



Relationship between Social Support and Work-Family Conflict: A Case Study of Women Employees in a Malaysian Higher Education Institution

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30880/jtet.2019.11.02.009>

Received 01st September 2018; Accepted 02nd December 2018; Available online 30th June 2019

Abstract: Work-family conflict (WFC) is a relatively less studied construct in the Eastern world and even sparser in the academic literature regarding working women in Malaysia. This paper is one of the few studies to examine social support mechanism used to alleviate such conflicts. The study examined the relationship between social support from work domain (supervisor support) and family domain (family support) addressing both directions of the conflict, work-to-family (W-to-FC) and family-to-work conflict (F-to-WC). A total of 278 women employees (146 academics and 132 non-academics) at a Malaysian Technical University participated in the study. The well-established instrument in work family literature was used to collect data via a survey. The results indicated a moderate level but relatively high mean value of W-to-FC than F-to-WC reported by women. Contradictory to a large body of work-family literature, the Pearson correlation analysis showed that work-family specific supervisor support is not related to either directions of work-family conflict (WFC) for Malaysian women. Social support provided by family however, was found to be statistically and negatively related to both directions of conflict. Findings from this study contribute to the understanding of the role of informal workplace social support by supervisor and family support with WFC in Malaysian educational institutions specifically in TVET. The results showed that women employees do experience WFC and supervisor work-family support is not enough to mitigate these conflicts. Hence, to produce women role models and retain them in the workplace, TVET higher learning institutions such as universities need to look into other workplace social support (like, family friendly policies, maternal leave, onsite childcare) to reduce the conflict for women employees.

Keywords: Work-family conflict, Social support, Supervisor support, Family, Eastern Countries, Women academics

1. Introduction

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is an education sector that emphasises the application of technical and vocational elements in their programmes by providing the study of technologies, practical knowledge to prepare individuals for a profession (Abdul, Hassan, & Hasan, 2015). The TVET sector has now turned out to be in high need of global policy reforms (Khan, Aradi, Schwalje, Buckner, & Fernandez-Carag, 2017). The financial development policies anticipate women as playing an imperative part in meeting labour market needs by filling the technical roles that are largely filled by males or foreign labour at present (Fazili, 2017). However, in many countries, females stay less likely than males to pursue the Technical and Vocational fields. The lack of female TVET faculty staff is one of the reasons that discourage women from choosing to pursue TVET programmes and afterward entering technical related employments. Hence, it is important to increase women role models to encourage females to enrol in TVET programmes and jobs for meeting the need of the current and future labour market (Khan et al., 2017).

In Malaysia, women outnumber men in university enrolments every year (Kinoshita & Guo, 2015). Women are leading in the fields of education, humanities, arts and the social sciences, yet the technical fields are still dominated by

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men. The number of females in technical disciplines such as engineering, manufacturing and construction is significantly lower than males (Tienxhi, 2017). According to UNDP Malaysia and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development report, there were only 52,415 females versus 69,047 males enrolled in technical fields in the year 2014 (UNDP & The Ministry of Women, 2014). Hence, it wouldn't be wrong to say that gender disparity in Education still exists but horizontally, where women tend to choose most typical female fields (Education, Arts, humanities and social sciences etc) and are not comfortable adopting technical related fields. One way to increase female enrolments in the technical fields is through producing women role models in TVET (Ngugi & Muthima, 2017). Having women role models helps female students to overcome the identity crisis related to technical fields (like, technical fields do not belong to girls and are the male fields of study) and encourages them to enrol in TVET programmes and later to seek employment in the technical discipline (Khan et al., 2017).

To produce women role models in TVET, it is important to retain women in the workforce which can be achieved by understanding the challenges that they face in employment. Working women are often confronted with the issues of work-family conflicts (WFC) due to the burden of simultaneously managing heavy workload and family responsibilities (Almaki, Silong, Idris, & Wahat, 2016; Hassan, Dollard, & Winefield, 2010). This factor is reported as a crucial career inhibiting factor for women in Malaysia (TalentCorp, 2013; WorldBank, 2012). The work-family conflict (WFC) occurs when the demanding expectations of work and family roles get difficult to fulfil simultaneously (Busch-Heizmann & Holst, 2017; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In other words, WFC results from the competition between employer and family for the time and energy of an individual (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004). Theoretically, the work-family conflict is bi-directional as two domains (work and family) are involved concurrently. Work to family conflict (W-to-FC) happens when work demands interfere with the family responsibilities and family to work conflict (F-to-WC) occurs when family obligations get conflicted with the work duties of an individual (O'Mera, 2017).

Furthermore, an extensive body of empirical studies available link WFC to several negative personal and organizational consequences. They include higher turnover intention (intention to leave the current workplace), higher levels of family distress, sleep disturbance, poor physical and mental health, lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Aazami, Mozafari, Shamsuddin, & Akmal, 2016; Haines, Harvey, Durand, & Marchand, 2013; Higgins, Duxbury, & Julien, 2014; Michel, 2011). Therefore, in modern society, the conflict aspect is gaining more and more research interest. For the sake of clarity, the rest of this paper, use the term WFC to denote work-family conflict construct in general and use W-to-FC and F-to-WC when mentioning to a specific direction of the conflict.

In the literature, social support has incessantly been associated with improved well-being and health. Though, few studies assumed social support as a significant resource in reducing work-family conflict. Early work-family literature stressed on employees' use of formal workplace supports such that work-family policies (Maternal/parental paid leaves) can reduce WFC. However, currently the field has shifted the focus to evaluate informal workplace support, such as supervisor sympathy to work-family issues and its relationship with WFC (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011). On the other hand, spousal support from the family domain is the most studied construct in W-F literature especially if the sample is women (Achour, Grine, & Roslan Mohd Nor, 2014; Griggs, Casper, & Eby, 2013; Thein, 2014). However, a limited amount of research has examined family support in relation to WFC.

Moreover, a large body of literature on work-family conflict has originated from Western developed countries such as USA, UK, Australia and Canada which have high individualism values in (Cooper, 1982) cultural framework. Consequently, the studies portrayed the individualist roots in their findings such as Hassan et al. (2010) in his cross-cultural study on WFC reported that Malaysians are significantly lower on W to FC and scored significantly higher on F to WC than the western samples (USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Finland). It is due to differences in collectivism-individualism cultural dimensions. Thus, the literature available in western perspective may limit its applicability to non-Western cultures (Allen, French, Dumani, & Shockley, 2015).

1.1 Work-Family Conflict

Goode (1960) first introduced the idea of role strain - the challenge of satisfying role responsibilities. Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964) studied the concept of role strain and first coined the word "inter-role conflict" which arises when demands in one role become incompatible with the demands in another role. Afterwards, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) extended Kahn's work and denoted the contending obligations of work and family role as work-family conflict. Theoretically, WFC is defined as bi-directional. In one situation, work is seen as interfering with family responsibilities, for instance, long working hours of an employed mother consume her family time to help children with their homework. In a second situation, family is seen as interfering in the work duties where family demands of an employee interfering with work responsibilities such as taking care of a sick child whole night long, drains out the energy of an employed mother to fully prepare for a meeting presentation at work. Additionally, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) suggested WFC as multi-dimensional; 1) time-based conflict, 2) strain-based conflict, and 3) behaviour-based conflict. This paper conceptualizes WFC as bi-directional W-to-FC and F-to-WC.

1.2 Social Support

Social support represents the interpersonal relationships and social interactions that help to protect individuals from the effects of stress. Both the availability and the quality of social support are important social assets for any individual (House, 1981; Kossek et al., 2011). It refers to any type of instrumental aid, emotional concern, informational support, or appraisal functions that are intended to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient.

1.3 Supervisor Support

The supervisor is the person who directly supervise/manage employees of any organization and in this study, supervisor would be the dean/ head of the department. Previous literature on social support in relation to WFC differentiates the workplace social support from a supervisor as general and work family specific support (Kossek et al., 2011). This article conceptualizes workplace support as work family specific supervisor support. It is the degree to which employees perceive supervisors care about their ability to experience positive work-family relationships and demonstrate this care by providing helpful social interaction and resources (Kossek et al., 2011). The Social support involves the exchange of resources between at least two persons, with the aim of helping the person who receives the support (Van Daalen, Willemsen, & Sanders, 2006). The study will evaluate social support from the work domain as instrumental and emotion support from a supervisor. Instrumental supervisory support refers to the provision of direct assistance and advice with the intent of helping an employee to meet his or her family responsibilities (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). On the other hand, emotional supervisory support refers to sympathetic understanding and listening, sensitivity toward the WFC issues of an employee (Yildirim & Aycan, 2008).

1.4 Family Support

Family support is a form of social support provided by family members and in the study context this is the support provided by (spouse, children, siblings, parents and extended family). Support from family members may be either emotional or instrumental. It can involve providing empathy, care, love and trust (emotional support), actual aid in time, money and energy (instrumental support).

1.5 Theoretical Perspective

Although work-family conflict is traditionally described using the principles of role theory (Kahn et al., 1964), certainly, the emergence of work-family conflict reflects the competition for an individual's limited resources (time and energy) between work and family role (Chang, Zhou, Wang, & de Pablos Heredero, 2017). However, a limited number of studies have investigated ways of decreasing work-family conflict through the lens of resources. In regard of resource perspective, Conservation of Resources theory-COR model is one of the widely used theories in the work-family literature (Chang et al., 2017; Haines et al., 2013; Thein, 2014). COR is a general model that covers several stress theories and thus may provide a more appropriate framework for work-family studies to examine both W to FC and F to WC, which are necessary to create a better understanding of work-family conflict comprehensively.

According to COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), an individual is interested to build, maintain and protect (conserve) resources that can be utilized to manage the spheres of life such as work and family. Resources may be in the form of social support, personal characteristics (e.g. self-esteem), or energies (e.g. time). These resources can be the powerful assets to use when challenges emerge in the environment (Kalliath & Kalliath, 2014). COR theory predicts that resource loss is the major factor in the stress process like work-family conflict. Resource gain (social support), on the other hand, is shown as of increasing importance in the context of loss (Chang et al., 2017). When resources of an individual are in danger or lost, stress and its subsequent strain outcomes (e.g. dissatisfaction, depression, and anxiety) may arise. Such that an increased workload of 50 to 60 hours per week for women employees, sharpened the pace and intensity of work which is resulting in high workplace stress (Kalliath & Kalliath, 2014; Kossek et al., 2011; Panatik et al., 2012). Therefore, social support from work domain (supervisor support) and family domain (family support) can act as a resource to mitigate the negative consequences of WFC for women employees (Achour et al., 2014; Thein, 2014).

1.6 The Role of Social Support in Work-Family Conflict

A meta-analytic review on work family conflict by Michel (2011) presented the model of WFC and posits that the workplace social support (supervisor support) and family social support are negatively associated with W-to-FC. Followed by Kossek et al. (2011) meta-analysis, the researcher compared the influence of general versus content specific supervisory support on WFC. Results revealed that mean correlation between W-to-FC and supervisory support (work family specific) was significantly stronger than the mean correlation of W-to-FC and general supervisor support. On the other hand, Thein (2014) reported that supervisor support was not a source of large difference in W-to-FC in a sample of Indonesian academics. Furthermore, Busch-Heizmann and Holst (2017) stated that higher WFC perceived by women in highly qualified positions than men. In Turkey, Chopur (2011) concluded the same for university employees that women observed the greater WFC as compared to men.

In terms of eastern context, Achour et al. (2014) in his qualitative study observed that Malaysian women academics do experience WFC and use social support mechanism to cope with it by asking help from family and friends. On the other hand, Perrewé and Carlson (2002) found a stronger decrease in F-to-WC when levels of family support increased for women as compared men. However, no gender differences found in work-related support and W to FC. Griggs et al. (2013) revealed that children support was associated with lower time and strain-based F-to-WC and extended family support was related with lower strain-based W-to-FC. In the literature, the relationship between social support (supervisor and family support) and WFC has inconclusive results. Therefore, the article contributes to WFC of eastern world as the sample is taken from Malaysia. However, research that is specifically looking at the retention of women who are currently working in TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) higher learning institutions is rare in Malaysia (Omar, Rashid, & Puad, 2018). Thus, a study is needed to understand how WFC among women working in higher learning institutions to support retention women in TVET who can contribute to positive role models.

2. Methodology

The study is designed as correlational and the survey method was used to collect data. A total of 278 (academics and non-academics) were selected randomly from the total population of (N= 997) women employed at a longstanding Malaysian Technical University. As the study sought to evaluate the relationship between work-family conflict and social support provided by supervisor and family, the respondents who had a supervisor, work for at least 30 hours a week, had children or elderly care responsibilities were eligible to participate in the survey.

The questionnaire for the study consists of 24 items, unevenly divided into four subscales with 5-point Likert scale. For supervisor support (SS), researcher adapted the “family supportive supervisor behaviours (FSSB)” scale by Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, and Hanson (2009). A sample item from SS scale is “My supervisor is willing to listen to my problems in juggling work and family life”. The Family Support scale adapted from the 7-item scale of “family supportive inventory for the worker” by King, Mattimore, King, and Adams (1995) and the sample item is “When I'm frustrated by my work, someone in my family tries to understand”. The WFC assessed with 10 items scale by Netemeyer, Boles, and McMurrian (1996) for W-to-FC and F-to-WC (5 items each). The items from W-to-FC and F-to-WC subscales said that “the amount of time my job takes up makes it difficult to fulfil my family responsibilities” and “the demands of my family or spouse/partner interfere with work-related activities” respectively. A pilot test performed to check the reliability of the instrument for the study and Cronbach alpha coefficients of all the tested variables were high ($r = .801$) which indicates that the instrument used is a good reliable scale (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).

First, the mean and SD were computed for the study variables separately to be followed by the Pearson correlation coefficients computed to assess the relationship between supervisor support and WFC (W-to-FC and F-to-WC) similarly with Family support and WFC (W-to-FC and F-to-WC).

3. Results

An eighty-eight percent response rate ($n = 278$) were obtained. Majority of the respondents (80.2%) were married, 16.2% were single, 2.7% were single mothers, among all 212 had children and 122 women provided care for other family members who are not their children. More than half of the respondents 150 (54.0%) were age between 31-40 years. The participants at staff position were almost 47.5%, while the remaining 52.5% held academic position. Majority of women employees 71.6% worked approximately 31 to 50 hours per week and 12.6% women reported working more than 51 hours per week.

Descriptive statistics were employed to measure the level of work-family conflict, supervisor support, and family support. The women employees surveyed reported a moderate level of WFC, with higher mean of W-to-FC (mean = 2.94, $SD=0.97$) compared to F-to-WC (mean = 2.57, $SD=0.93$). Women employees reported that they received a moderate level of support from their supervisors (mean=3.18, $SD=0.86$) and from family (mean=3.54, $SD=0.87$). The Pearson correlation was performed to assess the association between study variables and correlation results are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1 – Relationship between social support and WFC.

Variables	WtoFC		FtoWC	
	r	p-value	r	p-value
Supervisor support (SS)	-.078	.097	.012	.424
Family support (FS)	-.114*	.029	-.126*	.018

*Statistical significance in association is obtained

Table 1 shows that Supervisor support (SS) does not have statistically significant relationship with both W-to-FC ($r = -.078$ at $p>.05$) and F-to-WC ($r = .012$ at $p>.05$). Furthermore, the Pearson correlation coefficient r shows that family support has a statistically negative relationship with both forms of conflict W-to-FC ($r = -.114$ at $p<.05$) and F-to-WC ($r = -.126$ at $p<.05$).

4. Discussion

The study sample perceived moderate level of WFC, however women employees in the TVET University perceived that work interfere more into their family life than family interference into work. It may be because of respondents' heavy workload, up to 40 to 50 hours per week (as reported in the demographic data). Busch-Heizmann and Holst (2017) reported that university women employees exposed to enormous job-related stress due to work intensification of 50 to 60 hours per week and often reported work-family conflict (Panatik et al., 2012). That situation undermines the work motivation of women contributing to their leaving the workforce (Omar, Rashid, & Puad, 2018).

However, it can also be because of the academic job characteristics, such as its non-typical work hours – not necessarily nine to five working hours. Academic working hours may run into night classes and work may have to be completed at home and not left in the office. The non-typical work schedule and hours might result in more conflicts as boundaries between work and family become permeable and individual may experience W-to-FC (Busch-Heizmann & Holst, 2017; Chandola, Booker, Kumari, & Benzeval, 2019). Despite being an important source of work stress, work-family conflict (WFC) has often been overlooked in the education professions (Achour et al., 2014; Omar, Rashid, & Puad, 2018).

Moreover, the findings from this study revealed that work-family specific supervisor support is not associated with either direction of conflict (W to FC or F to WC). This means that if a woman employee receives work-family specific support from her supervisor (faculty dean/ head of the department), the support does not influence the work-family conflict that she experiences in any way. The finding supports the previous study conducted on Indonesian academics by Thein (2014), who found that women accepted the difficulties arise with their academic related work, consider it as a private matter, and mostly did not seek supervisor support to resolve such conflicts. Similarly Van Daalen et al. (2006), also found that social support from supervisors do not reduce WFC of women academics despite its positive effect in reducing WFC for men. On the contrary, supervisor support appeared to increase women's time-based WFC, perhaps because women are more likely to feel pressured to do something in return for their supervisors' support (Van Daalen et al., 2006). Other the other hand, it can also be inferred that supervisor's support may not be enough to deal with WFC issues in Malaysian university staff which is contradictory to many western studies where supervisor support help to alleviate WFC for their employees (Kosseck et al., 2011; Mache et al., 2015).

However, social support received from family members is found to help reduce both directions of conflict for women employees. The study finding is consistent with previous literature where family support has been found to significantly decrease both forms of conflicts (Griggs et al., 2013). The reduction in F-to-WC could be because the collectivist culture that Malaysians have and in a collectivist culture, the family is valued and is the most important unit of an individual's life. The rationale to the above finding could be for example, a husband can provide support in sharing care responsibilities for his wife and protect her resources (time, attention and energy) to be drained out completely. Thus, a working wife now has plenty of resources available in her stock to better perform in her work role (F-to-WC reduced).

On the other hand, cross domain effect of family support (family support can even help to decrease work related outcomes) was found on work-to-family conflict as family support provided to women may reduce their W-to-FC as well. It was consistent with the recent meta-analytic review by Michel (2011) and the studies conducted by Hassan et al. (2010) and Haines et al. (2013) where they found that family support was predicting both forms of conflict negatively. However, the study result contradicts O'Mera (2017) where the author found only same domain effect of family social support on family outcome (F-to-WC).

The finding might be explained through cultural context. Hassan et al. (2010) argued that work has a different meaning in Eastern societies compared to the Western culture. Work in the Eastern culture is seen as a way of supporting the family, rather than the means to improving oneself, such as that in the Western cultures. Hence, collectivist's culture, the purpose of work in life is to achieve a meaningful life where family welfare is given utmost importance (Hassan et al., 2010). Likewise, Noor (1999) found that the purpose of working for Malay women was for the family's economic welfare, rather than their own career development. Thus, work is usually supported and encouraged by their immediate and extended family members, through instrumental or emotional support. Therefore, the cross-domain effect found where family support reduces W-to-FC by the fact that work is not seen as an obligation and thus, is mostly supported by the family.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to determine the relationship between work support and family support on WFC among women in Malaysian academic institutions. Women face difficulty in managing work and family life simultaneously and many decide to leave the workforce. Therefore, the study explored the relationship between social support and work-family conflict for women employees in Malaysian technical university. The study clearly defines workplace social support as work-family specific supervisor support, family domain social support as support from husband, parents, parents' in-law and sibling (instrumental and emotional support). As previous WFC research has inconclusive results because of ambiguity of construct definition, hence, the clearly defined constructs of the current study may help researchers to better generalize the findings.

The study produces mixed results on social support and work-family interactions. Interestingly for the Malaysian sample of university women employees, the supervisor support is found to be irrelevant in reducing both directions of conflicts which could be due to inadequate quality or quantity of supervisor support to address the WFC issues. In the future, TVET universities may look into other forms of workplace support (such as general supervisor support, family friendly policies, maternal paid leaves and onsite childcare) to ease the WFC for university women staff. On the other hand, family support is found to be conducive in reducing WFC which could indicate that family understands women employees' workload, hence, fulfil their share of household responsibilities and support them emotionally as well. The author considers it as a positive sign that family members are supportive towards a woman and help her in pursuing/progressing in her career alongside the family life. This study gives a new perspective on support role in WFC among women employee and this new understanding can help in promoting female enrolment in the technical field in Malaysia through producing and retaining more women role models in TVET institutions. The finding could also be applicable to women employees in TVET institutions in the Eastern world as they are likely to share similar culture to their Malaysian counterpart.

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