WORK-LIFE BALANCE AMONG MOTHERS IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

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INTRODUCTION & THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Work-life balance, in its broadest sense, is defined as a satisfactory level of involvement or ‘fit’ between the multiple roles in a person’s life (Hudson 2005). There is no agreed definition of work-life balance but it does appear that the ‘right’ or ‘perfect’ balance for one person may differ from another. Although definitions and explanations vary, work-life balance is generally associated with the ability to manage simultaneously the needs arising from work and other life roles.

Studies in the area of work-life balance have so far mainly concentrated on the conflict between people’s work and other life roles. It is generally accepted that there is a clear link between work-life conflict and work-life balance, as attaining work-life balance is dependent on managing or reducing the conflict between various roles (De Villiers and Kotze 2003). So, in order to understand work-life balance, it is important to first consider the possible underlying conflict between various life roles.

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 & Rothbard (2000) and Greenhaus & 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 respect.

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 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.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to examine the relationship between perceived work-family conflict and socio-demographic and family characteristics of the mothers.

APPROACHES, METHOD & TECHNIQUES

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. Both bivariate and multivariate analyses have been applied to examine the relationship between perceived work-family conflict and the characteristics of mothers.
Initially, the bivariate correlations were used to determine whether the socio-demographic and family characteristics variables involved correlate significantly with the dependent variable. Then, logistic regression analyses were performed to study the relationship between the dependent and the independent variables.

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 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 if otherwise.

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.

RESULT, INTERPRETATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

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 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.

The logistic regression analysis used 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 are included in Model 1. No controls for the family characteristic of the mothers are specified in the model. In Model 2, the significant socio-demographic characteristic variables are combined with all the family characteristic 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 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 conflicts compared to Malays. The likelihood of mothers to have conflicts is greatest among those in their 30s. These finding show that mothers aged 30-34 and 35-39 years are more likely to have conflicts compared to those aged below 30 years with 1.5 times and 1.6 times respectively. The prevalence of conflicts is much smaller among those aged 40+ years, which is 0.2 times (1 - 0.8) less likely to have conflicts than the reference category (below 30 years). Among sectors of employment, the prevalence of conflicts is lower among the non-formal sector which is 0.4 times (1 - 0.6) less likely to have conflicts 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
the Chinese are 3.1 times while the Indians are 1.5 times more likely to have conflicts compared to the Malays. The non formal workers are 0.4 times (1 – 0.6) less likely to have conflicts compared to the formal workers. As in Model 1, the prevalence of conflicts is higher among mothers aged in the 30s. As expected, the likelihood of having conflicts increases as the number of children increases. By comparing the type of childcare used, the prevalence of conflicts 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 this study, we could see that ethnicity, age and employment are the main factors related to the prevalence of work-family conflicts among working mothers. As expected, the prevalence of conflicts is higher among formal workers as compared to non formal workers. It is due to long working hours, mandatory overtime and frequent outstation travel. The flexible working hours are most common among non formal workers because they have greater control over hours and overtime. Among the three major ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia, the Chinese and Indians are more likely to be working in the formal sector compared to Malays, which probably explains the reason of high prevalence of conflicts among the former two ethnic groups. Unexpectedly, there is no significant relationship between the prevalence of conflict and the studied family characteristics of mothers. It implies little or no variation across family characteristics in perception of conflicts. In other words, women of different family backgrounds perceive work-family conflicts more or less equally.

CONCLUSION

The importance of work-family balance was given prominence since in the Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010. Several programmes were launched such as the concept of the home office and the Parenting@Work Programme. However, the family-responsive policies and programmes can fail to reduce work-family conflicts if there is no consistent support from the management. Managers play an important role in the success of work-life balance programs because they are in a position to encourage or discourage employees’ efforts to balance their work and family lives (Hudson 2005). Programmes however need to be targeted to those most in need. The study shows that Chinese and Indian women are more likely to report work-family conflicts compared with Malay women. Younger women are more likely to experience work-family conflicts as do women working in the formal sector.

REFERENCES


