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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v9-i11/6603>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v9-i11/6603

**Received:** 02 October 2019, **Revised:** 26 October 2019, **Accepted:** 04 November 2019

**Published Online:** 25 November 2019

**In-Text Citation:** (Muda et al, 2019)

**To Cite this Article:** Muda, T. F. M. T., Husin, S. N. M. S., Ismail, S. K., Yusoff, Z. M., Salleh, S. F., Zakaria, M. Y., & Chik, W. W. Y. W. (2019). Working Women and the Islamic Work-Life Balance Concept. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9(11), 834–841.

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**Vol. 9, No. 11, 2019, Pg. 834 - 841**

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## Working Women and the Islamic Work-Life Balance Concept

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### Abstract

Modernization has made a significant difference in women's lives today. Increased access to education, employment and socioeconomic change have also enabled women to progress and actively contribute to national development. As a result, most women are now having dual-roles, juggling between work and personal life. Achieving balance between both is crucial since any imbalance could bring adverse effect whether in personal or work life. Therefore, using document analysis method, this study aimed to identify the concept of balance as discussed by the Muslim scholars, as well as work-life balance of a career woman in the Islamic perspective. The data were collected from classical and contemporary texts and were analyzed through document analysis method. The study finds that Islam as a universal religion has provided guidelines in determining the priorities that should be considered in every aspect of life, including in exercising the concept of moderation and balance.

**Keywords:** Balance, Work-Life Balance, Tawazun, Working Women

### Introduction

In realizing the country's vision of a developed nation by 2020, various aggressive initiatives are underway such as economic transformation programs that require the commitment of all government, private and non-governmental organizations regardless of ideology, background, culture and gender. This scenario led to a transformation in demographic trends that influenced the composition of the workforce not only in developed countries but in developing countries such as Malaysia (Surena, 2012; Husna, 2017; Ogbiji, 2018). As the country progresses, the phenomenon of working women is not anymore uncommon. Where married women are concerned, balancing the dual role and responsibilities between the profession and the household are certainly a challenging task.

Empirical studies on work-life balance have been pioneered in the West but have recently gained attention in Malaysia. Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw (2003) define work-life balance as the degree to which a person is bound by the balance between his job responsibilities and his responsibilities in the family or life. Thus, employees with a good work-life balance show a strong commitment between the domain of work and life (Virick, Lily & Casper, 2007). According to Scholarios and Marks (2004) work-life balance has a significant impact on workers in an organization. It is the ability of an individual to effectively manage the work done in the career with all other activities important to one's life such as family development, personal health, community activity, leisure, or recreation. Based on studies by Keyes (2002) and Marks & MacDermid (1996), one's ability to balance life and career plays an important role in achieving happiness in family life and improving health. Past studies also found that failure to effectively manage the family alongside career could trigger stress issues at work, roles conflicts, health and mental problems, neglect and even divorce (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Jalili et al, 2017). When stress out of work demands is not well managed, it will tend to cause conflicts within the demands of domestic and personal life. The mass media regularly reported on the issue of tension arises in dual-career partners (<http://www.utusan.com.my>, 2009; <http://www.utusan.com.my>, 2016). The Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services Malaysia (CUEPACS) reported that the shifting-work schedule was among the triggering factors causing low levels of trust in spouses and which led to divorce (Bharian, 2017). Thus, the overall satisfaction with a balanced life and work can lead to a fit mental state and well-being. Satisfaction in life and happiness are often used to perceive quality of life, as well evaluate how well one is doing financially, physically, emotionally and socially (Lauer & Lauer, 2014). In today's challenging working environment, motivation and support from the family members and organizations may also affect one's capability to maintain a balanced life.

In the history of Islam itself, women have been involved in working atmosphere before the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was sent as the last Prophet and Messenger. The historic Queen Balqis who ruled the Kingdom of Saba' as prescribed in the Quran demonstrated women's ability to manage and lead outside the scope of her family institution. Likewise, women played a significant role in the decision-making process during the Prophetic era as voiced by Umm Salamah in the Hudaibiyah War. In the Islamic literature, the study of women's career in Islam, the role and responsibilities of women as wives and mothers in the household are often part of the discussion in the *fiqh el-mar'ah* and the *fiqh el- munakahat*. This paper shall then focus on the concept of balance as discussed by the Muslim scholars, as well as work-life balance of a career woman in the Islamic perspective.

### The concept of 'Balance' In Islam

There is a concept known as '*al-tawazun*' in Islam which denotes the concept of balance and equilibrium. Allah has declared to all His creatures to live in equilibrium just as He has made nature and its existence in balance. The Quran says to the effect;

الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا ۚ مَا تَرَىٰ فِي خَلْقِ الرَّحْمَنِ مِن تَفَافُوتٍ ۚ فَارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ هَلْ تَرَىٰ مِن فُطُورٍ  
(QS,67: 3)

**“He Who has created the seven heavens one above another and you can see no flaw in the Creation of the Most Gracious. Then, behold again, can you see any rifts?”**

The above verse illustrates that despite all its greatness, the world of creation is based on systematicity, consistency, well-measured constituents, and precise laws.

In Islam, the concept of balance and equilibrium known as *al-tawazun*, and in many instances, it is also referred to as moderation (*al-wasatiyyah*). It brings forth the idea of balancing the extreme as the best approach. In discussing the concept, there are authors who distinguish the concepts *al-tawazun* and *al-wasatiyyah*, while the latter tend to define both under the same notion.

The concepts of *al-tawazun* and *al-wasatiyyah* are similar according to al-Qaradawi (2012), since these two concepts of equilibrium give a fair meaning between two opposite sides without affecting the other. While others who distinguish the two explained that *al-wasatiyyah* is derived from the word ‘*wasat*’ in Arabic which means the middle-road approach (Ghazali Basri, 2008) as inscribed in the following verse:

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا

**“Thus, We have made you a justly balanced community that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you” (QS, 2:143)**

Al-Razi (n.d.) in commenting the verse elaborated that the justly balanced (*wasata*) in reality is the furthest point between two extremes, which is to be just and virtuous. The religious observance in the above verse has been interpreted as a middle-class people who are fair, impartial and worldly and at the same time balanced in all aspects of their lives. It portrays Muslims who have been described by Allah as human beings who can be witnesses of all human acts. Therefore the whole Islamic teaching and its system is upheld on a unified and balanced basis whereby each part with the other is inter-related.

### **Islamic Views on Working Women**

Both men and women have their own roles in the family institution in Islam, as men are responsible for providing the sustenance, while women are assigned to manage households (Fatimah, 2011). However, it is common now that women ventures in the career world to ease the family finances. High educated women are also the assets for the nation in developing the community's potential.

According to Ibn-Qayyim (1953), women were allowed to enter into various occupations and that their activities should conform to the nature of women. The nature of work should not be in violation of Islamic law, one that would not bring harm to the women and people around her. Married women, in particular shall need to balance their roles and priority towards their spouses, their children as well as towards their employer. Indulging in a career may strain a woman's physical and psychological self, thus an effective work-life balance should be practiced. Since the utmost responsibility of a married woman is towards the husband, the nature of work should therefore one that shall not violated the husband's rights (al-Qardhawi, 2006: Okwuraiwe, Ezenwaka, Mojekeh, Chiyem, 2018).

Discussion among the jurists on the permissibility of women to work revolves around the boundaries and conditions of working, which include permission from the husband to leave the house (Abu-Syuqqah, 2002; Basri, 2009; al-Zuhaili, 2008); observing to cover the aurah by modest attire (Shalaby, 2001; Abu-Syuqqah, 2002; al-Zuhaili, 2008); not wearing perfume unnecessarily (al-Jaziri, n.d.; Abdul-Qadir, n.d.), as well as committed to Islamic morality as a Muslim woman (Abu-Syuqqah, 2002).

### **Work-life Balance for Working Women in Islam**

The ability to balance between work and household implies giving justice to both rights and duties and setting everything in its rightful place. The moderate, just, and correct action taken in any given situation often involves balancing various concerns whether of family institution or of the work. In this instance, if a career taken by a married woman to the extent that her husband and her children are neglected, it is impermissible for the woman to work (Sabiq, 1995). Therefore, when a woman chooses to work outside the home, her rightful responsibilities should not be ignored (Zeenath, 2002). Working women must be able to coordinate between the outside of the home and the household tasks such as caring for the husband and raising children in a supportive environment (al-Buty, 1996). This is also the opinion of the Muslim jurists that subsistence giving is the right of the husband towards the family, while the wife duty is to care for and give good treatment to the husband as well as of the household (al-Siba'i, 1999, al-Sartowi, 1997; Abu-Syuqqah, 2002). Obviously, the family is the key to the formation of a society, and given the different duties, obligatory duties should be given priority.

The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) explained on the responsibilities, rights and roles of working women regarding their true duties as narrated in the following hadeeth:

عن أبي أمامة عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم أنه كان يقول (ما استفاد المؤمن بعد تقوى الله خيرا له من زوجة صالحة . إن أمرها أطاعته . وإن نظر إليها سرتة . وإن أقسم عليها أبرته . وإن غاب عنها نصحتة في نفسها وماله)

Meaning: "From Abu Umamah of the Prophet (peace be upon him), " There is no better benefit for a believer after he has feared Allah Almighty than a good wife in the case of her husband asking her (for a good) to obey him. If her husband saw her (with a look of affection or lust) she immediately pleased him. If her husband swears (for a mistake that he does not repeat) she is quick to forgive him. If her husband is not by her side, she will take care of herself and take care of her husband's property." (Ibn Majah).

Obviously, this narration is a reference to the importance of working women today to prioritize their rights and responsibilities in the household over their careers, regardless of their positions and income. Hence the concept of work-life balance is seen as the effectiveness of individuals in managing their roles that is in line with the values and priorities in life.

The true gist of keeping balance in one's life in the light of Islamic principles is all-embracing whether it is religion, worship, relationships, ideas, or daily activities. Therefore practicing a work-life balance shall also call for an effective time-management. It requires the ability of a woman to manage and allocate her time for herself, worship, as well as for her family.



Principled moderation is one of the defining characteristics of good character in Islam. The benefits for exercising moderation and balance in life can be illustrated as in the following figure:

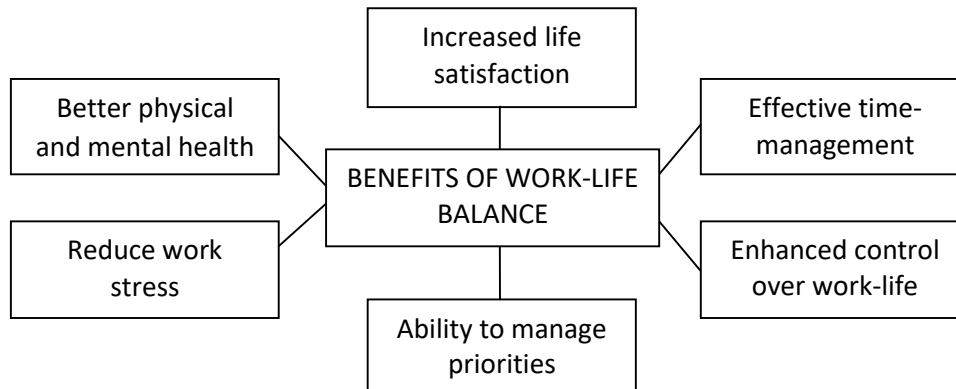


Fig.1: Benefits of Work-Life Balance

Thus it is pertinent that one should be able to organize her daily activities effectively and flexibly. A work-life balance concept in Islam shall as well extend to observing both physical and psychological health. This is in line with the need to preserve and protect the five purposes of the Islamic law, which are; protection of religion, intellect, self, offspring and property. Consequently, any act or behavior that is detrimental to any of these five Islamic objectives is prohibited in Islam. Emphasis on these five fundamentals should be the aim in implementing a balanced work-life.

### Conclusion

Involvement of women in the workforce nowadays is inevitable resulting from the rapid development of the country. There arises then, the question of whether women are able to balance forth their family and personal demands alongside the career workloads. Islam as a universal religion has provided guidelines in determining the priorities that should be considered in every aspect of life. The idea of a balanced life in Islam could be applied in almost every matter concerning one's life. The concept of work-life balance then binds woman to adopt sense of moderation and deciding relative prioritization in every action, whether it is towards personal life, family life, social or even mental and physical health.

### Acknowledgement

This article is part of a research fund entitled "Pembangunan Model *Islamic Work-Life Balance* (I-WLB) Bagi Wanita Bekerjaya Berdasarkan Maqasid Syariah Ke Arah Peningkatan Kualiti Hidup (QoI) Berkeluarga" sponsored and managed by the Center for Research Excellence & Incubation Management (CREIM), Sultan Zainal Abidin University (UniSZA), Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu, Malaysia.

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