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Figures and Boxes: Contextualizing work-life balance; a case of women of African origin in the UK

Figure 1 theoretical Framework



#### Boxes

'Ability to be able to balance work and life outside work'...'I have been doing good. 7/10'...'Very difficult to attain'...'While working and being able have a life'...'My life comes before the work'...'More of life; that is family'...'Can be challenging'...'When it's not all about work but a balance too'...'On a scale life should be 5 while work 4'...'Not too much into work and not totally into life/family'...'Ability to be able to balance work and life'

#### Box 1: Interviewee positioning

'Work stays at work; if I have to work late I stay back occasionally but never bring work home'...'Family comes before work...Family first before work even if it means reducing working days...'Cut down on hours to attend to family sometimes'...'Family/children before work'...'Family first'...'Family should come first but most of the job usually comes 1st'...'Most times work has to come first not family'...'Try not to do too much of family otherwise one may lose the job'...'Cannot really do that except in extreme family emergency...'Try as much as possible to make family come first including owing my employer time'

#### Box 2: Interviewee positioning

Respondent	Education Level	Age	Occupation	Marital Status	Dependants
R1	Master's Degree	30-39	Employed (about 1 year) Management	Single	None
R2	Bachelor's Degree	30-39	Employed Under 3 Years	Married	None
R3	Master's Degree	30-39	Employed and own a business more than 3 years	Married	none
R4	Master's Degree	40-59	Employed (Administrator) more than 5 years	Married	Children
R5	Master's Degree	30-39	Employed More than 5 years (management)	Married	Children
R6	Master's Degree	40-49	Employed More than 5 years (Management)	Married	Children
R7	Master's Degree	40-59	Employed (Consultant)	Married	Children
R8	Bachelor's Degree	30-39	Employed (more than 3 years)	Married	Children
R9	Bachelor's Degree	30-39	Employed (more than 10 years)	Married	Children
R10	Master's Degree	40-59	Administrator now self employed	Married	Children
R11	Master's Degree	40-59	Employed (Consultant)	Married	Children
R12	Bachelor's Degree	30-39	Employed Management (more than 5 years)	Married	Children
R13	Bachelor's Degree	30-39	Employed Administrator (under 3 years)	Married	Children
R14	Bachelor's Degree	30-39	Employed Consultant More than 3 years	Married	None
R15	Bachelor's Degree	30-39	Employed Administrator 3 years	Married	Children

**Table 1: demographic data**

Theoretical Framework	Data Extract	Coded for
Gender inequality (Roles differences - division of house hold labour and childcare, labour market disadvantage) Time based conflicts (Responsibilities) Behaviour based conflicts (behaviours, values)	life comes before work...more of life, that is family Family is like the glass, has to be handles with care Family is important consider family first We value the family Expectations Family is priority Shared roles with partner I do more chores at home I provide more child care taking care of the children is the major commitment for me, the timing has to work every time	Cultural Sensitivities
Behaviour based conflict (personality type and values) Time based conflicts (responsibilities) Gender inequality (functionality – support systems and self-directed activities)	open to have conversations with my manager about support internalise issues don't really speak about family matters at work Family matters are left out of the office would rather not talk about family issues have to ask good support from manager get support when I ask don't get enough support at work I feel like I have missed out on promotion because of my gender, race Maybe I have missed out on promotion because of my gender, race I do not think I have missed promotions because of my gender or race.	Personality Types
Gender inequality (functionality – support systems and self-directed activities) Time based conflicts (responsibilities) Strain based conflicts (wellbeing)	Childcare Budgeting Family income Support parents Support Siblings Investments Meeting expenses Donating Receiving the salary I take home give me pleasure from work	Financial commitments
Gender inequality (functionality – support systems and self-directed activities) Strain based conflict (fatigue, anxiety, wellbeing)	Visa requirements Family members coming to support from abroad Support systems Going back to work Transfer skills my work environment is not so supportive towards my family lifestyle leaving work for more than 6 months will affect my position at work having the kind of job I do makes it harder for me to do things for my family	Policies

**Table 2: Theoretical Framework and Thematic analysis for coding**

Themes	Theory X Assumptions	Theory Y Assumptions
Cultural Sensitivities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Needs close Supervision</li> <li>*Less commitment to more responsibilities especially when they conflict with family roles and responsibilities</li> <li>*Feel isolated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Assume more responsibilities</li> <li>*Uses situational approach in balancing commitment between work and family</li> <li>*Integrate better</li> <li>*Feel Included</li> </ul>
Personality Types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Pessimistic</li> <li>*Reacts negatively as a result of internalising problems</li> <li>*Less commitment to work with others</li> <li>*Flexible with work options</li> <li>*Not ambitious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Optimistic</li> <li>*Communicates regularly and negotiates responsibilities where necessary</li> <li>*Flexible with work patter options</li> <li>*Ambitious</li> </ul>
Financial Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Main/Only Motivation to work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Part of motivation</li> <li>*Seeks more opportunities for self-actualisation and career progression</li> </ul>
Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Reacts negatively to work commitment as a result of policies that impact work-family balance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Negotiates, communicates with management, co-workers concerning policies that impact work- family balance</li> </ul>

**Table 3: Theory X and Y assumption in relation to work-family balance**

Contextualising work-life balance

**Abstract:**

Purpose: The existing gender gap in the workplace, that affects job satisfaction and career advancement of women, creates a need to understand further the causes and effects of the gender gap phenomenon. Although, there are many challenges that affect women's job satisfaction and advancement in the workplace, this paper investigates work-life balance using multiple theoretical lenses.

Design: 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women from Nigeria and Ghana residing in the UK, they were selected using a purposive sampling method.

Findings: The findings show four main factors that explain the choices these women make in relation to work-family. These are cultural sensitivities, current phase in family and work life, personality types and other influences like policies and financial commitment. Results also show how these women make these work-family choices using networks and services.

Practical Implications: The paper postulates the need for organisations to pay attention to the acculturation and enculturation of these women which would indicate observing their cultural behaviours, values, knowledge and identities in order to understand how they integrate, assimilate and to also prevent separation and marginalisation. In addition, the use of (internal and external) networks as support systems for these women can create the opportunity for informal learning. Finally, organisations should create structure that support workplace learning and should include activities like decision-making, communication, career advancement planning and flexible work patterns.

Originality/Value: This study contributes to theory using multiple theories (work-family, gender inequality and theory X and Y in explaining the work family construct of women of African origin in the UK.

Keywords: Gender, Work-life Balance, Career Development, Job Satisfaction, African Women

**1. Introduction**



## Contextualising work-life balance

In spite of the numerous efforts to curb gender gaps and foster equality in the workplace, research (Durbin et al, 2017; Conley and Page, 2017; Independent, 2017; Kelan, 2017) shows that inequality still exists, especially in relation to the slow improvement of women's job satisfaction and progression in the workplace. One of the ongoing discussions that reveal this is work-family balance, which is integrated as part of the work-life balance phenomenon. In response to concerns about work-life balance, job satisfaction and career advancement of women, studies (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Goff, Mount, & Jamison, 1990; Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996; Adame et al., 2015; Bateman et al., 2016) have established the conflict between family duties and career demands. This conflict arises because some aspects of work and family roles are incompatible (Adame et al., 2015), and depend on the career or family stage of women (Beigi et al, 2018). Employers have responded by developing policies that reinforce the need for best practices on work-life balance (Abbott, & Trisha, 2005; Dupre & Day, 2007; Giardini & Kabst, 2008; Ribeiro-Soriano & Urbano, 2010). Despite research, publications and institutional efforts to foster best practices, work-life balance remains a challenge, which affects how organisations address and manage the work-life balance experiences of male and female employees. This suggests the need to understand the perceptions of diverse groups of people in the workplace and factors that influence their decisions concerning achieving work-life balance.

Although work-life conflicts affect males and females, there is more research (Durbin et al, 2017; Conley and Page, 2017; Independent, 2017; Kelan, 2017) on the female gender due to the higher impact it has on their job satisfaction and career progression. Thus, rather than having to consider broadly the organisational gaps in policies and practices, it is necessary to identify demographic positioning, to determine influencing factors on women's job satisfaction and career progression. We argue that in understanding why and how these women balance



## Contextualising work-life balance

1  
2  
3 their work-life balance, we can recognise factors that influence job satisfaction and career  
4  
5 progression.  
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7 Kirby, (2017) mentions the significance of understanding how work-life balance differs across  
8  
9 social representations due to economic systems, political backgrounds, gender philosophies,  
10  
11 socio-cultural ethos, experiences, and possibly governmental support. Similarly, Kamenou  
12  
13 (2008) stresses that there is limited research around ethnicity, culture, religion, and carers of  
14  
15 older or disabled people, from the mainstream discussions of work-life balance. To address  
16  
17 this, our research, which intersects gender and ethnicity, investigates why and how women of  
18  
19 African origin (specifically Nigerian and Ghanaian women) in the UK manage work-life  
20  
21 balance and its impact on their job satisfaction and career progression.  
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26 Previous research across various social groups include studies on the aging workforce, age  
27  
28 diversity, working middle class, men and women in midlife, foreign women, African American  
29  
30 women, ethnic minority women, black migrant women entrepreneurs and managers without  
31  
32 children (Connell, 2005; Kamenou, 2008; Forson, 2013; Warren, 2015; Atkinson and  
33  
34 Sandiford; 2016; Kemp and Rickett, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2018; Ali and French, 2019).  
35  
36 Kamenou, (2008) argues for a broader, more diverse approach to how different social groups  
37  
38 and individuals react to work-life conflicts. Her study suggests that there are restrictions as the  
39  
40 current understanding of diversity is beyond the standard white western model. She broadly  
41  
42 compares minority women and men vs white men and women, showing that though all  
43  
44 participants struggle with work-life balance, various socio-cultural factors influence how  
45  
46 ethnic minority participants balance work and family life. Kamenou, (2008) further stipulates  
47  
48 that a deeper understanding of diverse contexts is necessary to avoid a shallow understanding  
49  
50 of the experiences and needs of varying social groups. By acknowledging and examining  
51  
52 different forms of 'diversity', a more realistic analysis, which can inform organisational policy  
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54 and practice, is possible. This underpins the relevance and contribution of our study, which  
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## Contextualising work-life balance

1  
2  
3 seeks to examine the experiences of ethnic minority women from Nigeria and Ghana within  
4  
5 the broader discourse of women and work- life balance. This is a growing demographic group  
6  
7 within the UK workforce (Office of National Statistics UK, 2017)  
8  
9

10 The rationale for this study is that a relevant conceptual perspective of work-life balance  
11  
12 significantly focuses on prioritising work and family activities (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000;  
13  
14 Ransome, 2007; Pradhan, 2016; Beigi et al, 2018). This is likely to include managing  
15  
16 dependants and non-family households (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). There is a growing call  
17  
18 (Haddon et al, 2009; 2010), for precise conceptual views and the development of more  
19  
20 inclusive perspectives that reflect the changing nature of society, the workplace, family and  
21  
22 even individuals. In addition, diversity is significant to how individuals conceptualise work-  
23  
24 life balance, which incorporates work-family balance. To support similar discussions, (Haddon  
25  
26 et al, 2009; 2010; Ali and French, 2019), we identify and examine factors such as cultural  
27  
28 sensitivities, personality types, financial commitments and government policies; and how these  
29  
30 influence the conceptual views of work-family balance, job satisfaction and the career  
31  
32 progressions of women of African origin in the UK.  
33  
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## 37 **2. Literature Review**

### 38 **2.1 Conceptual Views on Work-life and Work-Family Balance**

39  
40 We explore conceptual perspectives in order to highlight and position this study within the  
41  
42 existing literature. We specifically look at the concepts of work-life balance and work- family  
43  
44 balance, where the former encompasses a much evolved and broader interpretation that  
45  
46 includes ideologies linked to the latter. Taking a contextual approach towards understanding  
47  
48 work-life balance of women of African origin in the UK, we consider the relevance of this  
49  
50 study from a work-family perspective. This hinges on the belief that balancing or prioritising  
51  
52 activities are significant between work and family related activities.  
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## Contextualising work-life balance

1  
2  
3 In defining the term work-life balance, we draw from the extant literature as discussed by  
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5 Kelliher et al, (2018) who refer to the term work-life balance as the relationship between work  
6  
7 and other aspects of an individual's life. Previous literature (for instance Kalliath and Brough,  
8  
9 2008) suggests that the term does not include a more common or fixed understanding of the  
10  
11 words 'life or balance', therefore, giving opportunity for individual perceptions as they relate  
12  
13 to social constructs. Hence, work-life balance has been a subject of debate amongst academics,  
14  
15 practitioners and policy makers since we continue to experience changes in the way we work  
16  
17 and how this interferes with non-work activities (Carlson and Kacmar, 2000). Fleetwood,  
18  
19 (2007) observes that while current conceptualisations and theoretical positioning, debates,  
20  
21 policies and practices might be persuasive; they create more problems in understanding the  
22  
23 interrelatedness of the two words work and life. For instance, in primarily understanding the  
24  
25 word 'life' in relation to non-work activities, a number of variables ranging from family,  
26  
27 hobbies, religion, entertainment, community engagements and sports are included (Khan,  
28  
29 2016). This means that the variations of 'life' related activities are boundless, difficult to  
30  
31 quantify and likely to intersect in multiple, complex ways in the context of work-life balance.  
32  
33 Consequently, scholars, (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Ransome, 2007; Grzywacz and Carlson,  
34  
35 2007; Pradhan, 2016; Beigi et al, 2018) refer to work-life balance as work-family balance.  
36  
37 Grzywacz, and Carlson, (2007) critically reviewed various definitions (for instance, Marks and  
38  
39 MacDermid, 1996; Greenhaus et al., 2006) and defined work-family life balance as an  
40  
41 accomplishment of expectations that align with shared roles between an individual and partner  
42  
43 or associates within the work and family space (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007). Similarly,  
44  
45 Carlson and Kacmar (2000) believe in the inclusion of life role values within the work and  
46  
47 family conflict discourse. They define life role values as the system of values an individual  
48  
49 holds, regarding the work and family domain, which is based on individual prioritisations.  
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51 Hence, the individual will make choices that align with these priorities.  
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Contextualising work-life balance

Although the underlying assumptions of these views vary, their emphasis on the scope, nature and direction of the relationship between individuals and social systems (Pradhan, 2016) remains consistent. Hence, in contextualising work-family balance for women of African origin in the UK, we explore themes such as values, prioritisations and shared roles, with respect to how they inform work-family balance.

## **2.2 Theoretical Perspectives of Work-Family Balance.**

### **2.2.1 Work-Family Conflict**

Here, we explore two theoretical views (work-family conflict and gender inequality) to explain work-family balance. These theories explain the relationship between work and family and other variables (Ransome, 2007; Beigi et al, 2018) and reinforce the work-family conceptual positioning of this study. For instance, work-family conflicts focus on problems created because of pressures from work and family that are incompatible (Netemeyer et al., 1996; Adame et al., 2015; Bateman et al., 2016; Pradhan, 2016). This would also include other variables faced by members of non-family households.

Ransome (2007) states that the ideal-typical family is a household with dependants, especially children. This has become the stereotypical household for most societies including the UK. However, he suggests that the term family should also capture people who have to balance their non-work activities to meet other demands within tight income restraints. This includes people outside the ideal family structure but still within specific social groups.

Three types of work-family conflicts; time-based conflict, behaviour-based conflict and strain-based conflict; were identified (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Time based conflict focuses on the conflicting demand of work and family responsibilities for time. Greenhaus and Beutell, (1985) argue that this could be physical or mental. Behaviour-based conflict occurs when an individual exhibits certain behaviour like aggressive communication as a result of unfair division of household, childcare or wage labour (Kelliher et al., 2018) which is considered

## Contextualising work-life balance

1  
2  
3 inappropriate in the workplace (Pradhan, 2016). This could be a form of fatigue and a result of  
4  
5 stress (Paludi, 2013). Strain based conflict occurs when symptoms like anxiety and fatigue  
6  
7 develop because of increased work-family responsibilities, possibly affecting an individual's  
8  
9 wellbeing. A recent study (Lucia-Casademunt et al, 2018) explores the concept of wellbeing  
10  
11 and its impact following long working hours, which often result in poor performance,  
12  
13 absenteeism, high turnover and burnout (Pradhan, 2016). Wellbeing is important in balancing  
14  
15 work and other non-work activities, including the family. Investigating the wide-ranging work-  
16  
17 family conflicts that can occur and recognising how they affect an individual's wellbeing and  
18  
19 performance is thus an ongoing concern for academics, practitioners, policy makers and  
20  
21 society. We consider this impact in order to understand why and how women of African origin  
22  
23 make work-family balance choices that affect their job satisfaction and career progression.

### 2.2.2 Gender Inequality Theory

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31 Gender inequality theory helps in understanding the dynamics of work-family balance of  
32  
33 women professionals (Pradhan, 2016). It provides a unique perspective and offers insights for  
34  
35 possible unequal participation of women in the labour market (Thomas, 2007; Pradhan, 2016).  
36  
37 The study of gender difference is associated closely with feminism, which explores the  
38  
39 relationship between the male and female gender in relation to economic, political and social  
40  
41 equality (Valentine. 1998; Pradhan, 2016). Exploring 'gender' can possibly take a broad  
42  
43 approach due to the evolving construct of society. Feminist theory believes that one can only  
44  
45 gain knowledge when a standpoint has been identified; this occurs only by the conscious  
46  
47 awareness of those being marginalised, and their desire to bring change by making their voices  
48  
49 heard (Harding, 2004). For instance, feminist theory has a voice in academic discourses  
50  
51 because of the consciousness of feminism within feminist movement (Collins, 1990). This  
52  
53 provides an understanding for the grounding of the feminist standpoint (Ramazanoglu and  
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1 Contextualising work-life balance

2  
3 Holland, 2002; Harding, 2005) in feminist political practice which still focuses largely on  
4 differences between the male and female gender.  
5

6  
7 However, this position has been criticised by some researchers who regard this as an  
8 individualistic movement (Collins, 1990; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). McCall (2005)  
9 attributes this evolving construct of society to gender intersecting with other 'social divisions.  
10  
11 Nonetheless, the basis remains gender in the context of differences between the male and  
12 female construct, whether sociological, biological or psychological (Pradhan, 2016).  
13  
14

15 Likewise, feminist studies, which primarily buttress the empowerment of the female gender,  
16 have adopted concerns related to discrimination and differences between various social groups.  
17  
18 For instance, labour market disadvantage (Ogbonna, 2019) could include fewer women at work  
19 than men because women are prone to take career breaks for family related responsibilities.  
20  
21 Paul Seabright (as cited in Whitfield, 2012) argues that women who take career breaks because  
22 of family responsibilities do not necessarily signal a systematic discrimination. This is  
23 debatable but remains a reason for gender inequality in the workplace.  
24  
25

26 An additional view concerning the gender construct is the functionalist perspective. Parsons  
27 (1951; 1968; 1971) viewed society as a system of interacting social units, institutions and  
28 organisations. He believed that elements of a society were functional for a society as well as  
29 for social order and that order and stability in a society are the result of the influence of certain  
30 values (Parsons, 1951; 1968; 1971). In addition, his view highlights the notion that social  
31 institutions are designed to achieve different task thereby, contributing to the overall  
32 functionality of the society. For instance, the family provides social support and growth,  
33 education offers knowledge and skill development while the economics and labour market  
34 structure offer opportunities for production of goods and services. Hence, there is a need to  
35 explore how individuals within these social institutions can create or achieve a balance  
36 (Parsons, 1951; 1968; 1971).  
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## Contextualising work-life balance

In considering its relevance within this work, we examine how women of African origin in the UK adapt to various social systems (Boston, 2015; Hirvonen, 2016) and explore how the systems interact. This indicates the utilisation of possible social related support systems from both the work and family domain, in determining work-family balance. From an individual perspective, we examine how these women manage responsibilities through self-directed activities within a changing environment, and how they adapt and develop themselves through interaction with the environment, and keep this cycle going to ensure work-family balance (Lorig & Holman, 2003; Pradhan, 2016). In doing this, we recognise the environment as a social platform that allows individuals to connect to other social entities (Hirvonen, 2016).

### **2.3 A Review of Job Satisfaction and Career Advancement**

For the purpose of this work, we define job satisfaction as how jobs provide higher extrinsic and intrinsic rewards (Fraser & Hodge, 2000) and this tends to focus on homogeneous groups (Fraser & Hodge, 2000). Consequently, we argue that from a gendered, ethnic perspective there are limited studies in relation to job satisfaction, hence, in exploring the work-family balance experiences of these women, we can understand the challenges with job satisfaction and career progression. Scholars (Fraser & Hodge, 2000; Kaur & Malodia, 2017) categorise job satisfaction broadly as structural, which examines workplace environment and workers satisfaction and dispositional approach, which considers the behaviours and abilities of the workers. Hence, we specifically consider factors like the management and employee commitment to job roles that influences job commitment.

Likewise, concerning career advancement, we recognise the problematic phenomenon regarding women progression to more senior positions especially women of African origin, how this can affect their perception of achieving job satisfaction. We use theory X and Y because we believe this theory helps us to understand organisational effectiveness in



Contextualising work-life balance

1  
2  
3 addressing concerns about job satisfaction and career progression. We specifically explore  
4  
5 how management assumptions in relation to work-family conflict can affect the job  
6  
7 satisfaction and career advancement of these women.  
8

9  
10 McGregor's thoughts about theory X and Y emphasises that there are two main types of  
11  
12 management assumptions; X which is a pessimistic view of workforce and Y which is more  
13  
14 optimistic. Theory X assume that employees are pessimistic about work hence, such  
15  
16 employees need more direction and a demanding leadership approach to work, while theory  
17  
18 Y supports the notion that employees are optimistic about work hence, they need less  
19  
20 direction and apply themselves in more assertive and creative ways (Gürbütz et al., 2014).  
21  
22 However, Gürbütz et al., (2014) mention that one of the criticism with the theory is that it  
23  
24 does not consider environmental factors in determining why employees exhibit X or Y  
25  
26 orientations at any given time. Hence, in this work, we argue that all employees are likely to  
27  
28 exhibit both theory X and Y orientations at some point (Kopelman, et al., 2012; Ross, 2013).  
29  
30 Hence, understanding other environmental factors like work-family balance can inform  
31  
32 assumptions about theory X and Y orientations and this will foster organisational  
33  
34 effectiveness, where management understands and identifies the proper support to ensure  
35  
36 women employees are consistently within the theory Y orientation in order to ensure job  
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38 satisfaction and career advancement.  
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#### 44 **2.4 A Combined Theoretical Framework**

45  
46 In this study, we combine relevant theoretical perspectives to bring together the positions and  
47  
48 interactions of women of African origin, to examine why and how they make choices that affect  
49  
50 their work-family balance that affect job satisfaction and career advancement. Thus, we apply  
51  
52 positioning theory to explain key features fundamental to the assumptions expressed, using  
53  
54 multiple conceptual and theoretical perspectives like work-family conflict, gender inequality,  
55  
56 and theory X and Y.  
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## Contextualising work-life balance

Positioning theory explores how individuals are constantly generating and interpreting their sense of what is real and ethical (Boston, 2015). Individuals do not only position themselves in particular situations, they also position others; creating a network of thoughts about similarities or differences in their interactions within a specific phenomenon (Harre & Van Lagenhove, 1999; Harré et al., 2009). This can be reflective, interactive or self-positioning (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014) although other styles of positioning are possible.

Recognising various styles of positioning establishes that people are likely to view themselves from precise positions. This occurs in every conversation where individuals tell stories reflecting their identity (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014). Hence, positioning theory highlights the interactive and contextualised features of how women of African origin understand themselves as well as others within specific or interdependent networks, in relation to how they attempt to address work and family challenges.

Hirvonen (2016) notes that positioning theory tends to focus on situation-specific actions and the construction of different positions in interaction. For instance, position goes beyond human beings as social entities and includes institutions, social groups, organisations and even cultures (Boston, 2015). In addition, positioning and roles can be interchanged in interpersonal interactions. Hirvonen (2016) argues that this can be problematic as roles can be regarded as the basis of positioning and vice versa. In this study, we address women positioning themselves as social entities within other social entities such as organisations, cultures and social groups, expressed in their discussions about their roles.

In relation to other perspectives (Hirvonen, 2016), positioning theory offers a broader view to the analysis. It can draw from contextualised narrative analytic works (Depperman, 2015). This makes it possible to apply the basic concepts of the theory to a variety of different contexts. The basic concept (Hirvonen 2016) which is group positioning, helps us set the theory in its usefulness to the study of individual interactions.

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Positioning theory has been used in a number of research contexts such as organisational and institutional contexts for collaborative learning and mentoring activities (Tan, 2013; Hirvonen, 2016). We use positioning theory to understand why and how women of African origin make choices that affect their work–family prioritisations. We also use it to explore the role of personality trait and culture, as this sets the focus of analysis on diverse aspects of individual phenomena and behaviour.

Our theoretical Framework is summarised in **Figure 1**.

### **3 Research Methods**

#### **3.1 The context - Women of African Origin**

The growth of migration in the UK (office of National Statistics, 2017) poses new questions and challenges for managing work life balance. Consequently, we explore women of African Origin but specifically examine the case of women originally from Nigeria and Ghana by birth and nationality. This is an initial study that will further underpin studies across other nationalities and ethnic minority groups in the UK to ascertain similarities and/or differences in contexts. One rationale for selecting these ethnic nationalities is the need to have a definite context. Furthermore, there is a growing number of women from these nationalities in the UK. The population of sub Saharan Africans in the UK aged 16-64 is 1,081,000 of which Nigerians account for 194, 000, 98,000 of which are male and 96,000 female. There are 109,000 Ghanaians, 47,000 male and 62,000 female (Office of National Statistics UK, 2017). Although both countries are categorised as West African and have differences in sociocultural settings, there are similarities between contexts especially regarding their social constructions.

#### **3.2 Sample and Data Collection**

In order to address the research questions we conducted face to face (13) and telephone (2) semi structured interviews with 15 women from Nigeria and Ghana, randomly selected from across the United Kingdom, between January 2018 and January 2019. The interviews lasted

## Contextualising work-life balance

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3 between 45 and 90 minutes and were held at the residence of the women, public meeting venues  
4 and over the telephone. The method of selection used in this study was purposive sampling;  
5  
6 we recruited volunteers from friends and acquaintances within social and religious networks.  
7  
8 There were initial face-to-face contacts, phone calls and referrals, followed up by a formal  
9  
10 contact before an interview. In addition, we attended network events where discussions around  
11  
12 work-family balance were held. In these events, women from African origin shared their stories  
13  
14 and gave verbal consent for information to be used. All interviews were documented. However,  
15  
16 to respect the wishes of some of the participants, only 11 of the 15 interviews were recorded  
17  
18 and transcribed while, written notes were taken in the other 4 interviews.  
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### 3.3 Analytical Method

24  
25  
26 We used thematic analysis to examine the narratives of how these women position themselves,  
27  
28 to interpret their experiences within their social realities (Boston, 2015). Using Braun and  
29  
30 Clarke, (2006), we define thematic analysis as identifying and reporting themes within data in  
31  
32 order to interpret the research topic. The themes were derived by highlighting points significant  
33  
34 to addressing the research questions. We applied conventions for representing prevalence in  
35  
36 thematic analysis, using the word 'majority' to indicate the number of participants (Braun and  
37  
38 Clarke, 2006). The themes are cultural sensitivities, current phase in family and work life,  
39  
40 personality types and external influences like policies and financial commitment. Concerning  
41  
42 the coding process, we used a more flexible approach as we were looking at the relevance and  
43  
44 prevalence of themes induced across the data set. The themes identified were based on each  
45  
46 participants' conversation indicating the number of participants who articulated these themes.  
47  
48 It takes an inductive approach, as the themes identified are not drawn from theory even though  
49  
50 linked to existing theory, which indicates it is not a pre-existing coding structure thereby giving  
51  
52 the opportunity to offer this as a contribution to theory. Similarly, we also use a semantic  
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## Contextualising work-life balance

approach where, the data is summarised and interpreted in order to theorise the significance of the themes in line with the existing literature.

The theoretical framework (figure 1) also informed how we derived the themes. We considered the derived terms within the theoretical framework in order to reveal their relevance and then extracted data that reflected their meanings. For work life conflict, which include time based, strain based and behaviour-based conflicts, we specifically focused on responsibilities and shared roles. For gender inequality, we aligned with role differences and functionalities, examining division of household labour and childcare, labour market disadvantage, self-directed activities, support systems and interactions with networks. These networks refer to ethnic minority communities to which the women belong and include extended families, friends and other social networks; e.g. religious (church) communities.

Our approach is consistent with previous similar research. For example, Kamenou, (2008) conducted in depth interviews using a social constructionist framework which recognised the relevance of interactions between social systems to study the experiences of ethnic minority women balancing work and personal life. Similarly, Powell et al., (2018) used feminist and work life theory, interviews with open-ended questions and a thematic analysis for their study about African American women and work life balance.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

In line with ethical considerations, all respondents were anonymised and fully informed about the purpose of the study, including the methodology, dissemination of results and implication of participation, which is consistent with current practice. All respondents agreed that their participation was voluntary and gave their consent to participate in the study.

### **3.5 Results**

Our results include the demographics (table 1) and narratives of 15 women of African origin in the UK, 10 Nigerians and 5 Ghanaians. Our findings show four main factors that explain the

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choices these women make in relation to work-family. These are cultural sensitivities, current phase in family and work life, personality types and external influences like policies and financial commitment (table 2). Results also show how they make these work-family choices using networks and services.

Before explaining these findings, we include the codes for each theme. As earlier mentioned, the themes are based on prevalence where themes occurred in a significant number (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the individual interviews.

### **Table 1: demographic data**

### **Table 2: Theoretical Framework and Thematic analysis for coding**

### **Table 3: Theory X and Y assumption in relation to work-family balance**

## **4. Findings**

We highlight in (box 1) some language used by respondents in sharing their experiences on work-family balance. Each quote is from a different interviewee;

### **Box 1: Work-life prioritisation**

These phrases highlight respondents' positioning regarding work-family balance. Some of them indicate the need for family life to take priority over work, noting 'life is about family'. In addition to children, most respondents indicate that the family construct includes other dependants like aged parents and extended family members, as well as non-family activities like affiliations with a church community and growing self-owned businesses. Some respondents stopped work temporarily because of family responsibilities; e.g. to care for young children; while others combine family and work in spite of pressures with balancing these roles. Responses also indicate that respondents who choose to combine work and family responsibilities do so because of the need to support their spouse and extended family financially, which has priority over any challenges they face. Nonetheless, some who combine

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2  
3 these responsibilities state they have support from extended family, parents, friends, spouses  
4 and in laws. These include childcare and school runs. Eight of the respondents also indicate  
5 some support from the workplace, through maternity leave, extended maternity, flexible  
6 working times, service for sick child (ren), work from home, shared work and leave of absence.  
7  
8 Financial commitments also play a significant role as to why respondents made decisions about  
9 work and family responsibilities.  
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12 In prioritising choices concerning work vs family life, box 2 includes some of the narratives;  
13 each quote is again from a different interviewee:  
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### 17 **Box 2: Personality and Culture**

18 These responses indicate mixed feelings on why family or work take priority. The findings also  
19 show that cultural sensitivities affect how the participants respond to these commitments. For  
20 instance, some respondents indicate that their beliefs and values propel them to be family  
21 centred. However, others believe that these personal, cultural values should not be the  
22 motivation for decisions on priority between work and family, but decisions should be  
23 determined by the situation each time.  
24  
25

26 Some of the narratives indicate personality as the driver for how decisions are made about work  
27 and family prioritisations. Drawing on the big 4 personality traits (Ali, 2019) (openness,  
28 agreeableness, conscientiousness and extraversion), 5 respondents stated that they were  
29 agreeable as they would prioritise work expectations; 4 expressed openness to work and family  
30 expectations; 3 indicate conscientiousness, making decisions as the need arises and 3  
31 respondents consider themselves as extroverts, able to draw energy from pressures of work and  
32 family responsibilities.  
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35 These choices are also dependent on available support systems, for instance, flexible or shared  
36 work, extended maternity, childcare and support from family and friends. The findings show a  
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## Contextualising work-life balance

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3 lack of consistent support for work-family balance, which affects job satisfaction and career  
4  
5 progression in the workplace, and the need for long-term support. Findings also reveal how  
6  
7 respondents attain support outside the work place as they prioritise socio-cultural activities,  
8  
9 across different phases of their work and career progression. From a cultural perspective,  
10  
11 women get support from extended family members who normally assist in household and  
12  
13 childcare responsibilities so they can return to work. However, this support is not easily  
14  
15 accessible to most women who have migrated to the UK. From an institutional barrier  
16  
17 perspective, which examines exclusion from receiving social rights (Zhang et al., 2018), some  
18  
19 respondents relate how immigration policies hinder their access to support. For example, their  
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21 parents living abroad are sometimes denied entry visas. This could be a form of exclusion  
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23 because these respondents were then unable to access support systems to balance work-family  
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25 expectations.  
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31 In positioning themselves within their social realities, respondents acknowledge the need for  
32  
33 self-directed activities to enable them to manage work and family life expectations. The  
34  
35 narratives show that respondents set career and family goals. However, the determination to  
36  
37 achieve these and deal with arising conflicts leads to interactions with social networks that can  
38  
39 provide needed support. These social networks include friends, family members and religious  
40  
41 groups. Some of the respondents acknowledged that their employers provide support to help  
42  
43 with work and family balance. However, as these were not available to other respondents,  
44  
45 support from the workplace depends on organisational type and policies. For instance,  
46  
47 respondents who work for MNCs stated they had some formal mentoring, unlike those working  
48  
49 for smaller private, third sector companies or even some departments in the public sector where  
50  
51 mentoring was more likely to be informal.  
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56 Another issue, which was confirmed by Kamenou (2008), involves breaking into an industry  
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58 with a system perceived as foreign. Hence, respondents position themselves as new and alien  
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## Contextualising work-life balance

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3 and feel the need to do whatever they can to get ahead. In addition, these women gravitate  
4  
5 towards people of the same ethnic group, even at work. If this is not possible, they isolate  
6  
7 themselves and build networks outside the workplace. Although this is not limited to women  
8  
9 of African origin in the UK, they are likely to face more difficulties as they are more prone to  
10  
11 cross-cultural adjustment problems, especially in the face of the growing surge in anti-  
12  
13 immigration expression (Independent, 2018). However, full integration may depend on the  
14  
15 length of time spent in the UK and their level of acculturation.  
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19 One respondent narrates how having an extroverted, self-driven personality seeking to succeed  
20  
21 in all that she does, enables her to draw energy from the pressures of combining both family  
22  
23 and work responsibilities. However, there are instances where time constraints and conflicting  
24  
25 demands of work and family (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985) create the need for support. This  
26  
27 is not always readily available, especially from family members and partners who work or live  
28  
29 out of town; one respondent notes, 'I tend to pay for child care, and this increases financial  
30  
31 commitments'. ....'it almost seems a mandatory task of having to find the balance between  
32  
33 work and family responsibilities because, the financial benefits gotten from work supports the  
34  
35 family'. This acknowledges the impact of socio-economic circumstance in balancing work and  
36  
37 family responsibilities and indicates why women and even men feel pressured and ignore  
38  
39 strain-based conflicts (Pradhan, 2016), as illustrated in the following quotes.  
40  
41  
42

43  
44 *'...I don't consciously think about possibly having a physical or mental breakdown*  
45  
46 *until I am brought to checks by family members like my mum who goes... 'you need to*  
47  
48 *stop and take a break otherwise you will breakdown'.*- respondent 5  
49

50  
51 *'I attend religious events that emphasise the importance and need for health and*  
52  
53 *mental wellbeing, this is when I tend to reflect on my activities...'* - respondent 15  
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Contextualising work-life balance

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3                    ‘....I don’t feel comfortable to discuss family matters at work, but I am more  
4  
5                    comfortable to share work issues with my social networks outside the workplace’-  
6  
7  
8                    respondent 12  
9

## 10 **5 Discussion and Theoretical Implications**

11  
12 This research explores the experiences of women of African origin as they position themselves  
13 within the work-family discourse. We specifically reflect this within the context of work-family  
14 conflict and gender inequality theories in order to identify, recognise and validate the role of  
15 time-based, behaviour based and strain-based conflict in managing these responsibilities. In  
16 addition, we reveal the significance of shared roles in division of family responsibilities,  
17 including household, childcare and wage labour (Kelliher et al., 2018). We also establish the  
18 use of functionalities like support systems towards goal attainment, integration and adaptation  
19 for work-family balance.  
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### 30 **5.1 Cultural Sensitivities**

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32 Cultural sensitivities significantly inform how decisions are made in balancing work-family  
33 conflicts. A number of respondents indicate prioritizing family over work. Therefore, increased  
34 family responsibilities may cause them to leave work or search for less demanding jobs. This  
35 is however not an absolute approach as some indicate having to consider their decisions from  
36 a situational positioning. It is nonetheless evident that the culture driven value system informs  
37 the perspective of most respondents in prioritising family over work. In addition, it reflects  
38 unfair burdening (Kelliher et al., 2018) on whoever is required to make the career adjustment,  
39 which in most cases is the woman. The perspective of unfairness may be debatable as cultural  
40 sensitivity makes women accept this choice because they perceive themselves as the  
41 homemaker. These African women are more home centred in comparison to men who are  
42 generally more work centred. This creates an unbalanced situation in the workplace gender  
43 equation. Hakim, (2006) argues that there should be at least three types of careers to allow for  
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3 progression. They are the truncated career because of marriage and babies, the adaptive career  
4 that allows for work-life balance and hegemonic career which can be time consuming. This  
5  
6 may be plausible when negotiating a variety of ways by which marginalised women can  
7  
8 achieve job satisfaction and career progression in the workplace.  
9  
10

11  
12 In addition, women who are family oriented are more likely to be exempted from jobs that  
13  
14 require long hours, travel, working across borders, or which cannot be made family friendly.

15  
16 Hakim (2006) argues that organisations that allow flexibility within working patterns may still  
17  
18 be competitive for people who work flexibly vs those who work full time with more hours.

19  
20 This supports the argument that family friendly work patterns only give access to women. It  
21  
22 does not reduce gender inequality, build job satisfaction or aid career progression, as exclusion  
23  
24 (Zhang et al., 2018) is likely to exist. More so, women of African origin who may be at different

25  
26 stages of integration within the workplace are more likely to suffer some form of segregation  
27  
28 (Hakim, 2006) and exclusion (Zhang et al., 2018). It is essential to explore this from an  
29  
30 individual context and implement the best approach to eradicate stress and improve wellbeing.

31  
32 As a coping mechanism, women use support systems to achieve goals, adapt and integrate into  
33  
34 work and community. These include extended family members, friends, church communities,  
35  
36 paid childcare, maternity cover and extended maternity cover.  
37  
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## 41 42 5.2 Financial Commitments

43  
44 Despite cultural sensitivities to prioritise family over work, women are increasingly staying in  
45  
46 paid employment to meet family financial commitments (Nwagbara and Akanji, 2012; Zhang  
47  
48 et al., 2018). This highlights the impact of financial commitments, indicating that despite  
49  
50 possible physical and mental strain, women still take on both work and family responsibilities.  
51  
52

53  
54 It also reveals a gender gap in the workplace, as significant numbers of women tend to take  
55  
56 career breaks or consider other career choices that allow for higher flexibility. Although  
57  
58 Seabright, as cited in Whitfield, (2012) argues that career break is not a systematic  
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3 discrimination, it evidences a reason why fewer women from these nationalities progress within  
4 their career to senior management and beyond. In instances where these women progress to  
5 senior management, personality and an environment that supports positive acculturation and  
6 enculturation (Kim et al., 2006) have played a role. This indicates that effective integration and  
7 adaptation processes can help job satisfaction and career progression in spite of organisational  
8 barriers and possible institutional barriers (Zhang et al., 2018).

### 5.3 Personality Types

9  
10 Hill and Blunn (2018) showed overall that women displayed more openness, conscientiousness  
11 and extraversion in work-family interactions, especially in comparison to their partners. They  
12 found that the level of openness, conscientiousness and extraversion these women displayed at  
13 home also affected their functionality at work. This suggests that personality types have a  
14 significant impact on work-family balance. This study reiterates the impact of personality on  
15 work-life balance, and the role of networks in the society as a social platform (Hirvonen, 2016),  
16 that allows women to connect with other social entities. It also depicts the role of trust within  
17 these networks that allows for openness, communication and information sharing. With the  
18 lack of inclusion, these women are likely to experience weak ties at their places of work if they  
19 perceive difference and distance because of difference in social characteristics and hierarchical  
20 position.

### 5.4 Policies

21  
22 Immigration policies concerning migrants living in the UK affect work-family decisions. The  
23 results show direct and indirect impact; some of the women indicate the lack of family support  
24 during maternity due to visa approvals, restrictions to access to some services as migrants,  
25 which could lead to feeling of exclusion among migrant workers, as discussed by Zhang et al.,  
26 (2018). In order to tackle this, organisations can develop policies that strengthen the sense of  
27 belonging through social ties. This would mean providing, as a support system, the  
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3 acculturation and enculturation process that examine how these women integrate, assimilate  
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5 even beyond the workplace, and identify challenges they might experience that could result in  
6  
7 separation and marginalisation (Kim et al., 2006; Hajro et al., 2019) especially where  
8  
9 immigration policies are concerned. This can be achieved by exploring the external networks  
10  
11 and empowering women to foster social capital within the workspace. This includes  
12  
13 understanding how these relationships develop in order to refine the current networks or  
14  
15 develop new and more suitable ones (Álvarez, and Romání, 2017). Organisations can enact  
16  
17 policies that give these women the access and opportunity to advance in their career, through  
18  
19 the flexi work/part time routes. Though we recognise possible individual differences, we  
20  
21 harmonise women from two distinct ethnic backgrounds to emphasise a collective as well as  
22  
23 independent awareness of factors that affect ‘why and how’ women of African Origin make  
24  
25 choices that inform their approaches to work and family life balance.  
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### 5.5 Contribution to Theory

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31  
32 This study supports the view that conceptualising work-life balance can incorporate work and  
33  
34 diverse aspects of life, and specifically focus on work- family balance; this indicates work and  
35  
36 family activities that include raising children, supporting aged parents, extended family  
37  
38 members, and being part of principal networks in the broader community. Likewise, this study  
39  
40 contributes to theory as we apply the work-family and gender inequality theories in explaining  
41  
42 the work family construct of women of African origin in the UK. Consequently, linking these  
43  
44 theoretical perspectives within the selected context, we show the relationship between these  
45  
46 theories, and we present factors that explain why and how women of African origin make  
47  
48 decisions that affect their career advancement. The factors include personality types, cultural  
49  
50 sensitivities, financial commitments and policies. Consequently, this qualitative work  
51  
52 establishes the fact that work-family balance exhibits factors that influence management  
53  
54 assumptions for theory X and Y. These factors can also be argued to be environmental factors,  
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which was scarce in McGregor's work (Gürbütçü, et al., 2014). In summary, the theoretical contribution emphasises the inclusion of the discussed themes within the theoretical framework we used

## 6. Practical Importance and Implications of Research

Diversity in the workplace calls for the need to work for inclusion rather than marginalisation (Kamenou, 2008; Ali and French, 2019). Women of African origin, as other migrants, face cross-cultural adjustment problems (Hajro et al., 2019) and their acculturation may depend on time spent in the UK. In this work, we examine women as social entities and reveal how specific factors can influence their work-family balance and career advancement. Drawing on Kim et al., (2006), we postulate the need for organisations to pay attention to the acculturation and enculturation of these women which would indicate observing their cultural behaviours, values, knowledge and identities in order to understand how they integrate, assimilate and to also prevent separation and marginalisation. We also propose the use of (internal and external) women networks as support systems for these women. These networks create the opportunities for informal learning (Manuti et al, 2015) even beyond the workplace. We reemphasise the need for situational leadership and flexible work patterns that can allow for job satisfaction and career advancement. In addition, we recommend training around management assumptions and support towards career development and job satisfaction for these women. This should include awareness trainings that focuses on giving these women safe spaces to discuss their work-life conflicts with management. Likewise, these trainings should also consider mindful responses that are built on facts and not assumptions in order to help these women identify and consider the choices available to them. Finally, organisations should create structure that support workplace learning (Park and Lee, 2018). These structures should include activities like decision-making, communication, career advancement planning and flexible work patterns that



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ensure these women have the opportunities and expertise required to meet organisational objectives.

## 7. Limitations and Future Research

Although this work draws from empirical findings to explore the experience of women of African origin in the UK, an increase in sample size can provide more insight to other indicators of how work-family balance occurs. This study ascertains similarities and differences concerning gender and ethnic diversity issues. In addition, we believe this work acts as a lens to more studies as we propose the impact of personality trait and cultural positioning in the broader study of work-family balance, women and career advancement. Likewise, we propose the opportunity for future studies that focus on enhancing the theoretical contribution as highlighted within this study, which emphasises the inclusion of the discussed themes within the theoretical framework we used.

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