

## **WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT: A STUDY ON EMPLOYEES IN DHAKA CITY, BANGLADESH**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to find out the real issues relating to work family conflict of employees in Dhaka. The research is conducted on fifty executives who are working indifferent organizations in Dhaka. An open ended questionnaire was used to collect the data from respondents. The research is qualitative in nature. Excessive workload, indifferent management and work culture are prime reasons behind the work family conflicts. Balancing between work and family and changing life style would be the key to resolve the problems. The main drawback of this study is that it is confined within the arena of Bangladeshi culture which may not be universally applicable. The findings of this study would open the new ways of thinking and new avenues of researches.*

*Key words: Work – Family Conflicts, Balancing work- family, Indifferent Management, Personnel Policy, Work Culture.*

## INTRODUCTION

One of the significant characteristics of today's workplace is the changes taking place and the impact of these changes on the lives of workers of every age and background and in every workplace situation. Although this paper will touch upon issues that affect all workers, the main focus will be on the broad areas of work-family and work-life as these relate to Dhaka City families.

The work-family literatures over the past several years accept a shift from using the term "work-life balance" to the broader notion of "work-life integration". As well, the term "work-life", once thought of as a "women's issue", is now being recognized as having broader social implications. Work and family are essential life roles that ideally need to be harmonized, not viewed as competing for time and energy (Johnson, Lero, & Rooney, 2001).

In this paper the terms "work-family" will be used interchangeably as will the words "balance" and "integration".

### The Evolving Structure of Family in Dhaka, Bangladesh

The families in Dhaka today differ in many ways from previous generations. They are smaller than those of their parents and grandparents. There are many family forms and various combinations of caregivers, and it is increasingly likely that many children will live in more than one type of family before they reach their adult years. People are living longer and staying healthier and more active as they age.

The majority of families of the 1950's, 1960's, 1970's and till mid 1980's consisted of a male wage-earner and a stay-at-home spouse. Today, the significant family type if not the dominant family type is the double-income family with both working outside the home. The entry of women into the workforce is possibly the most significant social change within families in the present generation. This has generated the need to redistribute care giving and homemaking responsibilities and has created a dramatic shift in both men's and women's roles.

Women, however, still carry the primary responsibility for care giving, whether for children, the elderly or other family dependents and for child rearing and for the carrying out of household tasks. Only a minority of families with young children fit the profile of an earlier era. One obvious result is the increase in the percentage of workers with eldercare responsibilities and with both eldercare and childcare responsibilities. The major stress associated with today's worker is to blend the responsibilities of paid work with that of the responsibilities of family and personal life.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Several large-scale surveys have been conducted in Canada since the early 1990s and have been repeated in recent years (Conference Board of Canada; Duxbury-Higgins and Associates; and Statistics Canada's General Social Survey, 2001). They have used various measures of work-life conflict to try to assign a value to the degree of stress experienced by workers (Johnson, Lero & Rooney, 2001). There is now consistent evidence that stress and work-life conflict are on the rise for Canadian workers. The research further shows that work-life stress is particularly problematic for parents of young children, especially women. The data also indicate, however, that work-life conflict is showing a marked increase in the lives of men and that it is especially high among both men and women in professional/managerial tracks. The connection of work-life conflict and stress to increases in illness, depression, injury and prescription drug use has been documented. Less well documented are the effects of work-life conflict and stress on the quality of parenting and the quality of intimate relationships with family and friends from on our sense of personal well-being and security are based (Johnson, Lero & Rooney, 2001). Employers of today are aware of the increasing level of work-life conflict and stress among their employees.

A survey conducted over 10 years ago by the Conference Board of Canada (Paris, 1989), showed that 58% of employers believed that work-family conflict created stress for their employees. By the end of the 90s awareness among employers was even higher – close to 75% of employers indicated that employee stress was in part attributable to the challenges faced in blending work, family and personal responsibilities (Bachman, 2000). Research that has looked at work-life issues from the viewpoint of employers has tended to take two approaches. The first approach starts with the assumption that ignoring work-life conflict is expensive to the organization and documents the costs to the workplace, when, it does not provide a supportive work environment, Johnson, Lero & Rooney (2001) note that, to date, recognition of the costs of ignoring work-life conflict has not been sufficient to generate strong employer action.

A second approach tends to measure the benefits that accrue to a workplace when it does provide a supportive environment. According to the Conference Board of Canada employer survey, this is the type of study that employers want if they are to seriously commit to a work-life agenda (Bachmann, 2000). Employers also report that they need better mechanisms for learning about the experiences of other organizations and for sharing learning among similar workplaces (Halinsky et al, 1991). Add to this the current interest of the companies in "high performance" workplaces and "best companies to work for" awards bring changes in human resource management approach, involvement and engagement of workers and support for workers as these are considered to be essential determinants of "successful" workplaces (Lowe,

2001). The costs to employers when there is conflict between their employees work and family responsibilities have been well documented. In 1997 it was estimated that work-life conflict in Canada cost workplaces approximately \$2.7 billion in lost time due to absenteeism. (Duxbury, Higgins & Johnson, 1999). The Conference Board of Canada report (1999) observed that employees who found it “very difficult” to balance their work and family lives missed an average of 11.8 days per year, compared to 5.5 days among employees with moderate difficulty, and 2.9 days among employees who reported low difficulty (MacBride-King & Bachmann, 1999). The 2001 national study on work-life balance conducted by Duxbury and Higgins, found a significant connection between work-family conflict and employees’ attitudes toward work and their employers. Employees with high work-family “overload” (defined as feelings of being drained, rushed or overwhelmed by the pressures of multiple roles) were less satisfied with their jobs; less committed to their organizations and less likely to rate their organizations as “an above average place to work. “Employees who have difficulties blending their work and family responsibilities may say no to additional work responsibilities such as, attending meetings before or after business hours, participating in training after hours; they may say no to transfers and may ultimately leave their jobs (MacBride-King & Bachmann, 1999). It becomes more evident for women workers.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Our objectives are to identify in line with the above mentioned Canadian study the major sources and types of conflict between work and family and possible gender differences in the context of Dhaka city.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Method**

Qualitative Research methodology is being used to conduct the research. The central questions of this research is most relevant to the exploratory type of research and the qualitative research design can take design is always questioned because of its lack of quantitative approach. But the present researchers strongly believe that the explanation of the relevant variables is more important than quantification in this particular research care.

### **Population & Sample**

The research population includes the working men and women who are working in managerial positions in different private organizations of Dhaka City.

## **Sampling Frame**

A total of 50 professional, both men & women, working in different private social & business organizations were selected randomly for data gathering purpose.

## **Data Collection**

Relevant Literature Survey and extensive Open Personal Interviews (of research subjects e.g. working women holding managerial positions) were conducted for data collection. An open-ended questionnaire was used. Three female interviewers are in charge of interviewing the female respondents since, the female respondents traditionally feel comfortable in dealing with the same gender. Employment of female interviewer is one of the strongest points of the data collection method. The researchers strongly feel that it helps the process to gain the maximum insights into the issue.

## **EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

### **The Changing Nature of Today's Workplace**

Most of the Respondents from private social and business organizations have identified the following changes, which they have experienced in their respective workplaces.

1 Effect of Economy: Globalization, deregulation, foreign investment and free market practice create more jobs in both public and private sectors.

2 Technological Advances: Technology has taken on a life of its own and continues to develop at a staggering pace, getting better and cheaper on a continuous basis. It has profound effects on the business functions and also on the lives of the workers.

3 Informal Employment: Part-time, temporary, and self-employment account a significant portion of today's job market.

4 Increased Workload: There is every indication in most workplaces that job responsibilities keep expanding. More people are working longer hours.

5 Issue of Life Long Learning: Globalization of economy requires a person who knows how to learn, who is a fast learner and who keeps learning throughout the career.

6 Diversity in Job Market: Today's workforce is very diverse. The presence of increasing number of women, foreign educated workers, expatriates, and highly skilled workers are significant addition to today's work place.

## Sources of Work-Family Conflict for Employees

The respondents of this survey identified the following factors at the organizational level that make their life more difficult in coping up with the family demand:

1 Excessive Workloads: Males, those working in managerial and professional positions in foreign and local business organizations and employees in the non-profit sector are all more likely to talk about workload issues. They have identified several causes of heavy workloads: unrealistic expectations; inability to plan and set priorities, demanding boss and the impact of office technology. This finding coincides with the following excerpts of a recent research.

“There is a universal expectation that everyone reads, clears and responds to all e-mails on a daily basis, actually a constant basis. This is unrealistic. Memos sent in late afternoon are expected to be read by morning for discussion. This is unreasonable” (Duxbury & Higgins, 2003)

2 Indifferent Management: Men and employees without children were more likely to regard their manager as non-supportive. The majority of respondents (about 70%) were frustrated with the behavior of their immediate manager/supervisor. The rest felt that leadership at the top was the source of work-life balance problems. Some of the mechanisms cited by the respondents as to how managers make balance more difficult include the following: not treating employees with respect; managers not seeing their “People Managing” role as a priority; and immediate managers/supervisors acting as a barrier to the use of supportive policies.

3 Either/or: The attitude that an employee has to choose either career advancement or family have been identified by most (80%) of the women employees as a source of conflict. Most of their comments indicated that they feel they are in a “no-win” situation – either to choose a meaningful life outside of work or advance in career. The common problems are: putting family ahead of work hurts career advancement; career development activities often make it more difficult to meet family demands; time crunch has a negative impact on career advancement and career advancement often means relocation, which is difficult on families where both partners are working. This result of the current research confirms the following output of a recent carried out by Duxbury & Higgins (2003)

“Normal family life with two young kids is more and more demanding; the rat race is competitive and without mercy. Bachelors or dual income, no kids are at an advantage, with more time to work and focus on a job. Since this is what gets you ahead in this company, it makes all the talk about work-life a farce” (Duxbury & Higgins, 2003)

4 Personnel Policy: The respondents of this study expressed their concern regarding the personnel policy of their respective organizations. The policies regarding overtime, executive development, training, flexible hours, leave in general, maternity leave; vacation time or a variety of other supportive-type policies etc. are being questioned by the majority of the (80%) respondents of this study. Policies are not clear (20%), many organizations do not even have written policy (40%), there also examples of supportive policies in theory but not being practiced by the organization.

5 Effect of Continues Change: The rapid and constant change being experienced at the work-place level is a key contributor to stress and makes balance more complicated. The change that results from restructuring, downsizing, and managers result in increased workloads and added stress. This present study also supports the following research result carried out by Dusbury & Higgins (2003):“Work is getting very demanding. The merger has been extremely difficult. Culture clashes.People resigning. Most aged and experienced employees were bought out, leaving the mid-level employees to pick up the workload.” Too much change and the constancy of it leave employees feeling that they are constantly redesigning the wheel (Dusbury & Higgins, 2003).

6 Temporary and Part-time Work: Part-time employees are always worried about the future. The insecurity that this creates is very stressful – term positions are hard on employees and their families.

“We are always worried about making ends meet, about what happens when my job is done” (Dusbury & Higgins, 2003).

7 Work Culture: Organizational norms, values, customs, rules and expectations contribute positively or negatively to work/life balance. One of the factors, which complicates organizational culture is the “culture of hours” – the expectation that “serious” employees work longer hours and are always available for early morning or evening meetings.

### **Is Work/Family/Life Integration Achievable?**

The most obvious answer is “it depends”. The respondents of this pilot survey disclosed how do they personally achieve balance and also recommend policies for the employers.

1 Secrets of Balance: Sixty five percent of the respondents suggested a variety of personal strategies that help them to achieve a balance in their personal lives. The summery of their suggestions are given below:



2 Spiritual Power: Many of the respondents noted that their faith and spiritual beliefs helped them to keep their work on track.

3 Organized Life Style: Scheduling jobs ahead; plan meals in advance make life easier for many respondents.

4 Set Goals: Knowing the priority in life and what is important.

5 Take Everything Easy: As one respondent commented: "Take time to play, laugh, love, work, cry together and respect each other. We all make mistakes at home and work.

6 Remain physically fit: As Mr. X commented "Regularity in daily life, healthy food and positive attitude towards lifestyle are secrets of success."

7 Family Issues: As Mrs. Y commented "Don't ignore family instead put the family-issues on the top. Then family will remain happy. You can concentrate more."

## CONCLUSION

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in work-family interface in the human resource management literature, especially regarding the sources and outcomes of conflict between these two spheres. A number of studies have addressed this issue from different perspectives. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) and Greenhaus, Parasuraman, Granrose, Rabinowitz, and Beutell (1989) examined the antecedents of conflict between family and work, Goodstein (1994) and Ingram and Simons (1995) presented an institutional perspective on organizations' responses to work-family issues. In addition, Campbell and Kennard (1994) have studied the effects of family responsibilities on the work commitment and job performance of women. The work-family issue is even further expanded to address the relationship of business-marriage partners (Foley & Powell, 1997). Past research has consistently demonstrated that work-family interface is prevalent and, being an important source of stress, has negative impact on employees' well-being and family relationships (Geogins, 1991; Voydanoff, 1987; Williams & Alliger, 1994). Given the common perceptions of appropriate roles for men and women, the demands for combining motherhood and marriage with career becomes an immense challenge for many female executives. One may expect that female executives, particularly those who are married and with children, are more likely to experience work-family conflict than their male colleagues (Williams & Alliger, 1994). Such gender differences may have many implications for human resource management, particularly, particularly for developing human resource



management policies aiming at alleviating the role strain of employees. Despite many studies have been done in the West, only a few studies were conducted in the Asian context. Some notable exceptions include Aryee (1992) and Yuen (1995) which used Singaporean samples, and Aryee and Luk (1996) which examined Hong Kong dual-career couples.

The present study tries to explore the extent of work-family conflict among a group of male and female executives in Dhaka. This paper has attempted to focus on the broad areas of work-life as these relate to Dhaka families. It is a challenge that needs to be addressed by every sector. It is also a very complex challenge as work-life issues cut across various agendas in both public and private spheres. There is no “one size fits all” solution to the complexities of achieving work-life balance. Also, various policies and practices are needed at different stages of employees’ life and work and in different types of workplaces. Therefore it is unhelpful and might even be unwise to suggest specific policies or strategies.

The policy implications are complex and must take into consideration legislative provisions that currently exist – for example, labor standards, salary replacement provisions, occupational health and safety and human rights/employment equity. All of these provisions have a link to work-life balance and the successful implementation of work-life policies and practices. The government is one of the largest employers. Recognizing the significant changes that have taken place in both families and the economy, government at all levels have the opportunity to take the lead in introducing policies and forward-thinking legislation, as evidenced in enabling longer maternity leave. Both employees and employers have come to realize that the challenge of addressing work-life issues is pivotal to addressing the profound changes taking place in the restructuring of the economy and as Vanier narrates “equally profound changes to the patterns of family formation and functioning the confront us as individuals, as family members, as employers, community members and citizens” (1999).

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Interested researchers may carry out further research on the following topics to explore better the work-family balance situation in Bangladesh:

- The impact of work-life conflict on low-income workers. How do they cope and how do employers meet their needs?
- What are the challenges faced by the self-employed women and how do they handle work-family conflict?
- How do the business & NGO sector organizations handle work-life conflict and how do they work towards flexible work environments?
- The issues of taking care of children and other dependent family members in the absence of the breadwinners.

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