

# Work-life balance and the psychosocial work environment in Finnish working life: The case of gender and family life stages

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## Abstract.

**BACKGROUND:** Work-life balance is associated with many positive effects at multiple levels and demands increased research attention. In the international literature on work-life balance, the term “gendered life-course” has been used to describe the differences between men and women in work biographies. However, whether this term applies to the Nordic work context remains underexplored.

**OBJECTIVE:** This study examined Finnish men’s and women’s subjective experience of the association between work-life balance and the psychosocial work environment (work demands and social support at work) across the life course, devoting special attention to family life stages encompassing the care of (young) children.

**METHODS:** Data from the Quality of Work Life Survey 2018 were utilized to conduct binary logistic regression analyses ( $N = 3790$ ). Separate analyses were conducted for men and women.

**RESULTS:** A significant association between family life stage and high work-life balance was found for women but not for men in the Finnish working life. Women in family life stages involving the care of young, dependent children reported the lowest odds of high work-life balance. For both men and women, a positive association between social support at work and high work-life balance was found, while a negative association was found between work demands and high work-life balance.

**CONCLUSIONS:** These findings highlight the importance of psychosocial factors in both the work and family settings for work-life balance. Further, the findings call for an expanded focus on gender equality, also including issues in unpaid work in addition to issues in paid work.

Keywords: Work-life balance, psychosocial factors, life span, gender equality, scandinavian and nordic countries, work environment

## 1. Introduction

Work-life balance, i.e. the overall satisfaction with the balance between work and personal life [1], is associated with many positive effects. Work-life balance is, for example, associated with increased work engagement [2] and job performance at the individual level [3], increased performance at the organizational level [4], and increased fertility rates and increasing labor at the societal level [5].

However, work-life balance can be very challenging to attain and sustain in contemporary working life. This is for example due to worldwide trends including intensified work [6], increasing work demands in terms of work efficiency, task complexity and related skills requirement, and a changing workforce in terms of an increased share of women, dual-earner couples, single parents, and older workers [7, 8]. Thus, the promotion of work-life balance demands increased research attention as the identification of support and protective factors supports the design and development of effective work-life initiatives at both the organizational and societal level [9].

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In the international research debate on work-life balance, family life stages including the care of young, dependent children are increasingly highlighted [10], commonly referred to as “the ‘rush hour’ of life” [11–13]. This is because the most intensive career-building and child-rearing years tend to coincide, resulting in a potential double-burden to workers in these family life stages [14]. However, there is only a small body of work that examines the specific ways in which these workers perceive the balance between work and caring and other life spheres. Additionally, the role of gender is often underemphasized in the literature, even though gender inequalities remain [10]. It has been demonstrated that working parents with young children perceive that they need to increase their investments in work to provide for their family and advance in their careers [14–15]. They must find their place in a work organization and explore whether they can fulfill their work obligations, evaluating how their own competencies meet specific role requirements and expectations [16]. At the same time, they report increased pressure at home related to childcare and household responsibilities [14] – especially working mothers [17–19] – subsequently resulting in lower levels of work-life balance compared with individuals in other family life stages [20]. In a large-scale study spanning several countries, it was found that conflicting demands from work and family reduced work-life balance primarily across early family life stages, especially among workers with preschool and school-aged children [21]. This indicates that the use of lifespan approaches, including a family life stage perspective, see e.g. [22], can be helpful in the study of work-life balance and its support and protective factors.

During the past two decades, positive psychology [23] has gained momentum and has been applied to research targeting different settings. In the organizational context, conservation of resources (COR) theory [24] which stems from this theoretical framework, has gained much ground. It also helps us frame the current study. The basic tenet of COR theory is that human development depends on the acquirement and conservation of resources. In the work and family literature, especially various sources of social support at work, referred to as “psychological or material resources provided through social relationships that can mitigate strains” (p. 288) [7], are resources consistently linked to a high work-life balance. For example, co-worker support [25], supervisor support [26], and a constructive social climate

[27] have all been demonstrated to promote work-life balance. COR theory emphasizes that both resource loss and gain take place across the lifespan [24]. A situation becomes stressful for individuals when they risk, or already face, a loss of key resources, or when they make substantial efforts to gain key resources but fail to do so. Resourceful workers, families, and organizations, in turn, rely on their capability to manage stressful situations as key resources can be employed to buffer against the negative effects of stress or be sustained for times of future need. In the context of work, resources, especially social support at work, can buffer against the negative effects of work demands.

Work demands refer to aspects of one’s job that diminish employees’ mental and physical energy [28–29], subsequently limiting the individual’s time and energy to handle non-work responsibilities [30]. For example, a range of cognitive demands, such as exhaustive work tasks and work overload [26, 30], and time-based demands, such as time pressure [31], have been found to reduce work-life balance.

Even though work demands to some extent have been included in previous research using a family life stage approach in the examination of work-life balance, focus has traditionally been placed on a single point in the life course, rather than on simultaneously comparing different life stages. However, social support at work has to our knowledge not been included as a focal point of study. This warrants research including all three variables, to provide organizations and societies with guidance on how to effectively support and protect work-life balance among workers in different family life stages.

In the international research on work-life balance, the term “gendered life-course” has been used to describe the differences between men and women in work biographies [12–13; 32]. That is, in most parts of the world, for men the norm is still continuous full-time work, while the norm for women is part-time work or temporary unemployment during child-rearing years and few women ever go back to full-time employment [14]. A recent study from the Netherlands also showed that work continues to be gendered in midlife, with women taking various measures (such as finding new jobs, negotiating different job tasks, and cutting work hours) to manage and reduce exhaustion associated with challenges in both paid work and private life [33]. In Finland, in turn, there is an emphasis on full-time employment, meaning that both mothers’ and fathers’ full-time work is encouraged by heavily subsidized

childcare [34]. Flexible work arrangements exist but are limited to part-time working parents with children younger than 3 years (flexible care allowance) and with children starting primary school (partial care allowance). While this model promotes gender equality in the work setting and generally has resulted in high levels of work-life balance among Finnish workers in the past [35–37], gender differences may exist in the family setting. Gender equality in the family setting remains a largely unexplored issue in Finnish – and in larger terms Nordic – research on work-life balance [38]. However, the results of a recent Finnish study provide initial support to this argument by showing that while there are no gender differences in work interference with family among Finnish women and men, women generally report significantly higher levels of family interference with work than men [2]. To the best of our knowledge, no Finnish study has adopted a family life stage approach in the examination of work-life balance and its support and protective factors.

In sum, international research has demonstrated that high work-life balance varies across family life stages, especially highlighting the time-pressed situation of workers with young, dependent children [14]. Even though this can be particularly true in Finland, where both mothers and fathers are encouraged to engage in full-time employment, the current study is the first to adopt a family life stage approach in the examination of work-life balance and its support and protective factors among Finnish workers. Further, while work demands and social support at work both are recognized as important factors exerting an influence on work-life balance in international research, only work demands have been included in prior studies using a family life stage approach.

### *1.1. Study aims and hypotheses*

The aim of this study was to examine men's and women's subjective experience of the association between work-life balance and the psychosocial work environment (social support at work and work demands) across the life course among Finnish workers, devoting special attention to family life stages encompassing the care of (young) children. Previous studies on work-life balance have tended to examine different demographic variables separately, even though there exists some evidence that work-life balance is experienced differently by, for example,

women and men in different family life stages [16]. Therefore, we will conduct separate analyses for men and women in the current study, simultaneously looking at how gender, family life stage, employment status, and presence of a cohabiting partner influence the experience of work-life balance.

We expect work-life balance to be the lowest in family life stages 2 and 3, because the career-building years tend to coincide with the primary child-rearing family-life stages.

#### *Hypothesis 1:*

Looking at the demographic variables all together, both men and women in family-life stages 2 and 3 report lower levels of work-life balance than respondents in other family life stages.

Moreover, relying on COR theory, we expect that both men's and women's subjective experience of social support at work, an important work-related resource, is positively associated with work-life balance. Accounting for social support at work in the analyses, we assume that the association between work-life balance and family life stage becomes weaker, since social support at work acts as a buffer against conflicting demands.

#### *Hypothesis 2:*

The more social support at work men and women are perceiving, the higher the experienced work-life balance will be. The role of family life stage for work-life balance will become smaller when social support is included in the model.

Continuing to build on COR theory, we expect that both men's and women's subjective experience of work demands, an important work-related stress factor, is negatively associated with work-life balance. When work demands are added to the analyses, we assume that the association between work-life balance and family life stage becomes stronger. Further, in line with COR theory, the association between work-life balance and social support at work will remain significant as social support can buffer against conflicting demands.

#### *Hypothesis 3:*

The more demanding women and men find their work, the lower the experienced work-life balance will be. When work demands are included in the model, the role of family life stage becomes more important for men's and women's work-life balance, while the role of social support at work for work-life balance remains significant

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Study participants consisted of persons aged 15–67 who were identified as employed wage and salary earners regularly working at least 10 h per week. The original sample comprised 4110 participants. Only respondents that could be classified into any of the five family life stages (see the study inclusion criteria below) were included in the current study. This subsample consisted of 3790 participants, of which 1807 were men (47.7%) and 1983 were women (52.3%). Different age groups were represented among the participants. The largest age group consisted of participants aged 45–54 (29.6%), followed by participants aged 15–34 (26.6%), participants aged 55–67 (24.9), and participants aged 35–44 (18.8) (see Table 1).

### 2.2. Study design and data material

The data set stems from a population-based, cross-sectional interview survey study, the Finnish Quality of Work Life Survey 2018 (QWLS) collected by Statistics Finland during September 2018–January 2019. QWLS is a recurring national interview survey. The QWLS is conducted to monitor Finnish workers' working conditions and changes in them. The collected information concerns the physical, mental, and social work environments, the contents of work, employees' labor market positions, conditions of employment, values and valuations of work, and factors at the work organization level. In this study, QWLS data from the eighth wave was utilized. This large-scale, interview survey included 652 variables. In QWLS 2018, the interviews were primarily conducted face-to-face (9% were conducted over the phone), and the duration median of the face-to-face interviews was 63 min. The response rate was 66.8%. Further information on the survey can be found elsewhere [39].

### 2.3. Measures

The dependent variable, work-life balance, was measured using a single-item statement: "How satisfied are you with how well you can combine work and the rest of your life in your present job?" This item was originally scored on a 4-point Likert scale. While "Difficult to say" was a possible response option, this was excluded from the regression analyses. For the purposes of the current study, this dependent variable

was dichotomized into high work-life balance (very satisfied) and other (quite satisfied, quite dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied).

In line with previous research conducted in the Nordic work context (e.g. [40, 41]) two factors from the QWLS were included in the analysis to measure psychosocial work environment: work demands and social support at work. The respondents were asked to indicate how well the following six statements describe their perceived work demands: "I often find it difficult to cope at my work?", "Matters related to work keep running disturbingly in your mind in free time?", "My work contains tight time schedules?", "I often have to stretch my working day to get all the work done?", "I usually have too many different tasks under way?", "I do not have time to do my work as well and conscientiously as I would like to?". These items were scored on a 4-point Likert scale, where 4 denoted full agreement. Similarly, the respondents were asked to indicate how well the following five statements describe their perceived social support at work: "When your work seems difficult, do you receive support and encouragement from your superiors?", "When work seems difficult, do you receive support and encouragement from your co-workers?", "Do you feel that you are a valued member of the work community?", "Open atmosphere and team spirit prevail at my workplace?", "There is an inspiring atmosphere at my workplace?" The first three items were scored on a 4-point Likert scale (where 4 denoted full agreement), while the two last items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (where 5 denoted full agreement).

Based on these items, two separate instruments were developed to measure work demands and social support at work. The items were averaged to obtain an overall score for the instruments measuring work demands and social support at work, and the internal consistency was good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$  for both scales).

Hill et al.'s [22] family life stage categorization mentioned in the article introduction was utilized. This categorization includes five family life stages: family life stage 1 = aged under 35 years with no children living at home, family life stage 2 = children aged 0–5 years and no older children living at home, family life stage 3 = children aged 0–5 years as well as 6–17 years living at home, family life stage 4 = children aged 6–17 years only (no younger children) living at home, family life stage 5 = aged 45 years or more and no children under 18 years living at home.

Table 1  
Overview of the study sample according to variables measuring work–life balance, demographic variables, and psychosocial work environment (work demands and social support at work) by gender and in total [ $N = 3790$ ;  $N$  (%) or mean (SD)]

Variable	Men	Women	Total
	$N = 1807$ (47.7)	$N = 1983$ (52.3)	$N = 3790$ (100)
Work-life balance			
High	521 (31.0)	526 (28.8)	1047 (29.8)
Other	1162 (69.0)	1303 (71.2)	2465 (70.2)
<i>Background factors</i>			
Employment status			
Part-time	113 (6.3)	291 (14.7)	404 (10.7)
Full-time	1691 (93.7)	1688 (85.3)	3 379 (89.3)
Cohabiting partner			
Yes	1327 (73.4)	1465 (74.0)	2 792 (73.7)
No	480 (26.6)	514 (26.0)	994 (26.3)
<i>Family Life stages</i>			
Life stage 1	378 (20.9)	343 (17.3)	721 (19.0)
Life stage 2	163 (9.0)	135 (6.8)	298 (7.9)
Life stage 3	129 (7.1)	123 (6.2)	252 (6.6)
Life stage 4	496 (27.4)	531 (26.8)	1 027 (27.1)
Life stage 5	641 (35.5)	851 (42.9)	1 492 (39.4)
<i>Psychosocial work environment</i>			
Work demands (overall score)	2.21 (0.61)	2.41 (0.62)	2.32 (0.63)
Social support at work (overall score)	3.41 (0.64)	3.40 (0.66)	3.40 (0.65)

Gender (man, woman) was included as a dichotomous variable. Dichotomous control variables were cohabiting partner (yes, no) and employment status (full-time, part-time).

#### 2.4. Statistical analyses

SPSS version 27 was used to conduct the statistical analyses. A missing data analysis was conducted, revealing that the missing values ranged from 0 to 7 (0.002%) for the included variables. The responses ‘not applicable’ and ‘cannot say’ ranged from 0 to 64 (0–0.02%) and from 0 to 10 (0–0.003%) respectively. A descriptive analysis was conducted to report sample characteristics (i.e., frequencies and percentages). In addition, another analysis was conducted to look at how the included variables were correlated.

Next, separate binary logistic regression analyses were run for men and women with reported work-life balance as the dependent variable. The regression analyses were conducted using the Enter method, where all included variables were specified by the researchers and manually entered in a stepwise process. In the first step, demographic variables were entered with family life stage 5 as the reference group for the family life stage variable. Social support at work was added in the second step and work demands were added in the third step. The results are presented in terms of calculated odds ratios with 95% confi-

dence intervals. The goodness of fit of the logistic regression models was estimated using the Hosmer-Lemeshow test.

#### 2.5. Ethical considerations

This study used data collected by Statistics Finland, a governmental national statistics service provider. The compilation of statistics adheres to the provisions of the Finnish Statistics Act (280/2004). Alongside the Statistics Act, the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation EU 2016/679 and the national Data Protection Act are applied to the processing of personal data. Confidentiality of data collected for statistical purposes is decreed in the Act on the Openness of Government Activities (621/1999).

### 3. Results

Study sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. Approximately one third (29.8%) of the respondents reported that they experienced high work–life balance; however, this was slightly more common among men (31%) than among women (28.8%). Results of correlations analysis are presented in Table 2. Results of separate regression analyses for men and women are presented in Table 3.

Table 2  
Correlations among study variables

<i>All (N = 3790)</i>								
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
1. Work-life balance	0.30	0.46	–					
2. Employment status	0.11	0.31	0.05**	–				
3. Cohabiting partner	0.74	0.44	–0.03*	–0.07***	–			
4. Family life stages	3.60	1.53	0.00	–0.09***	0.14***	–		
5. Social support at work	3.40	0.65	0.20***	0.01	0.02	–0.10***	–	
6. Work demands	2.32	0.63	–0.31***	–0.06***	0.06***	–0.05**	–0.25***	–
<i>Men (N = 1807)</i>								
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
1. Work-life balance	0.31	0.46	–					
2. Employment status	0.06	0.24	0.03	–				
3. Cohabiting partner	0.73	0.44	–0.05	–0.13***	–			
4. Family life stages	3.48	0.55	–0.03	–0.13***	0.20***	–		
5. Social support at work	3.41	0.64	0.23***	0.01	0.00	–0.12***	–	
6. Work demands	2.21	0.61	–0.29***	–0.09***	0.07**	–0.04	–0.24***	–
<i>Women (N = 1983)</i>								
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
1. Work-life balance	0.29	0.45	–					
2. Employment status	0.15	0.35	0.07**	–				
3. Cohabiting partner	0.74	0.44	–0.02	–0.03	–			
4. Family life stages	3.71	1.50	0.04	–0.09***	0.08**	–		
5. Social support at work	3.40	0.66	0.18***	0.02	0.04	–0.09***	–	
6. Work demands	2.41	0.62	–0.33***	–0.09***	0.05*	–0.08***	–0.26***	–

Notes: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Hypothesis 1 stated that when looking at the demographic variables all together, men and women in family-life stages 2 and 3 report lower levels of work-life balance than respondents in other family life stages. For men, Hypothesis 1 was rejected, since work life balance was not significantly associated with the family life stage variable. For women, a statistically significant, positive association was found between work-life balance and the family life stage variable. Comparing the odds for reporting high work-life balance among women in family life stages 1–4 with women in family life stage 5, the odds were lowest for women in family life stage 2 (OR 0.49 CI 0.30–0.80 in Model 1) in all models, followed by women in life stages 3 (OR 0.62 CI 0.40–0.96 in Model 1) and 1 (OR 0.66 CI 0.51–0.85 in Model 1). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported for women.

In Hypothesis 2 we expected that the more social support at work men and women are perceiving, the higher the experienced work-life balance will be. Further, we assumed that when social support is included in the model, the role of family life stage for work-life balance will become smaller. The first part of Hypothesis 2 was supported, since the odds for reporting high work-life balance were higher for both men (OR 2.36 CI 1.95–2.85 in Model 2) and women (OR 1.99 CI 1.67–2.38 in Model 2) reporting higher social support at work. The second part of the hypothesis was

supported for women but not for men. That is, when social support was included in the model, the role of family life stage for work-life balance became smaller for women (family life stage 1: OR 0.62 CI 0.48–0.80; family life stage 2: OR 0.47 CI 0.29–0.77); family life stage 3: OR 0.57 CI 0.36–0.89) family life stage 4: OR 0.69 CI 0.51–0.94 in Model 2), while family life stage remained non-significant with work-life balance in Model 2 for men. Finally, in Hypothesis 3, we assumed that the more demanding women and men find their work, the lower the experienced work-life balance will be. Further, we proposed that when work demands are included in the model, the role of family life stage becomes more important for men's and women's work-life balance, and the role of social support at work remains significant.

The first part of Hypothesis 3 was supported; the more work demands both men (OR 0.36 CI 0.29–0.44 in Model 3) and women (OR 0.30 CI 0.25–0.37 in Model 3) experienced, the lower the experienced work-life balance. Regarding the second part of Hypothesis 3, family life stage remained non-significant with work-life balance in Model 3 for men, which means that the assumption related to the role of family life stage was not supported. However, the role of social support at work remained significant for men's work-life balance, as assumed (OR 1.93 CI 1.59–2.35). The second part of Hypothesis 3 was fully

Table 3

Logistic regression analyses conducted by gender and presented in terms of odds ratio with 95% confidence intervals: association between work-life balance, psychosocial work environment (work demands and social support at work), and demographic variables, including family life stages (Men *N* = 1807; Women *N* = 1983)

		Work-life balance					
		Men			Women		
		Model 1:	Model 2:	Model 3:	Model 1:	Model 2:	Model 3:
		Demographic variables	M1 + Social support	M2 + work demands	Demographic variables	M1 + Social support at work	M2 + work demands
Cohabiting partner	No	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	Yes	0.93 (0.72–1.20)	0.91 (0.70–1.18)	0.93 (0.71–1.22)	0.98 (0.77–1.24)	0.93 (0.73–1.18)	1.03 (0.80–1.33)
Employment status	Full-time	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	Part-time	1.10 (0.73–1.67)	1.15 (0.75–1.77)	0.94 (0.60–1.47)	1.58 (1.20–2.09)*	1.56 (1.18–2.07)*	1.33 (0.99–1.79)
Family life stage	5 (≥45 yrs & no children at home)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	4 (children 6–17 yrs only)	1.26 (0.94–1.68)	1.02 (0.76–1.38)	1.14 (0.83–1.55)	0.79 (0.59–1.05)	0.69 (0.51–0.94)*	0.84 (0.61–1.15)
	3 (children 1–5 yrs & 6–17 yrs)	0.72 (0.47–1.09)	0.67 (0.43–1.02)	0.82 (0.53–1.28)	0.62 (0.40–0.96)*	0.57 (0.36–0.89)*	0.62 (0.38–0.98)*
	2 (children 1–5 yrs only)	0.90 (0.58–1.39)	0.82 (0.52–1.28)	1.00 (0.63–1.60)	0.49 (0.30–0.80)*	0.47 (0.29–0.77)*	0.54 (0.32–0.91)*
	1 (<35 yrs & no children at home)	0.84 (0.64–1.10)	0.84 (0.64–1.11)	1.00 (0.75–1.33)	0.66 (0.51–0.85)*	0.62 (0.48–0.80)**	0.63 (0.48–0.83)**
<i>Psychosocial work environment</i>							
Social support at work							
(overall score)			2.36 (1.95–2.85)*	1.93 (1.59–2.35)**		1.99 (1.67–2.38)**	1.53 (1.28–1.84)**
Work demands							
(overall score)				0.36 (0.29–0.44)**			0.30 (0.25–0.37)**
Hosmer and Lemeshow							
goodness-of-fit test		$\chi^2 = 0.83, df = 6, p = 0.991$	$\chi^2 = 15.82, df = 8, p = 0.045$	$\chi^2 = 12.42, df = 8, p = 0.133$	$\chi^2 = 2.91, df = 5, p = 0.713$	$\chi^2 = 10.89, df = 8, p = 0.208$	$\chi^2 = 5.138, df = 8, p = 0.743$

Notes: Statistically significant odds ratios (95% confidence intervals) at the \*\**p* < 0.01 level, and the \**p* < 0.05 level. yrs = years.

supported for women. In line with our expectations, the role of family life stage became more important for women's work-life balance (in family life stages 1–3) when work demands were included in the model (family life stage 1: OR 0.63 CI 0.48–0.83; family life stage 2: OR 0.54 CI 0.32–0.91; family life stage 3: OR 0.62 CI 0.38–0.98 in Model 3), and the role of social support at work for their work-life balance remained significant (OR 1.53 CI 1.28–1.84 in Model 3).

#### 4. Discussion

In the current study, approximately a third of both the male and female respondents reported that they were very satisfied with their work-life balance, demonstrating that a substantial share of the participants experienced high work-life balance. This is in line with previous research, demonstrating that comparatively high levels of work-life balance generally have been reported by workers in Finland – and in broader terms the Nordic countries – in the past [35–37].

The main contribution of this study was the separate analyses conducted for Finnish men and women and the novel combination of variables (family life stage included as a demographic variable, work demands, and social support at work), analyzed in relation to work-life balance. Since previous research has demonstrated that work-life balance varies across family life stages, especially highlighting the time-pressed situation of workers with young, dependent children [14], we expected that family life stage plays a role for both men's and women's work-life balance. We also found it reasonable to believe that this can be particularly true in Finland, where both fathers and mothers are encouraged to engage in full-time employment. In line with what was expected, family life stage played an important role for the work-life balance of Finnish women.

More specifically, comparing women in family life stages 1–4 with women in family life stage 5 (women aged  $\geq 45$  with no children under 18 years living at home), women in family life stages 1 (<35 years & no children), 2 (children 1–5 years only), and 3 (children 1–5 years & 6–17 years) were less likely to report high work-life balance. This is in line with previous international research which has demonstrated that conflicting demands from work and family reduce work-life balance primarily across early family life stages [16]. Furthermore, as assumed, women in family life stages 2 and 3 in particular were less likely

to report high work-life balance, which supports the results of prior studies demonstrating that workers in family life stages involving the care of young, dependent children report increased pressure at home (e.g. childcare and household responsibilities) [14], especially working mothers [17–19]. Subsequently, it has been found that workers in these family life stages report lower levels of work-life balance compared with workers in other family life stages [20]. However, we were surprised to find that men's family life stage did not emerge as a significant predictor for their work-life balance.

We can only speculate why this finding stands in conflict with previous international research showing that family life stages including the care of young, dependent children (family life stages 2 and 3 in our study) are associated with lower levels of work-life balance, also for men [20]. A possible explanation is the emphasis on full-time work for both men and women in Finland. The dual-earner model means that Finnish men generally do not have to live with the pressure of being the lone provider for their family, rather, it is a burden shared by the women in the family. Also, even though the dual-earner model should, at least in theory, provide many men with the opportunity to spend more time with their family and engage in unpaid work, it may, in fact, unintentionally have contributed to an intensive double-burden for women. Put differently, men and women are expected to equally engage in paid work, but women are expected to engage more in unpaid work due to gender role expectations and related actual task distribution. Taken together, the results related to the association between family life stage and work-life balance discovered in the present study suggest that the term "gendered life-course" [27], which has been used in previous international literature to describe gender differences in work biographies, applies to the Finnish working life as well but rather to describe the different experiences by Finnish men and women when it comes to their work-life balance. Further, while previous research on work-life balance targeting the Finnish – and in broader terms the Nordic – welfare state setting has highlighted gender equality in the work setting as a focal issue [38], the results of this study are among the first to shift focus to gender equality in the family setting.

Moreover, as assumed, the more social support at work men and women were perceiving, the higher was the experienced work-life balance, while the more demanding women and men found their work, the lower was the experienced work-life balance.

Thus, our findings both support the basic tenets of COR theory [24] and previous studies [30–32, 34], highlighting the key role of the psychosocial work setting for the promotion of work-life balance. However, this study goes beyond previous research using a family life stage approach, as focus has traditionally been set at a single point in the life course when examining work demands in relation to work-life balance, and social support at work has to our knowledge not been included as a focal point of study. Since social support at work can act as a buffer against demands and conflicts [24], we further assumed that the role of family life stage becomes smaller for work-life balance when social support at work was included in the model. For women, findings supported this assumption, highlighting that the energy resources can provide to women in one domain (e.g. work) can spill over to other life domains (e.g. family). In previous research, this effect has been discovered as well and has usually been referred to as work-life enrichment [42]. In contrast to when we controlled for social support at work, we assumed that the role of family life stage becomes more important for work-life balance when controlling for work demands. Again, this assumption was true for women, likely because child-rearing family stages involve high family demands. In contrast to our expectations, family life stage remained non-significant for men, even after controlling for social support at work and work demands. Finally, in line with COR theory and as we assumed, the role of social support at work remained significant for work-life balance when controlling for work demands for both men and women. Thus, our results indicate that resourceful workers employ social support at work to buffer against the negative effects of work demands on their work-life balance.

#### *4.1. Strengths and limitations*

The current study utilized data from a Finnish, national survey study (QWLS). A relatively high response rate (66.8%) was attained, and the sample represented the total study population well. A particular strength of this study – especially when considering the fairly large sample size – was that interviews primarily were conducted face-to-face [39]. However, as with all cross-sectional research, there was a risk of common method bias, and no causal inferences could be claimed.

The data was collected a few years back, which could be considered a limitation of this study due to the events that have occurred during recent years

including the COVID-19 pandemic, increased political tensions, and the economic challenges that have followed. However, it seems that workers are now facing similar challenges in work-life balance as they did a few years back, which means that results can be considered valid and relevant in the contemporary working life context.

Analyses were performed using binary logistic regression. An advantage with this statistical method is that it allows for the study of groupwise differences, while simultaneously controlling for effects of potential covariates. However, the dependent variable must be dichotomous, meaning that all nuances of the data may not become visible. The dichotomization of the dependent variable was justified in the current study to separate the group of workers reporting that they were very satisfied with their work-life balance from the group reporting that they were less than very satisfied, and to subsequently identify systematic differences in family life stage, work demands, and social support at work. The logistic regression analyses were performed separately for men and women in line with the focus of this study. While we acknowledge that the gender differences in our sample related to the psychosocial variables were only marginal, it was revealed that family life stage seems to play a more important role for women than for men with regards to their work-life balance.

A single-item statement was used to measure work-life balance. This could be regarded as a study limitation as multi-item instruments generally are preferred in research. However, due to practical constraints (such as survey comprehensiveness and respondent burden), certain single-item statements, including statements about work-life balance, are regarded acceptable and even useful [43].

The use of a family life stage perspective could be considered a strength, as it shifts the focus from the individual to the psychosocial environment of the individual [32]. The use of Hill et al.'s [22] family life stage classification is limited in the sense that it does not include workers who are not (yet) parents and above 35 years. However, the use of this classification could also be considered a strength, as it has been adopted in other studies as well e.g. [14] and thus allowed a comparison between research results.

Finally, to increase the validity of the main findings related to the associations between family life stage, social support at work, work demands, and work-life balance, we simultaneously accounted for employment status and cohabiting partner.

#### 4.2. Further research

This paper has highlighted how a comparison of family life stages can enrich our understanding of work-life balance and its support and protective factors, advocating further research that moves beyond focusing on a single point in the life course. Further, social support at work emerged as an important predictor of work-life balance in our results, emphasizing different aspects of social support at work as a focal point of study in future studies using a family life stage approach. In this paper, social support provided by the supervisor, co-workers, and the work community was examined in general terms, but it would be interesting if further research looked at how social support in relation to specific family-oriented behaviors and decisions (such as cutting work hours, requesting different work tasks or more flexibility) impacts on women's and men's work-life balance in different family life stages. Finally, further research on work-life balance adopting a family life stage approach should pay attention to gender role expectations and related actual task distribution, not only in paid work but also in unpaid work.

#### 5. Conclusion

Work-life balance is not just an individual priority in contemporary working life, it is also valued by organizations and societies due to its multi-levelled positive effects. Widespread trends, not least an increasingly diverse workforce, challenge organizational work-family initiatives and societal family-friendly policies which are currently in place. To the best of our knowledge, the present study is the first Finnish study to use a family life stage approach in an empirical examination of work-life balance, as well as the first study on work-life balance internationally to include both family life stage, social support, and work demands. Importantly, this study demonstrates a gendered life-course with respect to experienced work-life balance in Finland, as a statistically significant association between family life stage and work-life balance was found for Finnish women but not for Finnish men. Further, compared with women in the age of 45 or over with no under-aged children in the home (family life stage 5), women in the earlier family life stages were less likely to report high work-life balance and this particularly applies to women with young, dependent children living at home (family life stages 2 and

3). With regards to both men and women, a positive association between social support at work and high work-life balance was found, while a negative association was found between work demands and high work-life balance. These findings highlight the importance of psychosocial factors in both the work and family settings for work-life balance. On a global level, the results indicate that countries' and organizations' family-friendly policies and initiatives to encourage women's paid work may not have produced the desired equality effects. Thus the findings call for an expanded focus on gender equality, also including issues in unpaid work in addition to issues in paid work.

#### Ethical approval

Not applicable.

#### Informed consent

This study used data collected by Statistics Finland, a governmental national statistics service provider. Statistics Finland adheres to principles of research ethics and in the event of collecting data direct from citizens with interview surveys, informed consent is always obtained from all involved individuals.

#### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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