

# How do Professional Working Mothers Experience Conflicts in Balancing Work and Family? Phenomenological Study

<sup>1</sup>Siti Kamalia Sabri, <sup>2</sup>M.Y. Kamal, <sup>3</sup>Wannadwah Ja'afar

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM), Malaysia<sup>1\*</sup>

DKM Academy, Seri Kembangan Selangor, Malaysia<sup>2</sup>

Club HEAL, Singapore<sup>3</sup>

Corresponding Author<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Democratization in the education system and the changes in social norm has led to a more significant role of women in Malaysia. In fact, women have been claimed as a group which has contributed a huge impact on the advancement of the country. Despite the increasing participation of women in the Malaysian workforce, work-life balance of women employees has become a critical subject of discussion as we see women working in different areas of profession and sharing responsibilities equally with men both at work and at home for the betterment of their family life. Work-family conflict (WFC) is an inter-role struggle that arises when the demands of the responsibilities of work and family are irreconcilable. The objective of this study is to explore experiences of professional working mothers at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) to discover the conflicts they experience in balancing work and family. Qualitative research design has been employed using in-depth interview methods. Snowball sampling techniques were selected and two (2) informants designated. The finding of this study has identified eight themes such as time management, priority, multitasking ability, support systems, difficulties in time arrangement, proper planning, mental health conditions and avoiding procrastination.

**Keywords:** Conflict Experiences, Islamic Perspective, Phenomenological Study, Professional Working Mothers, Work And Family Balance

## Introduction

In Malaysia, almost half of the current total population are women (Sham et.al., 2021). Democratization in the education system and the changes in social norm has led to a more significant role of women in Malaysia. In fact, women have been claimed as a group which has contributed a huge impact on the advancement of the country. Despite the increasing participation of women in the Malaysian workforce, work life balance of women employees has become a critical subject of discussion as we see women working in different areas of profession and sharing responsibilities equally with men both at work and at home for the betterment of their family life (Bharadwaj and Shanker, 2019). For the last decade, major

segregation has been drawn on gender and responsibilities in which particularly men were a breadwinner of the family and women primarily on the family support system (Singh and Singhal, 2016).

The world has evolved, and the recognition and acknowledgment of gender contribution is indubitable. The remarkable evolution is detrimental towards the family unit. As defined by Nair et.al., (2020), work-family conflict (WFC) is an inter-role struggle that arises when the demands of the responsibilities of work and family are irreconcilable. There are two categories of WFC; (1) work-to-family conflict, when the demands of work interfere with family life and (2) family-to-work, when family responsibilities interfere with work life (Zhou et.al., 2018). According to Nair et. al., (2020), WFC has a pernicious effect on the health and wellbeing of women as WFC can cause depression, marital problems, poor health status, reduced life satisfaction as well as a negative impact on work outcomes and health.

Previous literature has debated about work and life balance such as mentioned Ismail et.al., (2022) on the obstacles that promote to the problem. In strengthening the argument of work and life balance. Mohamad and Despois (2022) and Camilleri and Spiteri (2021) had explored the niche area of mother's response to their responsibilities and investigated the organization culture on work life balance. Shaari et.al., (2022) mentions that consequences of an imbalance can cause adverse health outcomes and poor well-being. Despite the issue arising on the work and life balance, there is a research loophole in investigating the conflicts experienced by the professional working mother in balancing work and family.

In emphasizing of this premise, the discovery of informants' religious background also imperative since there were only few research conducted in this area (Shaari et.al., 2022; Kadir et.al., 2021; Nair et al., 2021; Uddin et. al, 2021; Nair et al., 2020; Arham et. al, 2019; Nizam and Kam, 2018). The highlighted point has been deliberated and it is essential to the researcher in establishing the importance of conducting the research among Muslim professional working mothers to discover conflicts experienced by them in balancing work and family in an educational setting.

### **Objective of The Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore experiences of professional working mothers at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) to discover the conflicts they experience in balancing work and family.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

Qualitative research design has been employed in exploring people's lived experience and is essentially subjective, vulnerable to both researchers' and informants' biases (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). It also used to emphasize contextual understanding, emphasizing that researchers typically aim to understand attitudes, values and beliefs in the context of a study (Azungah et. al., 2018).

Method used for data collection for this study was in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted that required informants to share their stories by using everyday spoken language that was in line with (Polkinghorne, 1991). He quotes that a narrative or linguistic expression is the most appropriate data type to study human experiences. Therefore, this research was conducted using in-depth interviews in extracting the conflict experiences of professional working mothers by the means of spoken language. Snowball sampling techniques were selected towards informants from institute of higher education (IHE) and

resulted in two (2) informants designated. The one-to-one interview lasted between 50 to 60 minutes in one session. The individual interviews on different days and different places. For informant 1, it was through online google meet and for informant 2 was physical meeting. The subject of juggling work and family hasn't received as much attention as it should have with a sample of Muslim professional mothers who work at higher education institutions, as reported in the introduction. As a result, it is important to investigate and comprehend the subject matter when there is less "intervention" from religious viewpoints. According to Morse (1991) (as referenced in Creswell, 2009), a qualitative research approach is required when a subject hasn't received as much attention from a particular sample or population. Consequently, the results of this research may be utilised to close a gap in the existing body of knowledge.

Additionally, the researcher first maintained the data by using an inductive analysis procedure, as advised by (Armat et al., 2018). The researcher presented to two predetermined interraters as professional interraters in order to establish credibility and trustworthiness.

### **Informants**

Furthermore, this research was derived from a larger study that was carried out. The data is shared from two individuals whose life experiences were relevant to the research and been followed quite closely by the researcher. In this phenomenological study was common to involve a small number of informants, typically ranging from two to twenty-five informants as stated as for the research population and sample size, Creswell (2012) suggested that "When selecting participants for a study, it is important to determine the size of the sample you will need" (p. 146). This is because the focus in phenomenology was on exploring the depth of individual experiences, rather than gathering large amounts of data from a large number of informants. By deeply examining the experiences of the informants, researchers aim to uncover the essential structures and meanings underlying those experiences. Nevertheless, using only two informants in phenomenological research was entirely acceptable and can provide valuable insights.

Both interviews were audio- and video-recorded. The criteria of the informants which are: (a) self-identification as a Muslim (b) working mother in a professional role (c) have experiences or/ currently experiencing conflicts or challenges in balancing work and family life (d) working at Institution of Higher Education (IHE) in Peninsular Malaysia (e) agree to participate in the study.

The following table 1 summarizes the demographics profiles of the informants

Table 1

*Demographics of the informants*

<b>Informants</b>	<b>Informant 1</b>	<b>Informant 2</b>
Age	50	40
Religious	Islam	Islam
Race	Malay	Malay
Marital status	Married	Married
Years of marriage	13 years	25 years
Husband's occupation	IT officer	Retired
Numbers of children	3	2
Status of the children	Primary school students	Completed their studies
Education level	Master's degree	Doctorate PhD
Occupation	Lecturer	Lecturer
Years of working experience in the current field	5 years	6 years

Table 1, displayed above, presents the demographic of the professional working mothers interviewed in this study. To ensure confidentiality, the informant's name has been replaced with pseudonyms. The informants were aged 50 and 40 years old. They both identify as Islam and Malay ethnicity and they perform Islamic and Malay cultural values. Furthermore, both informants were married, such as Informant 1 having a 13 years long marriage and three children, all of whom are currently attending primary school students. On the other hand, Informant 2 has been married for 25 years and has two children and the children who have completed their studies. Informant 1 husband's work as IT officer and informant 2 husband retired. Furthermore, informant 1 holds a master's degree, while informant 2 has attained a Ph.D. Both informants work as lecturers, with Informant 1 having five years of experience in their current field, and Informant 2 having six years of experience.

### **Instrument**

The table 2 below signifies the set of interview protocol:

Table 2

*Interview protocol*

No. Questions
1. What does work-life balance mean to you?
2. Why are women involved in work life balance?
3. In your opinion, can work-life balance be handled equally? If yes, how? / Why No?
4. Tell me your experience as a parent/wife during having another role in hand?
5. Tell me your experience as a worker while having another role in hand?

Table 2 above illustrates semi-structured questions that were used as guides for the interview with the informants. Both interviews were audio- and video-recorded, manually transcribed and translated themes into English.

The researcher emphasizes the confidentiality of the informants due to taking care of informants' personal needs. Prior to the interview, informed consent was given to the informants. The structuring process during the pre-interview session includes a brief

explanation of the purpose of the study, the expected length of interview, and the confidentiality of the informants' personal information.

### Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data gained were first transcribed and saved for each informant. Second, the interraters were approached by the researcher and, after their approval for participation, separately visited for an instructional session. Third, the interraters were asked to list the common themes per highlighted question on a form that the researcher developed for this purpose and enclosed in the data package. The purpose of having the interraters list these common themes was to distinguish the level of coordinating interpretations between the findings of both interraters, as well as the level of coordinating interpretations between the interraters' findings and those of the researcher. Fourth, after the forms were filled out and received from the interraters, the researcher compared their findings to each other and subsequently to her own. A complication of this study occurred when the researcher found that the interraters did not return an equal number of common themes per question.

Table 3 below stated about interrater's calculation:

Table 3

#### *Interrater's Calculation*

	Percentage (%) of Agreement (Total Number of Agreement/Total Number of Responses) x 100%
Inter-rater 1:	$(8 / 10) \times 100$  = 80%
Inter-rater 2:	$(10 / 10) \times 100$  = 100
Average:	$(18 / 20) \times 100$  = 90%

Table 3 illustrates the percentage scores obtained from inter-rater 1, with the score of 80%, followed by inter-rater 2, with the scored 100%. The overall average score is an impressive 90%.

### Procedures

Figure 1 below summarize the research procedure:

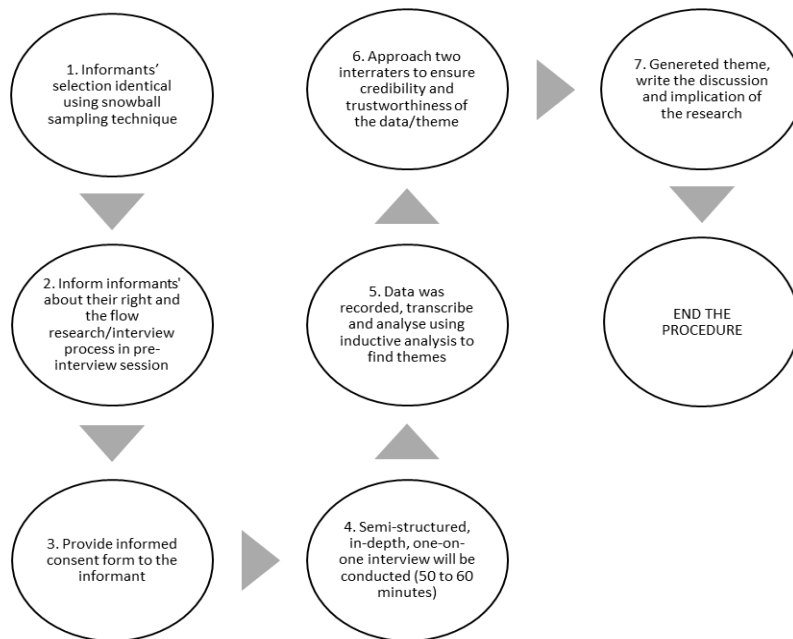


Figure 1. Research procedure

### Ethical Consideration

The main recruitment-related ethical concern was to have a formal plan for contacting and selecting informants. All informants will be treated fairly and equally, and the recruitment materials and processes for determining informants' selection will be identical. Researchers will inform informants about their rights as human subjects. These rights ensured that their participation was voluntary, and they had a right to refuse or terminate their participation at any time. The informed consent document will be provided to informants with this information. However, researchers will inform informants of their freedom to terminate their involvement in the study at any time without repercussions.

Another ethical consideration addressed the storage and disposal of data. All informant's data will be securely stored on an encrypted hard drive and personal google drive throughout the study. Informants will receive pseudonyms, and all data will remain confidential. Researchers will remove any personally identifying information from the interview transcripts and avoid including any facts in the final report that might be used to identify an informant. These measures protected informants' rights to privacy and encouraged open sharing of information during the interview process.

Throughout the study, only researchers can access the informant' contact information, audio recordings, and transcripts other than the informants themselves. Once the study is completed, researchers will store all the electronic study data on an encrypted external hard drive that was locked securely away to prevent anyone else from accessing it. Any hard copy data was also locked in a safe. The data will be kept for 5 years, after which time, it will be destroyed following standard data disposal.

A final ethical consideration was the potential for conflict of interest. No informants had a prior personal relationship with the researcher. Prohibiting personal relationships between the informants and the researcher prevented potential conflicts of interest and power imbalances. All informants needed to exercise autonomy when participating in the study.

### Results and Analysis

Through the application of inductive analysis, the researcher interpreted and categorized the themes, collecting and coded. The researcher has identified a total of eight themes across five interview questions. The first set of questions encompasses two themes, namely time management and priority. The second question explores the theme of multitasking ability. The third question delves into the themes of support systems and difficulties in time arrangement. The fourth question touches upon the themes of proper planning and mental health conditions, while the fifth question addresses the theme of avoiding procrastination.

The table 4 has explained about themes and informants' expressions:

Table 4

#### *Themes and Expression*

List of interview questions	Themes	Expressions
1. What does work life balance mean to you?	Time Management	Informant 1: "Because of work, we know the process. usually working hours... 9 to 5. that is written... life as an individual... who has responsibilities with the household. responsibilities with the children. and so on...meaning that. People have to balance between work and personal life..." Informant 2: "Work-life balance is actually we know how to start and we know when we want to stop... then every job we do... we know when we will finish it... that is my work-life balance... we have to know when we stop"
	Priority	Informant 1: "When we work, our priority is work..." Informant 2: "So, people need to practice things like this... after work I really don't bother about work matters, unless there is something important..."
2. Why are women involved in work life balance?	Multitasking ability	Informant 1: "The Fitrat. That is the essence of a woman. Who is multipurpose. Multitasking..." Informant 2: "...because now it's the time when all women work, if you're married, you work... so it's two jobs, those who are in the education field like us... I have to finish my PhD..."
3. In your opinion, can work-life balance be handled	Support system	Informant 1: "...Now Naili has grown - up, she is the one who goes to the



<p>equally? If yes, how? / Why No?</p>		<p>kitchen. She is the one who cleans the kitchen. Nakuyah she is the one who vacuums, mops.</p> <p>Informant 2: my husband is really very helpful... because for example... he helps manage the house, he helps cook, he takes care of the children, and sometimes... say 100% I have to manage the house, but I just do 50%, 50% my husband has helped...the support system is very important...I don't think this work-life balance will be successful...if there is no support from my husband</p>
	<p>Difficulty in time arrangement</p>	<p>Informant 1: Personally... it's not possible to get 50/50... 50 work... 50 life... we were... like I said... more to work... because we've been at the office for a day... right... physically I'm sitting at the office... it's true that it's 100%, but my personal opinion is 60% at the office... 40% at home... so I don't agree when you say work-balance your life... must be there if it is in arbitration... that is really hard on work... sometimes even back home... We are still doing work...</p>
<p>4. Tell me your experience as a parent/wife during having another role in hand? How do you handle this?</p>	<p>Proper planning</p>	<p>Informant 1: "it's a bit chaotic and quite a lot of distractions... It means we have to be strong... I always think that if I don't do this every day when it will be over... like when we already do some work, we suppose not to stop in the middle..."</p>
	<p>Mental Health condition</p>	<p>Informant 2: "if we're sick or the family is sick. That's the challenge of our emotions...we have to be good at taking care of our emotions..."</p>
<p>5. Tell me your experience as a worker during having another role in hand? How do you handle this?</p>	<p>Avoid procrastinated</p>	<p>Informant 2: "even if any task. Even if it's difficult we have to finish it. When I'm working. I have to finish the task. Otherwise, why do I work? Why do I get paid? Starting from private I learn to work fast. When I entered the office of the Chief Minister, you knew I was a fast type...my work is not tenacious. I just keep doing it. Because when we</p>



		are tenacious it becomes chaotic. So, when we keep doing it. It's easy."
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### Discussions and Implications

This study delved into the conflict experiences of professional working mothers as they navigate the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities. Through analysis of the study, the researcher unearthed eight themes that shed light of this conflict. Furthermore, the study draws upon previous literature to provide a comprehensive discussion and implication of the findings.

Similar to the idea from previous literature (Deshmukh, 2018; Nair et al., 2020), this research study aligns with the notion that time management and priority as the key conflicts in the delicate juggling act between work and family. The multitasking abilities of women also play a significant role in the balance between work and family. Recent research has corroborated the findings of earlier researchers (Bhumika, 2020; Venkataraman and Venkataraman, 2020), demonstrating that working women adeptly employ multitasking skills to handle their personal and professional lives. Moreover, lack of proper planning resulting from the overwhelming workload in both family and work spheres can significantly impact individuals' behaviors, whether consciously or unconsciously. For instance, a mother who has had a long or difficult day at work might return home feeling agitated, moody, and unfriendly, inadvertently directing her frustration towards her children. Similarly, a mother who experiences a challenging morning with her kids may become frustrated and carry that negative mindset to work, creating an unfriendly work environment for her colleagues and subordinates. These situations contribute to the mental health condition of women, aligning with the findings of a study by (Kremer, 2016).

The support system theme is another crucial significance in effectively achieving work-family balance. As highlighted by Adisa et al. (2019), societal perceptions and internalized assumptions of masculine dominance have prompted concerns among the informants regarding the absence of spousal support in managing family responsibilities. This lack of support exacerbates the challenges and stress associated with achieving work-life balance. Moreover, this research study uncovers an additional dimension of the support system which involves the involvement of family members. Spouses and children play an important role at home in order to ease the burden of the wife after spending most of her time at work. By sharing the responsibilities among the family members does not only ease the burden but it also creates bonding among them. As we can see, love and kindness are spread naturally in them. According to Ali, (2022) Islamic perspective has debate on whether a husband is obliged to protect his wife and provide everything necessary for household life according to his ability.

As mentioned by our Prophet Muhammad pbuh, *"From among the believers are those who have the kindest disposition and are kindest to their families, such are those who show most perfect faith"*.

Moreover, the absence of family member support led to challenges related to time management. As outlined in a previous study by Siva et al. (2022), working women, particularly those who are mothers, face additional hurdles such as distractions and interruptions when they bring their work home, as their young children rely heavily on them. Furthermore, various background noises originating from activities such as family members' meetings, children's online classes, and neighborhood disturbances contribute to further

distractions and interruptions. These factors collectively impact the ability of working women to maintain focus and productivity in their work environment. In Islamic perspective, self-spirituality plays a crucial role in balancing work and family especially for women itself. To nurture the self-spirituality and maintain harmonious balance through performing performs prayers, fasts, pays alms, recites the Quran, practices zikr (remembrance of God), makes supplications (du'a), possesses patience, forgiveness, gratitude to God, and trust in the providence of God is often considered as a good Muslim (Aziz et al., 2021). Allah always reminds in Quran:

*"Such are on true guidance from their Lord; such are the truly successful" (Quran 2:5).*

*"So those who believe (in the message of the Truth) and do good are destined for happiness and a blissful end" (Quran 13:29)*

These verses in the sacred Quran teach its believers to hold on to religious principles firmly to achieve well-being as Islam is regarded as a comprehensive way of life. Several researchers found that religiosity is significantly associated with well-being as Muslim employees (Aziz et al., 2021).

Furthermore, this research study revealed an additional theme such as avoiding procrastination. It was observed that women spend three times longer on household chores in comparison to men. Despite their belief in their ability to fulfill all the responsibilities, working mothers often find themselves exhausted as a consequence. This conflict between work and family obligations arises due to the time-consuming and stressful nature of women's roles. Consequently, when faced with extreme exhaustion, there is a notable inclination towards procrastination. In order to avoid procrastinating, employers need to allow employees to balance the demands of their work with their personal lives. In addition, the existence of a work-life balance can reduce the level of burnout for employees in a company (Latif et al., 2023). Islamic perspective debate about employees in avoiding procrastination as it aligns with principles of responsibility, productivity, and fulfilling one's obligations. Islam instills in its adherent's respect for the virtues of honest labor (Aziz et al., 2021). Because humans are homo Faber, Islam also offers large room for a variety of useful work activities. Islam does not ban women from working, choosing a job, or engaging in that profession. With the caveat that they do not shirk their duties as mothers to their offspring and wives to their spouses (Badriati et.al., 2022).

The above discussion reveals a new theme in other aspects of family members' involvement and support. The family plays a crucial role in effectively balancing work and family responsibilities. When families are actively engaged and supportive, it eases the burden on professional working mothers striving to manage their professional and personal lives. The implications of family involvement in achieving work-family balance included, shared responsibilities, emotional support, childcare and household, flexibility and understanding and communication and collaboration (Aziz et al., 2021).

Revealing new themes in involvement and support of employers are crucial in facilitating the successful balancing of work and family responsibilities for their employees beside employees playing an important role in helping themselves. The implications of employer involvement in achieving work-family balance such as flexible work arrangements, family-friendly policies such as parental leave, child care assistance, or on-site childcare facilities that will enhance

employee satisfaction, loyalty, and retention, supportive company culture, employee assistance programs, training and development and recognition and rewards. By embracing these implications, employers are able to create a work environment that supports and facilitates the successful balancing of work and family responsibilities for their employees. This not only benefits the employees but also contributes to higher job satisfaction, productivity, and retention rates (Žnidaršič and Bernik, 2021).

The implication of self in balancing work and family is crucial, as individuals need to actively engage in managing their personal and professional lives. The key implications of self-involvement in achieving work-family balance such as self-awareness and prioritization, setting boundaries and managing time, effective communication and negotiation, self-care and well-being, continuous learning and adaptation, embracing resilience and flexibility. By embracing this implication, individuals can strive for a healthier work-family balance, leading to improved well-being, satisfaction, and fulfillment in both personal and professional aspects of life (Latif et al., 2023).

### **Conclusion**

This study has unveiled the intricate conflict experienced by professional working mothers as they strive to balance work and family. The researcher has identified eight themes derived from five interview questions. The initial questions encompassed two themes, namely time management and priority. The subsequent question delved into the theme of multitasking ability. The following inquiry shed light of support systems and the challenges encountered in time arrangement. The fourth question encapsulated the themes of proper planning and mental health conditions. Lastly, the fifth question explored the theme of avoiding procrastination. In conclusion, the researcher affirmed the undeniable interconnectedness between work and family balance.

This study acknowledges certain limitations that warrant further attention in future research. Firstly, the research objective is predominantly around the examination of conflict arising from work-family balance, with limited exploration of the potential interventions. Secondly, the study focuses on professional working mothers within an IHE (Institute of Higher Education) setting, which may not adequately represent the other population of professional working mothers in Malaysia. In conclusion, it is highly recommended that future researchers delve into this subject on strategies/intervention and resolving conflicts associated with balancing work and family commitments among professional working mothers.

### **Corresponding Author**

Siti Kamalia Sabri, Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Mara,(UITM) cawangan Puncak Alam, Selangor Malaysia.

Email: sitikamalia@uitm.edu.my

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