



Work-Life Challenges and How to Overcome: An Explorative Study among Female Criminal Investigators

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the significant challenges faced by female investigators in the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), focusing on the complexities of balancing professional duties and family life. The nature of their work, coupled with irregular hours, makes achieving work-life balance particularly difficult. The research, conducted in Malaysia, aimed to identify the work-life challenges, their impacts, and potential solutions to improve the situation for female investigators. Seven female participants, selected through purposive sampling, were interviewed using semi-structured questions. The criteria for selection included a minimum of one year of marriage (with or without children) and at least two years of experience in the CID. Content analysis revealed several challenges, including time constraints, heavy workloads, role conflict, inadequate working facilities, health issues, and long work-home distances. These factors contribute to work-life conflict, highlighting the need for improved time management, stress management, work policies, workplace environment, and enhanced family support.

Keywords: female investigator, work-life balance, work-life conflict, personal challenges, work-life domain

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1 INTRODUCTION

The term "work-life balance" refers to the equilibrium between work and personal life, but it involves more than simply comparing the time and energy spent on both domains (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Work-life balance encompasses the harmonious integration of professional, personal, and family responsibilities, leading to a sense of satisfaction (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Kirchmeyer (2000) defines balance as achieving fulfilling experiences across all life domains, which requires an appropriate distribution of personal resources such as energy, time, and commitment. Marks and MacDermid (1996) suggest that balance means being fully engaged in every role within one's total role system and approaching each with mindfulness and care. This definition underscores that individuals are intentionally involved in all aspects of their lives and maintain an awareness of their roles. Achieving a harmonious work-life balance (WLB) is essential for allocating time and energy to both professional responsibilities and personal pursuits. However, when WLB becomes distorted—due to excessive work demands or insufficient personal time—it can lead to work-life conflict (Lakshmi & Sai Prasanth, 2018; Markwei et al., 2019).

Greenhaus and Allen (2011) categorised work-family conflict into three types: time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based. Time-based conflict occurs when the demands of one role clash with another due to limited time resources. Strain-based conflict arises when stress in one domain negatively affects performance in another, and behaviour-based conflict occurs when behaviours suitable for one domain are incompatible with those required in another (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). As gender equality is increasingly implemented in various professions, including law enforcement, female investigators must navigate the challenge of balancing their professional and personal lives. The investigative profession is demanding, with irregular hours, complex cases, and a need for high attention to detail, all of which require significant stamina and physical fitness (Markwei et al., 2019). Yet, limited research has explored the challenges female professionals face in balancing work with family life, especially in Eastern countries. Therefore, this study aims to explore female investigators' experiences in managing the dual demands of work and personal/family life.

Women's participation in the workforce is recognised as a critical factor in societal development (Brue, 2018). Their involvement not only contributes to economic growth by increasing household income but also presents significant challenges, especially for those balancing professional responsibilities with familial duties (Blake-Beard et al., 2010; Lakshmi & Sai Prasanth, 2018). Female participation in law enforcement has risen significantly (Markwei et al., 2019), but working women are often expected to excel in their careers while fulfilling personal and familial obligations. This dual expectation frequently leads to role conflict (Markwei et al., 2019), negatively affecting both professional performance and personal well-being (Lakshmi & Sai Prasanth, 2018).

Studies conducted in India have found that married working women face significant challenges in managing work-family conflict (WFC) (Lakshmi & Sai Prasanth, 2018). While both women and men often work long hours, the situation is more challenging for women due to their greater responsibility for household duties, even though their workload at work is comparable to that of men (Leiter & Maslach, 2003; Shuen et al., 2023). Research suggests that such imbalances can

lead to physical and psychological exhaustion, burnout, life dissatisfaction, and deteriorating mental and physical health (Leiter & Maslach, 2003; Panatik et al., 2022; Shuen et al., 2023).

Working women, particularly in male-dominated fields such as law enforcement, face additional challenges in balancing their work and home responsibilities. Irregular and unpredictable work hours exacerbate this struggle (Stoilova et al., 2020), sometimes even leading to job abandonment (Bertrand et al., 2010), which hinders talent development and economic growth. Work-family conflict stems from competing demands for time, energy, and behaviours, resulting in the incomplete fulfilment of responsibilities in one domain (Leiter & Maslach, 2003; Panatik et al., 2022). Over time, unresolved conflict can lead to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and fatigue (Leiter & Maslach, 2003; Panatik et al., 2022). Married female investigators, in particular, are highly susceptible to such conflict as they manage the competing demands of professional and personal life.

A related theory that helps explain the dynamics of work-life conflict is Spillover Theory. Spillover theory suggests that experiences in one domain, such as family life, can affect another, such as work life, and vice versa (Abdou et al., 2024; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Wayne et al., 2017). It posits that emotions, attitudes, tensions, skills, and activities in one domain can transfer to the other (Morris & Madsen, 2007). Therefore, what happens in family life can influence an individual's experiences at work, and vice versa (Abdou et al., 2024; Maadon et al., 2019; Wayne et al., 2017). The theory proposes that experiences in either work or family domains can have both positive and negative effects on the other (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). These effects are often intensified when individuals lack sufficient support systems to manage the demands of both roles (Zedeck, 1992).

While many studies emphasise the negative aspects of spillover (Grzywacz et al., 2002; Sirgy et al., 2020), such as stress and negative emotions affecting behaviour in both domains, Greenhaus and Allen (2011) also highlight the significance of positive spillover. Negative spillover occurs when challenges in one domain leads to negative emotions and outcomes in the other. Spillover theory highlights how the challenges faced in both work and personal life can affect psychological well-being, work performance, and family life. Despite its broad application, there is limited research addressing the specific challenges faced by female professionals, particularly female investigators in Eastern countries, in balancing work responsibilities with personal and family life.

In light of this, the present study aims to explore the experiences of female investigators in managing the competing demands of their professional and personal lives. The research objectives are: (1) to explore the challenges female investigators face in balancing work and personal responsibilities, (2) to examine how these challenges impact their life domains, and (3) to propose strategies for improving work-life balance for female investigators.

2 METHODS

2.1 Design

A qualitative research approach was employed to explore the experiences of female investigators, focusing on the "what", "why" and "how" of their work and personal lives. This case study design was conducted within the Criminal Investigation Department in Malaysia. As defined by Creswell (1998) and Merriam (2009), a case study involves a detailed examination of a specific subject within clearly defined boundaries. In this study, the "case" refers to the experiences of female investigators managing the balance between their professional roles and personal/family responsibilities.

2.2 Participants

Seven female investigators from the Criminal Investigation Department in Malaysia were selected for in-depth interviews, using a semi-structured format. Purposive sampling was employed to obtain the most relevant and detailed information, with the unit of analysis being female investigators. This sampling method ensured that participants were selected based on specific characteristics, guaranteeing their insights would be valuable (Maxwell, 2013). The selection criteria for participants were as follows: (1) female investigators who had been married for at least one year, with or without children; (2) those with a minimum of two years' experience in the Criminal Investigation Department; and (3) those willing to voluntarily share their life experiences. These criteria ensured that the participants possessed sufficient experience to provide meaningful data. Table 1 provides the demographic information of the participants.

2.3 Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. This approach offered flexibility in exploring the participants' lived experiences, behaviours, and perspectives, while maintaining a structured framework to address the research objectives (Merriam, 2009). The interview questions were designed to explore the lived experiences of married female investigators. The questions were as follows:

1. What challenges do you face in managing your role as a female investigator and as a housewife?
2. How do these challenges affect your work and personal/family life?
3. What strategies do you use to harmoniously balance your roles as a female investigator and as a housewife?

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants.

| Informant | Ethnic/Race | Age | Marital status | Year of services in law enforcement department |
|-----------|-------------|-----|----------------|--|
| 1 | Malay | 36 | Married | 13 |
| 2 | Malay | 38 | Married | 11 |
| 3 | Indian | 47 | Married | 20 |
| 4 | Malay | 35 | Married | 11 |
| 5 | Chinese | 36 | Married | 12 |
| 6 | Indian | 38 | Married | 11 |
| 7 | Malay | 35 | Married | 10 |

2.4 Procedure and Data Analysis

The data collection process began by seeking permission from the management and explaining the research objectives. Once approval was granted, the researcher contacted participants who met the inclusion criteria: (1) female investigators who had been married for at least one year, with or without children, (2) with a minimum of two years' experience in the Criminal Investigation Department, and (3) who were willing to voluntarily share their life experiences.

Seven female investigators were purposively selected to participate in the study to obtain rich, in-depth data. Participants were interviewed using semi-structured questions, with each interview lasting approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Prior to each interview, participants were informed of the purpose of the research and reassured that their information would be kept confidential. They were asked to sign a consent form, and permission to record the interview was also sought. Once consent was granted, the interviews were conducted, and the recordings were transcribed. The transcripts were carefully reviewed for accuracy by listening to the recordings' multiple times. Initial data analysis began during the interview process.

The data were analysed using content analysis, following the six-step process outlined by Graneheim and Lundman (2004): (1) transcribing the data, (2) conceptualising the data, (3) generating codes, (4) categorising the codes, (5) coding each transcript, and (6) reviewing and refining the codes and categories. These steps ensured the reliability and depth of the analysis.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study seeks to understand the phenomenon of female investigators dealing with the challenges that arise due to responsibilities in both the work and personal/family domains. The findings from this study support and align with previous research. Interestingly, new aspects were uncovered that were not widely discussed in prior studies, particularly regarding the role of family as a support system in facing these challenges. This study provides new empirical data on how female investigators balance work with both personal and family life, particularly from the perspective of Eastern cultures, thereby contributing to the existing body of knowledge.

3.1 Challenges Faced by Female Investigators

To understand the challenges faced by female investigators, it is essential to first identify the specific issues they encounter when balancing work and family life. As shown in Figure 1, this study identified two categories of contributing factors: organisational and personal/individual. Among the organisational factors, key challenges include time constraints and workload. Time constraints are characterised by tight deadlines, extensive administrative tasks, and irregular working hours, which sometimes require investigators to stay late. Additionally, certain cases demand exceptional attention, energy, and swift resolution, necessitating heightened focus and dedication to the investigation process.

Informants 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7 consistently emphasised that lack of time was the primary issue, as case management requires significant time for analysis, administrative reporting, and documentation. As a result, female investigators often find themselves unable to fulfil their roles as mothers or wives when they return home. As Participant 1 mentioned:

“My job is problematic; if possible, we don’t want to work overtime because we have other responsibilities at home. The problem at home is that the children need to be looked after both on weekends and weekdays. My husband was transferred to Sarawak, so after work, I have to pick up the children from nursery and care for them. Time is very limited, and I feel exhausted.” (P1)

The findings of this study align with previous research that highlights how one life domain, whether work or family, can either enhance or diminish an individual’s ability to manage roles and responsibilities in the other domain (Bowen, 1988; Morris & Madsen, 2007; Song et al., 2023). This is consistent with Greenhaus and Allen's (2011) concept of time-based work-family conflict, which arises when the demands of one role compete for time that is also needed for another role. They define this conflict as an unpleasant situation in which fulfilling one role results in insufficient time for another.

“At the beginning of my marriage, it was really difficult because my husband was in Kelantan at the time. I was far away from him, and that became a source of stress. When I had children, my husband was still far away. I was really stressed at work, and my mind couldn’t focus.” (P3)

Suresh et al. (2013) support this notion, noting that organisational and social factors contribute to job stress among law enforcement officers. These factors include constant task demands, irregular working hours, limited family time, office politics, inadequate facilities, low salaries, outdated equipment, lack of recognition, insufficient workforce, and strained relationships with colleagues and family. These factors confirm that time constraints are a significant challenge for many female investigators.

“If possible, women prefer flexible working hours and no more than 8 hours per day because we still have to take care of the family. If men work long hours, it’s okay. Another challenging factor is the superior. Our superiors need to consider the workload of female investigative officers and balance it with that of male officers, so at least the tasks can be distributed fairly.” (P2)

Informants 2, 5, and 7 identified workloads as a secondary problem. They reported that the lack of fixed rest hours and the unpredictable nature of their workload made it difficult to manage time, leading to uncertainty that impacts their family responsibilities. This finding aligns with Coetzee and de Villiers’s (2010) study, which identified role ambiguity, poor co-worker relationships, job insecurity, lack of autonomy, inadequate compensation, and insufficient management support as significant sources of job stress. Role ambiguity and an unclear workload contribute to stress, reducing employee engagement and performance. This aligns with research by Viegas et al. (2023) and Kalliath and Brough (2008), highlighting how work stress can negatively affect marital relationships. As Participant 5 mentioned:

“Usually, our workload is not specific and cannot be predicted. Sometimes there’s a case today, sometimes there’s none tomorrow. For example, today there are 10 cases. So, the workload is not balanced. With 8 years of experience as an Investigator Officer, I find this challenging, and I have to manage my time very well because I also have the responsibility of taking care of my children.” (P5)

The role of primary caregiver was identified as a significant problem affecting both the work and personal life of female investigators. Informants 1, 3, and 4 reported that household responsibilities, such as preparing meals, cleaning, and caring for children, often cause stress when they return home exhausted. This is consistent with previous studies that found a lack of family time, negative societal reputations, and inadequate salaries to be significant stressors for female investigators (Coetzee & de Villiers, 2010; Subha & Devika Rani, 2014). The physical and psychological demands of balancing work and family life can lead to considerable strain. Informants 5 and 7 highlighted the long distance between home and the workplace as another challenge, with Informant 5 specifically mentioning the difficulties of commuting long distances and dealing with traffic congestion, which exacerbates work-family conflicts. Health issues further compound this stress, disrupting work focus.

All informants reported that the stress of balancing work and family life negatively impacts their physical and psychological well-being, leading to emotional exhaustion. Informants 3 and 4 described instances where workplace stress triggered emotional outbursts at home. Informant 4 also noted that a colleague’s marriage ended due to her frequent late nights, which were perceived as neglect of her maternal responsibilities. Informant 1 experienced prolonged emotional exhaustion and depression from the constant shift between work and family life. Emotional exhaustion, characterised by both mental and physical fatigue, is a well-documented source of burnout (Panatik et al., 2022).

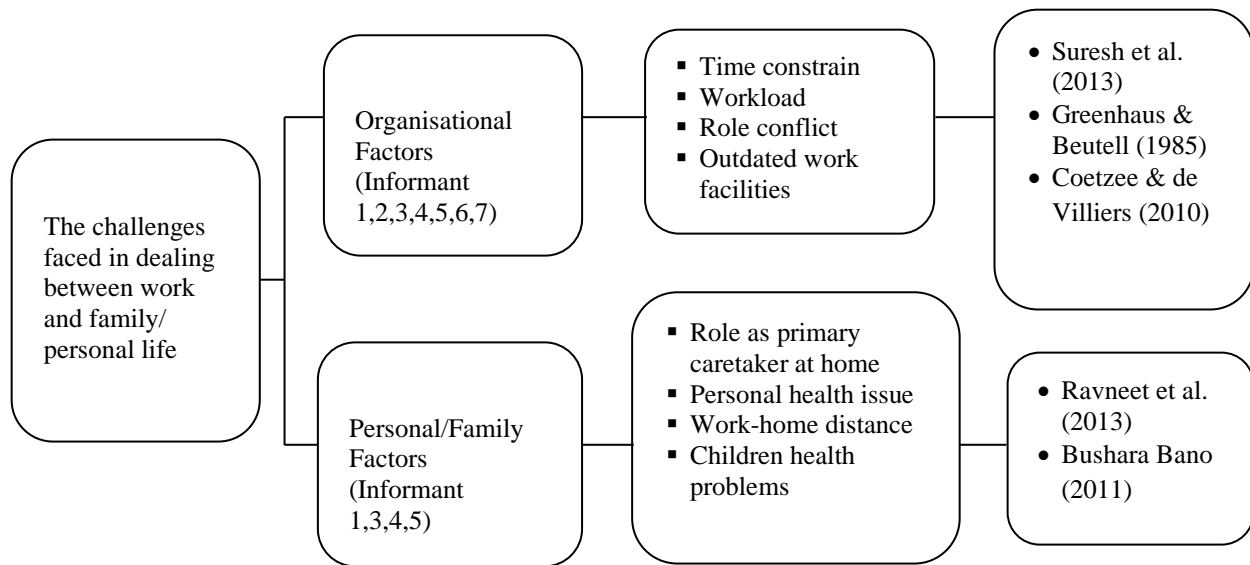


Figure 1. The challenges faced in balancing work and family/personal life.

3.2 The Effect of the Challenges Faced

The findings of this study identify the effects of the work-life balance challenges faced by female investigators, as illustrated in Figure 2. These effects can be categorised into three main areas: mental health, work performance, and family life. Informant 2 reported that female investigators often spend extended periods at the office, sometimes remaining away from home for two to three days. This extended absence significantly impacts married female investigators, as they are unable to fulfil their familial responsibilities, which in turn affects both their children's well-being and their marital relationships.

Meanwhile, six out of the seven informants indicated that managing both work and family life adversely impacts their job performance. The demanding nature of their work, which involves thorough and time-consuming investigations, often conflicts with family responsibilities. This creates tension and affects their role as parents, leading to a lack of attention and affection for their children or marital conflicts, which impair their focus at work and diminish job performance. Stoilova et al. (2020) noted that long, irregular, and unpredictable working hours intensify work-life conflict. Similarly, Albertsen et al. (2008) observed that non-standard working hours adversely affect work-life balance, with some evidence indicating negative effects on child well-being and marital satisfaction. Moreover, some studies have found that female employees often face psychological issues such as stress, anger, depression, hypertension, and other health problems due to work-life imbalance (Deivasigamani & Shankar, 2017; Ravneet et al., 2013; Sundaresan, 2014).

This study strongly supports the spillover theory, which suggests that demands in one domain, such as work, can influence the family domain and vice versa. The empirical data demonstrate that high job demands and irregular working hours for female investigators impact their family life. Sundaresan (2014) similarly found that work-life conflict negatively affects both organisational

performance and employees' personal lives. Excessive workloads that interfere with family responsibilities result in high stress, depression, burnout, dissatisfaction with life, and deteriorating mental and physical health (Sundaresan, 2014). As Participant 2 mentioned:

“As female investigators, sometimes we have to stay at the workplace for 24 or 48 hours, just like the male investigators, but they don't have to look after the children. Our salary must be used to pay for the babysitter. So, the children receive less love and attention and become closer to the babysitter. This can cause depression and lead to many mistakes at work.” (P2)

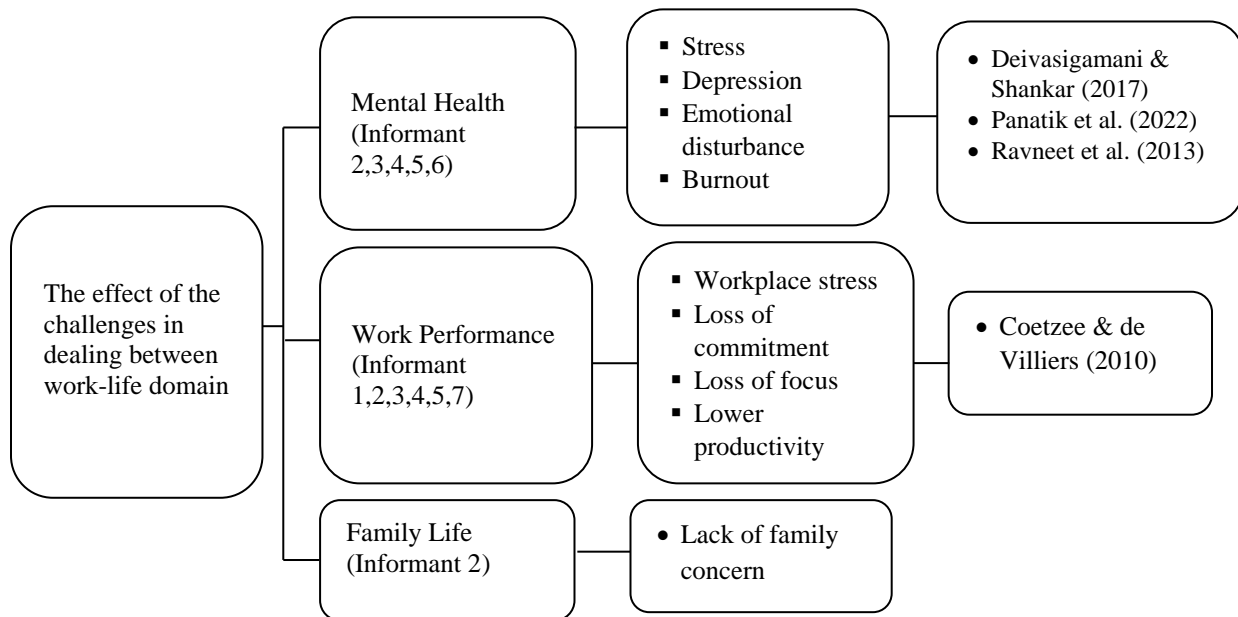


Figure 2. The effect of the challenges related to work-life balance faced by female investigators.

3.3 Strategies for Improving Work-Life Balance for Female Investigators

This research highlights how female investigators struggle to balance demanding work and personal lives. The study identifies several strategies to overcome work-life-related challenges, which can be categorised into three areas: improvement in personal skills, improvement in organisational factors, and family support, as shown in Figure 3. Informants consistently emphasised several solutions to mitigate these challenges, including the development of practical personal life skills such as time management, maintaining a positive mindset, practising self-discipline, and adhering to a healthy lifestyle. They acknowledged that inefficiencies in time management often lead to problems. Among the seven informants, six participants (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7) highlighted the importance of effective time management to balance work, family, and personal responsibilities. Informants 1 and 3 specifically stressed the importance of managing time wisely to ensure a balanced allocation between work, family, friends, and personal activities.

“My advice to female investigators is to manage their time effectively between work and family to reduce stress.” (P1)

This aligns with the findings of Kasper et al. (2005), who emphasised the importance of time management skills for individuals who invest significant emotional effort in their work while managing heightened time constraints. Additionally, the study highlights the significance of self-discipline in effectively managing time and energy. Teamwork skills are also crucial, as female investigators frequently collaborate with other professionals, clients, and community members. Enhancing teamwork fosters a positive work environment, contributing to psychological well-being. Informants 2, 4, and 7 emphasised that supportive colleagues create a collaborative work culture, which can alleviate burdens and boost motivation. Informants 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 also stressed that strong teamwork skills can improve motivation and reduce conflicts, particularly when handling cases. These findings align with Wu et al. (2013), who reported that a positive work environment significantly enhances work-life balance, whereas supervisory support alone may not be as impactful. Valcour et al. (2011) found that colleague support fosters a sense of unity and helps integrate work and personal domains. Spillover theory suggests that balancing work and personal life is essential for overall well-being (Morris & Madsen, 2007). Furthermore, informants 5 and 7 highlighted the need for awareness and the practice of a healthy lifestyle, especially for female investigators who often work long hours. Informant 2 suggested improving workplace facilities, such as nursery or childcare services, to alleviate concerns about children's health and safety.

“If possible, there should be a good support system.” (P2, P5)

In addition to a supportive work environment and improved facilities, leader support is also crucial (Babu & Raj, 2013). Informants 5, 6, and 7 stressed that supportive leadership significantly affects employees' satisfaction and the balance between work and life. This aligns with Mas-Machuca et al. (2016), who found that leader support and employee autonomy in decision-making enhance comfort and satisfaction. Lyons and Bandura (2023) emphasised that leaders who act as coaches contribute to employee development and performance, increasing commitment and career potential. Therefore, organisations should improve interpersonal skills, including teamwork, supportive relationships, and leadership, while upgrading work facilities. Lastly, the importance of family support, particularly from spouses, was highlighted by informants 1 and 4. However, there is a notable lack of literature on how spouses can assist working women in managing the dual demands of work and family life, particularly in the Asian context.

“Understanding from the spouse is very important.” (P4)

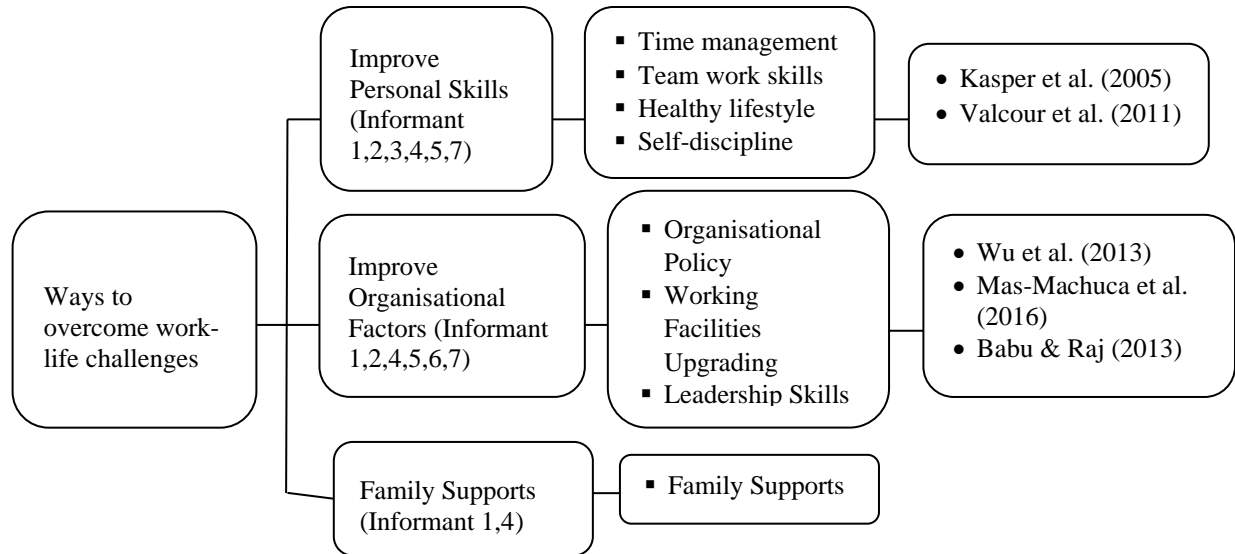


Figure 3. Ways to overcome work-life-related problems faced by female investigative officers.

In conclusion, this study makes a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge regarding the challenges faced by female investigators, specifically in balancing work and personal life. The interplay between these domains has a profound impact on their psychological well-being, work performance, and family life. To address these challenges, it is recommended that all stakeholders focus on improving individual skills, management practices, and family support systems. Developing key skills such as time management, self-discipline, teamwork, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle is crucial. These findings align with the work of Maadon et al. (2019), who demonstrated that strengthening workplace skills positively influences family life. Additionally, management should focus on enhancing work facilities and systems to streamline administrative tasks, implement policies supporting work-life balance, and invest in leadership development. Family support plays a vital role in enabling female investigators to balance their dual responsibilities. Furthermore, female investigators should be encouraged to develop robust stress management techniques, as managing stress is an inherent challenge of their career. The evolving work environment also necessitates ongoing technical skill development to ensure that female investigators remain well-equipped to meet the demands of their roles.

This study faced limitations due to time constraints, which impacted the number of participants involved. Additionally, scheduling interviews was challenging because of the busy work schedules of female investigators. Future research should consider implementing more flexible scheduling approaches to better accommodate participants' availability, thus enhancing the reliability of the findings. Furthermore, it is recommended that future studies employ data triangulation, using a variety of data sources, methods, and perspectives to strengthen the validity and reliability of the results. This could include incorporating documentary analysis, observational data, and focus group interviews with family members to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

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