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When Work and Family Collide: A Phenomenological Inquiry Exploring Work-Family Conflicts Among Professional Working Mothers at Institutions of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Democratization in the education system and changes in social norms significantly expanded the roles of women in Malaysia. As the nation modernized, professional working mothers faced escalating demands, highlighting the necessity for a deeper understanding of the work-family dynamic. Balancing professional and domestic roles often resulted in work-family conflict, where competing demands were incompatible. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore experiences of professional working mothers at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) with particular emphasis on specific conflicts in balancing work and family. In-depth interviews were conducted with six (6) informants selected through snowball sampling technique. The data were analyzed using Atlas.ti9 and van Kaam method was modified, which included seven steps such as horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing invariant constituents, validating themes, and constructing textual-structural descriptions. The findings revealed three themes related to psychological experiences of the professional working mothers such as barriers in personal life, family matters and work-related challenges.

Keywords: balancing; conflict; education; phenomenology; professional working mothers

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, women constitute nearly half of the nation's total population (Salleh & Sheikh, 2021). The democratization of the education system coupled with shifts in social norms has significantly expanded the role of women in Malaysian society. Historically, women have been acknowledged as a vital force driving national progress, contributing meaningfully to the socio-economic development of the country. Despite the increasing participation of women in various professional sectors, the issue of work-family balance among women employees continues to garner critical attention. This is particularly relevant as women are now seen sharing equal responsibilities with men, not only within professional spheres but also in managing familial obligations (Bharadwaj & Shanker, 2019).

Traditionally, gender roles were distinctly demarcated, with men predominantly positioned as breadwinners and women entrusted with domestic and caregiving responsibilities Doddapaneni & Sk (2024). However, the evolving socio-economic landscape has necessitated a re-evaluation of these roles. The growing recognition and acknowledgment of gender contributions have, while

progressive, introduced new complexities into family dynamics and individual well-being. As the roles of women transcend conventional boundaries, the strain of balancing work and family becomes increasingly pronounced.

Work-family conflict (WFC) is a critical concept in understanding this phenomenon. Defined by Nair et al. (2020), WFC refers to an inter-role conflict wherein the demands of work and family responsibilities are mutually incompatible. WFC is further categorized into two dimensions: (1) work-to-family conflict, where professional demands encroach upon family life, and (2) family-to-work conflict, where family obligations disrupt professional commitments (Zhou et al., 2018). The detrimental effects of WFC on women's health and overall well-being are well-documented, encompassing issues such as depression, marital discord, compromised health status, reduced life satisfaction, and adverse work outcomes (Nair et al., 2020).

The objective of this study is to explore the lived experiences of professional working mothers employed at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) in Malaysia, with particular emphasis on identifying the specific conflicts they encounter in balancing work and family responsibilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The challenge of work-family balance remains a critical issue in contemporary society, often presenting a significant dilemma for families and couples (Szeker, Nagy & Nagy, 2024). Work demands frequently encroach on personal time, creating stress, particularly for mothers of young children. National and global studies confirm that the majority of respondents consider balancing work and family life as one of their biggest challenges. Literature suggests that management professionals often perceive this as a "women's issue," placing a disproportionate burden on women to navigate the complexities of work and household responsibilities. Discrimination in the workplace further exacerbates these challenges, with women facing slower career advancement and greater obstacles compared to their male counterparts (Mckinsey, 2022).

The structural barriers against working mothers are evident in research findings. Bright (2018) reported that 82% of working mothers encountered barriers to leadership roles, while Heanglee (2016) found that 40% of Malaysian women experienced job discrimination due to pregnancy. These discriminatory practices manifest through limited promotion opportunities, redundancy, demotion, prolonged probation, or even termination. Work-family conflict is a recurring theme, with women reporting significantly higher levels of stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion than men (Kremer, 2016; Bhumika, 2020). The conflict theory suggests that success in one domain often comes at the expense of the other, reinforcing the need for better work-life balance policies (Ravindranath et al., 2021).

Emotional exhaustion among working women is compounded by financial instability and workplace stressors (Venkataraman & Venkataraman, 2021). Work-family conflicts influence psychological well-being, affecting productivity and household responsibilities (Ramani, Siva & Dada, 2022). Furthermore, distractions at home, particularly for working mothers, pose significant challenges. Studies highlight that background noise, online classes, and household duties interfere with work performance, impacting job satisfaction (Ramani et al. 2022; Hemapriya & Ramchandran, 2019). Job satisfaction is shaped by physical, psychological, financial, and technological factors, and these elements must be addressed to support working mothers in their professional roles (Bhattarai, 2020).

Qualitative studies provide insight into the lived experiences of working mothers. Lekchiri and Eversole (2021) found that 67% of respondents reported that professional responsibilities hindered their ability to care for their families. Some participants recounted their struggles, including the difficulty of balancing caregiving responsibilities with career aspirations. Others, however, benefited from flexible work environments that facilitated work-life balance. Spousal support was also a significant factor influencing career sustainability for women, with those lacking support experiencing greater difficulty in managing both roles (Camilleri & Spiteri, 2021).

Research further illustrates that work-family conflict disproportionately affects women across various cultural contexts. Nair et al. (2020) found that female professionals, particularly those with young children, reported higher levels of guilt and stress due to competing work and family

demands. Similar patterns were observed among female academics, who experienced significant work-family conflict due to their extensive professional responsibilities. Studies in Norway also highlighted those women in academia faced greater challenges than men in managing work-related pressures and family responsibilities. These findings underscore the urgent need for policies promoting equitable work-life balance, flexible working arrangements, and institutional support systems to mitigate gender-based disparities in the workforce.

METHODOLOGY

This study has employed a qualitative approach to achieve its research objectives. The subsequent subsections provide an in-depth discussion of this approach.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of professional working mothers employed at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) in Malaysia, with particular emphasis on identifying the specific conflicts they encounter in balancing work and family responsibilities. A phenomenological approach was adopted to understand the essence of informants' experiences, focusing on their psychological, emotional, and social dimensions (Van Manen, 2023). In-depth interviews were conducted, allowing participants to share their narratives in their own words, facilitating the identification of patterns and themes. This approach ensured a culturally and contextually grounded understanding of their challenges and coping mechanisms (Yin, 2016).

The study focused on professional working mothers employed as lecturers in Malaysian public universities, specifically Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA, and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit six (6) informants who met inclusion criteria, such as being Muslim and experienced in balancing work and family responsibilities, working at an institution of higher education (IHE) in Peninsular Malaysia and agree to participate in the study. Data saturation was achieved with this sample size, aligning with recommendations for phenomenological research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Demographic of informants

Table 1 illustrates the demographic profiles of professional working mothers who participated in this study, emphasizing key aspects of their personal, educational, and professional backgrounds. The informants, all married Muslim women aged between 37 and 56 years, demonstrated diverse experiences in balancing family and career responsibilities. Their years of marriage ranged from 8 to 33 years, and they had between 2 and 5 children. Academically, the informants possessed advanced qualifications, including master's degrees and Ph.Ds., in areas such as Educational Psychology, Instructional Technology, and Early Childhood Parenting. Professionally, they served as lecturers in institutions of higher education (IHE), assuming leadership roles such as department heads and program coordinators, with work experience spanning 7 to 24 years. The informants' spouses worked in various professions, including civil engineering, journalism, and law enforcement, further adding to the dynamic nature of their family lives.

Table 1. Demographic profiles of informants

Pseudonym	Mdm Nad	Dr Haya	Dr Sya	Dr Azi	Dr Jaz	Dr Suri
Age	44	44	56	42	37	40
Marital status	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married
Religion	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam
Years of marriage	13 years	12 years	33 years	9 years	11 years	8 years
Number of Kids	3 (2 boys, 1 girl)	2 daughters	4 (2 boys, 2 girls)	2 daughters	5 (3 boys, 2 girls)	3 daughters

Table 1. (continued)

Educational background	Master in Educational Psychology	PhD in Instructional Technology	PhD in Educational Psychology	PhD in Early Childhood (Parenting)	PhD in Anthropology	PhD in Psychology
Job titles	Lecturer, IHE	Lecturer, IHE	Lecturer, IHE	Lecturer, IHE	Lecturer, IHE	Lecturer, IHE
Years of working experiences	10 years	10 years	24 years	16 years	9 years	7 years
Additional post	Coordinator Practicum	Coordinator E-learning and Mooc	Head of Department, Faculty	Head of Department, Faculty	Head of Department, Faculty	-
State	Selangor	Negeri Sembilan	Johor	Selangor	Terengganu	Kedah
Spouse Career	Pegawai Tadbir Diplomatik	Mechanical engineering worker	Civil engineer	Journalist	Police	Self-employed

Instruments

Table 2 below signifies the set of interview protocols:

Table 2. List of interview protocols

Questions
What barriers did you encounter throughout your personal and professional life?
How does your family role affect your ability to realise work-family balance?
How does your work role affect your ability to realise work-family balance?
Did you find yourself giving up or letting go of something to balance work and family life?
How did making this decision make you feel?

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument, offering flexibility to explore informants' experiences deeply. Open-ended questions guided the discussions, with probes used to clarify responses and uncover emerging themes. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve authenticity. Member checking, expert validation and clarification bias was employed to enhance trustworthiness, while a demographic survey provided contextual background on informants' professional and personal lives, complementing the qualitative data.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using Atlas.ti9 and van Kaam method was modified, which included seven steps such as horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing invariant constituents, validating themes, and constructing textual-structural descriptions.

RESULTS

From the analysis, three themes emerged in describing the lived experiences of professional working mothers at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). The themes are presented and discussed below:

Barriers in personal life

Theme one focuses on the barriers that professional working mothers encounter in their personal lives, which significantly impact their ability to balance work and family. The data revealed six sub-themes: challenges with mothers-in-law, extended family, children, physical and mental health, and communication with spouses. Two informants, Puan Nad and Dr. Sya, shared their experiences of navigating complex relationships with their mothers-in-law, which often contributed to stress and conflict. Puan Nad talked about the emotional strain her mother-in-law's opposition to her studying

abroad caused, leading to a persistent sense of resentment. Similarly, Dr. Sya described the challenges she faced when her husband decided to quit his job to care for his mother, adding a layer of complexity to her work-family balance.

Madam Nad/DU75 discussed and shared the experiences of navigating complex relationships with their mothers-in-law, which often contributed to stress and conflict:

"The only thought that bothered me was that I wasn't being kind to my in-laws, especially to my mother-in-law. She was the one who opposed my decision to study abroad. Whenever we visited her, I couldn't bring myself to smile or make prolonged eye contact because I felt she was the strongest reason why we shouldn't study abroad."

Dr. Sya/DU43 similarly said:

"There was a bit of a challenge with my mother-in-law. Since I was working, my husband decided to quit his job to take care of her for over a year. Whether to continue working or not was an issue because someone had to look after her, and that became a major challenge."

And Dr. Sya/DU43 also described:

"A significant conflict arose when we had to care for my mother. Both my parents had passed away, and with the children growing up, we had to step in. For instance, my mother had other children, like my sisters, who would just come to visit occasionally."

Next, four informants discussed the challenges associated with managing their children's needs alongside their work commitments. For instance, Puan Nad emphasised the difficulty of allocating time for her children while still fulfilling her professional duties. Similarly, Dr. Sya and Dr. Jas highlighted the struggles of ensuring their children's well-being, particularly when work demands limited the time they could spend with their children. Dr. Jas also mentioned the shortcut intervention that she took. Next, Dr. Suri acknowledged the importance of reliable childcare but noted that even with trusted carers, concerns about her children's health and education remained a constant source of stress.

Madam Nad/DU99 discussed the challenges associated with managing their children's needs alongside their work commitments:

"I need to spend time with my kids and also have time for myself. Students submit assessments and other tasks, and I mark them very slowly. So it's difficult for me. I really want to dedicate my time to being at home."

Similarly, Dr. Sya/DU43 highlighted.

"Managing children during their school years? Whenever we faced a barrier, my husband and I quickly found solutions, like addressing school-related issues. Proximity to the school and having a car was part of how we managed."

And Dr. Jaz/DU55 also highlighted.

"There was a time when, as I mentioned earlier, while working, I resorted to giving gadgets to my children to keep them occupied. But this had consequences. For instance, my third child became overly attached to gadgets, which had negative effects. I acknowledge that this was my weakness. Sometimes I was busy cooking or doing other tasks. Now, I try to spend more time with my children, but it also depends on the leadership at work. It's hard to ignore work when your boss is very demanding. Sometimes I feel guilty seeing my children fall

asleep playing with gadgets, but at least my work gets done. To make up for it, I take them to the park or do other activities to reconnect with them."

Dr. Suri/DU28/32 also mentioned.

"There are some issues with my children now, but they are not too disruptive. For instance, I trust the people taking care of my children, which eases my worries while working. However, health issues are common concerns. For example, with my second-grader, I have to ask if there's homework, check on their studies, prepare their dinner, and organise their books. And that's just for the second grader, there's also the baby to think about."

The issue of physical and mental health is another significant barrier for the three informants. The pressures of balancing work and family often led to various health problems, such as fatigue, back pain, and emotional strain. These health challenges affected their ability to perform effectively at work and hindered their capacity to engage fully with their families. Puan Nad highlighted her struggles with physical health, particularly as she approached her 40s. She described the physical toll of managing her responsibilities, noting a lack of energy and difficulty maintaining personal health. Dr. Haya specifically highlighted the issue of back pain, which began during the pandemic, and described the additional emotional strain she experienced. Dr. Azi also underscored the importance of health as a significant barrier, particularly in the context of managing both work and family responsibilities.

Madam Nad/DU104/108/112/116 highlighted:

"My health and sanity, I think, are the biggest concerns, especially now that I'm in my 40s. You need to take care of your diet and health, but I often don't feel good physically. I don't have the energy to make breakfast in the morning. I really want to get a medical checkup, but I haven't had the chance. I need to see a dentist, but there's no time. I go to the government hospital because I can't afford private care, but my schedule with classes doesn't leave me enough time."

Then, Dr. Haya/DU145/157 specifically highlighted:

"It's not a barrier, but my main issue is health. I've had back pain since the pandemic. Another challenge is emotional, it makes me quick-tempered and irritable."

After that, Dr Azi/DU23 explained:

"For me and my husband, health can also be an issue. We're in our early 40s and caring for a young child, which can be a barrier."

In addition to health-related issues, communication difficulties emerged as a significant challenge. Puan Nad shared her struggles with communication, especially concerning serious issues such as her children's education and religious upbringing. She described how miscommunication and differing priorities between her and her spouse led to ongoing conflicts.

And Madam Nad/DU75 shared:

"Sometimes communication differs, and it can lead to misunderstandings. Our major struggle is often a lack of communication on serious issues, especially regarding our children's future. For example, I want to be more involved in mosque activities and religious studies, but my spouse seems indifferent, just agreeing without real commitment. This also extends to education. I want my children to have sufficient religious education, but he's more academically oriented. This causes some clashes. He often compares our children to his

friends' kids who excel in academics, which affects our eldest emotionally. My child once said, 'Why does Papa compare me to his friends' kids?' I also wanted to send them for Quran classes, but he insisted on teaching them himself. However, his teaching is inconsistent and strict, which makes the children reluctant to learn. Moving forward, I believe we need better communication to address these issues effectively."

In conclusion, theme six highlights the multifaceted barriers that professional working mothers face in balancing work and family roles, emphasizing the complexity of their lived experiences. The findings emphasise six sub-themes such as challenges with mothers-in-law, extended family, children, physical and mental health, and communication with spouses. These barriers often result in emotional strain, physical health issues, and interpersonal conflicts, underscoring the interplay between familial expectations and professional commitments.

Family matters

Theme two explores the impact of family roles on the ability to achieve work-family balance. The informants shared the two perspectives on financial management and the importance of a support system. The subtheme of financial management was highlighted by two informants, who reflected on how financial constraints impact their work-family balance. For example, Dr. Haya discussed how financial pressures and perceived discrimination affect their family's financial stability. Second, Dr. Jas noted the impact of high living costs on the necessity for both partners to work. Next, Dr. Azi highlighted the importance of a support system, especially when dealing with a child with special needs.

First, Dr. Haya/DU172 discussed how financial pressures and perceived discrimination affect their family's financial stability.

"Balancing work and family is challenging. The reason we work is for income. My husband doesn't have a PhD. Even though he studied mechanical engineering abroad and was well-regarded there, in Malaysia, it's a different story, particularly in the mechanical industry. Opportunities depend on the company you join. Previously, he worked in the fibre optic sector, but now he's employed by a German government-linked company operating locally as a private limited company. Unfortunately, his qualifications aren't fully recognised, leading to discrimination. For instance, only three Malays work in his department, while the rest belong to Malaysia's minority groups. I encouraged him to explore other opportunities because we see limitations in his current position. From a financial perspective, Allah has blessed us with the advantage of higher education, and with that comes greater responsibilities."

Second, Dr. Jaz/DU51 noted the impact of high living costs on the necessity for both partners to work.

"In today's high-cost living environment, both husband and wife need to work. Actually, it's possible for just the husband to work, but that would mean living with basic necessities and without many comforts. There's also the satisfaction we gain from our own careers, the fulfilment of achieving what we aspire to be."

Next, Dr. Azi/DU27 highlighted the importance of a support system, especially when dealing with a child with special needs.

"Having a child with special needs requires a unique level of understanding. We had to educate ourselves about her condition and adapt to her requirements. On top of that, my husband's unpredictable work schedule demands that I remain in standby mode. Although we try to coordinate our timetables, we must always be prepared for unexpected situations. Communication is essential because children with special needs require extra attention and care."

In conclusion, theme two explores the influence of family roles on achieving work-family balance, focusing on two critical subthemes such as financial management and the importance of a support system. Financial constraints emerged as a significant barrier, with participants reflecting on how economic pressures and systemic challenges, such as high living costs and discrimination, necessitate dual-income households and create additional stress in managing work and family responsibilities. In contrast, the presence of a robust support system was identified as an essential enabler for maintaining balance, particularly in families with unique caregiving demands, such as caring for a child with special needs.

Work-related challenges

This section addresses how work-related challenges as theme three impact work-family balance. Informants discussed issues related to time constraints, work expectations, high workload, and fatigue. Four informants highlighted time constraints as a major challenge in balancing work and family life. Puan Nad described the difficulty of managing work that extends into personal time. Dr. Azi echoed similar sentiments about the struggle to manage time effectively. After that, Dr. Jas emphasised the excessive demands placed on her time due to work. Dr. Suri also mentioned the impact of time constraints on family life.

Madam Nad/DU99 described:

> *"In my line of work, I often have to bring work home. This becomes particularly challenging during the end-of-semester period. There is no real break or relief. When students are on holiday, our workload shifts to tasks such as event planning, program implementation, report writing, and uploading numerous documents."*

Dr. Azi/DU23 echoed similar sentiments:

> *"I would say time is a major constraint. My husband and I are in our forties and have a young child, which can be a barrier. We try to manage it. As for our parents, they are still in good health, so we haven't had to consider caregiving responsibilities for them yet."*

Dr. Jaz/DU43emphasised:

> *"Time is the most significant challenge. As we know, there are only 24 hours in a day, but our work often feels like it requires 48 hours to complete. Some people are overly obsessed with their work due to chasing KPIs or other targets. If a man is a workaholic, the woman can usually manage other family responsibilities. However, if a woman is a workaholic, the children often suffer. A mother's role in the household is immense it goes beyond cooking or being present. When a mother becomes overly focused on her job, children may feel neglected. While this might not be immediately visible, it will manifest in the future. Additionally, some colleagues or supervisors do not respect personal boundaries, frequently calling or texting about work matters even outside working hours. This constant intrusion into personal time is unsustainable."*

Dr. Suri/DU32 also mentioned:

> *"For me, time is the biggest challenge. Since starting this career, the time I spend with my children has become increasingly limited and constrained."*

Moving to another discussion, three informants discussed the pressures of work expectations and how they affect their ability to balance work and family. In the case of Puan Nad, she noted the difficulties in meeting work expectations while trying to manage family responsibilities. Dr. Azi

mentioned how changing work expectations adds to the challenges of balancing work and family. Then, Dr. Jas highlighted issues with work invading personal time.

Madam Nad/DU99 noted:

"Currently, I am managing the admissions process for Chinese students as well as handling a significant number of local students. I also need to ensure students submit their assessments before returning to China. I wish I could finish my work by 5:00 PM and go home to do housework, but I can't. I am exhausted. I need to spend time with my kids and also have some personal time, but even grading assessments is delayed because of my workload. It's really difficult. I genuinely want to dedicate more time to my home."

Dr. Azi/DU23 mentioned:

"Work expectations have become increasingly demanding, with new hurdles and challenges emerging every year."

Dr. Jaz/DU23 highlighted:

"Work encroaches on our personal lives, especially with the accessibility of messaging apps. People contact us late at night, and this disrupts emotional well-being and time with our children. For instance, while trying to spend time with my kids, I'll receive work-related messages. I try to postpone such matters until work hours whenever possible."

After that, two informants, Dr Haya, discussed the impact of a high workload on their health and family life and Puan Nad also mentioned the same thing as Dr. Haya about the impact of a high workload on their health and family life.

Dr. Haya/DU23 discussed:

"Since they know we have laptops and other facilities at home, they feel entitled to request things at any time. Meetings are held at odd hours, even on weekends and nights. Sometimes, we're required to produce notes within extremely tight deadlines, spending long hours in front of a computer. This results in significant stress, which has started to affect my health. My back pain hasn't subsided, and I've stopped bringing my laptop home because they still expect us to work beyond office hours. Employers need to normalise respecting personal time outside of work hours."

Similarly, Madam Nad/DU148/153 mentioned:

"Sometimes I feel upset that I can't finish my work because I need to spend time with my younger child. While I had no such issues with my two older children, I enjoyed watching my youngest grow and play. Yet, I often can't join her because of work commitments."

Additionally, Puan Nad, also mentions fatigue as the difficulty in balancing work and family:

"Currently, I am managing admissions for Chinese students and handling a large number of local students as well. I need to chase students to submit assessments before returning to China. I really wish I could finish my work at 5:00 PM and then focus on housework, but I often find it impossible. This situation leaves me feeling drained and tired."

In conclusion, theme three underscores the significant impact of work-related challenges on achieving work-family balance, focusing on time constraints, work expectations, high workload, and fatigue. Time constraints emerged as a predominant issue, with informants emphasizing the

difficulty of managing work demands that encroach upon personal and family time. The pressures of meeting evolving work expectations further exacerbated these challenges, making it difficult to maintain a clear boundary between professional and personal responsibilities. High workloads were noted as a key stressor, adversely affecting both physical health and family engagement. Fatigue, as a direct consequence of these overlapping challenges, further hindered participants' capacity to balance their dual roles effectively. These findings underscore the critical need for organizational policies and practices that promote realistic workloads, flexible scheduling, and support mechanisms to reduce the strain on working mothers and facilitate a healthier work-family balance.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in theme one highlight the intricate barriers that professional working mothers face in their efforts to balance work and family roles. This study extends prior literature by examining how familial, societal, and individual factors shape these challenges in the Malaysian context. One significant finding concerns the strain arising from relationships with in-laws, particularly regarding eldercare responsibilities. While childcare has been widely documented as a dominant stressor (Dousin et al., 2021; Latip et al., 2022), this study underscores the equally demanding nature of eldercare. For instance, the emotional toll of intergenerational conflicts, such as a mother-in-law's opposition to a professional mother's academic pursuits, illustrates how external family expectations can interfere with career progression. The findings suggest that these familial tensions not only influence emotional well-being but also reinforce gendered expectations that place disproportionate caregiving responsibilities on women.

Theme two sheds light on the intersection of childcare and work responsibilities, emphasizing the diverse coping mechanisms employed by professional working mothers. Consistent with existing research (Dousin et al., 2021; Latip et al., 2022), this study affirms that Asian women continue to bear the primary burden of household responsibilities despite professional commitments. However, beyond highlighting this imbalance, the findings reveal pragmatic adaptation strategies. One informant described resorting to giving her children gadgets as a temporary solution to manage distractions, a decision that alleviates immediate stress but raises concerns about long-term reliance on technology. In contrast, other mothers adopted proactive approaches, such as selecting childcare facilities near their workplaces to optimize logistics. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of women's agency in navigating systemic constraints. Prior research predominantly framed work-family conflict as a challenge requiring structural intervention (Wiens et al., 2022), yet this study underscores the micro-level strategies women employ to sustain equilibrium within their dual roles. Nevertheless, the persistence of these strategies highlights the need for broader institutional support to alleviate the systemic burdens faced by working mothers.

Theme three explores the critical issue of health, both physical and emotional, as a consequence of work-family conflict. The study findings align with Dousin et al. (2021), which argue that the dual burden of career and household duties exacerbates health problems for women. Informants detailed struggles with fatigue, back pain, and emotional strain, particularly as they aged or navigated the heightened pressures of the pandemic. However, this study expands the discussion by examining the socioeconomic constraints that limit access to healthcare resources. One informant highlighted financial limitations as a barrier to seeking private healthcare, a perspective that underscores the compounded challenges of economic pressures, professional obligations, and personal well-being. The lack of time whether to focus on personal health or to adequately balance work and family responsibilities further exacerbates stress, aligning with Szeker et al. (2024), who identified excessive workloads as a primary source of distress. While previous literature has addressed health implications in broad terms, this study offers a contextualized perspective by linking these challenges to the broader socio-economic realities of professional working mothers in Malaysia.

In conclusion, this discussion provides a comprehensive analysis of the barriers faced by professional working mothers, emphasizing the interplay between familial expectations, childcare responsibilities, and health implications. Unlike prior studies that primarily focus on childcare as the

predominant challenge, this research highlights the multifaceted nature of work-family conflict, incorporating eldercare, financial limitations, and spousal communication challenges. The findings underscore the resilience of working mothers in navigating these overlapping demands while also calling attention to the urgent need for systemic reforms. Policies that promote flexible work arrangements, equitable caregiving responsibilities, and accessible mental health support could significantly alleviate the burdens identified in this study. Ultimately, a holistic approach one that integrates familial, institutional, and policy-driven interventions is essential in fostering sustainable work-family balance for professional working mothers.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explores the lived experiences of professional working mothers in Malaysian Institutions of Higher Education (IHE), emphasizing the specific conflicts they faced in balancing work and family responsibilities. The findings revealed that these women navigate complex challenges, including intergenerational conflicts, caregiving duties, health concerns, and communication struggles with spouses, all of which are intensified by traditional gender roles and societal expectations. The emotional toll manifested in guilt, stress, and exhaustion highlights the need for culturally relevant support systems. Despite systemic constraints, the working mothers exhibit resilience through various coping strategies, with financial independence serving as a key factor in empowerment, though financial pressures and employment discrimination add further complexity. The presence of strong support networks, including spouses, extended family, and childcare services, significantly influences their ability to manage dual roles, yet disparities in spousal support and societal attitudes towards shared caregiving reinforce gender inequalities. To address these issues, this study calls for institutional reforms such as flexible workplace policies, structured workload management, and enhanced parental leave, alongside cultural shifts that promote shared caregiving and recognize the psychological burden on working mothers. Additionally, financial literacy programs and culturally sensitive mental health support are essential to alleviating stress and improving well-being. Future research should further explore the intersection of cultural expectations and professional aspirations in diverse socio-economic and global contexts to inform the development of more inclusive policies and holistic support systems that advance the well-being and career progression of professional working mothers.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 carried out the field work, prepared the literature review, wrote the research methodology, did the data entry, discussion and conclusion. Author 2 checked contents of this article and provide suggestions for improvement.

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