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Organizational Policies and Supports for Dual-Career Couples in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper explores the organizational policies and supports provided for dual-career couples in Malaysia, the impact on their work and family balance and a comparison between the couples' experiences with previous research particularly from the West. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to collect data from 23 dual-career couples. The findings highlight that the policies and support provided have benefited the participants, facilitated them to balance their work and family demands. However, some weaknesses were identified in the current policies and supports, such as workplace childcare with unsuitable conditions and the short paternity leave. The study also presents the couples' recommendations to improve the policies and supports, in addition to those that they would like to be introduced. The study fills the gap of dual-career couples' literatures which have been carried out mainly in the West. The research also suggested some appropriate workplace policies and supports for organizations and policy makers in Malaysia to enhance couples' work and family balance, and increase role sharing between dual-career couples.

Keywords: Organizational Policies, Organizational Supports, Dual-Career Couples, Work Family Balance, Qualitative Interview

Introduction

The growth of women's involvement in the labour force has contributed to the increase of dual-career couples in which both spouses having professional careers. Due to responsibilities for multiple roles, couples are more likely to experience challenges and role conflict involving incompatible

demands. Indeed, many work family arrangements and supports were carried out by governments and employing organizations of dual-career couples to reduce work-family conflicts (Stier & Lewin-Epstein, 2007). However, despite shared international concerns, countries vary in how they address issues of work and family. Previous research (e.g. Bianchie & Milkie, 2010; Xiao & Cooke; 2012) have revealed that cultural variables, such as gender role and political and economic factors, influence an individual's work and family experiences. Up to now, research on work family experiences in developing countries, are still lacking as compared to research in Western countries (Munn & Chaudhuri, 2016; Rahman, Mustaffa, Rhouse, & Ab Wahid, 2016; Sidani & Hakim, 2012). Moreover, in Malaysia, most of the studies on supports for work family balance in Malaysia concentrate mainly on the experiences of women (e.g; Abdullah, Noor & Wok, 2008; Achour, Grine & Roslan Mohd Nor, 2014; Achour, Nor & Yusoff, 2015; Ismail & Ibrahim, 2007; Subramaniam, Overton & Maniam, 2015). Hence, the participation of men in dual-career marriage will provide a more balanced account of their experiences. This study seeks to investigate the implications of the organizational policies and support for the couples, the couples' recommendations to improve the current arrangements and supports, as well as comparing the perceptions and experiences identified in the Malaysian context to those identified in previous literatures. A comparison between the Malaysian couples' experiences and past literatures will enrich the knowledge of work and family experiences across culture. For practical purposes, this research will suggest some recommendations for the government and organizations in Malaysia, particularly in terms of workplace work family arrangements and supports that would enhance work-family balance and promote more role-sharing between dual-career husbands and wives.

Literature Review

In the workplace, many employing organizations respond to the needs of dual-career couples by offering a variety of family-friendly policies, such as flextime, telecommuting, compressed work week, job sharing, day-care provision and many others. These family-friendly policies are found to be helpful in increasing job satisfaction and employees' work and family balance (Bae & Yang, 2017; Belwal & Belwal, 2014). Flextime, for example, has been cited as one of the most popular strategies used by dual-career couples (Baltes & Clark, 2015; Breaugh & Farabee, 2012). In addition, telecommuting, the use of technology to perform paid work while at home, is another preferred strategy used to balance work and family demands (Baltes & Clark, 2015; Breaugh & Farabee, 2012). However, it is important to note that organizations in public sector offer more work-life arrangement compared to private organizations (Den Dulk, 2005; Den Dulk, Groeneveld, Ollier-Malaterre & Valcour, 2013). Furthermore, larger organizations are more likely than smaller organizations to offer more supports due to the benefit from economies of scale and less cost involved (Den Dulk et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2016)

Societal variation affects work-life dimension in many aspects including the supports that the couples relied upon for work and family balance. Thus, in organizations, policies are constrained by managers' cultural assumptions regarding what is beneficial to employees. In Europe, for example workplace childcare and leave arrangements were the highest in countries such as UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria and Belgium compare to other European countries (Den Dulk, Peters & Poutsma, 2012). A study by Straub (2007) shows that company contribution to childcare is low in European countries where the state plays an active role as care provider, whereas company contribution is high in countries with little public care coverage. However, in Sweden, the company involvement is very high despite the state being an active childcare provider (Straub, 2007).

In organizations, policies are influenced by managers' cultural assumptions regarding what is beneficial to employees. Poster and Prasad (2005) found that similar software firms in the US and India offered distinctive work-family policies. The American firm offered flextime and telecommuting, while the Indian company offered material support such as paid maternity leave and on-site childcare. Meanwhile, Chandra (2012) found that many American multinational companies focus on flexible working practices while Indian companies focus more on employee welfare and employee assistance programmes (EAP). Workplace policies, such as telecommuting and flextime, which affect the work-home boundary, would likely create problems for women in some Asian countries due to the greater importance placed on them to provide care for the children and parents (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). Another study by Masuda (2012), also found that the use of certain programs and supports may not help managers in eastern Asian regions address work-family challenges compared with similar programs in Anglo and Latin America. Hence, it is crucial to note that the effectiveness of family friendly policies are different according to the need of people in different countries.

Methodology

Most of the studies on organizational policies and supports for dual-career couples were conducted quantitatively (e.g. Kossek, Pichler, Bodner & Hammer, 2011; Russo, Shteigman & Carmeli, 2016; Thompson & Prottas, 2006). Therefore, considering the need to explore various views and experiences of dual-career couples, this research employs a qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology generates a deeper understanding on the impact of organizational policies and supports for the couples. In-depth interviews with 23 couples have been carried out using a semi-structured questioning format. The sample of the research had a position as a professional or at the management level and have at least one dependent child as they are expected to carry greater responsibilities and struggles in balancing work and family demands compared with childless couples or parents of adult children. Interviewees for this research were selected by personal contacts and recommendations. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and couples were interviewed separately. The respondents came from three different sectors, which were defined as public, private and non-profit organizations (NPO). The reason for differentiating between these sectors was to see the differences in their experiences and in terms of the support provided by the organizations to the employees in dual-career families. Template analysis based on codes are used to analyze the findings from the interviews. The findings are presented in a thematic presentation of the findings, using different individual case-studies to illustrate each of the main themes. The participants' names are replaced with pseudonym in the report to secure confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

The Implication of Organizational Policies and Support

It was evidenced from the interviews that different organizations undertake provides different kinds of work-family supports. Participants working for Government bodies are generally provided with many useful supportive arrangements such as child care, medical benefits, maternity and paternity leaves. In contrast, the supports provided for employees working in private organizations vary according to organizations. For participants working in smaller private companies, the financial resources to provide the supports may be limited, thus making them available to less supports. As mentioned by a female interviewee who owns a law firm:

I hope that the government could support the maternity leave for the staffs that take three months maternity leave or more. Because it will be a bit difficult for us to pay for the staff that take 3 or 4 months maternity leave since we are a small company.

This finding is consistent with previous studies by Poelmans, Chinchilla & Cardona (2003) and Den Dulk et al. (2013) that have shown that larger organizations more likely to adopt family-friendly support practices. In contrast, some private organizations especially small firms, which may not have many resources the lack of funds becomes a factor that hinders workplace from providing a lot of support to their employee. Meanwhile, some respondents working in a non-profit organization (NPO) enjoy different kinds of support. Since these respondents came from a huge international NPO, the support they receive is very advantageous. A male participant described his experience this way:

My paternity leave is different from my friend in Malaysia because we are enjoying four weeks of paternity. Previously, I only got three days leave compared to 28 days now. We are also partially covered by insurance for the whole family. Besides that, we have 30 days entitlement leave which is quite a lot and four months maternity leave which is common in Europe countries. (Raymee)

Being employed in an international non-profit organisation, Raymee clearly received much helpful support; for example, in terms of the four weeks' paternity leave which is far greater than that available to Malaysians. It was also found that the family-friendly work family arrangements and support provided by organizations for their employees have provided many benefits. This matter is reflected in the following remark by a female interviewee working for the Government:

I feel grateful because I think there is lots of flexibility in terms of work. Moreover, now we have three months maternity leave, there are some advantages to us. Besides that, my workplace still practice half-day leave, if there is any emergency, we can take that leave. And then the boss is also very flexible...we can do our work at home and e-mail it to him. So... even though I feel stress sometimes, but these supports help me to overcome it. (Syireen)

Syireen's statement above indicates how the support at her workplace not only facilitates her work and family balance, but also helps her to handle the stress that she feels at work. For some other participants, the support also has beneficial implications, such as job satisfaction and loyalty to the organizations. This is elaborated by a male respondent in his comment:

I am grateful with what has been provided by my employers. It is very effective... I don't foresee anything else to be added because I came from a company offering less entitlement, so the improvement on the entitlements that I get is good...It gives me a lot of satisfaction. (Raymee)

Raymee's comment illustrates how the helpful support that he receives is very rewarding, not only facilitating his family life but also having a positive effect on his overall work experience. The support provided by the organizations is found to be beneficial, not only to the employees, but also to their family in general. This matter can be seen from an example given by Shamsul, who said that his workplace's policies are more flexible than his wife's.

I can always take extra leave whenever I apply for it. Usually people who work for the government might have some problem applying for leave. Like my wife for example, since it is stricter there. (Shamsul)

This matter is supported by his wife, who commented that:

Sometimes my husband and I bring the children with us to the office, for example when the day care is closed...but he brings them more often than I do because he works in a private company and it is smaller than my organization so it is easier for him to bring them there as

compared to me because I work in the government sector and always have lots of meeting.
(Lina)

These statements not only indicate how support from the organizations is helpful in facilitating their work-family balance, but it can also help to increase role sharing among husband and wife.

Weaknesses in the Work family Arrangements and Support

It was found that the Government also provides workplace childcare to help with childcare demand among its employers. Nevertheless, some participants have pointed out some of the childcares' weaknesses that should be taken into account. This includes the quality of the childcare centre, as mentioned by an interviewee:

I don't feel satisfied with the nursery at my school because there are too many kids there. The proportion between the nursery staff and the children is not balanced. So I think this does not meet the standard. Sometimes I see that the children are just left alone by themselves and sometimes they don't really care about their feeding. So the care is not very satisfactory.
(Razlinda)

Maternity leave issues have also been raised by some interviewees. Previously, in 2010, women who works in the government sector are subjected 300 days of maternity leave equating to 90 days' maternity leave for up to three children. This act has been revised and in 2018 the maternity leave has been extended for 360 days equating to 90 days' maternity leave for up to four children (Malaysian Department of Public Services, 2018). For example, a female respondent stated:

The policies are okay but I hope they will not set limitation towards the number of children that the staff can apply for maternity leave. I don't think it will really affect their work. So, if they start working when they are not really fit yet...I'm afraid this will have an implication in the future. They always say that it is not good for the productivity, but they didn't think about the long-term effects. (Fatihah)

Clearly, the limitations imposed on maternity leave do not satisfy some women participants, especially those who have, or might want to have, more than four children. Moreover, the Malaysian community, especially the Malays, are very much influenced by the Islamic values that regard children as a blessing; and therefore, tend to have more children. In addition, the fact that much of the concerns regarding maternity leave came from the women participants reflects the cultural values that the maternal role is really emphasized by the women despite being in professional and managerial line.

Policies and Supports Recommended

Many suggestions have been raised by participants for improving the weaknesses in some of the current work family arrangements and supports. For example, improvement on paternity leave has been suggested by some participants. As mentioned by a female respondent:

Maybe they can extend the leave for the husband. Right now my husband only got three days paternity leave. So for mothers that have to undergo their post-natal period without their family around...I think three days is not enough... So it's difficult if the mothers need any help...if she is all by herself. (Razlinda)

Currently, the Malaysian Government has not regulated any paternity leave for male employees. With the exception of government servants, who receive seven days' paternity leave for each child, employees in the private sector are provided with various provisions of paternity leave which on average would be less than that allocated to Government employees. This is definitely in contrast

with some European countries, which are found to be generous with their paternity leave. For example, in Portugal, fathers are entitled to the obligatory paid leave of fifteen working days (Wall & Leitão, 2016). Thus, an action towards a more egalitarian option by the government is crucial to instill more roles sharing among dual-career couples in Malaysia. Furthermore, the influence of cultural and religious values that make Malay families tend to have more children indicates the importance of having on-site childcare. As stated by a female interviewee:

Sometimes we have meeting until late afternoon...and sometimes we even have to work on Saturdays...in which we have to pay extra charges to the nursery. And some nursery doesn't even look after children on Saturday. Furthermore, most of the staff are young people who just got married and active having babies...so, it would be beneficial to have a childcare here. (Nora)

Apart from childcare as well as maternity and paternity leave, there are some interviewees in the study who wish that their workplace could offer more flexible work arrangements, due to their work location being far from home. It has been acknowledged that flextime and telecommuting are some of the most popular strategies used by dual-career couples in Europe, the United States and Australia (Baltes & Clark, 2015; Breugh & Farabee, 2012). In Malaysia, however, flexible arrangements such as telecommuting and part-time working are not as widely practiced as in Western countries (Subramaniam, 2011; Subramaniam et al., 2015). Although some participants have expressed their desire for flexible working and telecommuting, these supports are not heavily emphasized as other family-friendly options such as longer paternity leave or on-site child care. Thus, it is important for organizations to analyse and consider this option in order to help those employees who wish to gain the benefits as mentioned in the earlier comments by participants who enjoyed having flexible work options. These recommendations should be given emphasis since the benefits may also have a positive impact on the organization.

Conclusion

This study explores the implications of the government and organization's policies and support to Malaysian dual-career couples and the kind of policies and support the couples would like to see introduced. Indeed, many policies and supports including childcare, medical benefits, maternity and paternity leave, flexible work arrangements and many others have been implemented, which differ according to sector and types of organization. The Malay cultural values, which promote traditional gender role orientation, seem to influence the types of policies and supports provided by the organizations, as well as the types of supports preferred by some couples. Overall, the policies and supports provided have benefited the participants, facilitated them to balance their work and family demands, and produced a more positive effect on their work experience. However, some weaknesses were identified in the current policies and supports, such as daycare with unsuitable conditions, the limitation on the maternity leave, and paternity leave that is too short. Hence, many suggestions have been made by the interviewees for improving the current policies and supports. These recommendations include having 90 days' maternity leave without limiting the number of children, providing some options for maternity leave, longer paternity leave, better quality on-site day care, and flexible work options, such as telecommuting and part-time work. These recommendations are valued highly by the participants since they will not only help them to have a better work and family balance, but can also benefit the organization through increase performance and commitment. Therefore, it would be valuable if employing organizations could provide suitable work family

arrangements and supports in order to enhance couples' work and family balance, and encourage role sharing between dual-career husbands and wives.

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