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## **Work-Family Interface in Malaysia: Perceptions of and Perspectives by Muslim Women**

Zulqernain Haider Subhani, Bouhedda Ghalia, Rohaiza Rokis

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article contributes to the ongoing discourse in gender and women's studies by offering a comprehensive exploration of the work-family interface, focusing on Malaysian Muslim women's unique perspectives and experiences. Employing a quantitative survey approach and examining various facets of this phenomenon, including influencing factors, challenges, perceptions of conflict, and strategies for balance, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the work-family interface. By directly incorporating the voices and experiences of working Malaysian Muslim women, this study sheds light on the intricate nature of their efforts to harmonise professional and family roles. The findings underscore the paramount importance of achieving work-family equilibrium in contemporary society and emphasise the need for shared domestic responsibilities, redefined gender roles, and career choices aligned with family priorities, reflecting the agency and resilience of these women in managing this multifaceted interface.*

**Keywords:** *Work, Family, Muslim Women, Malaysia.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This article intricately explores the multifaceted roles of women, specifically Muslim women in Malaysia, at the intersection of work and family in the contemporary era. Discussions surrounding women and gender issues have become increasingly controversial, sparking broader debates on modernity and tradition. However, the extent to which modernity and earlier stages of the modern epoch favoured women's empowerment and development remains a subject of ongoing debate (Ledger, 1996). Feminism, though having surfaced as a potent champion of women's empowerment, encounters a spectrum of receptions globally. To many, feminism is often perceived as a problem rather than a solution (Williams, 2000). Non-European countries such as Japan, China and various African and Asian nations have not fully embraced "feminism" or the complete feminist agenda (Mills and Mullany, 2011). This divergence underscores the complex relationship between culture, history, and the underlying concepts that shape women's rights and gender equality worldwide.

Gender discrimination and inequality persist as some of the most pressing issues of our time. UNDP Human Development Report 2019 report stated, "gender disparities remain among the most persistent forms of inequality across all countries." (Human Development Report; UNDP, 2019, p. 147) This report also emphasises the vital link between gender inequality and societal norms that exhibit biases against women. Furthermore, it highlights the connection between such gender biases and religious beliefs. It is commonly assumed that traditions and religions have historically oppressed, marginalised, and limited women in their roles and agency. This assumption suggests that many faiths have portrayed women as secondary and subordinate to men in their human creation and agency narratives. Islam is also included in this assumption (Paludi and Ellens, 2016)

One of the central questions in modern society concerning women's issues revolves around their roles in the workforce and family life. Notably, in pre-industrial societies, there was no clear separation between domestic and public work, resulting in a less rigid division of labour. However, the advent of the Industrial Revolution marked a significant shift, as boundaries between the private and public spheres were established. Men were primarily assigned to engage in paid general work, while women were expected to focus on household chores and family care. In the latter half of the twentieth century, driven partly by the high demand for a labour force and partly by increased educational and employment opportunities, women entered the workforce alongside men. This transformation marked a significant turning point in gender dynamics, challenging traditional roles and expectations (Maani, 2015; Morgan, 2006; Preston, 1999)

This complex interplay between work and family roles gives rise to the concept of the work-family interface, which is “a broad concept referring to the myriad way families and workplace intersect.” (Holmes et al., 2020, p. 327) This concept comprehensively addresses the intersection of women's family and work lives. Recent literature on women and work highlights how work and family influence each other in mutually impactful and bidirectional ways (Holmes et al., 2020).

Given the significant impact of these changes, many countries have recognised the importance of preserving the family institution. They have introduced various work-family or work-life balance policies to pursue this goal. Social scientists have dedicated substantial attention to studying the work-family interface, aiming to provide government policy recommendations and offer social solutions to address these issues (Lewis, 2009; Morgan, 2006). One prominent social solution frequently advocated by many social scientists is redefining men's roles by encouraging them to actively participate in household chores and responsibilities. This shift towards equal involvement of men in domestic tasks is seen as a way to alleviate some of the challenges posed by the work-family interface. (Cerrato and Cifre, 2018; Goldscheider et al., 2015)

While the movement for women's participation in the workforce initially emerged as a response to specific socio-political and technological developments and the transformation of economies from agricultural to industrial and later to post-industrial, it quickly spread globally. Initially rooted in the historical experiences of European and Western societies, this movement expanded through colonisation and later with globalisation, reaching nearly every corner of the world; according to data from the International Labor Organization (ILO), female participation in the labour force in Malaysia at 51.33% (ILO, 2019). More recently, the Global Gender Gap Report 2022 by the World Economic Forum indicates a similar or marginally declining situation, with female participation in the labour force documented at 51.19% ((Global Gender Gap Report, 2022)). However, because it originated in a particular part of the world, other regions initially exhibited reluctance and hesitancy in embracing these new realities. This gave rise to antagonistic sentiments toward the changing economy and its impact on culture and lifestyle, sentiments that are also observable among Muslims when they grapple with emerging questions related to gender, society, and the economy (al-Ghannouchi, 2015)

The issue of Muslim women's participation in work and public affairs should be viewed within the broader context of Muslim women's agency, as insightfully pointed out by Saba Mahmood (Mahmood, 2005) and eloquently expressed by a social scientist:

“From this definition, work-family balance policies must address various concerns and focus on unpaid and paid work. Thus, policies must deal with working time and time to care; the cash transfers needed either to buy care to

enter the labour market, or to buy the time to exit the labour market to care.”  
(Lewis, 2009, p. 19)

This study focuses on four critical aspects of this multifaceted and multidimensional issue. Firstly, the researcher aims to understand the factors of the work-family interface. Secondly, it seeks an in-depth understanding of issues and challenges of work-family interface. Thirdly, it explores working women’s perceptions of work-family conflict, and finally, it explores women’s perspectives on work-family balance.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a quantitative approach, utilising a survey method. Questionnaires were distributed to 250 working Muslim women in Kuala Lumpur, selected through convenience sampling between January and March 2023. Distribution occurred at workplaces and public spots, such as LRT stations and markets. Participants were asked to complete a structured questionnaire to explore different aspects of their work-family interface experiences. The questionnaire included a demographic section and four other sections, each comprising questions on a 6-point Likert scale. These sections focused on factors affecting the work-family interface, issues and challenges within the work-family interface, work-family conflict, and work-family balance. Out of the 250 distributed questionnaires, 225 responses were collected. According to Comrey and Lee, a sample size of 200 is considered fair for conducting a survey (Comrey and Lee, 1992). The responses were then analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics-26 for descriptive analysis, including calculating percentages and mean values.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Researchers have observed a significant gap in the existing literature regarding studies on the work-family interface, with most research predominantly focusing on the Western context. In contrast, there has been limited exploration of this topic within the Asian context (Hassan et al., 2010). However, a noteworthy shift has occurred over the past two decades, with several researchers beginning to address issues related to the work-family interface in the Malaysian context. The key highlights of these studies are outlined below:

### ***Gender Roles, Culture, and Religion***

In Malaysia, evolving gender roles, cultural traditions, and religious influences significantly impact how women navigate the work-family interface. Noraini Mohd Noor's book underscores the complexity of women's lives in a society where traditional divisions of labour persist (Noraini Mohd Noor, 2006). Rohaiza Rokis's research explores how Malaysian Muslim women balance their work and family roles, highlighting the role of Islam in shaping their choices (Rokis, 2009). "Women and Development in the Light of Islamic Legal Principles: A Case Study of Malaysian Muslim Women" by Mek Wok, Ghalia, and Akhtarzaitie discusses Islamic perspectives on gender equality and work-family dynamics (Mahmud et al., 2009). Zaiton Hassan and colleagues compare work-family conflict between Eastern and Western cultures in Malaysia, shedding light on the intricate interplay of culture and work-family dynamics (Hassan et al., 2010).

### ***Legal Framework and Reform***

Legal reforms are crucial for addressing work-family challenges in Malaysia. Sarvinder Kaur Sandhu's research on Malaysian secretaries and clerks emphasises the importance of legal changes to

create a more balanced and supportive environment for working women (Sandhu, 2007). Said Sikandar Shah Haneef's article discusses the concerns raised by Muslim women about Malaysian Islamic family law, advocating for a more inclusive legal approach and consideration of Maqāṣid in interpreting Islamic jurisprudence (Haneef, 2011).

### ***Work-Family Interface and Well-Being***

Work-family interface dynamics in Malaysia have significant implications for well-being. Wan Edura Wan Rashid's research on nurses in Malaysia's healthcare sector explores the complex relationship between work-family conflict and enrichment, emphasising the need for a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics (Rashid, 2012). Noraini M. Noor and colleagues' article focuses on family well-being indicators in Malaysia, recognising the importance of evaluating family well-being in the context of evolving work-family dynamics (Noraini M. Noor et al., 2012). Zaiton Hassan and colleagues' longitudinal study examines the relationship between religion and the work-family interface in Malaysia, revealing that religion significantly reduces conflict and enhances enrichment, particularly in a collectivist society like Malaysia (Hassan et al., 2017).

### ***Work-Family Conflict***

A substantial body of scholarly work has centred on the issue of work-family conflict among Muslim women in Malaysia. This focus on work-family conflict has garnered significant attention from researchers aiming to dissect the intricate web of causes, factors, and consequences within this distinctive sociocultural setting (Abidin et al., 2010; Achour et al., 2014; Hassan et al., 2010; Jamadin et al., 2015; Mahpul and Abdullah, 2011; Panatik et al., 2011; Rahman et al., 2020; Rashid, 2012; Rodhi, 2015; Sitimin et al., 2017). These studies delve diversely into the multifaceted dimensions of work-family conflict, scrutinising its potential impact on declining marriage rates and the evolving landscape of fertility patterns within the Malaysian context. Furthermore, these investigations probe the profound implications of work-family conflict for individuals' mental and emotional well-being, often resulting in heightened stress levels and debilitating burnout experiences.

## **PARTICIPANT PROFILES: A SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW**

The demographic analysis of respondents from Malaysia yielded several key findings. In terms of age distribution, the study encompassed a wide range of age groups, with 20-30 years constituting 28% and 31-40 around 24%, with the majority (47%) falling into the 41 years and above category, indicating a substantial representation of experienced professionals. Additionally, the data revealed that 35% of respondents possessed diplomas or certificates, while 25% were undergraduates, and 13% had completed master's degrees, highlighting a diverse educational background among participants. Regarding occupation, administrative work (23.6%) and teaching (17%) emerged as the two largest occupational groups, followed by clerks (14.7%) and nurses (13%). Furthermore, most respondents (70%) were married, emphasising the significance of understanding work-family dynamics within the context of matrimony, while the remaining 30% included unmarried (23%), divorced (5%) and widowed (2%). Regarding family structure, 71% of respondents belonged to nuclear families, while 29% were part of joint family systems, providing insights into the varying family structures within the study. Regarding childcare, 18% of respondents utilised nurseries, 9.3% relied on their parents, 9% hired babysitters, and 5% employed domestic helpers. However, over half (51.1%) of respondents indicated "NA," indicating that they were either unmarried, had grown children, or had alternative childcare arrangements. These demographic insights serve as a foundation for further exploration of the

work-family interface experiences of Muslim women in Malaysia, highlighting the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of the study's participants.

### FACTORS OF WORK-FAMILY INTERFACE

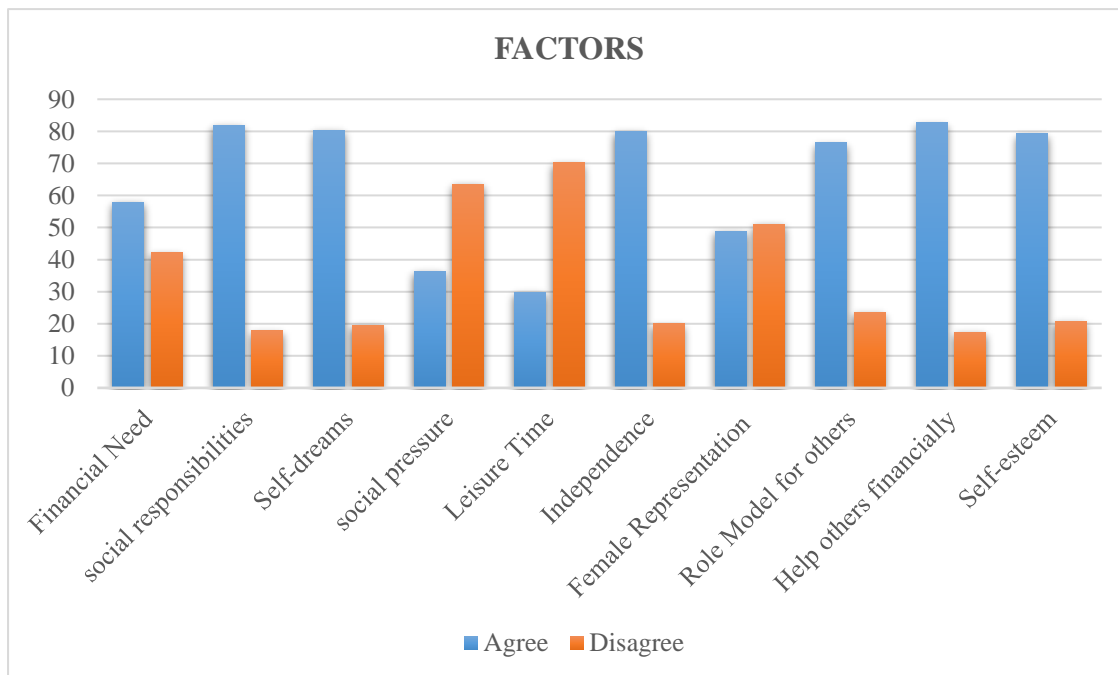
The transformation of women's roles in Malaysia, characterised by their adept balancing of careers and family responsibilities, results from a multifaceted interplay of factors. While societal shifts and increased access to education are often credited with this transformation, our study explores the nuanced motivations driving Malaysian Muslim women to integrate their family and workplace roles seamlessly. Traditionally, discussions centred on structural and macro-level elements, such as organisational forms, material arrangements, and educational and employment opportunities [66], driven partly by the demands and challenges of the job market (Greenhaus et al., 1989; Holmes et al., 2020; Oláh et al., 2018). Additionally, feminism has had a role in motivating women's workforce participation, though opinions vary (Kassim, 2009; Williams, 2000).

Scholars have also highlighted individual-level factors, including self-esteem, well-being, life satisfaction, and self-realisation (Oláh et al., 2018), with many women viewing full-time employment as intrinsic to their life course (Esping-Andersen and Billari, 2015). In the Malaysian context, economic considerations are a primary motivator for women's employment, mirroring global trends (Hassan et al., 2010; Noraini Mohd Noor, 2006), while a sense of appreciation and duty to contribute to national development also significantly influences their choices (Rokis, 2009).

When exploring contemporary Islamic scholarship on the permissibility of women's involvement in the workforce, it is evident that most scholars from modern times advocate that women, especially wives, should primarily focus on household responsibilities as dictated by their fitra or biological design and religious obligations (Katz, 2022). They suggest that women should engage in work only when it becomes a necessity and there are no viable alternatives. Also, men are breadwinners, and women are homemakers (Kahūs, 2015; Qardhawi, 2017). Using the three-level Maqasid categories, one can argue that they permit women to work primarily for Dharuriyat (necessities) or, at most, for Hajiyat (needs). However, a closer examination of factors and motivations from women's perspectives reveals that while many women enter the workforce out of financial necessity, their reasons for engaging in the work-family interface are not easily confined to the Dharuriyat or Hajiyat categories alone. The dynamics at play are considerably more complex and intricate, as the results of our study illuminate.

This study delves into the micro-level factors that shape the work-family interface among Malaysian Muslim women, offering a nuanced perspective on the active role these women play in shaping their lives and contributing to society. Through a comprehensive 6-point Likert scale questionnaire analysis, ten key factors were identified and assessed, shedding light on the intricate motivations driving their choices, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1- Factors of Work-Family Interface



Economic considerations stand out as prominent motivators, with nearly 57.9% of respondents acknowledging that economic necessity drives their work, emphasising the pivotal role of financial stability in motivating these women to balance their work and family roles. Additionally, social responsibilities are significant, as approximately 81.9% of participants work to fulfil them, highlighting the impact of societal roles and expectations on their choices. Moreover, personal aspirations and self-realisation are key drivers, with over 80% expressing a desire to achieve their dreams through work.

Interestingly, external social pressure plays a relatively minimal role, with only 36.4% of respondents agreeing or somewhat agreeing, indicating that external pressures may influence women's work-family decisions. Importantly, these women do not perceive work as a mere pastime but as a meaningful pursuit beyond their domestic roles, with 70.2% disagreeing with working because they have little to do at home. Seeking independence, both in terms of autonomy and self-sufficiency resonates with 80% of respondents. In comparison, the desire to provide financial support to their families is a significant motivator for 82.7% of participants.

Self-esteem and the aspiration to live with dignity are also essential drivers for Malaysian Muslim women, with 79.2% expressing this desire. Interestingly, while approximately 48.9% recognise the value of representing women in underrepresented areas, there are other motivators than this for the work-family interface, as 51.1% disagree to some extent.

Examining the mean values for each factor reveals that the three most influential motivations are working to help others financially (4.72), working to live with self-esteem (4.64), and working to achieve personal dreams (4.56). These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of these women's motivations, challenging simplistic narratives about the factors shaping their dynamic relationship between work and family life.

In conclusion, the work-family interface among Malaysian Muslim women is a complex interplay of diverse factors, from economic necessity to personal dreams and social responsibilities. These



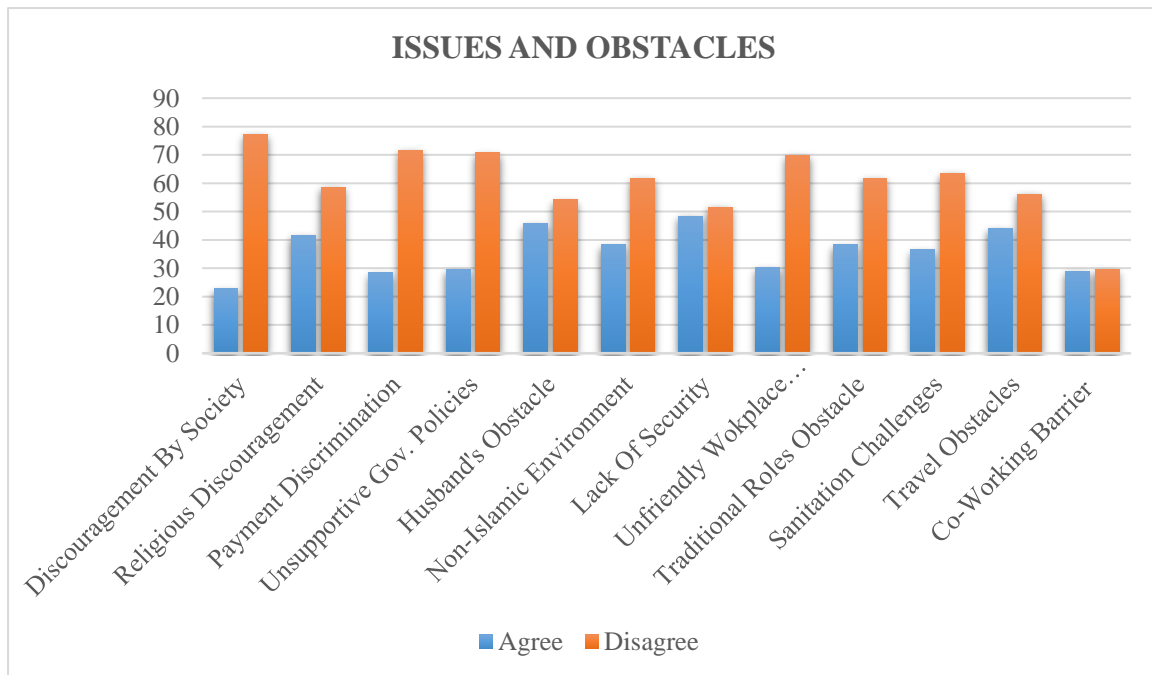
women navigate this intricate landscape with a strong sense of agency, driven by multiple motivations. Our study sheds light on their choice's nuanced and multifaceted nature, challenging simplistic narratives and enriching our understanding of the dynamic relationship between work and family life.

**ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN THE WORK-FAMILY INTERFACE**

In this section, we delve into the intricate challenges and obstacles Malaysian Muslim women face as they navigate the complex intersection of work and family. While previous research has shed light on issues such as traditional gender roles, cultural expectations (Bianchi and Milkie, 2010; Ridgeway, 2009; Rokis, 2009), religious interpretations (Barlas, 2012; Kassim, 2009; Mernissi, 1991), and government policies (Lewis, 2009; Morgan, 2006; Sandhu, 2007), our study takes a deeper dive into the lived experiences of these women. By exploring their perspectives, we aim to unveil the intricacies that shape their professional choices, aspirations, and the barriers they confront.

Our investigation into Malaysian Muslim women's challenges in balancing work and family roles paints a complex picture, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2- Issues and Obstacles in Work-Family Interface



The majority of respondents (77.3%) strongly disagreed with the notion that society discourages their participation in the workforce, indicating a growing societal support for women in employment. Concerning religious obstacles, 58.6% of respondents disagreed with the idea that religious teachings discourage women's work, though around 41.4% still saw religious understanding as a potential hindrance. As reported by respondents, workplace discrimination was relatively low, with 71.6% disagreeing with the concept of gender-based discrimination. However, 28.5% partially or fully agreed, signifying the importance of ongoing efforts to ensure gender equity.

Regarding government policies, 70.7% disagreed with the notion that government policies do not support women's work, suggesting a general satisfaction with existing policies. However, 29.4% expressed varying degrees of agreement, indicating room for policy improvements. The issue of requiring a husband's permission to work displayed a divided perspective, with 45.7% agreeing or

somewhat agreeing, while 54.2% disagreed. This highlights the intricate interplay between familial dynamics and women's agency in career decisions. Moreover, while 61.7% of respondents disagreed that a non-Islamic work environment presents an obstacle, 38.2% expressed varying degrees of agreement, revealing adaptability to diverse workplaces.

Safety concerns generated mixed responses, with 51.6% disagreeing that a lack of security and safety hinders women from work, while 48.4% agreed to some extent. 69.8% of respondents generally saw workplace policies as women-friendly, but 30.2% agreed or somewhat agreed that improvements are needed. The perception of traditional gender roles as an obstacle was expressed by 61.8% of respondents, emphasising the continued influence of cultural norms. Travelling alone for work posed a moderate challenge for some, with a mean score of 3.03, indicating potential religious and cultural considerations. Co-working at the workplace was perceived as the least significant challenge, with nearly 28.9% of respondents agreeing to some extent.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that Malaysian Muslim women have made significant strides in their work-family interface, encountering fewer issues and obstacles compared to the findings of the previous research conducted over a decade ago (Ng et al., 2006; Noraini Mohd Noor, 2006; Rokis, 2009; Shah, 2018). This reflects a progressive shift in societal attitudes and evolving dynamics within the workforce.

### **PERCEPTIONS OF WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT**

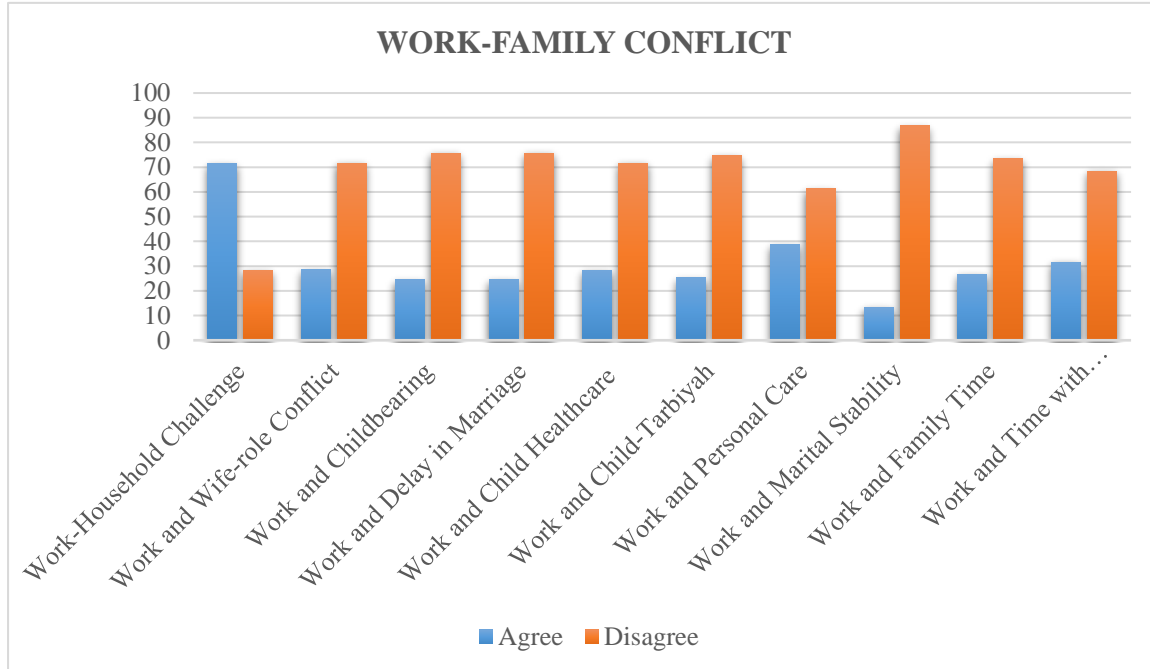
Work-family conflict, as defined by Greenhaus and Beutell, (1985), refers to a situation where the demands of one's work and family roles are mutually incompatible, giving rise to conflict. This interplay between professional careers and family responsibilities is often assumed to generate discord and contradiction (Cerrato and Cifre, 2018). Many researchers and scholars have characterised pursuing dual roles as inherently fraught with challenges and conflicts (Kauppinen and Gordon, 2019). Existing literature predominantly emphasises the concept of work-family conflict and offers various theoretical frameworks to elucidate this phenomenon, shedding light on the evolving landscape of gender roles (Oláh et al., 2018).

In Malaysia, the discourse surrounding the work-family interface, particularly among Muslim women, has predominantly revolved around the concept of work-family conflict, as observed in the literature review conducted above. Researchers have dedicated significant attention to understanding the causes, factors, and consequences of the work-family conflict within this unique sociocultural context. This context is shaped by the interplay of religion (Islam), culture (Malay), and interactions with modernity in a distinctive manner. These studies delve into the multifaceted aspects of work-family conflict, including its potential contributions to declining marriage rates and fertility patterns, as well as its implications for individuals' mental and emotional well-being, often resulting in experiences of stress and burnout.

However, this study takes a distinctive approach by seeking direct insights from Malaysian Muslim women. Rather than relying solely on theoretical frameworks or past observations, it aims to understand how these women perceive the duality of their roles, the extent to which they view these roles as contradictory, and the specific aspects of work-family conflict within their lived experiences. This research strives to provide a more nuanced and firsthand understanding of these women's challenges and dynamics in balancing their work and family responsibilities.

The study comprehensively explains how Malaysian Muslim women perceive and manage the intricate interplay between their professional careers and family roles. It sheds light on various facets of this dynamic, revealing insights into their challenges and ability to navigate these complexities, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3- Work-Family Conflict



**Household Chores and Work:** A substantial 71.5% of respondents acknowledged that their work hinders their ability to perform household chores, highlighting the significant challenge of balancing professional and domestic responsibilities. This finding emphasises the need for a nuanced exploration of evolving household dynamics and how women creatively navigate traditional gender roles.

**Marital Duties and Fertility:** In contrast, a noteworthy 71.6% disagreed with the notion that work prevented them from fulfilling their roles as wives. Moreover, 75.6% disagreed with the idea that their work prevents them from bearing children. These perspectives indicate that these women can effectively balance their marital responsibilities and family-building aspirations alongside their careers. It challenges traditional expectations and underscores their confidence in harmonising work commitments with personal desires.

**Relationships and Social Connections:** The data also revealed insights into how work impacts personal relationships. A substantial 75.6% of respondents disagreed with the notion that work causes delays in marriage, emphasising their willingness to prioritise personal relationships alongside their careers. While 73.4% disagreed that work hinders their ability to spend leisure time with their families, a significant 26.6% agreed to varying extents. Moreover, 68.4% disagreed that work prevents them from spending time with relatives and friends, but 31.6% agreed to some extent. These responses highlight the importance of balancing quality time with family and maintaining social connections amid work commitments.

**Childcare and Values:** Additionally, the data indicates that 71.6% of respondents disagreed with the statement that work prevents them from taking care of their children’s health. A significant majority (74.6%) also disagreed with the idea that work hinders their ability to instil good habits and manners in

their children. These findings suggest that these women prioritise their children's well-being and perceive themselves as influential role models and caregivers despite their careers.

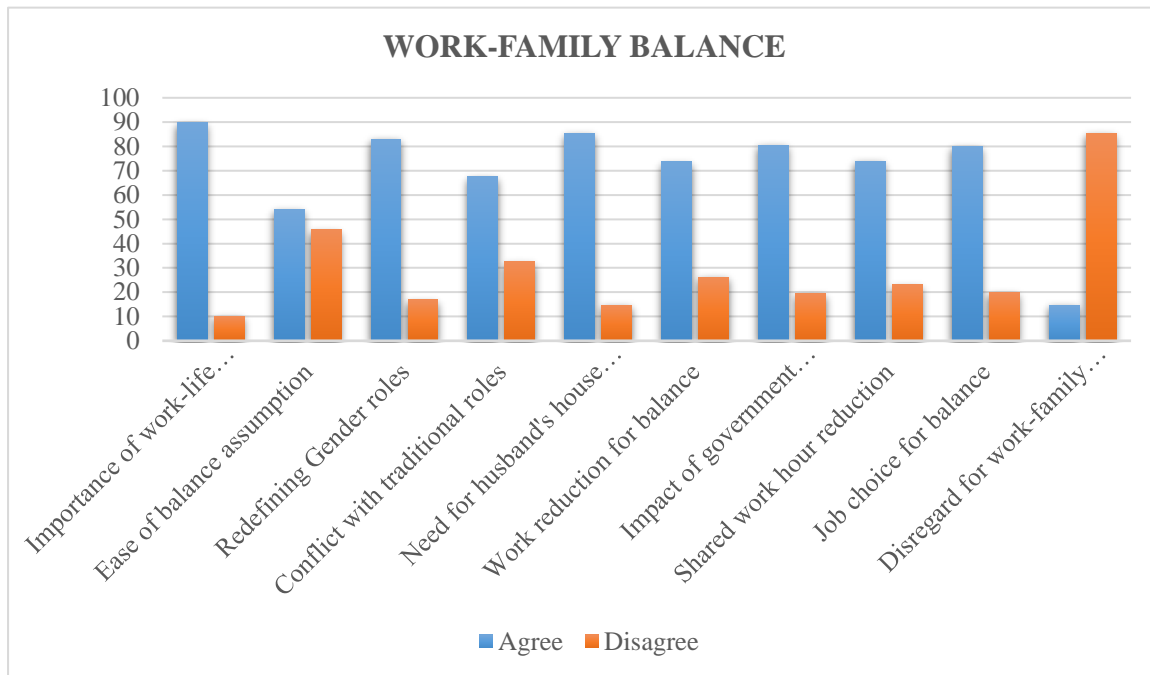
These women adeptly manage various aspects of work-family conflict, demonstrating their skill and effectiveness in navigating their roles as wives, mothers, and individuals. Notably, they face tangible challenges in balancing household chores and work, as indicated by a high mean agreement score (mean=4.25), which implies that gendered family roles need revision. However, they challenge conventional assumptions, with a persistent mean disagreement score regarding work's impact on marital duties (mean=2.06) and fertility (mean=1.96). This suggests a shift in societal norms, emphasising their confidence in harmonising work commitments with family life and personal choices. They also exhibit adeptness in supporting their children's well-being (mean=2.35) and are conscious of the need for self-care (mean=2.88). Moreover, their high mean disagreement score regarding work's impact on marital stability (mean=2.16) challenges stereotypes, underscoring their resilience in managing matrimonial relationships.

In sum, these insights illuminate the adaptive capabilities of Malaysian Muslim women in navigating the complexities of the work-family interface. They challenge longstanding stereotypes and underscore the need for a more supportive societal framework that accommodates women's evolving roles and aspirations in contemporary Malaysia and provides a blueprint for greater gender equality and work-family harmony. By acknowledging their resilience and resourcefulness, we can chart a path towards greater gender equality and work-family harmony.

### **PERSPECTIVES ON WORK-FAMILY BALANCE**

In the context of work-family conflict, achieving work-family balance is paramount, and researchers propose various strategies and perspectives to address this delicate equilibrium, reflecting gender dynamics and cultural considerations. Some advocate for a gender-egalitarian approach, redefining traditional gender roles to balance responsibilities within households and workplaces (Esping-Andersen and Billari, 2015). Others emphasise workplace flexibility, parental leave policies, and accessible daycare arrangements for effective balance (Holmes et al., 2020). Achieving work-family balance requires collaborative efforts from women, workplaces, and governments, recognising the need for change at individual and systemic levels (Noraini Mohd Noor, 2006). The interplay of cultural practices and Islamic teachings in the Malaysian context poses a critical challenge, highlighting the distinction between normative teachings and diverse cultural practices among Muslims (Rokis, 2009). This study aimed to gather direct perspectives on work-family balance from working Muslim women in Malaysia, utilising 6-point Likert scale items to elucidate critical findings, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4- Work-Family Balance



Firstly, a vast majority (89.8%) emphasised the significance of balancing family and work, highlighting the growing acknowledgement of this equilibrium in contemporary society. However, respondents expressed a more nuanced view regarding the ease of attaining this balance, with around half indicating agreement and the other half disagreeing, revealing the intricate nature of this challenge.

Furthermore, the need to redefine duties and responsibilities for both men and women to achieve work-family balance found strong agreement among an overwhelming majority (83%) of respondents, emphasising the desire for more equitable divisions of labour within households. Nevertheless, the concept of traditional gender roles hindering work-family balance received agreement from 67.6% of respondents, while 32.5% disagreed, indicating diverse perspectives on navigating these roles. Additionally, the importance of husbands' support in household chores for maintaining work-family balance was emphasised by an impressive 85.4% of respondents, highlighting the vital role of spouses in creating a conducive environment.

Likewise, approximately 73.7% of respondents expressed the need to reduce work hours to achieve balance, underscoring that work-related adjustments may be necessary for equilibrium. Additionally, an overwhelming 80.5% believed that improved government policies could aid in managing work and family lives more effectively, highlighting the potential impact of supportive policies. Respondents also emphasised the importance of flexibility for both husbands and wives (73.9%), demonstrating a shared commitment to balanced partnerships where both contribute to family well-being. Lastly, 85.3% disagreed with the notion that they do not care about achieving work-family balance, reflecting their active commitment to harmonising their professional and family lives.

Examining the mean of these items reveals valuable insights into the perspectives of Malaysian Muslim women regarding work-family balance. Respondents displayed the highest mean agreement (mean=5.20) for the statement emphasising the importance of work-family balance in their lives, showcasing their overarching recognition of this significance. Additionally, there was a substantial mean agreement score (mean=4.89) for the statement highlighting the need for husbands' support in

household chores, indicating their value on collaborative domestic responsibilities. They also expressed favourable agreement (mean=4.60) for the statement advocating for new definitions of gender roles, signifying their belief in redefining traditional roles for balance. Notably, a willingness to redefine gender roles without conflicting with conventional or religious roles was evident, as fewer respondents agreed that maintaining balance within traditionally defined roles is impossible (mean=3.93).

Furthermore, the majority disagreed (mean=1.93) with the statement suggesting indifference toward work-family balance, underscoring their active commitment to seeking equilibrium despite acknowledging this endeavour's inherent complexity (mean=3.61).

In conclusion, this section provides valuable insights into the perspectives and priorities of Malaysian Muslim women regarding work-family balance. These women recognise the importance of achieving equilibrium between their professional and family lives. They emphasise the need for collaborative domestic responsibilities, redefined gender roles, and a proactive approach to career choices that align with family priorities. Their commitment to work-family balance is evident despite the acknowledged complexity of this endeavour. These findings underscore the dynamic and proactive approach these women take in navigating the intricate landscape of work and family roles.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

In conclusion, this article has explored the intricate dynamics of the work-family interface from Muslim women's unique perspectives and perceptions in Malaysia. Through an in-depth examination of four significant sub-themes, we have gained valuable insights into the factors, issues, challenges, conflicts, and the pursuit of balance in these women's lives.

As discussed in this study, the factors influencing the work-family interface reveal the complexity and interconnectedness of various elements that shape the experiences of Muslim women in Malaysia. These factors encompass financial considerations and cultural, social, and personal aspirations. It is crucial to recognise that women's engagement in work should not be solely perceived through the lens of financial or material needs. Instead, their agency and desire to contribute to the world uniquely should be acknowledged and celebrated.

While addressing the issues and challenges these women face, it is heartening to note that overall, Malaysian women have made significant progress with the support of society. They have demonstrated resilience in navigating the multifaceted landscape of work-family dynamics. This progress reflects not only the adaptability of these women but also the evolving societal norms and structures that are becoming increasingly conducive to women's empowerment.

One noteworthy finding of this study is the relatively low levels of work-family conflict experienced by the participants. This indicates that these women have developed effective strategies to harmonise their roles and responsibilities, minimising the tension between work and family life. Their ability to manage these two domains is a testament to their agency and adaptability.

Furthermore, our study's women have highlighted the importance of work-family balance. They recognise the need for a multi-level approach involving collaboration between women, workplaces, governments, and societies to enhance this equilibrium. This collaborative effort is about reconciling work and family obligations and creating an environment where women can fully exercise their agency, pursue their aspirations, and contribute meaningfully to society.

This research underscores the significance of viewing women's work through a broader lens encompassing their agency, aspirations, and contributions beyond traditional economic measures. Muslim women in Malaysia are not merely balancing work and family; they are asserting their agency and striving to make their mark on the world in ways that resonate with their values, beliefs, and goals. We must recognise and support these endeavours, fostering an inclusive and empowering environment that allows all women to flourish in their unique journeys. In doing so, we can harness the full potential of women as agents of positive change in society, shaping a more equitable and prosperous future for all.

In light of the findings and the overarching theme of agency and empowerment among Muslim women in Malaysia, several recommendations emerge for promoting a more supportive and equitable work-family interface:

***Revise and Reform Religious and Traditional Aspects:*** Collaborative efforts should be made to revisit and adapt religious and traditional norms to contemporary realities. This includes engaging with religious scholars and community leaders to promote interpretations that emphasise the importance of gender equality, women's agency, and the compatibility of work and family life within Islamic principles.

***Promote Islamic Ideal of Gender Equality in Responsibilities:*** Gender roles and expectations should be further redefined and improved to ensure that the burden of the work-family interface is not solely placed on women. Men should be encouraged and supported to take on a more active role in household and caregiving responsibilities, fostering a more equitable distribution of responsibilities between spouses consistent with the Islamic principles of gender equality.

***Flexible Work Arrangements:*** Employers and workplaces should implement and promote flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting, part-time work, or job-sharing to accommodate the diverse needs of employees, particularly women. This flexibility can enable women to better balance their work and family responsibilities without compromising their careers.

***Mandatory Family-Friendly Policies:*** The government can play a pivotal role in mandating and enforcing family-friendly workplace policies, such as parental leave, childcare support, and flexible working hours. These policies can support women in managing their work-family interface effectively.

***Community Support Networks:*** Encourage the establishment of community support networks that provide resources, guidance, and mentorship to women in managing their work and family roles. These networks can help women access information, share experiences, and offer emotional support.

***Promote Education and Awareness:*** Raise awareness about the benefits of a balanced work-family interface for individuals and society. Educational campaigns can help challenge societal norms and stereotypes that may hinder women's agency in making choices that align with their aspirations.

***Corporate Responsibility:*** Encourage businesses to adopt corporate social responsibility practices that support work-family balance, such as on-site childcare facilities, lactation rooms, and employee assistance programs.

***Continuous Research and Data Collection:*** Continue researching the work-family interface in Malaysia to monitor progress and identify evolving challenges. Regular data collection and analysis can inform policy adjustments and interventions.

***Engage Men as Allies:*** Promote awareness among men about the benefits of a balanced work-family interface and engage them as allies in advocating for gender equality and supportive policies at home and in the workplace.

In summary, achieving a healthy and conducive work-family interface for Muslim women in Malaysia necessitates a multifaceted approach involving religious, cultural, legislative, and societal changes. By embracing these recommendations, Malaysia can move closer to realising a society where women's agency is respected and where work and family life are harmonised through the collective efforts of all stakeholders, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and prosperous nation.

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