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Review

Improving Work–Life Balance in Academia After COVID-19 Using Inclusive Practices

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Abstract

Work–life balance (WLB) in academia remains a challenge as a result of increasing workloads, precarious employment, and expectations of constant availability. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these structural barriers to work–life balance in academia and also clearly showed the inequities related to hybrid and remote work for women, caregivers, and underrepresented minorities. This paper highlights the key factors that pose challenges to WLB in academia, how these challenges have been worsened by COVID-19, and what we can learn from pandemic times solutions to devise inclusive practices for long-term structural change. The methodology used in this paper is a critical review of 298 published articles. This review is structured as follows: The structural barriers, inequities, and workplace policies that impact academic WLB are first inventoried. Then, the lessons learned from the pandemic are studied by dividing the short-term disruptions from the permanent shifts. Finally, inclusive solutions, focusing on institutional boundary-setting, workload redistribution, hybrid work policies, and mental health support are presented. This paper makes three key contributions: (1) it provides an intersectional understanding of WLB, accounting for gender, caregiving, ethnicity, migration, and social class; (2) it frames COVID-19 as a driver for structural reform, rather than an anomaly; (3) it bridges WLB research and policy design, proposing actionable strategies for universities and policymakers. By placing equity and inclusion at the core of the analysis, this work advocates for systemic solutions that promote a sustainable academic environment aligned with principles of social justice.

Keywords: caregiving; faculty well-being; gender; higher education policy; hybrid work; institutional reform; telework

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1. Introduction

Work–life balance is generally considered as the equilibrium between personal life and paid work. The opposite, work–life conflict, arises from the incompatibility of multiple roles in our personal and professional lives [1,2], and is linked to lower productivity, higher rates of absenteeism, lower job satisfaction, and lower general well-being [3]. Traditionally, the conflict is seen as either of the following:

1. Inter-role conflict (with competing pressures of work and family) [4], with personal preference for separation or integration [5];
2. Using conservation of resources theory, which focuses on our time and energy resources, highlighting how time spent in one role limits time for another [6–8];

3. By analyzing spillover between roles [9];
4. Through border theory, where individuals are border-crossers between work and family spheres, influenced by border-keepers like spouses and supervisors [10];
5. Through person–environment fit theory, considering alignment between an individual's various life roles, aiming for minimal conflict and balanced engagement and satisfaction across all domains [11].

Defining "life" in WLB is challenging: it is often narrowly defined as family, but more generally, this category encompasses family, health, friendships, education, romantic relationships, community involvement, and leisure [7,12]. Researchers also disagree whether WLB is a long-term perception, a state, or a relationship [13].

Recent WLB research has focused on the link to ethical behavior [14], the impact on marriages, and link between spousal support and WLB [15,16], religiosity [17], and private worship [18]. Studies in various countries highlight the impact of national and workplace cultures on WLB. In Poland, satisfactory work and good working conditions contribute to WLB [19], and in Lithuania, flexible arrangements have negative impacts due to interruptions [20]. Company-provided daycare services in Sweden and Germany are beneficial, while flexible working and extended maternity leave in Italy and the UK show no significant effect [21]. In Sweden, lower work interference with personal life predicts better overall work ability [22]. In Pakistan, person–job fit and WLB are crucial for organizational commitment, influenced by poverty and prevalent unemployment [23,24]. In Bangladesh, family-supportive policies are more influential than other workplace interventions [25]. South Korea's low fertility rates and low female economic participation highlight the need for family-friendly policies, occurring in companies with strong unions or women in key roles [26]. In Hong Kong, personal feelings, behavior and health outweigh communal factors in WLB [12,27,28]. Banking employees in China face psychological distress due to long hours and lack of autonomy [29].

Certain industries face unique challenges in achieving WLB: news industry professionals due to the 24 h news cycle [30], humane entrepreneurs due to the interrelation with personal values [31,32], athletic trainers due to the schedules [33], the military due to the training regime [34], hospitality due to the long hours [35–37], teachers due to the out-of-office activities [38,39], and consultants due to high workloads [40,41]. WLB has been extensively studied in the medical field as physician burnout is a threat to the health system [42–52]. In Korea, for example, 62.1% of neurosurgeons experience burnout [53]. Factors like non-stop working, altering personal plans for work, and overtime significantly reduce WLB satisfaction in medical professionals [54–59].

In academia, WLB satisfaction is low [60–64], more so for women and minorities [1], as a result of the high workloads [62,65]. While flexibility is often presented as a benefit of academic careers, it is a double-edged sword, providing opportunities for integration of personal activities and blurring the boundaries between work and personal life. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and intensified these challenges, highlighting the pre-existing inequities in WLB across different academic positions and demographic groups. Women, caregivers, and underrepresented minorities bore the brunt of increased demands, reinforcing disparities in career progression, mental health, and professional stability. In addition, the poor WLB climate in academia also affects student well-being [66–68]. Measuring WLB is complex due to the different definitions and thus the different instruments used [6,69–74].

Although the pandemic created an immediate crisis, it also served as a critical stress test, revealing systemic weaknesses and potential avenues for long-term structural reform. The widespread adoption of remote and hybrid work went from being a necessity to reshaping expectations around work flexibility, as well as providing crucial insights into the

flexibility of academic careers. The changes resulting from COVID-19 have not benefited all academics equally. Care responsibilities disproportionately affected certain groups, while institutional policies often failed to provide adequate support, further increasing inequalities that are present in the academic work culture. Understanding the long-term impact of these shifts is essential to developing inclusive policies.

A key limitation of many discussions on WLB is the tendency to apply a universal framework, which fails to address how structural barriers relate to identity-based inequities. Gender, caregiving responsibilities, ethnicity, migration status, and employment precarity all shape how individuals experience and navigate WLB. This paper shows that an intersectional perspective is essential for developing actionable solutions. Without acknowledging the different needs of different minorities, policies risk reinforcing rather than alleviating inequities.

2. Materials and Methods

The main thesis of this paper is how the insights from the COVID-19 pandemic into work–life balance can result in lessons learned moving forward, with a focus on inclusive solutions. In total, 298 articles have been collected through a Scopus search on the search terms of "work–life balance" and "work–life balance AND academia" to cover the literature until 2023. A selection of the obtained articles was made by focusing on the publications from the last five years, as well as by sorting the publications by citations and selecting the publications with the largest number of citations. The articles were first read and annotated, then summarized. Next, based on key themes from the annotations and first reading, the summaries and main insights were organized thematically. The thematically organized information was read through and annotated again, analyzed for overlap with a focus on the COVID-19 insights and intersectional aspects, and further summarized. A total of four rounds of review and analysis of contents were carried out, and then the information was organized by relevance for writing this review. Figure 1 shows the publications per year. As this study was originally carried out in 2022, the majority of the references are from the year 2021 to have be recently state-of-the-art. In later modifications of the writing, a selected number of references from 2022 and 2023 were added to strengthen the points of the paper. However, no significant changes in the insights were noted. In addition, Table 1 shows the top 10 journals with papers represented in this study, as well as the disciplines the journals are associated with. From this analysis, it can be seen that the topic is of relevance to a broad range of fields, and no clear top journal can be distinguished.

Table 1. Overview of top journals represented in this study.

Journal	Discipline	Number
Frontiers in Psychology	Psychology	5
Sustainability (Switzerland)	Environmental Science/Interdisciplinary	5
International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	Public Health/Environmental Science	5
Gender, Work, and Organization	Gender Studies/Organizational Studies	4
Journal of Vocational Behavior	Psychology/Career Development	4
PLoS ONE	Multidisciplinary Science	3
Applied Research in Quality of Life	Social Sciences/Quality of Life Research	3
Journal of Women's Health	Health Sciences/Gender Studies	3
International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction	Psychiatry/Addiction Studies	2
BMC Medical Education	Medical Education	2

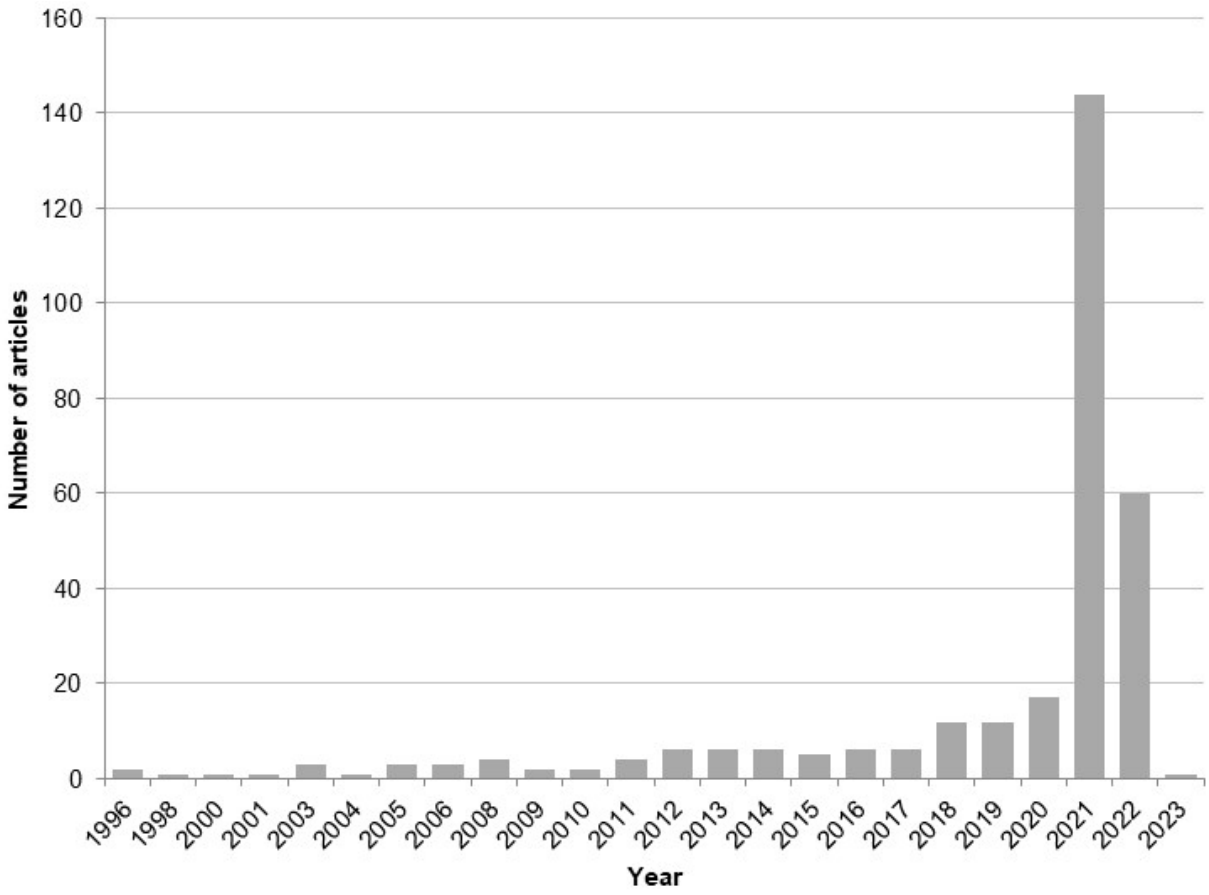


Figure 1. Overview of publications per year for this study.

The paper makes three key contributions to the field:

- Providing an intersectional understanding of WLB, highlighting how different academic populations experience these challenges in distinct ways.
- Positioning COVID-19 as a driver for structural reform, rather than an anomaly from which academia must bounce back.
- Bridging WLB research and inclusive policy design, with a focus on actionable recommendations for institutions and policymakers.

To structure the argument, Section 3.1 outlines the key factors shaping WLB in academia, identifying structural barriers, inequities, and workplace policies that impact academic careers. Section 3.2 also examines the unique challenges of WLB in academia, emphasizing pressures related to research, publishing, and career progression. Section 3.3 furthermore analyzes the impact of COVID-19, distinguishing between short-term disruptions and permanent shifts to academic labor structures. Section 4.1 presents inclusive solutions, focusing on institutional boundary-setting, workload redistribution, hybrid work policies, and mental health support. Section 4.2 discusses the main contributions of this work, proposing pathways for future institutional and policy reforms. Finally, Section 4.3 concludes with a call for structural change, advocating for sustainable and equitable academic work environments. Figure 2 shows the flow and structure of the paper and provides a summary of the main topics addressed in each of the sections.

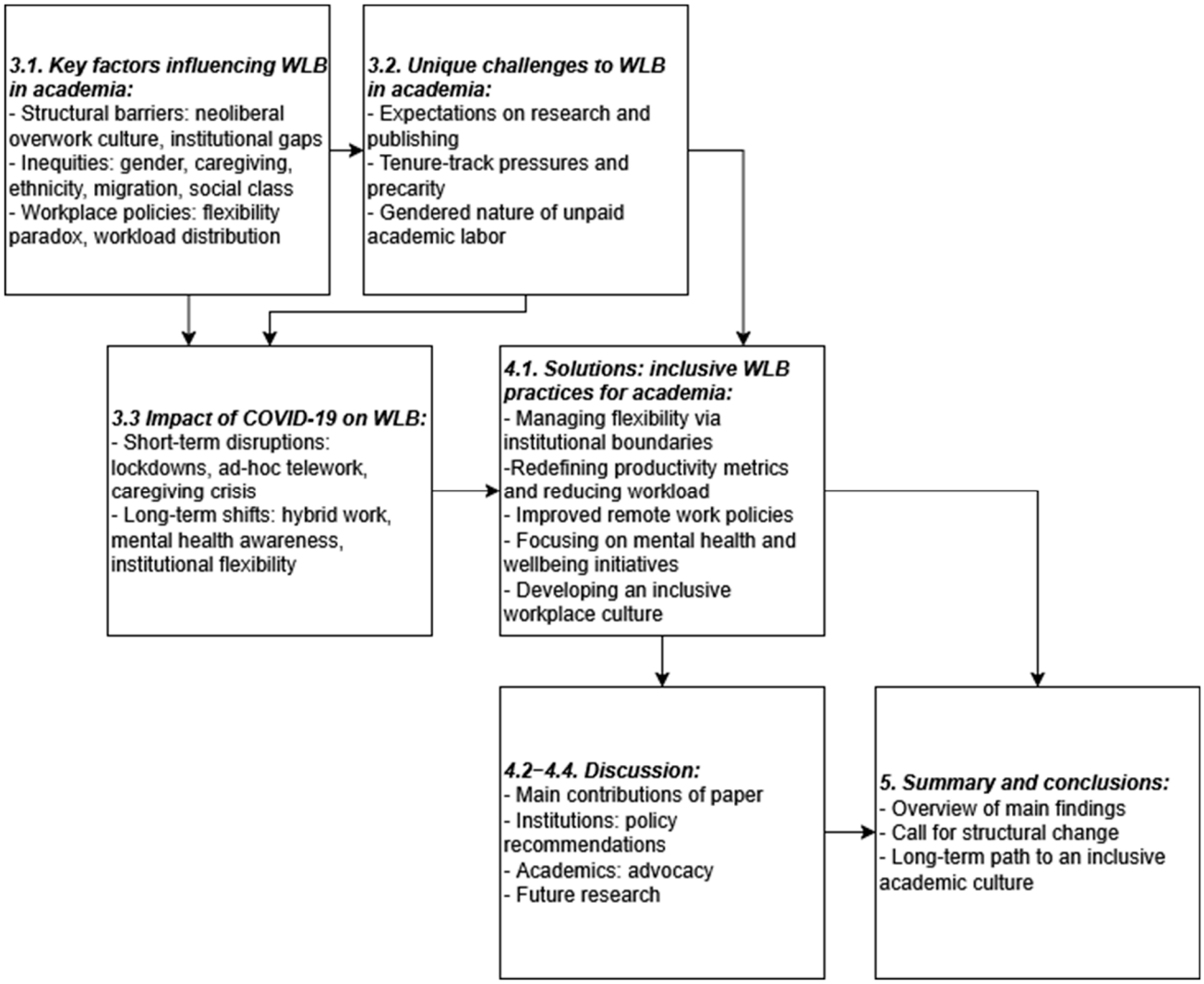


Figure 2. Overview of the structure of the paper.

3. Results

3.1. Key Factors Impacting Work–Life Balance in Academia

3.1.1. Theoretical Basis of Work–Life Balance Research

The industrial revolution introduced a distinction between paid work and the home. In that era, 70–100 h work weeks were common. The concept of WLB was introduced by Sigmund Freud in 1909, when he identified the need for "lieben und arbeiten" (to love and to labor). In the 1920s, American women psychologists addressed work–family balance [75,76]. In the 1920s and 1930s, employers controlled leisure activities for managing workers, and political groups used sports and leisure for worker rights education [77].

The 40 h work week, established in the USA in the 1940s, came from Ford's observation that workers are more productive when they work shorter hours [6]. Family-friendly policies emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by broader WLB initiatives in companies [63]. However, the rise of electronic devices has led knowledge workers to work longer hours due to constant connectivity and the expectation to be always "on".

3.1.2. Structural Barriers: Neoliberal Overwork Culture and Institutional Gaps

The influence of our workplace, as well as cultural and societal norms, is not often emphasized in pop culture notions of WLB, yet it plays a crucial role in a worker's experience of WLB [11,42,78]. WLB is, in fact, a social construct. In the neoliberal context, however, the

focus has shifted from the role of the workplace and the state to aid workers in managing inter-role conflict to a personal responsibility [78].

The poor WLB of academics is linked to lower health, job satisfaction, and increased considerations of leaving academia [6,79,80]. Younger faculty anticipate greater conflicts in balancing family and career progression [63,81]. However, WLB satisfaction tends to improve with academic rank, suggesting faculty manages work and life more effectively over time [82]. Single faculty, especially those with children, face significant challenges due to limited resources for caregiving [83]. The absence of adequate institutional support and collegial structures forces faculty to adopt various coping strategies, ranging from problem-focused (support from family and friends, time management strategies, working harder, and schedule adjustment) and emotion-focused coping strategies (self-talk, self-efficacy, religious activities, recreational activities) to satisficing and addressing workplace culture and leadership [84].

The neoliberal reform of academia has intensified pressures on academics. A rereading of Sennett's "Corrosion of character" [85] highlights how short-term contracts for early-career researchers breed anxiety, serving as both a result of the structure of higher education and a management tactic to influence the behavior of researchers. Good academic character, centered on "collegiality, student centeredness, public engagement, loyalty and dependability, and ethical conduct" clashes with neoliberalism's focus on individual responsibility, hindering communal goals and ethical values in career planning. The required career flexibility disrupts the construction of a coherent life narrative [63,86–89].

Supporting PhD candidates in this environment demands a critical approach from faculty to avoid passing on ingrained power imbalances and oppressive practices. Senior faculty play a crucial role in modeling WLB and rethinking how life should be lived within and outside of work [90,91].

3.1.3. Inequities

Gender

WLB is a gendered construct, as the conversation often does not include women's unpaid labor [92,93], resulting in the gender gap in WLB satisfaction [3,94]. This gender gap is attributed to factors like the glass ceiling, job intensity, and part-time work [95], despite similar education levels [1]. Women often find themselves in lower-wage sectors or part-time roles, which improves WLB [96] but reduces pension later in life [97], as well as working as entrepreneurs [98]. Policies aimed at equality have failed to reach the same WLB outcomes across genders [89]. Women are more aware of the moral dimension of WLB [99].

Cultural and country-specific studies highlight diverse challenges and solutions. In Malaysia, female engineers leave organizations due to poor WLB [100], while in Nigeria, flexible schedules and better remuneration are suggested to improve WLB for female academic librarians [101]. Indian IT women's WLB could be improved by addressing long working hours in combination with household burden [102–105], and in Bangladesh, coworker and supervisor support in the banking sector significantly improves women's WLB [106,107], whereas in Malaysia, the collectivism of society improves WLB [108]. Media representations in Kenya suggest that WLB is a choice and a luxury for the wealthy, and focus on the western concept of intensive mothering over the collective child-rearing common in African cultures [109].

In academia, women face additional pressures from traditional gender roles, resulting in lower WLB satisfaction due to family responsibilities and perceived sacrifices [11,110]. The neoliberal university model exacerbates these challenges by requiring the "ideal worker" devoid of care duties, underlining the fact that the neoliberal model at its core

is at odds with equity initiatives [111]. Universities struggle with gendered divisions of labor and implementing effective HR practices [112,113], even though valuing gender equality and WLB results in qualitatively better scientific work [114]. Workload disparities, especially in teaching and administrative tasks, contribute to this imbalance [62,89,115]. In addition, there are significant variations across different cultures. Chinese female academics report satisfaction due to work flexibility, whereas British counterparts describe their situation as challenging [11]. The struggle for WLB among women faculty in India emphasizes the additional family responsibilities, including caring for their parents-in-law [116]. Spanish and Chilean female academics struggle with WLB, and Chilean female academics also consider their partner as a demand on their time [112].

Parenting

Women disproportionately bear the burden of caregiving and domestic responsibilities, as well as the task of assisting children with homework, contributing to stress, guilt, and exhaustion, combined with the pressure of "having it all" [5,117–122]. This pressure on mothers results in emotional and behavioral issues in children [123,124]. Working mothers face decisions about advancing to managerial roles to support family finances, which may increase time pressure [125]. Studies show that the WLB of fathers can positively affect mothers, indicating the importance of shared household responsibilities [126,127].

In the corporate sphere, mother-friendly policies are linked to better financial performance for companies [14]. However, the effectiveness of WLB policies depends on their accessibility and the cultural norms modeled by senior executives [128,129]. Physician mothers face unique challenges including fertility issues, career sacrifices during peak fertile years, and postponing or foregoing motherhood [130–132]. Mentorship groups and providing portable breast pumps have shown positive results [130].

Country-specific policies play a crucial role in shaping WLB [133]. In the US, the lack of parental leave puts significant strain on working mothers [36,134,135], and in the UK, only 27.8% of women work full-time for three years after having a child [136]. In Japan, policies support employment for mothers of young children but may reduce leisure time [137,138]. Changes in parental leave policies, like in Lithuania, may affect WLB satisfaction of both parents in the future [139], whereas the natalism of France does not support fathers who want to spend more time with their children [140]. Policies are generally developed for traditional families and do not consider the needs of single parents [141].

Academic mothers face additional pressures from the academic culture, which does not value dual identities as mothers and scholars [142], so that academic mothers are less likely to achieve tenure [143]. They experience significant work–family conflict and fit work into odd hours [70,144–146], as well as family–work conflict when children are sick or during snow days [147]. Moreover, women have reported hostility to pregnant women and bullying of academic mothers [148–155]. The core of the neoliberal university can never be reconciled with a culture of care [156]. This hostile environment can lead to negative coping strategies, such as smoking, drinking, overeating [157], a sedentary lifestyle, as well as sleep problems [158,159] and a clear absence of joy in life [147,160–162]. In recent years, the experiences of all academic parents have been studied [2,115], recognizing the diversity of family roles and the importance of meaningful work in facilitating WLB through inter-role facilitation [160,163,164].

Strategies for balancing work and family in academia include social support outside of work and mentorship [153,165], flexible class scheduling [155], on-campus childcare, and reducing competitiveness in the department [145,166]. Support for academic parents should extend to students with children, fostering a more inclusive and caring workplace culture [62,75,167–169].

Ethnicity

Ethnicity can impact WLB. In the USA, black upper-middle-class mothers have had higher employment rates (64%) since the 1960s compared to their white counterparts (27%) [75]. Maori and white New Zealanders report similar WLB satisfaction, possibly due to the collectivist culture of the Maori providing both demands and benefits [170]. Black female ICT professionals in South Africa face greater WLB challenges than other ethnic groups [171].

Ethnic minority academic mothers face the challenge of fitting in with the majority and navigating traditional gender roles [166]. Female faculty of color in STEM encounter systemic barriers, including exclusion from networks, lack of support, competence questioning, and the burden of their tokenized status [148,172]. Parents of color in academia face professional and social isolation [173].

Migration Status

Immigrant status, as well as the individual attributes of the migrant worker, impact WLB satisfaction [174]. Nurses from the Philippines and India in Saudi Arabia report lower WLB satisfaction compared to their non-migrant counterparts [175]. In Germany, low language proficiency increases workload perception and burnout levels of immigrant nurses [176]. Immigrant physicians have higher burnout scores but similar WLB perception [49]. Ukrainian migrants in Europe balance work and life over extended periods, alternating between seasonal work abroad (in agriculture) and family time in Ukraine [177].

Cultural background influences family planning decisions and WLB experiences of academic migrants. Russian-speaking women in Germany, shaped by post-socialist superwoman ideals, start families earlier and parallel careers and motherhood, unlike German-speaking women who view career and motherhood as sequential [178,179], leading to differing WLB experiences. Chinese immigrant scholars emphasize spousal support, child-centered career planning, and relying heavily on grandparents for achieving WLB [180].

Social Class

Social class impacts WLB, with lower social classes facing challenges such as physical, labor-induced pain among construction workers, affecting leisure and family time [181]. Gig economy jobs, although promising flexibility, lack formal employment's safety nets, leading to precarity and negatively impacting WLB due to income and work time unpredictability [182]. Economic hardship prevents the working poor from affording childcare while increasing relationship conflict and depression, thereby worsening WLB satisfaction [183]. Lower-class workers often face employer-demanded shift work, while middle-class workers may choose part-time roles, and upper-class workers perceive motherhood as a threat to autonomy and job satisfaction [184]. WLB is influenced beyond social class by housing, childcare availability, and social networks, highlighting the complex interplay between a woman's neighborhood, childcare choices, and WLB satisfaction [185]. In reviewing the literature, the author did not come across studies that address the link between social class and WLB in academia.

Other Aspects and Intersectionality

Other minority experiences on WLB satisfaction are less studied. LGBTQ+ MD/PhD trainees face significant career barriers due to sexual harassment [186]. Local cultures influence WLB, with WLB programs in countries like Ireland evolving from the unique historical context of occupational alcoholism programs [187]. Comparisons between countries such as the USA (organizational culture governs) and South Korea (societal culture governs),

as well as between British (more individualistic) and Swedish (more family-centered) academics, show that cultural and policy differences influence WLB satisfaction [2,188]. In Canada, Quebec's subsidized universal childcare leads to higher WLB satisfaction among single mothers [189].

Religious diversity impacts WLB, with organized religion offering more social capital and satisfaction than private spirituality or secularism, and atheists carrying a stigmatized identity [18]. Generational perspectives on WLB vary, with younger age groups reducing the importance of work [47,171,190,191]. Employees with disabilities face unique WLB challenges, spending considerable time managing health and facing workplace discrimination [192].

3.1.4. Workplace Policies: The Flexibility Paradox, Workload Distribution

Academic jobs offer flexibility, so that academics in theory can plan and adjust their schedules around family demands. The flexibility, however, often results in work bleeding into family time, causing mixed feelings [150,158,193]. Smart work, often equated with teleworking, is often recommended for this challenge. It brings both mobility and potential issues like technostress and extended work hours, especially impacting women, academics with children, and married individuals [194–199].

Academic couples sometimes live apart, leading to a unique form of work–life segmentation, with life experienced mainly during weekends and holidays [60]. Interventions like telecommuting, job sharing, and flexible work schedules have been shown to reduce faculty turnover intentions by enhancing WLB [200,201]. Personal key factors are having a supportive partner, work flexibility, and job enjoyment [162].

Academics struggle with WLB, and a first cause is increasing work pressure, with 50–60 h weeks being common, resulting in unpaid overwork that even violates national labor laws [3,6,62,81,161,202]. This overwork leads to fatigue, sleep difficulties, and headaches [203]. Those working nights and weekends, in particular, see their physical and psychological health affected [6]. Moreover, academics are often driven by a sense of calling and the merging of work (research) and life (having an academic presence) in academia [204,205].

Academics face growing demands for service and administrative participation with diminishing direct support staff, reducing time for conferences, networking, reading, self-directed study, and scholarly activities [183,202]. A culture of "time macho," valuing long office hours, exacerbates this issue, alongside the open-ended nature of academic tasks, further driving overwork [5,11].

3.2. Unique Challenges to Work–Life Balance in Academia

Summarizing the findings from Section 3.1.2, and looking forward to linking this to the impact of COVID-19 in Section 3.3 and tailored solutions in Section 4.1, we can conclude that the main challenges related to work–life balance in academia are as follows:

- Expectations on research and publishing;
- Tenure-track pressures and precariousness;
- The gendered nature of unpaid academic labor.

The academic workload is high, as academics are expected to fulfill various roles at the same time, and need to carry out tasks in various categories: research, writing, teaching, service, administration, and public outreach. The expectations in each of these categories have increased over the past decades as a result of policy changes, commercialization, student number expansion, increased student expectations, funding cuts, and pressure to secure grants and publish [3,11,87,183]. As a result, faculty often work long hours to be able to accomplish all their tasks. Faculty working over 60 h achieve significant

publishing success and 11% of paper submissions, reviews, and editorial decisions happen during weekends [3,206].

Another challenge for academics is the precarious nature of their contracts until they achieve tenure. Job security is not guaranteed, and not obtaining tenure often means moving from academia to industry, thus making a major career change, or moving to a different institution in a different region or country, which is a major disruption for those with families. Early- and mid-career faculty see their well-being affected by worries about tenure and career advancement [207]. The tenure-track policy significantly affects mothers, and they are less likely to achieve tenure [160,167,208–210]. Tenure clock extensions may not be the best solution, as they can lead to dissatisfaction with the tenure process [155,211].

The gendered dimension of unpaid work has a long history. In 16th-century England, rural households combined subsistence farming with market sales, blurring lines between income-earning and family care. Women's contributions in pre-industrial economies were significant yet often overlooked as their care and income-generating activities took place at home [92]. As identified in Section 3.1.3 women faculty experience additional workload as a result of gendered expectations, ranging from taking on additional organizational, at times nearly secretarial, tasks to taking care of the emotional needs of students. Therefore, the aspect of gender, as well as other intersectional considerations introduced in Section 3.1.3, cannot be separated from the reported experiences of academics regarding their WLB.

3.3. Impact of COVID-19 on Work–Life Balance

3.3.1. Short-Term Disruptions: Lockdowns, Ad Hoc Telework, Burnout

In this section, we will analyze the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on WLB in general, and of academics specifically. When analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to separate the influence of the pandemic itself from the influence of working from home during lockdown stages of the pandemic, and to separate the short-term disruptions from the long-term shifts.

The uncertainty related to the pandemic had an influence on WLB. Research found an increase in harsh parenting among mothers, while fathers' parenting remained stable [212]. A feeling of connection to family and, to a lesser extent, to friends and neighbors positively affected WLB [213]. Job insecurity or income fluctuations further strained WLB across classes [214,215]. Micro-sized enterprise managers felt a more significant pandemic impact on their WLB compared to those in small-sized enterprises, as they focused on business survival and sought government support [216].

Medical personnel were on the frontlines battling the virus. Nurses who maintained better WLB showed improved performance and organizational commitment, yet faced challenges due to excessive workloads, overtime, and fear of the virus, which affected their WLB and psychological well-being [217–219]. Women physicians particularly struggled with the tension between professional obligations and potential exposure of their loved ones [214,220].

The COVID-19 lockdowns necessitated a shift to ad hoc telework for many, introducing both challenges and opportunities. Negative aspects identified include fatigue, reduced productivity, poor sleep, stress from blurred work–home boundaries, emotional exhaustion, and constant connectivity pressure. These challenges led to a poor WLB, with stressors ranging from the pandemic itself over indistinct organization to technostress and the intensification of household and care duties, especially for women [70,71,221–226].

Lockdowns forced many children into homeschooling, with large or young families struggling the most. The pandemic exacerbated the gender divide in household labor, with women bearing the brunt of homeschooling and domestic tasks [227,228]. A study comparing the Netherlands and Finland showed that Finnish mothers faced more chal-

lenges in balancing work and childcare, affecting their WLB more negatively than for Dutch mothers [229]. Combining telework with childcare presented difficulties, with multitasking between technology-mediated and in-person activities impacting work interference and life satisfaction differently [230,231]. The pandemic also highlighted the need for employees to care for elderly relatives [222].

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the WLB of academics, presenting a complex mix of challenges and opportunities. Academics faced immediate pressures such as transitioning to online teaching, supporting students and researchers affected by lockdowns, and experiencing stress and anxiety, as well as family-to-work conflict, working under non-ideal conditions with inadequate tools, feeling isolated, and struggling with collaboration. Faculty in life sciences saw an increase in clinical duties, whereas others lacked access to labs, complicating research advances [207,232,233]. More female faculty considered leaving their positions [234].

3.3.2. Long-Term Shifts: Hybrid Work, Mental Health Awareness, Institutional Flexibility

The long-term impact of the pandemic is marked by a change in the way we work—with hybrid settings being much more common—and increased institutional flexibility. Telework can be considered working from home while having an office, whereas remote work is used for those who work from a different location. The fluidity of work, as a result of work being done and the worker being exposed to work in the home sphere and possibly outside of traditional work hours, is largely driven by technological advances.

The shift to more hybrid work setups results from the positive aspects of telework during the pandemic, which include closer family bonds and social support, valuable insights for future telework practices, including the necessity of clear schedules and boundaries, and the beneficial roles of family-supportive and servant leadership. A benefit to hybrid work is the reduced commuting time. Active commuting is associated with WLB higher satisfaction, whereas long commuting times, especially by public transport, correlate with lower well-being [235]. Job autonomy can mitigate the negative effects of commuting by allowing productive use of travel time [236].

Studies on remote work show that virtual office platforms can enhance WLB if employees feel trusted and supported, have necessary resources, and know how to interact with colleagues effectively. However, telework can lead to work overload in personal spaces, emphasizing the need for transformational leadership to maintain engagement and balance [237–239]. Hybrid work models, combining office and home work, are linked to improved WLB, particularly for occasional teleworkers. In contrast, highly mobile teleworkers experience lower job quality and WLB satisfaction. This setup is characteristic of lower-skilled, lower-income clerical jobs with limited career prospects predominantly held by women [240,241].

Effective boundary management is crucial for those working from home, with successful techniques focusing on activities, people, and time. Teachers who strictly adhered to self-imposed boundaries reported higher WLB satisfaction [242]. Flexible work arrangements require supportive work cultures and clear agreements on time demands to reconcile work and personal life successfully [9,243].

For academics, it is not clear if telework causes stress and fatigue, or if faculty resort to telework because of the pressures experienced at work [71], iterating again the double-edged sword of flexibility in academia. Personal preferences play a significant role in the integration or separation of work and life, with a majority of academics experiencing (63%) and appreciating (47%) some level of integration [6]. The effects of hybrid work and telework on WLB vary widely among academics. Some report decreased productivity and well-being, an increase in workload that infringes on personal time, and difficulties

combining work and additional childcare and household responsibilities [164,233,244]. Other academics experienced the elimination of commute times and the opportunity to work more flexibly or spend additional time with family as positive changes, with a subset even reporting increased efficiency [233,245]. Another important aspect is the change in students' expectations during and after COVID-19 as a result of the shift to online teaching. Immediate responses are more often expected and hinder faculty WLB.

Universities with transformational leadership saw improved faculty WLB [246]. Effective strategies for those wishing to continue working from home include training in boundary management techniques [247]. Temporal, physical, behavioral, and communicative segmentation needs to be developed to have better separation between work and family, even when working from home [233]. The pandemic revealed the need for flexible, supportive approaches to maintain and improve the WLB of both academic parents and the broader academic community.

Ultimately, based on the lessons learned during the pandemic, proposals emerged for better parental leave policies and the provision of mental health services. Workers explored various strategies for crafting their WLB, emphasizing time management, workspace organization, self-care, and maintaining social relationships [24,214,221,222,224,225,242,248–252]. The root cause of mental health struggles of students and faculty is tied closely to academia forcing itself into the disciplinary logic of the market [253]. A better environment, with a focus on care and mentoring, can be created [254].

4. Discussion

4.1. Solutions: Inclusive Practices for Work–Life Balance

To improve the WLB of academics, including the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, and considering the intersectional inequalities highlighted in this work, the following solutions are proposed:

- Set institutional boundaries to flexibility, including equitable hybrid work setups;
- Redefine productivity metrics and reduce faculty workload;
- Use new frameworks for WLB;
- Strengthen well-being and mental health in the campus community to move to a culture of care.

For all solutions that are proposed and that could result in policy changes, individual choices should be possible, as earlier research has clearly shown that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to improving WLB in academia [164].

The long-term insights from the COVID-19 pandemic show the way forward in developing institutional policies on flexibility, including training for faculty and administrators to go against the expectation to be always on. In terms of remote work options at universities, it is not recommended to prescribe a certain split between working from the office and working from home. Differences in research and lab access necessities influence preferences regarding working from the office, and care responsibilities may influence preferences in terms of working from home (between needing the separation between home and the office to concentrate for one person, and preferring to work from home to combine work with care responsibilities for the other person).

In terms of redefining productivity metrics and reducing workload, we can refer back to Sennett's observations in "The Corrosion of Character", and build a workplace where collegiality is valued at the same level as research output. Measuring workload through time tracking can provide the necessary data on the true workload of academics and develop proposals on what can be realistically expected in a work week. To reduce physician burnout and improve their WLB, recommendations include the following: advocating for better legislation, flexible work hours, workload sharing, training in time

management and documentation skills, reducing work hours, developing a supportive work climate, ensuring confidentiality for mental health issues, aligning work tasks with personal interests, and promoting overall well-being [43,51,57,255–270]. The legal aspects of WLB should not be underestimated, and these aspects are informed by research related to anti-discrimination, bias, and civil rights in employment. Issues of hiring, firing, and workplace harassment impact WLB and academic climate that may be country-specific. As such, the observations from different countries can also be interpreted from the point of view of the legal aspects and labor rights.

The pandemic opened the discourse on mental health and well-being in academia [79], which can only be achieved when an inclusive and intersectional culture of care, which respects WLB, is built on our university campuses. Transformational leadership within organizations positively influences employee WLB by modeling organizational values and support [271,272]. To move towards an intersectional culture of care, we need to understand the intersectionality of identities, which can take two forms: examining compounded inequalities (being further removed from the "ideal worker" and the "ideal mother", for example), and exploring distinct experiences shaped by identity [111,129,273]. The reality of various minority identities demands an approach that considers all aspects [108], including ecological justice [84] and the emerging concept of green WLB [274]. However, there is a need for a more interconnected understanding that values care work and environmental activism, often overlooked in gendered perspectives on green WLB [275]. In addition, for a full intersectional approach, the intersection between the (various) marginalized identities and WLB in academia should be addressed.

Recent interventions reported in the literature aimed at improving WLB satisfaction include yoga, meditation, Christian religious rational emotive behavior therapy, rational emotive occupational health coaching, online gaming, and African singing and drumming, demonstrating varied approaches to enhancing well-being among academics [276–284].

Ultimately, to come to such a culture of care, new frameworks for WLB are necessary, which go beyond the traditional work–family conflict approaches. The resilience framework focuses on enhancing "enhancers" and reducing "depleters" in work and home life [285]. Social support improves resilience, and thus WLB [15]. The configurational approach considers both enrichment and depletion, aiming for a state of "flourishing" characterized by high enrichment and low depletion [13]. This approach acknowledges that WLB perceptions are fluid and influenced by whether individuals see their energy as fixed or expandable.

4.2. Main Contributions

The first main contribution of this work is that it has been able to shine a new light on the literature on WLB in academia by identifying the main drivers of poor WLB of academics, such as overwork, and changes in the neoliberal university. The double-edged sword of flexibility in academic jobs was highlighted, and current research findings regarding well-being and WLB in academia were summarized. These findings can be compared and contrasted with recent research findings on WLB in general. In general, a topic that has received considerable attention is the burnout epidemic of physicians, and what can be done to improve the well-being and WLB in the medical field. Learning from successful interventions in the medical field can be a way forward to improving the WLB of academics.

However, when we want to improve WLB in academia, we need to consider the disruptive nature of the COVID-19 pandemic (second main contribution of this work): both the trauma that all underwent as a result of the fear and interruption of regular life, as well as the lessons learned from the impossibility of parenting and homeschooling in combination with teleworking. Not only should universities allow for a space (physical, temporal, and

intellectual) to mourn all those and all that which has been lost during the pandemic, as exemplified by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the first compassionate university in mainland Europe [286,287], but universities should also learn from the difficulties academic parents experienced during the lockdown while trying to homeschool their children and lecture and supervise at the same time [164] and frame these insights in the discussion on telework and flexibility.

The third main contribution of this work is its call for an inclusive view of WLB, in general and in academia, in particular. All aspects of our identity contribute to our WLB experience, and this article explains how gender, parenting status, ethnicity, migration status, and social class influence our WLB. Only few studies have looked at sexual orientation, cultural background, religion and religiosity, non-traditional parenting situations [13], generational differences, and ableism, and no studies have looked at neurodivergence and gender outside the binary. Moreover, very few studies have looked at how belonging to different minorities intersects and influences the WLB experience.

4.3. Actionable Takeaways

The findings of this paper can be translated into pathways to action, where we can distinguish between what can be done individually and collectively in academia to improve WLB satisfaction [153]. For institutions, the focus should be on creating sustainable changes, and for academics, advocacy for better policies and methods to cope with the demands adequately while waiting for structural changes.

Combining insights from this review and direct observations from the literature, the following aspects of higher education policy regarding WLB are important. First of all, the debate should acknowledge the social, cultural, and organizational dimensions of WLB, and the reality that minority groups are left behind in the neoliberal individualistic discourse. Research supports a "culture of care" in the workplace, advocating for flexible, inclusive policies that benefit everyone, not just parents [149,167,288]. This approach creates a supportive environment, addressing diverse needs with tailor-made accommodations rather than a one-size-fits-all policy [193,289]. Within the neoliberal discourse, we can highlight that universities adopting care-oriented policies gain a competitive edge by attracting top talent with family-friendly packages and dual-career services [150,290]. Effective strategies for enhancing academic WLB include extended leave [291], more flexible requirements for making tenure, on-site affordable childcare [289], transparent policy communication, transformational leadership by the administrators, taking active steps towards reducing faculty overload [183], and allowing faculty to hold service appointments that align with their skills and purpose [163]. Achieving a better WLB requires a holistic approach involving societal, organizational, and individual levers [13], emphasizing the critical role of employer–employee collaboration [84], and the possibility to use WLB policies without professional risks [148].

While changes in organizations and society are necessary but often slow, academics can develop personal coping skills to improve their WLB, including managing technology [84], setting boundaries, engaging in leisure activities, utilizing flexibility, seeking support, adding meaning to work [78], focusing on activities rather than roles, and reflecting on life roles to prioritize actions [13]. Practical advice encompasses dedicated non-teaching days for research and writing [193], focused research agendas [65], establishing what is "good enough" [167], clear goal setting [292], reducing travel [203], leaving the office for holidays and long walks [293,294], spending time with loved ones, and maintaining external networks as a safety net [65].

4.4. Future Work

At this moment in time, a broader view of WLB, considering social and ecological justice, and framing WLB within society, culture, and organizations is important and requires further research. Indeed, there is a need to frame well-being and WLB within the UN sustainable development goals [122] and to move towards a sustainable society in times of deep climate crisis [295–297]. We need to pay special attention to workers in low- and middle-income countries [298], where the cultural background, recent developments, and potential social and political unrest shape the WLB narrative in a different way than in the Global North, which requires giving a podium to diverse voices and practicing pluralist thinking [125,298]. Reviewing the different aspects of intersectionality, it called to my attention that no studies address the link between social class and WLB in academia. While research on the experiences of first-generation students is available, no data were found on how class background plays a role later in an academic's career in terms of WLB. Ultimately, future work on WLB should not only look at how WLB is achieved, but also why [99].

5. Conclusions

This paper reviewed and thematically organized 298 papers on the topic of work–life balance, with a focus on what we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and the experience of minorities. Based on this review, we can conclude the following:

- Work–life balance has no single definition, measurement, or theory, which makes discussing the topic complicated.
- The flexibility of academic work is experienced as a paradox: in theory, academics can work flexibly, but in reality, this flexibility often leads to erosion of boundaries and overwork, reducing WLB.
- The key factors that impact WLB in academia are structural barriers (the neoliberal culture of overwork and lack of institutional support), intersectional inequities, and workplace policies (unclear expectations around flexibility, workload distribution).
- Particular challenges for academics are the precariousness of contracts until tenure is achieved, the gendered division of labor in departments, and mental health and burnout concerns that are under-addressed at the institutional level.
- COVID-19 impacted WLB in academia directly during the lockdown due to ad hoc telework and increased caregiving and, in the longer term, due to changes in the way we work, the increased awareness of mental health, and push for institutional flexibility.
- The impact of COVID-19 on WLB in academia requires a view on the minorities: there is a disproportionate burden on women, early-career faculty, caregivers, and underrepresented minorities.
- Recommendations for inclusive WLB practices for universities include institutional boundary-setting through workload analysis and setting clear expectations, redefining productivity metrics, flexible and equitable hybrid work policies that acknowledge diverse needs, and strengthening well-being and mental health initiatives.

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for rethinking WLB, exposing critical obstructions to WLB in academia and demonstrating potential for reform. WLB in academia cannot be addressed without an intersectional lens, as different populations in academia experience these challenges in different ways. Therefore, this paper acts as a call for institutional and cultural change to develop sustainable WLB policies through a shift in academic culture, supporting a culture of care, and setting realistic workload expectations.

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