

Understanding Work-family Conflict in Building Sustainable Workplaces: A study in Indian Socio-cultural Context

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ABSTRACT

The job market scenario is changing dynamically, especially in a developing country like India. This makes the issue of sustainable development with respect to human factor even more important in today's time. With the advent of more and more multi-national organisations in the country, the work-place culture has changed drastically. Demographic constitution of work-force has also changed and these changes have brought with them newer challenges for the management. In order for organisations to attract and retain talented workforce and reduce problems of absenteeism, lack of commitment among employees and turnover of employees, it is important for the management to look into the various factors that can lead to these problems. One significant factor identified by researchers is the amount of work-family conflict faced by those working in the highly-challenging and highly-rewarding environment of multi-national corporations. Most research, however, is concentrated in the west and it would be interesting to see if some of the propositions relating to the causes of work-family conflict, hold good in the Indian context too. Cultural differences may manifest in the form of how people perceive changes in traditional work and family environment and the challenges associated with the same. The paper explores the various propositions that can be tested in Indian socio-cultural, which can help in finding similarities and differences in the results obtained from the research conducted in the western world.

Index Words: work-family conflict, social support at work, social support from family, cultural differences

1. INTRODUCTION

Internationally, there has been a lot of talk about sustainable growth and how people, organisations and governments can adopt models of sustainable growth, which will save the physical environment around us and make the earth a better place to live in. While all this talk about environment and its conservation is happening, an important aspect of sustainable growth is the impact of the working of organisations on humans- those working within the organisations and those getting indirectly affected by it. Sometimes, organisational policies can have effects on its human resource, which can be more pervasive and harmful than the effects on physical world (Pfeffer, 2009). Workplace stress, absence of leave provisions, inadequate reward systems, are some examples of how organisational work climate can have an impact on the physical and mental health of the employees. Studies conducted in the more developed western economies have shown how management policies regarding layoffs, not offering medical benefits, sick leave or paid vacation, bullying, lack of job autonomy, can have serious physical and psychological consequences on employees (Pfeffer, 2009). When we look at the developing economies of the world, the job market scenario is different than that in the developed economies and is much more dynamic due to the changes happening in the socio-political-economic environment of these nations. These economies also enjoy demographic dividend of a younger workforce.

The job market scenario in the developing economies has undergone some significant changes in the last two to three decades. Most of these economies globalised in the last 2-3 decades and adopted a more liberalised stand, which ushered in an era of multi-national corporations, bringing with it a plethora of job opportunities and an absolutely new work-culture to these countries. The high economic potential of these developing economies and the availability of a huge human resource made these economies potential investment option for the developed nations. Along with this change, another internal change that was happening simultaneously in these developing economies, was a change in the demographic composition of workforce. In the last 30-40 years, women have achieved increasingly higher educational levels and have progressively entered professional occupations in greater numbers.

The result of these externally imposed and internally generated changes has been that the gender-defined roles- of women taking care of the family and raising children while men go out to earn, has taken a backseat. These developing economies are witnessing a large number of dual-earner and dual-career couples (where both partners are in highly ambitious and high paying jobs). This change has brought with it many challenges, which are faced not just by job seekers but also by job givers. It is not just about women giving competition to men, it is more about economic independence and financial security, which has also pushed young adults and retired men and women to take up part-time jobs. So, the job market has become much more competitive and the work culture of most multi-national corporations is equally competitive, challenging and at the same time highly rewarding. On the one hand, individuals are trying to prove themselves at work by taking up newer and challenging work roles, that will help them climb the corporate ladder faster and on the other hand, they face the difficulty of effectively managing their work and family role responsibilities. The pressures of work and non-work roles, makes work-life balance a challenge for them, which may result in many of them facing problems of stress, strain, burnout, marital dis-satisfaction, job dis-satisfaction, psycho-somatic complaints, reduced performance at work etc. The challenge is not just for individuals, but equally so for organisations, which have to make attempts at attracting and retaining talented workforce. Organisations also suffer due to higher rate of absenteeism, employee turnover and low employee commitment and performance. Researchers, trying to understand the probable cause for this, identified and defined the problem

as Work-family conflict. *Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985 defined work-family conflict as “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect; that is, participation in work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in family (work) role”*. The definition quite sums up the problem faced by the workforce today- of balancing the work and non-work roles.

The paper attempts to look at the problem of work-family conflict faced by those working in the corporate sector in India. Cross-cultural research in the area of work-family conflict has clearly brought forth the difference in the attitudes of people coming from culturally distinct countries. In western nations, which are more individualistic by nature, there was a greater instance of work-family conflict as reported by the employees (working in various types of jobs), than in a collectivist culture like China. Where does India stand in such a situation- as Indian culture is not as collectivist as that of China and neither as individualistic as the European or American cultures are. So, it is important that research in work-family conflict is conducted in context of the socio-cultural environment that exists in a country.

The paper not only attempts to understand the various factors in the work and personal domain of an individual, which can lead to work-family conflict, but also gives various propositions that can be tested in the Indian context.

2. WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

In addition to defining work-family conflict as an inter-role conflict, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), have further divided into three types- time-based, strain-base and behaviour-based conflict. *Time-based conflict* is where an individual is unable to devote adequate time to a particular role due to pressures of other roles. *Strain-based conflict* arises due to role overload, where demands from each role are multiple and satisfying the demands of each role causes strain- mental and physical. Several times the different roles that an individual performs require different behaviours on his/her part. Such behaviours may be mutually incompatible which leads to *behaviour-based conflict*.

The underlying cause behind work-family conflict has been identified by researchers as juggling various responsibilities simultaneously. This can be a source of stress and strain as the resources available (in terms of time and energy) are limited. So, with limited time and energy, an individual tries to maximise the results in terms of satisfactorily discharging different role responsibilities. The attempt here is to make the most efficient utilisation of available resources (*Conservation of resource theory*, Hobfall, 1989). Here, an important role is played by one's own personality traits like self-efficacy, locus of control and positive affect, in managing the demands of different roles.

The effectiveness of even highly skilled employees will be limited if they are not motivated to perform. Sustainable people practices, oriented at motivating the employees can help them work harder and smarter (Huselid, 1995). An example of this can be a practice of allowing those with heavy family responsibilities to work from home once or twice a week. This will help them manage their role responsibilities better and in times where employees are connected to their organisations 24/7, it will not be difficult for organisations to ensure communication and co-ordination among their employees. This will help align the interests of the employees to the interests of the organisation.

Understanding inter-role conflict and work-family balance is important because cross-national research conducted in 33 nations (9627) managers has shown that managers who were rated high

on work-life balance, were rated high on career development potential (Lyness & Judiesch, 2008). To understand the factors leading to work-family conflict or help an individual better manage the often conflicting and demanding work and family role responsibilities, we have divided these factors as work-place level factors and individual-level factors.

3. WORK-PLACE LEVEL FACTORS

At workplace, an employee interacts most with his/her co-workers and immediate supervisor or line managers. Many researchers have identified the critical role that supervisors/leaders play in defining the work-role responsibilities of an employee and the uptake of family-friendly policies offered by the organisation. Supervisors can extend their support in the following ways- *Emotional Support* (supervisors providing support by listening and showing care for employees' work-family demands), *Instrumental Support* (supervisors responding to an employee's work and family needs in the form of day-to-day management transactions), *Role-Modelling Behaviours* (supervisors demonstrating how to synthesize work and family through modelling behaviours on the job) and *Creative Work-Family Management* (supervisor initiated actions to re-structure work to facilitate employee effectiveness on and off the job) (Hammer et al, 2011). The attitude of line managers is very important as workers report directly to them. The intention of line managers in making family-friendly policies available to the employees/workers was explained using Theory of Planned Behaviour (McCarthy et al, 2010). According to the theory:

$$\text{Behaviour} = f(\text{intentions}) = f(\text{attitudes, subjective norms, perceived control})$$

In the absence of supervisory and organisational support, employees worry that taking advantage of these benefits will jeopardise their career (Fierman, 1994; Maitland, 1998; Morris, 1997). Lack of informal supervisor support may act as a major deterrent in the successful implementation and usage of these policies and programs (Allen, 2001). Line managers play a critical role in enabling the actual utilisation of the policies framed by the top management and HR department. To strengthen the link that line managers and supervisors are between availability and utilisation of work-life balance policies, it is important to involve them in strategy formulation to reduce work-family conflict as well as train them in the effective implementation of these benefits and policies. Hammer et al (2011), in their research on the role of supervisors, designed and implemented a training program on store supervisors and it did bring about an attitudinal change in them and employees working under them, who were facing work-family conflict, also reported a positive change in the supervisor's behaviour.

This brings forth the fact that employees are heavily influenced by the attitude that their superiors or departmental head has about the uptake of family-friendly policies and that attitude of supervisors can be moderated using some form of training. Not many studies have explored the effectiveness of training supervisors. The question that arises here is that are the supervisors inherently averse to the uptake of work-life balance policies by their subordinates? Are they bound by certain other factors which may not permit them to encourage their subordinates to take up the benefits otherwise offered by the organisation? The proposition that can be tested here is:

Proposition 1: Managerial concern for employee work-family conflict and support regarding uptake of family-friendly policies is dependent on such a conflict experienced by the managers themselves and their own use of the available policy benefits.

The issue of managerial support was taken up by Allen (2001) in a study to understand the role of family-supportive organisational perceptions. Allen (2001) argued that in addition to the

availability of work-life balance benefits and supportive supervisors, what is additionally required is a supportive organisational culture. In the absence of a supportive organisational culture, employees as well as departmental heads may not take up the policies offered by the organisation. They feel that it may have negative impact on their growth prospects. In response to the need of employees to be able to manage their work and family life more effectively, some organisations do offer family-friendly policies (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Perrin, 1994). These policies can be in the form of flexible work arrangements (flexi-time, telecommuting, compressed work week etc.) or in the form of dependent care support (on-site crèche, paid maternity and paternity leaves etc.). Yet reports indicate that these are under-utilised by employees, frequently unsupported by prevailing corporate cultures and may not reduce work-family conflict, or improve organisational effectiveness.

Research conducted in Australia has identified hostile, unsupportive work environment, attitude of supervisors and lack of communication of family-friendly policies to the employees, as main factors hindering the development and implementation of work-life balance policies (Ceiri et al 2002). Research has therefore established that it is not just about having family-friendly policies, but also about the cultural support that organisations can provide to the employees to ensure that they avail of the policies.

Is supportive organisational culture influenced by the overall culture of the country in which the organisation is working? In case of MNCs, does the culture of the host or home country have a bearing on the organisation culture? As cultures are significantly different in different economies of the world, can the results obtained from a study in a specific culture be generalised? How easy or difficult it is to change the culture of the organisation and what are the costs involved in being family supportive? Do the benefits exceed the cost and this is important in the face of cut-throat competition faced by most organisations? These are important questions that need to be answered because it may not always be possible to change organisation culture and overall culture of the country (whether it is an Asian or western economy), has a significant role to play here. Multi-national corporations bring with them an influence of the culture of the country of origin. This influence can be observed in the policies of the organisation, their attitude towards their employees and most often, the managers coming from the home country also bring with them the attitude and culture of the organisation. Their concern for employee well-being can be directly attributed to the culture of the country to which the company belongs. Studying influence of culture on work-family conflict will also help managers in non-western contexts (example- emerging economies), who are in need of understanding the applicability of work-family conflict models and policies that are developed in western industrialised societies (Aycan Z, 2008).

Proposition 2: *Culture of the home country has a strong influence on the culture of the organisation and the attitude of managers and this moderates the relationship between work-role demands and Work interface with family.*

Supportive organisational culture is characterised by a positive attitude of the organisation and the top management towards the non-work life of the employee and this leads to constructive cultural and structural changes in the working of the organisation. In a supportive organisational culture, an employee is likely to feel less of inter-role conflict and can easily take advantage of the available policy measure to better manage the various role responsibilities. This in turn motivates the employees, makes them committed to the organisation and promotes their own well-being. This can have positive implication for employee engagement initiatives run by the organisation. This leads us to the next proposition:

Proposition 3: *Supportive organisational culture will promote uptake of family-friendly policies and will strongly increase employee engagement.*

Bailey (1993) argued that human resource in most organisations remains under-utilised, as employees perform below their maximum potential. In such a situation, if an organisation can take steps to increase or improve the performance of the employees, then the returns/gains for the organisation shall far exceed the cost. Employees facing work-family conflict, experience stress and strain, which affects their performance at work. In such a situation, if an organisational intervention in the form of family-friendly policies (structural support) or a supportive organisational culture (cultural support), can help employees better manage their work and non-work role responsibilities, it is likely to create advantages for the organisation, in the form of highly-committed workforce, better individual performance at work, lower employee turnover and absenteeism etc. These family-friendly policies and programs can be in the form of a flexible work schedule, on-site child care or leave policies for child-care. These policies, along with a supportive work culture, can result in sustainable human resource practices, which can help attract and retain talented employees in the organisation.

Organisation structures are changing today and work in most organisations is performed by teams. There is lesser of hierarchical structure and teams have gained significant importance. In such a scenario, dependency and interaction among team members has gone up. This has considerably increased the importance of co-worker support as a crucial factor present on the work front, which can influence work-family conflict as well as uptake of work-life balance policies. The shift of job content from steady and routine individual tasks to more complex and collective tasks has enhanced the salience of co-workers and their potential influence (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). Studies have shown how social support from co-workers is related to individual stress, burnout and physical strain (Viswesvaran et al, 1999; Halbesleben, 2006; Schwarzer and Leppin, 1989; meta-analysis by Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) emphasise that interactions with co-workers, as well as with supervisors (leaders) can be positively or negatively valenced, that is, the relationship can be a source of support or antagonism. Despite this similarity in the relationship with co-workers and leaders, there is more freedom and liberty that employees enjoy in their lateral relations than in vertical relations. This can be so as lateral relations are governed by equality-matching as compared to vertical relations, which are governed by authority ranking. Also, co-workers have greater presence within the organisation and because of equality in ranking, interactions are more frequent and dependency on each other for social support is higher amongst co-workers. It can be assumed that high quality and frequent exchanges with co-workers can affect an employee's perceived role conflict.

Teams work under pressure of fixed targets, which are important not only for the team as a whole, but also for each individual as attainment of these targets and goals affects the incentives and growth achieved by each individual. Teams are heterogeneous by nature, with people of different age group and both men and women working together. How does the amount of work-family conflict faced by individual members influence the group dynamics? How does it affect the team performance? There has been little research in exploring the impact of work-family conflict on team performance and group dynamics. Most research has been individual-centric by nature, but with changing times, it has become important to look into the impact that work-family conflict has on other levels in an organisation. A supportive team culture will definitely be conducive to the uptake of family-friendly policies and can in fact reduce the amount of work-family conflict experienced by an individual. Michael et al (2004) investigated the impact of support from co-workers and family on work-family conflict. The research reported a decline in work interface

with family as a result of increased support from colleagues. Baker et al, (1996) found that support from a supervisor or co-workers may decrease an individual's negative feelings about a job and that increased co-worker support is associated with decreased depression. Thomas and Ganster (1995), conducted a research to examine the impact of social support at work on work-family conflict and the findings indicated a direct positive effect of supportive work environment on employee perception of control over work and family matters.

In a research by Hammer et al (2011), where supervisors were trained to be family-supportive and feedback was taken from the employees regarding post-training behaviour of the superiors, the set of employees who faced least work-family conflict showed maximum resentment towards such a training program, citing it as a waste of organisational resources. Peer support and peer pressure both are critical factors in determining the overall satisfaction of an individual with his job. Within the same department or team, some may experience more of work-to-family conflict and for some family-to-work conflict may be more. The need for a family-friendly policy may also vary from individual to individual. In such a situation, understanding the individual issues of each team member as well as working towards attainment of team/departamental goals may pose a challenge. Work environment today, is very challenging and an employee's growth prospects depend not just on his/her own performance but also the performance of the entire team. In such cases, how do employees react to a co-worker's need for a family-friendly policy (like leave or work from home etc.) which may bring forth a fresh set of challenges for others? Do they react empathetically towards their co-worker's needs or does it lead to negative attitudes towards co-workers? Do gender differences matter here, given that research has established that female employees need more of such flexible work policies? These are key questions which lead to the following propositions that need to be tested in context of group/team behaviour and performance:

Proposition 4: *With an increase in family responsibilities (characterised by parenthood and dependent adults), employees seek greater support and co-operation from other team members.*

Proposition 5: *The ability to offer social support to other team members is determined by factors like personality of the individual and personal need for family-friendly policies by a team member.*

Proposition 6: *In high-performance work cultures, the ability to extend support and co-operation to co-workers facing work-family conflict, significantly reduces.*

High-performance work cultures are characterised by long working hours, increased emphasis on target attainment, significant importance given to business/revenue generated by an employee, heavy inter-dependence amongst different departments and performance linked promotion and incentive schemes. Employees working in such high-performance work cultures are unable to show empathy towards their co-workers as it may considerably affect their work-related performance and the focus is always on work-role performance.

4. INDIVIDUAL LEVEL FACTORS

Individual-level factors refer to those factors that are unique to each individual. These include *individual personality traits*, like positive or negative affectivity, locus of control, self-efficacy, extraversion or neuroticism, which determine an individual's reaction to stress and conflict causing situations and the ability to manage stress. Stressors are present both in work as well as in the personal domain of an individual. Yet, different people react differently to the source of stress and have different coping mechanisms to deal with them. How people react to situations that lead to inter-role conflict and how they deal with the same, is different as this is quite dependent on the personality type of an individual. Dispositions also impact the environment that individuals choose

for themselves. For example, some dispositional variables may pre-dispose individuals to select supportive work environments and/or develop personal support networks that make it easier to manage work and family roles (Allen et al, 2011). The Meta-Analysis (Allen et al, 2011), of the impact of dispositional factors on work-family conflict, has reported the existence of a relationship between the two.

Most researchers have used the Big 5 personality model to check the influence of personality on coping ability. Neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion and conscientiousness have been found to be related to WFC (Frone, 2003; Bruck and Allen, 2003; Wayne et al, 2004). Byrant (2009) reported conscientiousness to be negatively related to WFC among a sample of 164 employees at the University of South Florida and a sample of 296 employed fathers in the Netherlands. Wayne et al (2004) found that conscientiousness, agreeableness and extraversion was negatively related to WFC, and neuroticism to be positively related to WFC, using a national random sample (N=2130). Similarly, for extraversion, Grzywacz and Marks, 2000 found in a National survey of Midlife Development, conducted on a sample of 1986 adults, that extraversion was negatively related to both negative spill-over from work-to-family (among men and women) and negative spill-over from family-to-work (among women only). The meta-analysis by Allen et al (2011) found strong evidence for negative effect and neuroticism as personality traits influencing both work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict. The review by Cohn and Edwards (1989) concluded that locus of control is the personality characteristic that provides the most consistent and strongest evidence of stress-moderation. Research examining locus of control in the work-family domain has generally found individuals higher on internal LOC report less WFC, while individuals higher on external LOC experience higher WFC (Personality and Work family Conflict: The mediational role of coping styles by Bryant, 2009).

Proposition 7: Personality of individual team members strongly moderates the relationship between work-family conflict and team-level outcomes.

Proposition 8: There will be a unique relation between personality factors and work-family conflict experienced by individuals, based upon the nature and type of work environment that the individual faces.

At a personal level, this also includes *social support from family*, which may also be different for different people and depends on one's marital status, number of children, whether one is staying with or away from family etc.

Social support can be in the form of emotional support (example: empathy) or instrumental support (example: tangible assistance for problem solving). Cobb (1976) has defined social support as information that leads a person to believe that he or she is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and a member of a network of mutual obligation (Wadsworth and Owens, 2007). In a study of police officers, Burke (1988) documented that lack of social support in non-work environment was related to work-family conflict.

Amongst the various sources of social support, the one that has been cited as being very significant is the support from one's spouse (partner). This may be because families are becoming nuclear and as most research has happened in the western world, there may not be too much evidence of joint families there. Social support is viewed differently in the different cultures of the world. Research in western countries have brought forth that the amount of social support received by an individual depends upon his/her response to the source of social support. People experiencing stress at workplace may start withdrawing from potentially supportive people and this may limit

the family's ability or desire to provide social support (Beehr, 1995: Beehr and McGrath, 1992; Jackson et al, 1985). In a cross-cultural research by Spector et al (2007), it was found that in China and certain other Asian cultures, work is considered to be contributing to family rather than competing with it. Therefore, work related responsibilities carry a lot of importance and with an increase in these responsibilities, the amount of social support (from spouse and immediate family) also goes up. Higher work-related responsibility is considered a matter of respect and prestige in these countries. Also, there is evidence of joint and extended families in such cultures, which can contribute towards sharing of family responsibilities, unlike in western cultures where dependency on external sources of support is higher.

Spousal emotional support has the greatest influence in reducing the level of work-family conflict in case of Singapore women (Aryee, 1992). Thomas and Ganster (1995), also reported that emotional support from one's partner in dual earner relationship reduces the negative effects of work on family life among 398 health care workers with children aged 16 years or less. The study by Carlson and Perrewe (1999), examined the role of social support in work-family conflict and the results brought forth a negative relationship between family support and work-family conflict.

Although, existing research has established the importance of social support in mitigating the stress arising out of inter-role conflict, the sources of social support and the attitudes associated with them is vastly different in different cultures. Research needs to establish whether the strong presence of social support (like in Asian economies) leads to a considerably low work-family conflict in these countries. The changing structure of families in Asian countries and the implications of it on work-family conflict also needs to be explored. With an increase in movement from one city/state to another, joint family system is dis-integrating in these countries as well. A cross-generational study can bring forth the differences in social support and the consequences of it on an individual's work-family conflict.

Proposition 9: *The amount of social support received from family and its impact on work-family conflict will be different for Gen X and Gen Y in the current Indian scenario.*

Work-family conflict can also be a major consideration for those employees who may face international transfers in their organisation. Shifting base to a new country can give rise to work-family conflict or aggravate the conflict already being experienced by an employee. The matter can be more severe if the employee facing the issue of international posting is married and has children and/or dependent adults. Such decisions may require a lot of adjustment in the current lifestyle of the individual and he (she) may/may not get the required support from the family. In such a challenging situation, social support received from family and organisation plays an important role in managing the inter-role conflict.

Proposition 10: *Social support buffers the adverse impact of international transfers on work-family conflict, thereby reducing the negative impact of work-family conflict on work and family domain.*

5. CONCLUSION AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a substantive amount of literature available on work-family balance, but majority of it is concentrated in the west. A review of literature reveals that work-family conflict-its causes and consequences, differ from one profession to another and from one cultural setting to another. So, the causes and the resultant consequences, as well as the interventions required (both at organisational level as well as individual-level), will be unique for each job type and must take

into account the socio-cultural environment of the country. Despite a substantial body of research available, there still exists scope for further research. Firstly, an important area of research is the impact of work-family conflict on team performance and team dynamics. Most studies have been individual-centric by nature and role of co-workers and leaders has also been seen on an individual basis. The collective impact of conflict on team performance and inter-personal relations, needs further investigation. Secondly, the amount of conflict experienced and its relationship with various other factors mentioned above, is a very culture-specific concept and may yield different results for different cultures. As observed in the seminal work by Spector et al (2007), in a study across five different cultures, the attitude of employees towards their work and family responsibilities and the expected social support from organisation and family, was significantly different amongst western cultures and Asian culture. In Asian countries like China and India, work is seen as contributing to family rather than competing with it and social support from family increased with an increase in work related responsibilities and pressure. So, in the light of these cultural differences, work-family conflict experienced by employees of a specific profession should be studied with the culture of the country as boundary factors. Thirdly, the causes leading to work-family conflict can be present in both work and non-work domains and may range from factors present at the organisation, department or individual level. This calls for more multi-level analysis of the factors leading to work-family conflict as it will give a better understanding of the causes. India enjoys demographic dividend in the form of a large population, majority of which is young and can contribute towards the economic prosperity of the nation. A report by Boston Consultancy group shows how India can use this bonus of a large and skilled population base, to its favour, at a time when many other nations of the world are struggling with shortage of labour. Given this, it is important that organisations operating in India have HR policies that enable these organisations to attract and retain skilled workforce.

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