

Examining Occupational Stress on Family Cohesion: Implications to Women Professionals in Accra, Ghana

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Abstract

The study explored the causes and effects of occupational stress on family cohesion among women professionals in Accra, Ghana. Using a phenomenological case study design, a quota-sampling technique was used to sample the views of 15 women through semi-structured interview guide. The researchers analysed the data thematically. The data revealed several causes of stress among women professionals and these included excessive workload, poor working conditions, inadequate resources and lack of support system. The data also highlighted the effects of stress experienced by women professionals and this included family conflict and unity, ill-healthiness and procrastination of family/motherhood duties. The study therefore recommends that institutions should employ assistance to reduce workload, the institutions should consider more technological approach in their daily activities and women should participate in regular exercise and regular medical checkup to prevent them from ill-healthiness. Finally, the study also that revealed that there will be the need for women to start practicing behaviours that indicate family commitment.

Keywords: Occupational Stress, Family Cohesion, Ill-Healthiness, Excessive Workload, Women Professionals and Procrastination

Introduction

Occupational stress has been the major problem of most female professionals in Accra, Ghana. In a cursory observation, this could be attributed to the workload and overtime activities related to their job description coupled with family duties. Women professional in Accra, especially those at banking sector, educational sector and health sector seem to be the most affected victims of occupational stress.

Driscoll and Cooper, (2002) asserted that excessive demand on female time and may create uncertainty about the ability to perform all roles effectively. With respect to this, pressure or demands amounted from ones profession affects them not to meet all the requirement of family needs that in way result in lack of family cohesion. A substantial body of evidence suggests that the tensions of occupational workload can decrease individual desire to attend to family issues of finishing deadline duties correctly. Pleck, (1989) describe that tensions as inter role conflict. The theory suggest that excessive workload of one's occupation compliance with one role is compatible to take responsibilities of other duties. For instance, escalating demands associated with women professionals result in occupational stress, which would not enable them to display all family duties correctly.

However, provisions made by the institutions to support the employees to cope with this increase pressure appear to prove futile. The study explains that most women professionals pay attention to their occupations that fetch them income and leave family duties to house helps. This paper therefore, attempts to explore the causes and effects of occupational stress on family cohesion among women professional in Accra, Ghana.

The study is significant in three main ways. Firstly, it helps the women professionals to identify the effects of occupational stress on their families as they carry out their daily roles and responsibilities. Secondly, the study draws the women professionals' attention to the factors responsible for the occupational stress experienced in their setting. Finally, the study contributes to literature on occupational stress-family cohesion in the Ghanaian context.

Theoretical Framework

The Boundary theory was the most appropriate as the framework within which the findings of the study was discussed. Boundary theory provides reasons for expecting work conditions to influence family conflict, proposing that social roles are often separated by physical, temporal, or psychological parameters (Ashforth et al. 2000). They further assert that “flexibility” and “permeability” characterize the boundaries between profession and family duties. Flexibility involves the extent to which role-related tasks and responsibilities may be conducted beyond the usual spatial and temporal workplace boundaries. For instance, flexible work allows workers to perform duties at home and provides greater latitude in family cohesion. By contrast, permeability is “the degree to which elements from other domains may enter” (Clark 2000 cited in Bedu-Addo, 2010). High permeability implies that work-related dimensions (i.e., people, materials, thoughts) are able to enter the home domain more easily. Boundary theory predicts that higher levels of permeability foster integration between roles and ease transitions between them, but the potential for interference between domains are also increased.

Contrariwise, lower levels of permeability imply greater segmentation but less occupation to family interference. Although there are no direct measures of flexibility and permeability, one can apply those ideas in the occupational stress in women professionals’ suggestion. Women professionals working conditions probably increase flexibility and permeability, which, in turn, increase the likelihood of occupational stress, which affect family cohesion. At first peep, this effect may appear to be somewhat paradoxical because we typically think of “flexibility” as a resource that helps people to avoid or manage occupational stress. However, the boundary theory implicates flexibility as contributing to greater variability in the boundaries of creating more potential for inter-role conflict, which cause stress for family cohesion. For example the typical Ghanaian women professional employ house helps to take of certain responsibilities in the home since some of them attend work very early. Because of excessive workload attach to their occupations, some are compelled to bring home some of the work tasks to complete. All because they are stressed up! This will inadvertently give her less time to attend to family issues, which might be pertinent, thus creating problem for family cohesion.

The boundary theory informed the study mainly because its assumption is in line with the research findings. The study revealed that excessive workload cause women professional occupational stress. Boundary theory suggests that professionals, whose work schedules are characterised by high levels of flexibility, as well as permeability, are more likely to experience problem with family cohesion.

Conceptual Framework

Women professionals in Accra are likely to experience occupational stress because they are operating in very challenging professional context. For instance, for the lecturers at the public Universities, some teach large class up to 800 students per semester, doctors at the public hospital attend to 150 patients per daily bases and bankers attend to costumers up to 200 per daily bases. In addition to inadequate office space they operate from. Therefore, due to risk condition and work overload they are operating from would cause them to stressful that could lead to lack of family cohesion.

Study Area

Greater Accra region is the capital of Ghana and the smallest of the ten (10) administrative regions in terms of area, occupying a total land surface of 3,245 square kilometers or 1.4 percent of the total land area of Ghana. It term of population, however, it is most density populated region with 4,010,054 in 2010, accounting for 15.4 percent of Ghana’s total population. Due to the cluster of businesses in Accra most people from other regions migrate to the region and this usually causes congestion in the greater Accra region. The planning in Accra is such that businesses are located in one area while place of settlement is also located in different area. In view of the poor planning, high rate of migration to Accra and movement of vehicles towards same direction during working days cause heavy vehicular traffic while going to work and close from work.

Due to the higher population density in Accra, costumers, patients and students ratio to professionals workers in the region are in an increasing order, it has caused most women professionals to be stressful due to work overload. Because one may close from work early but reach home late due to high traffic jam and road construction across the city. This cause most women professional to cohere with their family after work. Some even come to house with their children are asleep due to this problem.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the causes and effects of occupational stress on family cohesions among women professionals in Accra, Ghana. A phenomenological case study design was employed for this study. This design requires the researchers to explore, to describe, understand, dig deep into the life experiences of participants. The study used approaches where “the importance of context, setting, and subjects’ frame of reference” come under scrutiny (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). The researchers interest in understanding occupational stress-family cohesion cannot adequately be met by a quantitative approach because the researchers

want to delve deeply into case take place in socio-cultural context.

Population and Sampling

The study population consisted all the women professionals in Accra, Ghana but for the purpose of this particular study, women professionals were used and this include (Female Doctors, Female Bankers and Female Lecturers). It was from this population that quota-sampling technique was used to sample fifteen (15) women for the study. This sample size was selected for the qualitative study because it was controllable. Also, it was necessary to select a sample that would enable the phenomenon under study to be explored for a better understanding. Creswell, (2005) argues that selecting a large number of interviewees will ‘result in superficial perspectives ... the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site’ (p.207).

Data Collection Methods

The instrument used for data collection was semi-structured interview. The interview schedule was employed to gather data qualitatively. Interview schedule was based on the issues that were discussed in the review of literature which were causes and effects of occupational stress on family cohesion and its implication to women professionals. Demographic data for individual women professionals were collected. Duration for data collection was three (3) months.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In order to establish the validity of the instruments women professional with knowledge in the topic and analysis of data were given the instruments for a thorough check for flaws and problems in the study. Moreover, to grant the content validity of the instruments, the instruments were given to retire female professor in University of Education, Winneba and retire female health professional in University of Cape Coast to scrutinize the instruments.

To establish the internal consistency of the semi-structured instrument, it was pre-tested between two (2) female lectures from University of Education, Winneba and two (2) health doctors from University of Cape Coast Hospital. The other step the researchers used to check reliability of the study was asking the interviewees female professionals to confirm or disconfirm their comments after each transcription of the data.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analysed thematically. Thematic analysis is an analytical process which requires researchers to work with data, organising them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them and searching for pattern (Merriam and Associates, 2002). For example, a comment like “at times I perform surgery before I attend to almost 150 patients per day and this makes me stressful all the time” was coded as “Female Doctor’ workload” furthermore, to attribute comments to the women professionals, the interview transcripts were assigned with some serial codes. For instance, Interviewee Female Doctor (IFD-1to5); Interviewee Female Lecturers (IFL-6 to 10) and Interviewee Female Bankers (IFB-11 to 15).

Socio-demographic Background of Interviewees

Fifteen (15) women professionals were interviewed, which comprises of five (5) Doctors, five (5) Lecturers and five (5) Bankers in Accra-Ghana. For academic qualification, all these women professionals have completed their first degrees from different Universities in Ghana. However, nine (9) of them hold doctorate degree and one (1) master degree holder and five (5) first-degree holders. Their ages ranged from twenty eight (28) to fifty (50) years. All the women professionals were married with children. The duration of service from their respective institution ranged from two (2) to fifteen (15) years.

Results and Discussions

This section presents the results/findings from the qualitative interview data collected from women professionals in Accra on causes and effects of occupational stress on family cohesion. The related literature was linked to findings to confirm or disconfirm the respondent’s assertions.

Causes of Occupational Stress on Family Cohesion among Women Professionals

This section established the number of potential causes of occupational stress on family cohesion among women professionals in Accra, Ghana. An examination of the individual interview transcriptions gave an indication as to which potential causes of occupational stress are more frequently perceived to be most problematic by the respondents; the coherent respondents comments show how higher that factor cause women professional to occupational stress on family cohesion, and the lesser comments made by respondents contribute how low causes of occupational stress on family cohesion.

The results show that excessive workload was identified as the most frequent consistent cause of occupational stress on family cohesion among women professionals in Accra, Ghana. Respondents attributed that too much of workload is causing them a lot. For example IFL-7 remarked:

I teach too many programmes during the regular school and the sandwich programmes. Apart from that I supervise more than twenty (20) under graduate students and ten (10) both the MPhil and MED students. I am always, tired that when I get home I am always stressful not even able to ask my daughter about what they did in school today. That is really affecting my social, religious and marital life.

IFD-2 added,

Infact too much workload is killing us oooo. Please would you; imagine I always attend to more than 80 patients within the space of eight (8) hours of working. And after that I need to check patients who have been admitted at the various wards too. This workload with small salary is causing us a lot. Even to the extent of not being able to attend my daughters PTA meeting.

My department has too many courses but with few lecturers to teach those courses. So we always need to work extra to achieve the said goal for the semester. For now I am teaching three (3) courses with different levels. So I always work extra to achieve that target which make me stressed up and it affecting my family life (IFL-6).

IFL-10 shared similar comment:

I have no free day within the week; I am always at the department, because I take regular school (both masters and undergraduate students) and mature students who come in the evening after 4:30pm. In fact due to this workload it's really affecting my family and religious life.

IFB-14 complains that:

There is no free time at the bank even the time to eat. I attend to more than 200 customers a day. Even to the extent of sitting for 8 hours a day, I am always stressful and it disturbing my marital life.

When probed further as to why she is still in this occupation, she said, she has no option than to be there. Although, there is respect when working at the bank and she also need to work to support the husband. IFD-1 added that:

Stress is what is killing us. Could you imagine I will come from theater and attend to almost 50 patients before I go home at 4:00 pm? In fact the most gravely part is the traffic jam that I joint to the house

I always come to work early and close late all because of workload. When is pay-day, then life within that week becomes very tedious because workers that come to bank for their salary are more than four thousand within that week. Could you imagine you need to attend to them all? I could say it's affecting my family cohesion because looking at the time I close from work, my children would be asleep by the time I get home (IFB-11). When asked why! She said, she has employed a house help who is doing the house chores for her. Studies elsewhere have also shown that excessive workload was potential stressor to workers in organizations (Bennet, 1994; Rollinson, 2005; Cole, 2004, Erasmus, 2006 and Kusi et al 2014).

IFL-9 said that:

Due to more administrative works, teaching, supervision and marking of students scripts are done by one person who the lecturer, I am always stressful. In fact, I need to carry some office duties to house which actually affect my family.

When asked to explain further, she said her husband is someone who likes to eat early in the evening and FUFU during the week, but because of this workload she always fail to do that for her husband. Kusi et al, (2014) asserts that excessive workload were one of the major causes of stressor among academic staff of the university.

The second most reported stressor was poor working condition and inadequate resource. With respect to this IFL-8 remarked that:

Irrespective of how large your class size is, it does not determine the salary you receive during the month. In fact could you imagine some of us are teaching more than 500 students without any teaching assistance and projector to assist us in facility teaching and learning?

She further asserts that at times, poor lighting and inadequate teaching and learning materials available put you us off when teaching. When asked about how this could make one stressful, she said teaching a large class without the needed resources makes you over work that cause us to stressed. IFB-13 asserts that, the chairs we sit on for long time cause us to be stressful. In fact the chairs are very hard. We sit on these hard chairs for more than 8 hours that makes us stressful and when you go to house you feel very weak. IFD-3 added that:

We are working with old and out-mounded machines which do not facilitate effective doctor to patient's relationship. It causes us to over work. We lack proper chairs and those at the late floor normal climb 10-story building when the elevator is not working. Working in such conditions attached to the large patients base is making us stressful.

IFD-5 suggested that, management take little consent about employers working condition, lack of maintenance and inadequate of resources. Would you imagine light can go off without any top management telling us why!

But because of patients' conditions we need to force our self to work under such hardship conditions and attend to those large patients. In fact such conditions are affecting us over work which make us stressful that when you reach the house there is nothing you can do.

Another major stressor condition that causes occupational stress on family cohesion among women professionals in Accra, Ghana is lack of support system. IFL6 and 10 suggested that the university lack support system, because the top management knows the condition they working in. lecturers have suggested they need research assistance to assist them in their academic, research and marking of scripts. But nothing has been done about that so the workloads attach to the lecturing is making them stressful and affecting their family life. IFD-4 commented that:

The small number of nurses to patient's ratio at the hospitals causes some of us to check patient's temperature before diagnosis process. Imagine checking 60 patients within the day, do you know what will happen after work. You feel very weak when you reach the house such that assisting your kids for their homework becomes a problem.

Modern technology could assist us in our work, but at times when the ATM is not working it put pressure on us the tellers at the banks. Imagine if you will attend to 150 customers per day because the ATM is not working, we need to attend to more than 250 customers a day that make us stressful and affecting our family life (IFB-15).

Effects of Occupational Stress on Family Cohesion among Women Professionals

This section sought to find out how occupational stress has affected women professionals. The coherent respondents remarks give an indication as to which effects reported have manifested itself the highest. The qualitative interview data revealed that majority of the interviewees were of the view that family conflict and unity are the effects associated with occupational stress on family cohesion among women professionals. For example IFL-6 remarked:

The cause of workload has affected my family and me. Because I hardly come home early to prepare food for the family. In fact this situation is affecting my marriage because my husband normally cooked for the kids. When probed why! She can't stop the job. She said I couldn't stay at home; I need to support my husband too.

IFL-10 added:

My husband always complains that I don't have time for the children because I hardly pick them from school. All because I normally start lecturing at 7:30am and close late. My husband is always complaining about the children's well-being and not having mothers love.

This tedious work caused my friend's divorce, because her husband thinks the wife does not have time for him. She said they have always been calling night for emergencies (IFD-4).

We always quarrel when I come home late. In fact, it's been affecting my marriage and my attachment to the kids (IFB-12). When probed further, she said, her husband doesn't like the idea of house help cooking his food and being the mother to his kids because her wife closed from work late. It's affecting my family unity because I can't remember the last I time supervise my kids home works.

IFD-2 stated that:

My husband always complain that he is now the mother and I am the father, all because I hardly perform my responsibilities as a wife in the morning and the evening. It's all because I come home feeling very tired and weak such that I hardly had time to chat with my children, which is affecting my family life as a mother.

IFD-5 added that;

With my situation both of us are doctors. Because of the workload of our occupation, at times I will come early and he will not be there. When he comes home early, I may also be seriously working at that time.

When probed further about her sexual life with her husband, what she said was that at time they arranged for it during weekends when they are at home. And when ask about how, she is taking care of her children, she said, they have a house help. But accept that her occupation is affecting her family cohesion. The danger of leaving house chores in the hands of house helps cause danger in family cohesion (Kissi-Abrokwah et al, 2014). IFL-8 complained particular about the few time she spend with her family and the problems associated with leaving house duties to house helps. IFB-15 also affirmed that:

I hardly spend time with my kids, because I normally come home late when they have finished eating.

The most difficult part is not being able to supervise their assignments from school. In fact this job is affecting my family unity and motherhood responsibilities.

The second most reported effect of occupational stressor among women professionals was on ill-healthiness. This was consistent among all respondents. Infact during the transcription process most of the respondents reported and stressed on it but few just said it without adding much importance to the situation. The question the

researchers were looking for was how ill-healthiness caused by stress affects their family cohesion. IFD-1 remarked:

At time when I get to the house, I feel like I am being beating by someone, because the workload was too much to be handled by a person within a day. I always feel weak with my entire body and sometimes I had to take painkillers before I sleep. So Sir, based on this long hours of sitting I always feel weak and can't attend to all family duties.

IFL-7 added:

Most of the time, I had to stay off work for about two weeks because of the serious stress I experienced. Please, I cannot even read students thesis and assignments because of the burning sensation I was feeling on my whole body. I was seriously advised by my physician to stay out from the job in order to recuperate and that helped me. In fact this is affecting my relationship with my kids and even my husband do complain.

As I am speaking to you now, my blood pressure is high and I feel very weak and tired. Sometime, I feel like leaving this job because it really affecting my family duties and me as a mother. As I speak to you now, just returned from a sick leave but still feel weak (IFB-14).

IFD-4 also confirmed this view:

The burning sensation I always feel is too much. The number of patients we attend to is too much. It causes us to come home late, weak and the tiredness involve in it is killing us.

Ill-healthiness has come to stay with me because I always complained of back pains when I come to the house (IFB-11).

When probed further about why she is still doing the job, she said, she wish to stop and enter into trading but later asserted because the salary too is good. Kusi et al, (2014) work revealed that stress and burnout experienced by lecturers caused some to experience ill health, burning sensation and even causes lecturers to feel like leaving the job. But Spier argued that ill health could affect an employee commitment to their family, leading to absenteeism and career progression (2003).

Additional effects of occupational stress among women professionals, which emerged from the qualitative interview data, were related to procrastination of family duties or motherhood duties. In fact the entire women professionals attested to it that procrastination of motherhood/family duties is affecting them. For example, considering comments like I hardly pick my children from school (IFB-13); I don't remember the last time I went to the market (IFD-3); my son always complained I don't come for his PTA meetings (IFD-5 and IFB-14); attending funeral and wedding on weekends have been a problem (IFB-15), when ask why! She said her bank is rounding Saturdays banking service.

The responses from the respondents revealed that occupational stress caused by excessive workload, poor working condition, inadequate resources and lack of support system affected them to experience ill-healthiness, procrastination of motherhood and family duties and it affected their ability to unity or cohesion with their family. However, the data suggested that the women were prepared to remain in their respective professions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study found that excessive workload was the major stressor among women professionals in Accra, Ghana. Moreover, if possible, various institutions should employ additional assistance, physician assistance and bank tellers to reduce the workload associated with the few employees. With practical option, the research assistance could assist the lecturers with marking of scripts, preparation of lecture notes and few administrative duties. Physician assistance could help perform the minor consultation service, which does not demand the service of doctors and tellers could assist with checking of account balance and provision of client enquiry service.

The study also highlighted that the poor working conditions, inadequate resources and lack of support system owing to the poor management consent about employees needs. The researcher therefore, recommends that the management should consider more technological based approach, which could reduce the workload of employees.

A growing concern of occupational stress relating to stressor among women professional in Accra was family conflict and unity. It is recommended that women professionals should not be carried by the income earn from their occupations than cohesion or uniting their family through coming home early to assist in family duties.

Furthermore, study suggested that ill-healthiness was another stressor among women professionals in Accra. The researchers therefore, recommend that they should consider regular medical checkup and should involve in regular exercise in the morning and during weekends.

The study unearthed that procrastination of motherhood duties was another effects of occupational stressor among women professionals in Accra. Researchers therefore, recommend that women should undertake mandatory annual leave to overcome stress. Additionally, women should inculcate the spirit of family commitment than thinking of income earned from their occupations.

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