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Impact of Workplace Flexibility on Women and the Labour Market

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation, industrialisation and the structural change in the Malaysian economy in the 1970s resulted in export-oriented industrialisation policies and an increase in the female labour force participation in the country. However, from the gender perspective, women are seen as socially and culturally constructed which results in discrimination prior to entry into the labour market and causes inequality within the family. These important determinants cause gender differences in the labour market which is further perpetuated by women's employment patterns and job characteristics which are shaped by certain norms which require women to work and also bring up children. One modern concept which has emerged as a workplace reform in many developed nations in managing resources more effectively, efficiently and economically, is workplace flexibility. Little is known whether workplace flexibility may benefit Malaysian women and the nation in terms of utilising untapped human resource. Using a quantitative approach on a sample of 500 women, this study firstly aims to identify how widespread is the use of workplace flexibility in the country. It further examines whether flexibility at the workplace may have an effect on women's work-life balance and hence their decision to participate in the labour market. The respondents were identified using a convenient sampling technique and self-administered questionnaires were distributed to women who are currently working and also women who have worked before but currently not working. Findings reveal that workplace flexibility can improve the working women's work-life balance and hence may be a useful tool to retain women in the labour force. Women who are able to juggle their triple burden and enjoy their economic independence found that balancing work and home is a lesser challenge if there is workplace flexibility. Implications of these findings for working women and the nation are also discussed. Policy implications are also discussed, as to how the nation may utilise the untapped potential of the 50 percent of the human resource in generating higher productivity and economic growth in line with Malaysia's New Economic Model, to become a high-income nation by 2020. However, for these effective policies to be successful, a change in mind set and a paradigm shift is very crucial as women's decision-making process begins from the home.

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INTRODUCTION

Workplace flexibility has become a buzzword in a globalised economy where more and more women join the labour market. Although workplace flexibility and flexible working schedules were historically introduced to meet employers' needs, in the recent decades, it has become more important to meet employees' needs. The advent of globalisation has created a paradigm shift in the way work is done and how work relations are maintained throughout the world and require employees to be competent to cope with work, leisure and family. In Malaysia, the demographic composition of the Malaysian workforce has changed dramatically in the last two decades to include more dual-earner couples who also have responsibility for the care of children and/or the elderly, as well as wanting to establish themselves in their careers. This means that juggling the demands of the workplace and the home has become a more difficult balancing act for many. Another outstanding development in the country is that more than two-thirds of student enrolments in tertiary educational institutions consist of females while women encompass almost one-half of the labour force.

Amidst this scenario, being unable to juggle work and home, many women exit from the formal labour market in Malaysia leaving women's participation rate at 47.9 percent (Malaysia, 2012), which is the lowest in

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the ASEAN region (Business News, 2013). The government's concern in this issue is reflected in the most recent 5-year Malaysian development plan, where the objective of the government is to increase the female labour force participation to 55 percent by 2015. According to the United Nations Development Programme's Asia Pacific Human Development Report 2010 (UNDP, 2011), increasing the female labour participation rate to 55% will increase Malaysia's GDP by 2% annually.

While the government is doing its part to encourage workplace flexibility using various measures, the uptake of flexible working arrangements (FWAs) in the private sector is not very encouraging other than in multinational organisations which have very good FWAs and family friendly policies. FWAs are not widely practiced in most Malaysian organisations. The government's initiative of FWAs started back in the late 1990s with the implementation of the staggered working hours in all government agencies. A most recent measure was the recent launch of flexWorkLife.my, a new online portal by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and Talent Corp that brings together a network of employers and employees to share information on FWAs and family friendly policies. The government's announcement of tax incentive for employers with FWAs in 2014 is also a positive move.

In this study, workplace flexibility is measured using FWAs at the workplace. FWAs may be in the form of flexibility at location or flexibility of time. Examples of FWAs include varying starting and finishing time; annualised hours or term time working; part-time working; working from home or teleworking; job sharing; selecting or influencing own rosters or shifts; flexible break provisions and flexible leave/time off provisions, both paid and unpaid. On the other hand, work-life balance is about assisting employees manage their work time and non-work time.

This paper attempts to understand the low participation of women in the labour market in Malaysia by studying women's perception towards the use of FWAs. The paper first identifies whether Malaysian women are interested in FWAs at their workplace. It then examines whether the availability and use of FWAs at the workplace will help achieve work-life balance. This paper finally concludes with discussions on family friendly policies and long-term measures which might have an effect on women's continued participation in the labour market.

Literature Review:

The increase in labour force participation of women across countries in the past decades is a major factor behind the increasing rate of social and economic development. Findings reveal that women with degrees at higher educational levels enjoy better job positions whereby education plays a key role in employment and promotion of women in their working life (Yousefy & Baratali, 2011). However, because the burden of carrying out domestic chores and caring for elders and children fall more on women, being able to balance between work and family becomes essential for their well-being. In a study by Bolorizadeh, Tojari & Zargar (2013), it is seen that women have more opportunities to advance in sport careers; however, they are faced with the conflict to keep up with their profession and their family duties. Adding the common belief that maternal care is better than non-maternal care in raising children (Yaacob & Huang, 2010), the predominant responsibility for child-care is still borne by women (Schueller-Weidekamm, Kautzky-Willer, 2012), and this conflict may be worsened if it is not being effectively administered. Wan Edura, Mohamad Sahari, Azura, & Izhairi (2012) also found that there is a positive strong relationship between self-esteem and satisfaction outcome; a negative weak relationship between work/family conflict and satisfaction outcomes; and a negative relationship between self-esteem and work/family conflict. Work-family advocates have long championed the adoption of a variety of family-friendly benefits to positively influence work-family balance (Galinsky, 1992).

Workplace flexibility is "the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks" (Hill *et al.*, 2008, p. 152). Such flexibility in the workplace is accorded through flexible working arrangements. Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) are work practices (explained by the employer in employment policies and contracts) that allow the employees a certain degree of freedom in deciding how the work will be done and how they'll coordinate their schedules with those of other employees. The employer sets certain limits such as minimum and maximum number of hours of work every day, and the core time during which all employees must be present. FWAs include flexibility in the scheduling of hours worked, such as alternative work schedules (e.g., flex-time and compressed work weeks), and arrangements regarding shift and break schedules; flexibility in the amount of hours worked, such as part-time work and job shares; and flexibility in the place of work, such as working at home or at a satellite location. Flexibility in the timing (flex-time) and location of work (flex-place) are two forms of FWAs that are seen as a way to achieve balance in work and family life in this challenging environment (e.g., Christensen & Staines, 1990; Galinsky, 1992; Galinsky & Johnson, 1998; Zedeck, 1992). Scholars agree that individuals can better manage long work hours with the unpredictable demands of dependent care when given a measure of control over when and where work is done (Barnett, 1994; Shore, 1998). For instance, home based work was found to enable women to spend more time on domestic work than those employed at the company location (Silver & Goldscheider, 1994).

Most of the reasons why female employees want FWAs centers on family responsibilities and work-life balance (Liechty & Anderson (2007). With more flexible work and part-time work, literature suggests that possible benefits for these young mothers will be better monitoring of the children and more equality time with the children. In terms of caregiving, Bryan (2012) examines the relationship between employees' access to FWAs and the amount of informal care they provide to sick or elderly friends and relatives and finds that flexitime and the ability to reduce working hours are each associated with about 13% more hours of informal care.

Organisations that offer FWAs are providing opportunities for their employees to reconcile their dual work-life responsibilities which could then help to sustain their employees. In fact, a number of studies highlight the increase in the use of FWAs in many organisations. For example, Wang (2010) suggests that FWAs, either in the form of part-time employment or job sharing, are increasingly being explored as potential solutions to individual employment needs by junior medical officers. The use of FWAs is not only limited to private companies, but also extended to the public sector. In Indonesia, a lot of facilities are provided to women public servants to ease the effect of working on their families, such as child-care, job sharing, flexible hours, longer maternity leave and working from home (Ilhaamie, Sharifah Hayaati & Siti Arni, 2012). In another study, Edralin (2012) suggests that the strategies used by Filipina women entrepreneurs to integrate work and life demands incorporate engaging in activities to manage stress, having the business located at home or near residence and planning work and household chores ahead of time which include redesigning work structure to make it more flexible. Such changes in the way work is done and family friendly policies such as FWAs will enable more women to contribute to both work and home.

As previous studies indicate, FWAs, when appropriately implemented, can benefit both the organisation and the employees. The availability of FWAs such as flex-time and compressed workweek seem to help employees experience greater enrichment from work to home, which in turn, is associated with higher job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions (McNall, Masuda & Nicklin, 2010). Employees on FWAs also earn wages that are at least equal to, and often higher than their counterparts who are on fixed schedule which opposed the belief of "flexiglass ceiling" in wages (Weeden, 2005).

The question of whether workers "choose" and prefer FWAs to standard employment has been widely explored in the western countries (Blank, 1990; Blossfeld & Hakim, 1996; Meiksins & Whalley, 2002; Negrey, 1991; Tilly, 1996) and the issue of work-life balance is an issue which is gaining much popularity in terms of dual career workers. However, little is known about whether FWAs are a solution to work-life balance and family demands in Malaysia. Existing literature shows that women's participation in the labour market is affected to a large extent by their workplace environment which has a bearing on their work-life balance. Therefore, to retain women in the labour market, it might be very crucial to study workplace flexibility which is the main focus of this study.

Methodology:

In an attempt to understand whether workplace flexibility may have an impact on women's ability to balance work and family responsibilities, 500 questionnaires were distributed to women in the country. Convenient sampling technique was used in distribution and the response rate was more than 90 percent, where 454 usable questionnaires were returned. The survey was conducted in a 4 month period from September 2013 to December 2013.

The questionnaire consisted of 3 parts: Part A consisted of items on the demographic and socio-economic profile of the respondents; Part B consisted of questions on family background; and Part C consisted of items on working arrangements and family responsibilities. Using the Delphi technique and focus group discussion with women's groups, and women employees, 7 items which measure workplace flexibility and work-life balance were identified. Respondents indicated on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree) on their perception of these statements. Data was analysed using the SPSS 20 software. Descriptive statistics and cross tabulations were used to support the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the respondents' background. Respondents were divided into three age groups. The first group consisted of women aged 24 years and below because most women below the age of 24 years are either in school or yet to finish their tertiary education. The second group consisted of women aged 24 to 30 years where women are at the start of their career and their family life and most of them do not have children. Therefore women in this age group are the ones most likely to stay longer in the labour force. The third group consisted of women who are 30 years and above, and this is the age group which is most likely to have women exit the labour force due to family commitments. Overall, each group is equally represented in this study. More than half of the women surveyed are currently not married. They are either single or divorced/separated. Likewise, more than 50 percent of the women are highly educated with at least a bachelor degree. About four fifths of them are

Muslims and overly represent the Malaysian population where only about two thirds are Muslims. In terms of family commitments, about 40 percent of them have children less than six years old as most of them are below 40 years old. Only one fifth of them have older children. In terms of economic status, a majority of them (45 percent) have household income between RM2000 to RM5000*. Only one third of them have monthly household income of more than RM5000. Two thirds of them are working full time, while the remaining are either currently studying or are working part time. (*1 USD is equivalent to RM3.1)

Table 1: Background of Respondents

Selected Variables	Percentage	N
Age Group		
Below 24 years old	28.6	130
25 to 30 years old	39.6	180
Above 30 years old	31.7	144
Marital Status		
Currently Not Married	55.3	251
Currently Married	44.7	203
Education Level		
Diploma and below	46.3	210
Degree and Post Graduate	53.7	244
Religion		
Non-Muslim	17.0	77
Muslim	83.0	377
Have children aged less than 6 years old		
No	60.4	274
Yes	39.6	180
Have children aged between 6 to 12 years old		
No	78.9	358
Yes	21.1	96
Have children aged between 13 to 18 years old		
No	79.1	359
Yes	20.9	95
Have children aged more than 18 years old		
No	75.6	343
Yes	24.4	111
Total Household Income per month		
Less than RM2000 per month	20.0	91
RM2000 to RM5000 per month	45.2	205
More than RM5000 per month	34.8	158
Respondents' Work Status		
Currently Working	65.0	295
Currently Not Working	17.6	80
Currently Studying	17.4	79
TOTAL	100.0	454

As mentioned earlier, workplace flexibility was measured using the availability of FWAs at the workplace. As shown in Table 2, among the 454 respondents, 65 percent are currently working, while 18 percent have worked before and the balance 17 percent are still studying or working part-time. Some questions were posed to the respondents to find out more about workplace flexibility in Malaysia. It was very interesting to note that 90 percent of the women who have worked or who are currently working are interested in FWAs, even though only 28 percent have used any form of it in the last one year. This conforms to previous findings of the study conducted by Subramaniam, Overton and Ali in 2010 in the Klang Valley, the central business hub of Malaysia. In terms of workplaces offering any form of FWAs, only 23 percent of the respondents worked in organisations which have some form of FWAs.

Even though there are various types of FWAs offered in Malaysia, such as flexible working time, working from home, part-time, job-sharing, telework and career break, most of the respondents preferred working from home, followed by flexible working time.

Table 2: Flexible Working Arrangements among Women who are currently working and who have worked before

Items	Percentage	N
Interested in Flexible Working Arrangements		
No	9.9	37
Yes	90.1	338
Have used FWAs in the workplace in the last one year		
No	72.5	272
Yes	27.5	103
Organisation offered FWAs		
No	76.8	288
Yes	23.2	87
Type of FWAs preferred		
Permanent part-time	19.5	73
Working from home	43.5	163
Flexible working time	26.4	99
Teleworking	1.6	6
Career break	2.9	11
Job Sharing	4.8	18
None	1.3	5
Common Types of FWAs used in workplace		
Permanent part-time	10.4	39
Working from home	16.0	60
Flexible working time	31.7	119
Teleworking	5.3	20
Career break	4.5	17
Job Sharing	7.5	28
None	66.1	248
TOTAL	100.0	375

Table 3 shows the analysis on how women perceive FWAs have an impact on their work-life balance. In terms of their perception on FWAs and work-life balance, four fifths of the respondents perceived that FWAs will increase their time with family. Two thirds of them specifically indicated that FWAs will increase their time with their children. In fact, every three out of four women who were surveyed believed that FWAs will allow them to spend more time on religious activities and will give them more time for themselves. However, it was noted that the availability of FWAs would not encourage them to participate more in voluntary work or even community work. Overall, only 57 percent of the total respondents were satisfied with their work-life balance. This may indicate that every one out of two women surveyed believed they are not able to balance their work and life if they are participating in paid labour.

Table 3: Perception of Balancing Work-Life and Flexible Working Arrangements

	Percentage	N
FWAs allow spending more time with family		
No	18.5	84
Yes	81.5	370
FWAs allow spending more time with children		
No	24.9	113
Yes	75.1	341
FWAs allow more time for religious activities		
No	27.3	124
Yes	72.7	330
FWAs allow more time for myself		
No	26.4	120
Yes	73.6	334
FWAs allow more time for voluntary works		
No	49.3	224
Yes	50.7	230
FWAs allow more time for community service		
No	50.2	228
Yes	49.8	226
FWAs allow saving time on commuting to work		
No	37.2	169

Yes	62.8	285
Satisfied with balance between work and the rest of life		
Somewhat satisfied	57.7	262
Not satisfied or not sure	42.3	192
TOTAL	100.0	454

Further analysis was carried out on those who have used FWAs and those who have not used FWAs and the results are as shown in Table 4. In summary, those who have used and those who have not used flexible working arrangements are quite similar in their opinions on how much time they have for themselves and their families. Regardless of whether the women have used or have not used FWAs, the results also show that FWAs allow them to spend more time with children and save on commuting time. However, the fact is FWAs are only able to increase family time or time for oneself if FWAs can meet the unique needs of each individual woman or her family. For example, women with younger children may prefer working from the home compared to flexible working time. Nevertheless, the different opinions are only significant at 10 percent significant level. However, in terms of work-life balance, those who have used FWAs are more likely to believe that they have achieved work-life balance compared to those who have not used FWAs. In summary, FWAs may not actually increase the family time or personal time but FWAs definitely increases the work-life balance of the women. This may indicate that FWAs may be one of the most important pull factors for women to remain in the labour market.

Table 4: Perception of Balancing Work-Life among respondents who Have Used and Have not Used FWAs

	Have not used FWAs	Have Used FWAs
FWAs allow spending more time with family*		
No	16.8 (60)	24.7 (24)
Yes	83.2 (297)	75.3 (73)
FWAs allow spending more time with children		
No	23.2 (83)	30.9 (30)
Yes	76.8 (274)	69.1 (67)
FWAs allow more time for myself*		
No	24.6 (88)	33.0 (32)
Yes	75.4 (269)	67.0 (65)
FWAs allow saving time on commuting to work		
No	35.9 (128)	42.3 (41)
Yes	64.1 (229)	57.7 (56)
Satisfied with balance between work and the rest of life**		
Somewhat satisfied	55.2 (197)	67.0 (65)
Not satisfied or not sure	44.8 (160)	33.0 (32)
TOTAL	100.0 (357)	100.0 (97)

** Significant at 5%; * Significant at 10%

Conclusion and Policy Implications:

The present study reveals a few interesting findings in terms of FWAs and women's participation in the labour market. Three main conclusions which should be highlighted are:

- Firstly, Malaysian women are interested in FWAs, regardless of whether they are presently working, have worked before or never worked before.

In the context of power relations within the household, women's varied working arrangements help to elevate them from stressful lives which impacts their quality of life and work-life balance. This in turn is closely related to their decisions to work in the labour market.

- Secondly, in terms of work-life balance, a majority of the women perceive that they will have a better work-life balance with FWAs.

This is probably because they feel that flexi-time will allow them to manage time better and working from home will allow more time to be with their family and children and empower them.

Besides, trying to manage the double burden may become a challenge for working women, especially without support, with household chores and child-care. This is due to the patriarchal values which still persist in the Malaysian culture, where the women are responsible for household chores and caring responsibilities as well.

- Finally, workplace flexibility did not have any significant effect on voluntary work and social work and this is one feature among Malaysians where voluntary work is still new and is more common among women with older children and who are quite settled in their family responsibilities.

Although this study has notable contributions to women's participation in the labour market, several issues can be investigated further. Firstly, though work-life balance is regarded as a rather "Western" topic, it could be

of interest to find out more about how this concept is becoming very important in the in the Eastern world. Secondly, the sample size could be increased and finally, future studies should focus only on working women.

Implications And Policy Recommendations:

The most important implication from this study is that Malaysian women are interested in FWAs regardless of their demographic status, socio-economic status or work status. As such FWAs may be a possible tool to retain women in the labour force as it empowers women with more time to juggle the double burden of work and home. With a better work-life balance, employers will be able to unfold the potential of the women who are less stressed and more motivated. Looking at the bigger picture, FWAs create a more environment-friendly workplace with less traffic congestion and better family management. This might translate as low stress level with less commuting time and traffic jams. Commuting time regardless of workplace arrangements is an influential predictor of women's quality of life.

Some important policy recommendations can be made at this point. The first recommendation will be providing a sustainable, long-term and holistic approach from the employers' perspective. By providing a family friendly corporate culture which embeds the concept of work-life balance, the organisation will be able to retain a happier and more motivated talent. Secondly, government policies should include creating awareness on the costs and benefits of FWAs to both employers and employees. Next, even though many child-care facilities have been implemented both by the government and the private sector, care must be taken in terms of quality and trustworthiness, which requires a better regulatory and monitoring system.

Even though FWAs are very beneficial to women, it cannot be denied that FWAs cannot be offered as a comprehensive package but needs to be provided on a case-to-case basis. Work-life balance cannot be achieved by providing FWAs only but it also means doing away with the stereotype of the woman as a homemaker and moving towards a fair, broad and wholesome level of thinking. A more concerted effort by society to educate the younger generation that sharing is caring should be inculcated.

As the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) of the country aims to take Malaysia towards becoming a high income nation in an inclusive and sustainable manner, there needs to be an urgent call for a paradigm shift in the working environment to facilitate women's juggling of paid and unpaid labour.

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