What work-life balance means for women

As a first-time mum, I have had to find ways to meet work and family needs. Work-life balance means different things to different people and changes across time.

For example, I am a professor, a researcher, a mother to a young daughter, a wife, a friend, and a family member. I might hold these same identities, yet I may attach completely different values to each of these identities.

And our values and priorities can shift over time. Last year, if someone told me I would have to juggle work and family matters, I would feel deeply offended by their doubt about my professionalism. But now, in the five months since I became a first-time mum, I have missed a couple of work meetings owing to last-minute, unforeseen circumstances, such as my baby being sick and my having no alternative caregiving help at the time.

The topic hit the headlines recently when, in a podcast, DBS chief executive Piyush Gupta described the belief in work-life balance as outdated. Mr Gupta’s suggestion to view work as a "critical part of life is actually sound advice, but when people in influential positions express dissent with this concept of work-life balance, some employees may feel ashamed even for wanting it.

In several online mum’s support communities that I am part of, countless working women share their struggles with juggling their work and family after having children. In 2021, I surveyed 107 Singaporean employees over 10 working days and found that working mothers, but not fathers, or those without children, experienced greater family-to-work interference on days when they worked from home. When that happened, it raised stress levels from their co-workers.

In fact, it is common for employees who are going through life transitions to feel worried and guilty for placing their careers on the back burner because our society traditionally emphasizes the prioritising of collective company goals over individual interests.

Indeed, two years ago, my team conducted focus group discussions with 25 Singaporean managers and employees during the Covid-19 pandemic. They believed that for performance appraisals to be objective and fair, managers should disregard the interference from employees’ personal lives.

This finding was not surprising to me as we were well aware that the Singapore’s economy was founded on values of diligence and a strong work ethic. However, times are changing. Both employers and managers should recognise that the demand for empathy to navigate work and personal lives.

As such, the desire for work-life balance should be normalised. It is okay not to prioritise work and career at certain or even all stages of your life. There is nothing wrong or shameful about being someone whose work or career does not define you centrally, or who engages in work merely to sustain your family or other life passions.

Remember, there is no single best equation for work-life balance. Giving ourselves the space to navigate and organise our work and non-work demands will enable us to experience greater satisfaction and motivation to contribute our best to both domains.

What is this ‘balance’?

Work-life balance refers to how employees engage in their work and non-work domains to minimise conflict between them and optimise the fulfilment that they create for it. It does not entail a clean split between work and other parts of life. Instead, it echoes Mr Gupta’s sentiments of calibrating how your job and career fit into the larger scheme, including your family and hobbies.

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Work-life balance does not exist in isolation from our significant others and co-workers. As someone who has been a working mum for over 10 years, I echo Mr Gupta’s sentiments of calibrating how your job and career fit into the larger scheme, including your family and hobbies.

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The key is not to endorse a fixed 50-50 split between work and life, but to construct your own optimal equilibrium that works for you.

Examine me as I sign off now to go exercise my work-life balance of feeding my crying baby.

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