



Factors influencing the emotional health effects of female employees working from home: A literature review

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes worldwide, including the loss of many lives. Governments have directed many employees to work from home (WFH) during this period. This study explores how job demands and work-family conflicts affect the emotional well-being of employees, specifically looking at depression and emotional exhaustion while working from home. It employs a quantitative method, distributing surveys to female employees who are working from home. The results of this research will enhance our understanding of the emotional impacts on female employees and provide guidance for future counseling strategies to address the challenges of working from home.

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1. Introduction

As most countries implement quarantine methods and practice the social distancing necessary to break the chain of COVID-19, the world has been put into a period called The Great Lockdown. [Bhumika \(2020\)](#) stated that 2020 is declared to be involved in a global public health crisis with the existence of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which originated in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, making its presence felt in more than 100 countries in the first week of March 2020 including Malaysia. To reduce the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries have implemented closure and movement control orders and ordered residents to stay at home ([Azlan et al., 2020](#)). As a result, many job sectors in various fields are affected by the instructions issued by the government. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions in the functioning of not only public sector organizations ([Schuster et al., 2020](#)) but also private sectors.

Therefore, a high-performing workforce capable of providing exceptional service is essential to ensure that these institutions can still be controlled in an atmosphere of extreme uncertainty ([Bhumika,](#)

[2020](#)). However, WFH is not a new phenomenon in the 21st century, as it has already been widely practiced in developed countries. In the United States, more than 50% of employees in professional and business services, information services, and financial activities practice WFH ([USBLS, 2018](#)). One of the flexible work schedules that can help ease an employee's responsibilities while on duty is to apply the strategy of working from home ([Dockery and Bawa, 2014](#)).

Positive implications of WFH include producing more flexible time, more autonomy and power in controlling working hours ([Gajendran and Harrison, 2007](#)), lower level of stress towards work ([Baruch, 2000](#)), and improved work and life conflicts ([Crosbie and Moore, 2004](#)). Our study focuses on the negative effects on employee emotional health, i.e., depression and emotional exhaustion. For example, [Arntz et al. \(2020\)](#) stated that working from home is ideal for female employees with young children. [Jiménez and Madsen \(2003\)](#) mentioned the need for women employees to balance family and work to avoid family or role conflict. The impact of family conflict is the emergence of psychological pressure, depression, complaints, and fatigue. Other psychological issues that emerge include dissatisfaction with job roles within family life, reduced commitment to the organization, and ultimately, the decision to leave the job.

[Gregory and Milner \(2009\)](#) argued that the positive effect depends on the nature of the organization of a public institution itself. It is because, through the findings of several other

studies, the strategy of working from home increases stress (Shepherd-Banigan et al., 2016; Song and Gao, 2020), depression (Shepherd-Banigan et al., 2016), emotional exhaustion (Abdel Hadi et al., 2021) and psychosomatic complaints (Beauregard, 2011). Judging from the negative impacts stated earlier, the mental and physical health of most employees undergoing WFH can decrease due to job and family demands. In addition, for women employees who are married and have children, working at home impacts the dual role of women, which makes women employees overloaded with work and feel stressed. In addition, social disruption from employees' families and conventional work mindsets make employees lose focus between working and spending time with family (Mustajab et al., 2020).

Other things are debated in the implementation of WFH; namely, the WFC should be felt by employees who work from home. However, not all employees feel the WFC is equal. There are certain things, such as marital status and gender, that determine the WFC that employees feel. Male employees can feel more dominant in controlling their WFC than women employees, especially women who are married and have children (Mustajab et al., 2020). It could be due to the culture in Malaysia that women at home must serve their husbands and take care of children. As a result, women employees carry out multiple roles and tasks, resulting in a high workload that can trigger fatigue and work stress. Nowadays, role changes in the family are increasingly visible, especially among women, who play the role of a mother and an employee. In general, the prevalence of work and family role conflict nowadays occurs due to the increased involvement of women in the field of employment (Mahpul and Abdullah, 2011).

Although working from home has an important relationship with health outcomes (Oakman et al., 2020), that strategy is not a common work approach practiced by most employees in Malaysia. This employment strategy has also not been implemented among employees from any other public or private sector. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscape of life and ways of working. The strategy of working from home is an unfamiliar scenario in the public and private sectors. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the course of work activities among staff in Malaysia and the world (ILO, 2020). The ambiguity of work implementation and the confusion of personal life make it quite difficult to adapt to most employees (Routley, 2020), overwhelmed by the pressure to balance childcare duties, personal relationships, household duties, and family demands. Employees with small children face greater obstacles to maintaining the efficiency of working at home and nurturing their children simultaneously. School closures and the shift to online teaching and learning sessions for students have forced many working parents to become temporary teachers for their children.

Women employees face constraints and challenges, especially conflict and stress. Past studies have also explained that career women face family financial problems, conflicts in work and family responsibilities, social networking challenges, educational limitations, and a lack of work and family life management (Mauchi, 2014). However, the involvement of women in the career sector has changed society's view and perception that men are the only head of the family who earns a living and bears all the household needs (Klesment and Van Bavel, 2017). Nevertheless, the role of women is still tied to the fact of life, i.e., women are still housewives and manage the affairs of children and households even if they have careers (Idris and Tan, 2017; Pierret, 2006). It is because, although society expects women to be actively involved in social work and contribute to the community, society still attaches importance to the role of women towards the family (George et al., 2016; Gierc et al., 2016).

Additionally, according to research by Öztürk et al. (2021), 35.9% of Turkish healthcare professionals had severe or extremely severe stress, and 71.1% reported depression. More than half were women employees. There were a variety of findings from international research utilizing DASS-21 during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, a meta-analysis revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, depression (48.1%), anxiety (26.9%), and stress (21.8%) were all prevalent in China. Compared to the general Chinese population, women had greater rates of depression and anxiety (Bareeqa et al., 2021). Wang and Peng (2017) conducted with 1210 Chinese participants and found that women were more likely than males to experience depression (53.8%), anxiety (28.8%), and stress (16.1%) than men. The outbreak had a significant psychological strain on women who experienced high stress levels, anxiety, and depression. Therefore, this study aims to examine job demands and WFC on employee health outcomes during MCO.

2. Underpinning theory

Research support requires the strengthening of theory as the basis of the study's strength. Thus, the researcher found that role theory has an approach that supports this study. Role theory comes from the study of Kahn et al. (1964). Role theory asserts that a person will usually be burdened with various roles in life (for example, the role of parent, wife, child, and family), and they have constraints and limited time limits to meet the demands of each role. As a result, it will cause conflict between roles because there is an attitude to fulfill all roles in their lives. Kahn et al. (1964) found this theory exists when a person has time constraints caused by various burdens and responsibilities such as parent, wife, child, and family responsibilities. These things are the cause and trigger for conflict on the basis of trying to fulfill all roles in the daily life of a working woman.

The probability of an individual experiencing a conflict between roles stems from the partner's and family's demand to focus and engage in family activities, especially while working from home. Working from home, a mom doesn't have an exact time to work or play a role as a mom and wife. For example, from the aspect of the work demand, a woman who holds a position as a director in the company and at the same time must obey and respect her husband as the head of the family at home faces the conflicting weather to complete tasks as an employee or as a wife. When both demands come at one time, conflict appears. In this situation, a female employee should not highlight her attitude and role as a company director when working from home because her role is not only as an employee but also as a wife. On the basis of the domains discussed, the researcher found that role theory is a holistic theory supporting the research.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Job demands and women employee emotional health effects

Work demands are several job requests that must be completed in a short time, and simultaneously, in the job demands, there are aspects of time and aspects of work speed (Kristensen et al., 2004). Meanwhile, according to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), work demands are physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects that require effort (physical) and skills. These work demands are related to psychological costs, work pressure, and emotional demands of employees. Job demands become stressors when employees require high effort and do not recover properly (Sonnetag et al., 2010).

More generally, the influence of job demands on psychological health impairment and risk-taking organizational behaviors has gained attention in the literature (Demerouti et al., 2009). Past research showed that job demands were negatively related to sleep quality (Hülshager et al., 2018). Sleep quality was also related negatively to emotional exhaustion (Giorgi et al., 2018). Increased workload (job demands) positively affects emotional exhaustion in various settings (Rizo-Baeza et al., 2018). The high workload was also related to poor sleep quality (Hülshager et al., 2018) and low relaxation (Molino et al., 2015).

Job demands and role ambiguity are closely related to the tension that reacts to the psychology and physiology of employees (Idris, 2011). The results of this finding are strongly supported by Rahman's (2013) study at a Commercial Bank in Bangladesh, which statistically shows that work pressure involving job demands such as the number of working hours and workload have a close relationship with employees' physical and mental health. This study shows that employees will experience health problems such as stomach aches, ulcers, severe chest pain, heart disease, and high

blood pressure. When the body receives excessive stress, then employees will face physical and mental health that are harmful and threaten their ability to cope with the work environment. Accordingly, this study is supported by Yen's (2024) research involving workers in Taiwan, which demonstrates that job demands positively influence work stress through factors such as work overload, information overload, communication overload, and system feature overload.

In the meantime, a meta-analysis study by Nahrgang et al. (2011) shows that job demands, namely job risk, complexity, and physical demands, impact employee health and are positively related to burnout. Some previous studies, such as the work of Niedhammer et al. (2015), revealed the effect of emotional demands on depression over three years. Other studies discovered that job demands led to depression after a year (Bakker et al., 2000). Thus, a longer time exposure to emotional demands must be considered to predict their consequences. Interestingly, the current study showed that job demands, specifically physical demands, can lead to depression within four months. This finding indicated that physical demands, such as frequent movements, lifting heavy objects, and physical activity quickly and continuously, can accelerate the onset and symptoms of depression. Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 1: Job demands will be associated with employee emotional health outcomes (depression and emotional exhaustion) during WFH.

3.2. Work-family conflict (WFC) and women employee emotional health effects

The discussion of WFC among women is indeed an important issue. Furthermore, more women are involved in business and politics nationally or globally. Aware of this fact, researchers are increasingly active in conducting studies related to the role of women in dealing with work-to-family conflicts. For example, a study by Wang and Peng (2017); conducted on 443 female employees from three large-scale enterprises in China found that work-to-family conflict is positively related to depression among professional women. It shows that the increase in conflict between work and family also increases the problem of depression among women. In contrast to the study conducted by Baral (2016), WFC and FWC on 224 managerial and professional women in India showed a negative relationship with employee well-being. The bivariate analysis also shows that women who experience FWC, are not involved in family decision-making, and have time constraints for social activities and therapy generally have poor mental health.

Studies related to WFC have been found to negatively impact mental health and employees' tendency to end their service in the employment sector. The stress of balancing roles at home and the office affects working women's mental and physical

health (Shakil Ahmad et al., 2011). Noor (2002) examined the relationship between WFC, locus of control (direct, moderator, and mediator), and women's health and well-being. His study involved a total of 310 women who work and have families in Malaysia. The study proved that the three controls affect the relationship between WFC and health and well-being. The results of his study also clearly show that WFC has a positive effect on stress. However, only direct effects of control were found in predicting depressive symptoms. It shows that control of the emotional and internal aspects of oneself can change the level of mental health of employees.

According to Nabila (2019), WFC often arises due to jobs that have inflexible working hours, high workloads, perceived job stress, and self-conflict with the team at work. A lack of support from the head of the organization also affects the realization of his responsibilities to the family. Such conditions can also disturb the mind or mentality of an employee while working. Previous studies consistently supported that variable WFC has a significant negative effect on performance due to emotional exhaustion (Agustina and Sudibya, 2018; Mubassyir and Herachwati, 2014; Nabila, 2019; Septyaningsih and Palupiningdyah, 2017).

WFC is another factor that triggers declining health outcomes, especially emotional exhaustion. The study entitles the effect of WFC through emotional exhaustion on the performance of female nurses at Gresik Petrochemical Hospital. An individual may decrease due to negative attitudes and behaviors. Excessive stress will eventually be the cause of emotional exhaustion. Emotional fatigue that arises in employees will impact their performance, especially job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Septyaningsih and Palupiningdyah (2017) revealed that the variability of emotional exhaustion significantly negatively affects employee performance.

The discussion of WFC among women is indeed an important issue. Furthermore, more and more women are getting involved in business and politics nationally and globally. Realizing this fact, researchers are increasingly actively conducting studies related to the role of women in coping with work conflict against the family. For example, a study by Wang and Peng (2017) conducted against 443 female employees from three scale enterprises large in China found that work conflict against family has a positive relationship with depression among professional women. It shows the increasing WFC also increases the problem of depression among women. In contrast to the study conducted by Baral (2016), WFC and FWC on 224 women management and professionals in India show negative relationship findings with employee welfare. The bivariate analysis also showed that women who experienced family-work conflict, were not involved in family decisions, and had time constraints of social activities and therapy would typically have poor mental health, especially depression.

In WFC studies conducted by Allen et al. (2000) and Hilton and Whiteford (2010), uncontrolled WFC will lead to depression, dissatisfaction in life, an increased range of illnesses, and psychological stress among women employees. Women were more likely to experience higher Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) depression scores, lower morale, and more negative emotional symptoms (Alavi and Sail, 2010). In addition, job demands and WFC were said to be able to negatively impact elements of employees' health outcomes, such as physical and mental health. A bundle of literature found negative impacts of WFC, especially depression (Gauthier and Guille, 2017) and emotional exhaustion (Boles et al., 1997; Frank et al., 2010). Then we propose:

Proposition 2: WFC will be associated with employee emotional health outcomes (depression and emotional exhaustion) during WFH.

Proposition 3: Job demands and WFC will affect the employee's emotional health outcomes (depression and emotional exhaustion) during WFH.

3.3. Family work conflict (FWC) and women employee emotional health effects

Over the past ten years, research on the link between FWC and general health outcomes has expanded dramatically. Sari (2009), in her study on 93 nurses at the Emergency Treatment Installation of RSU Dr. Soetomo Surabaya, found that FWC was longitudinally related to poor emotional health (emotional exhaustion). The research evaluating the relationships between WFC and FWC and depressed symptoms indicated gender inequalities. For instance, a prior study found that WFC had an impact on men's psychological capital while FWC had an impact on women's psychological capital. Wang et al. (2021) found FWC was longitudinally related to poor emotional health and more depressive symptoms. On the other hand, according to longitudinal data collected over four years, FWC was linked to increased depressive symptoms, while WFC was not (Gisler et al., 2018).

Lu et al. (2006) also discovered that the two aspects of WFC, WFC and FWC, strongly correlated with employees' depression symptoms. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, WFC and FWC contributed to increased depression symptoms. Depressive symptoms would be brought on by both WFC and FWC in this study as a general emotional health condition (Zhou et al., 2020). Also, according to Wang et al. (2021), comprising 238 hotel management pairs from 33 five-star luxury hotels in Taiwan, FWC is substantially connected with emotional exhaustion. According to a study on financial organizations in Indonesia, employees dealing with FWC would surely experience emotional exhaustion. In a study conducted by Posig and Kickul (2004), they found that women employees tend to experience FWC more than WFC

and are finally correlational to emotional exhaustion. Turkish women reported having depression (55.7%), anxiety (49.6%), and stress (63.1%) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings from this literature review reveal a lack of significant extant literature on the specifics of the topic of investigation in this research. Indeed, previous studies show a gap that needs to be filled. This problem has still not been addressed or answered in previous studies. For example, at least several studies examined the impact of incorporation constructs, i.e., job demands and WFC, on emotional health outcomes among women employees, especially while WFH. Despite the potential drawbacks, the success of remote work depends on an effective arrangement, clear expectations, and supportive work culture for both employees and employers.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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