



Rural Nurses' Work-Life Balance and Home-Life Satisfaction in a Level 1 Government Hospital in Leyte: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT:

Rural Nurses often face unique challenges in achieving work-life balance and home-life satisfaction due to the heavy workloads, long working hours, inadequate salary/compensation, and workforce shortages resulting to stress, burnout and job dissatisfaction. This study aims to assess the work-life balance and home-life satisfaction of rural nurses in a level 1 government hospital in Leyte, with three objectives: (1) To explore and document the experiences of rural nurses regarding work-life balance and home-life satisfaction; (2) To identify and analyze the common challenges and barriers that rural nurses face in achieving work-life balance and home-life satisfaction; and (3) To provide actionable recommendations for strategies and interventions that can assist rural nurses in a level 1 government hospital in Leyte in attaining better work-life balance and home-life satisfaction. The study used a qualitative phenomenological approach with a purposive sampling design (20 participants). A validated semi-structured interview questionnaire guide was used as research instrument by conducting a one-on-one interview focus group discussion. The collected data was measured by using thematic analysis. The study emphasizes the importance of organizational support such as flexible work schedules, access to professional development opportunities, and supportive work environment, in alleviating these challenges. Hospital administration can improve job satisfaction, reduce burnout and enhance overall nurse retention by implementing workplace programs that supports its employees.

Keywords: *Home-life satisfaction, Level 1 government hospital, Qualitative study, Rural nurses, Work-life balance*

Introduction:

The health workforce is a component of any healthcare system and is vital to the performance of health services where patients are the major clients. The World Health Organization (WHO) underscores that healthcare workers in rural and remote areas are essential to achieving health equity, yet they often lack adequate support and recognition. Rural nurses are the frontline in delivering generalist care in remote, underserved areas, where they face unique challenges and develop multiple proficiencies despite difficulties in accessing trainings (World Health Organization, 2010; "Importance of Nursing in Rural Communities, 2019).

Nurses working in rural hospitals has scarce workforce, making it more difficult to maintain job satisfaction and staff retention. According to a study, it was identified that several factors contribute to job dissatisfaction and fast turnover among rural nurses, which includes inadequate support from work-life balance due to staff shortages, and limited opportunities for professional development and career advancement. (Smith et al., 2019; Rose et al., 2023).

Work-life balance refers to managing and allocating mental and physical energy and time effectively across leisure, family responsibilities and personal growth. To ensure the well-being of rural nurses, it is a challenge for them to attain balance between work and home-life. Many nurses frequently struggle to maintain this equilibrium. Studies indicate that rural nurses often experience higher levels of stress and burnout, which impact their overall job satisfaction and work-life balance. Personal circumstances of rural nurses also influence the work-life balance. Studies have shown that rural nurses often have a hard time juggling multiple roles at work and at home, which may lead to a significant personal and professional stress (Cho et al., 2023).

One of the dire issues in the medical and health sectors is nurse shortages. This is one of the reasons why nurses decide to leave the workforce because of a challenged work-life balance affecting their personal lives. Given the nature of their job having both day and night hours, attaining balance between work and home life can be particularly challenging for many rural nurses. An important aspect of work-life balance is work-family conflict. This occurs when individuals struggle to manage their roles at work and home. Research has shown a clear link between work-family conflict, reduced job performance, intentions to leave job, and increased rates of depression (Fukuzaki et al., 2021).

Filipino rural nurses frequently face highly challenging working conditions and job contracts that range from suboptimal to exploitative. These conditions involve heavy workloads, insufficient staffing and limited job security and compensation due to contractual constraints. In general, burnout

among Filipino rural nurses can result in resignations, career changes, and migration to other countries, worsening the shortage of local nurses and presenting a substantial challenge to the Philippine healthcare system. Although mental health programs and interventions can mitigate burnout, addressing structural issues like low salaries, delayed benefits, understaffing, heavy workloads, and job insecurity is crucial. Initiatives should begin by mobilizing existing resources such as appointing nurses to permanent government positions and enhancing policies to tackle burnout among rural Filipino nurses (Alibudbud, 2023).

Hospital administrators should consider implementing programs that seek to address work-life balance, while accounting for the domestic responsibilities of rural nurse' home life. Moreover, strong organizational bonding can diminish the harmful impacts of personal life on job attitudes, which help to keep a friendly and enthusiastic nurse since well-balanced work-family makes affective commitment in an organization. Employees are likely to feel that if their work has demonstrated empathy for the challenges they face in balancing their family life with working at your organization, employees will in turn repay the latitude given by demonstrating fantastic performance. If organizations adopt family-friendly work-life balance policies, then employees might feel a sense of commitment toward the organization leading to engaged workforce (Fukuzaki et al., 2021).

Experiences of Rural Nurses in Attaining Work-Life Balance

One of the biggest challenges for rural nurses is work-life balance. The demanding nature of nursing work like long hours and irregular shift patterns combined with high emotional labor, makes it more difficult for rural nurses to maintain balance between work and home-life. Reviewing literature, it would seem that one of the greatest challenges faced by nurses in recent times is attempting to strike a balance between work and personal life; this failure apparently affects job satisfaction negatively as well, since poor mental health has been linked with work-life imbalances. A key driver of this discrepancy is the physically rigorous nature of nursing of often working long hours due to short-staffed settings that can lead to suffer from being burnout. These working conditions can result in heavy work-life conflict, whereby job demands overlap with family or leisure activities. This conflict does not result in all-out burnout as it can drive greater than normal turnover rates due to sheer exhaustion. The cost of a negative work environment is too high and nurses have made it clear that they will keep leaving unless something changes (Labrague and de los Santos, 2021).

Nurses who are unable to find work-life balance not only suffer as a result, but their ability to provide high-quality care is also directly affected. Many nurses are dissatisfied with their jobs and lack work-life balance, which can compromise the quality of patient care. And it also demonstrates the importance of not just caring for nurses so that they stay healthy, but in their ability to deliver health care better. Nurses who have a high degree of work-life conflict are more likely to experience symptoms related with stress, depression and/or anxiety. Which will then make them less helpful at any capacity, causing an emotion frustration spiral of stress and misery. The struggle mentioned herein reminds us that health care institutions need to take preventive steps and actions writing on better work-life balance, the more so in nurses (White et. al., 2019).

The culture of healthcare organizations exercises such a profound influence over work-life balance. Hospitals with supportive culture that prioritize nurses' well-being are more successful in helping nurses cope with their work-life responsibilities. Conversely, hospital organization with less emphasis on supporting work-life balance priorities has nurses that are more likely to experience burnout and consequently leave their jobs (Fasbender et. al., 2019).

Challenges and Barriers Faced by Rural Nurses in Achieving Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is difficult to obtain for rural nurses due to the demands of the work environment, geographic isolation and few resources that are usually available if staff becomes overwhelmed with case numbers. Heavy workload exacerbated by chronic staffing shortages is one of the main barriers to achieving work-life balance for rural nurses. Nurses in rural settings often have multiple job roles and increased working hours, heightening the workload. A study outlines that rural nurses frequently conduct a range of healthcare duties which are carried out by specialized professionals in urban locales. The additional demands also lead to less time for personal and family life, resulting in a lack of work-life balance (Browne et. al., 2021).

Rural nurses are often called in to work as needed at all hours of the day as well, causing them stress and exhaustion. The unpredictable nature of rural nursing routinary schedules affects the personal planning and family bonding time among nurses. Having to be always "on call" for emergencies only complicates the work-life balance issue at hand. Factors — such as difficult workloads and isolation of rurality — contribute to mental health issues in rural nursing, burnout included. Rural nurses are more at risk of burnout due to the demands upon their physical and emotional resources, in addition to the lack of provider access for themselves. Burnout leads to both physical and mental health issues for the nurse staff, taking them away from work-life balance (Labrague and de los Santos, 2020).

Another issue is professional isolation experienced in rural nurses. Study have shown that being unable to access professional support network further increased feelings of isolation. Without sufficient peer support, rural nurses struggle to maintain balance between work and their personal lives. Rural areas are also geographically isolated, making it more difficult for nurses to take part in social or recreational activities that can be so crucial for winding down and distressing after a day at work. A study also explained how the rural context is an intense working environment with these nurses and their families often residing in small communities where it may be challenging to separate from professional responsibilities. It is an overlap of their work and home life that creates a never-ending cycle of stress in both mental health and family (Carleton et. al., 2020).

Rural healthcare facilities usually operate on limited budgets, which act as a constraint in terms of their ability to staff properly and provide for resources beneficial for the relief from strain among nurses. A study noted that financial constraints intensify employment pressures on nurses who compensates to fill gaps for missing specialist roles. There is the added financial pressure to put in more hours a day at work, cutting into personal time

and moments of rest. Due to insufficient resources at rural healthcare facilities, nurses are expected to do more. Another study was found that rural nurses provide a broad spectrum of care from emergency to health promotion services through chronic disease management in many instances with little access or support existing within other regulated professions. This additional work and responsibility become difficult for nurses to balance with their own professional and personal lives. Rural-residing nurses are also often restricted from educational and professional development activities, creating rural nursing shortage areas with impacts on job satisfaction and the ability to balance work–life commitments. The absence of career progression opportunities in rural areas discourages nurses and increases their sense that they have hit a professional ceiling, lowering overall satisfaction with work and life (Browne et. al., 2021; Carleton et al., 2020).

The demanding nature of rural nursing jobs can have negative impact to their family lives. A study reports that nurses have the difficulty juggling responsibilities between work and family due to irregular shifts and long working hours. This guilt only adds to their stress and dismay, causing them always feel less of a spouse or parent too. In rural areas, nurses are often seen as community leaders who need to be available to their fellow constituents even after working hours. This sense of responsibility adds more stress because nurses feel the obligation of being readily available, which blurs the boundaries between work and home-life, thus making it difficult for them to attain work-life balance (Russell et. al., 2021).

Strategies and Interventions in Attaining Work-Life Balance among Rural Nurses

The need for work-life-balance of rural nurses has been one major concern in healthcare management as their duties call more often burnout, stress and personal dissatisfaction. In response to these challenges, a range of proposed strategies and interventions have been put in place with mixed success. For example, a popular recommendation involves the establishment of flexible scheduling models in which staff nurses can allocate their time more efficiently among professional and personal obligations. These schedules include shifted hours and decreased on-call responsibilities which, according to studies can help reduce work-life strain (Browne et al., 2021; Labrague and de los Santos 2021).

In supporting rural nurses, mentorship programs and peer support networks are extremely valuable. A study proposed that by mentoring and fostering peer learning in rural contexts nurses may decrease professional isolation. This technique not only increases work-life balance but also helps job satisfaction and mental health (Carleton et.al., 2020).

Another successful intervention involved workplace wellness programs that stressed mental health resources and stress management strategies. A study stated that rural nurses need mental health support such as counseling services which is very useful, because all this time the use of counseling-based practice including mindfulness practices. Some of these programs also have the added benefit of decreasing burnout and improving other aspects related to well-being by increasing emotional resilience and coping techniques (Cohen et. al., 2022).

A further critical measure are policy reforms at institution level, like solution for an increase in staffing to reduce workload for individuals. Sufficient staffing means nurses can do their jobs as required without too much overtime, and this leaves time for personal life. It also ensures that nurses can advance their careers whilst still engaging with a satisfactory work life (Russell et. al., 2021).

It is also important to have community support for rural nurses in improving work-life balance. The reinforcement of networks that form between healthcare providers and community organizations in gathering these resources ensures involvement, enhancing the personal life as well as professional practice lifestyles available to rural nurses. Additionally, family support is an important aspect of rural life because familial understanding and assistance can help alleviate the stresses associated with rural nursing (Bushy et al., 2019).

Synthesis:

Because of the importance of rural nurses and yet poor work-life balance, not as much research has been done about their home-life satisfaction level specifically in Leyte. Although global literature has proposed the unique work environment of rural nurses within Philippine government hospitals, to date, there have been no to limited studies that qualitatively examined these experiences. The research will qualitatively explore the personal and professional life world of rural nurses, their lived experience in identifying stressors whether general or specific challenges associated with practice that may lead to future intervention strategies for developing sustainable solutions addressing well-being.

The findings of this study will be useful for hospital administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders. This research has the potential to inform targeted interventions and policy development that address rural nurse needs and experiences, leading to improved work-life balance reduced burnout, as well as quality of care in a variety of ways delivered by healthcare professionals working in rural locations.

METHOD:

The study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach to be able to explore in-depth insights of the personal experiences of rural nurses in a level 1 government hospital regarding work-life balance and home-life satisfaction. A semi-structured interview guide questionnaire that was verified and validated by an expert, was coordinated to each rural nurse participants, after a signed consent was secured. Personal experiences, attitudes and perceptions from respondents were gathered in the study. The semi-structured interview guide questionnaire includes typical experiences on regular workdays, significant challenges and barriers met in balancing work and home-life, intervention on managing stress, and actionable recommendations to assist rural government hospital nurses in attaining work-life balance and home-life satisfaction. This method provided flexibility to explore various aspects of work and home life in every rural hospital nurse that participated in this study. Transcription

of interviews were done shortly after completion to ensure accuracy and fine distinction of details. Transcripts were anonymized to protect confidentiality and privacy of each participant in the study. With this reflective approach to data collection, a solid foundation of subsequent thematic analysis was achieved.

The study was conducted in a level 1 district hospital in Carigara Leyte, Philippines. A purposive sample size of twenty (20) registered rural nurses from the level 1 government hospital study site were selected in the research since only twenty nurses are currently employed in this hospital. This sample size is conducive enough for a qualitative study to allow in-depth exploration of the rural nurse participants' experiences and challenges related to work-life balance and home-life satisfaction. This sample size also maintained data collection and analysis management in conducting the research study.

Inclusion criteria included all registered nurses who have been employed for at least 1 year in the study site hospital. This inclusion criterion ensured that participants have sufficient experiences to provide informative insights regarding the subject matter of the study particularly on the experiences and challenges met in their practice, as well as their coping mechanisms related to their work and personal lives.

RESULTS:

On the basis of all the responses gathered, on participants background the longest years in terms of service is 35 years and the least is 1 year. Majority of the respondents belongs to 5 – 10 years in service which means that they already have the knowledge, skills and dedication when it comes to dealing different patients with different personalities and attitudes which could somehow affect their mental health.

Most common work-related challenges of rural nurse participants in this study, experiences high workload and do overtime and irregular shifts due to understaffing, which in result to fast turnover of rural nurses. Of the twenty participants, majority conveyed they are facing these struggles, and most of them considered resigning to change work environment with flexible time schedule and with good compensation. Most of them plans to work as nurse abroad if given the opportunity.

Experiencing all this challenges in a rural setting, it is crucial for nurses to balance time between work and their personal life. Majority of the nurse participants conveyed that due to high demands of their nursing jobs, it consumes most of their time resulting to family time scarcity and missed activities, affecting personal relationships which has home-life impact. However, they have been resilient in facing these challenges by creating coping mechanisms and strategies to manage stress. They have established support systems from family and colleagues and find community resources to balance their work and personal lives.

In this study, rural nurse participants have an overwhelming advocacy that in order to address the challenges they are facing, the additional hiring of nursing staff will be the primary solution to attain balance between their work and personal lives. They also expressed the need for policies focusing on flexible time schedules, time off, recognition of work, incentives and granting permanent positions for job order nurses. Policies focused on these aspects is essential for reducing burnout, improving job satisfaction, employee retention, thereby, improving work-life balance among nurses in the rural settings. Other key recommendations conveyed by the participants of this study suggests career advancement opportunities, team-building activities, and stress debriefing programs that will contribute to the overall mental and physical well-being of rural nurses.

The study's findings aligned with existing literature on the challenges by rural nurses while also shedding light on the unique coping mechanisms they utilize. Notably, a strong sense of community and professional fulfillment emerged as critical factors in sustaining home-life satisfaction despite the pressures and stress associated with work.

CONCLUSION:

Work-related challenges identified were high workload, overtime, and irregular shifts due to understaffing are prevalent issues that rural nurses regularly face. These work-related challenges were found to have significant impact on their personal lives. As a result, they struggle from family time scarcity, missed activities and strain on personal relationships due to the demanding nature of their job. These stressors contribute to increased job dissatisfaction and burnout.

A good work-life balance status always indicates increased job satisfaction of employees. The present study also intended to study the impact of work-life balance on nurses' job satisfaction. Nurses opined the study that there would be connection between work-life balance and job satisfaction. Therefore, positive quality of work life always motivates nurses to do better services in their work place, spent their time with family members and friends and also discharge responsibility meaningfully. Both management and each individual nurses should know proper strategies to enhance quality of work-life.

Rural nurses tend to be resilient in managing stress and employ various coping mechanisms. Most of them created stress management techniques and establish support system from family and colleagues to mitigate work-related stress. However, these strategies are not sufficient enough to resolve significant barriers in attaining work-life balance among rural nurses. Workplace programs supporting the well-being of the workforce must also be innovated by the hospital administration. The study emphasizes the importance of organizational support such as flexible work schedules, access to professional development opportunities, and supportive work environment, in alleviating these challenges. Hospital administration can improve job satisfaction, reduce burnout and enhance overall nurse retention by implementing workplace programs that supports its employees.

RECOMMENDATION:

Based on the findings of this study, The following recommendations are proposed to improve the work-life balance and home-life satisfaction of rural nurses in a Level 1 government hospital:

For the Rural Government Nurses: (1) *Lobby for Flexible work hours:* Nurses need to discuss with service heads or their unions the importance of flexible working time, rotation roasters and part-time options if possible. It would help to balance professional responsibilities with personal life which in turn will reduce the stress and burnout; (2) *Use Self-Care and Stress Management Practices:* Nurses should engage in self-care activities, including time off, exercise and mindfulness strategies such as meditation or stress-reduction exercises to address the stresses experienced from rural health care work; and (3) *Join or Form Peer Support Networks:* Participating in peer support groups with other rural nurses enables professionals to exchange coping strategies, develop camaraderie and emotional assistance when confronting the complex realities of daily life as a rural nurse.

For the Hospital Administration: (1) *Enhanced Staffing and Resource Allocation:* It is important to boost the number of nursing staff to help alleviate individual workloads and ensure that that nurses are not overburdened. Provide sufficient resources and equipment necessary for nursing tasks to reduce stress and enhance efficiency of rural nurses in the hospital; (2) *Implement Work-Life Balance Policies:* Create flexible scheduling, job sharing or rotating shifts to allow our nurses a better balance in their personal lives. One of the key benefits that fosters it is enough time off, such as paid leave and mental health days; (3) *Support Career Development:* An effective approach of the hospital administration is to institute regular opportunities for further training and professional development to help nurses stay current on emerging medical practices and technologies. The nursing career development needs of new and practicing nurses should be nurtured so that they can make maximum use their skills on the job; (4) *Supportive Work Environment:* The management needs to provide an enabling and supportive work environment in which nurses feel they are respected. It would also be helpful to include establishment of mentorship programs that could aid in imparting skills, advice and get them up-to-date with what long-standing nurses have learned through the years as a part of professional growth; (5) *Health and Wellness Programs:* The hospital should implement such programs as counselor services with particular focus on the help for bullied nurses; free support group sessions or a yoga class, Zumba event for staff wellness can be one of those work-life balance initiatives to set up at least once every 2 months. Leaders are also encouraged to organize some morning exercise classes and encourage all their nurse members in the shift schedule get involve as office work-outs within huddle time-out gives them an inclusive social work hour feel before rushing into works. The management should as well establish stress debriefing programs for those in need of personal growth or support; and (6) *Hospital Management Support:* The nursing staff and management need to establish honest communication channels that are pursued in a clean way by the hospital administration. Host social events and team tram-building exercises to build closer relationships with all the employees so that they will feel less out of touch. It can also help to reward and acknowledge the hard work of nurses through awards, incentives that would improve their morale. They should offer financial incentives to attract and retain rural nurses in the hospital.

For the Academe: This study has limited qualitative nature, further researches are needed. With this current study, a follow-up study can be done to determine whether participants are able to attain work-life balance and home life satisfaction given period of time after implementation of recommendations to the hospital administration. It is also suggested to conduct a similar study regarding work-life balance and home-life satisfaction of nurses in general, covering a bigger study population and a wider range of research locale.

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