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Work-Family Conflict and Social Support: A Study of Female Secretaries in Malaysia

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ABSTRAK

Terdapat semakin ramai wanita yang telah berkahwin terlibat dalam tenaga buruh dan mempunyai tanggung jawab di tempat kerja dan di rumah secara serentak. Dengan ini mereka sering mengalami konflik antara peranan kerja dan keluarga. Penyelidikan ini mengkaji intensiti konflik antara peranan kerja dan keluarga yang dialami oleh setiausaha wanita di negeri Selangor, Malaysia. Penyelidikan ini juga menganalisis sokongan sosial yang diterima di tempat kerja daripada ketua dan rakan sekerja, dan di luar tempat kerja daripada suami serta rakan-rakan dan saudara-mara. Data telah diperolehi daripada 120 setiausaha dengan menggunakan borang soal selidik yang diisi sendiri. Setiausaha dalam penyelidikan ini mengalami konflik kerja-keluarga dengan intensiti yang berbeza dalam usaha mereka untuk memenuhi tuntutan yang bercanggah bagi peranan kerja dan keluarga. Mereka menerima sokongan sosial yang paling sedikit daripada ketua dan paling banyak daripada suami. Implikasi hasil kajian bagi wanita bekerja yang sudah berkahwin, dari segi kemudahan, perkhidmatan sokongan dan sokongan sosial dibincang.

ABSTRACT

As more married women participate in the labour force and occupy both work and family roles simultaneously, they tend to experience conflict between work and family roles. This study examined the intensity of work-family conflict experienced by female secretaries in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. The study also analysed the social support that the secretaries received at the workplace from supervisors and co-workers and outside their workplace from husbands, and friends and relatives. Data were gathered through self-administered questionnaires from 120 secretaries. The secretaries in this study experienced work-family conflict with varying intensities as they try to fulfil the conflicting demands of work and family roles. They received the least social support from their supervisors, and the most from their husbands. Implications of these findings for married working women in terms of facilities, support services and social support are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

As Malaysia moves towards industrialization and with greater access to education, the participation of women in the labour force steadily increases. The female intake into institutions of higher learning expanded rapidly from 38.6% in 1980 to 47.5% in 1993 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 1995). Female labour force participation rate was 39.3% in 1980 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 1983) compared with 46.5% in 1993 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 1995). The labour force participation rate of married women increased from 51.2% in 1980 to 58.2% in 1991 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 1995). As more married women are continually entering the labour force and occupying both work and family roles simultaneously, it is important to examine the psychological implications. One of the most salient of these is work-family conflict.

Work-family conflict occurs when an individual has to perform multiple roles: worker, spouse and in many cases, parent. Each of these roles imposes demands requiring time, energy and commitment. Kahn *et al.* (1964) defined work-family conflict as a form of interrole conflict in which the simultaneous

occurrence of two (or more) sets of pressures is such that compliance with one would make compliance with the other more difficult .

Based on the work of Kahn *et al.* (1964), Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) conceptualized work-family conflict as a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible, such that participation in one role makes it more difficult to participate in the other. They proposed that any role characteristic that affects a person's time involvement, strain or behaviour within a role can produce conflict between that role and another role.

Researchers have documented the experience of work-family conflict among women, and have provided convincing evidence of the adverse effects of such conflict on their well-being in both the work and family domains (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Pleck 1985; Greenhaus and Parasuraman 1986; Voydanoff 1987; Burke 1989; Aryee 1992; Mohamed Hashim 1993). In studies conducted on married working women in Malaysia, women not only experienced work-family conflict (Fatimah 1985; Aminah 1995), but work-family conflict was shown to lead significantly to lower job satisfaction as well as life satisfaction (Aminah 1996a, b). Work-family conflict also significantly leads to lower family satisfaction (Aminah 1996a).

The recognition of negative psychological consequences of work-family conflict has directed attention towards the role of social support in reducing this conflict (MacEwen and Barling 1988; Frone *et al.* 1991; Parasuraman *et al.* 1992). Supportive relationships are also seen as critical social resources in dealing with work-family issues (Greenhaus and Parasuraman 1986; Suchet and Barling 1986; Ray and Miller 1994). House (1981) defined social support as the demonstration of emotional concern, and the provision of instrumental aid, information, and/or appraisal. Cobb (1976) focused on information passing between or among individuals, information that an individual is (1) loved, (2) esteemed or valued, or (3) part of a group, the members of which share information and mutual obligations. Shumaker and Brownell (1984) defined social support as an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient.

With regards to the content of support, some researchers have distinguished effect, affirmation and aid as types of support (Abbey *et al.* 1985). Cohen and Wills (1985) identified esteem, informational, social companionship and instrumental support; Eggert (1987) focused on emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal support. Although there are certain distinctions among these approaches, all types of support are perceived to have an emotional component. This study focused on the emotional component of support in line with Beehr's (1985) view that emotional support involves the provision of sympathy as well as behaviour that shows care, liking and willingness to listen.

According to Caplan *et al.* (1975), social support can be derived from sources at the workplace and outside the workplace. At the workplace, the sources of social support include the supervisor and co-workers, while sources of extra-organizational support include family and friends. Several studies suggest the importance of supervisor support (Ganster *et al.* 1986; Jayaratne *et al.* 1988) and co-worker support (Shinn *et al.* 1984; Jayaratne *et al.* 1988; Ray and Miller 1991). Both supervisors and co-workers are in optimal positions to provide support because of their understanding of the stresses inherent in the workplace. A number of studies found that support from family and friends can have positive effects on a wide range of psychological outcomes (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Cohen and Wills 1985). Results of research conducted by Ray and Miller (1994) indicated that the different sources of social support worked in unique ways to relieve the strain of work-family conflict. Hence it is recognized that social support can be derived from sources at the workplace and outside the workplace and that social support is of importance to those experiencing work-family conflict.

The literature indicates that married working women are vulnerable to work-family conflict and that there is evidence of adverse effects of such conflict on workers' well-being in both work and family domains. However, the limited empirical research on social support in relation to work-family conflict points to the need for such a study. This research determines the intensity of conflict that married working women experience in trying to balance their work and family roles, and the extent of social support that they receive at the workplace and outside

their workplace. This research also attempts to examine the relationship between work-family conflict and social support received from various sources.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Procedures

Participants in the present study were married women who lived with their husbands, had at least one child, and were full-time secretaries or stenographers. These criteria were established to ensure that the women in the sample had quite similar responsibilities in terms of work and family roles.

Questionnaires were mailed to 234 female secretaries (including stenographers) meeting these criteria from two selected government organizations and the Secretaries' Society Malaysia. A total of 120 returned the questionnaires within a period of ten weeks, that is a return rate of 51%.

The women in this study averaged 39.3 years of age (SD = 5.09). Each family had an average of 3.0 children (SD=1.31). A majority of the women had completed upper secondary (58.8%) and tertiary (35.3%) education. The remaining 5.9% had completed pre-university or post-secondary certificate level of education. The women earned an average of RM1532 per month.

About a quarter of the respondents (24.2%) reported that they sent their children to babysitters and 13.4% had relatives to look after their children. Only 18.3% sent their children to childcare centres and 16.7% had domestic helpers to care for their children.

Instrumentation

Work-Family Conflict. Work-family conflict intensity was measured using the interrole conflict scale of Pleck *et al.* (1980). This scale consists of eight items based on the three most prevalent aspects of work-family conflict, namely excessive work time, schedule conflicts, and fatigue or irritability. Five-point scaled response options ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) were used. The reliability coefficient (alpha) for this work-family conflict scale was 0.84.

Social Support. Perceptions of support from supervisor, co-workers, husband, and friends and relatives were measured. Items developed by Caplan *et al.* (1975) were used for all four sources of support, inserting the appropriate source for each set of items. The scale of Caplan *et al.* (1975) was used by Greenglass *et al.* (1989). Unlike some procedures which measure social support indirectly (for example, as number of social contacts), these sub-scales were chosen because they directly assess the respondent's perception regarding the level of social support received. There were four items in each of the four sub-scales. Each respondent was requested to state the extent of support received from each source using five-point Likert scaled response options. The reliability coefficient (alpha) for the four social support subscales were 0.86 for supervisor support, 0.81 co-workers support, 0.86 husband support, and 0.89 for support from friends and relatives.

RESULTS

Table 1 indicates that 72 (63%) of the 120 women who responded reported medium intensity of conflict. Twenty-two (19%) reported high intensity of conflict while 20 (18%) reported low intensity of conflict. The mean score for work-family conflict on a five-point scale was 2.5 (SD = 0.71). The means and standard deviations of items measuring work-family conflict are presented in Table 2. The most highly endorsed item was "After work, I come home too tired to do some of the things I'd like to do" (M = 3.1, SD = 1.07) and the item that was least endorsed was " My work schedule often conflicts with my family life"(M = 2.1, SD = 0.81).

Women received social support from all the four resources, namely supervisor (M = 2.6, SD = 0.96), co-workers (M = 2.8; SD = 0.78), husband (M = 4.0; SD = 0.93) and friends and relatives (M = 2.7; SD = 0.98) (Table 3). The extent of social support received from their husbands was the greatest, while that received from their supervisor was the least. Table 4 shows the means and standard deviations of items measuring social support from the four sources. The mean score of every item for support from husband was more than 3.5, while that from supervisor ranged only between 2.2 to 2.9.

There were significant differences for four pairs of support sources (Table 5). The mean for supervisor support differed significantly ($p < .05$) from that for co-workers ($t = -2.68$), husband ($t = -13.88$). Besides supervisor

TABLE 1
Distribution of respondents by work-family conflict intensity

Conflict Intensity	Frequency	%
High (>3.1)	22	19.3
Medium (2.0 - 3.1)	72	63.2
Low (< 2.0)	20	17.5

TABLE 2
Means and standard deviations of items measuring work-family conflict

Item	M	SD
My work schedule often conflicts with my family life	2.1	0.81
After work, I come home too tired to do some of the things I'd like to do	3.1	1.07
On the job I have so much work to do that it takes away time for my family interests	2.3	0.99
My family dislikes how often I am preoccupied with my work while I am at home	2.8	1.99
Because my work is demanding, at times I am irritable at home	2.5	1.04
The demands of my job make it difficult to be relaxed all the time at home	2.4	0.95
My work takes up time that I'd like to spend with my family	2.5	0.97
My job makes it difficult to be the kind of spouse or parent I'd like to be	2.4	1.03

TABLE 3
Means and standard deviations of respondents by social support

Item	Mean	SD
Supervisor	2.6	0.96
Co-workers	2.8	0.79
Husband	4.0	0.93
Friends and Relatives	2.7	0.98

TABLE 4
Means and standard deviations of items measuring social support

Item	Supervisor		Co-workers		Husband		Friends and Relatives	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
How much does each of these people go out of their way to do things to make life easier for you	2.4	1.05	2.5	0.92	4.1	1.02	2.8	1.04
How much can each of these people be relied on when things get tough at work	2.9	1.12	2.8	0.92	3.6	1.25	2.3	1.04
How much is each of the following people willing to listen to your personal problems	2.2	1.14	2.7	1.04	4.1	1.08	2.8	1.19
How easy is it to talk with each of the following people	2.8	1.27	3.1	1.09	4.2	1.09	2.9	1.26

TABLE 5
Differences between sources of social support

Social Support	df	t	p
Supervisor and co-workers	116	−2.68	.01
Supervisor and husband	116	−13.88	.00
Supervisor and friends and relatives	115	−1.16	.25
Husband and co-workers	116	−12.80	.00
Co-worker and friends and relatives	115	0.92	.36
Husband and friends and relatives	115	−11.92	.00

support, the mean for husband support differed significantly ($p < .05$) from that for co-workers ($t = -12.80$) and friends and relatives ($t = -11.92$). There was no significant difference between supervisor and friends and relatives support, and co-worker and friends and relatives support ($p < .05$).

Correlation analyses revealed that work-family conflict was related to supervisor support ($r = -.186$) and husband support ($r = -.156$) (Table 6). The correlation coefficients, although small, were significant ($p < .05$). There was no significant relationship between work-family conflict and co-worker support as well as from friends and relatives.

DISCUSSION

Role theory postulates that the expectations surrounding each of the different roles a person performs can generate interrole conflict when they involve pressures which dominate the time of the focal person and interfere with fulfilling the expectations associated with the other role (Katz and Kahn 1978). The fact that female secretaries experience work-family conflict with varying intensities as they perform different roles as wife, mother, housewife and employee is supportive of the role theory.

The findings of this study and other studies conducted on 86 female researchers (Aminah 1995), and 100 professional women (Fatimah

Table 6
Relationships between work-family conflict and social support

Relationship	r	p
Supervisor support and work-family conflict	–.186	.03
Co-worker support and work-family conflict	–.072	.23
Husband Support and work family conflict	–.156	.05
Friends and relatives support and work family conflict	.056	.28

1985) showed that married working women in Malaysia experience work-family conflict. The findings also support those of other studies conducted by Pleck *et al.* (1980), Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), Gutek *et al.* (1991) and Higgins and Duxbury (1992) in the United States.

It is evident that respondents of this study received the most support from their husbands and least from their supervisors. This could possibly be due to the limited time available at work for helping relations in the form of social contact or communication with supervisors. Beehr (1995) stressed the importance of communication with sources of support in order to reduce job stress such as role conflict.

Correlations between work-family conflict and two of the four sources of social support, namely, husband and supervisors, were significant, although the correlation coefficients were low (-.156 and -.186, respectively). This indicates that increased social support from the husbands and supervisors tend to reduce work-family conflict. However, support from friends and relatives and co-workers does not relate with work-family conflict. An analysis of eight studies on relationships between social support and job stressors by Beehr (1995) found that 38 of 60 correlations were significant ($p<.05$). However, the median correlation was only -0.22.

Ganster *et al.* (1986) studied the role of social support in work stress-strain relations among 326 employees of a large contracting firm. The sources of social support studied include supervisor, co-worker and family and friends. They found that the sources from the workplace, especially supervisors, were the most important in affecting strains, including job and life dissatisfaction, somatic complaints and depression. Furthermore, support from family and friends was significantly associated with lower levels of psychological strain.

Beehr (1976) reported negative correlations between supervisor emotional support and psychological strain among samples of employees from five different work organisations. House and Wells (1978), in a study of white male workers in a rubber and chemical plant, found that supervisor support buffered the relationship between role conflict and psychological strain. LaRocco *et al.* (1980), in a sample of males from 23 occupations, found buffering effects of social support on stressor-strain relationships.

These studies showed that the experience of social support may serve to reduce the severity of strains during the experiences of job stressors. Although these studies focused on work stress-strain relations and not on work-family stress or conflict, it may provide some insights into the association of social support with stress.

It can be summarized that married female secretaries in this study experienced work-family conflict in trying to meet the expectations of work and family roles. They received social support from all the four support sources, namely supervisor, co-workers, husband, and friends and relatives. The extent of social support received from their husbands was the greatest, while that received from their supervisors was the least. Increased social support received from supervisors and husbands tended to reduce work-family conflict.

Several implications can be made based on the results of this study. One of the implications of the prevalence of the work-family conflict among married working women is that women need assistance in terms of facilities, education,

and advisory and support services in trying to cope with the conflict.

Supervisors should provide substantial social support to workers through behaviour that shows care and willingness to listen to problems so that stressors inherent at the workplace and problems faced by female workers in relation to the interface of work and family roles can be understood. This would assist women to reduce the conflict they experience in trying to balance the demands of work and family roles, and the negative effects of the conflict.

Organizations can help reduce some amount of work-family conflict by providing facilities such as quality on-site childcare programmes at subsidized rates and enhanced maternity and parental leave. These family-friendly policies can be implemented as an effort to reduce work-family conflict for employees and enhance women's career development, but may also be developed to retain female workers. The effectiveness of these family-friendly initiatives should not be evaluated based largely on cost-effectiveness and short-term organizational benefits. Attention should be given to the perspectives of employees and impact on families.

However the most well-intentioned of family-responsive policies can fail to reduce work-family load if, for example, women retain sole responsibility for family work, and a woman's share of the provider role is not reciprocated by the husband's share of family role. Husbands should continue to provide social support to their working wives to help reduce the pressures arising from work and family domains.

Continuing education planners need to consider the problems married working women face in managing multiple roles when planning continuing education programmes. Educators in the areas of family development and organizational behaviour need to incorporate topical areas related to the interface of work and family roles in the courses offered.

Researchers, in their serious effort to promote workers' welfare must recognize that work is only one of the significant domains of individual functioning. The strain within the work domain may "spill over" into the family domain and vice versa. To help reduce the strain, future research on social support should focus not only on emotional but also tangible support such as information, advice and suggestions. Besides research on social support, research should be conducted on organizational policy formulation to reduce the strain resulting from work-family conflict.

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