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Beyond Bidirectionality in Spill-Overs: Asymmetrical Work-Life Dynamics and Indigenous Support Systems in a Fragile-State Military Context

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ABSTRACT

Work-life balance and work engagement are central concerns in human resource development because they shape employee well-being, resilience, retention, and sustainable performance across demanding work environments. However, much of the literature on work-life balance and engagement has been developed in relatively stable civilian and Western institutional contexts, where role boundaries are more manageable and formal support systems are often more reliable. These assumptions may not hold in fragile-state military settings characterized by prolonged insecurity, deployment instability, rigid hierarchy, and uneven welfare provision. This study explores how personnel in the Armed Forces of Nigeria experience work-life balance and work engagement under such conditions. Drawing on qualitative interview data from 60 military personnel and using a Gioia-inspired analytical approach, the study integrates the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and spill-over theory to examine how demands, resources, and cross-domain pressures interact in a fragile-state military context. The findings show that work-life spill-over is not experienced as a balanced or consistently reciprocal process. Instead, participants describe a strongly asymmetrical dynamic in which prolonged deployment, hypervigilance, unpredictable scheduling, welfare strain, and institutional rigidity intrude into family life and weaken recovery, morale, and sustained engagement. At the same time, kinship ties, peer solidarity, and communal reciprocity emerge as culturally embedded informal resources that partially buffer these pressures where formal organizational supports are weak or unevenly accessible. The study contributes to HRD scholarship in two main ways. First, it refines spill-over theory by showing that, in a fragile-state military setting, spill-over is better understood as structurally asymmetrical rather than presumptively bidirectional. Second, it extends JD-R theory by demonstrating that resources are hierarchically mediated and culturally supplemented rather than simply organizationally present or absent. These findings extend work-life and engagement research into an under-studied Global South military context and underscore the importance of context-sensitive HRD interventions in high-risk institutional environments.

1 | Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB) and work engagement remain important concerns in human resource development (HRD)

because they shape well-being, commitment, adaptability, retention, and sustainable performance across organizational contexts (Schaufeli et al. 2002; Bakker and Demerouti 2017; Lesener et al. 2022). Research has consistently shown that

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when job demands intensify without adequate support, employees are more likely to experience strain, exhaustion, and reduced engagement, whereas access to meaningful resources can sustain motivation, buffer stress, and support positive organizational outcomes (Demerouti et al. 2001; Bakker and Demerouti 2017; Talukder 2019; Ajonbadi et al. 2025). Despite this, much of the literature continues to be shaped by relatively stable civilian and Western institutional settings, where role boundaries are often more negotiable and formal support systems more structured than in military or fragile-state environments (Adisa et al. 2021; Schüttengruber et al. 2023). In an era marked by escalating global security threats and asymmetric warfare, the ongoing involvement of military personnel remains crucial to national defense and operational effectiveness. However, the military profession, characterized by its inherent volatility and urgency, often takes a significant toll on individuals' psychological and physical reserves, leading to imbalances in work-life relations and reduced organizational commitment (Chambel et al. 2019). This study examines WLB and employee engagement among personnel in the Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN), a context that is particularly challenging due to prolonged insurgencies, resource shortages, and socio-economic instabilities typical of emerging economies.

These issues are important because military work differs fundamentally from many civilian occupations. It is mission-driven, hierarchical, unpredictable, and often defined by non-negotiable sacrifice, prolonged separation, duty, and operational risk (Anderson and Goldenberg 2019; Burrell et al. 2019; Berndtsson and Österberg 2023). In military contexts, work-life balance is not merely about flexibility, scheduling, or role preference. Rather, it concerns whether personnel can sustain family relationships, psychological recovery, and personal functioning under conditions of institutional intensity and repeated disruption (Nilsson et al. 2023; Turner et al. 2024). These issues are amplified in fragile-state settings, where insecurity, logistical limitations, and uneven welfare provision can intensify the penetration of work pressures into non-work life (Adegbesan and Ofole 2023; Akinyetun et al. 2023; Ofongo 2024; Wadsworth et al. 2023).

The AFN provides an especially important setting for investigating these dynamics. Since the escalation of Boko Haram violence and related forms of insecurity, military personnel have operated under conditions marked by prolonged deployment pressure, staffing shortages, uncertain rotation patterns, and continuing psychosocial strain (Channels TV 2016; Abel et al. 2018; Alabi 2020; Adegbesan and Ofole 2023; Sahara Reporters 2024). In this environment, work does not simply compete with non-work life; it often overrides it. Emerging studies in Nigerian and related high-risk environments suggest that welfare conditions, work-nonwork interference, and informal support systems shape motivation, well-being, and work attitudes in important ways, but these issues remain insufficiently developed within mainstream HRD and work-life scholarship (Okafor et al. 2023; Okafor and Eze 2023; Ogunyemi et al. 2024).

This study addresses that gap by integrating the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model with spill-over theory to examine

work-life balance and work engagement among personnel in the Armed Forces of Nigeria. The JD-R model explains how job demands deplete energy and how resources support motivation and engagement, while spill-over theory helps explain how pressures and experiences move across work and non-work domains (Demerouti et al. 2001; Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Bakker and Demerouti 2017; Lovita et al. 2026). Bringing these frameworks together makes it possible to explore both the internal dynamics of strain and support within military work and the cross-domain consequences of those dynamics for family and personal life (Lesener et al. 2022; Schüttengruber et al. 2023).

The paper makes a focused contribution. First, it shows that spill-over in this context is better understood as structurally asymmetrical than as fully reciprocal, because work pressures shape non-work life more powerfully and persistently than the reverse (Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Schüttengruber et al. 2023; Lovita et al. 2026). Second, it shows that resources are not simply present or absent, but are mediated by hierarchy, local command practice, and access to culturally embedded support systems such as kinship ties and peer solidarity (Demerouti et al. 2001; Adisa et al. 2021; Carlson et al. 2024; Ogunyemi et al. 2024). In doing so, the paper extends work-life and engagement research into an under-examined Global South military context while maintaining bounded and proportionate claims.

Despite growing work-life and engagement research, we still know too little about how these dynamics unfold in fragile-state military environments where insecurity, institutional scarcity, rigid hierarchy, and communal obligation intersect (Adisa et al. 2021; Adegbesan and Ofole 2023; Ofongo 2024; Wadsworth et al. 2023). Existing literature often assumes clearer role boundaries, more stable support systems, and more symmetrical spill-over patterns than may be realistic in such settings (Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Schüttengruber et al. 2023; Adisa et al. 2022). This study therefore asks: *How do personnel in the Armed Forces of Nigeria experience work-life balance and employee engagement, and how do job demands, constrained resources, and indigenous support systems shape these experiences?*

The paper therefore contributes by refining how JD-R and spill-over theory are understood in fragile-state contexts and by bringing an African-centred empirical lens to HRD and international human resources management (IHRM) scholarship. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on work-life balance, employee engagement, and spill-over theory in military and high-risk contexts, followed by the study's theoretical framework. The methodology is then outlined, followed by the findings and discussion. The paper concludes with the study's contributions, implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Work-Life Balance

Recent evidence further shows that leader support plays a particularly important role in shaping work-life balance, while behavioral work-life conflict diminishes employees' perceived

balance and work engagement (Žnidaršič and Bernik 2026), while behavioral work–life conflict diminishes that sense of balance. Particularly notable is the role of leader support, which appears especially influential in shaping how employees manage boundaries across work and non-work domains. These insights are relevant to the present study because they reinforce the need to examine not only operational demands but also how support is made available and experienced through organizational relationships.

Work-life balance is commonly defined as the extent to which individuals are able to meet work and non-work responsibilities without excessive conflict, overload, or chronic depletion (Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Kaushik and Nair 2020). In much of the HRM and HRD literature, the concept implies that employees have at least some capacities to negotiate boundaries between work and personal life through flexibility, supportive leadership, organizational policy, or coping strategies (Talukder 2019; Bhensuwan and Chantharat 2022). This framing is useful in many settings, but it may be less adequate in occupations where work is institutionally dominant and temporally invasive, leaving little discretion over time, emotional availability, or location (Anderson and Goldenberg 2019; Burrell et al. 2019).

In military environments, work-life balance is particularly complex because work demands are not limited to workload or working hours. They also include deployments, frequent relocation, danger exposure, emotional vigilance, and prolonged absence from family and community life (Berndtsson and Österberg 2023; Nilsson et al. 2023). Research on military personnel also shows that work-life balance is shaped by deployment rhythms, training demands, physical readiness requirements, and institutional expectations that extend beyond conventional working hours, making role boundaries especially difficult to manage (Mann and Brinkley 2021). As a result, the issue is not necessarily whether work and non-work domains can be kept in perfect equilibrium, but whether personnel have sufficient support, predictability, and recovery to prevent work from overwhelming family functioning and personal well-being (Turner et al. 2024). This becomes even more difficult in fragile-state environments, where insecurity and institutional strain may intensify the extent to which work penetrates and destabilizes non-work life (Adegbesan and Ofole 2023; Akinyetun et al. 2023; Ofongo 2024; Wadsworth et al. 2023).

Recent scholarship from African and emerging-economy contexts has also questioned the universality of individualized equilibrium models of work-life balance. In more relational and collectivist settings, work-life experience may be shaped not only by formal work structures but also by family obligation, social reciprocity, and community-based support systems (Adisa et al. 2021; Adekoya et al. 2019). Recent work-life research further shows that boundary management and spill-over are shaped not only by workload but also by the availability of linked personal and contextual resources, suggesting that pressures and supports often cluster rather than operate in isolation (Adisa et al. 2022; Carlson et al. 2024). This suggests that work-life balance in the Armed Forces of Nigeria should not be approached as a purely individual matter of role optimization,

but as a contextually negotiated condition shaped by insecurity, hierarchy, and socially embedded support.

2.2 | Work Engagement

Work engagement refers to a positive, fulfilling, work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al. 2002). It has been widely associated with motivation, commitment, discretionary effort, and positive performance outcomes (Bakker and Demerouti 2017; Lesener et al. 2022). Within the JD-R tradition, engagement is understood not as a stable personal trait but as an outcome that emerges when employees have sufficient resources to meet work demands and remain psychologically connected to their roles (Demerouti et al. 2001; Bakker and Demerouti 2017).

However, engagement in military settings may not map neatly onto standard organizational formulations. Personnel often remain engaged because of professional identity, moral duty, peer loyalty, or commitment to mission, even when organizational conditions are difficult or personally costly (Anderson and Goldenberg 2019; Berndtsson and Österberg 2023). In such settings, engagement may coexist with fatigue, frustration, and significant family strain rather than representing a uniformly positive work state (Burrell et al. 2019; Nilsson et al. 2023). In fragile-state military environments, understanding engagement therefore requires attention not only to organizational support but also to fairness, leadership, social recognition, and informal coping resources that allow personnel to remain committed under pressure (Okafor and Eze 2023; Ogunyemi et al. 2024).

2.3 | Job Demands-Resources Model

Recent JD-R research also shows that workplace conditions may function simultaneously as enabling resources and constraining demands, depending on how they are experienced and whether they are accompanied by sufficient support (Pinho et al. 2026). This dynamic view is useful here because it helps explain why institutional arrangements may sustain engagement for some personnel while intensifying strain for others. It also supports the argument that work engagement can operate as an important psychological mechanism linking work conditions to broader work–life outcomes.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model provides a flexible and widely used framework for understanding how work conditions shape employee well-being and performance (Demerouti et al. 2001; Bakker and Demerouti 2017). The model distinguishes between job demands, which require sustained physical, cognitive, or emotional effort and may generate strain, and job resources, which help employees achieve work goals, reduce demands, or stimulate learning and development (Demerouti et al. 2001; Lesener et al. 2022). The model proposes two linked processes: an impairment pathway in which excessive demands contribute to exhaustion and reduced well-being, and a motivational pathway in which resources foster engagement and positive outcomes (Schaufeli et al. 2002; Bakker and Demerouti 2017).

The JD-R model is particularly useful for studying military work because it can accommodate occupation-specific demands such as danger exposure, prolonged separation, role overload, emotional vigilance, and unpredictable scheduling (Anderson and Goldenberg 2019; Burrell et al. 2019; Berndtsson and Österberg 2023). It can also incorporate military-specific resources such as unit cohesion, professional identity, peer support, leadership, and recognition (Nilsson et al. 2023; Lesener et al. 2022). However, applying the JD-R model in a fragile-state military context requires greater contextual sensitivity because resources may be unevenly distributed, inconsistently implemented, and filtered through rank, command discretion, and institutional capacity (Adegbesan and Ofole 2023; Okafor et al. 2023; Ogunyemi et al. 2024).

Accordingly, this study uses JD-R not as a closed model but as a flexible explanatory framework. It treats demands as both operational and institutional, and it recognizes that resources may be both formal and informal, including culturally embedded support systems that compensate for organizational shortfalls (Adisa et al. 2021; Adekoya et al. 2019; Okafor and Eze 2023). It also acknowledges that resources may operate in interconnected ways, consistent with research suggesting that personal and contextual supports can form clustered “resource caravans” rather than isolated protective factors (Carlson et al. 2024).

2.4 | Spill-Over Theory

Spill-over theory explains how experiences, emotions, and pressures in one domain of life influence functioning in another (Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Piotrkowski 1979). In work-life research, this usually refers to the movement of pressures or benefits between work and non-work domains. Spill-over may be negative, when stress and conflict transfer across domains, or positive, when one domain enriches another through skills, affect, or support (Kaushik and Nair 2020; Schüttengruber et al. 2023). The theory is useful because it captures the permeability of role boundaries and acknowledges that work and family life are rarely fully independent.

Yet much spill-over research continues to assume broad reciprocity between domains even when one domain may be far more institutionally dominant than the other (Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Schüttengruber et al. 2023). In military settings, work often has greater temporal, spatial, and moral control over personnel than family life can exert in return, especially under conditions of deployment, insecurity, and organizational pressure (Anderson and Goldenberg 2019; Burrell et al. 2019). This raises an important theoretical question: rather than presuming that work-to-life and life-to-work spill-over are equally salient, should spill-over in such contexts be understood as structurally asymmetrical? (Berndtsson and Österberg 2023).

This question becomes even more compelling in fragile-state settings, where insecurity, resource scarcity, and welfare uncertainty may intensify the dominance of work over non-work life (Channels TV 2016; Adegbesan and Ofole 2023; Ofongo 2024; Wadsworth et al. 2023; Sahara Reporters 2024). The present

study therefore uses spill-over theory to examine cross-domain transmission while remaining open to the possibility that the pattern of transmission is directionally uneven.

2.5 | Integrating JD-R and Spill-Over in the AFN Context

The value of integrating JD-R and spill-over theory lies in their complementary strengths. JD-R explains how work environments generate depletion or motivation through the interaction of demands and resources, but says less about how those effects extend beyond work into family and personal life (Demerouti et al. 2001; Bakker and Demerouti 2017). Spill-over theory addresses that cross-domain movement, but often under-specifies the organizational and institutional mechanisms that produce the underlying pressures and supports (Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Schüttengruber et al. 2023). Used together, JD-R helps explain the production of strain and motivation within work, while spill-over theory helps explain how these conditions extend across life domains.

This integration is especially useful in the Armed Forces of Nigeria, where prolonged insecurity, repeated deployment, institutional strain, and uneven welfare provision shape both work experience and non-work consequences (Abel et al. 2018; Adegbesan and Ofole 2023; Ogunyemi et al. 2024). At the same time, the AFN operates within a socio-cultural context in which kinship, reciprocity, and communal obligation remain important features of everyday life (Adisa et al. 2021; Adekoya et al. 2019). This means that personnel may rely not only on formal organizational resources but also on informal support networks to cope with pressure, maintain morale, and sustain engagement (Okafor et al. 2023; Okafor and Eze 2023).

2.6 | Research Gap and Study Contribution

Although existing scholarship provides useful insight into work-life balance, engagement, JD-R dynamics, and spill-over, important gaps remain. First, much of the literature has been developed in civilian or relatively stable military settings, where assumptions of organizational predictability and more manageable role boundaries are more plausible. Second, spill-over research often assumes reciprocity between work and non-work domains without sufficiently considering contexts in which work is structurally dominant. Third, while JD-R research recognizes the importance of resources, less attention has been paid to settings in which resources are hierarchically filtered, institutionally inconsistent, and culturally supplemented through informal support systems.

These gaps are especially significant in fragile-state military environments such as the Armed Forces of Nigeria. Existing studies in Nigerian and related contexts point to work-non-work interference, deployment strain, and the role of support, but they do not yet provide a sufficiently integrated account of how demands, resources, and spill-over combine to shape work-life balance and engagement in lived experience (Adekoya et al. 2019; Ogunyemi et al. 2024; Okafor et al. 2023). This study addresses

that gap by using an integrated JD-R and spill-over lens to examine how AFN personnel interpret and navigate work-life pressures, engagement challenges, and support systems in a fragile-state context.

3 | Methodology

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants with direct experience of military work-life pressures, engagement challenges, and operational demands within the Armed Forces of Nigeria. This was complemented by snowball sampling because the target population was difficult to access and situated within a trust-sensitive institutional environment shaped by operational confidentiality and hierarchical protocols. Such an approach is methodologically appropriate when the objective is to identify information-rich participants who can speak directly to the phenomenon under study rather than to achieve statistical representativeness. Initial access was facilitated through trusted gatekeeper relationships, after which snowball sampling enabled recruitment to extend across multiple functional areas and ranks. This helped ensure organizational breadth while remaining consistent with the practical realities of access in a military setting. The use of purposive and snowball sampling is also consistent with research on hard-to-reach populations, where trust, networked access, and contextual sensitivity are central to recruitment. This is particularly important in an under-researched military setting, where existing theory may not fully capture the forms of pressure, support, and cross-domain strain shaping personnel experiences (Demerouti et al. 2001; Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Ogunyemi et al. 2024). The design therefore aligns with the study's aim of refining theory through empirically grounded contextual analysis.

The Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN), comprising the Army, Navy, and Air Force, operate under the Ministry of Defence and serve as the country's principal defense institution against complex and evolving security threats (Ministry of Defence 2024). With substantial active and reserve personnel and a central role in safeguarding territorial integrity, the AFN provides an important case through which to examine human resource management challenges in high-pressure, resource-constrained institutional environments. Its responsibilities extend beyond conventional defense functions to addressing asymmetric threats, including Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East and militancy in the Niger Delta, both of which have placed sustained pressure on personnel, organizational capacity, and operational systems (Council on Foreign Relations 2025; Global Firepower 2025).

These pressures are further intensified by manpower and institutional constraints. Egbegi et al. (2018) note that understaffing can increase workload pressures and reduce morale and effectiveness, while Adekoya et al. (2024) identify structural barriers to work-life balance such as prolonged deployments, compulsory relocation, rigid hierarchy, and unsupportive organizational cultures. Together, these conditions create a setting in which work-life conflict, psychological strain, and retention challenges are likely to be especially pronounced. Examining how personnel interpret and navigate work-life balance and engagement in this

context therefore offers valuable insight into the operation of demands, resources, and coping processes in a fragile-state military environment.

The study is anchored in an interpretivist perspective, which views social reality as constructed through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Bryman and Bell 2023). This perspective is appropriate because it allows the study to foreground emic accounts of how AFN personnel understand work-life balance, interpret work and family pressures, and make sense of the factors that support or undermine their engagement. In doing so, the study seeks to generate a rich and contextually grounded understanding of an underexplored African military setting (Creswell and Poth 2023).

Consistent with this interpretivist orientation, the research uses a mono-method qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews. This approach enables in-depth exploration of how job demands, available resources, and spillover experiences are perceived and negotiated in everyday military life. Although the design does not aim for statistical generalization, it supports analytical depth and theoretical refinement through close attention to participants' accounts and the institutional context in which they are embedded. In this sense, the study contributes not only empirical insight, but also a more context-sensitive understanding of work-life balance and engagement in high-risk environments.

3.1 | Sampling and Participant Recruitment

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants with direct experience of military work-life pressures, engagement challenges, and operational demands within the Armed Forces of Nigeria. This was complemented by snowball sampling because the target population was difficult to access and situated within a trust-sensitive institutional environment. Such an approach is appropriate when the objective is to identify information-rich participants who can speak directly to the phenomenon under study rather than to achieve statistical representativeness.

The sample was designed to include variation across rank, gender, and location to capture differences in how work demands, access to resources, and family disruption were experienced. In qualitative research, the value of such diversity lies in strengthening analytical depth and comparative insight rather than approximating a survey frame. This is consistent with qualitative work in high-risk and military environments, where access is often constrained and contextual richness is central to the value of the analysis (Nilsson et al. 2023; Turner et al. 2024).

Access to AFN personnel, as a hard-to-reach and ethically sensitive population shaped by operational confidentiality and hierarchical protocols, required a flexible but carefully managed recruitment strategy. Initial access was facilitated through trusted gatekeeper relationships following institutional ethics approval. From this starting point, snowball sampling enabled recruitment to extend across multiple functional

TABLE 1 | Demographic profile of research participants.

Category	Sub-category	Number of participants	Illustrative notes
Gender	Male	52	Reflects the male-dominated composition of AFN
	Female	8	Women across admin, medical, and limited combat roles
Age range	35–49 years	36	Early/mid-career officers
	50–64 years	12	Senior/mid-ranking officers
	65–80 years	12	Retired/ex-service senior officers
Years of service	6–15 years	33	Junior/mid-level experience
	16–25 years	15	Mid-to-senior experience
	26–35 years	12	Long service, mostly senior officers
Marital status	Married	55	The majority reflected traditional family structures
	Single/widowed	5	Minority categories
Military arm representation	Army	40	Most participants, reflecting the Army's size
	Navy	15	Mix of officers and specialists
	Air Force	5	Includes first-generation female officers

areas, including Gunnery, Logistics, Human Resources, and Legal. This helped ensure organizational breadth while remaining consistent with the practical realities of access in a military setting.

3.1.1 | Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria required that participants be active-duty personnel in the Armed Forces of Nigeria who had completed at least 3 years of service. Additionally, candidates must have had experience with deployment or other high-tempo operational conditions. This criterion was expanded to encompass active-duty personnel who had been deployed and participated in high-tempo operational missions before their retirement. By broadening the scope in this way, the study aimed to gather insights from a diverse range of experiences, ensuring that the perspectives considered were comprehensive and reflective of the challenges faced by military personnel during their service. Participants were excluded if they had fewer than 3 years of service, had never been active-duty personnel, lacked experience with deployment or comparable high-tempo operational conditions, or held roles too far removed from operational demands to provide relevant insights into the phenomenon under study.

These criteria were not intended to make the study unnecessarily restrictive; rather, they were used to ensure that the sample comprised participants who could provide relevant and meaningful insight into work–life balance and engagement under the specific conditions examined in the study. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, the point at which additional interviews no longer generated substantively new insights. Saturation was judged to have been achieved after 52 interviews, while a further eight interviews were conducted

to confirm thematic redundancy and strengthen confidence in the stability of the emerging analysis. The final sample comprised 60 participants, including both men and women and spanning junior, middle, and senior ranks across different locations. Table 1 gives a demographic profile of research participants. This composition supported a more nuanced analysis of how work-life balance and engagement were understood across frontline and command-level contexts.

3.2 | Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews. This method was appropriate because it provided sufficient consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to explore sensitive and context-specific experiences in depth, including work-life conflict, welfare strain, leadership, and coping (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018; Nilsson et al. 2023). The interview format enabled participants to describe how operational demands, institutional arrangements, and personal life disruptions interacted in practice, while also allowing the researcher to probe emerging themes across cases.

An interview guide was developed and refined iteratively, with questions focusing on work demands, access to resources, spill-over between work and non-work life, and factors shaping engagement. The guide was piloted with three officers who were not included in the final sample to improve clarity and relevance. Interviews lasted an average of 47 min and were conducted online via Zoom and WhatsApp to accommodate participants' operational schedules and geographical dispersion (Archibald et al. 2024).

Given the sensitivity of the participant group, ethical practice was central throughout the study. Institutional approval was

secured, informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed for accuracy. Pseudonyms and aggregated reporting were used to minimize identification risk in a hierarchical military setting.

3.3 | Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a Gioia-inspired approach, which provides a systematic process for moving from participant-centred accounts to higher-order theoretical explanation (Gioia et al. 2013). This method is well suited to qualitative organizational research because it preserves informants' meanings in the early stages of coding while enabling the development of more abstract theoretical insights (Gioia et al. 2013; Tracy 2020). Analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts and memoing to identify recurrent experiences and patterns in participants' accounts (Braun and Clarke 2023). In the first stage, coding stayed close to participants' own language, capturing experiences related to work demands, spill-over, engagement, leadership, support, and family disruption. In the second stage, these first-order concepts were grouped into more interpretive themes and linked to the JD-R and spill-over frameworks (Bakker and Demerouti 2017; Gioia et al. 2013). This approach was appropriate because it enabled theoretical refinement without losing sight of participants' lived realities. In this study, it helped show how AFN personnel described pressures and supports in their own terms while also generating a clearer explanation of asymmetrical spill-over, resource mediation, and culturally embedded buffering. The summary of the data analysis is presented in Table 2.

3.4 | Trustworthiness

Methodological rigor was strengthened through several complementary strategies. Credibility was supported by repeated engagement with the transcripts, constant comparison across interviews, and close alignment between interpretation and participant accounts. Dependability was enhanced through a clear coding structure and an audit trail documenting the movement from first-order categories to second-order themes. Confirmability was supported by analytical transparency and by avoiding premature imposition of theory on the data. Transferability was addressed through rich contextual description, allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other high-risk and resource-constrained settings.

The study does not claim statistical generalizability. Rather, its strength lies in analytical credibility, contextual depth, and the disciplined development of concepts that may be relevant to comparable settings under similar institutional conditions.

3.5 | Ethical Statement

This study is part of a broader project on military career, leadership, personnel work-life balance, and engagement and was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the lead author's

university. Informed consent highlighted voluntariness, pseudonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any point. Due to the sensitivity of discussing work strain, silencing, and personal stress in a military context, participants were also informed that they could choose not to answer any questions and were provided with debriefing information as needed. Throughout the study, the research team prioritized participants' rights, welfare, and data protection.

4 | Research Findings

The findings indicate that work-life balance in this context is experienced less as equilibrium and more as a continuing negotiation under conditions of organizational intensity, insecurity, and constrained support. Across interviews, participants described military work as intrusive, persistent, and difficult to contain within formal working time, with consequences extending into family relationships, recovery, and sustained engagement. These accounts are broadly consistent with scholarship portraying military work as a high-demand environment, but they also suggest that the AFN context intensifies the directional dominance of work over non-work life (Anderson and Goldenberg 2019; Burrell et al. 2019; Berndtsson and Österberg 2023).

Using a Gioia-inspired analysis (Gioia et al. 2013), four aggregate dimensions were identified to explain how job demands, access to resources, and forms of spillover shape work-life balance and engagement among AFN personnel.

4.1 | Insurgency-Driven Asymmetrical Work-To-Non-Work Life Spill-Over

The first theme captures the extent to which work pressures intrude into non-work life in a strongly directional manner. Participants described prolonged deployment, emotional vigilance, unpredictable scheduling, and limited control over time away from home as demands that extended beyond the workplace and disrupted family presence, rest, and social functioning. Rather than portraying spill-over as balanced reciprocity between work and personal life, participants consistently described work as the more dominant and invasive domain.

The last-minute changes to my schedule had me cancelling plans with loved ones repeatedly. It felt like work was always coming first, and my family had to adjust.

(Special Duties Officer)

The nature of the job is such that personnel are not empowered to split their time... A very good example is the fight against Boko Haram... Once deployed... flexibility is relatively narrowed down.

(Special Forces Officer)

In the military, we have signed to go wherever and whenever... Many of our colleagues have been posted for several years now... They have missed

TABLE 2 | Gioia-inspired thematic data structure.

First-order concepts (with exemplar quotes)	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<i>Constant vigilance and inability to switch off</i>: “I am constantly on my toes, day and night... the dynamics of security is constantly changing for worse—Terrorism.” (Gunnery Officer) <i>Missing family milestones during deployment</i>: “Many of our colleagues have been posted for several years... They have missed Christmases... even the birth of new members to the family.” (Marine Officer) <i>Work taking priority over family responsibilities</i>: “Over time I found out I have prioritized work over family...” (Senior Security Officer) <i>Difficulty sustaining engagement after prolonged absence</i>: “Staying years away from home... especially during the festive periods... [I] find it difficult to engage with work.” (Gunnery Officer) <i>Leadership shapes whether support is experienced in practice</i>: “Every profession has its pressure... aggravated or ameliorated by those in leadership...” (Special Forces Officer) <i>Formal policy does not guarantee usable support</i>: “WLB is only as effective... depending on its leadership... makes WLB almost non-existent...” (Logistics Officer) <i>Rigid authority discourages younger personnel</i>: “Our young people... [are] discouraged by the military’s insensitivity, and arbitrary authority... rigid structure.” (Special Forces Officer) <i>Need for work restructuring and greater flexibility</i>: “Military work is all about ‘Presence’... if we can find a way to restructure it... [it would] increase dedication...” (Special Operations Officer) <i>Pressure to seek additional income</i>: “Sometimes, we are forced to do things... with the aim of surviving and feeding your family.” (Special Duties Officer) <i>Pay perceived as inadequate relative to sacrifice</i>: “The salary doesn’t match the work...” (Logistics Officer) <i>Financial strain distracts from duty</i>: “Most distractions are the quest to get additional income...” (Special Operations Officer) <i>Commitment weakened by lack of reciprocity</i>: “Personnel will be more engaged if all these are looked into.” (Special Operations Officer) <i>Extended family and peers as coping resources</i>: “Family back home and unit mates—they’re the real rotation we don’t get on paper.” (Medical Officer) <i>Brothers-in-arms and village ties sustain morale</i>: “We lean on our brothers-in-arms and village ties... It’s what keeps the fire burning...” (Engineering Officer) <i>Extended ties help personnel reinterpret sacrifice</i>: “Our extended ties remind us why we serve...” (HR Officer) <i>Collective support turns strain into shared resilience</i>: “It’s the village council or unit banter that flips it—turns depletion into shared strength.” (Legal Officer)	Persistent operational intrusion into personal life. Family disruption and recovery erosion Leadership-mediated access to support. Structural rigidity and constrained flexibility Perceived mismatch between sacrifice and reward. Financial strain and distraction from duty Peer solidarity as a coping resource. Extended family and communal reciprocity as resilience support	Asymmetrical work-to-non-work spill-over Hierarchical moderation of resource access Equity disparities and motivational strain Communal kinship as a spill-over buffer

Source: Authors’ fieldwork.

Christmases... even the birth of new members to the family.

(Marine Officer)

It has been difficult. Over time I found out I have prioritised work over family... at some point, I was ready to sit at home and do the chores while my wife goes to work.

(Senior Security Officer)

As one participant explained, “I am constantly on my toes, day and night. I do not see this pressure changing for better in future because the dynamics of security is constantly changing for worse—Terrorism. Anyways we are told up front by the military we are engaged for 24 hours” (Gunnery Officer). Others described prolonged postings that resulted in missing Christmas celebrations, births, and other major family milestones.

The extended time away from home during deployments meant I missed out on birthdays and family gatherings, leaving me feeling more like a stranger than a family member.

(Special Forces Officer)

I can't even count the number of anniversaries and school events I've missed; work just had a way of taking priority over everything else.

(Gunnery Officer)

Some participants shared their challenges in staying emotionally available due to a lack of control over their time. They expressed how operational pressure and work-related stress often infiltrated their home life, complicating their ability to be present.

When I finally got time off, it was hard to unwind because I felt so much pressure from the job. It seemed like work was always demanding more from me, even in my downtime.

(Medical Officer)

The stress of work often seeped into my home life. I'd find myself snapping at my kids because of the pressures I felt at work—it was hard to leave that behind.

(Legal Officer)

These accounts align with work–family conflict scholarship, but they also suggest a more specific pattern in this setting: spillover was not only negative but also structurally uneven. Work appeared to exert greater influence over non-work life than non-work life exerted over work (Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Schüttengruber et al. 2023). Participants frequently described missing family events, struggling to remain emotionally available at home, and carrying operational pressure into the domestic space. This suggests that fragile-state military service intensifies the directional dominance of work over family and personal life.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that work-life balance in this setting is shaped by persistent work-to-non-work intrusion, with implications for recovery, family functioning, and engagement maintenance.

4.2 | Hierarchical Moderation of Resource Access

The second theme shows that resources were not experienced as uniformly available organizational supports. Participants described access to flexibility, welfare, understanding, and practical assistance as heavily shaped by rank, leadership style, and local command practice. In other words, whether something functioned as a resource depended not only on whether it formally existed but also on whether personnel could access it in practice.

I have noticed that how flexible and supportive our workplace is really depends on the leadership style. It seems like the quality and effectiveness of our leaders play a big role in determining how accessible these resources are.

(Marine Officer)

The availability of a resource isn't just about whether it exists on paper. It really comes down to how easily we can access it, and that often depends on where we stand in the hierarchy.

(Special Forces Officer)

Beyond the understanding that practical assistance and access to resources varied significantly among officers, reflecting the impact of local command practices and officers' rank, it can be inferred from the participants' narratives that rank plays a major role in the distinctions in resource availability. As noted by a participant, “I think that the effectiveness of the resources we had really depended not only on having them available, but also on the cultural and procedural context that our local command leadership had set up. It was interesting to see how the atmosphere and the way things were done played such a significant role in how we utilised those resources” (Special Forces Officer).

This matters because the JD-R model often treats resources as features of the work environment that help individuals manage demands and sustain motivation (Demerouti et al. 2001; Bakker and Demerouti 2017). The present findings suggest a more conditional pattern. In the AFN context, resources were not simply organisationally available; they were socially and hierarchically filtered. Supportive leadership could make welfare measures meaningful, while unsupportive command practices could render formal provisions ineffective or inaccessible.

Participants repeatedly emphasized the role of leadership in shaping whether work-life balance measures could function at all and that operational realities could make such balance “almost non-existent” when leadership support was weak (Logistics Officer).

WLB is only as effective and dependent on the leader and their leadership style. However, the internal security situation like... Boko Haram... impacts our work-life balance... makes WLB almost non-existent.

(Logistics Officer)

Every profession has its pressure... aggravated or ameliorated by those in leadership... military leaders... need to constantly develop ways... to bridge these pressures.

(Special Forces Officer)

Accounts of generational tension and rigid command structures further reinforced this theme. Younger personnel were described as discouraged by “*insensitivity*” and “*arbitrary authority*,” while others argued that work remained too heavily tied to physical presence and would benefit from restructuring where possible.

Military work is all about ‘Presence’... if we can find a way to restructure it... it would also help increase dedication... amongst the millennial children... who want so much more out of life.

(Senior Officer)

Our young people... are discouraged by the military’s insensitivity, and arbitrary authority... rigid structure... They want greater personal freedom.

(Senior Officer)

These accounts suggest that the motivational value of resources depends not only on policy design, but also on the institutional and relational conditions under which those resources are distributed.

4.3 | Equity Disparities and Motivational Strain

The third theme concerns the mismatch participants experienced between sacrifice and reward. Accounts of delayed allowances, material shortfalls, unmet welfare expectations, and insufficient recognition indicate that engagement was weakened not only by workload or danger, but also by perceived inequity in the exchange relationship between personnel and institution. Participants often remained committed to service, but their commitment was strained by the view that sacrifice was not matched by adequate support or reciprocity.

We joined the service with the understanding that our well-being would be prioritised, but the reality falls short. The welfare programs promised to us seem elusive and unfulfilled.

(Special Forces Officer)

The challenges we face in the field are compounded by the constant delays in our allowances. We sacrifice

our safety, yet the institution doesn’t honour its commitments in a timely manner.

(Special Duties Officer)

There are times when we lack basic materials that are essential for our work. It feels unfair that we put our lives on the line without the necessary support to do our jobs effectively.

(Gunnery Officer)

These findings complement JD-R scholarship by suggesting that motivational depletion may be shaped not only by demand intensity, but also by perceptions of fairness and institutional acknowledgement (Talukder 2019; Dousin et al. 2021). In this context, engagement persisted, but often under conditions of disappointment, frustration, and emotional strain. Sustainable engagement therefore appeared to depend not simply on resilience or duty, but also on whether personnel felt that their sacrifices were recognized and reciprocated.

We are confronted with many security issues... the salary doesn’t match the work... We are not encouraged to and motivated to go out there knowing we may lose our life and our family will not be compensated.

(Marine Officer)

Recognition for our hard work is rarely seen. While we remain dedicated to our duties, the lack of acknowledgement makes us feel undervalued and fosters a sense of disconnect between us and the institution.

(Security Officer)

I love serving my country, but my commitment is tested when I see that our sacrifices are not reciprocated with adequate support from leadership. It’s a difficult position to be in.

(Gunnery Officer)

As one participant asked, “Why do we work? Is it not so we can care for our family financially?... The pay unfortunately is not commensurate with the work... Personnel will be more engaged if all these are looked into” (Special Operations Officer). Another stated, “There will be a WLB... if there is a balance between the work we do and the pay we receive... we are forced to do things... with the aim of surviving” (Junior Officer). As stated by another participant, “There’s a growing sense of inequity when we compare our sacrifices with the lack of resources and recognition. It makes you question whether the sacrifices we make truly matter to the institution.”

These accounts suggest that financial strain was not peripheral, but part of the wider structure through which work-life balance and engagement were experienced. Motivational strain, therefore, arose not only from heavy demands but also from the perception that institutional reciprocity was insufficient (Ajonbadi et al. 2025).

4.4 | Communal Kinship as a Spill-Over Buffer

The fourth theme shows that kinship, peer solidarity, and communal reciprocity acted as important informal resources where formal organizational systems were weak or inconsistent. These support structures did not remove work-life strain, but they helped personnel endure it, reinterpret it, and maintain functioning across work and family roles. Participants described reliance on extended family, trusted peers, and social networks as a way of coping with absence, uncertainty, and emotional pressure.

My family has been a great pillar of support—my parents, siblings, their wives and husbands, nieces, nephews—they have all been all my backbone. When I remember they are depending and looking up to me, I can't abandon the work, I keep going.

(Medical Officer)

I have found a great support system in my immediate and extended families. They have served as a lifeline during times of uncertainty. This has helped me to cope with the pressures of work and family responsibilities.

(Special Forces Officer)

My family, kinsmen have not just provided emotional support, but have been there for me through the challenges associated with my work and life. They have been a vital resource and a buffer against the strains and the emotional pressures inherent in military service.

(Gunnery Officer)

This finding is consistent with scholarship emphasizing the contextual and cultural shaping of resources in African and collectivist settings (Adekoya et al. 2019; Adisa et al. 2021). It also refines JD-R theory by showing that resources are not limited to formal organizational supports. In fragile-state settings, culturally embedded relational systems may partially compensate for deficits in institutional provision (Okafor et al. 2023; Ogunyemi et al. 2024). These informal systems are therefore not incidental; they form part of the practical support infrastructure through which personnel manage demands and sustain engagement.

One participant explained, “In the military... we lean on our brothers-in-arms and village ties... It's what keeps the fire burning when the front lines drain you dry” (Engineering Officer). Another stated that “family back home and unit mates—they're the real rotation we don't get on paper. Without that pull, the strain would break us” (Medical Officer). As explicated by another, “While formal organisational systems often fall short, the solidarity found within familial and social circles has seen me through several occasions of work-life strain, fostering resilience during difficult times” (Special Duties Officer).

Such accounts indicate that communal ties helped personnel preserve morale, emotional continuity, and a sense of purpose even where formal support was limited. Taken together, the four themes suggest that work-life balance in the AFN is not best understood as a stable equilibrium between domains. Rather, it is a contextually negotiated condition in which work pressures disproportionately shape non-work life, while sustained engagement depends on a fragile combination of leadership, perceived fairness, and informal communal support.

5 | Discussion

This study set out to examine how work-life balance influences work engagement among personnel in the Armed Forces of Nigeria. The findings suggest that work-life balance in this setting is characterized by pronounced asymmetry. Work demands did not simply coexist with family and personal life; they frequently dominated them through prolonged absence, emotional vigilance, welfare strain, and constrained recovery opportunities. While this broad pattern is consistent with military work-family scholarship, the present study suggests that fragile-state conditions intensify the directional force of work-to-non-work spillover (Anderson and Goldenberg 2019; Burrell et al. 2019; Berndtsson and Österberg 2023).

A central contribution of the study is its refinement of spill-over theory in a high-risk, resource-constrained military setting. Existing accounts often treat spill-over as a bidirectional process in which work and non-work domains influence one another in both positive and negative ways (Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Kaushik and Nair 2020). The present findings indicate a more uneven pattern. In the AFN context, spill-over was described predominantly as movement from work into non-work life, with relatively limited capacity for family or personal life to counterbalance the demands of military service. Non-work resources were still important, but their role was more often buffering and restorative than equal in directional force. This suggests that spill-over theory may need greater sensitivity to contexts in which occupational demands are structurally dominant.

The findings also extend the JD-R model by showing that the distinction between demands and resources remains useful, but requires contextual elaboration in settings marked by insecurity, strong hierarchy, and institutional scarcity. Job demands in this study were intensified by prolonged deployment, operational uncertainty, insufficient rotation, and pressures associated with family separation. At the same time, resources could not be understood simply as formal workplace supports. Their effectiveness depended on whether leadership enabled access, whether personnel perceived institutional reciprocity to be fair, and whether communal networks could compensate where organizational provision was weak. The study therefore suggests that JD-R processes in fragile-state environments are shaped not only by the presence of demands and resources, but also by how they are socially distributed and culturally mediated (Demerouti et al. 2001; Bakker and Demerouti 2017).

The role of communal kinship is especially significant in this regard. Research in African and collectivist settings has shown that social embeddedness can shape coping, obligation, and work-family negotiation in distinctive ways (Adekoya et al. 2019; Adisa et al. 2021). The present study adds to that literature by showing that peer solidarity, extended family ties, and communal reciprocity functioned as meaningful informal resources that helped personnel absorb strain and preserve engagement. At the same time, these supports did not eliminate structural pressures. Their importance should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that formal organizational shortcomings are unproblematic, but rather as an indication of how personnel improvise resilience under constrained conditions.

Overall, the study contributes to scholarship on work-life balance and engagement in three ways. First, it shows that spill-over in this context is predominantly work-to-non-work and strongly asymmetrical. Second, it demonstrates that access to resources is hierarchically filtered rather than uniformly available. Third, it highlights the importance of perceived fairness and communal buffering in sustaining engagement where formal systems are limited. Together, these findings suggest that conventional models of work-life balance developed in relatively stable organizational settings may not fully capture the conditions under which balance and engagement are negotiated in fragile-state military environments.

5.1 | Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to spill-over theory by showing that the bidirectional logic often assumed in work-life research requires qualification in fragile-state military settings. Although spill-over theory correctly emphasizes cross-domain transmission, the present findings suggest that such transmission is not experienced as evenly reciprocal. Instead, work-to-non-work spill-over appears more visible, more persistent, and more consequential than non-work-to-work spill-over in participants' accounts. The contribution, therefore, is not that reciprocity is impossible, but that reciprocity should not be presumed where one domain possesses greater institutional power and temporal control than the other (Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Schüttengruber et al. 2023).

The study also adds contextual nuance to the JD-R model. In classical JD-R terms, demands impair well-being and resources sustain motivation, but the AFN findings suggest that resources are not simply static supports embedded in the organization. Their value depends on whether personnel can access them through rank relations, local command culture, and socially embedded support networks. The study therefore does not reject JD-R; rather, it shows that JD-R mechanisms are contextually filtered by hierarchy, scarcity, and relational systems (Demerouti et al. 2001; Bakker and Demerouti 2017; Lesener et al. 2022). In this sense, the paper advances a more relational and context-sensitive understanding of resources within work-life and engagement scholarship.

5.2 | Practical Implications

The findings have several practical implications for human resource development in military and similarly high-risk

environments. First, improving work-life outcomes requires more than generic welfare language or imported family-friendly policy templates. In the AFN context, more meaningful support would involve greater attention to deployment predictability, rotation fairness, recovery time, and the practical implementation of support at unit and command levels, where personnel most directly experience organizational care or neglect (Anderson and Goldenberg 2019; Adegbesan and Ofole 2023; Ogunyemi et al. 2024).

Second, leadership development should recognize that immediate supervisors and commanding officers play a central role in mediating access to resources, and therefore in shaping both engagement and work-life strain (Talukder 2019; Dousin et al. 2021). Third, perceptions of inequity matter. Where personnel experience a mismatch between sacrifice and recognition, engagement may be weakened even when commitment to service remains strong (Blau 1964; Talukder 2019). Finally, support strategies should acknowledge the practical importance of communal and kinship-based support systems. This does not mean replacing formal HRD systems with informal ones, but it does suggest that policies may be more effective when they recognize how personnel already cope through culturally embedded relational networks (Adisa et al. 2021; Okafor et al. 2023).

These implications may be analytically relevant for other high-risk and resource-constrained settings, but they should be treated as suggestive rather than automatically generalisable, since the present analysis is grounded in the specific institutional, cultural, and security conditions of the Armed Forces of Nigeria.

5.3 | Contextual and African-Centered Contribution

A further contribution lies in the paper's contextualisation of work-life balance in an African fragile-state military setting. Rather than treating work-life balance as a universal and individualized ideal of equilibrium, this study's findings suggest that Western-centric WLB paradigms may not adequately capture the complexities of contextual realities in fragile states such as Nigeria. In such settings, socio-political instability and security challenges significantly impact the lived experiences of service members. Consequently, WLB emerges not as a fixed state of balance, but as an adaptive and relational condition shaped by insecurity, institutional hierarchy, communal obligation, and constrained autonomy. In this context, work-life balance is not simply a matter of personal choice or boundary preference; it is negotiated within conditions of instability, strong institutional duty, and culturally embedded expectations of interdependence. This does not require a wholly separate theory of work-life balance, but it does indicate that dominant formulations developed in relatively stable Western organizational settings require contextual refinement when applied to fragile-state African environments. More specifically, this study's findings suggest that work-life balance in such settings may be understood as a context-sensitive process through which individuals navigate professional duty, personal well-being, communal expectations, and environmental instability while striving to maintain engagement and fulfillment across domains. This does not require

a wholly separate theory of work-life balance, but it does indicate that the meaning and experience of balance are culturally and institutionally mediated (Adisa et al. 2021; Adekoya et al. 2019).

By foregrounding kinship ties, peer solidarity, and communal reciprocity as meaningful buffering resources, the study highlights dimensions of support that are often underplayed in work-life and HRD scholarship derived mainly from Western organizational settings (Okafor et al. 2023; Ogunyemi et al. 2024). These support systems are theoretically important not because they replace formal organizational resources, but because they reveal how personnel in resource-constrained settings sustain functioning when institutional supports are partial, uneven, or unreliable.

5.3.1 | Conceptual Framework

This study proposes an integrated conceptual framework for understanding work-life balance and work engagement among personnel in the Armed Forces of Nigeria within a fragile-state context (see Figure 1). Drawing on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and spill-over theory, the framework argues that military personnel operate within an environment shaped by prolonged insecurity, institutional fragility, rigid hierarchy, operational uncertainty, and welfare constraints. These conditions intensify job demands such as prolonged deployment, hypervigilance, unpredictable schedules, separation from family, and material strain. In turn, these demands generate a predominantly *asymmetrical work-to-life spill-over*, whereby work pressures intrude more forcefully into family and personal life than non-work domains influence work.

At the same time, the framework recognizes that the effects of these demands are not uniform. Their impact is conditioned by access to both *formal organizational resources* and *informal indigenous resources*. Formal resources include leadership support, welfare provision, recognition, and practical flexibility, while informal indigenous resources include kinship support, peer solidarity, and communal reciprocity. However, access to

formal resources is not neutral; it is mediated by *hierarchy and command practice*, meaning that support becomes effective only when leadership and institutional arrangements enable personnel to draw upon it meaningfully.

The framework also positions *work engagement* as a related motivational state shaped by the interaction of demands and resources. Stronger support and lower interference can help sustain vigor, dedication, and commitment, whereas excessive demands and inequity weaken engagement over time. Most importantly, the framework reconceptualises *work-life balance* in this context as an *adaptive and relational outcome*, rather than a universal state of equilibrium. In a fragile-state African military setting, work-life balance is better understood as the ongoing negotiation of professional duty, personal well-being, communal obligation, and environmental instability. The framework therefore extends conventional work-life and engagement models by showing that, in this setting, balance is shaped by asymmetrical spill-over, uneven resource access, institutional fragility, and culturally embedded support systems.

5.4 | Contributions to Human Resource Development Scholarship

This study contributes to HRD, work-life, and engagement scholarship in three related ways. First, it refines spill-over theory by showing that in a fragile-state military context spill-over is better understood as structurally asymmetrical than as presumptively bidirectional (Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Schüttengruber et al. 2023). Second, it extends JD-R scholarship by showing that resources are hierarchically mediated and culturally supplemented rather than merely organisationally present or absent (Demerouti et al. 2001; Bakker and Demerouti 2017; Lesener et al. 2022). Third, it brings an under-researched Global South military context into HRD analysis and shows that indigenous informal support systems can function as partial buffers under conditions of institutional scarcity (Adisa et al. 2021; Okafor et al. 2023; Ogunyemi et al. 2024).

These contributions should be understood proportionately. The paper does not claim to overturn existing theory or to generalize automatically across the Global South. Rather, it offers a contextually grounded refinement of familiar mechanisms and invites further comparative work on high-risk and resource-constrained environments.

5.5 | Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it draws on qualitative interview data from one military context, so its purpose is analytical depth rather than statistical generalization. Second, the findings capture participants' experiences at a particular point in time and therefore cannot fully trace how work-life dynamics shift across deployment cycles, leadership changes, or career stages. Third, the analysis relies primarily on self-reported accounts and does not incorporate complementary administrative or organizational data such as formal welfare records, rotation histories, or engagement metrics.

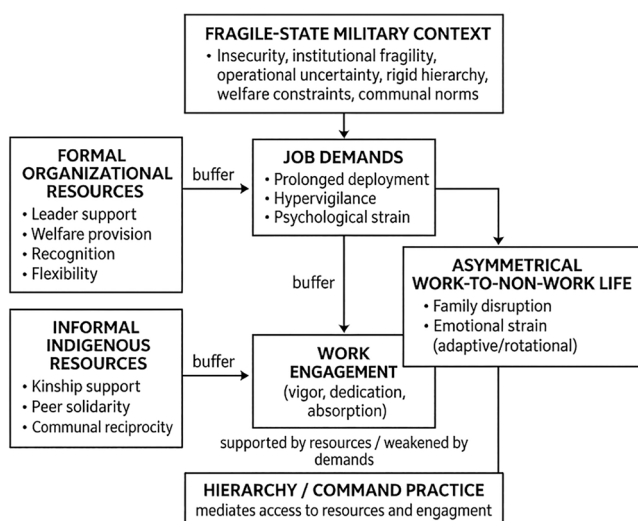


FIGURE 1 | Navigating work-life dynamics in fragile-state military contexts: An integrated JD-R and spill-over framework.

Future research could build on this study in several ways. Comparative work could examine whether similar asymmetrical spill-over patterns emerge across other fragile-state militaries, paramilitary organizations, or high-risk public service occupations. Longitudinal research could also examine how work-life strain and engagement change before, during, and after deployment cycles, while mixed-methods studies could test the broader applicability of asymmetrical spill-over and communal buffering across larger samples (Turner et al. 2024; Nilsson et al. 2023; Ogunyemi et al. 2024). Further work could also examine more explicitly how formal supports and informal relational resources combine to shape resilience under high-risk institutional conditions. Such work would help clarify which elements of the present analysis are context-specific and which may travel more widely across comparable institutional settings.

Ultimately, the paper argues that in fragile-state military environments, work-life balance is best understood not as a universal equilibrium, but as a contextually structured negotiation over demands, resources, recovery, and relational support.

6 | Conclusion

This study examined work-life balance and work engagement among personnel in the Armed Forces of Nigeria through an integrated JD-R and spill-over lens. The findings show that work-life dynamics in this fragile-state military context are shaped by pronounced asymmetry: work pressures intrude into non-work life more powerfully than non-work experiences influence work, while sustained engagement depends on uneven access to both formal and informal resources. In this setting, hierarchy, insecurity, welfare strain, and communal support all shape whether personnel can recover, remain engaged, and protect their family and personal lives under pressure (Demerouti et al. 2001; Grzywacz and Marks 2000; Adegbesan and Ofole 2023; Ogunyemi et al. 2024).

The study therefore contributes to HRD scholarship not by multiplying conceptual labels, but by showing how context changes the operation of otherwise familiar theoretical mechanisms. Specifically, it refines spill-over theory by demonstrating the importance of structural asymmetry and adds contextual nuance to JD-R by showing that resources are socially mediated and culturally supplemented rather than neutrally distributed (Bakker and Demerouti 2017; Schüttengruber et al. 2023; Adisa et al. 2021). In doing so, the paper extends work-life and engagement research into an under-examined Global South military setting while maintaining appropriately bounded claims about transferability.

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The authors have nothing to report.

Ethics Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the University's research code of practice and ethics. This includes securing appropriate consent

from participants, minimizing the potential for harm, and complying with data protection.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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