discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion, $HTMT < 0.85$) to confirm construct reliability and validity. Second, Structural Model Testing assessed hypothesized paths ($H1$: Organizational $\rightarrow$ WLB; $H2$: Social $\rightarrow$ WLB; $H3$: Economic $\rightarrow$ WLB) using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to obtain path coefficients (β), t statistics, and p values. R^2 values measured explanatory power, while f^2 effect sizes gauged the relative contribution of each exogenous construct. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo 12. Initial open coding identified meaningful units related to economic strain, organizational barriers, social expectations, and coping strategies. Subsequent axial coding clustered these codes into themes that both corroborated and contextualized quantitative findings, including “economic hardship,” “rigid schedules,” and “informal support reliance.” Member checks (participant feedback sessions) enhanced credibility and ensured the interpretations reflected participants' experiences. Finally, a triangulation protocol aligned quantitative path model results with qualitative themes, providing a comprehensive understanding of how economic, organizational, and social factors interrelate to shape work–life balance among Ethiopian public sector mothers.

3.7 Measurement Model

3.7.1 Sources and Adoption Scale

The indicators for the constructs were adapted from previous studies, as detailed in the literature review and hypotheses development sections (Hundera et al., 2021; Yesuf et al., 2024; Mulugeta, 2021; Matias & Recharte, 2021; Fathima & Helan, 2019; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Demerouti et al., 2001). Table 1 presents the final list of indicators for each construct.

Table 1

Measurement Model: Constructs, Indicators, and Sources of Scale

Construct	Original Sources	Indicators	Notes on Alignment
Economic Factor (EF)	Hundera et al. (2021)	Income, Inflation, Housing Cost, Transportation Cost	Adapted to Ethiopian public sector context; indicators measured financial pressures relevant to WLB/
Organizational Factor (OF)	Yesuf et al. (2024); Mulugeta (2021)	Housing Service, Daycare Service, Flexible Working Hours, Transportation Service, Maternity Leave, Remote Working	Adapted to Ethiopian federal public sector practices; flexible working hours, housing, and daycare reflect available organizational support.
Social Factors (SF)	Matias & Recharte (2021); Fathima & Helan (2019)	Marital Status, Family Support, Social Security, Gender Role Expectations	Contextualized for Ethiopian cultural norms; marital status and family support included to reflect social determinants
Work-Life Balance (WLB)	Greenhaus & Powell, 2006, Bakker & Demerouti (2001);	Family Life, Social Life, Work Life	Indicators capture satisfaction across the three primary life domains.

3.7.2 PLS Path model

The structural relationships among the study constructs were examined using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). As illustrated in Figure 4, organizational, social, and economic factors were treated as independent (exogenous) variables, while work–life balance (WLB) functioned as the dependent (endogenous) variable. The measurement model, presented in Table 2, operationalizes each construct and confirms that the chosen indicators validly and reliably represent the underlying theoretical concepts. The overall model comprises 17 indicators across four constructs, offering a comprehensive view of the determinants influencing WLB. By combining the measurement and structural models, the analysis evaluates the hypothesized relationships and estimates the relative contribution of economic, organizational, and social factors to WLB outcomes among Ethiopian public sector mothers.

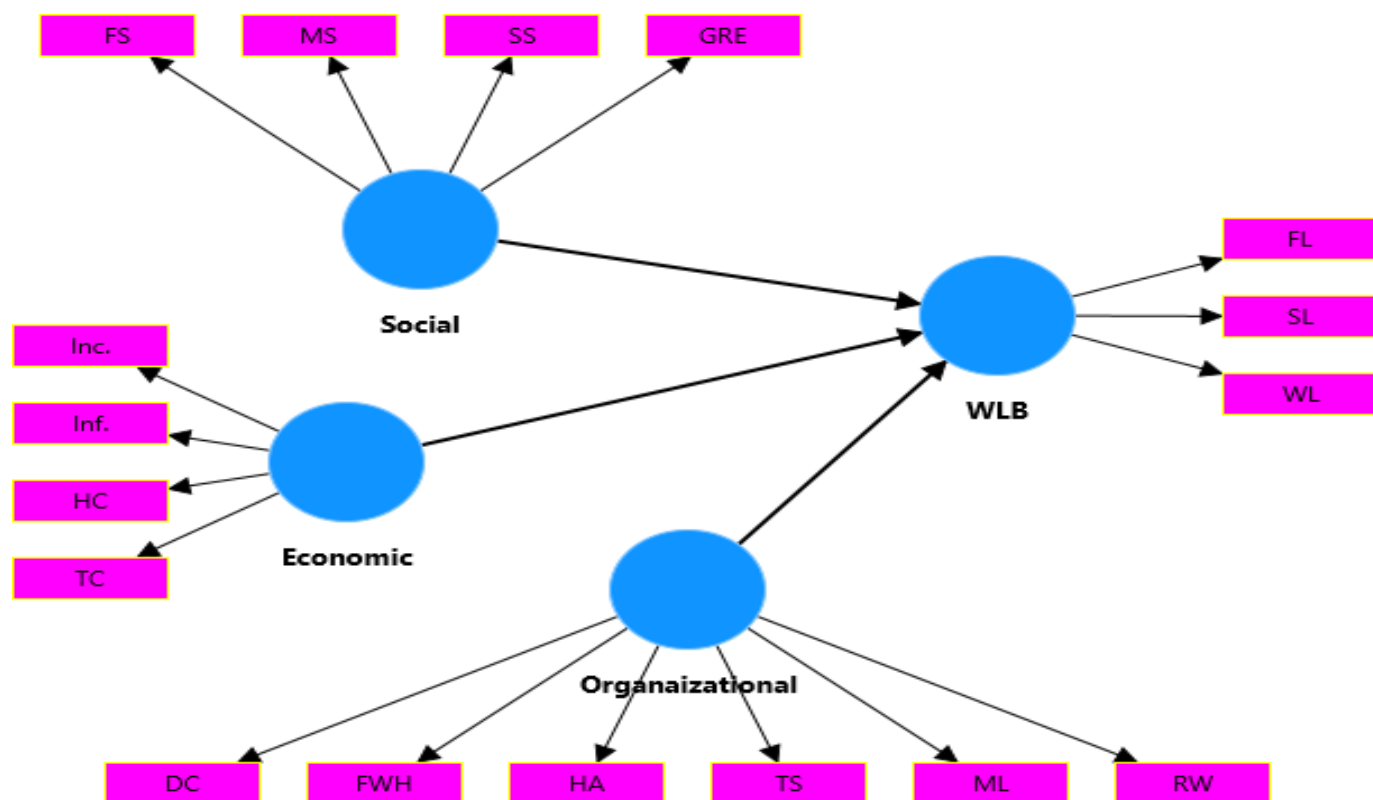


Figure 4
Path Model

Table 2
Measurement Model

Construct	Indicators	Model
Economic factors (Ef)	Income (Inc.)	Endogenous
	Inflation (Inf.)	
	Housing Cost (HC)	
	Transportation cost (TC)	
Social Factors (Sf)	Marital Status (MS)	Endogenous
	Family support (FS)	
	Social Security (SS)	
	Gender Role Expectation (GRE)	
Organizational Factors(Of)	Housing Service (HS)	Endogenous
	Daycare Service (DS)	
	Flexible working Hours (SWH)	
	Transportation Service (TS)	
	Maternal Leave (ML)	
	Remote Working (RW)	
Work-Life Balance	Family Life (FL)	Endogenous
	Social Life (SL)	
	Work Life (WL)	

3.7.3 Structural Model Analysis

The structural model analysis aims to evaluate the relationships between latent constructs and their influence on the dependent variable, WLB. This stage of analysis builds upon the validated measurement model, where Social, organizational, and economic factors were established as reliable and valid constructs. By examining the hypothesized paths, this analysis provides insights into the extent to which social, organizational, and economic factors determine the WLB of working mothers in the public organization of the federal government of Ethiopia. Path coefficients, t-statistics,

and p-values will be examined to test the hypotheses, while effect size (f^2) will provide further insights into the model's robustness and predictive capabilities. The results of the structural model analysis will offer both theoretical and practical implications for understanding the WLB challenges of women in the federal government organization and inform strategies for improving their coping strategies. 3.8 Ethical Considerations

3.8 Ethical Consideration

Ethical principles were followed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and participated voluntarily after providing informed consent. They were also informed that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained, and the information collected was used only for academic purposes. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant institutions before data collection.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

This study employed a mixed-methods design to examine the determinants of work–life balance among public employees in Ethiopia's federal organizations. By integrating qualitative narratives from in-depth and key informant interviews with quantitative structural equation modeling, the research captured both the lived experiences of participants and the statistical significance of key variables. The qualitative phase included 20 in-depth interviews with working mothers in public organizations and 5 key informant interviews. The quantitative phase involved a structured survey distributed to 470 respondents, of which 412 were returned. After excluding 21 incomplete responses, the final sample comprised 391 valid cases (97.75%). This figure is very close to the originally calculated sample size of 400, ensuring generalizability of the results at a 95% confidence level.

4.1.1 Major Determinants of Work–Life Balance Challenges

The qualitative analysis identified three major themes influencing work–life balance challenges among public-sector mothers. Economic constraints appeared as the most pressing concern. Participants frequently mentioned low wages, inflation, high housing costs, and increasing transportation expenses as constant stressors. Mothers with young children were particularly affected, as many could not afford dependable childcare or household help. One participant shared,

“Housemaids demand high salaries... frequent turnover affects my children's health” (Respondent 17, August 10, 2024)).

Her experience reflects a broader reality in which economic instability limits access to essential support services and disrupts family routines. This finding aligns with Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes how macro-level economic pressures shape individual well-being, family relationships, and the daily lives of working mothers. In this context, the strain created by economic hardship extends beyond financial limitations; it influences emotional security, work performance, and the overall welfare of both mothers and their children. Organizational barriers also played a significant role in shaping work–life balance challenges. Participants frequently mentioned rigid work schedules, the absence of on-site childcare, and long commutes exacerbated by high urban housing costs. One participant noted,

“Flexible hours or childcare services could ease my burdens, but they're unavailable at my office” (Respondent 4, August 8, 2024)

This statement highlights how limited organizational support intensifies job demands, increases stress, and complicates the challenge of managing multiple roles for public employee mothers in the study area. According to the Job-Demand Resource (JD-R) Model, when job demands are not balanced by adequate resources, employees are at a higher risk of burnout. This dynamic can adversely affect overall well-being, and the impact is particularly pronounced for mothers in low-income countries, who are expected to fulfill multiple roles both at home and in the workplace. Social pressures emerged through gendered expectations, with women often expected to prioritize caregiving despite professional responsibilities. Many participants relied on informal networks, particularly elderly parents or other relatives, for childcare support. However, these arrangements were frequently unsustainable. One participant reflected,

“I rely on my elderly mother... but I worry about her health” (Respondent 8, September 6, 2024).

This example illustrates how deeply entrenched social norms intersect with economic and organizational constraints, intensifying role strain for women. As highlighted in the background section, women in Ethiopia disproportionately shoulder childcare responsibilities compared to men, while simultaneously being expected to fulfill their office duties. This dynamic aligns with Role Theory, which posits that conflicting social expectations and limited support increase the challenge of managing multiple roles, particularly for public employee mothers in resource-constrained environments.

4.1.2 Coping Strategies Adopted by Working Mothers

Participants described a variety of strategies to manage the competing demands of work, family, and social responsibilities. Relying on family and social networks: Many participants leaned on family members, particularly elderly parents, for childcare and household support. Neighbors and friends sometimes assisted, though such help was informal and often unpredictable. One participant reflected,

“I rely on my elderly mother for childcare, but I often worry about her health. This is the stage in her life that I am supposed to be taking care of her, not the other way around” (Respondent 10, September, 8, 2024).

These informal networks can provide temporary relief but cannot fully address structural constraints. Mothers navigate these overlapping pressures, social expectations, economic limitations, and workplace demands, often making difficult choices to manage both family and work responsibilities. These strategies highlight the resilience and adaptability of public employee mothers, even within a context where systemic support is limited. Sacrificing personal and social life: Some mothers reported giving up personal and social activities to manage the demands of work and family responsibilities. One participant shared,

“I no longer go out or meet friends like I used to. After work, I usually attend to my child, and I barely have time for myself. Even weekends are spent catching up on housework or office tasks, which I bring home” (Respondent 7, August, 20 2024).

This account illustrates that coping often comes at the expense of personal well-being. The need to prioritize work and family duties over social and leisure activities reflects the heavy cumulative burden of overlapping roles. For public employee mothers in the study area, these sacrifices are compounded by limited organizational support and societal expectations, highlighting the complex interplay between individual, social, and workplace demands. Prioritizing work over family responsibilities: Several participants described reallocating their time and emotional energy to meet work demands, often at the expense of family life. One participant noted that extended work hours or office responsibilities frequently left little time to engage with children or attend to household needs. This pattern illustrates how organizational and economic pressures compel mothers to make difficult trade-offs, intensifying role conflict. It highlights the hidden costs of balancing multiple responsibilities, showing that coping strategies, while necessary, often carry consequences for both personal well-being and family functioning. Sharing resources and responsibilities: Some participants coordinated childcare and household tasks with neighbors or colleagues to ease daily pressures. One participant explained,

“I share the school drop-off duties with my neighbor, who works nearby. This small help makes a big difference in managing my morning routines” (Respondent 14, September, 9, 2024).

While such arrangements provided temporary relief, participants emphasized that these strategies could not fully overcome the structural limitations of workplaces or meet societal expectations. These experiences illustrate how working mothers creatively navigate constraints, relying on informal networks to manage responsibilities, yet still face persistent role strain due to insufficient systemic support

4.2 Structural Equation Model Analysis

The quantitative analysis employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine the relationships between economic, organizational, and social factors and work-life balance among public employees. The analysis included both measurement and structural models. Evaluating the measurement model is a critical step in SEM, as it verifies that the constructs used in the study are valid and reliable representations of the underlying theoretical framework. Establishing construct reliability and validity ensures that subsequent structural model results are interpretable and meaningful. The results of the measurement model assessment, including indicator loadings, composite reliability, and convergent validity, are presented below.

Discriminatory Test: The discriminant validity of the measurement model was assessed to ensure that each construct is empirically distinct from the others. This evaluation was conducted using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which requires that the square root of each construct's average variance extracted (AVE) exceeds its correlations with other constructs. As shown in Table 3, the square root of the AVE for each construct is greater than its correlations with all other constructs. This finding confirms that the constructs are empirically distinct and indicates that the measurement model is suitable for subsequent structural analysis. Establishing discriminant validity strengthens confidence in the reliability of the hypothesized relationships and supports meaningful interpretation of the SEM results.

Table 3*Discriminant validity Fornell-Larcker*

	Economic	Organizational	Social	WLB
Economic	0.817			
Organizational	0.581	0.799		
Social	0.646	0.755	0.805	
WLB	0.746	0.784	0.788	1

Test of Reliability and Validity Metrics: Table 4 presents the evaluation of the constructs using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (ρ_a and ρ_c), and average variance extracted (AVE) to assess internal consistency and convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values for all constructs exceed 0.7, indicating consistent and reliable measurement. Similarly, AVE values are above 0.5, confirming that each construct captures sufficient variance from its indicators. These results demonstrate strong reliability and convergent validity, providing a robust foundation for the subsequent structural model analysis. Ensuring both internal consistency and adequate variance capture enhances confidence in the accuracy and interpretability of the hypothesized relationships within the SEM framework.

Table 4*Reliability and Validity Metrics*

	Cronbach's alpha	ρ_a	ρ_c	AVE
Economic	0.751	0.751	0.858	0.668
Organizational	0.812	0.858	0.875	0.638
Social	0.819	0.826	0.880	0.647
WLB	0.740	0.745	0.852	0.658

Indicators Value and Analysis: Figure 4 and Table 5 present the relationships between indicators and their respective constructs, assessed using PLS-SEM. Among economic factors, income exerted the strongest influence on work-life balance (loading = 0.825; $t = 20.351$; $p < 0.001$), followed by inflation (0.784) and housing costs (0.738), reflecting the economic pressures faced by working mothers. Transportation costs (0.695) further highlighted the burden associated with daily commuting and its impact on balancing work and family responsibilities. For organizational factors, housing assistance demonstrated the largest positive effect (loading = 0.862), alleviating domestic challenges. Daycare services (0.772), flexible working hours (0.713), maternal leave (0.710), and transportation support (0.697) also contributed positively. While remote work was statistically significant, its practical effectiveness in Ethiopia is constrained by infrastructural and social limitations, limiting its potential as a coping mechanism.

Among social factors, marital status showed the greatest influence on work-life balance (loading = 0.857), followed by family support (0.815), both highly significant. Social security (0.781) and gender role expectations (0.762) also played important roles, emphasizing how social norms and support systems shape the work-life experiences of public employee mothers. Regarding work-life balance dimensions, family life emerged as the most critical (loading = 0.847), followed by social life (0.796) and work-life (0.790), highlighting that familial responsibilities remain central to the challenges faced by working mothers in Ethiopia.

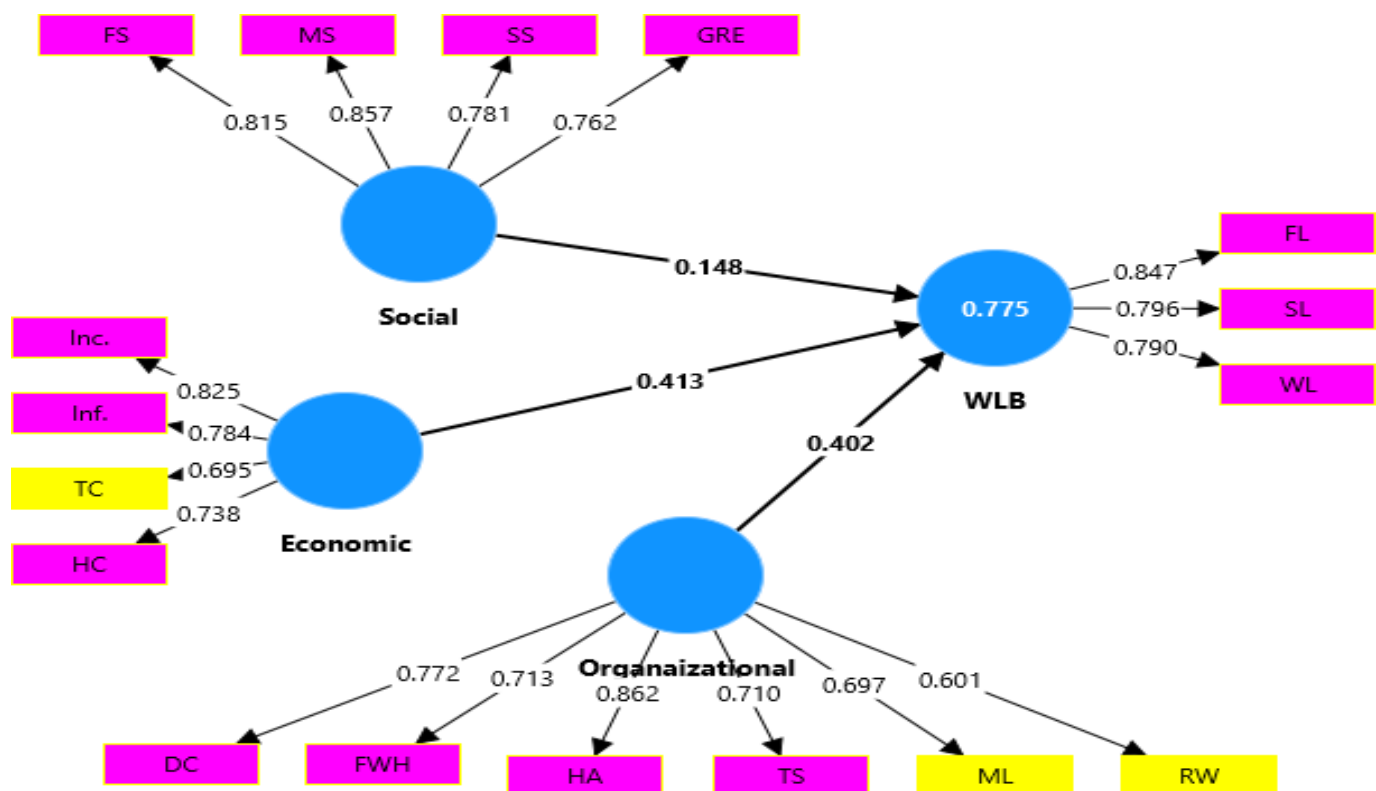


Figure 4
Measurement model result

Table 5
Significance of Loading value

	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation	T- statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
DC <- Organizational	0.767	0.051	15.144	0.000
FL <- WLB	0.847	0.028	29.769	0.000
FS <- Social	0.817	0.029	28.547	0.000
FWH <- Organizational	0.709	0.091	7.834	0.000
GRE <- Social	0.759	0.067	11.443	0.000
HA <- Organizational	0.865	0.021	40.718	0.000
HC <- Economic	0.736	0.054	13.685	0.000
Inc. <- Economic	0.824	0.041	20.351	0.000
Inf. <- Economic	0.777	0.065	12.141	0.000
ML <- Organizational	0.694	0.073	9.488	0.000
MS <- Social	0.854	0.037	23.033	0.000
RW <- Organizational	0.592	0.099	6.056	0.000
SL <- WLB	0.795	0.049	16.107	0.000
SS <- Social	0.777	0.055	14.153	0.000
TC <- Economic	0.692	0.080	8.657	0.000
TS <- Organizational	0.712	0.059	12.100	0.000
WL <- WLB	0.787	0.061	12.907	0.000

Dropping Low-Loading Indicators: Transportation cost, remote working, and maternity leave were excluded from the final model because they contributed little to predicting the work–life balance of employed mothers in Ethiopia’s public sector. In the initial conceptual framework, transportation cost was considered part of the economic factors; however, the analysis revealed a weak contribution compared with variables such as income, housing cost, and inflation, which demonstrated stronger and more significant effects. A likely explanation is that most respondents rely

on public transportation, primarily crowded buses and trains, rather than private vehicles. Thus, in the Ethiopian context, transportation-related challenges are driven more by safety concerns and long commuting times than by cost.

Similarly, although remote working is widely recognized in the Job Demand–Resource (JD-R) model as a valuable resource for enhancing work–life balance, it is less applicable in the Ethiopian public sector due to limited information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and the nature of government office operations. In many developed countries, remote work is a key organizational policy tool, particularly benefiting mothers of infants after maternity leave. In contrast, the Ethiopian context highlights how macroeconomic and organizational conditions influence the practical implementation of such policies, reflecting insights from Ecological Systems Theory and the JD-R framework.

Maternity leave, while important, was also dropped from the model. In Ethiopia, maternity leave typically lasts only four months (one month before and three months after childbirth). Since most respondents had children under four years of age, maternity leave did not substantially influence their ongoing work–life balance experiences. In comparison, countries such as those in Scandinavia provide longer leave periods, mitigating some of the challenges faced by working mothers. Including these variables in the initial model, based on prior literature, allows for comparison and illustrates how the Ethiopian low-resource context differs from higher-resource settings. The revised measurement model (Figure 5) confirms that the retained indicators make significant contributions to their respective constructs. Among economic and social factors, income and marital status emerged as the most influential determinants of work–life balance. Within the organizational dimension, housing assistance and daycare services were particularly critical. Overall, family life appeared as the most dominant aspect of work–life balance priorities.

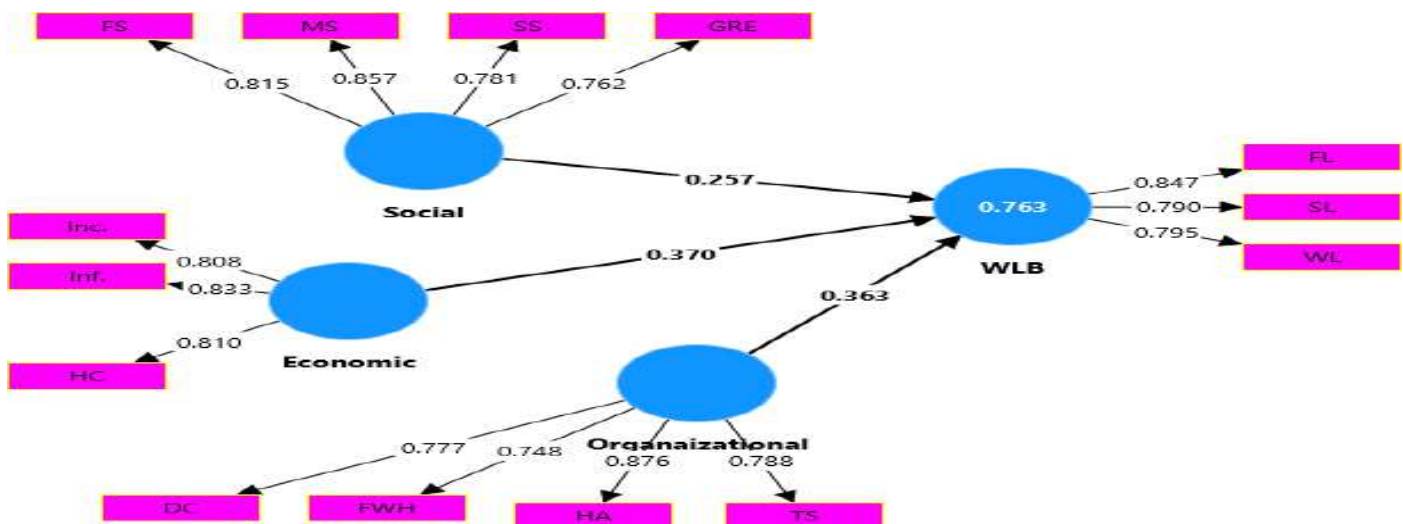


Figure 5
Revised Path model

The Structural Model Analysis: The structural model analysis included multicollinearity diagnostics to ensure that the predictor variables were sufficiently independent, allowing each factor to contribute uniquely to work–life balance (WLB). By examining both the direct effects and the overall predictive power of the model, this analysis identifies the relative influence of economic, social, and organizational factors on WLB among public-sector mothers. Beyond statistical evaluation, this approach provides insight into how these determinants interact in real-life contexts, highlighting which factors are most critical in shaping WLB. This understanding is particularly relevant in Ethiopia, where macroeconomic pressures, organizational constraints, and entrenched social norms jointly influence mothers' ability to balance work and family responsibilities.

4.3 Collinearity Test: Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) Analysis

Multicollinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with the following thresholds: $VIF < 3.0$ indicates low multicollinearity, VIF between 3.0 and 5.0 suggests moderate multicollinearity requiring careful interpretation, and $VIF > 5.0$ signals high multicollinearity requiring remedial action. As shown in Table 6, the VIF test revealed that economic and organizational factors have acceptable values, indicating no multicollinearity issues. Social factors displayed moderate multicollinearity, but the VIF values remain within tolerable limits for structural equation modeling. Overall, the predictors are sufficiently distinct to contribute uniquely to the model, allowing their effects on work–life balance to be interpreted confidently. This analysis confirms that the model is robust and can proceed to structural modeling without concerns about severe collinearity.

Table 6*Collinearity Test (VIF)*

	VIF
Economic -> WLB	1.749
Organizational -> WLB	2.887
Social -> WLB	3.284

R-Square and Adjusted R-Square Analysis

The R-squared and adjusted R-squared values (Table 7) provide insight into the explanatory power of the structural model, showing how effectively the predictor constructs account for variance in the dependent variable, work–life balance (WLB). The model produced an R-squared value of 0.763, indicating that 76.3% of the variance in WLB is explained by the combined influence of economic, organizational, and social factors. This high R-squared value demonstrates strong explanatory power, suggesting that the model effectively captures the majority of variance in WLB among public-sector mothers. The adjusted R-squared value (0.754) accounts for the number of predictors relative to the sample size. The slight reduction from 0.763 reflects a correction for potential overfitting, confirming that the model remains robust and generalizable. Overall, these findings indicate that the selected determinants provide a meaningful and comprehensive representation of the factors shaping work–life balance in the Ethiopian context.

Table 7*R-Square and Adjusted R-Square results*

	R-square	R-square adjusted
WLB	0.763	0.754

F-Square Analysis

The f-squared (f^2) metric assesses the effect size of each predictor construct on the dependent variable, work–life balance (WLB). This metric quantifies the contribution of each predictor to the overall R-squared value, highlighting the relative importance of economic, organizational, and social factors. Common thresholds for interpreting f^2 are: 0.02–0.15 for a small effect, 0.15–0.35 for a medium effect, and values above 0.35 indicating a large effect (Cohen, 1988).

Table 8*The F-Square results*

	WLB
Economic	0.329
Organaizational	0.192
Social	0.085
WLB	

As shown in Table 8, economic factors demonstrated a medium-to-large effect on WLB ($f^2 = 0.329$), suggesting that financial pressures, including income limitations, high inflation, and rising housing costs—exert a stronger influence on the work–life balance of public-sector mothers than either organizational or social factors. Organizational factors displayed a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.192$), highlighting the meaningful role of workplace policies such as housing assistance, daycare services, and flexible working hours. Social factors showed a small effect size ($f^2 = 0.085$), indicating that constructs like family support, social security, and marital status contribute to WLB but have a relatively smaller impact compared to economic and organizational determinants. These results provide insight into the hierarchy of influences on work–life balance in Ethiopia, stressing the dominant role of economic pressures while still acknowledging the importance of workplace resources and social support.

4.3.1 Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing was conducted to evaluate the three proposed hypotheses, which posited that: Favorable workplace policies and organizational support systems positively predict work–life balance (WLB), Positive social expectations regarding gender roles and a supportive social environment positively predict WLB, and Economic conditions positively predict WLB. The results, presented in Figure 6 and Table 9, indicate that all three hypotheses were supported.

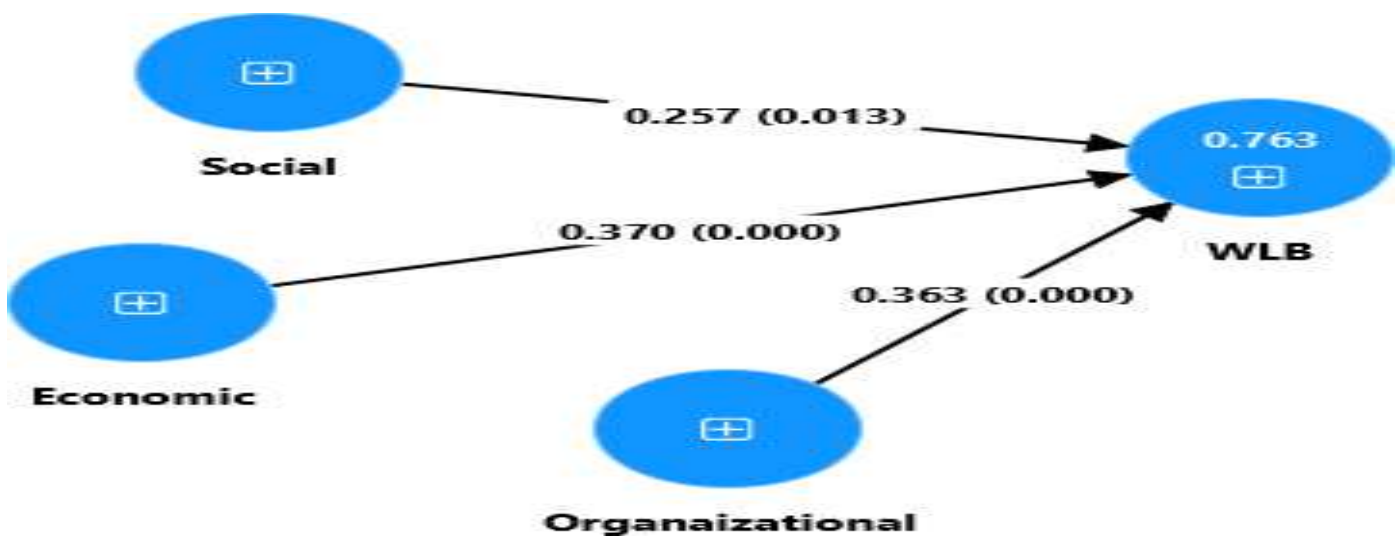


Figure 6
Structural Model with Path Coefficients

Table 9
Hypothesis test result

Hypothesis	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T-statistics	P values	Decision
H3: Economic → WLB	0.366	0.078	4.710	0.000	Supported
H1: Organizational → WLB	0.363	0.080	4.542	0.013	Supported
H2: Social → WLB	0.261	0.104	2.471	0.000	Supported

Among the predictors, economic factors emerged as the strongest determinant of WLB, demonstrating high statistical significance. Organizational factors also exhibited a significant positive effect, highlighting the meaningful role of workplace resources such as housing assistance, daycare services, and flexible working hours. Social factors, although statistically significant, exerted a comparatively smaller influence, reflecting the limited but meaningful role of family support, social security, and marital status. Overall, these findings confirm that economic, organizational, and social determinants each contribute to shaping the work-life balance of Ethiopian public employee mothers, with economic pressures having the most substantial effect. The results underscore the need to consider macro-level economic conditions, organizational policies, and social support structures simultaneously when addressing work-life balance challenges among public-sector mothers.

4.4 Discussion

4.4.1 Summary and Interpretation of Results

Understanding the factors shaping work-life balance (WLB) among public-sector mothers in Ethiopia requires examining the interplay of economic, organizational, and social pressures. The study found that economic constraints were the strongest predictor of poor WLB ($\beta = 0.370$, $p < 0.001$), with income (0.820), inflation (0.784), and housing costs (0.738) showing the highest factor loadings. Qualitative data reinforced this finding: participants described how low wages and unaffordable housing limited access to childcare and increased daily stress. As one respondent explained, “Housemaids demand high salaries... frequent turnover affects my children’s health” (Respondent-3, September 6, 2024). These experiences highlight how macro-level economic pressures, central to Ecological Systems Theory, shape mothers’ daily decisions and constrain their ability to manage both professional and family responsibilities.

Organizational factors ranked second in influence ($\beta = 0.363$), particularly housing assistance (0.862) and daycare services (0.772). Interviews revealed that rigid work schedules and long commutes, often linked to high urban housing costs, further exacerbated work-life conflict. One participant noted, “Flexible hours or childcare services could ease my burdens, but they’re unavailable at my office” (Respondent-4). Interpreted through the Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) Model, the absence of organizational supports amplifies job demands, increasing stress and constraining mothers’ ability to balance competing roles. Although remote work is widely promoted internationally, its impact was limited (loading = 0.601), reflecting Ethiopia’s infrastructural constraints and limited digital readiness.

Social factors, while quantitatively less influential ($\beta = 0.257$), remained meaningful. Marital status (0.857) and family support (0.815) were significant, yet caregiving expectations remained highly gendered. Participants often relied on elderly parents or relatives for childcare, but these arrangements were frequently unsustainable: “I rely on my elderly mother... but I worry about her health” (Respondent-10). Role Theory helps explain this, showing how entrenched social norms assign women primary responsibility for family and caregiving, while limited economic and organizational resources exacerbate role strain. Across both quantitative and qualitative data, mothers consistently prioritized family life (loading = 0.847) over social (0.796) and professional (0.790) domains. Many participants reported sacrificing social engagements to maintain family cohesion, reflecting Ethiopia’s cultural emphasis on family responsibilities. Importantly, this prioritization should be interpreted as a coping strategy within structural constraints, rather than reduced commitment to professional roles. Work schedules and deliverables are largely non-negotiable, whereas social activities offer comparatively more flexibility to adjust around work and family demands.

4.4.2 Situating Findings with Global and Regional Literatures

When viewed in the context of global and regional research, these findings are largely consistent with patterns observed in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where economic constraints are frequently reported as the primary stressor (Begum et al., 2024; Mahirah et al., 2021; Wassie et al., 2024; Ewerling et al., 2020; Gebremariam et al., 2020). In particular, income inadequacy and rising inflation echo the observations of Pennings (2022), who noted that escalating living costs destabilize household budgets in Ethiopia. While parental leave and other organizational policies often significantly shape WLB outcomes in high-income countries (Yesuf et al., 2024), Ethiopian mothers face additional structural pressures, such as high housing costs (loading = 0.738), reflecting the acute urban housing crisis in Addis Ababa (Getahun et al., 2023). Fragmented social safety nets in LMICs further exacerbate caregiving challenges, particularly for single mothers (Wassie et al., 2024).

Findings related to organizational factors align with evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the critical role of housing assistance and daycare services in supporting working mothers (International Labour Organization, 2021). In contrast, remote work had a limited effect in Ethiopia compared with high-income countries, largely due to infrastructural gaps and cultural resistance to flexible arrangements (Attar et al., 2021). Social factors reflect deeply entrenched gendered caregiving expectations. Ethiopian women often experience additional pressures to conceal workplace stress to avoid familial stigma. Across contexts, the consistent prioritization of family life over social and professional domains aligns with studies from Sub-Saharan Africa (Opoku et al., 2022; Hundera et al., 2019), emphasizing the cultural importance of familial obligations. Importantly, while these findings corroborate trends in LMICs, they also extend theoretical understanding by illustrating how macroeconomic pressures, limited organizational supports, and culturally specific gender norms intersect in Ethiopia, producing challenges to role balance for public employee mothers in Ethiopia.

4.4.3 Cross-Regional Perspectives: Work-Life Balance: Insights from Asia, Europe, and Africa

Building on the global and regional trends discussed above, it is useful to examine work–life balance (WLB) from a comparative perspective across Asia, Europe, and Africa. Although the concept of WLB originated in Western societies, its meaning, associated challenges, and policy responses vary considerably across regions, reflecting differences in economic conditions, cultural norms, and institutional frameworks. In Ethiopia, economic pressures, such as low income, inflation, high housing costs, and weak infrastructure—combined with limited organizational support, make it challenging for public-sector mothers to balance professional and family responsibilities. In contrast, stronger institutional frameworks and social welfare systems in Europe promote greater gender equality and workplace flexibility. European public institutions often implement family-friendly policies, supported by stable economies and progressive social norms (Cuéllar-Molina et al., 2018; Stoilova et al., 2020). Nevertheless, European women are not entirely free from work–life conflicts; social expectations and organizational cultures continue to influence their well-being. For example, a comparative study between Germany and the United States found that working mothers in both countries experience cultural pressures, although U.S. mothers tend to prioritize flexibility and personal well-being more strongly, whereas younger German mothers report greater strain due to stricter workplace expectations (Genkova & Wieser, 2016).

In Indonesia, state intervention and corporate culture play a decisive role in shaping work–life balance policies. Singapore’s Work-Life Grant and the Tripartite Standard on Flexible Work Arrangements promote flexibility through fiscal incentives and accountability mechanisms (Supadmi et al., 2024). Similarly, Japan’s Work Style Reform Law and Child Care and Family Care Leave Law aim to reduce overwork and address gender disparities, although traditional norms continue to limit progress. Compared with these countries, Ethiopia’s decentralized and under-resourced public sector lacks the institutional capacity to provide similar support. While women in both contexts face cultural expectations to prioritize domestic duties, East Asian women benefit from broader institutional assistance.

Unlike Ethiopian mothers, whose stressors primarily stem from housing costs and low wages, South Asian women identify the lack of flexible working arrangements as their most significant constraint. A similar pattern is

observed in Southeast Asia, where Indonesian working mothers report higher rates of child stunting, closely linked to inadequate breastfeeding and limited time for childcare (Supadmi et al., 2024). In Ethiopia, only 20–25% of employed mothers sustain exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) for six months, mainly due to inflexible work schedules and insufficient workplace support (Gebrekidan et al., 2021).

Within Africa, experiences in Kenya and Nigeria closely mirror those in Ethiopia. Deeply rooted patriarchal norms continue to shape both formal and informal workplace practices, restricting women's access to decision-making and limiting time and resources for childcare and career advancement (Mwangi et al., 2018; Nwagbara, 2020). Unlike Europe, North America, or parts of Asia, where supportive workplace policies and welfare systems are more established, most African women lack comparable institutional and socioeconomic supports. This absence intensifies stress and increases risks to women's mental and physical health, as well as that of their families and communities.

Although similar patterns are observed across Africa, Ethiopia's situation remains particularly concerning. For example, while 58% of Ethiopian infants are exclusively breastfed until six months (Central Statistical Agency, 2016), only 20–25% of working mothers manage to maintain exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) for the same period due to inflexible work schedules and unsupportive workplace environments (Gebrekidan et al., 2021). This gap highlights Ethiopia's lag in policy responsiveness compared with regional peers. Kenya, for instance, has reduced maternal attrition by 18% through the introduction of workplace lactation rooms (Mwangi et al., 2018). In contrast, Ethiopia allocates merely 0.01% of its GDP to childcare and early childhood education, less than one-third of the Sub-Saharan African average (Rabee, 2023).

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Work–life balance among female public employees in Ethiopia is shaped by the interaction of economic, organizational, and sociocultural forces. Low salaries, high housing costs, limited transport, and inflation restrict women's ability to meet both work and family demands, creating stress and fatigue. Organizational barriers, rigid schedules, long commutes, and scarce childcare intensify these pressures, while weak infrastructure and unclear policies make remote work ineffective. Cultural expectations still place caregiving mainly on women, and informal family support, though common, is often unreliable and emotionally draining. These realities show that individual coping strategies alone cannot solve the problem. Policy measures are required to build supportive and equitable workplaces. Broader gender and development policies should go beyond access to education to ensure women's retention and advancement in the labor market. Expanding women's participation in higher education must be matched by initiatives that sustain their employment and career growth. Integrating early-childhood care and education with labor and gender policies would reduce women's dual burden and strengthen families. Such coordinated action can promote women's empowerment, enhance child well-being, and contribute to inclusive national development.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to improve work–life balance among mothers employed in Ethiopia's public sector. First, the government should strengthen access to affordable and reliable childcare services, particularly for employees with young children. Investment in workplace childcare facilities, community-based childcare services, and partnerships with private childcare providers could help reduce the burden of childcare on working mothers. Housing support and appropriate salary adjustments should also be considered, especially for employees facing high living and childcare costs. Second, public institutions should introduce and strengthen flexible work arrangements where the nature of the job allows. Flexible working hours, supportive leave arrangements, and workplace childcare facilities could help employees better manage their work and family responsibilities. Public institutions should also create a supportive working environment in which employees can discuss family-related responsibilities without fear of negative consequences for their careers.

Third, greater attention should be given to gender equality within households and workplaces. Awareness programmes can encourage shared responsibility for childcare and domestic work between women and men. Community-based initiatives may also help strengthen informal support systems for working mothers, particularly where formal childcare services are limited. Finally, addressing work–family challenges requires cooperation among government institutions, employers, communities, the private sector, and development partners. Policies should consider not only women's employment but also maternal well-being, child health and development, and the broader social and economic benefits of supporting working families. Coordinated action in these areas can contribute to creating a more supportive working environment for mothers in Ethiopia's public sector.

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