

Work and family in the UK: Perspectives of minority Asian women expatriates

Balancing work and family commitments is challenging for everyone. But what happens when you are an expatriate, cut off from your family support network, and adjusting to a culture with potentially very different expectations around gender roles and the appropriateness of non-family-based childcare? Some of my recent research has explored how expatriate Asian minority women in the UK experience the work-family interface and respond to national and organisational family-friendly practices.

In a [paper](#) co-authored with [Sameera Khokher](#), a graduate of the MSc International Employment Relations and Human Resource Management programme at LSE, we interview newly expatriate Pakistani professionals. These individuals come from a traditional Muslim society that is strongly patriarchal, with [clearly demarcated gender roles](#); men are seen as economic providers, and women as family caretakers. Extended families are organised in hierarchical structures, and decision-making authority is generally vested in older relatives. As such, it's common for mothers-in-law to have [greater decision-making authority](#) over young couples' family planning than the couple itself.

Being expatriates allows these young professionals the freedom of an independent and democratic family unit. While social, cultural, and religious norms would have been sources of pressure to have children immediately after marriage in Pakistan, our study participants are delaying childbirth to gain educational qualifications and establish careers in a foreign country. Exposure to the different lifestyles practised and values espoused by UK residents – whose society is, relatively speaking, more open, tolerant, and egalitarian – results in these individuals adopting less traditional attitudes and beliefs regarding women's education and women's employment.

When it comes to family-friendly work practices, the availability of part-time or flexible hours has the potential to significantly affect employment outcomes for Pakistani expatriate women who, in the absence of extended family to provide care for children, might not return to work following childbirth. These expatriates express a strong preference for childcare to be performed by family members; this is connected to concerns about children being isolated in a foreign culture. Childcare options that are not sensitive to religious or cultural concerns are unlikely to be acceptable to most Pakistani families. Employers wishing to retain expatriate Pakistani staff after childbirth may need to invest in local Pakistani childcare providers in order to promote them as a viable alternative to direct family care. More creative benefits can also be considered; for example, supporting the travel of expatriate staff members' parents to provide childcare assistance, by paying expenses for airfare and visitors' visas.



I'm also working with [Seonyoung Hwang](#) from the University of Warwick on a project exploring how work and non-work commitments positively influence one another for expatriate Asian minority women in the UK. In the interviews, women often compare their work-family experiences in the UK to those of people they know, or their own past experiences, in their home country. Several Japanese women say that achieving a satisfactory work-family balance is more feasible in the UK, which has relatively high provision of quality childcare, than in Japan, where a [lack of affordable](#)

childcare keeps many women from returning to work after childbirth. The quality of UK childcare options is also mentioned by Indian participants, who compare the calibre of the provision favourably to that in India. These working mothers report being able to focus on their work responsibilities without the distraction of worrying about their children, being satisfied that they are receiving good care.

In contrast, affordable, full-time childcare and eldercare options in the UK can be perceived as lacking by those from nations where foreign domestic workers (FDWs) are often employed to perform caregiving duties. For example, one in five households in Hong Kong and Singapore have live-in FDWs, rising to **one in three** for households with young children. To encourage women to work outside the home, the Singaporean government offers **financial assistance** with employing FDWs to residents with young, elderly, and/or disabled dependents. According to a Singaporean woman participating in our research, balancing work and family is much more difficult in the UK than in Asia because of the relatively higher cost of employing a full-time nanny. This is undoubtedly true; FDWs in countries such as Malaysia and Taiwan are **excluded from minimum wage legislation**, while in Hong Kong they are subject to **lower minimum wage** requirements than nationals. This enables dual career households in this region to function by outsourcing caregiving to low paid migrant workers, but the **lack of protective legislation** in place for these workers opens the door to **exploitation** and **abuse**.

For expatriate Asian minority women in the UK, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to work-family practices that guarantees satisfaction. Diversity in expectations for caregiving results in diverse needs for support among expatriates. Employers familiarising themselves with staff requirements and adapting their provision accordingly will be best placed to reap the engagement and retention benefits of a positive work-family balance.



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