Work-Life Balance of Women Employees at Startup Companies in Calicut City

Authors:

First Author

ARYA C R

Research Scholar,

Department of Management,

VET Institute of Arts and Science Co-Education) College,

Thindal, Erode-638012

Second Author

Dr. G T Sasetharan

Assistant Professor,

Department of Management,

VET Institute of Arts and Science Co-Education) College,

Thindal, Erode-638012

Abstract

The rapid growth of startup companies in Indian urban centres has created new employment opportunities, especially for women seeking flexible and innovative work environments. However, this new-age ecosystem often lacks structured HR frameworks, creating challenges that significantly impact the work-life balance of women professionals. This study explores the experiences of women working in startups across Calicut City, Kerala. By examining HR policy gaps, salary disparities, and socio-cultural influences, the research aims to understand the underlying factors affecting women's ability to balance professional demands with personal responsibilities. A descriptive research design was adopted, involving 80 women employees across various startups in Calicut. Primary data were collected through

structured questionnaires, and findings were supported by secondary data and literature. The results indicate that while startups often offer dynamic work culture, women face considerable challenges, including unregulated work hours, unequal pay, limited safety measures, and inadequate maternity benefits. The paper concludes with policy recommendations that advocate for gender-sensitive HR structures and stronger legal frameworks for equity and work-life wellness.

Keywords: Work-life balance, startup companies, work-life balance of women employees, HR policies, salary discrimination

1. Introduction

1.1 The New-Age Startup Ecosystem

Startups have transformed the Indian business landscape by fostering innovation, risk-taking, and digital enterprise. With over 100,000 recognized startups across the country, India is now the third-largest startup hub globally. These businesses range from tech solutions and wellness products to eco-commerce and education platforms. Calicut, often overshadowed by metro cities, has emerged as a notable regional startup hotspot in Kerala. Spearheaded by initiatives like the Kerala Startup Mission (KSUM), Calicut's startup landscape thrives on digital literacy, youth entrepreneurship, and an expanding local economy.

However, with all its promise, the startup ecosystem also reflects growing pains, especially in human resource practices. Most startups operate without fully developed HR departments. This creates challenges in terms of formalized work contracts, fixed working hours, parental benefits, and equitable pay structures.

1.2 Understanding Work-Life Balance for Women

Work-life balance (WLB) refers to the equilibrium an individual maintains between work responsibilities and personal or family life. For women, particularly in the Indian socio-cultural context, this balance is complex. Women often carry the dual burden of professional and domestic obligations. Expectations around caregiving, child-rearing, and household management continue to fall disproportionately on women, regardless of their employment status. When such social expectations meet informal startup work structures, it generates stress, burnout, and dissatisfaction.

1.3 The Gender Dimension in Startups

Unlike corporate organizations, startups often pride themselves on flat hierarchies and fast-paced work cultures. However, this flexibility can turn counterproductive when policies aren't in place to protect employee welfare. Several studies indicate that many startups prefer hiring women under the assumption that they are willing to accept lower salaries or fewer benefits. While this may open doors to employment, it also introduces gendered vulnerabilities like wage gaps, unstable job security, and limited career advancement.

1.4 The Calicut Context

Calicut (Kozhikode), located in northern Kerala, is a growing technology and education hub. Its educated population, rising entrepreneurial interest, and increased internet penetration have contributed to the formation of local startups. Yet, the city still reflects traditional gender norms, which affect the professional engagement of women. Many women in Calicut's startups juggle work in tech, marketing, and content creation while also navigating household roles and responsibilities, often without institutional support or legal safety nets.

1.5 Importance of HR Policies

Human Resource (HR) policies serve as the backbone for employee engagement and welfare. They cover essential areas such as recruitment, leave entitlements, sexual harassment redressal, grievance mechanisms, maternity benefits, and appraisal systems. In startups, HR departments are either underdeveloped or completely absent in early stages. As a result, policies are often unclear or discretionary. This puts women at a disadvantage, especially when they seek maternity leave, flexi-hours, or equal compensation.

This study is a focused inquiry into how these conditions affect women employees in startups across Calicut. It aims to identify their struggles, unpack the structural causes, and suggest policy remedies.

2. Review of Literature

The concept of work-life balance (WLB), especially as it pertains to women in emerging economies like India, has been the focus of increasing scholarly attention. The rise of startups has generated both opportunity and complexity in employment conditions, prompting various Indian researchers to explore the intersection of gender, policy, and performance in this context.

2.1. Anuradha Sharma (2019)

In her study on flexible work practices in startups, Sharma emphasized that while startups in cities like Bangalore and Kochi offer greater autonomy to employees, they also lack structured policies that support women during life transitions such as pregnancy or childcare. Her work noted that without codified HR protocols, flexibility becomes inconsistent and subjective, creating stress for women employees.

2.2. Deepika Menon (2020)

Menon conducted qualitative interviews with 40 women working in tech startups in Kerala. Her findings revealed that the absence of formal work contracts, clear leave policies, and defined grievance redressal mechanisms left women vulnerable to overwork and exploitation. She advocated for gender-sensitized startup policies and local governmental oversight.

2.3. Rajeev Nair (2018)

Nair explored the issue of salary discrimination in startup hiring. His study across 100 startups in South India found a 23% average wage gap between male and female employees in similar roles. He argued that in the absence of policy regulation, startups often rationalize lower pay for women as a cost-saving measure rather than performance-based reasoning.

2.4. Leena Joseph (2017)

Joseph analysed the cultural dimensions of work-life stress in Kerala. Her research showed that deeply embedded gender roles continue to affect women's mental health, even among educated professionals in startups. The pressure to conform to idealized roles of mother, wife, and worker simultaneously causes burnout and reduced job satisfaction.

2.5. Gopinath Pillai (2021)

Pillai's paper compared the HR structures of startups with traditional SMEs. He found that while startups use digital HR tools, these often lack depth and consistency. Women employees were particularly affected due to the lack of provisions like menstrual leave, maternal health policies, and harassment prevention mechanisms.

2.6. Priya K. (2016)

Priya's research highlighted how informal HR culture in startups tends to benefit male employees who can network and self-advocate, while women are often left behind in promotions and leadership opportunities. Her study noted that women hesitate to demand benefits or raise concerns due to job insecurity.

2.7. Thomas Mathew (2022)

Mathew analysed employee satisfaction data from emerging companies in Calicut and found that startups scored low on long-term employee retention, especially among women. Lack of HR training among founders and absence of regulatory compliance were cited as major reasons.

2.8. Aisha Rahman (2015)

Rahman focused on the experiences of young mothers employed in startups. Her interviews revealed that women returning from maternity leave were often demoted or excluded from key projects. The absence of re-onboarding processes or childcare support systems contributed to high attrition among this group.

Together, these studies indicate a clear pattern: while startups are seen as modern and progressive workplaces, the absence of formal HR policies and the persistence of cultural biases often undermine women's ability to achieve a sustainable work-life balance.

3. Statement of the Problem

In recent years, the startup sector in India has emerged as a vibrant and innovative employment space, especially in non-metro cities like Calicut. With flexible roles and less bureaucratic management, startups attract a wide range of professionals, including young women seeking growth in dynamic environments. However, beneath this surface of opportunity lies a more complex reality, one in which the absence of structured human resource policies and undefined work roles often leave women vulnerable to stress, discrimination, and imbalance between personal and professional responsibilities.

Women in startup companies in Calicut find themselves at the crossroads of modern workplace freedom and traditional societal expectations. They are often required to extend their working hours without compensation, lack access to maternity benefits, and operate under HR systems that are either underdeveloped or non-existent. Moreover, many women are hired on the presumption that they will accept lower salaries or more demanding schedules, highlighting underlying gender biases in startup hiring practices.

The crux of the issue lies in how these women navigates such informal systems. While they strive to build careers, maintain family commitments, and safeguard their mental health, they are simultaneously forced to manage workplace uncertainties without adequate institutional backing. The problem is not merely individual, it is structural, deeply embedded in both the entrepreneurial culture of startups and in broader societal norms about women's roles.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore how women employees in Calicut-based startups are meeting the dual challenges of unstructured HR environments and the pressure to maintain a healthy work-life balance. The research focuses on identifying the barriers, documenting lived experiences, and offering realistic, context-sensitive solutions.

4. Objectives of the Study

This research is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the work-life balance patterns among women employed in startup companies within Calicut city, analysing how they allocate time, energy, and emotional labour between professional and personal life.
2. To understand the nature and quality of HR policies (or the lack thereof) implemented in these startup firms, especially concerning leave policies, performance evaluations, grievance mechanisms, and maternity support.
3. To identify critical factors organizational, cultural, and personal that influence or disrupt the work-life balance of women in startups.
4. To explore socio-economic variables such as income level, marital status, family type, and educational background that may contribute to or hinder women's status, safety, and security at work.
5. To recommend practical solutions that could enable women employees and startup founders to co-create healthier, more inclusive work environments and support systems.

5. Research Methodology

5.1.1. Research Design

The research adopts a descriptive design aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of the work-life balance of women working in startup companies in Calicut city. Descriptive research is appropriate for this study as it allows for the collection of factual data regarding current conditions, behaviours, attitudes, and experiences of the target population. It helps in portraying an accurate profile of individuals and settings without manipulating any variables.

5.1.2. Population and Sample

The population for this study includes women employees working across various startup organizations operating within the boundaries of Calicut (Kozhikode) city. According to data from the Kerala Startup Mission and local business registries, approximately 145 registered startups operate in and around Calicut city as of 2024. These startups range across sectors such as IT, digital marketing, ed-tech, health-tech, food and wellness, and e-commerce.

Out of this population, a sample size of 80 women employees was selected using purposive sampling to ensure participation from startups of varying sizes, industries, and operational stages. The sample includes women with diverse roles such as software developers, marketing executives, HR managers, content creators, customer service agents, and administrative staff.

By focusing on a cross-section of startups and a heterogeneous participant group, the study aims to capture the nuances of work-life balance from different socio-economic and professional perspectives.

5.2. Type of Research

This research is descriptive and empirical in nature. It collects both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a holistic view of the lived realities of women in startup work environments. While quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires, qualitative insights were gathered through open-ended responses and observational remarks during interactions.

5.3. Geographical Scope

The study is geographically restricted to Calicut city (Kozhikode), located in northern Kerala. Calicut has become a hub of entrepreneurial growth in recent years due to government support programs, youth-led innovation, and digital literacy. However, it also retains traditional socio-cultural norms, which significantly influence the roles and expectations of working women.

5.4. Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method was used to select startups and participants who were willing to provide insights into HR practices and work-life balance. Care was taken to ensure representation from both well-funded and bootstrapped startups, as well as those led by male and female founders.

7. Data Collection

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the work-life balance of women employees in Calicut's startup ecosystem, the study relied on both primary and secondary data sources.

7.1 Primary Data

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to 80 women employed in various startup organizations across Calicut. The questionnaire was designed to gather both factual and perceptual responses regarding HR practices, personal well-being, job satisfaction, and work-life dynamics. The instrument included both closed-ended questions (using Likert scale responses) and a few open-ended questions to allow participants to express nuanced perspectives.

Additionally, informal interactions and interviews were conducted with a subset of respondents and a few startup HR representatives to enrich the data with contextual understanding. These discussions helped reveal patterns that raw data alone might miss-such as emotional fatigue, informal support systems, and career discontinuity fears.

7.2 Secondary Data

Secondary data were sourced from:

- Reports published by the Kerala Startup Mission (KSUM)

- Research articles and policy briefs on gender and employment in startups

- Academic journals focused on HR practices in India

- Media reports on working conditions in Kerala's startup ecosystem

- Government labour and employment statistics

Together, these data sources enabled triangulation of findings and supported the validation of primary data insights.

8. Data Analysis

This section presents the results of the primary data collection. Responses from 80 women across startups in Calicut were tabulated and analysed using both graphical and descriptive statistical methods. Key patterns are highlighted below through tables and charts.

8.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age 21–30	36	45%
Age 31–40	28	35%
Age 41 and above	16	20%
Married	52	65%
Unmarried	28	35%
With children	39	49%
Without children	41	51%
Working hours > 9/day	47	59%
HR policy clearly defined	22	28%

8.2 Work-Life Balance Ratings

Participants were asked to rate their work-life balance on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree/Very Poor) to 5 (Strongly Agree/Excellent):

Rating	Respondents	Percentage
1 – Very Poor	10	12.5%
2 - Poor	21	26.25%
3 - Average	28	35%
4 - Good	15	18.75%
5 – Excellent	6	7.5%

Self-Reported Work-Life Balance Levels:
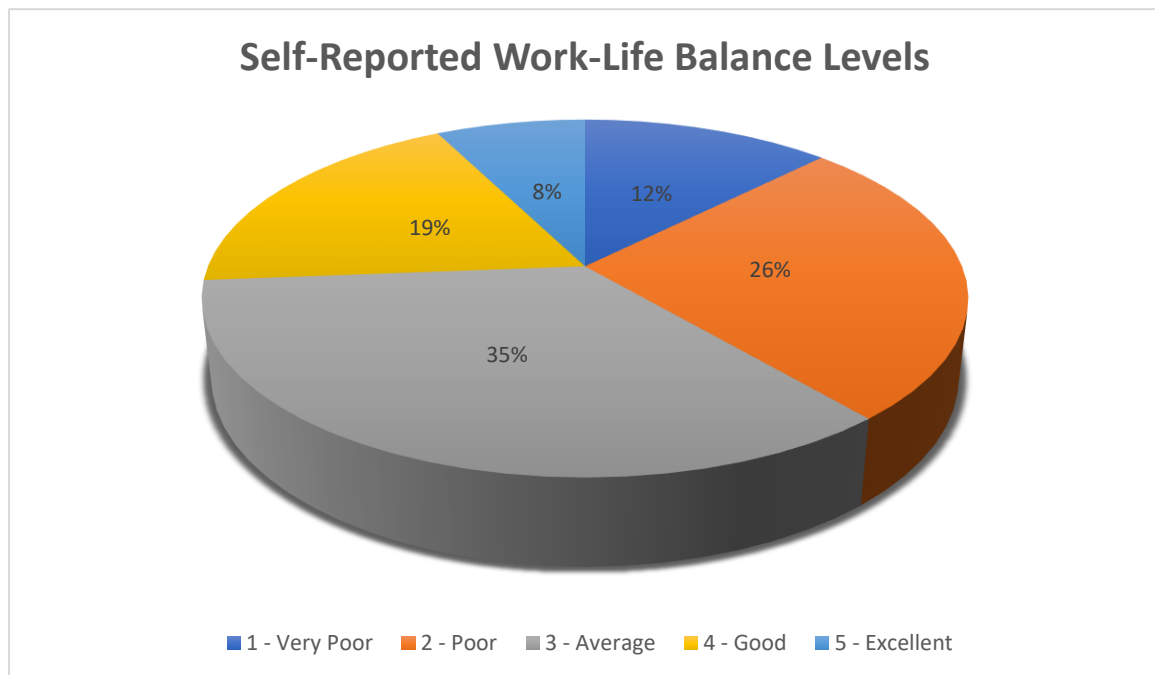
8.3 Awareness and Access to HR Policies

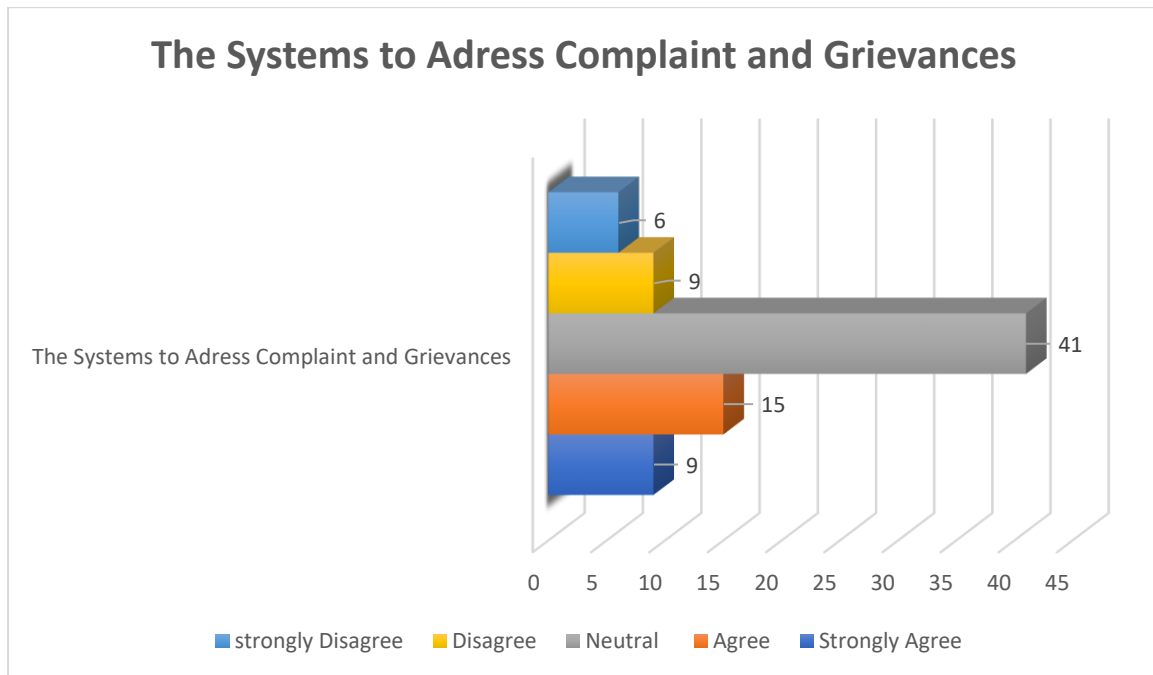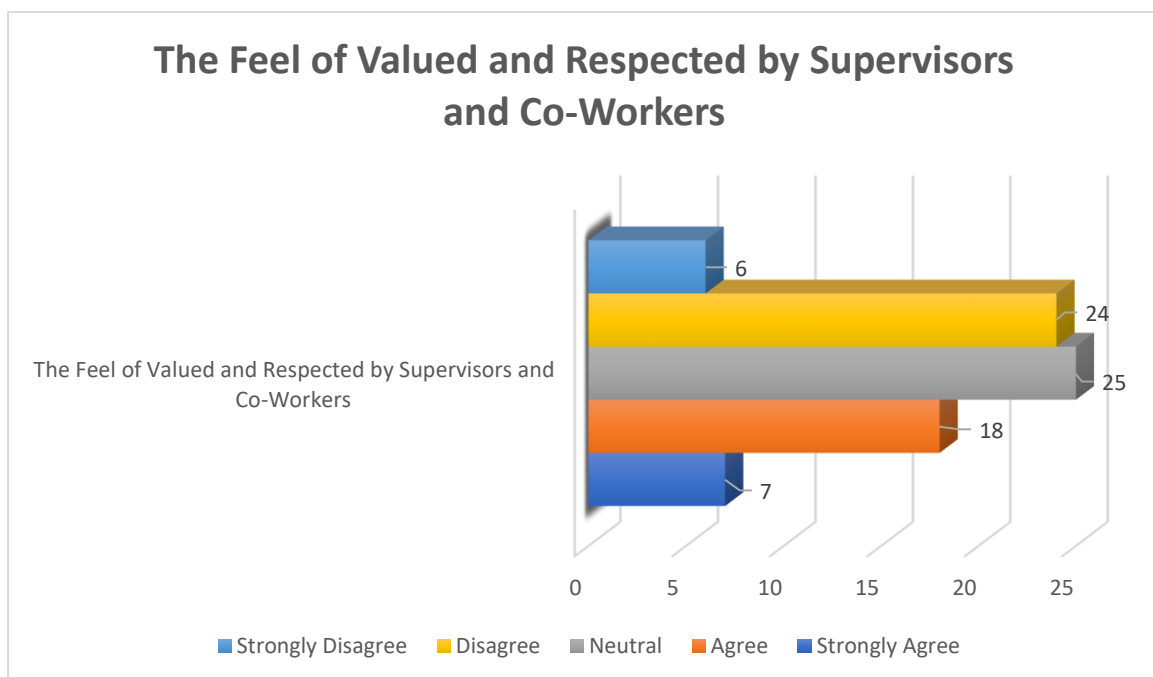| Aspect	Yes (%)	No (%)
Aware of maternity benefits	34%	66%
Aware of sexual harassment policy	41%	59%
Flexible work schedule available	38%	62%
Clear grievance redressal channel	29%	71%
Equal pay for equal work	35%	65%

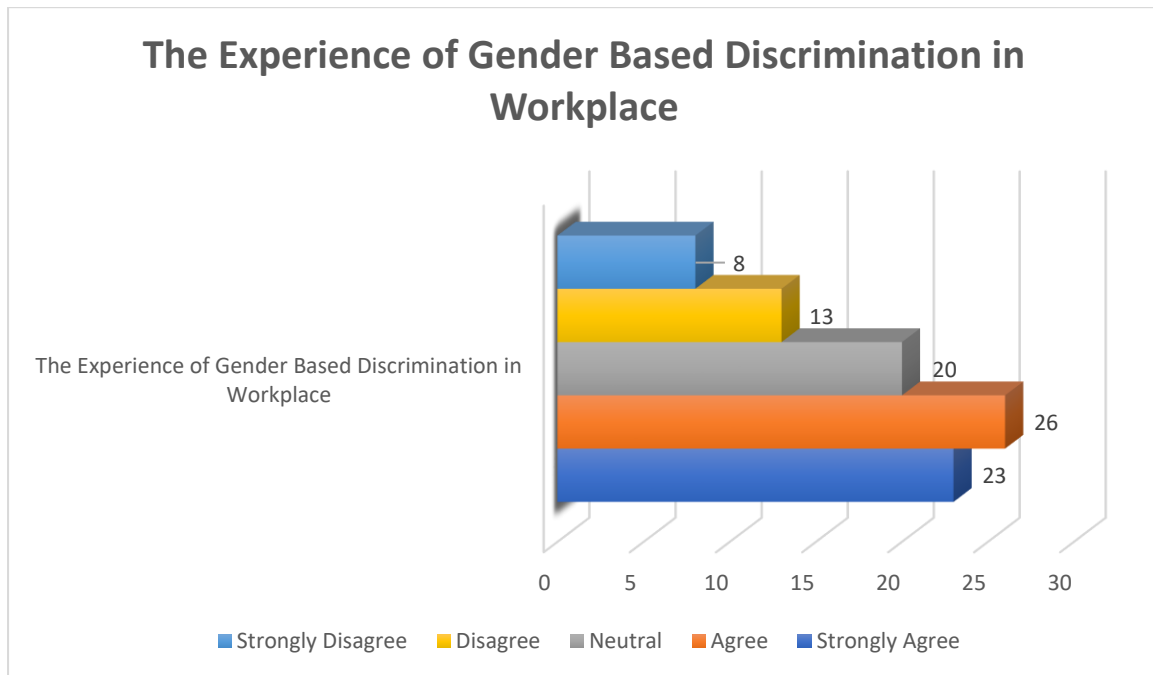HR Policy Awareness Among Respondents:
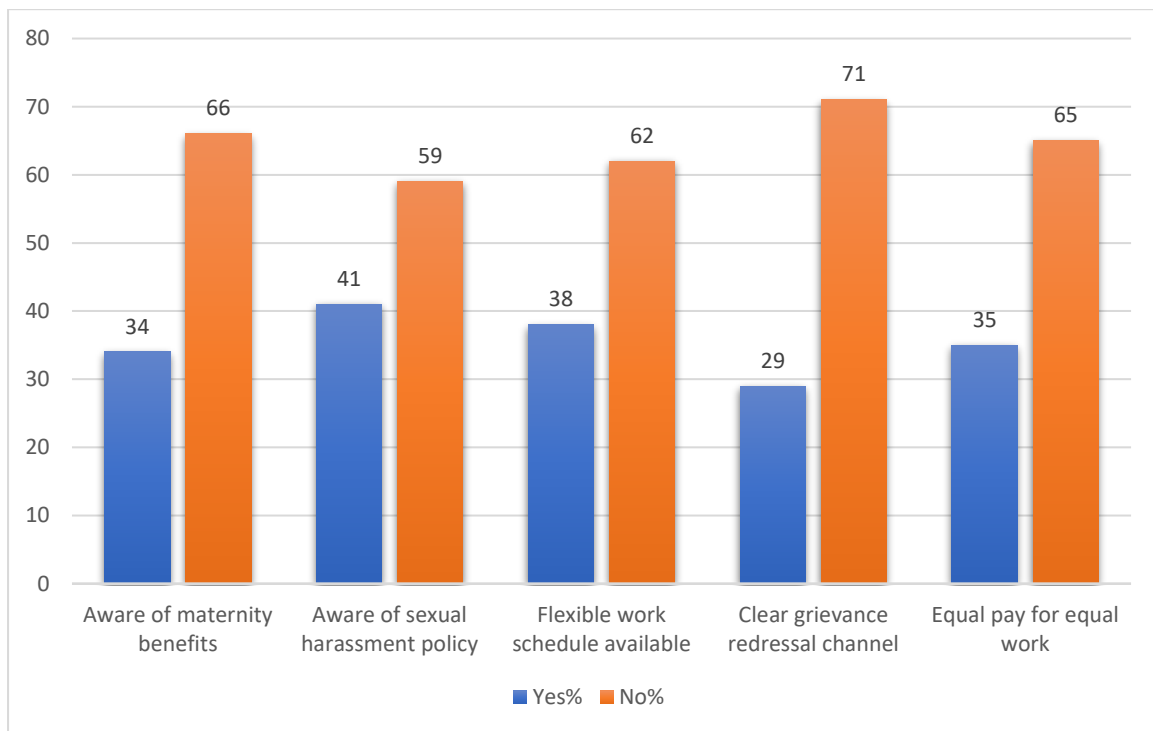
8.4. Support Flexible Work Arrangements
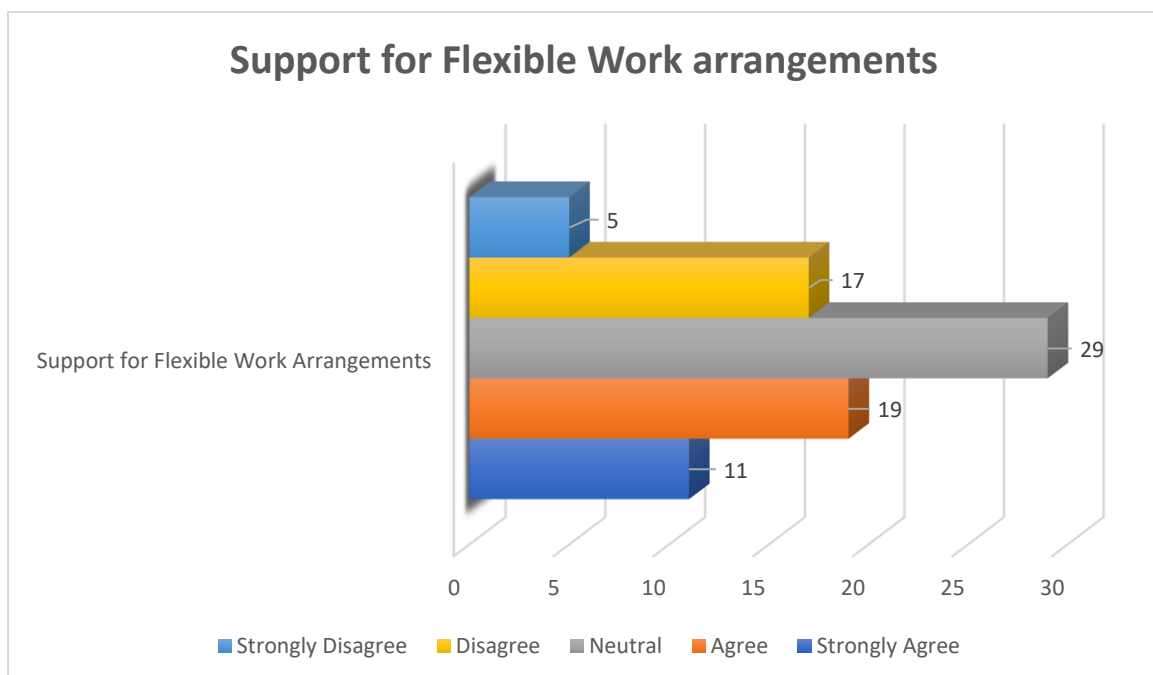
8.5. The Systems to Adress Complaint and Grievances

The Systems to Adress Complaint and Grievances

The Systems to Adress Complaint and Grievances

- 6
- 9
- 41
- 15
- 9

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45

■ strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

8.6. The Feel of Valued and Respected by Supervisors and Co-Workers

The Feel of Valued and Respected by Supervisors and Co-Workers

The Feel of Valued and Respected by Supervisors and Co-Workers

- 6
- 24
- 25
- 18
- 7

0 5 10 15 20 25

■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

8.7. The Experience of Gender Based Discrimination in Workplace

8.8. Common Issues Faced

Participants were asked to select the most pressing issues affecting their work-life balance (multiple choices allowed):

Issues	% of Respondents
Long/unpredictable working hours	63%
Lack of childcare support	55%
Salary discrimination	47%
No formal HR grievance mechanism	60%
Pressure to meet unrealistic deadlines	50%
Lack of recognition or promotion delays	42%

9. Findings and Conclusion

9.1 Key Findings

Based on the data collected and analysed from women employees working in startup companies in Calicut city, several critical insights have emerged:

1. Women employees struggle to maintain a consistent work-life balance: A significant number of respondents rated their work-life balance as poor or average. Many reported long, undefined working hours, absence of support for childcare, and increased emotional fatigue. Women with families, particularly mothers, found it more challenging to manage work responsibilities alongside domestic expectations.

2. Unstructured or evolving HR policies directly impact job satisfaction: The lack of clear HR policies including maternity leave, grievance redressal, flexible working arrangements, and anti-harassment measures leaves many women feeling unsupported and vulnerable. Only 28% of respondents said that their company had well-defined HR systems, while most felt they had no formal channels to voice concerns.

3. Many startup companies prefer hiring women due to salary flexibility: One concerning trend is that many startups in Calicut appear to view women as more willing to work for lower salaries. 47% of respondents reported experiencing salary discrimination or were aware of such incidents in their workplace. This exploitation under the guise of cost-saving is not only unethical but also demotivating for skilled professionals.

4. Cultural and familial expectations remain a hidden pressure: Despite working in modern sectors, many women employees still carry the primary burden of family care. This dual responsibility adds invisible labour, often overlooked by their employers.

5. Lack of gender-sensitized infrastructure and workplace practices: A significant number of women expressed concerns about the absence of basic safety measures, non-

availability of sanitary facilities, and poor access to mental health resources. These issues point to a broader lack of gender-aware design in startup cultures.

9.2 Conclusion

The startup ecosystem in Calicut, while energetic and full of promise, has yet to evolve into a gender-sensitive work environment. The enthusiasm for growth and innovation often sidelines critical issues like employee welfare and gender equity. Women, although recognized for their multitasking capabilities and commitment, are frequently underpaid, overworked, and unsupported in personal transitions such as marriage or motherhood.

There is a pressing need for startup founders, incubators, and government policy-makers to acknowledge these challenges and co-create solutions that are empathetic, inclusive, and sustainable. Codified HR policies, transparent grievance systems, equal pay for equal work, and a genuine commitment to diversity can transform startups into spaces of empowerment for women not just employment.

Empowering women in startups is not just a moral imperative it is an economic necessity. A balanced, respected, and well-supported female workforce will not only help startups scale but also contribute to a more equitable and progressive society.

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Appendix: Primary Questionnaire (15 Questions)

The questionnaire is 5-point Likert scale format, where responses range from Strongly Disagree/Very Poor (1) to Strongly Agree/Excellent (5), with neutral options in between. This format allows for quantitative analysis of attitudes and perceptions.

Likert Scale Format (1–5)

Scale:

1 – Strongly Disagree/Very Poor

2 – Disagree/Poor

3 – Neutral/Average

4 – Agree/Good

5 – Strongly Agree/Excellent

Questionnaire: Work-Life Balance of Women Employees at Startup Companies in Calicut City

Description:

This form is part of a research study titled Work-Life Balance of Women Employees at Startup Companies in Calicut City, conducted by **Arya C R,** a researcher at **VET Institute of Arts and Science (Co-Education) College-Thindal, Erode.** The study aims to explore the challenges and coping strategies related to work-life balance among women working in startup environments.

Eligibility:

Participants must be women currently employed in startup companies located in Calicut City.

Consent:

Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and used only for academic purposes. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any stage. By submitting this form, you consent to participate in this research study.

Thank you for your valuable time and input.

1. Name of the Women Employee:

    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
    │   │
    └─────────────────────────────┘

Demographic Profile

2. Age Group:
    - ○ 21-30
    - ○ 31-40
    - ○ 40 and Above

3. Marital Status:
    - ○ Married
    - ○ Unmarried
    - ○ Other

4. Having or not having kids:
    - ○ With Child
    - ○ Without Child

5. Working hours per day:

    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
    │   │
    └─────────────────────────────┘

Questions Related to Work Life Balance in Your Company

6. I am able to maintain a healthy balance between my work and personal life.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very Poor	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

7. My working hours allow me enough time for personal or family commitments.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

8. My current workload is manageable and does not cause excessive stress.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

9. My organization supports flexible work arrangements (e.g., remote work, shift timing).

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

10. My company has well-defined HR policies that are accessible to employees.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

11. I am aware of the maternity leave policies and benefits in my workplace.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

12. My workplace has a proper system to address complaints and grievances.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

13. I feel that women employees receive equal opportunities for promotions and recognition.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

14. I believe that salary levels are equal for men and women doing the same work in my company.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

15. I feel valued and respected by my supervisors and coworkers.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

16. My employer supports women employees with caregiving responsibilities.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

17. I have experienced or witnessed gender-based discrimination in my workplace.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

18. I have thought about leaving my job due to poor work-life balance.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Strongly Agree

19. My organization makes efforts to ensure the safety and well-being of women employees.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Strongly Agree

20. One or more changes in HR policy could improve my overall work-life balance.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Strongly Agree