Women's empowerment: Things that matters a lot to get to the top

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ABSTRACT

This study plans to examine the experiences of female working in the higher education sector in order to develop an understanding of why there is a comparatively dearth of senior women in leadership positions in the universities of Pakistan. The Pakistani society is highly patriarchal. The working women have to manage home obligations as well.   the main purpose of the study was to sought out Is work-family interface a barrier to women's career progression to the top management. This paper takes a qualitative approach. A series of in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with 48 female working in junior, middle and senior management positions, in addition to a focus group discussion. The data collected forms a basis for understanding the different factors which women themselves contribute and counter the pressures that result from social practices in the local cultural and social settings. The findings presented here offer a new framework for understanding the factors influencing women's career development in management positions with particular reference to the absence of work family interface.

Key words: *Women career progression, work-family interface ،Women's Empowerment.*

INTRODUCTION

Internationally, the literature suggests that there are a range of complex factors obstructing women's advancement in leadership and management positions.

Coleman (2011) suggests that "in addressing the situation of women in top jobs, it is necessary to consider both the possible barriers to career progress for women and factors that have helped their career success" (p.12).

Historically, as well as in recent years, there has been considerable research on work and family life (Kossek et al., 2010) particularly in relation to the actual and perceived impact of dual responsibilities as a barrier to women's career progression (Miller, 2006). There is a huge body of literature that suggests work/life balance challenges career opportunities in women's lives and forms the basis of work-family conflict (Currie et al., 2002; Guillaume and Pochic, 2009).

In contrast to these findings other researchers have found beneficial aspects of the work-family interface for working people (Mann, 2013;Haar and Bardoel, 2008; Stoddard and Madsen, 2007; Wayne et al., 2002). Such research adopts different terms to describe the positive aspects of the work-family interface instead of focusing on work-family conflict, for example work-family facilitation (Frone, 2003; Rotondo and Kincaid, 2008), work-family compensation (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000), work-family enrichment (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Rothbard, 2001) and positive spillover from family to work and work to family. These authors have all tried to explore the positive relationships between work and family, whereas McMillan and Morris (2012) suggest problem-solving coping to mediate the relationship between family work conflict and life satisfaction. Adopting such a positive perspective Greenhaus and Powell (2006) and Steenbergen et al. (2007) also argue that work and family responsibilities need not always be detrimental.

Before considering some of the possible effects of work-family issues on working females, it is necessary to reiterate that there are diverse cultural contexts across the world ranging from collective to individual perspectives. Despite this, similar themes emerge across cultures regarding the role of women. Pakistani culture tends to be collectivistic. For working women this means that family members i.e. grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle all take care of children. Even in an individualistic society, despite the pressures working mothers have to deal with, they enjoy better health and healthier relationships than full-time housewives. Therefore, the work-family interface might not be a problem for women depending on their specific circumstances and culture. Taking account of this, the current study has as a main research questions '*Is work-family conflict a barrier to women's career progression in Pakistan*'? Further to this the research considers how organizational and family support impacts on the challenges that are faced by working women in the collectivistic context of Pakistani society.

Research strategy and study design

The study with its focus upon understanding the views, perceptions and experiences of women working in higher education management, in relation to their specific cultural context and own practices was consistent with an Interpretist epistemological position. The epistemological assumption underpinning the interpretive paradigm is that all human action is meaningful and has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices (Usher, 1996; Scotland, 2012). This approach was best suited for the current research which was undertaken in a natural setting, where I interacted with women to study how they made sense of their everyday experiences in society, universities and at home in relation to their career progress. In exploring the different perceptions of the reality of these working women's social world, I took the view that reality was best constructed in collaboration with them. This had implications for the methodology of my research.

Methodologically, the focus of this study and the research question led me to in-depth semi-structured interviews with 48 junior and senior women working in management positions which provided a comprehensive understanding of the career development of women in senior management positions in higher education management. Schwandt (2001) describes interviews "as a particular kind of discursive narrative where the meanings are contextually grounded and jointly constructed by interviewee and respondent" (p. 136). In semi-structured interviews the interviewer has a list of issues and questions to be discussed but has some flexibility in the order of topics covered and can allow the interviewee to elaborate on the issue (Denscombe, 2010). Having considered the importance of interview methods I decided that semi-structured interviews would allow me to maintain some control over the issues raised while also giving me the flexibility I needed to explore new perspectives as they arose.

The study involved a total of 48 women; 30 senior women in university management, married, single, with/without children working in cadre/basic pay scale (BPS) 18 and above which comprised Deans, Directors, Heads of Department, Registrar, Treasurer and representatives of other management units of Universities. Eighteen younger women working in cadre/ BPS 17 as Assistant Controller, Assistant Registrar, Assistant Treasurer and Assistant Director having demographic characteristics similar to the senior women were also interviewed.

The reason for focusing on public sector universities was that they have uniform systems of promotion, selection, seniority, salary structure, and basic pay scales (BPS) as compared to the private sector. The proposed universities offered a good combination of old and new, mixed and women only universities, located in urban areas/big cities, and a small city, and with or without specific area specialization. The reason for choosing this blend of diverse institutions was to explore a range of

perspectives and provide a broad analysis of the potential factors contributing to women's career progression

To explore the perceptions of women in management positions and to gain in depth insights into their experiences while getting to the top,I asked them individually to shed light on: *Is work-family conflict a barrier to women's career progression in Pakistan*'? The interview guide included questions which focused around family environment, domestic responsibilities, childcare responsibilities, and care of elderly relatives, family-work interaction, and inter-family support.

Since this study aimed to discover and explore a wide range of views, opinions, and meanings that women assigned to their experiences, I chose a focus group as a further appropriate qualitative research method for the study. The focus group helped me to gain more insights into the issue in a shorter period of time (Cohen et al., 2007).

Data Analyses

Following the guidance for qualitative data analysis, suggested by many researchers (Strauss and Corbin, 1996; Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011; Weber, 1990), I completed my analysis following the four phases of coding process. Thematic analysis was adopted searching for patterns and themes rigorously (Ezzy, 2002; Bernard, 2010). Finally, the number of participants responding in each theme was also counted to give a broad indication of the importance attached to each theme (Cohen et al., 2011; Vaismoradi, et al., 2013). A framework outlining the final overarching themes and sub-themes and categories which resulted from this process is presented in the analysis section.

Findings

The analysis based on participants' responses addressed the supportive factors and individual coping strategies which the women adopted to deal with the challenges of managing work-family roles with reference to the way that they affected women's careers in higher education management. The participants experienced the relationship between career advancement and work-life balance in different ways within their specific home and work contexts. The data revealed that a small number of participants had experienced the work-family interface as an issue. Most reported that they did not experience any difficulties with the work-family interface which may have hindered their careers. The research explored how the participants managed to achieve senior management positions while still managing their family responsibilities. Many of the interviewees indicated that despite their assumed social role within Pakistani culture, a range of different positive factors had had a significant impact on their dual role responsibilities, all

of which contributed to their advancement and their ability to combine career and family.

Figure 1 presents the frequency of responses related to participants' perceptions about the supportive factors and individual approaches that had a positive impact on the work-family interface. Note that the percentages do not add to 100% as interviewees made responses in more than one category.

Figure1.

Coping work-life: supportive factors and personal strategies
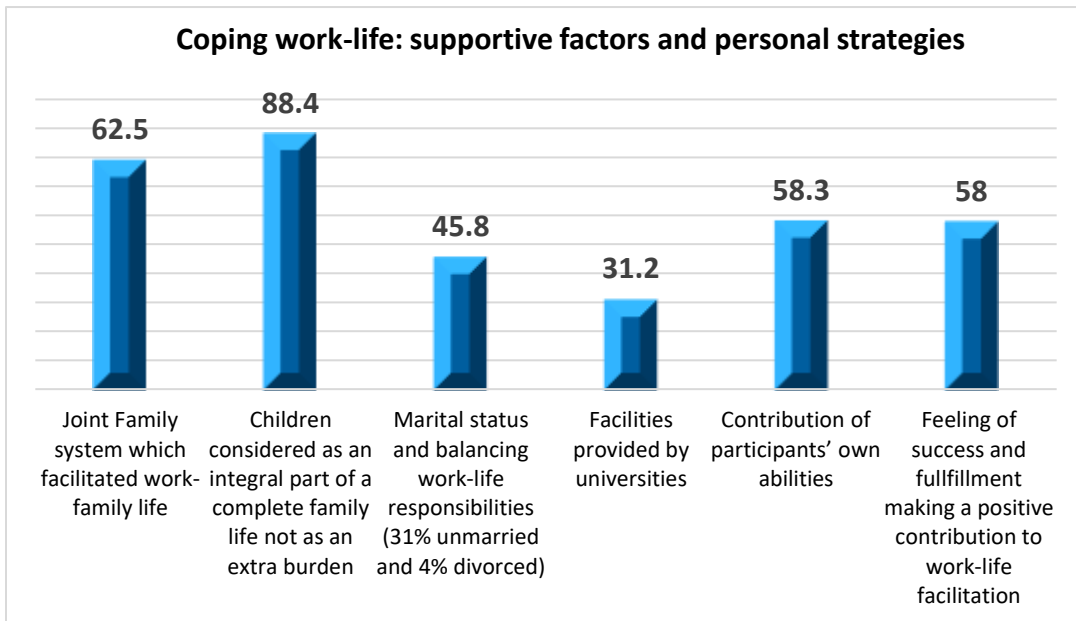
Joint family systems which facilitated work family life

Families emerged as a significant supportive factor for the majority of the participants (62.5%). The cooperation of joint family members was a dominant feature in different ways. For example, in the joint family set up, the traditional role of grandmothers in the provision of care to their grandchildren was repeatedly acknowledged.

The research found differences between the role obligations of the participants in nuclear families and joint families. The junior participants living in a nuclear family reported that managing both career and family was very hard especially when the

children were quite young. They indicated that, in time of need they took advantage of supportive family members.

Some of the participants acknowledged that the demands of management work imposed greater stress on their personal lives. It carried the possibility of losing a sense of balance and a comfortable family life. In such circumstances one of the participants mentioned the moral support and positive thoughts of joint family members. The social support she received meant that she did not have to choose between career and family:

It was acknowledged by the participants that due to the facilitating behavior of family members they were able to manage work and family life simultaneously. If this had not been the case it would have been difficult for them to meet work and family commitments effectively. They would have had to reduce the hours they devoted to work or might have had to sacrifice their career to undertake their family roles.

Marital status and balancing work-life responsibilities

As far as marital status and work-family responsibilities were concerned, there was little difference between the lives of married (65%) and unmarried (31%) participants. Although unmarried participants reported being free from married life responsibilities, it was not always married women that required extra effort to maintain their homes. Unmarried participants also had commitments to their parents, brothers and sisters in addition to their work. There were also two single mothers who had the sole responsibility of caring and providing for their children while also managing their work roles. The findings did not reveal any differences between unmarried (31%) and divorced participants (4%) in relation to their work-family responsibilities. Unmarried participants were engaged with elderly care responsibilities. However, they felt satisfaction in looking after their parents and did not consider this to be an extra burden on them, so perceived no conflict in their work-family lives.

Further to this it was found that the participants saw it as their moral and religious duty to take care of their parents. They always thought of it in that way and did it willingly rather than complaining. They happily provided their dependants with all of the things that they needed:

It was also found that managing the responsibilities of work and family was not that challenging for single mothers. The participants identified disciplined strategies which helped them to establish the necessary balance to reduce dual roles stress and keep their lives running smoothly.

Children considered as an integral part of a complete family life not as an extra burden

The literature suggests that women see the demands of family life and having children adding to work-family conflict and interfering with achieving career success (Colman, 2011). However, the research revealed that children were thought of as enhancing participants' personal life and minimizing work-family issues. The majority of the participants (88.4%) did not see the demands of family life with children interfering with achieving their career success. Having children was thought to be the best part of their lives. The pleasure of nurturing them was evident from their narratives. They were happy and satisfied in putting in every effort for their upbringing.

Among the 16.6% of the participants who reported working late in the evenings, a few of them considered that their lengthy working hours meant that they could not spend as much time as they wished with their children. They often suffered from guilt at not spending enough time with their children while they were very young. However, most of them said that they had succeeded in managing to spend time with them whenever possible.

Facilities provided by the universities

The data revealed that the participants appreciated the organizational facilities that they had utilized in managing their career and family responsibilities. Although the status of participants working in junior and senior management positions differed in terms of what was provided by the university, the majority of the participants managed their housekeeping, childcare, and all other areas of running a home using some of the provided services.

For example some of the participants (31.2 %) working in most senior management positions reported that they were entitled to have chauffeur driven cars. Thus they had no travel worries. They had been provided with comfortable cars to facilitate their travelling for official purposes. This provision was an important contributor towards the facilitation of official activities. The senior participants, who were entitled to the provision of transport facilities, had developed strategies for utilizing the time available while travelling. They made different plans to benefit from it.

Although university childcare centres were reported to not be very reliable, they still continued to be a major source of support for the working women. The availability of childcare facilitates at the universities had helped some junior participants who wanted their children to attend these centres. This helped them balance work and home.

The senior and junior participants who were not entitled to have chauffeur driven cars were facilitated by other means of transportation provided by the university. This made their lives much easier.

Contribution of participants' own abilities

The participants credited several factors for maintaining a relatively stress free environment both at work and home. Demanding work-family roles and the desire for a peaceful working and living environment led them to utilize their personal abilities. More than fifty percent (58.3 %) of participants developed their professional and personal roles in such a way to help them to achieve their careers with relatively few difficulties. The interviews revealed that the following abilities had a significant impact on their work life.

The adoption of different strategies to overcome inter-role conflict

One of the strategies exercised by the participants to overcome work-family role conflict was their own attitudes towards work and life. Some of them indicated that they had never felt any pressure fulfilling the requirements of both domains. They adopted a range of strategies for minimizing the possibility of conflict.

A few of the participants applied their assertive skills to manage work and family matters. For example, some participants realized that they were not giving proper time to their families. Following this, they took some time away from work to share activities with their children. They refused to attend meetings late in the evenings, tried to return home early and avoided staying very late. This strategy did not affect their work obligations. Some of the participants admitted that their busy work schedule made it difficult for them to spend enough time with their families but they were able to justify this through pointing out the advantages of their work:

The findings suggested that the participants tried to organize their schedules and plans carefully to be practical. The ability to work in an organized manner made it easier for the participants to accommodate work and family requirements. This was an effective strategy for reducing work pressure:

Some of the participants indicated that while it was difficult to manage dual responsibilities simultaneously, they succeeded by making a fair distribution of time between both roles. Adaptability was also identified as the most important strategy among the participants to attain a satisfactory work-life balance:

Despite the dual role pressures that participants confronted the majority of them tried not to develop conflict with family members. When it came to arranging work-family lives, they sacrificed their own comfort for the sake of family members and avoided the possibility of conflict. Most of the participants succeeded in managing their families simultaneously with their career. This was associated with their positive attitudes and realistic thinking.

Delegation at work

A further strategy adopted by 58 percent of the participants was delegation of responsibility to others. One of the participants stated that she was never afraid to delegate to her colleagues and subordinates and acknowledged their role in offering

her cooperation which enabled her to manage her work responsibilities. The same strategy was adopted by another participant who spoke about her management techniques for completing different activities and daily tasks efficiently.

The research found a connection between work-life facilitation and participants' professional and personal attributes which enabled them to organize their work and family responsibilities efficiently and professionally.

Feelings of success and fulfillment making a positive contribution to work-family life facilitation

The data showed that feelings of success and achievement were derived from engaging in multiple domains of work and family life and that this was gratifying for most of the participants (58%). They reflected upon their career and family lives within the Pakistani system and indicated that working in senior management positions especially in higher education management had boosted their self-esteem.. The participants indicated that feelings of achievement and related excitement kept them working in their professional lives despite the challenges of balancing the work-family interface. The participants felt valued for what they were contributing to their organizations. The success of their career life contributed to their sense of personal fulfillment. They believed that due to which they were able to manage the balance between holding senior positions with family roles**.**

DISCUSSION

The data indicated that there was not a single participant who claimed that work-family issues were completely absent from their lives. Dual commitments to a career and a family were reported to be complex to manage. Some family issues as well as individual circumstances created particular difficulties for the participants in combining work and family life. However the participants did not perceive these difficulties as insurmountable. Work-family interface challenges were considered as part of their dual roles and could not be avoided but several helpful aspects were indicated and participants reported adopting different approaches and practices to overcome the challenges.

The type of family was reported as an important facilitative factor in supporting work-life domains. The participants frequently acknowledged the positive impact of joint family systems and recognized that such extended families provided considerable support in the facilitation of career and family roles. The family structure, whether there were children or not, was found to be important. Although having children was reported to increase family demands and create a potential imbalance in work-life domains, the participants considered children as an integral part of their family life and as one of the blessings of God. This was a source of strength in reducing difficulties in their children's upbringing. While unmarried participants experienced fewer difficulties than those who were married, they

frequently had elderly care commitments and younger brothers and sisters to look after. The care of parents was reported as a source of contentment for them. The data suggested that they thought themselves blessed for doing something for their family members. This belief meant that combining work and family roles was not an issue for them.

The participants attributed their ability to facilitate a positive work-life balance to different factors which were interlinked. Work-life conflict was quite low in the case of senior participants who had considerable support provided by their universities. For those not entitled to such extensive benefits due to their comparatively junior positions, there were still opportunities to leave their children in university day care centres.

The data suggested that managing career and family challenges required a particular approach to life, family and work. Participants adopted particular strategies to help them maintain an appropriate balance including delegating work. Their achievements gave them satisfaction and they had high self-esteem and a sense of empowerment. Their enjoyment of their work and the excitement they derived from it enabled them to manage the demands of work and family.

The participant's reports of how they were able to manage work-life demands and had combined management at work with a fulfilling family life contrasted with much existing literature which has documented the negative impact of family responsibilities. Many authors have demonstrated that the under-presentation of women in senior management positions was due to their dual responsibilities (see for example Coleman, 2002; 2011; Mostert, 2009; Harris and Giuffre, 2010; Franks et al., 2006; Mostert, 2009) resulting in clashes with family members and a lack of work life balance (Grzywaczand Bass, 2003; Colean, 2002; Major, et al., 2002; Yavas at al., 2008; Boyar at al., 2008; Haar, 2004).

The current research revealed that dual responsibilities were not reported as barriers for the participants reaching senior management positions. Their perceptions were at variance to a global picture of women facing work-family conflict where the greater the devotion to work, the more likely work-family conflict arises (Korabik et al, 2009; Hoobler et al., 2011; Mostert, 2008; Cinnamon, 2006; Bakker andGeurts, 2004), Instead, the findings of the current research support Carlson et al. (2006), Greenhaus and Powell, (2006), Marongiu and Ekehammar, (1999) and Storvik and Schone (2008), who have started to move the focus from these negative aspects of work family interaction to the positive impact that work can have on family roles. They suggest that work and family responsibilities are not always detrimental and

that female managers do not always find difficulty in combining both work and family. The finding also support McMillan and Morris (2012) who found problem-solving coping to completely mediate the relationship between family work conflict and life satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

It was concluded that balancing the work and family domains was not an easy task for the participants to manage but they had adopted a range of strategies drawing on their personal qualities in order to achieve a satisfactory balance. The data suggested that the participants were able to overcome some of the challenges they faced in their work lives with the help of family members and the facilities provided by their organizations. To facilitate a positive work-family life their personal and professional abilities also played a significant role. The participants also experienced a sense of fulfillment and contentment from having multiple roles. Thus dual role responsibilities did not inhibit participants from ascending to the top of organizations.

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