

JUGGLING BETWEEN FAMILY AND CAREER: A STUDY OF WOMEN ACCOUNTANTS IN MALAYSIAN PUBLIC SECTOR

Abdul Halim Abdul Majid¹, Noor Asma Jamaluddin² and
Mazlindawati Abdul Malek³, Farhah Muzni⁴

^{1,2}College of Business

^{3,4}Post Graduate Students
Universiti Utara Malaysia

Abstract

Women involvements in professional jobs do not release them from responsibility to their family. Regardless of their positions and superiority at workplace, women still need to carry out duties as wives and mothers at home respectively. This scenario seems to indicate that women confront greater challenges in their daily life as compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, playing multiple roles con-currently can lead to greater inter-role conflict amongst working women. Thus, this present paper investigated the issue of social support and its role in relation to reducing inter-role conflict among women accountants who serve in Malaysian public sector. The distribution of questionnaires to women accountants was purposely done in gathering their views about the issue. A total of 75 samples were used for the analysis. Interestingly, the result shows that 77.3 percent of those respondents indicated that social supports have reduced their inter-role conflict. Findings are discussed in terms of existing research and recommendations in managing challenges related to the inter-role conflict borne by women are suggested.

Introduction

The introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) by Malaysian Government in the early 1970s among others has led to a radical structural change such as from import substitution industrialization (ISI) to export-oriented industrialization (EOI). The developmental strategy which was influenced by the "prescription" of the World Bank (McMichael, 2000) paved the path for the emergence of a new labor force drawing on workers, especially young women, moving from the rural areas to the cities. Various studies on women in Malaysia have revealed that such an economic progress and industrial development since the implementation of NEP in 1970 have upgraded the socio-economic status of women in Malaysia (Siti Rohani, 2009; Ng & Leng, 1999; Husna, 1994).

Working women face relatively more challenges and obstacles compared to men. They frequently face difficulties in allocating and sharing time for children, families and jobs. As quoted from city directory, a study in Malaysia has revealed that a working mother was only able to allocate about 1 hour 21 minutes or 81 minutes for taking care of children and families per day. Moreover, there has been a tendency for married women in Asian countries (including Malaysia) to quit or leave employment upon their marriage and having children (Kaur, 2004). Inflexibility at the workplace and lack of social supports at home trigger a lot of stress on women, especially for most women who consider home as their main responsibility (Hill et al., 2004).

Inter-role conflicts among working women

The phenomenon of “Superwomen” or “Supermom” is rather global, which is very much due to their multiple roles. They are the mothers, wives, workers, and also as community members. Being a mother for instance confers upon a woman the responsibility of raising children. This process also changes the way in which she is perceived in society and at her workplace (Poduval & Poduval, 2009). One cannot take leaves more than available and allowable number of days by the employers. Yet, the leave options may negatively affect job security and potential promotions. Thus, significant social support and personal adjustments are necessary to cope (Poduval & Poduval, 2009) with such a conflicting situation.

On the contrary, being an employee (working woman) does require something different. Although the opportunity for education and jobs extends to competent and qualified ladies and women, their roles do not totally shift from just home caretakers to working professionals. Over the decades, the majority of women have moved from being purely home-based, to taking clerical works and to being professionals in both public and private sectors. Undeniably, at all levels, women are being very successful in what they do in the corporate arena. As employees, they still need to comply with the company’s rules and regulations, fulfill the organization’s need and tag along with the work environment. Moreover, some working women find themselves in difficult situation whereby there are conflicting requirements such as going outstation. Again, significant social support and personal adjustments as well as job flexibilities are necessary to cope with.

Below are two quotes that imply the inter-role conflict faced by some working women.

"I am relieved if, rather than sex bias; the reason why more women are not breaking through the glass ceiling of academic medicine is because their children are hanging on the tails of their white coats. Most of us are happy to have them there, and academic medicine offers a level of professional fulfillment, financial stability, and geographic flexibility that is well worth the juggle" (Laine, 1998).

"First, from the early 1950s, many employed mothers began to challenge, although not overturn, the dominant discourse of the ideal mother as exclusively bound to the home. The simple fact that so many women were drawn to work outside the home despite criticism demonstrates the monetary and psychological importance of employment for women" (Wilson, 2006).

Both quotes reflect the unique life situation of working women, who are now a visible part of the workforce in almost all professions (Poduval & Poduval, 2009). Many women are getting married and start having children during their early stage or at the growing stage of their careers. In brief, Table 1 summarizes some advantages and disadvantages of being working women.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased independence • Financial rewards - the chance to raise the standard of living of family. • Career fulfillment - the chances to use whatever training and qualifications they may have. • More intense interaction with your child when you are at home. • Intellectual need to work - you may feel bored and lonely at home. • Ability to maintain a high profile in your chosen field of work • Build self-confidence, self-esteem and personal identity • Help contribute to the household income • Children of working couples tend to become more responsible and more independent compared to those staying home with either of the unemployed parent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of guilt and inadequacy because they feel they are neglecting their child. • Spend less time with the family. • Increase the expenses of paying maid, nursery • Isolation from the community. • Extreme tiredness because they will be juggling two jobs at once. • Great Stress due to dual responsibilities and the need to be constantly planning ahead. • Resentment of the other full-time mothers in your community. • Difficulty and concerns about finding and keeping good children. • Time management and life balance will be most crucial factor in arguments • You are not capable of providing direct supervision unless you are allowed to work from home.

Respondents' Profiles

This present paper focuses on working women who currently work and gain monthly salaries from government. Thus a survey has been conducted among those women who hold accounting related responsibilities, with job's titles including auditor, finance officer, and accountant. All these were lumped under one labeled of 'accountant'. This profession is of interest is due to the reason that accountants are considered to be very demanding in the job market. Further, the nature of those jobs requires relatively higher consideration from the job holders. Therefore, working women with the accounting related responsibilities in hand should be able to better handle as well as balance the inter-role conflict compared to other non-professional jobs.

Table 2: Respondents' Profiles (N = 75)

Respondents' Profiles		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	21 – 30 years	17	22.7
	31 – 40 years	33	44.0
	41 – 50 years	14	18.7
	More than 50 years	11	14.7
Level of Education	SPM/STPM	6	8.0
	Certificate	2	2.7
	Diploma	19	25.3
	Degree	37	49.3
	Master	10	13.3
	Others / missing value	1	1.3
Number of Years in Current Position	Less than 2 years	7	9.3
	2 – 5 years	16	21.3
	6 – 10 years	15	20.0
	More than 10 years	37	49.3
Organizational Tenure (in years)	Less than 5 years	19	25.3
	5 – 10 years	18	24.0
	11 – 15 years	16	21.3
	More than 15 years	21	28.0
	Others/ missing value	1	1.3

Findings: Roles of Social Support to Women Accountants

It's quite interesting to highlight that about 77.3 percent have indicated that social supports have reduced their inter-role conflict. Sources of social supports include from maids, parents in law, own parents, husbands, colleagues and others. To further analyze the roles of social support to women accountants, we have cross-tabulated the variable against respondents' age, level of education, number of years in current position and organizational tenure (in years). Below are the findings (as shown in Diagrams and Tables, respectively).

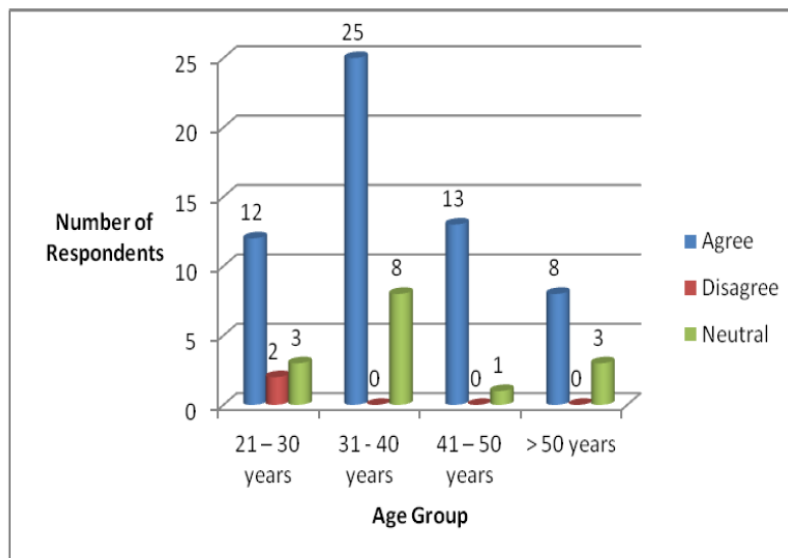


Diagram 1: Age group and number of respondents (N=75)

Table 3: Age group and Social support

Age Group	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
21 – 30 years	12	2	3
31 - 40 years	25	0	8
41 – 50 years	13	0	1
> 50 years	8	0	3
Total	58	2	15
Percentage	77.3	2.7	20.0

From the Diagram 1 and Table 3 above show that in total 58 respondents or 77.3 percent agreed (i.e., strongly agree plus agree) that social supports have reduced their inter-role conflict, whereas only 2 respondents (2.7%) have disagreed and 15 respondents (20.0%) stand neutral.

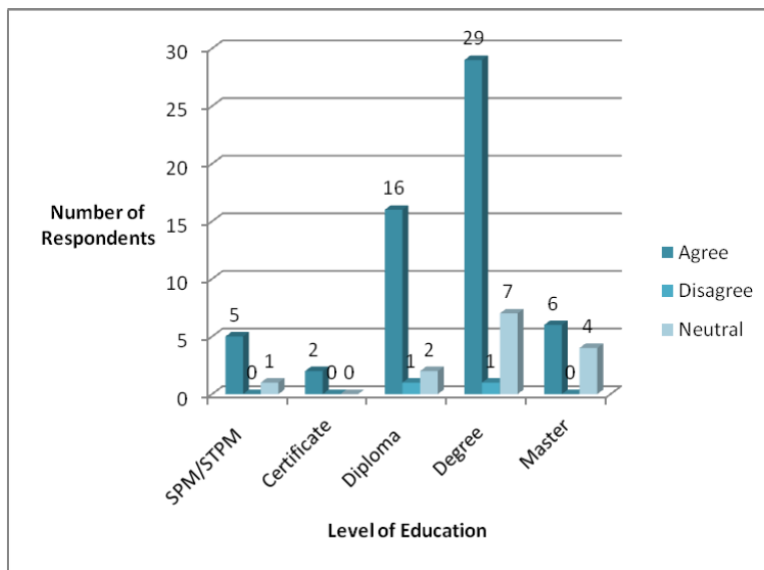


Diagram 2: Level of education and Social support (N=74)

Table 4: Education level and Social support

Level of Education	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
SPM/STPM	5	0	1
Certificate	2	0	0
Diploma	16	1	2
Degree	29	1	7
Master	6	0	4
Total	58	2	14
Percentage	78.4	2.7	18.9

From the Diagram 2 and Table 4 above reveal that 58 respondents or 78.4 percent agreed (i.e., strongly agree plus agree) that social supports have reduced their inter-role conflict, whereas only 2 respondents or 2.7 percent have disagreed and 14 respondents (18.9%) stand neutral. It is noted that one (1) respondent doesn't indicate his/her highest level of education.

Meanwhile the Diagram 3 below show that 58 respondents (78.4%) agreed that social supports have reduced their inter-role conflict, whereas only 2 respondents (2.7%) have disagreed and 15 respondents (20.3%) stand neutral.

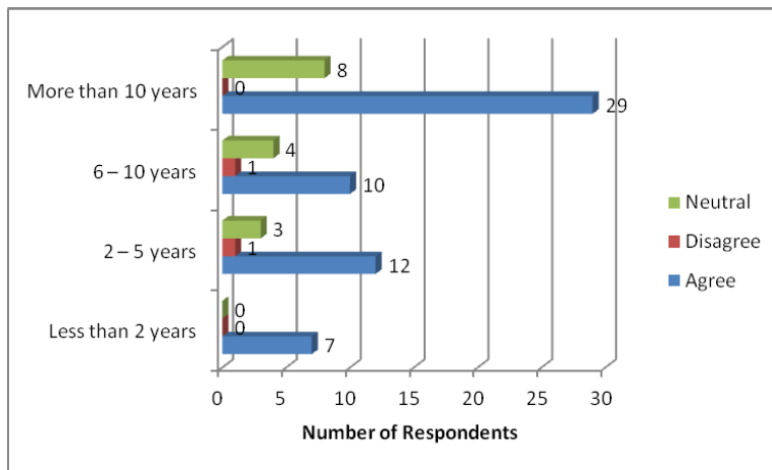


Diagram 3: Number of years in current position and number of respondents (N=75)

From the Diagram 4 below reveal that 58 respondents or 78.4 percent agreed (i.e., strongly agree plus agree) that social supports have reduced their inter-role conflict, whereas only 2 respondents or 2.7 percent have disagreed and 14 respondents (18.9%) stand neutral. It is noted that one (1) respondent doesn't indicate his/her organizational tenure.

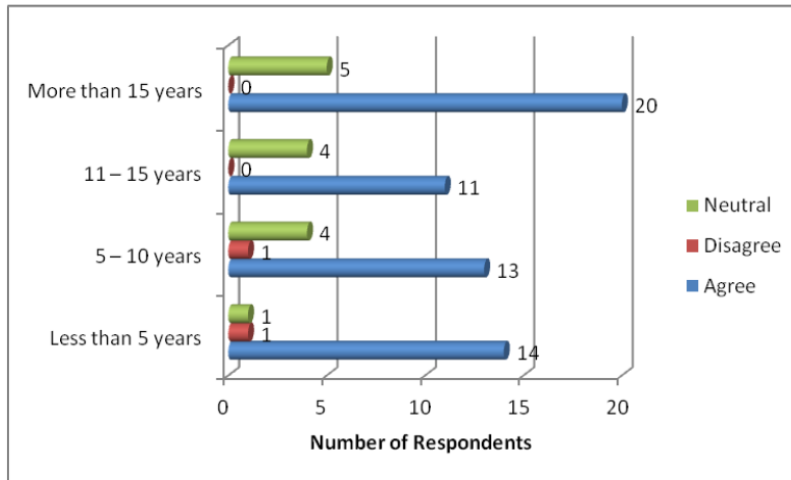


Diagram 4: Organizational tenure and number of respondents (N=74)

Discussion and Conclusion

Generally, findings supported researchers' expectation that is working women do need to have strong social support to be able to serve and perform well at their respective work place. The scenario may not only valid within the targeted respondents of this present research (i.e., women accountants in Malaysian's Public Sector), but also for working women in other demanding natures of work like surgeons and medical doctors within the same sector. Yet such a claim can only be verified upon conducting empirical research on them.

Due to the fact that working women play multiple roles, it further causes multitude of difficulties ranges from feelings of guilt to schedule conflicts. Therefore, the challenges faced in trying to balance between family and career (inter-role conflict) is apparently substantial. Given such demanding nature of work, to resolve the inter-role conflict women accountants need to take a careful assessment of the situations causing the conflict and objectively set forth a plan of action that will bring about a resolution. The conflicts could be reduced further with strong social supports from maids, parents in law, own parents, husbands and others. At home, working women have roles slated much of their hours, and at work an average of about eight (8) hours a day is a must. In some cases, this scenario has lead husbands to refuse their wives from working, from expediting too much for the cause of work, and/or from spending too much time at work place. Therefore the presence of social supports has helped in reducing inter-role conflict among the respondents as indicated in the findings above.

In most countries including Malaysia, a number of additional sources of social supports are already being provided by employers which include childcare centers at work place, flexible working hours, unpaid maternity leave and time off, and career customization. Based on the study by Geetha Subramaniam (2010), women who are educated and earn high income are really interested in flexible working hours. Perhaps flexible working hour is one of the feasible solutions for an inter-role dilemma.

Furthermore, in general successful working women are good in time management. Good time scheduling are required. Then, they may feel that there is still time for their own to have rest and relax as well as sanity of mind. They

should be able to prioritize their time based on what's important to the family. There are people who complain about time lacking but they still spend priceless hours doing things that do not matter to them. Successful people make every minute is counted. They find ways to save time and reinvest the savings into a couple of hours of positive interaction with loved ones. On weekends, they have slightly more time to catch up. These pockets of available time, if used productively, are usually enough to fix many domestic issues.

Working women should also consider realigning their career with the additional role at home in promoting work-life balance and not to burden their employers with under-performance job quality due to personal stress and not being focus. It is of course part of their duties and responsibilities as working women to have and maintain healthy life style and sanity of mind. These are to ensure their ability to juggle these two main conflicting roles and yet both are equally significant and demanding. Eating balance nutrition, exercising as well as keeping good social support/network are crucial in establishing good mental and body health.

A successful working woman is also the one who is good at tapping on a hidden resource-her husband. She must be able to persuade her spouse to come forward, understand, engage and support her at all times. By having positive and harmonious relationships with spouse any conflicting cases could be resolved. Instead of expecting the husband to read her mind, she may directly but politely ask for assistance. As a closed partner at home, the husband has to assume responsibilities in helping his working wife. Husbands should recognize the challenging situations that their spouses are in and should relentlessly step forward to support and volunteer in as many situations as possible. Nowadays, it is common to find husbands who share housework such as cleaning job in the kitchen, taking care of children, helping with the laundry, tidying the house or preparing meals.

Most importantly, women must be creative in sharing the burden with the family members and make full use of available social supports. Simple training and motivation would be useful to get cooperation and commitment from family members in sharing the housework. For example, subject to the age of the children, if they reached the age of 6 or 7 years, get them to take bath and wear clothes on their own and even teach them to clean up their own bedroom. A child of 12 years old can be trained to help his/her parents to do the housework for example doing the laundry, cleaning the house and washing the dishes. Teenage children if taught properly should be able to help in preparing meals and taking care of the younger siblings while waiting for the parents to get back. By having contributions with such supportive and understanding behavior from all family members (Alam, Sattar & Chaudhury, 2011), working women shall feel less stressful and burdened.

In brief, working women in Malaysia shape the larger part of the workforce, serving in various sectors. They have become the back bench of the family as well as the great source of skilled and unskilled workers to steer the country's productivity. Thus, keeping them in such an inter-role conflict would not be good. Support and assistance from employers as well as family members are perceived as the way out which shall enable working women to feel that they are well supported and comfortable in managing the inter-role conflict. Apparently, a smart collaboration between family and career is crucial for the betterment of our working women's families and their working organizations.

References

- Adler R. D. (2009). Profit, thy name is woman? The consistent correlation between women executives and high profitability. Retrieved at <http://www.psmag.com/business-economics/profit-thy-name-is-woman-3920/> on 25 September 2013.
- Alam M. S., Sattar, A., & Chaudhury, S. I. N. (2011). Work family conflict of women managers in Dhaka, *Asian Social Science*. Vol.7, No.7, July 2011; pp.108- 114.
- Hill, E.J., Martinson, V. K., Ferris,M., & Baker, R.Z. (2004). Beyond the mommy track: The influence of new concept part time work for professional women on work and family. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*. Spring 2004; 25, 1, pp 121- 136.
- Husna S. (1994). Rural women in rice based farming system: Trends and implications in Jamilah Ariffin (Ed), *Readings on Women and Development in Malaysia - A Sequel. Tracing Four Decades of Change*. Petaling Jaya: MPH Group Publishing.
- Kaur, A. (2004). *Costed not valued: Women workers in industrialising Asia*. New York, Macmillan.
- Laine C., (1998). On being Dr. mom. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 129 (7), pp 579-580.
- McMichael, P. (2000). *Development and social change - a global perspective* (2nd ed.). California: Pine Forge Press.
- Ng, C., & Leng, C. H. (1999). Women in Malaysia: Present struggles and future direction. In C. Ng (Ed.), *Positioning Women in Malaysia*. Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Poduval J., & Poduval M. (2009). Working mothers: How much working, how much mothers, and where is the womanhood? *Mens Sana Monograph*; Vol.7: pp. 63-79.
- Siti Rohani, Y. (2009). The development process and women's labour force participation: A macro-level analysis of patterns and trends from the 1980s. In Jamilah Ariffin (Ed.), *Readings on Women and Development in Malaysia - A Sequel Tracing Four Decades of Change* (pp.19-56). Petaling Jaya: MPH Group Publishing.
- Subramaniam, G. (2010). Are Malaysian women interested in flexible working arrangements at workplace? *Business Studies Journal*. Vol. 2 Special Issue No. 2 pp.83-98.
- Wilson D. S., (2006), A new look at the affluent worker: The good working mother in Post-War Britain. *Twentieth Century British History*, 17, pp 206-229.