

A Clash of Priority Between Work and Home: An Experience of Female Professionals in a Modernised Malaysia

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Abstract

This article explores the paradoxes relating to the intricate relationships of women, work and home in Malaysia. In general, employment activity enhances women's economic independence and influences their negotiations about the divisions of labour in the home. But in Malaysia, the situation concerns the issue over conflicts of priorities, which seems to challenge the traditional gender roles of woman, wife, mother and homemaker. What happens when family commitments come into conflict with the demands of employment? When the two seem incompatible, which one gets priority? The research proposition rests on the stance that traditional and normative values still confine female professionals in Malaysia to set the priority for family work more than professional work despite modernisation. This article therefore attempts to identify their priority when the private-traditional sphere collides with the public-modernised sphere. It is derived from an in-depth structured interview method on 34 female professionals such as engineers, chemists and geologists who work at one petrochemical company in Malaysia, as well as higher-ranking ministerial personnel and human resource managers. The study found that even though female professionals enjoy their work, they still consider family and home as the priority in life. Modernisation has not able to change women's traditional attitude towards home commitment. Though they may be modernised, educated and professional, when it collides with home affairs, these women are still traditional at heart.

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Introduction

The development has affected the lives of working women in various ways. Modernisation is one of the outcomes of a nation's development that changed the women's existence – from traditional to a modernised outlook. Women's work, for instance, seems to be more integrated nowadays yet at the same time also fragmented by the clash of traditional and modern influences. In Malaysia, the working scenario for women has developed tremendously since 1957 independence to early 1990s – from agriculture to manufacturing to services to professional sectors. Yet, how far do the so-called "modern" women emancipate themselves from being traditional?

Women, work and families are a significant issue. Working women have to cope in both worlds of work. If they are married with a family, they have the additional burden of childcare. Literature on gender at work cites that the norms of work life have developed to fit men whose life stages are uninterrupted by pregnancy, maternity, childcare and home managing (Chapman. 2004; Hakim, 1999; Walby. 1997). Women are different. They cannot match this pattern because women's work life proceeds at a different rhythm from men's. With many private matters at home requiring their attention, their public life outside home is expected to be less significant.

This article observes the life experience of the female professionals at PetCo². Considering the fact that they already have undergone years of learning and gained essential skills, they might get used to the idea of getting paid work. However, on odd occasions different stories might be generated. Not all women are the same, and therefore they might have different desires about life and diverse aspirations about career.

The fundamental research hypothesis rests on how do Malaysian professional women in the employment force adapt towards modernisation. The main objective is to study women's work experiences related to the meaning of work within the context of family roles. Specifically, when 'workplace priority'

¹ A part of this paper has been presented at the Work, Employment and Society (WES) Conference, organised by the British Sociological Association (BSA), 12-14 September 2007, at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.

² PetCo is a fictitious name for one petrochemical company in Malaysia used in my research. PetCo was selected based on three pre-requisites. Firstly, it is widely acknowledged in providing gender equal opportunity working policies in Malaysia. Secondly, due to its semi-government status, it is an embodiment of both the private and the public sector, which might show a more flexible way for women's entrance to the workplace. Thirdly, it is in the forefront of the high-tech industries, and hence may provide an easier access to women because they had not inherited long-standing gender stereotypes in organisational structures.

runs into 'home priority, which 'priority' receives women's attention? The study estimates that professional women set their priority more on family work rather than professional work despite the demands of modernisation that emphasises rationality and material things.

Sampling and Research Methodologies Used at PetCo

My study was conducted in two phases. The first phase in 2004 was the most extensive study as it interviewed 30 female engineers, chemists and geologists who worked at PetCo. The aim of this 2004 study was to gather their personal and professional experiences at home and workplaces. The second phase study in 2007 was the interview session with four higher-ranking ministerial personnel who work at the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development as well as PetCo's human resource managers. The objective of this 2007 study was to get their opinions towards working women's ability to manage the two life spheres concurrently.

The selection of the sample is based on snowballing sampling. It is a technique which existing subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. Snowball sampling nonetheless is not free from bias. To make unbiased estimates from snowball samples, I restricted my sample to age ranges, ethnic composition and locations of the workplace at each site.

The Effect of Modernisation on Women, Work and Home

Modernisation is a social process of becoming modern – that is typically contrasted with traditional forms of society and its lifestyles. Georg Simmel (Poggi, 1993) for instance, emphasised the role played by monetary exchange in consolidating the impersonal and calculative nature of relations among people. Max Weber characterised modernisation in which the dominance of rational calculation over emotional, affective and spiritual apprehension (McCormick, 2007). Likewise, as women modernise, their work orientation changes. Starting from the debates on women's rights by the third-wave feminist movement in 1970s, women's work orientation became the topic of discussion around the world particularly in the United Kingdom (Arber and Gilbert. 1992: Dex. 1988: Drew et. al. 1998: Perrons et. al. 2006). Some literature focused on the psychological effect of work for women while other studies emphasised the economic factors. Parker (1983) identified work with the means of earning a living. Pahl (1991) viewed money as a medium of exchange, not only in the conventional economic sense but also in a social and ideological sense. The issue of money in a marriage is about power in a marital relationship (Perrons et. al. 2006).

As Malaysia becomes more modernised, its women particularly the professional group, is expected to be rational beings as against traditional. However, this is unnecessarily true as the traditional and normative values still

capture the life of Malaysian female professionals in setting their priority right despite being influenced by modernisation. Their work orientation may have changed from providing affectionate comfort to searching for material comfort. But, that does not mean the latter supersedes the former.

The issue of women, work and family in Malaysia is generally directed towards understanding the condition of women in the workplace (Jamilah. 1992: Kaur. 2000). Jamilah found that women's work orientation in Malaysia was seen as more towards family work rather than market work (2001: 1999). In addition, religious and cultural values place extreme importance on the women's homemaker role (Noraini. 2001: 2006). Indisputably, the work pressures on married female workers are increased when they have husbands and children (Crompton. 1997). Female workers with family in Malaysia also face the same pressure (George. 2007: Intan. 1996: Noraini. 2006). Both areas of work demand competency. As women are expected to manage the family work, they are also expected to be competent at work. Women with a responsibility at home might experience a conflict of priority. Is it to home that their commitment should be directed or to the workplace? Or is it possible to manage both?

Experiences of PetCo's Female Professionals at Work and Home

PetCo seemed to be sensitive towards the needs of its staff, especially among its female engineers. Leniency at work, to benefit both the company and the workers, was very apparent. For example, when a female engineer was required at the offshore platform, the management tried to schedule a one-day visit. When she was found to be pregnant, if she requested, she could be exempted from taking high-risk tasks such as inspecting the reservoir or participating in a remote area exploration. But are these plus sides really benefitted them?

In finding the truth, this study delves into their life experiences at PetCo. The subsequent sub-topics briefly discuss relevant work conditions experienced by my interviewees, which clearly pinpoint the priority when 'things' clash. Among the issues are training, family issues, equal opportunities-promotions, money matter, psychological health, unforeseen future and other reasons to work.

- **Training**

PetCo's professionals were required to undergo many practical courses and training throughout their working life at the company. Generally, managerial and technical subjects were the usual courses given to the professionals. Every engineer in the company has to complete 16-technical course that are compulsory within a stipulated time. In addition, they have to attend the company's orientation course such as the induction course and the personal development courses such as the stress management course.

Tracing any discriminatory treatment in offering the training, an interviewee said, *"at most times, male workers are treated better at work. If there are long-*

term technical courses, they are given to men. But we can't afford to leave our family behind for such a long period". A long-term technical training course is about travelling either locally or abroad and receiving financial allowances from the organisation. This scenario is very much looked forward by some female workers. But, due to family responsibilities, most interviewees are reluctant to take the chance. Later on, this excuse becomes a trend in exempting women from participating in the course.

- Pregnancy, Childbirth and Children

The seed of the dual-burden problem starts when a female engineer gets married but it blooms when she gets pregnant and finally grows when she has children. Many professional women have a problem when they come to have children (Brannen and Moss. 1988: Brannen. 1992: Chapman. 2004). A female PetCo's human resource development manager said that female married engineers created "*problems*" to the management. Pregnancies, miscarriage, being physically weak, avoiding stand-by or on-call, being married to a non-PetCo partner were major obstacles that limited female engineers from progressing further in their career. A direct result of this judgement was that some women might feel that they were being denied the chance of proving that they were capable of fulfilling the requirements of the job at the workplace.

Additionally, women's inability to perform well at jobs due to the state of pregnancy suggested another work challenge, which never occurred to men (Chapman. 2004: Jones and Causer. 1995). Female engineers were unable to give their best performance at work due to some obvious problems related to pregnancy. In the end, it was male workers who grabbed the work opportunities and consequently benefited in their career.

The 'problem' of pregnancy affected women's commitment to work. One interviewee blamed herself for not showing professionalism in engineering. She said, "*I was unable to do my work efficiently during my last pregnancy. I brought a bad image to the company*". Hers was not a unique case because throughout the completion of the 30 interviews with these professionals, they somehow admitted that their working professionalism was lower than males, due to pregnancy.

I found her attitude of blaming herself for the unavoidable circumstance of being pregnant distressing. I believe married women could do nothing in this particular situation, unless they vowed not to get pregnant. And of course by doing so, it would be against the Malaysian standard of familial traditions, for every newly wed couple was expected to produce children (Jamilah. 2001: Noraini. 2001). In fact, my study showed that the idea of having children was deeply appreciated and greatly practised. In short, not to get pregnant was not an option at all because having more children in a family was always considered as a blessing (Jamilah. 2001). Pregnancy was regarded as a natural thing that came along after the marriage. Newly married couples felt stressed when people kept asking them when they would have babies (Noraini. 2006).

- Equal Opportunities and Promotions

If pregnancy has been regarded as an obstacle to progress at work, the appraisal system practised by PetCo would easily challenge the advancement of workers regardless of gender. The company was said to underline job performance as the most important criteria for assessment and promotion. However, there are opinions on the superficiality of the appraisal system. Many said, *"Our appraisal system is not perfect. Sometimes you have not been recognised for the work that you have done.* However, some interviewees simply did not want higher positions that would compete with family responsibility. They hesitated to pursue their career further.

The common explanations given by interviewees for the scarcity of women in senior posts was that many potentially eligible women left work to care for their families. Most interviewees in my study welcomed the idea of upgrading their position at work, but *"not too high"*. And if they were promoted, they just wished to have lesser responsibility than presently because promotion comes with bigger responsibilities. Thus, there is also an inclination to ignore promotion totally in order to avoid being given extra responsibilities *"No. I don't want a promotion. I just don't want to be in the position that I have to hold responsibilities which I know I can't handle effectively."* Greater responsibilities mean extra works. Their inability to fulfil these responsibilities might indicate their failure.

Concurrently, if a female engineer received promotion she might not be keen to accept it because usually promotion followed by a transfer. One interviewee said, *"We always think about family first. In PetCo, if you are promoted to a higher position, normally you'll be transferred. It will create a problem if you have children and if your husband is not a PetCo staff. You are not that moveable although you'd like to be promoted"*. With this transfer, they have to reconcile many personal issues, which consequently retard their eagerness for the promotion.

- Money Matter

Sharing the responsibility as a financial contributor in a family might affect women's judgement towards work. When the family was concerned, workers would accumulate as much as money as possible so that they and their family could live comfortably. An interviewee said, *"I want to make sure my children get whatever they want so that they won't feel left out"*. Another justification was to support the family and to help the husband financially. For example, one interviewee replied, *"(I work because I want) to complement the income of my husband. We are used to this easy lifestyle. I did ask my husband once, what if I quit? He said, quitting is okay but we have to limit our expenditure, change our lifestyle"*. Even though most interviewees were married to men in well-paid professional jobs, the need to reduce the current comfortable lifestyle has a negative implication should they decide to quit their job.

- Psychological Health at Work

One interviewee, who is married and has children, unabashedly declared that working was important to her because it could be *"an escape from my children*

and domestic chores". In other words, she was implying that family affairs were unappealing to her. The retort above might project the same experience that working outside the home was a chance to break away from children's demanding attitudes. Most definitely, her case would illustrate the scenario when women workers found they had more free time at work, and wished to escape from the non-stop labours of family works (Elias. 2004: Crompton and Harris. 1999).

By working outside the home, she would have time and space of her own and therefore it was good for her emotional health (Firth-Cozens and West, 1991). (eds.). Women were more likely to feel depressed at home than stressed in the workplace (Hochschild. 1997). The unappealing home would generate psychological stress to some married working women. Left with no other opportunities to socialise, the workplace would be the next best thing to boost their life.

My interviewees also cited positive implications to their emotions and feelings. According to them, work gave a sense of purpose to life, stimulated the brain, self-worthiness, self-esteem and confidence, as well as providing a motivation to life. One interviewee indicated, "*Work is part of women's life. I work because I will get certain benefits out of it*". Others said, "*I already used to working. It is a part of my life now*" and "*working stops me from being bored*". Frequently, work offers positive effects to women, such as enhancing self-esteem, satisfaction in life as well as for future.

- Work and Unforeseen Future

Despite the urge to stay married, marriage dissolution happens, and keeps on increasing (Malaysia. 2002). There was an increase of 3,793 divorce cases in 2002 compared to 1,613 in 2000 (Malaysia. 2003). The Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 2000 stated that for every 1,000 married people there were 15.2 divorce cases among the Malays; 10.4 divorces for the Indians; and 9.1 for the Chinese (Malaysia. 2000). Consequently, female-headed families due to divorce are on the rise (Tan and Ng. 1998).

The awareness about divorce could be a reason for women wanting to secure financial independence. Some female interviewees had almost prepared for this bleak future. Work was regarded as a safety net so that the continuation of her family would go on. An interviewee gave her view, "*What will happen to women and their families if something goes wrong? Women have to work*". This strong urge showed an inclination among Malaysian women to see a positive effect attached to work. They considered that working is important for security. One interviewee gave her life story, "*I would say (work) is very important. I remembered when I was about to get married, the only thing that my mother reminded me of was never quitting job. I gave my promise to her. We don't know what will happen in future, right?*" Parents, especially mothers viewed their daughters' participation in paid employment as desirable because it enabled a woman to "stand on her own feet" in a calamity such as a widowhood or marital breakdown.

- Other Reasons to Work

Apart from the above, there are numerous factors for women to work. Proud to be attached to the prestigious petrochemical company like PetCo is one of the most cited reasons. Views about their personal attachment to the company such as *"It is satisfying to be able to contribute my skills to an organisation like PetCo", "I wish to be part of PetCo forever", "I enjoy being an engineer at PetCo" and "I am proud to be recognised as a PetCo's employee"* are quite normal among them.

Other reasons were to gain social freedom, experience, skill and knowledge. Additionally, they have also mentioned that they wanted to apply the knowledge they have gained throughout their academic years. An interviewee said, *"Working enables me to apply (the knowledge from) the theories that I have learnt. It satisfies me once tasks or projects are completed successfully. Any difficulties are viewed as challenges, and they contribute even greater satisfaction once overcome"*.

However, in many cases women have to reconsider their working position, particularly when it concerns their relationship with other people, especially those who are close to them. To put one detailed answer by a respondent, *"I consider work is important. (Because) I can do anything and achieve everything, which is good for my self-esteem and self-belief. But work is not a definite importance compared to the family life. If I start a family later, which soon develop a conflict, I might have to leave the working life. If the relationship with the family gives a sense of security and satisfaction, then there should be no reason why I can't stay at home. This may not go well with the feminist (view) but I believe that the main happiness and satisfaction in life is to have a good and solid relationship with a husband and kids. Having a job and personal wages are just supplementary to me"*. This quotation might nicely summarise a delicate relationship of women, work and family. Although this particular respondent was still single, she already had firm thoughts on the importance of family life rather than pursuing her career further.

Correspondingly, in a previous study, Dex (1988) found that there is a strong attachment to home and the family rather than with a career, especially when a priority crisis occurred. The same scenario also experienced by Malaysian women.

In so far this study found the tendency to stop working magnifies when the clash of home and family commitments with work occur. But in what conditions are female workers likely to leave (or to stay in) their job? Do the single and married ones share the same feeling about leaving (or staying in) the job?

- Giving-up Work

The majority of the single workers were in the age range of 21 to 25 years old. Some of them had a clear intention to stop working when they got married, and further enhanced after having the first child. Some others had the intention of

quitting if their husbands had sufficient income for family maintenance. There is no such concrete explanation so far to clarify this particular situation, but it suffices to bring in the influence of traditional values among the participants in looking at marital life.

A strong adherence to the traditional view towards having a family life is very clear here. One interviewee said, *"I won't stop working as long as I'm single. But if I'm married, I might have to rethink about my career especially when I have children"*. It seemed that having a higher educational level would not guarantee single female workers would go on working with the company.

A few workers said that they would stop working once their spouse had a sufficient income to support the family. Additional data on marital status has further confirmed that a husband's adequate income was much awaited so that they might be able to leave their job. Clearly the answers provided by most interviewees implied that the financial attachment to work was significant for them. If they could earn sufficient money without the need to go to work, they would rather stay at home and manage the family. Bringing in the contextual meaning of the breadwinner in Malaysia, apparently most interviewees accepted the situation that it is the responsibility of the husbands to provide the economic needs of the family. Contrarily, McRae et. al. (1991) found that women in higher degrees in the United Kingdom were likely to retain the job regardless of their husbands' social worth.

Discussions and Conclusion

It has been suggested that market work or family work might fluctuate according to occupation, life cycle and national context (Crompton and Harris. 1998). They argued that the work patterns of women were the product of the choices they make towards their particular circumstances, opportunities and constraints in life. Hakim (2000) produced a preference theory on women's work orientations. According to her, women in affluent societies have a real choice between family work and market work. However, such choices may not be an option for women in developing countries like Malaysia.

Much literature on Malaysian women and career emphasises the significance of home and family rather than work and career (Jamilah. 2001; Noraini. 2001; 2006; Koshy. 2007). In fact, on the basis of social expectation, traditions and religions, marriage and children are important components for the well being of the women and the continuity of the society. According to Noraini (2001; 180), *"a Malay rural woman is essentially without status until she is married and has children"*. Additionally, Jamilah reported, *"there is a perception about marriage as a fundamental ingredient for ones' existence or a necessity in one's life"* (2001; 33). These quotations clearly confirmed the societal emphasis of marriage and motherhood.

However, women workers in the West are less likely to feel the influence of social sanctions on their private lives as their colleagues did in Malaysia. Take the example of children. They are in a better position to choose whether to have children or not, while committed to their career. It is not the same case for most women workers in Malaysia, for marriage was socially sanctioned and children would naturally come following the marriage. Consequently, family problems were easily blamed on women. The deteriorating of family values is indeed against the traditional principle that significantly interlocks the issues of women, work and the family in Malaysia (Sim. 2007).

This situation might increase the clash of choosing between family and career among professionals. Marriage and pregnancy could be understood as sources of tension among women workers. If professional women in the West said to have problems at work when children arrived on the scene, women of the same group in PetCo started to experience difficulty once they became pregnant. The management regarded pregnancy as a 'problem'. Though some interviewees believed that pregnancy is a natural process, they also agreed that their irregular state of health due to pregnancy jeopardised the productivity and the profit of the company. On many occasions they blamed themselves for their inability to work efficiently. Interviewees' loyalty and pride to the company were obvious, which in effect legitimised any sort of prejudice and discrimination. It is normal to find the function of gender discrimination at working many organisations around the globe (Bradley. 1999). However the situation was more intricate in Malaysia due to the personal choice for family life rather career life, as well as the involvement of the normative value towards women's employment.

In a nutshell, this study indicated the tendency of women, both married and single, to stop working if the priority clashes. Based on the findings, this study managed to establish the fact that the traditional and normative values still restrict Malaysian female professionals to set the priority for family matters over career even within the influence of modernisation. Though they may be modernised, educated and professional, these women are still home-centred type at heart.

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