CAN WORKING WOMEN HAVE IT ALL?
CASES OF SUCCESSFUL INDIAN WOMEN EXECUTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Work life balance refers to the act of striking the right balance between work and personal life. In the modern society, women are shouldering equal responsibilities with men at work and jobs have become more demanding and challenging. However, this does not relieve them of the household chores. Hence work life balance assumes greater importance for women. Many studies in the past have revealed that women find it difficult to cope up with two full time jobs, one at home and the other at workplace, as compared to men. Poor work life balance is also one of the reasons why women quit jobs. In spite of all odds there are women who have made it possible and reached the pinnacle of success. The paper aims at studying the story behind the curtains and finding out if women can ‘have it all’. Cases of two successful women executives have been considered for the same who have conflicting views on the topic.

Keywords: Work life balance, working women, quality of life

Introduction

Women today form a considerable chunk of the work force. Women are making their mark in the professions which were considered to be male dominated, and have proved that nothing is impossible for them. But it has never been easier for women to shoulder responsibilities equally with men owing to their unique mental and physiological makeup, demands from family and society, discrimination and stereotyping. It has always been a challenge to prove themselves making justice to both family and work. Juggling between board room and living room every day is a task. It may most of the times be accompanied by a non-supportive spouse, demanding kids and various stressors at the workplace. At one end we talk of work life balance and on the other, there are women who amaze us by their professional achievements. Do they really have it all? Or they pretend to have it all? The year 2015 is a proud one for women; the number of Fortune 500 companies led by women is at an all-time high of five percent.

Concept of work life balance

The phrase ‘work life balance’ was first used in the UK in late 1970s to describe the balance between one’s personal life and work life. Work life balance is about managing and prioritising well between work and other aspects of personal life. Appropriate balancing reduces stress levels of individuals.
Cases of successful women executives
The list of powerful women ruling the corporate sector is inspiring. The CEO and MD of the most popular brands in the industry have been chosen for the purpose of this paper.

Vinita Bali,
MD, Britannia.

A graduate from Lady Shree Ram College of Commerce and a post graduate from Jamnalal Bajaj Institute of Management Studies, she has been associated with brands like Voltas, Cadbury’s, Coke and Segio Zyman. She ensured that she made a difference to all the places she worked at. She was the first ever Indian to work with Cadbury - UK in 1984-85. She worked in South Africa in the early nineties when no Indian thought of going and working there. She took over Britannia in 2005 in difficult circumstances. She has won the Businesswoman of the Year award in 2009 and has been listed amongst the top 50 powerful businesswomen in the world twice by the Financial Times.

There is another side of the coin too! Ms. Bali has played Sitar, studied Kathak for a long time and even acted in plays. She loves travelling, exploring new countries and learning about their culture, history and people.

Her views on work and family

- Ms. Bali is a strong propagator of gender equality and has introduced a mandatory 50/50 male/female slate for every job in the company.
- She is of the opinion that, we shouldn’t think of any glass ceiling and keep doing what we enjoy and the rest would automatically fall in place. It’s futile to keep thinking of something that you cannot change and influence.
- She feels, at work, we must give our best, raise our own bar of performance and be true to ourselves. It requires dedication, devotion and application to be successful in business.
- While she addressed the students of Jamnalal Bajaj, she asserted, ‘We need to have a zero tolerance for mediocrity’.
- According to her, ‘We need to decide what is important for us and where we would like to spend our time’.
- She says “We all are born with multiple talents and multiple gifts. We are naturally born to play multiple roles. It’s important to have work and everything else that you would like to do as a part of your life and your life should not just revolve around work.”
Her mantra for a healthy work life balance:

She looks at work as life and vice versa and tries to fit work into her life and not life into her work. She lives by her blackberry and an organised calendar and tries to wrap up all her work at the end of the week to have leisure time on weekends. She prefers returning calls, answering emails while travelling. She keeps treating herself with short vacations, plays and concerts and keeps herself fit with stretching, pranayama and gym.

Indra Nooyi,
CEO, PepsiCo.

Ms. Nooyi ranks second in the list of 50 powerful women by Forbes this year. Having pursued BSc. in Chemistry from Madras a Master's Degree in Finance and Marketing from IIM Calcutta, Ms.Nooyi also holds a Master's Degree in Public and Private Management from the Yale School of Management. She immigrated to the U.S in 1978. She has worked with Johnson and Johnson, Mettur Beardsell, Motorola, Asea Brown Boveri and Boston Consulting Group. She began her career with PepsiCo in 1994 and was appointed as the CEO and President on October 1, 2006.

Indra Nooyi on women and workplaces

She is of the opinion that we need to challenge ourselves by raising our hands for the toughest assignments and contribute to solving problems that no one else was able to. If we want to be successful, it has to be an inner calling; a passion. She feels that women are needed in the workforce. In spite of all the juggle, they do pretty well. There is a need of an inclusive work culture at the workplace. People need to be trained and women need to be mentored by women.

Her views on work life balance:

She feels that women cannot have it all. For her, job is work and life; and home is also the same. There is always a conflict between the career clock and the biological clock. Working women constantly have to struggle between different roles of being an executive, a wife, a mother and so on. There is this guilt of not being able to do justice to roles in the personal life. Women need to find coping mechanism to deal with the guilt. She feels it is important to have an extended family at the workplace and at the same time a supporting spouse. She admits that at times it is easier to walk away from the fact that she is a corporate executive but it is impossible to walk away from the role of a mother. She also feels that in spite of all the coping mechanisms, her daughters might not feel she has been the strongest of the mothers. In an interview with David Bradley at the Aspen Ideas Festival, she admitted “Women can’t have it all” and narrated instances when she couldn’t attend her daughter’s ‘coffee class’, how she had to give an explicit list of questions to her secretary to ask her daughter whether she had completed her homework before she played Nintendo and the night when she returned home with the news that she was appointed the President of the company, how her mom asked her to fetch some milk for the family reminding her of her role at home.
Her mantra for a healthy work life balance:

She loves and believes in what she does. The extended family at PepsiCo helps her, and music and spirituality keep her calm. She wants to feel great about her contributions and that keeps her going on.

Conclusion

It is important to identify what ‘all’ means for one. Whether ‘you have it all’ or not is a relative term and a matter of personal priorities and perspective. Work can also be viewed with a lens that paves way for wholeness.

One can have it all, but not at the same time.

There will always be a role conflict that will exist between the personal and professional life. It is necessary to jot down the pressing issues and attend to them first. Coping mechanisms need to be made to keep out of the guilt of being unfair to any of the roles.

Work life balance is not something that happens on its own and requires a lot of sacrifices.

Balancing work and personal life is an art that requires thorough practice. It involves making decisions as to what you need at what cost. There would be times when the costs might be unreasonable at either of the places.

Follow your passion.

What you love, can keep you going for long. Work life balance can be better when you know what you are doing is worth the struggle. Coping up with the stress mentally becomes easier.

Exercise, meditate, and take out time for yourself.

Taking care of health goes long way in helping women balancing work and life by giving them the required mental and physical strength.

Work-life integration.

Rather than focussing on ‘having it all’ attention should be given to building a life of significance by integrating work and life together. Advantages of internet and social media should be harnessed.

References


