

Work-Life Conflicts of Working Couples and Their Management: A Theoretical Framework

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary workplaces there exist many employed parents who are endeavoring to balance participation between the two central life domains i.e. work and family. For parents living in dual-earner families, simultaneously occupying work and family roles can be difficult and has been associated with outcomes such as physical and psychological stress and organizational performance deficits. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the work and family roles accumulation experiences of working couple relationships, and to explore the strategies and processes to be adopted by working couples and their organizations to manage work life balance.

Keywords: Workforce diversity, Working couples, HRM, Stereotypes, Work-life conflicts, Work-life balance.

1. Introduction

Families and employing organizations throughout the industrialized world are changing fundamentally and rapidly, both in terms of structure and in terms of expectations. However, work and family policies and practices within organizations and wider societies, and the values and assumptions which underpin them, are changing more slowly. The failure to reflect and build upon rapid social change poses threats to occupational health and has far reaching implications for human resources management.

Further, organizations are becoming more diverse. The future human resource will include an increased number of women employees, more minorities, variety of ethnic backgrounds, more ageing workers, disabled, and people with different lifestyles. The extent to which these shifts are effectively and efficiently managed will have an impact on the competitive and economic performance of the business organizations (Kundu, 2003).

In a newspaper article, Taj (2012) has mentioned that in a bid to increase their gender diversity ratio, companies

today are selecting female graduates from B- schools during campus placements, discovers a recent study by FLEXI Careers India. Although girls add up to just 10-33 per cent of the student strength at the B- schools in the country, they still have been grabbing great offers at campus placements. “HR teams in organizations have been mandated with maintaining a balance in the gender ratio of employees; this and an overall awareness and acceptance of the importance of having a well balanced employee strength has prompted business leaders to identify roles where women would be attuned, productive, available and preferred. Organizations are therefore, starting at the grass root levels of hiring females at the campus levels, so that they can train and nurture them into future leaders of the world,” informs Sangeeta Lala, senior VP and co-founder, Team Lease Services. Traditionally, women have been under represented in organizations and the argument for equal opportunity employment as not borne sufficient in India. Naveen Narayanan, global head-talent acquisition, HCL Technologies points out that trends show a lot of companies are focused on diversity hiring than ever before. “Companies are advocating and strongly working towards hiring/ developing women executives as they believe the natural diversity it brings in thinking and action is of value to their firms. Various Targeted campaigns for hiring women employees, creating inclusive workplaces and policies focused on retention of women employees are some initiatives. This has become a norm for any progressive organization,” he states.

Therefore, workforce-employing pattern is changing because both women and men are entering into the organizations. This gives the concept of working couples i.e. the couples in which both husband and wife have a professional, managerial or administrative occupation. When wife and husband both are earning, it may be possible that they are in same as well as in different profession(s) or organizations or doing the business collectively or by separately. Both partners have to devote most of the time toward their careers so as to fulfill the office assignments. But with the same time, they also have

to maintain personal home life. There are many professional stressors like heavy work load as well as family life and societal stressors that are arising pressure among the working couples. So, in order to reduce such stressors and conflicts one has to maintain balance between work and family life.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 HRM and Diversity

We are living in a critical juncture of human history, under the shadow of ethnic warfare, nuclear war and an essentially discriminatory economic regime. Some of the issues concerning human civilization are product of our consumerist life style and others are the result of the doctrine of domination and power game. However, the crux of the present world order is the issue of ecology, development and gender and therefore need specific attention. Among all these issues, gender has gains primacy in recent discourses on social analysis because of its spread and effect. Women who constitute half of the population have been subjected to tyranny and oppression of a patriarchal order for centuries and in fact, most of them are suffering from the same fate even today (Employment News, 2000). Throughout the world women usually have fewer rights and a lower social status than men. The traditional role of a wife and mother dominates and most women's lives center on their households. Hence, women the world over, are still demanding for equality and justice because of the widespread discrimination they face in all walks of life. It is this aspect that needs to be closely examined because the future of the society in terms of its direction and pace is dependent on this question. Accordingly, many policies and programs are being drafted with some awareness of their marginalized position. Today, gender analyst must pay special attention to the wide-ranging frameworks regarding the perspective, approach and strategies advocated at different forums for understanding and combating women's unfavorable placement in the society if we have to get rid of gender discrimination (Dagar, 1998). Women employees today constitute a major share of the workforce. In India alone, over 400 million are employed in various streams due to a combination of factors like: Women's emancipation, Growing economic needs, Greater equality of sexes, Increased literacy rate, and Suitability for certain soft jobs (public relations, telephone operations, reception counter, HR managers, etc.) (Rao, 2008).

2.2 Working Couples

Dual-career couples were identified in the late 1960s as an important societal and workplace phenomenon. Such families were defined as those in which "both heads of

household pursue careers and at the same time maintain a family life together" (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1971). Dual-career couples were a small minority when Rapoport and Rapoport apparently coined the term in 1969. The dual-career couples, where both partners are pursuing simultaneous careers, is a prevalent and lasting phenomenon that reflects the increasing educational achievements and career aspirations of women worldwide (Davidson, 1987). Each spouse in a married relationship is pursuing a career that demands a high level of personal commitment, a constant updating of knowledge, and has a component of upward mobility. The dual-career title includes women in professions and in trainees skill careers (Cron, 2001). The dual-career relationship implies a psychological commitment of marital or de facto partners to both the family relations and their individual careers. This has been hailed the middle-class marital relationship (Hertz, 1986). Now these can be of further four types: a) Working in Same Organization, b) Working in Different Organization, c) Working in Same City and d) Working in Different City depending upon their work.

2.3 Stereotyping and Family Roles

Stereotyping is the process of categorizing an individual into a particular group and attributing a set of characteristics to the individual on the basis of the group membership (Davidson and Cooper, 1993). Gender stereotypes or sex stereotypes are shared beliefs about the psychological traits of women and men (Konrad and Linnehan, 1999).

In the world of work, Schien (2001) found that barriers to women in management exist worldwide. She noted although women represent more than 40 per cent of the world's labour force, their share of management positions remains unacceptably low. The author concludes, based on numerous studies that there is a view of "think managers – think male" syndrome that is held globally, especially among males. Even in traditional feminine professions such as social work and education, women do not occupy key decision-making jobs in proportion to their numbers. Women tend to stay in doer position with low-paying jobs while men plan, organize, direct and control (Curran, 2001; Carli and Eagly, 2001). Ledet and Henley (2000) added that women in high-level position or power are rated as being "masculine" as men and more "masculine" than women in lower levels of position of power, indicating that women at such levels are viewed as capable as their male counterparts. These gender differences bring diverse perspective to the workforce.

Simmons (1996) in his book "New Leadership for Women and Men- Building an Inclusive Organization" had chosen

six female stereotypes that 'Real women' are sensitive and soft, they care for other people, are expected to be slim, beautiful and well-dressed, have experienced the world as a frightening place, they need a man to protect them and aren't leaders. These stereotypes demonstrate the primary content of women's gender conditioning and its cumulative effect which appears to be that many women have lower expectations of themselves (settles for less) and their lives (preferring to accept less than to do battle for their just position).

According to Simmons (1996), the process of male conditioning takes place while growing up and occurs in a number of very specific ways. Some of the most important of these are that men have to be disconnected from their ability to feel, they are separate from women by sexism, all men are hurt by gay oppression and homophobia, every man is the victim of violence and abuse, they become isolated and achievement-oriented, women become sexual objects and men are separated from their children by work. Thus, following proposition can be stated:

Proposition 1: Age old stereotypes of male and female affect their roles both in family and work-life.

2.4 Stressors

Despite the increased numbers of women both participating in the workforce and achieving management positions the evidence is that, for the majority, advancement to the very highest levels is rare and that the "glass ceiling" still exists (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000). The gender segregation in occupations has meant that women remain concentrated at the bottom of the career ladder even in those areas that are traditionally female dominated. Female managers in every country remain a tiny fraction of those in senior positions (Linehan, 2002) and, although female managers have high levels of education and a desire to progress in their careers, it remains the case that few achieve the same status or salary as their male counterparts (Che ^nevert and Tremblay, 2002). Surveys by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in 2002 (EOC, 2002, 2003; Purcell, 2002; Neathey et al., 2003) show not only that the pay gap between men and women has remained static but also that men tend to be promoted more quickly (2002). The picture for women that have reached the top level of organizations is somewhat mixed. A survey of FTSE 100 companies suggests that the rate of increase of the presence of women on the board of directors is improving, although the percentage remains small at 7.2 per cent (Vinnacombe, 2002). However, in contrast a recent DTI report suggested that there is a shortage of female non-executive directors

(2003) and an EOC survey noted that the presence of women at the top across all sectors remains low (2004).

Researchers (Townsend, 1997; Oakley, 2000) argued that following three categories explain the barriers that result in a glass ceiling:

- (1) Corporate practices such as recruitment, retention, and promotion;
- (2) Behavioral and cultural causes such as stereotyping and preferred leadership style; and
- (3) Structural and cultural explanations rooted in feminist theory.

In addition to the above stressors there can be many more stressors that directly or indirectly affects work life balance of working couples like: Designation is Managerial or Non-Managerial, Job type is Part-time/Contractual or Regular, Organization Type is Indian or MNC, Organization Sector is Government/Public or Private, Organizational Nature is Service, Manufacturing or any Other, Age, Immediate Boss is Male or Female, Spouse Working in Same Organization, Different Organization or Self Employed/ Independent Professionals, Spousal Organization is in Same City or Different City, Family Type is Joint Family or Nuclear Family, Either they are having children or not, If they are having children than the number, age and stage of Children ,Having Elders at home or not.

Barrier is defined as a factor, event or phenomenon that prevents or controls access to individuals from making progress. The following section discusses three types of barriers, namely, family-, societal- and organizational-related barriers.

2.4.1 Family-related barriers.

The traditional division of labour leads people to expect domestic responsibilities to be women's primary roles and any obligation that detracts from their ability to perform their primary role causes role conflict. In the view of most employers and many employees, the gender division of labour frees men from domestic and childcare responsibilities at home (Charles and Davies, 2000). Based on a comparative study of work structures between Americans and Europeans discussed in Williams and Cooper (2004), women do 65-85 per cent of childcare work and more than 70 per cent of elderly care work. As women reduce their time in the workplace, they see depressed wages and lack of benefits and advancement that accompany that choice. In studies of women scientists and engineers by, Maskell-Pretz and Hopkins (1997), the pressure that women face in balancing career and family is the most significant barrier in women's attempt to advance.

Rosser's research has shown that women in the field of engineering fail to reach senior positions due to 12-14 hours of work duration. Makell-Pretz and Hopkins (1997) noted that women engineers face career mobility barriers as they begin to consider starting a family. Little time off and long and tiring work call for a sacrifice of private life which many women are not prepared to make, at least until their children grow up. Miller's study at an oil company indicates that women have to reinforce the masculine system, resulting in short-term individual gains but an apparently long-term failure to change the masculine values of the industry. Hence, the following proposition is developed:

Proposition 2: Family-related barriers are comparatively more affecting females negatively than males.

2.4.2 Societal-related barriers.

Ridgeway (2001) demonstrated the negative effect of the ideal worker belief to working mothers. As sanctioned by the belief that a good mother must give less effort and priority to work demands, she is therefore seen as a less committed worker. Furthermore, Ridgeway added that this biased belief is likely to create barriers to women's advancement in the workplace. Such barriers include the lack of opportunities for women to present their ideas, therefore reducing their influence over group decisions. In contrast to the societal judgment made towards mothers, employed fathers are regarded as better parents and more professionally competent (Feugen et al., 2004). This notion includes the belief that mothers must do more than fathers to be labelled as good parents and that mothers are held to higher standards of responsibilities than fathers. Based on social role theory that guides judgment of mothers and fathers, Feugen et al.'s (2004) sampled participants judged full-time employed mothers as violating the norms of caretaker role, but employed fathers embody the provider role. As such, motherhood would have a detrimental effect on women's career opportunities but an enhancing effect on men's opportunities. Thus, following proposition can be stated:

Proposition 3: Societal-related barriers are comparatively more affecting females negatively than males.

2.4.3 Organizational-related barriers.

The concept of organizational culture is important to understand barriers faced by career women. Harvey and Brown (1996) defined organizational culture as a system of shared meanings, values, beliefs, practices, group norms of the members to produce behavioral norms with regard to the working conditions of the organization. Organizational

culture is often cited as either the key facilitator or barrier to work-life policies, as cultural norms often over-ride formal policy intentions. A supportive culture can improve morale and motivate people to reduce stress and absences (Wise and Bond, 2003). Mills (2002), in his study on work culture at British Airways, claims that the holistic approach to culture is imperative as it can generate insights into how workplace practices can become discriminatory. Although organizational culture is often discussed as if it were a gender neutral phenomenon, the gendered nature of organizational culture is demonstrated daily by the multitude of differences that have been shaped in the context of male dominance. The cultural association of power and authority with masculinity makes it difficult for women to hold positions of power because their gender identity contradicts that of the masculinity of power (Charles and Davies, 2000). Hence the following proposition can be advanced:

Proposition 4: Organizational-related barriers are comparatively more affecting females negatively than males.

2.5 Work Family Conflicts

Work-family conflict (WFC) is defined as "a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Research suggests WFC is related to organizational commitment (Lyness and Thompson, 1997; Netemeyer et al., 1996), job performance (Frone et al., 1997), and turnover (Greenhaus et al., 1997). WFC also relates to non-work outcomes such as life satisfaction (Kossek and Ozeki, 1998), family involvement (Frone et al., 1992), and marital satisfaction (Coverman, 1989). Thus, WFC has implications for both organizations and employees. WFC can occur in two directions: work can interfere with family (WIF) and family can interfere with work (FIW). The present study focuses on WIF for several reasons. Research has shown that WIF, but not FIW, predicts job dissatisfaction and organizational commitment. WIF is also more prevalent than FIW (McElwain et al., 2005). Finally, we focus on WIF because it is appropriate for examining couple agreement. A spouse/partner has the opportunity to experience and observe when his or her partner's work interferes with family, but may not have the opportunity to observe when family interferes with work (Streich et al., 2007).

Dual careers can give rise to dual loyalties (Smith, 1992), which may result in negative consequences for personal relationships and the work environment. The stresses of managerial positions derive from complex managerial roles and tasks, information overload, technological

change, time pressures and deadlines, travel and mobility requirements, and pressures of managing people (Sutherland and Cooper, 1990). Continual change has intensified work pressures, while delayering and downsizing also have the potential to increase stress for managers facing career plateau crises (Hall and Richter, 1990). Effective managerial performance depends not only on individual competences and job demands, but also on the work environment (Boyatzis, 1982), although organizational support for managers is often perceived as inadequate (Nicholson and West, 1988).

Researchers have measured work–family conflict in many ways. Traditionally, researchers have measured work–family conflict uni-directionally. That is, they studied the conflict that occurred when work interfered with family. More recently researchers have begun to recognize the duality of work–family conflict by considering both directions: work interference with family and family interference with work. To fully understand the work–family interface, both directions of work–family conflict (WIF and FIW) must be considered (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

Researchers also have begun to consider the different forms of work–family conflict (Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian, 1996). Consistent with Greenhaus and Beutell's (1985) definition, three forms of work–family conflict have been identified in the literature: (a) time-based conflict, (b) strain-based conflict, and (c) behavior-based conflict. Time-based conflict may occur when time devoted to one role makes it difficult to participate in another role, strain-based conflict suggests that strain experienced in one role intrudes into and interferes with participation in another role, and behavior-based conflict occurs when specific behaviors required in one role are incompatible with behavioral expectation in another role (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). So, each of these three forms of work–family conflict has two directions: (a) conflict due to work interfering with family (WIF) and (b) conflict due to family interfering with work (FIW). When these three forms and two directions are combined six dimensions of work–family conflict result: (1) time-based WIF, (2) time-based FIW, (3) strain-based WIF, (4) strain-based FIW, (5) behavior-based WIF, and (6) behavior-based FIW.

Proposition 5: Dual career couples are having comparatively more work family conflicts than the traditional career couples.

2.6 Work Family Balance

According to the study conducted by Lockwood and Nancy (2003), life is a balancing act, and not in American

society but in every society now a days, it is safe to say that almost everyone is seeking work/life balance. But what exactly is work/life balance? We have all heard the term, and many of us complain that we don't have enough of *it* in our lives. Among men and women alike, the frustrating search for work/life balance is a frequent topic of conversation, usually translated into not enough time and/or support *to do, to handle, to manage ...* our work commitments or personal responsibilities.

“Juggling competing demands is tiring if not stressful and brings lower productivity, sickness, and absenteeism, so work/life balance is an issue for all employees and all organizations” Swift, (2002).

Lockwood and Nancy (2003) found that the meaning of work/life balance has chameleon characteristics. It means different things to different groups, and the meaning often depends on the context of the conversation and the speaker's viewpoint. The following are working definitions of terms used regarding work/life balance; some definitions overlap and some are continuing to evolve.

- *Work/family*: a term more frequently used in the past than today. The current trend is to use titles that include the phrase *work/life*, giving a broader work/life connotation or labeling referring to specific areas of support (e.g., quality of life, flexible work options, life balance, etc.)
- *Work/family conflict*: the push and pull between work and family responsibilities.
- *Work/life balance from the employee viewpoint*: the dilemma of managing work obligations and personal/family responsibilities.
- *Work/life balance from the employer viewpoint*: the challenge of creating a supportive company culture where employees can focus on their jobs while at work.
- *Family-friendly benefits*: benefits that offer employees the latitude to address their personal and family commitments, while at the same time not compromising their work responsibilities.
- *Work/life programs*: programs (often financial or time-related) established by an employer that offer employees options to address work and personal responsibilities.
- *Work/life initiatives*: policies and procedures established by an organization with the goal to enable employees to get their jobs done and at the same time provide flexibility to handle personal/family concerns.
- *Work/family culture*: the extent to which an organization's culture acknowledges and respects the family responsibilities and obligations of its employees and encourages management and

employees to work together to meet their personal and work needs.

Thus, on the basis of above literature following proposition can be stated:

Proposition 6: Comparatively new companies are offering more opportunities for balancing work-life conflicts than the old companies.

3. Strategies to Manage Work Family Conflict

An organization's need to attract and retain valued employees in a highly competitive labour market is a strong motivating factor for increased organizational awareness and action with regard to human resource policies and practices that address work/life balance. WLB, from an employee perspective, is the maintenance of a balance between responsibilities at work and at home. Employees view the benefits or working conditions that they provide to help employees balance the family and work domains as work-life benefits. WLB strategies have been defined as those that enhance the autonomy of workers in the process of coordinating and integrating work and non-work aspects of their lives. WLB strategies in an organizational setting include policies covering flexible work arrangements, child and dependent care and family and parental leave (Bardoel et al., 1998).

Bhatnagar and Rajadhyaksha (2002) surveyed that the traditional Indian concept of marriage as a stable and permanent institution (as different from being "a contract") perhaps makes it easier for Indian couples to neglect their spousal roles, as their parental roles become more demanding. Because marriage in India is widely regarded as an insoluble alliance, partners in a dual-career dyad may feel that they could take the marital bond for granted; it need not be serviced regularly. Thus, while coping with severe pressure on their limited time and energy resources that often characterizes a dual-career lifestyle, partners seem to place greater value on the parental role that requires constant nurturance than does the marital role that can be given a lower priority. What the above analysis suggests is that the "reversal in attitudes" rather than appearing between work and family roles restricts itself within the family roles, more specifically, to the marital and parental roles (Bhatnagar and Rajadhyaksha, 2002).

Along with strategies Cieri et al., (2005) found out the various barriers to WLB strategies:

- An organizational culture which emphasizes and rewards long hours and high organizational commitment (to neglect other life commitments);

- An isolated, hostile and unsupportive working environment for employees with life commitments external to the organization;
- Attitudes and resistance of supervisors and middle management;
- Preference of senior management involved in recruiting to dealing with people perceived as similar to themselves(homo-sociability); and
- Lack of communication and education about WLB strategies.

The study done by Haddock in 2006 investigates workplace practices perceived as supportive in balancing work and family. Respondents were middle-class, dual-earner couples (N=47) who described themselves as successful in balancing family and work. These supportive practices include: flexible work scheduling, non-traditional work hours, professional/job autonomy, working from home, supportive supervisors, supportive colleagues and supervisees, and the ability to set firm boundaries around work. Additionally, many participants describe their efforts to actively secure employment at workplaces that offered family-friendly alternatives, and describe the tradeoffs they are willing to make for balancing family and work (Haddock et al., 2006).

Several adaptive strategies recently "discovered" to be used by upper-income dual-career couples with children. The paper aimed to examine the lives of early twentieth century opera star Louise Homer and her composer husband Sidney, and their attempts to manage two successful careers and a family of six children. The Homers' use of adaptive strategies for dual career couples are divided into Individual, problem – focused coping like focusing and producing at work, valuing time, living simply, Emotion- focused individual coping like deriving meaning from work, Dyadic coping like valuing family, striving for partnership, taking ride in dual earning, making decisions proactively, Communal coping like prioritizing family fun, monitoring work boundaries (Kidwell and Kidwell, 2006).

Lockwood, (2003) found that Communication about work/life programs is essential. Although an organization may offer a rich menu of work/life benefits, the desired effect—yielding positive business results—is unlikely to occur if employees do not know about the programs or understand them. Human resource professionals should consider four critical questions: 1) does the company culture truly support work/life benefits; 2) does the management philosophy, starting with senior management, sincerely endorse work/life benefits; 3) do managers and supervisors understand the impact work/life balance has on their workforce; and 4) are employees aware of and do

they understand the company's work/life programs? If a company already offers work/life benefits, the next step may be to repackage and re-communicate them so employees see how these benefits offer ways to manage work/family conflict. In addition, developing a human resources strategy that is clearly integrated with the company's mission will demonstrate how committed the organization is to employee needs. The following are suggestions to promote work/life programs:

- i. Review the human resources strategy to see if it supports the company's mission.
- ii. Through questionnaires or focus groups, find out what employees feel about work/life balance.
- iii. Align work/life initiatives with HR strategy (e.g., employer of choice).
- iv. Create a work/life award program using noncash incentives aligned with business objectives.

Following statement can be proposed on the basis of above discussion:

Proposition 7: Innovative HR strategies are comparatively more helpful in managing work-life conflicts.

4. Conclusions

Human Resource Management is an emerging area for study as it changes fast in changing environment under globalization. With the passage of time and due to the globalization of the business including Human Resources, various contemporary issues in HR have emerged. One of such an issue, which has received great attention from researchers, is Workforce Diversity. Nowadays the focus is on smaller families with all heads working, which make women to come out of their traditional role and work. With this independency of the women, their focus towards their career leads them to the corporate world. With the entrance of women in job a new dimension, Workforce Diversity in gender was identified. Increasing number and level of education of women leads to an increase in their career aspirations.

When women entered in organization they have to face many stereotypes and problems like glass ceiling and others. Now with the increasing number of women employees, number of working couples also increased and the concept of working couples comes out. According to the norms of our traditional society, females are bound with more feminine tasks and family responsibilities and men are the bread-winners for the family. Increasing responsibilities and job tasks added to their stress and this ultimately leads to work-life conflicts. This drew an attention towards work-life balance and if the employees of an organization are under stress or if they are disturbed because of their problems in their family life it directly affects their efficiency and productivity which hampers the

organization as well. So, it calls for a need to evolve strategies to cope up with these problems and work-life conflicts among working couples.

Older and more recent studies have pointed out the need for longitudinal research and the importance of a life cycle perspective when studying dual-career couples. In fact, there should be a general consent that "marriages are fluid arrangements. At some stages of a relationship (e.g. during career-building), the allocation of tasks and responsibilities is very different from other stages (e.g. during the early years of child rearing). The shifts from more to less traditional types among married couples, however, are understandable when viewed within a long temporal framework." Only few scholars, however, have adopted such a research design when studying the dual-career couples/family.

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