

## The Prevalence of Work-Family Conflict among Mothers in Peninsular Malaysia

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### Abstract

*Achieving work-family balance is dependent on managing the conflict between work and family roles. This study focuses on the prevalence of work-family conflict among mothers in Peninsular Malaysia. The objective of this study is to examine the relationship between perceived work-family conflict and socio-demographic and family characteristics of the mothers. Data were obtained from 801 currently working mothers (with at least having one child) who were between 15 and 49 years old in Peninsular Malaysia interviewed in the Fourth Malaysian Population and Family Survey (MPFS-4), 2004. The result of this study showed that ethnicity, age and employment are the main factors contributing to the prevalence of work-family conflict. However, there is no significant relationship between the prevalence of conflict and the studied family characteristics, namely, number of children, childcare arrangement and presence of children aged 7 to 24 years.*

**Key words:** work-family conflict, work-life conflict, work roles, family roles, workplace support, family support.

### 1. Introduction

Work-life conflict occurs when the cumulative demands of work and non-work roles are incompatible in some respect so that participation in one role is made more difficult by participation in the other role (Duxbury and Higgins, 2008). According to Edwards and Rothbard (2000); and Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), work-family conflict is a form of work-life conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respects. Work-family conflict is conceptually bi-directional. There can be family-to-work conflict, which occurs when experiences in the family (for example, the presence of young children, primary responsibility for children, elder care responsibilities, interpersonal conflict within the family unit, and unsupportive family members) interfere with work life (Frone et al, 1996). There can also be work-to-family conflict, which occurs when experiences at work (such as extensive, irregular, or inflexible work hours; extensive travel, and unsupportive supervisors or organizations) interfere with family life. Although these two types of interference are strongly correlated, research has found that work roles are more likely to interfere with family roles than vice versa (Mokomane, 2009). In this study, the term “work-family conflict” will be used to point to general conflict between work and family where the directions of conflict (family-to-work/work-to-family) are not separated. The work-family conflict is prevalent today mainly due to the increased participation of women in the labour market.

The female labour force participation rate had increased from 39.3 percent in 1980 to 46.1 percent in 2010, largely as a result of the educational improvement, as better educated women are more likely than the lesser educated women to be in the labour force. As women continue to have a dominant presence in the workforce, the number of females facing problems in performing different roles, such as the wife, mother, homemaker and employee will inevitably increase. According to Aminah (1997), married working women in Malaysia do experience work-family conflict which was shown to lead significantly to lower job satisfaction as well as life satisfaction. Those findings are supported by other studies (Fatimah, 1985; Aminah, 1995). Studies have found that time committed to work contributes to conflict between employees’ work and family roles. Employees in professional positions experience greatest intensity of work-to-family conflict while those working in non-professional positions experience greatest intensity of family-to-work conflict (Aminah, 2008). Findings from the first Malaysian Family Life Survey (MFLS-1) and fourth Malaysian Population and Family Survey (MPFS-4) conducted by the National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB) revealed that between 1978 to 2004, there has been a significant increase in a proportion of working women in formal sectors such as professional, technical, clerical and sales workers.

At the same time, there has been a big decline in those who are in the non-formal sector such as the agricultural sector (NPFDB, 1978 and 2004). As more women become involved in the formal sector, there is a tendency for them to spend less time with their family. Huang et al. (2004) found that work-family conflict is positively correlated with the number and ages of dependent children. In MPFS-4, almost 60 percent of women who had ever worked (but were not working when they were interviewed) stopped working because of childcare problems. The main reason was they could not afford to pay for childcare services provided in their community. The findings from Study of Childcare and Parenting Style among Working Parents conducted by NPFDB in 1999 indicated that affordability was a significant factor in the type of childcare used. While 8.9% of the families with a household income of RM4,000 and above used childcare services, only 4.9% of those with a household income of less than RM2,000 did so (NPFDB, 1999). The cost of childcare services gives the burden to the parents, especially those in the low socio-economic group.

A study of role conflict among married working women in Malaysia by Fatimah (1985) suggested the need for further studies on work-family conflict. Most of the studies on work-family conflicts have been conducted in Western societies (Aminah, 1996) such as European countries, US, and Canada, but as more women in non Western societies join the labour market, understanding the effects of work-family conflicts has become increasingly important. Recognising the needs for further studies on work-family conflict, this paper examines the relationship between perceived work-family conflict and socio-demographic and family characteristics of mothers aged 15 to 49 years in Peninsular Malaysia.

## **2. Data and Methods**

This paper analyzes the MPFS-4, a nationally representative survey conducted by NPFDB, Malaysia in 2004. In this study, a total of 801 currently working mothers (those with at least one child) aged 15 to 49 years in Peninsular Malaysia were abstracted from the sample of 3,693 ever married women in MPFS-4 data. Both bivariate and multivariate analysis have been applied to examine the relationship between perceived work-family conflict and the characteristics of mothers. Initially, the descriptive analysis will explain the percentages of currently working mothers having work-family conflict according to their characteristics. Then, the bivariate correlations are used to determine whether the socio-demographic and family characteristics variables involved correlate significantly with the dependent variable. Finally, logistic regression analyses were performed to study the relationship between the dependent and the independent variables.

### **2.1 Dependent variable**

The dependent variable used in the logistic regression analysis is a perceived work-family conflict. The question is “As a working mother, do you face any pressure/problem to balance up your roles as a mother and as a worker?”. The variable is binary or dichotomous which is coded as 1 if women have work-family conflict and 0 otherwise. Data shows that about 33 percent of the currently working mothers answered that they have faced pressure/problem in balancing their roles.

### **2.2 Independent variables**

The variables of interest for the logistic regression analysis are Region, Stratum, Ethnicity, Age, Employment, Occupation, Children, Childcare, Child 7-12 and Child 13-24. Table 1 shows the description and distribution of the independent variables. From a total of 801 currently working mothers involved in this study, 31.2 percent of them living in the central region (Selangor and Kuala Lumpur), 22.3 percent in the northern region (Kedah, Perak, Perlis and Pulau Pinang), 21.1 percent in the southern region (Johor, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan), and 25.3 percent in the eastern region (Kelantan, Pahang and Terengganu). Almost 62 percent of studied mothers living in the urban areas. Among the three major ethnic groups, the majority are Malay (78.0%), followed by Chinese (12.9%) and Indian (9.1%). Almost 60 percent of mothers are aged below 34 years.

More than 70 percent of mothers were working in the formal sector, the rest were in the non formal sector as an unpaid family workers or self-employed. In this study, the types of occupation are classified into four major groups, namely, Professionals; Clerical and Service Worker; Craft and Plant Worker; and Agricultural, Fishery and Elementary Worker. The Clerical and Service Worker shows the largest percentage (36.3%) while Agricultural, Fishery and Elementary Worker make up the smallest, 11.9 percent. Around 20 percent of the respondents have only one child and the figure is about the same as those having two or three children. However, more than one third of the respondents have at least four children.

26.0 percent of mothers take care of their young children themselves with help from their husband and an older child. Mothers who hire maids to look after their young child made up only 5.0 percent of the respondents. By looking at the presence of children, almost 50 percent of the mothers having child aged between 7-12 years but only 26.3 percent of the mothers do have child aged between 13-24 years.

### **3. Background Characteristics**

Table 2 presents percentage of mothers who say they have work-family conflict by their socio-demographic and family characteristics. Overall, 33.2 percent of them having work-family conflict. Among all the regions in Peninsular Malaysia, the prevalence of work-family conflict is highest among mothers in southern region (37.3%) and lowest among those in eastern region (27.1%). Among the three major ethnic groups, Chinese made up the largest percentage having work-family conflict. This is not surprising because Chinese women work mainly in the formal sector as compared to Malays and Indians. Data shows that 56.3 percent of Chinese mothers having a conflict, while the percentage of Malay and Indian mothers are below 40 percent. Mothers in the age groups of 30-34 and 35-39 years show the highest percentage of having a conflict compared to the other age groups.

The percentage of women who have work-family conflict is higher among women in the formal sector (35.4%) as compared to the non formal sector (24.9%). The percentage of mothers having conflict does not vary greatly with their occupations ranging from 30.5 percent among those working in the Agricultural, Fishery and Elementary Worker Sector to 35.7 percent among those working in the Professional Sector. The percentage of mothers having conflict is smaller among those having only one child, and it increases as the number of children reaches two or three. Mothers who take care of their young children themselves with help from their husband and an older child show the smallest prevalence of conflict. The prevalence of conflict is highest among those who hire maids and those who send their child to neighbours/friends with the percentage of 37.5 and 37.1 percent respectively. The percentage of mothers having conflict is higher among those having child aged between 7-12 years (33.2%) as compared to those having child aged between 13-24 years (28.4%).

### **4. Findings**

Two types of analyses were performed in examining the relationships between perceived work-family conflict and socio-demographic and family characteristics of the mothers. The socio-demographic variables include Region, Stratum, Ethnicity, Age, Employment and Occupation whereas the family characteristics variables include Children, Childcare, Child 7-12 and Child 13-24. The result of correlational analysis in Table 3 shows that there is a significant association between Stratum, Ethnicity, Age and Employment towards the perceived work-family conflict. However, there is no significant association between Region, Occupation, Children, Childcare, Child 7-12 and Child 13-24 towards the perceived work-family conflict.

Table 4 shows the result of logistic regression analysis using two different models. In Model 1, the association between socio-demographic characteristics of mothers and the perceived work-family conflict is assessed. Only socio-demographic characteristics variables that appeared to be significant in Table 3 are included in Model 1. No controls for the family characteristics of mothers are specified in the model. In Model 2, the significant socio-demographic characteristic variables are combined with all the family characteristics variables to assess the association between those mothers' characteristics and the reported work-family conflict.

In Model 1, the variables that appear to be significantly associated with the perceived work-family conflict are Ethnicity, Age and Employment. The only variable that does not appear to be significant is Stratum. By looking at the ethnicity, the prevalence of conflict among Chinese and Indians are higher than Malays. From the model, we could see that Chinese are 2.8 times and Indians are 1.4 times more likely to have conflict compared to Malays. The likelihood of mothers to have conflict is greatest among those in their 30s. These finding show that mothers aged 30-34 and 35-39 years are more likely to have conflict compared to those aged below 30 years with 1.5 times and 1.6 times respectively. The prevalence of conflict is much smaller among those aged 40+ years, which is 0.2 times (1 - 0.8) less likely to have conflict than the reference category (below 30 years). Among sectors of employment, the prevalence of conflict is lower among the non formal sector which is 0.4 times (1 - 0.6) less likely to have conflict as compared to the formal sector.

When all the family characteristics variables were added into Model 2, the only socio-demographic variables that remained significant in the model are Ethnicity and Employment. However, all the family characteristics variables do not appear to be significant.

From Model 2, the Chinese are 3.1 times while the Indians are 1.5 times more likely to have conflict compared to the Malays. The non formal workers are almost 0.4 times (1 – 0.6) less likely to have conflict compared to the formal workers. As in Model 1, the prevalence of conflict is higher among mothers aged in the 30s. As expected, the likelihood of having conflict increases as the number of children increases. By comparing the type of childcare used, the prevalence of conflict among mothers who send their children to neighbours/friends is a bit higher than the others. It indicates that mothers who used informal childcare arrangement other than kinship childcare (involving family members and relatives) tend to face a conflict. Based on the predicted probabilities, it is clearly seen that mothers in their 30s have the highest probabilities of having work-family conflict. Chinese and Indian in their 30s have the highest probability of having conflict with the probability of 0.6 and 0.4 respectively. In other words, for every 10 working Chinese mothers aged between 30 to 39 years, on average 6 of them will have a work-family conflict. And for every 10 working Indian mothers, on average 4 of them will have a work-family conflict (Table 5).

## **5. Conclusion**

Work-family conflict is prevalent today mainly due to the increased participation of women in the labour market. The increases in women labour force participation rate largely as a result of the educational improvement, as better educated women are more likely than the lesser educated to be in the labour force. And as more married women participate in the labour force, they tend to experience conflict in order to occupy both work and family roles simultaneously. This study concludes that ethnicity, age and employment are the main factors related to the prevalence of work-family conflict among working mothers. Chinese and Indians mothers are more likely to have work-family conflict compared with Malay mothers. Mothers in their 30s are more likely to have work-family conflict as do those working in the formal sector. Type of occupation, number and ages of children, and type of childcare arrangement do not have significant relationship/association with the prevalence of conflict.

For example, women in professional and non-professional positions more or less have equal prevalence of work-family conflict. The difference might be just the direction of the conflict whether it is work-to-family or family-to-work conflict. A study of Malaysian females' operators, clerks, secretaries, nurses and physicians in 2005 found that physicians experienced the greatest intensity of work-to-family conflict. However, operators experienced the greatest intensity of family-to-work conflict (Aminah Ahmad, 2005). The fact is both of them having a work-family conflict and the matter is just the direction of conflict.

Studies in most of western countries found that number and ages of children are positively correlates with work-family conflict. However, in this study, number and ages of children do not have any significant correlation with the conflict. The different results probably due to the cultural differences between countries. According to Aycan, Z. (2005), there are some interesting cross-cultural variations between countries. For example, number of children positively correlates with work-family conflict in Australia, Romania, Sweden and highest in US, but negatively correlates in Hong Kong; and in some other countries there is no correlation at all (e.g., Columbia, Portugal, Spain). A weak positive correlation between number of children and work-family conflict has found in the Eastern cultures (China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand).

Work-family conflict is an important issue that needs to be resolved due to its negative outcomes such as absenteeism, stress and job dissatisfaction that are detrimental to both employees and the organization. It is evident that as employees experience conflict, they need a supportive working culture which could use proactive measures to promote the work-family balance across employees (R. Zirwatul et al., 2009). Other than workplace support in terms of childcare facilities, flexible working hours and paid parental leave, family support especially from spouse and other family members plays an important role in reducing work-family conflict. According to a study by Kim and Ling (2001), if men provide greater support in terms of household chores and childcare, work-family conflict would not be a major problem for working women. Based on this study, despite the type of childcare arrangement does not have any significant effect on the prevalence of conflict, better childcare facilities would allow women to continue working while raising children.

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**Table 1: Description and Distribution of Independent Variables**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Region	Categorical variable indicating place of residence of mothers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• North</li> <li>• Central</li> <li>• South</li> <li>• East</li> </ul>	22.3 31.2 21.1 25.3
Stratum	Dichotomous variable indicating whether the mothers live in urban or rural area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural</li> <li>• Urban</li> </ul>	38.1 61.9
Ethnicity	Categorical variable indicating ethnicity of mothers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Malay</li> <li>• Chinese</li> <li>• Indians</li> </ul>	78.0 12.9 9.1
Age	Categorical variable indicating current age of mothers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Below 30</li> <li>• 30-34</li> <li>• 35-39</li> <li>• 40+</li> </ul>	29.8 28.1 25.1 17.0
Employment	Categorical variable indicating the sector of employment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal</li> <li>• Non Formal</li> </ul>	78.9 21.1
Occupation	Categorical variable indicating occupational group of mothers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionals</li> <li>• Clerical &amp; Service Worker</li> <li>• Craft &amp; Plant Worker</li> <li>• Agricultural, Fishery &amp; Elementary Worker</li> </ul>	35.3 36.3 16.5 11.9
Children	Categorical variable indicating number of children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One child</li> <li>• Two children</li> <li>• Three children</li> <li>• Four or more children</li> </ul>	22.0 24.1 19.9 34.1
Childcare	Categorical variable indicating type of childcare for the children aged below 7 years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respondent/husband/older child</li> <li>• Family members living in the same house</li> <li>• Family members living elsewhere</li> <li>• Maids</li> <li>• Neighbour/friend</li> <li>• Childcare centre</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>	26.0 16.4 17.4 5.0 16.5 10.6 8.2
Child 7-12	Dichotomous variable indicating whether the mothers have child aged 7-12 years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No</li> <li>• Yes</li> </ul>	51.1 48.9
Child 13-24	Dichotomous variable indicating whether the mothers have child aged 13-24 years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No</li> <li>• Yes</li> </ul>	73.7 26.3

**Table 2: Percentage of Currently Working Mothers Facing Work-Family Conflict by Socio-Demographic and Family Characteristics**

	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>33.2</b>
Region	
Northern	34.6
Central	34.4
Southern	37.3
Eastern	27.1
Stratum	
Rural	27.5
Urban	36.7
Ethnicity	
Malay	28.8
Chinese	56.3
Indians	38.4
Age	
Below 30	28.9
30-34	39.1
35-39	39.3
40+	22.1
Employment	
Formal	35.4
Non Formal	24.9
Occupation	
Professionals	35.7
Clerical & Service Worker	30.6
Craft & Plant Worker	35.6
Agricultural, Fishery and Elementary Worker	30.5
Children	
One child	29.0
Two children	36.8
Three children	35.8
Four or more children	31.9
Childcare	
Respondent/husband/older child	28.8
Family members living in the same house	35.1
Family members living elsewhere	32.4
Maids	37.5
Neighbour/friend	37.1
Childcare centre	32.9
Others	34.8
Child 7-12	
No	33.3
Yes	33.2
Child 13-24	
No	34.9
Yes	28.4

**Table 3: Chi-Square Test Result of the Socio-Demographic and Family Characteristics of Mothers**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Pearson Chi-Square</b>	<b>Sig</b>
Region	5.009	0.171
Stratum	7.133	0.008**
Ethnicity	31.133	0.000**
Age	16.551	0.001**
Employment	6.743	0.009**
Occupation	2.339	0.505
Children	3.256	0.354
Childcare	3.369	0.761
Child 7-12	0.001	0.979
Child 13-24	2.942	0.086

Significance: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 4: Logistic Regression Analysis of the Effect of Mother’s Characteristics on the Prevalence of Work-Family Conflict**

Covariates	Exp(B)	
	Model 1	Model 2
Stratum		
Rural (RC)	1.000	1.000
Urban	1.158	1.177
Ethnicity		
Malays (RC)	1.000	1.000
Chinese	2.808**	3.085**
Indians	1.424	1.466
Age		
Below 30	1.000	1.000
30-34	1.530*	1.328
35-39	1.558*	1.251
40+	0.802	0.600
Employment		
Formal (RC)	1.000	1.000
Non Formal	0.650*	0.603*
Children		
One child (RC)	-	1.000
Two children	-	1.337
Three children	-	1.504
Four or more children	-	1.708
Childcare		
Respondent/husband/older child (RC)	-	1.000
Family members living in the same house	-	0.913
Family members living elsewhere	-	0.881
Maids	-	0.902
Neighbour/friend	-	1.200
Childcare centre	-	0.856
Others	-	0.877
Child 7-12		
No (RC)	-	1.000
Yes	-	0.875
Child 13-24		
No (RC)	-	1.000
Yes	-	1.044
Constant	0.334	0.299

Significance: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

RC: Reference category.

**Table 5: Predicted Probabilities of Having Work-Family Conflict According to Age and Ethnicity of Mothers**

Age Groups	Malay	Chinese	Indian
Below 30 years	0.251	0.492	0.352
30-34 years	0.355	0.615	0.472
35-39 years	0.361	0.621	0.479
40+ years	0.252	0.495	0.354
<b>Total</b>	<b>0.289</b>	<b>0.540</b>	<b>0.397</b>