

WORK-PERSONAL LIFE BALANCE AMONG SOCIAL WORKERS

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Abstract: *This paper examines the balance between professional and personal life among social workers in Bihor County. Factors influencing this balance, as well as modalities to maintain this balance, are explored. The research methodology involves interview-based surveys with 29 social workers from various organizations from the public and private sector. The study reveals a fragile work-personal life balance because of long working hours, overload with tasks and fatigue. The imbalance leads to stress and conflicts. Findings highlight that the support offered by family is an important factor in maintaining this balance among social workers. Also, there is the need for organizational support through flexible schedules and training.*

Key words: *work-personal life balance, social workers, work, family.*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, individuals face an increasingly difficult challenge in successfully fulfilling various roles and finding a balance between professional responsibilities and personal and family priorities. The optimal, functional balance is different for each employee and involves self-awareness and making appropriate decisions about work and personal life. The distribution of household tasks among family members and the perception of women's role in society also has an important impact. In Romania, most often family obligations remain the responsibility of women, especially those of taking care of children, the disabled or the elderly.

An analysis of the quality of life in Romania in European context (Pop and Mihalache, 2018) indicates the following: the balance between professional life and family life is largely unbalanced; two thirds of the respondents declared that, at least several times a month, they come home from work too tired to perform the necessary household activities; long working hours affect the fulfillment of family duties in the case of more than half of the respondents (above the European average); over a third of respondents

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(almost double than the European average) said it was difficult for them to concentrate at work because of family responsibilities.

The practice of social work involves, most of the time, complex, emotionally, and mentally demanding situations. The present paper tackles the challenges faced by social workers in maintaining the balance between multiple roles they have, how they manage to maintain this balance and its benefits, respectively the consequences of the conflict between professional and personal life.

2. Factors influencing Work-personal Life balance and the Benefits of this Balance

Kirchmeyer defines work-life balance (WLB) as 'achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains and to do so requires personal resources such as energy, time, and commitment to be well distributed across domains' (Kirchmeyer, 2000, p. 80). WLB is 'the extent to which an individual is engaged in - and equally satisfied with - his or her work role and family role' (Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw, 2003, p. 513). Kalliath and Brought (2008) consider that work-life balance is "the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities" (Kalliath and Brough, 2008, p. 326).

Vyas and Shrivastava (2017) identified eleven factors influencing work-personal life balance: social support, organizational issues, stress, information technology, work demands, family responsibilities, social issues, supportive factors from the organization, work overload, individual issues, and lack of knowledge. The first four were found to have the greatest impact on an individual's work-personal life balance.

The results of another study show that there is a positive relationship between emotional intelligence, work engagement and organizational support for employees regarding their work-personal life balance. These findings suggest that organizations should take steps to improve these three factors (Muthu, Pangil, and Faizuniah, 2015).

According to Brough (Brough et al., 2020) balance between personal and professional life is associated with three types of antecedents: work-related (job demands - working time, task difficulty, relationships with colleagues and superiors; job resources - e.g. job flexibility, attention, optimism, strength), family-related demands and resources (e.g. partner /family support, spending quality time with children, caring for children and/or aging parents) and other non-work-related (level of education and social-economic status; personality-related antecedents such as self-efficacy, hope, resilience).

At the organizational level, policies encouraging balance ("family friendly") offer a flexible work schedule, reduced work time, remote work, health benefits for the employee and family members, childcare facilities, and also "moral" or „emotional" support through mentoring, interest and encouragement coming from the organization (Neguţ, 2019; Iacovoiu, 2020; Roche and Baskerville, 2022).

The benefits of work-life balance include increased quality of life for employees, higher organizational performance, improved productivity, work satisfaction, and problem-solving skills (Kashyap and Kaur, 2021). Furthermore, it can also contribute to increased female employment and birth rates (Neguţ, 2019). Adopting policies that support work-personal life balance brings advantages like improved productivity,

reduced staff turnover, and increased ability to attract new employees (Kodz, Harper, and Dench, 2002).

In social work, maintaining the balance between professional and personal life involves building a healthy professional relationship with clients, maintaining boundaries, and caring for one's own needs (Marc, Makai Dimeny, and Bacter, 2019).

According to Robak and Słocińska (2015, p. 144) WLB is influenced by the social work environment “understood as formal relationships connected with the hierarchical and task dependencies, as well as informal relationships, based on personal contacts between the employees”. Thus, aspects such as leadership style, open communication, relationship with the supervisor and colleagues, respect for the employee's needs and rights are important.

A recent study (Barck-Holst et al., 2022) shows that after reducing their working hours the balance between the professional and private lives of the social workers improved, and they experienced improved mood, an increased control over private life demands and a larger capacity to meet private demands.

The first nationally representative research among social workers in Romania (Lazăr, Dégi, and Iovu, 2016) outlined that a large part of them consider that work keeps them away from their family for too long; however, they still manage to maintain a balance and work problems do not affect their family life so much.

3. Maintaining Professional life-personal Life Balance. A Perspective of Social Workers from Bihor County

Research objectives. The study aimed to analyse the work-personal life balance among social workers in Bihor County, focusing on identifying influencing factors and modalities to maintain the balance. Accordingly, the research objectives are the following: identifying the factors that influence the balance between professional and personal life among social workers and identifying the modalities in which the balance between professional and personal life can be maintained.

Research methodology. The method used was the interview-based survey, and the data collection was done through structured individual interviews. The data collection tool, the interview guide, was structured on two dimensions: factors that influence work-personal life balance and its benefits, respectively, modalities to maintain work-personal life balance. Data collection took place between April 20 and May 15, 2023, using structured individual interviews.

Study participants. The total number of participants was of 29 social workers, 16 participants from public institutions, 1 working in individual social work practice, and 12 from non-governmental organizations, all working in Bihor County. Of these, 6 occupy management positions, while the rest are executive staff. 26 of the participants were women and 3 men, 14 of them coming from the urban environment and 15 from the rural environment. 19 were married and 3 were living in consensual cohabitation. Regarding caregiving responsibilities, 10 study participants reported having people they take care of, one - elderly, and 9 - minor children. Nine of the subjects have two jobs and the cumulative working hours reach a minimum of 44 hours/week - a maximum of

77/week, 12 declare that they work an additional 2-4 hours/day.

All study participants have multiple roles, both professional and personal, within or outside the family. Thus, six social workers have management positions, such as manager or coordinator. Within the family, the interviewees have different roles, such as husband/wife/partner, parent, daughter, sister, grandmother/grandfather, niece and are responsible for organizing and managing the household. Outside the family, they take on the roles of friend and volunteer (participating in social activities, in church etc.), learner/student and active member of the community.

Regarding their professional role, social workers referred both to the performance of the tasks imposed by the position, as well as to those that are not related to the job description and the profession of social worker. „Responsibility”, „learning”, „development” and „assumption” are the main terms that have been used related to performing professional roles.

On a personal level, fulfilling the roles requires both the availability and physical involvement of the respondents and decision-making, as well as the emotional, affective component (listening, support).

3.1. Research result.

The collected data were interpreted using the thematic analysis.

Factors that influence work-personal life balance and its benefits

To express the significance of professional and private life balance the respondents used words such as „purpose”, „harmony”, „state of comfort”, „inner state of well-being”, „satisfaction” and correlated them with the achievement of objectives, prioritization of tasks, energy and sufficient time, lack of stress, concentration, and personal capacity/skills. 3 responses offered by the subjects indicate that achieving this balance remains a wish for some social workers. „*It means that state of reconciliation, normality, naturalness, where there is no trace of regret and guilt regarding the time allocated either to professional life or to private life*” (F, NGO, urban). „*For me the balance between professional life/private life means prioritizing in a balanced way the demands of the career and the demands of the personal life, but which I end up looking at as a luxury, an impossible goal to achieve*” (F, public institution, rural).

Regarding the factors that influence this balance, most subjects focused on work-related aspects (schedule, demands, interactions), with only five respondents referring to family aspects. Thus, the following negatively affect the balance: high volume of work, tight deadlines, poor time management, extended schedule (extra working hours/working overtime), strained relationships/lack of collaboration at work, insufficient resources. The balance is maintained by the following: balanced responsibilities and work tasks, flexible schedule, good organization of work, organizational climate based on communication and collegiality, support from the employer and colleagues, setting limits, discard unnecessary activities. The following aspects related to personal life were indicated: personal health, responsibilities towards children, especially children's health, support from family members, misunderstandings within the couple. „*The time dedicated to work, the quality of the interpersonal*

relationship, the complexity of the cases (seriousness) and the emotional impact" (F, public institution, rural). *„Influencing factors: excessive demands, lack of support from the team, lack of a culture that encourages teamwork."* (F, public institution, rural). *„Work environment, time spent at work, quality time with family (walks, vacations, joint activities - cooking, reading, chess etc.), income"* (M, NGO, urban).

The impact of job demands is also revealed by responses (7) that highlight stress and burnout as factors that negatively influence this balance. *„...Stress and deadlines, too many tasks"* (F, NGO, urban). *„Exhaustion - a person who works too much will, at some point, reach both professional and personal exhaustion. Stress - because balance is not reached, stress occurs, and it can generate health problems and problems in private life. Working conditions and environment..."* (M, public institution, rural).

Also, some social workers (8 participants) mentioned personal characteristics, personality, as important factors in achieving balance between professional and private life. *„... determination, self-control, strong psyche"* (F, public institution, rural). *„Energy, optimism..."* (F, NGO, rural).

We must outline the responses given by subjects with management positions (coordinator, manager) who believe that excessive perfectionism negatively influences work-life balance. *„Stress, multiple and urgent tasks, perfectionism"* (F, public institution, rural). *„A big dose of perfectionism..."* (F, NGO, urban).

Most respondents (21) believe that family life and family responsibilities do not significantly affect their work. The most frequent explanations are related to the lack of children or other people in care and/or the support offered by the family. *„At this moment, family responsibilities allow me to carry out my professional activity without any hindrance, because my family is by my side and relieves me of some tasks in order for me to deal with work duties"* (F, individual practice, urban).

These are also confirmed by the answers of the other interviewed social workers (8), which show that the existence of a disabled/sick child/family member or family problems cause difficulties in concentration, lack of patience, absenteeism. *„To a great extent, especially when a cold appears (...) I'm the one who stays at home and I have to postpone my activities. At the same time, having a disabled child who requires hospitalization for 3 weeks for recovery, means an absence of 3 weeks, which is a lot and the return is very difficult"* (F, NGO, urban). *„...if more difficult problems arise in family life, then the concentration at work decreases and the accomplishment of work tasks becomes more difficult"* (M, public institution, rural).

A social worker discussed the expectations associated with women's roles in modern society and their pressure, that can lead to postponing motherhood and the decision to start a family, especially when the woman is developing a managerial career. *„I personally think that it is more difficult to be a woman than to be a man, because family roles put more pressure on a woman, especially if she is also a mother. At the moment I am not married, and I have no children, therefore the responsibilities are not so big and pressing, but I feel that family roles are often postponed and (re)postponed"* (F, NGO, urban).

Responsibilities and problems at work affect the family life of many social workers (23) by reducing family time, nervousness, lack of communication. *„Sometimes it is affected by the fact that the workload is high, and I have to compromise activities with*

the family; stress and exhaustion affect relationships; mental fatigue at work discourages enthusiasm and increases rigidity" (M, NGO, urban). *„I do everything quickly, I spend less quality time with my family, I'm always busy, tired in such a way that I don't realize that I haven't said a word sitting at the table with my parents"* (F, public institution, rural).

Some answers confirm that responsibilities and, especially, successes at work increase self-esteem and have a positive effect on private life. *„The responsibilities I have at work give me a self-confidence that helps me in everyday life, teaches me to become more understanding."* (F, public institution, urban).

Respondents consider that the benefits of the professional-personal life balance on the work environment are numerous: efficiency, high productivity, concentration, physical and mental health, good relationship at the workplace, availability and energy, motivation and work satisfaction, improvement of the climate, increase in the quality of work, reduction of stress and frustration, self-confidence, creativity and flexibility. *„Performance, progress, positive attitude, openness"* (F, public institution, rural). *„Maintaining mental and physical health, productivity at work, efficiency, increasing the quality of work"* (F, NGO, urban).

The benefits of work-life balance for the family environment are also significant: quality time spent with family and emotional balance, relaxed family environment and harmony, good communication and understanding. Outside the family, the effects of maintaining balance are: strengthening relationships with friends, time for relaxation and hobbies. *„A relaxed family environment, good mood, more frequent meetings with family and friends, quality family time"* (M, NGO, urban). *„We could really enjoy our family time and make them enjoy our company, too"* (F, NGO, urban).

Lack of balance or conflict between professional and personal life has negative effects on work such as: lack of energy and concentration, irritability, decrease in work quality, mistakes/erroneous decisions, frustration, lack of motivation to work/apathy/disinterest, verbal aggression, conflicts with colleagues and bosses, anxiety, stress, burnout and looking for another job. *„There may be communication problems, frustrations, resentments, guilt, errors, fatigue, conflicts and misunderstandings, lack of satisfaction at work and the feeling of uselessness"* (F, NGO, urban).

The conflict between professional and personal life also impacts the family: lack of communication, low tolerance, neglect of family roles, tense family environment, contradictory discussions, quarrels, conflicts, damaged family relationships, family breakdown. *„Arguments for some objective but also subjective reasons, withdrawal and lack of communication, a tense environment in the family"* (M, NGO, urban). *„...emotional problems, neglect of personal or family members` needs, major conflicts that can lead to separation, unrealistic expectations, deficiencies in children's education etc."* (F, NGO, urban).

Respondents were asked to appreciate to what extent they believe they manage to maintain a balance between their professional and personal life; 4 social workers said „a little", 8 declared they "somewhat" manage this, 13 are managing it "good" and 4 "very well".

Respondents indicated the following main obstacles to achieving the balance:

working hours (too long, inflexible hours); poor time management; lack of professionalism; self-doubt; professional capping; the difficulty to say „No“; stressful work environment; lack of professional boundaries; low reward for work; insecurity at work; insufficient rest time; high dose of perfectionism; disease; misunderstandings in the family; the category of beneficiaries served; the „permanently dissatisfied“ personality. *„The program, communication with colleagues and beneficiaries and in free time“* (F, NGO, urban). *„Not being able to say „NO“ sometimes, not being able to be satisfied and realistic“* (M, NGO, urban). *„Stress at work, certain working conditions, lack of sufficient rewards for effort, job insecurity and lack of control over personal and professional life situations, rigidity and inflexibility of the work schedule, lack of emotional support from family members, low income related to the costs of daily life“* (F, NGO, urban).

Nine respondents stated that they do not have enough time to fulfil their personal needs, 13 social workers consider they do not spend enough time with family and 12 claim they do not have enough time for friends.

The majority (21) of social workers feel (17) or have felt (4) tired and worried because of their work tasks. *„Quite frequently, actually. I am quite a perfectionist and dedicate the necessary time to each task. The tasks are complex and multiple, and the deadlines are quite tight“* (F, NGO, urban). *„Often, especially because of problems that cannot be controlled, the health of the beneficiaries, accidents, the coverage of work shifts with staff“* (F, public institution, rural, personal coordinator). Four (of the other 8) declare that they have effective coping strategies, thanks to which they do not feel affected.

Many respondents report being exhausted (13) and some (5) even sick due to work demands. *„Exhausted, because there are days when I don't even manage to take the meal break“* (F, public institution, rural). *„Yes. When I get exhausted, my immunity goes down and I get quite bad colds which keep me in bed for several days“* (F, NGO, urban).

Modalities to maintain balance between professional and personal life.

Respondents mentioned the following resources and activities to achieve and maintain balance: practicing relaxation techniques, spending time in nature, walking, free days and holidays, engaging in recreational activities, swimming, gardening, reading, watching movies, theatre, music, religious activities, meetings with friends, resting and disconnecting from media sources, physical work, sports and shopping. *„I participate in women's groups, in courses other than those related to the job (e.g. traditional crafts), I try to participate in events in the circles I attend, I plan periodic activities with the family“* (F, NGO, urban).

Family, spouse, and children are the ones who, in almost all cases, offer support to our respondents. 27 subjects answered in this sense, 7 also mentioned the support of colleagues, 4 that of friends, one mentioned the support of the church and a social worker stated that no one supports him in maintaining balance.

Regarding the role of the organization, 25 social workers stated that the organization they work for does not have a policy to support work-family balance. The rest of them mentioned aspects such as flexible schedule, team-work, psychotherapy. *„No, but it shows understanding towards certain situations“* (F, NGO, urban). *„Yes, for example they offer a good working team, an adequate salary and a good program“* (F, NGO, rural).

Only five organizations (exclusively private) encourage the involvement of family members in various events. „*The association encourages the involvement of the family, even in some situations they turn into volunteers (participate with concrete actions in the preparation of the events: transport, arranging the space)*” (F, NGO, urban). „*Yes, we participate in joint projects precisely so that they also understand the work we do*” (F, individual practice, urban).

All interviewed social workers stated that they find understanding from the management when they face personal or family problems. „*Yes, for example to change the schedule according to a certain problem, absence for a few hours from the workplace if serious cases, absence from the workplace in crisis situations*” (F, NGO, urban). „*There is always understanding. In there is an emergency, a phone call is enough, and I can get permission or support.*” (F, public institution, urban).

Respondents consider that the main actions through which organizations can offer a better support to the professional life of employees are: team building and social activities with colleagues (mentioned by 10 responses); continuous training (6); reward, holiday vouchers (5); appreciation and recognition of results (4); increasing the number of employees (4); weekly meetings (4) and better communication between management and employee. The following were also indicated: lack of contact/requests outside working hours, balanced tasks, compliance with job-specific tasks, psychotherapy sessions, flexible schedule options, supervision, organizing spaces for employees to relax/disconnect, reducing working hours daily work and extra days off. „*One day per month for individual or group sessions related to job satisfaction, emotional stress and tasks; weekly meetings in order to communicate and distribute tasks; organizing an annual team-building; celebrating birthdays with colleagues; trainings on topics such as: assertive communication, time management, distribution of tasks, personal development*” (F, NGO, urban).

Social workers who participated in the research suggested the following aspects in order to improve the balance between professional and personal life: efficient organization of the activity – prioritizing tasks, time management (7 responses); information, study and continuous learning (5); „to have a profession you like” (4); communicating with colleagues and superiors and seeking support (4); self-care and focus on own health (4); establishing boundaries between professional and personal life (3). At the same time, the following aspects are also very important: establishing own priorities (family or profession); avoiding overwork and 'knowing how to say „no”'; relaxation; personal reflection; mentoring; positive and constructive thinking, optimism, seriousness, and responsibility. „*To care more about personal well-being in order to be productive at work, to work strictly on his/her duties, not to try to be a universal employee*” (F, NGO, urban). „*Prioritization, planning, learning to say „no”, taking breaks and establishing clear boundaries between professional and personal life*” (F, public institution, rural).

4. Conclusions

Our study results indicate a fragile balance between the professional and personal life

of the social workers included in the research. Most of the respondents declare that their professional life makes it difficult for them to fulfil their family responsibilities, while their personal life does not affect their performance at work. They are concerned about the situation and strive to maintain balance, which is especially affected by long working hours, overloaded with tasks and stress at work. The main support factor is the spouse/family. We must outline that the personal time (dedicated to own needs, self-care) is reduced.

The imbalance between professional and personal life can have negative consequences: on the social worker – increased level of fatigue and stress, physical and emotional health problems; at work - decrease in the quality of work, errors, deterioration of relations with the team, low motivation and satisfaction, and also on family life - irritability, poor communication, neglect of family roles and conflicts.

Improving this situation depends mostly on organizations. In this regard, social workers participating in the study consider that the following aspects are necessary: balanced distribution of responsibilities, an organizational climate characterized by communication and support; measures to strengthen the work team, effective stress management, adequate compensation, and professional training. Also, policies to balance professional life and personal life would be very helpful: flexible work schedule, reduction of daily working hours, additional days off, mentoring, spaces for relaxation, organization of events for employees and their families etc.

Own values, skills, abilities and personality, as well as organizational culture can guide and help the social worker to achieve a satisfactory situation in all areas of life. Self-reflection and awareness, establishing personal objectives, prioritizing tasks, but also the involvement of the organization and its adaptation to the needs of the social worker are important.

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