

# Why Can't We Have Both? A Discussion on Work-Life Balance and Women Career Advancement in Malaysia\* \*\*

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## Abstract

While the number of women labor force in Malaysia is increasing, only a few of them make it to the top. For many reasons, some women turn down top position offer and some of them refuse to stay working. Commitment to the family, work-life conflict and lack of support from the family and the colleagues are among issues that caused women to have less interest to pursue career advancement. This article examines the role of work-life balance and its relationship to women career advancement, and why both are important in Malaysia. The arguments are arranged based on a review of the previous literature to conceptualize the relationship between work-life balance and career advancement. It is found that both work-life balance and women career advancement are important to retain women in the working world as well as to motivate them to pursue promotion to a higher position. Even though some researchers agreed that the relationship between work-life balance and career advancement is mostly negative, others found positive relationship between both constructs. At the end of the paper, some suggestions on how to improve work-life balance and career advancement are presented as well as suggestion for future research.

**Keywords:** Career Advancement, Work-Life Balance, Women, Human Resource Management, Malaysia

**JEL Classification Code:** M50, M54.

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## 1. Introduction

Hoobler, Lemmon and Wayne (2014) wrote that Lisa Belkin, author of the New York Times "Life's Work" column, wrote, "Why don't women run the world? Maybe it's because they don't want to". Belkin affirmed that women are less interested to be promoted to a higher position and many of them retreat from a high position. Meanwhile, Posholi (2013) and Murniati (2012) recounted in their study that women were not looking forward to a promotion because the organizations preferred men than women to be promoted to higher positions. Other factors that restrict women from getting high position are gender bias, stereotyping and discrimination against women (Al-Asfour, Tlaiss, Khan, & Rajasekar, 2017; Orser, Riding, & Stanley, 2012), and long working hours (International Labour Office, 2016). Women usually took a longer time to be promoted (Flynn, Earlie, & Cross, 2015; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011b) and sometimes jobs that are offered to women are limited and not many

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opportunities for career advancement (Al-Asfour et al., 2017) due to its cultural and social tradition and not because of limitations of skills and capabilities of women (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011b).

Shahida, Hazelena Dewi, Mohd Hakimi and Zulhizzam (2015) found that the higher position women occupy, the higher role conflict they will experience. They also concluded that women found that role conflict is one of the biggest barriers to their career advancement. Therefore, women expected for more balance between work and life in the contemporary career setting (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). However, the study on the relationship between work-life interface and career is still lacking and need more investigations (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Therefore, this article is written to examine the relationship between work-life balance and career advancement in the current career setting of Malaysia.

Women struggle to fulfil others' expectation or "respectable femininity" that influenced their career advancement perception (Ansari, 2016; Fernando & Cohen, 2014). Respectable femininity means that women are expected to be excellent in completing works at home and at the office as well as to achieve work-life balance. Women who are capable of successfully managing work and life dimensions are regarded as having a successful career (Poon, Briscoe, Abdul-Ghani, & Jones, 2015). Due to their commitment towards their family women desire to achieve work-life balance, unfortunately, in some careers work-life balance is not easy to accomplish.

Women's commitment to family has been considered as one of the important factors that hindering women's career advancement (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Shah, 2014; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011a, 2011b). Some women in Malaysia also believed that family life is a hindrance for career advancement (Abdul Ghani Azmi et al., 2012; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011b) due to the cultural and social tradition of Malaysian communities that still emphasise on women's role as a nurturer in a family. The studies above are evidence that women do not always get support from the surroundings for their career advancement but always expected to fulfil certain expectations.

By understanding the relationship between women career advancement and work-life balance, issues of conflict especially pertaining work-life conflict could be addressed. This study will also increase understanding of women career advancement and work-life balance. Thus, it would also become an addition to the existing research on career advancement of women in South East Asia, particularly Malaysia.

## 2. Literature Review and Discussion

### 2.1. Women Career Advancement

A career is defined by Khadijah, Shahibudin and Ummi Naiemah (2015) as "... a fascinating and multifaceted phenomenon which is able to give an impact in various aspects of a person's life". The traditional career definition was not merely criticised because of the limitation of career to professional work life, but also because it was only focused on western middle class. A broader definition was then introduced by Super in 1976 as "The sequence of major positions occupied by a person throughout his preoccupational, occupational and postoccupational life; includes work related roles such as those of student, employee, and pensioner, together with complementary vocational, familial and civil roles". Only in the early 2000s "a more inclusive and less conceptually and culturally complex term" has been introduced; where the term 'work' was used in the area of human behaviour (Patton & McMahon, 2014).

Career development was perceived in the 1950s as a development process that takes several years, and the process was perceived completed in early adulthood. It was only in the 1970s where a career was perceived as a lifelong process related to work activities (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Besides career development, the career issues that usually studied among others are career choice, career success, career aspiration, career motivation as well as career advancement. Career advancement is considered as the objective aspect of success while career satisfaction is the subjective aspect of success (Shah, 2014). Career advancement refers to the status or achievements due to the activities to improve one's career. Career development, instead, refers to the process undertaken by the organisation and the employee to improve the employee's performance and job position over a specified period (Khadijah et al., 2015).

Early career advancement theories only focus on men and it is not a surprise since women were only minority in the workforce. In the 1990s and early 2000s, women were still considered as a minority in the study of career advancement, "separated from mainstream career theory" (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Due to the difference of nature of men and women, physically, mentally, psychologically as well as different perceptions based on religious and cultural inclination, more studies should be conducted to study women career advancement. For example, commitment to family is among factors that make career choice for women is different from that of men. Furthermore, women executives follow a different path to advance in their career

from their men counterparts and most of the time men managers advanced more in their careers (Shah, 2014).

For decades, researchers have been trying to understand the underlying issues of women career advancement. There have been debates (Farmer, 1987; Kelly & Dabul Marin, 1998; Metz, 2017; Straub, 2007) on the issues pertaining to women career advancement. Issues like facilitation of women career advancement (Knörr, 2005), organizational supports (Burke, Koyuncu, & Fiksenbaum, 2006) and the relationship of women career advancement and work-family conflict (Slan-Jerusalim & Chen, 2009) have been studied. Also, women perspective on career success differs in interpretation by which some women defined their career success as advancement in their career, but others consider themselves successful by being able to manage conflict between work and life (Tlaiss, 2015).

Adogbo et al. (2015) observed in their study that women sense of responsibility towards family is the greatest barrier to their career advancement and "women are more likely to turn down positions for family-related reasons" (Allen, French, & Poteet, 2016). Abdullah et al. (2013) concur with the idea that work-life conflict is one of the biggest barriers to women career advancement. The perception of the traditional role of women as primary caregiver has never changed and the role is observed in almost every culture existed among people. This traditional role resulted in the perception that having children could possibly increase the work-life conflict level. Cross (2010) discovered that women who have no children also perceived that having children would not enable them to achieve high positions (Metz, 2017). Mostly only single women and those women who have children older than 12 years old are considering to pursue higher positions (Cross, 2010).

Women lack the desire to pursue senior management position due to the issue of balancing between family and senior management position and women may reject more demanding careers because of a perceived role conflict (Patton & McMahon, 2014) and heavy workloads (Murniati, 2012). Furthermore, it was found that women had to work harder than men if they want to pursue higher positions (Murniati, 2012; Shah, 2014). The most significant challenge undergone by working women today is a conflict between work and life (Adisa, Gbadamosi, & Osabutey, 2016) and accepting a higher position usually would lead to higher conflict (Murniati, 2012). Moreover, Cross (2010) revealed that only 13 out of 30 women in her study said they are interested in pursuing a higher position. Lack of support system in the office (Posholi, 2013), as well as from the family (Itani, Sidani, & Baalbaki, 2011) and the government (Hodges, 2017) are among barriers to women career advancement. Other barriers such as lack of mentoring facilities, gender stereotypes and social isolation that

discouragingly influence their career advancement (Shah, 2014) are also the contributing factors.

Research also indicates that women's own view of their ability to exercise leadership effectively is somewhat negative (Hodges, 2017). Such feelings appear to arise despite the increasing levels of education among women (Hodges, 2017); the sense of fear because of feeling inferior as well as society's belief that women lack capabilities to be a leader. Women believed that their leadership opportunities were constrained by the view in society that women lack the capabilities for coping with the demands of leadership (Hodges, 2017). They also being discriminated in selection for promotion as well as for training and development (Hodges, 2017).

Women have been engaged in multiple strategies in order to manage work and life duties which include getting various types of support, as well as other strategies in handling career and family, such as negotiating with co-workers and spouse (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009) or other family members. Career decision-making is one of the stressful and anxiety-provoking life experience which could lead to career decision-making difficulties (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2015). Women must think through all aspects in making a career decision, especially their family when considering for an advancement in career. Therefore, women need more support such as organisational and managerial support (Rowley, Kang, & Lim, 2016) as well as family support (Kemp & Zhao, 2016) to ensure that every aspect of work and life is continue to be in order or manageable when they decide to accept a promotion.

## **2.2. Women Career Advancement Issues in Malaysia**

Malaysian population consists of more than 32 million people and 48 percent of the population are women (Bernama, 2017). 14 million of the total population of Malaysian are employed and 38 percent of them are women. Traditionally, women were viewed as a homemaker and they were not exposed to the working world even though Hirschman (2016) sustained that Malaysian women participation in economics were very active since the 1960s. Most of the women in Malaysia work for improving economies of their family (Itani et al., 2011). Between 1995 and 2000 women participation in economies was very low, and they were mostly participated in the middle and low-level jobs, with the majority of them was concentrated in the unskilled/semi-skilled categories and recruited as a low wage labour force (Aminudin & Abdullah, 2009). Therefore, the Malaysian government has given continuous effort in promoting women's equality in career advancement (Talentcorp Malaysia & ACCA, 2013). With the outpouring of women labour today, the traditional role of women as full-

time housewives has changed dramatically and with the increase of women participation in economics, the issue of career advancement must be given more attention today, more than it was before.

60% of working women in Malaysia agreed that they have an equal opportunity to men in career progression (Talentcorp Malaysia & ACCA, 2013). Department of Statistics of Malaysia (2015) reported that 56.2% of professionals in Malaysia are women but only 22.5% of women are promoted to the managerial position. In 2015, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Mohd Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak remarked that only 16% of Malaysian women are on the boards of public companies and the number of women on listed boards is even smaller at 10.3%. The government's targeted for at least 30% women participation in boards of public companies (de Pater, 2015). Therefore, he asked for more assistance to be given to women to help them to break the glass ceiling. Also, the former Chief Secretary of Malaysian Government, Tan Sri Dr. Ali Hamsa announced that 57.5% of civil service in Malaysia are occupied by women (this percentage excludes police and military service) with 35% of the top management posts are occupied by women (Ministry of Women Family and Community, 2016). The report shows that despite the effort taken by the government to promote more women into top posts (International Labour Office, 2016; Noor & Mahudin, 2016), the number is still low.

Therefore, it is not a surprise when Global Gender Gap reported that Malaysia is ranked at number 106 (out of 144 countries) in terms of gender gaps on economic, education, health and political criteria (World Economic Forum, 2016) compared to 2011 whereby Malaysia was listed at number 98<sup>th</sup>. This means that Malaysia's gender gap is widening despite its effort to promote more women involvement in those sectors. Malaysia is ranked at number 12 out of 16 countries listed in the report under East Asia and the Pacific region. Therefore, this study is important to investigate women career advancement, to help to close the gender gap in Malaysia. While many types of research were conducted all over the world on women career advancement, most studies were conducted in America and Europe, leaving spaces for studies on women career advancement in Asia (Murniati, 2012; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011b), particularly Malaysia.

Malaysian society is a collectivist society (Ibrahim, 2015; Sumaco, Imrie, & Hussain, 2014) and loyalty in a collectivist culture is vital. Therefore, Malaysians appreciate time with family which is why it also effect the career advancement of women. Malaysian is seen as having a need to be with family and give importance to family and extended family (Ibrahim, 2015; Sumaco et al., 2014). The collectivist society of Malaysia has shaped the culture in Malaysia where

Malaysians give more importance to family members than career and this will influence the career decision-making of women. Therefore, work-life balance and family issues are important aspects for women career advancement (Subramaniam, Mohamed Khadri, Maniam, & Ali, 2016) whereby 42% women agreed that both are their biggest challenge. Women are also expected to do most of the household work even though they are working full-time (Fernandez & Shiang, 2017; Hirschman, 2016).

### 2.3. Work-Life Balance

The most widely used definition of work-life balance is a lack of conflict or interference between work and family/life roles (Frone, 2003). Therefore, many studies focus on the absence of conflict between work and personal life as a component of work-life balance due to this definition. Another component of work-life balance is work-life enrichment or facilitation.

Balance is a more global view than the conflict and enrichment experiences (Carlson et al., 2009). Conflict and enrichment seem to happen on an individual level and are believed to be linking mechanisms between work and family (Marks & Macdermid, 1996). These mechanisms specify the extent to which they will affect work and family either negatively (conflict) or positively (enrichment) (Carlson et al., 2009). This approach was confirmed by Carlson et al. (2009) suggesting that in their study, balance explained more variance beyond conflict and enrichment for five work and family outcomes they tested, showing that balance is theoretically different from conflict and enrichment (Shah, 2014). The negative side of work-life is operationalised as work-life conflict and the positive side is operationalised as enrichment or facilitation. A negative relation between work and family are seen as conflict can influence an individual's emotional and physical health leading to detrimental effects on organizations such as absenteeism and declining productivity (Shah, 2014). According to Netemeyer, Boles and Mcmurrian (1996), work-life conflict is "...distinct but related forms of inter-role conflict". Work-life conflict and work-life balance are also closely related concepts and they are conceptually overlapping because these concepts are defined or imply the absence of the other (Kossek & Lee, 2017).

This study focusses on the work-life conflict component to investigate the work-life balance. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) defined work-life conflict as "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect." Work-life conflict is hypothesised as a concept with bidirectional nature (work-to-life and life-to-work) (Mcmillan, 2011), multiple forms (time-based, strain-based, and behavior-

based) (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Slan-Jerusalim & Chen, 2009) and multiple life roles (e.g., spouse, parental, elder care, home care, and leisure).

Work-life conflict concept was initially explained in the 1960s by the role theory framework. The role theory predicts that inter-role conflict from work and family are mutually mismatched. Responsibilities of a person do not only lie in his work but also on his family. At the workplace, a conflict between responsibility towards work and family may exist. However, it is not possible, argued by Murphy and Doherty (2011), to measure work-life balance or work-life conflict in an absolute way because of it is perceived based on personal circumstances. The conflict, nevertheless, can be resolved, and among them are through getting social support (Achour, Grine, & Mohd. Nor, 2014) and using religious coping strategies (Achour et al., 2014; Sav, Harris, & Sebar, 2014). Work-life balance issues have become a major attention in research and practices since 1980, due to increasing number of women employees. "Increasing female workforce participation, higher divorce rates, more dual-earner and single-parent families, more families with both child and elder care responsibilities, and a reconceptualization of traditional gender roles...increased globalization and use of technology, knowledge-based economies, deregulations, and labour shortages" are also among other reasons of the increased attention on the study of work-life balance (Slan-Jerusalim & Chen, 2009).

Single people and those without children also reported having some conflict between work and personal life as all the individuals may be sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, or may live with friends who function as a family (Kossek & Lee, 2017; Waumsley, Houston, & Marks, 2010). Work-life balance is believed to have an important impact towards their organisations as well as employees (Mohd. Noor, 2011). Hence, the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development has collaborated with TalentCorp Malaysia in creating a website to feature the guidelines and importance of work-life practices in Malaysia. This effort shows that the government has put effort into increasing the quality of work-life (Talentcorp Malaysia & ACCA, 2013). Nevertheless, (Azlinzuraini Ahmad et al., 2014) argued that work-life policies awareness is still low in Malaysia despite the government initiatives on it. "In Malaysia, the problem of work-family balance and family obligations is a critical matter" (Achour et al., 2014) and further study on work-life balance could increase more understanding on balancing between work and personal life matters. In this study, the terms "work-life conflict" will be occasionally used to illustrate the elevation of work-life balance by reducing work-life conflict.

## 2.4. Work-life Balance among Gender

Women are more likely to spend more working hours than men and this could be caused by the larger share of household work that is generally borne by women. Long working hours in Malaysia (International Labour Office, 2016) could also decrease the level of work-life balance. This creates a desire for less hours of work, however, fewer working hours is perceived as low job commitment (Fernandez & Shiang, 2017) and thus means difficulties in getting promotion.

According to Abdul Ghani Azmi, Syed Ismail, and Basir (2011), women put their family as a priority, which created conflict when women need to work. Yavas, Babakus, and Karatepe (2008) claimed that female frontline employees in their study experience significantly higher levels of work-family and family-work conflicts than their male counterparts. Sav and Harris (2013) however, found that there is no evidence that work-life balance experience is different between men and women.

On the contrary, Belwal and Belwal (2014) maintained work-life balance issues affect women the most and had become a barrier to women career advancement. Many studies found that work-to-family conflict is higher than family-to-work conflict (Zhang, Foley, & Yang, 2013). Conflicts in the work-life balance of working women affect their health who report more stress, headache, muscle tension, weight gain and depressed than their male counterparts, according to Delina and Raya (2013). Itani et al. (2011) indicated it is not possible for women to have work and life balance; they only increase stress by pretending to have the balance.

## 2.5. The Relationship between Work-Life Balance and Career Advancement

It is eminent that the level of work-life conflict differs from each individual, but it does affect career advancement distinctively. It is found from a study that employees with children and/or elderly dependents are more likely to have higher work and life conflict. The majority (85%) of women who wanted higher positions were either single or have no children or have children older than 12 years of age (Cross, 2010), which suggest that women perceived having children as a barrier to career advancement. Further, Sav and Harris (2013) argued non-work related antecedents have more impacts on life-work conflict among women than in men, which explains the high level of conflict among women. Moreover, employees with a higher level of education find it harder to balance between work and personal life than employees with a lower level of education (Aminah Ahmad, 2008). In other words, employees with higher education

level experienced higher work-life conflict than those with lower education level.

There is, however, a significant positive relationship between work-life balance and career advancement potential (Lyness & Judiesch, 2008, 2014). Consequently, they argued that managers who were rated higher on work-life balance were rated higher on career advancement potential than the managers who were rated lower on work-life balance. Lyness and Judiesch (2014) discovered that there was a positive relationship between perceived work-life balance and career advancement motivation based on self, peer, and supervisor ratings. In addition, Marican et al. (2011) implied that there are positive effects of work on families such as lesser depression and positive psychological well-being. Employees who attain a balanced life and career usually have better performance compared to those who don't (Omar, Mohd, & Ariffin, 2015). With these contradictory findings from previous research, the researcher decided to investigate whether the work-life balance will have a positive or negative effect on women career advancement.

Flynn et al. (2015) informed that most of the respondents from their study negated the idea of the existence of gender inequality in their organization, however, the result shows otherwise. For example, the issue of visibility of women may negatively affect their opportunity to reach a higher position. Women were always had to take leave (i.e. maternity leave or taking leave to take care of children) which is not the case for men. Cross (2010) supported the argument by saying that if women are not visible to the eyes of the top management team, they are less likely to get promoted.

Careers can be understood better by studying the influence of work and life on them, in past research, it was confirmed that work-life interface has a significant relationship with career advancement (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Saadin et al., 2016). Further, Linge (2015) found that family responsibilities and married status both have a significant relationship with the career advancement of women to managerial positions.

One of the biggest challenges of every woman is managing career with family (Beal, 2017). Some people believed that when a woman is not at home, her family suffers (Itani et al., 2011). Itani et al. (2011) insisted that women should set the right priorities, in terms of what they really wanted. If they want to raise the children, the idea of having a career should be postponed or withheld. However, if they want a career they must accept the reality that they would not have total care and control of their own children and have to let the children into the care of the other caretaker. With all those perspectives in mind, consequently, some women perceived themselves to be successful if they

are able to manage both work and family with less conflict (Tlaiss, 2015).

Work-life conflict leads to lack of job tenure, which makes it difficult for promotions and hence careers. Successfully coping with work-life conflict is critical to careers because many females leave work due to childbirth and childcare. If this issue can be resolved, there is hope for women's advancement to high-ranking positions. (Rowley et al., 2016).

### 3. Conclusion

For some women, a higher pay may not be a motivation to pursue high positions. Career success for them, may not be the highest position they might achieve in an organization. They perceived being able to balance between work and home as a definition of success. Even though many researches support the negative relationship between work-life balance and career advancement, there is other research that found the relationship to be positive. These contradicting findings should be examined further for reasons that could contribute to the different outcomes.

Sometimes, a good policy is not enough to retain women in labour market, for example, women choose to drop out of the labour market despite laws that entitle national women to 70 days of maternity leave with optional leave for up to two years on a reduced salary to enable mothers to nurse infant children (Itani et al., 2011). When the conflict between work and life become higher and unmanageable, women would highly consider sacrificing career over family (Itani et al., 2011). Others maintain that the difficulty of balancing professional and family obligations leads to women feeling that they are unable to take on a leadership role. The conflict between home and work roles leads to women feeling frustrated, inferior, and lack of self-confidence (Hodges, 2017). In Africa and Nigeria, for example, any woman who intends to work or involve into business must get approval from the government or leadership to ensure that she is able to adequately combine her responsibilities as a wife and mother with that of a professional effectively; otherwise, she will have to struggle with social disapproval (Beal, 2017). Therefore, by promoting work-life balance could be the answer to encourage more women to retain and advance in their career.

Both work-life balance and career advancement can be pursued with a good social support. It was found that having a supportive supervisor may be equivalent to having a supportive spouse that could assist women in balancing work and family issues (Borhanuddin, 2009). Russo et al. (2015) argued, "...work and family social support is key resources that can promote greater role balance, higher

readiness to engage in multiple roles and unleash positive energy." Married women who get helps from their husband were found to be happier and have a more successful career (Borhanuddin, 2009). Therefore, a support from the people around women could be one of the answers that enable women to achieve both work-life balance and career advancement.

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