

Conflicting Worlds of Working Women: Findings of an Exploratory Study

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Home and work are two different worlds for working women and are often in conflict. This paper attempts to study the causes, consequences and correlates of work-family conflicts among dual-career women. The study examines if the working women were able to combine their work and family, and identifies the constraints they faced and the family and organizational support they received in this process. The study also examines the strategies that working women adopt to contain the stresses of contradictory and competing dual role demands. The results suggest that many factors contribute to make role conflict of working women a reality. The sources of conflict are dependent on the availability of various support systems within and outside the family as well as the organization where she works.

Role Expectations

There are contradictory role expectations from working women while she is at work and at home. On professional front she is expected to be committed, dynamic, competitive, straight forward, non-sentimental and act in a “business like” manner and at home, she is expected to be sweet, soft, sensitive, adaptable, gentle, unassertive and domesticated (Misra 1998). As an ideal woman she wants to fulfill the duties of a faithful wife, a sacrificing mother, obedient and respectful daughter in-law and an efficient and highly placed career woman. These contradictory expectations cause the most confusion, tension and create many other problems for her. A woman employee finds it difficult to do justice to the two roles at the same time. An attempt to play one of the roles with perfection leads to an inadvertent sacrifice of the other.

Women assuming multiple roles results in work family conflict because time and energy are shared, clubbed and even extended across the two spheres of activity. When a housewife enters into gainful employment outside home she

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not only finds a change in her role and status within the family and outside it, but she also finds herself under increasing pressure to reconcile the dual burden of the two roles at her home and her workplace because each is a full time job. Coping up with the situation requires not only additional physical strength, personal ability and intelligence on the part of a working woman but also requires the members of her 'role set' to simultaneously make necessary modifications in their expectations. When conflict between the two life domains occurs the consequences are reflected in both organization and domestic life. For the employers such role conflict means disillusionment, dissatisfaction and strained relations with women employees, their lower standard of work performance and disregard of organizational goals. Since society is not separate from organizations, the negative impact of role conflict will have its effects on the society in general in the form of lower standards of performance, lower quality of goods and services and a growing feeling of interpersonal conflict being the obvious results. There is therefore, a growing recognition by policymakers of the importance of supporting women in juggling work and family life (Evandrou et al. 2002).

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In order to help dual-career women to manage the demands of both work and

family, it is necessary to explore the origins and correlates of work stressors and workfamily conflict, and to try to find a support system at the level of the family, workplace, community and government for resolving it. Although most of these issues have been well documented by the western researchers (Hardy & Adnett 2002, Mackey & McKenna 2002, Rapaport & Rapaport 1980, Seto et al 2004) far less is done in India. The present study attempts to study the nature, extent and sources of work-family conflict of dual-career women, assess the impact of role conflict on work and domestic performances of working women, identify the variables that interfere with their work-life balance, and suggest ways and means for striking out a balance between the domestic and professional roles.

Material & Methods

The study has been carried out in Kashmir valley among women working in different white-collar situations, belonging to various social, economic, cultural, demographic and professional groups and categories. White-collar working women were selected mainly because they exhibit a strong favour for white collar jobs in view of their physical suitability, easy performance and less time consumption. The respondents were selected from educational institutions, media organizations, banks, government offices and hospitals because of the high concentration of women workers in these occupational groups. A total of 250 participants responded to the survey but only 200 of the questionnaires were ana-

lyzed; others were either not filled properly or only partially completed.

Participants were randomly and independently sampled. The questionnaires were completed anonymously. The confidentiality of information was guaranteed by asking participants not to include their names on the completed questionnaires. The main data was collected using written questionnaires, direct oral interviews and observations. Visiting some of the respondent's homes and observing their behaviour and role in reality also supplemented the data obtained through interviews. The results of the study were analyzed with the help of simple average scoring scales, chi-square tests and ranking methods.

Nature & Extent of Work-family Conflict

The respondents were asked the question: 'How often do you have to juggle work and family obligations that conflict with one another and give you a pulled-apart feeling?' The items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Those whose responses were 4 and 5 were deemed to have high degree of role conflict and the others whose responses were 1, 2 and 3 were considered to have low degree of role conflict. There were 66 cases of high degree of role conflict and 134 cases of low degree of role conflict. All respondents had role conflict of which one-third had high. About 67 percent women, reporting low role conflict, were to some extent successful in achieving a harmony between their fam-

ily and professional lives and the remaining 33 percent faced obstacles in achieving the desired harmony.

The extent to which a working woman actually perceives potential role conflict situations as problems or feels personally troubled by them depends, generally, upon three mediating variables: characteristics of the conflict including the nature and intensity of the conflict; characteristics of the working woman including her age, qualification, length of service or marriage etc, and characteristics of organization which include the type and nature of organizations where woman is employed (Carlson & Kacmar 2000, Dautzenberg et al. 1998). The works of many other researchers (Carlson & Kacmar 2000, Frone & Yardley 1996) have also found that a variety of antecedents including role ambiguity, role conflict, time demands and involvement in both the work and family domains are directly and positively related to work-family conflict.

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The results of the study (Table 1) reveal that role conflict is not a function of any single factor but many factors contribute to make role conflict a reality. Doctors, nurses, bank employees and media women reported more marital

problems than teachers and office workers. It is generally assumed that with the advance in age and maturity of mind, the adaptability of a person increases; hence elderly working women are likely to better adjust in role conflicting situations than the younger ones. The results of the study corroborate the argument that the chances of role conflict are more when the mother has more pre-school going children and does not have satisfactory

child-care provision at home during their school hours. Working mothers who have more children are prone to face more role conflicts and problems of adjustment. Thus, the hypothesis, that older the working mother with more experience and grown-up children better adjusted she is than of a young mother with less experience, having small kids is found to be correct. Our X^2 values also confirm this theoretical proposition.

Table 1: Extent of Role Conflict and its Correlates

S. No	Correlates	X^2 value	V	P
1.	Type of Profession	6.169	4	NS
2.	Age	0.600	2	NS
3.	Education	8.066	2	< 0.05
4.	No. of Children	14.762	2	< 0.005
5.	Average age of children	0.904	2	NS
6.	Income	19.392	2	< 0.005
7.	No. of family members	19.690	2	< 0.005
8.	Length of service	6.983	2	< 0.05
9.	Length of married life	26.237	1	< 0.005
11.	Husband's attitude	3.943	2	NS
12.	Attitude of mother in law	6.359	2	< 0.05
13.	Attitude of boss/employer	12.005	2	< 0.005
14.	Attitude of colleagues	13.640	2	< 0.005
15.	Level of job satisfaction	9.896	2	< 0.01
16.	Level of work commitment	10.328	2	< 0.01
17.	Performance of job roles	2.841	2	NS
18.	Health Condition	18.128	2	< 0.005
19.	Personality type	29.902	2	< 0.005
20.	Child care arrangements	7.858	2	< 0.05
21.	Availability of domestic help	0.434	2	NS
22.	Use of labour saving devices	26.336	3	< 0.005
23.	Distance between workplace and residence	12.186	2	< 0.005

Note: 1) Based on corresponding contingency Table 2

2) "NS" stands for 'Not Significant'

Our results reveal that higher the level of education lesser is the degree of role conflict experienced by working-women. The actual conduct of educated working women in the situation of ten-

sion are determined by the way they themselves and their relevant family members interpret and evaluate the situation. It is also dependent on whether her own ideas, attitudes and concepts regard-

ing her economic activity agree with those of the members of her role set whose opinion is important for her. The economic activity of a woman plays a decisive role in the outbreak of open conflict. The results confirm the popular belief that higher the income, lower is the degree of role conflict experienced by working women.

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From our study it appears that working mothers from nuclear family background are better adjusted than those living in extended families. In case of a nuclear family, the working wife has to adjust herself with only her husband and children who are generally considerate, co-operative and sympathetic. But in the case of an extended family the working mother has to make adjustment with all the members who may not be so co-operative and sympathetic. Spouse support was also found to be a stronger predictor of work-family conflicts. Husband's attitude is the factor that mainly co-varies most closely with the role conflict in a working wife. Role conflict was found to be high among the respondents whose husbands were of demanding nature. If the mother-in-law is kind and considerate then the employed daughter-in-law is also found to be more or less adjusted. Similarly, non-cooperative and unfavorable attitude of other family members was found as a very potential factor in causing conflict. Employment of a woman can also be satisfying to her to

the extent to which the men with whom and for whom she works look for her and develop respect for her human dignity. In our sample, most of the respondents felt that their employers behaved with them well and their colleagues have, on the whole, a helping attitude towards them.

Every woman wants to use modern kitchen aids in order to save both time and labour which help them to carry on both the home and professional roles simultaneously with ease. From our data it appears that there is a significant relationship between these two variables. Those mothers who have proper arrangements for the care of their children during the school hours are found to have less tension and less maladjustment in their family and vice versa. A working woman satisfied with her job is argued to be generally in a favourable position to make adjustments in her family and her dissatisfaction with her job affects her marital harmony adversely. Our study lends support to this argument. Commitment to job also has an important bearing on the role conflict. Poor health leads to poor performance of the roles thereby resulting in role conflict. Those with home-cum-career-oriented personality face the least degree of role-conflict than those with home-oriented personality. Career-oriented personality women do not show marked difference in the incidence of conflict. The other factors like distance between workplace and residence and types of conveyance used by workingwomen to reach their places of work are also significant in producing role conflict in working women.

Sources of Work-family Conflict

As an individual's situational stressors within a domain increase, conflict results as one domain begins to interfere with the other. It generally originates from two major aspects of work-family interface-factors associated with the time required to perform work and family roles and the psychological carry over of strain from one role domain to the other, which affects the availability and amount of energy for performing the other roles. Women who choose to combine marriage with career face almost a situation of normlessness and hardly

know how to apportion time and resources between these two major responsibilities.

The respondents were given a set of 12 different factors and were asked to rate any ten of them in order of importance, using a five point scoring scale (ranging from 1 for the lowest score to 5 for the maximum score). The ranking analysis (on the basis of maximum possible scores) as shown in Table 2, reveals that the main sources of role conflict among the working women are work overload and incompatible role expectations.

Table 2: Sources of Role Conflict

S.No.	Source	Score	%age of max Possible score	Rank
1.	Work overload	795	79.50	I
2.	Incompatible role expectations	768	76.80	II
3.	Ambiguity and uncertainty of the two roles	684	68.40	III
4.	Husband's attitude & cooperation	622	62.20	IV
5.	Attitude of family members	475	47.50	V
6.	Inadequate and inappropriate role sharing in family	425	42.50	VI
7.	Primacy of family and job roles	359	35.90	VII
8.	Time budgeting	255	25.50	VIII
9.	Incompatible personality traits of spouses	218	21.80	IX
10.	Differences in the backgrounds of spouses	212	21.20	X

The greatest problems of employed women emerge from the divergent demands, which family and profession make on them. The ambiguity and uncertainty of the roles in the dual-career families, together with the complexity of modern life and exaggerated emphasis on individuality make it difficult for both husband and wife to adjust to their marital obligations. A good number of parents-in-law and other relations living in the joint family do not have much sympathy

with the working wife's new role and their demands and expectations from her remain more or less unchanged. Thus, combining the two roles is not an easy task for women. It requires not only skill but also physical and psychological acceptance of an adjustment to the changes brought about by this combination.

Conflicts break out always when educated working wives, through their egalitarian ideas and attitudes, threaten

the culturally determined order of priorities. A wife with such an attitude feels that if she shared with her husband the stresses and strains of a wage earner the husband should be ready to share with her the duties of her wife and mother role. Spouses belonging to inconsistent premarital socio-cultural backgrounds and those with incompatible and uncongenial personality traits, disharmony in sexual relationship, and unfavourable post-marital circumstances experience tensions in their married life.

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Acceptance of the goals of home and work simultaneously requires qualities of different sorts. Working outside the home can pull each partner towards routines and relationship that may conflict, or may be imagined to conflict with the marriage itself. Each spouse is required to accommodate his/her needs, and the complications of his/her situation out of the home to the needs and situations of the other. The size of the household and the use of modern appliances are also relevant to the time required by the housewife and mother roles. The results also indicate that working women are facing greater conflict in the management of household activities whereas housewives have less of conflict. This is but natural because the housewives have much more time than working wives for the household activities.

Consequences

When conflict between the two life domains of employed women occurs its consequences are reflected in both organizational and domestic lives of women. The challenge of balancing family and work is a difficult one and affects both men and women in dual-career families. Not only women working outside their homes often speak of being torn between family and work responsibilities but the men, whose wives work outside the home, also sometimes resent being asked to take on household responsibilities and chores. Role conflict has been reported to relate to various outcomes such as depression, job dissatisfaction, life and family dissatisfaction and intention to quit the job (Evandrou et al. 2002). Further effects are absenteeism (Goff et al 1990), lack of psychological availability at work (Cooper & Williams 1994, Hall & Parker 1993), accidents and loss of productivity (Ganster & Schaubroeck 1991), high turnover (Adebayo 2006), poor health (Evandrou et al. 2002) and wasted human potential (Wagner & Neal 1994).

The most common problem that working women suffered with was intense physiological stress.

The respondents were given a set of ten factors and were required to rate them on a five point scoring scale yielding a score of 1 for always to 5 for not at all. Table 3 reveals that the most common problem that working women suffered with was intense physiological

stress. Physiological problems like depression and irritability were found to be common. Women try to adopt themselves to the pressures of multiple roles as far as possible. They suffer from the feeling that they are neglecting their wifely and motherly duties on the one hand, they fear that they are not doing justice to their jobs on the other. All women consciously feel this double or triple roll conflict.

Table 3: Consequences of Role Conflict

S.No.	Consequences	Score	%age of max. possible score	Rank
1.	Stress & strain	825	82.5	I
2.	Anxiety and guilt	784	78.4	II
3.	Family tension	768	76.8	III
4.	Physical disorders	672	67.2	IV
5.	Reduced job satisfaction	615	61.5	V
6.	Reduced work commitment	569	56.9	VI
7.	Reduced performance	485	48.5	VII
8.	Loss of self-esteem	439	43.9	VIII
9.	Weakened bonds	365	36.5	IX
10.	Marital conflict	268	26.8	X

The physical strain was also felt as disturbing and unbearable by a number of women. Even when they were working for equal number of hours as their husbands, they had to complete the domestic duties like managing the households and looking after children, leaving them exhausted because of their limited physical capacity and energy. They also suffer

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from family tensions, anxiety and guilt when, owing to their jobs, they neglect their children, husbands and homes. There is also an adverse effect on women's professional life. A good number of respondents complained that they observed a fall in their concentration and analytical power and could not utilize their full potential on the job. As a result they experience reduction in their work commitment, decrease in performance and low job satisfaction. Many women are not able to increase their commitment to their professions because they either feel or are made to feel that by doing so they are overstepping their boundaries.

In order to avail more time for the household, working women resort to the defense mechanism of eliminating social relations. They are found to spend more of their time in completing their ever piled up household work and do not find enough time for their spouses. As they get exhausted after spending six to eight hours at the work place, they often prove to be less pleasant companions for their husbands and children. Sooner or later, many of these women learn either to scale down their occupational aspirations or to curtail their family obligations.

Coping up & Accommodation

Women generally prefer their family than their work if forced to choose between the two. Role conflicts will not become manifest as long as a woman does

not put her career above her duties as daughter in law, wife and mother. Our study results reveal that 46 percent of the respondents found it difficult to reconcile the demands of various roles with one another. About 30 percent of the married women under study try to do justice to the diverging claims. A considerably lesser number (14 percent) find that they succeed without much emotional tension in adapting themselves to both the roles. It however, reflected the complexity of the women's multiple roles and revealed their personal efforts to balance, on daily basis, their profession and family.

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It is interesting to observe that some women prefer to give up one or the other role due to the prevailing role conflict situation. Questioned whether they would imagine withdrawing from their salaried job for family reasons, the majority of respondents are highly positive, the simple reason being that the family is regarded as the more important domain. It has been found by several investigators that those women who strongly accept either the professional or domestic roles have relatively less role conflict than those who fall in between the two (Adebayo 2006, Rozario et al 2004). It makes sense that the more roles people have, the more possibility there will be for different roles to have conflicting expectations. The readiness to compromise enables them to adapt

themselves to the contradictory role demands. But every mother does not have the option of deciding to stay at home. Those who were able to achieve a balance between their domestic and job roles reveal that a clear understanding of the job and home roles, proper time management, drawing clear-cut distinction between the two roles, support of the husband and other members of the family particularly the mother-in-law and also that of colleagues and employers and the presence of various personality traits help working women in bringing out compatibility between the two roles they play. The power of endurance a woman develops from childhood also goes a long way in helping her in adjustment. Some working women were of the opinion that the profession and family can be harmoniously combined with one another. However, on closer observation one could see that these women did not fulfil all the elements of prescribed family roles. Their housewife and mother duties were considerably reduced, if not almost totally given up, because servants or the mother-in-laws had taken over these duties.

Content analysis of the suggested means of overcoming conflicts (Table 4) reveals that women favour that the domestic and professional issues should not be mixed up as they have identified 'de-linking issues and drawing boundaries' as the first preferred solution to the role conflict. To improve the interaction between work and family, most of the respondents emphasized the importance of not bringing work problems home and vice versa. They also showed a strong desire for en-

couraging flexible work system. They feel that a favourable attitude of the husband, other members of the family, colleagues

and employers would, to a large extent, help them in striking out a balance between the two roles.

Table 4: Suggested Solutions for Adjustment

S.No.	Alternatives	Priority			Total Score	%age of max. possible score
		I	II	III		
1.	Delinking issues & drawing boundaries	38	48	19	229	38.17
2.	Encouraging flexible work system	36	40	28	216	36.00
3.	Favourable attitude of peers & supervisors	36	35	25	203	33.83
4.	Favorable attitude of husband and in-laws	16	28	28	132	22.00
5.	Educating women about their rights	15	16	27	104	17.33
6.	Changing gender based division of labour	12	9	18	72	12.00
7.	Limiting the family size	10	8	14	60	10.00
8.	Launching of government schemes	9	9	12	57	9.50
9.	Increasing self-employment	9	2	15	46	7.67
10.	Changing the secondary status of women	9	2	6	28	4.67

Educating women about their rights is also expected to go a long way in achieving this goal. Others favoured changing the sexual division of labour as the essence for a balanced interaction between the two domains. A large section of respondents argue that the government can provide a wide range of working arrangements to enable their female employees to accommodate changing family patterns. The family-friendly work values should be introduced which would ultimately help in changing the male standard of work. Provision of career adaptation schemes and childcare facilities can be a fundamental action in dealing with this problem. For any effective change, it is also imperative to improve the secondary status occupied by women today.

A further analysis of the data reveals that a clear-cut distinction between the

home and work, which many of the respondents maintained, relieved them of much of the worry and strain. While at work they gave up themselves completely to their duties and back home they transformed themselves into busy housewives and mothers. Working women need support at home and a mentor in the work setting. Husband being a partner in all walks of life, his behavior was of much importance in resolving conflicts and performance of dual roles by women. It was found that a large number of women (46%) consider that their husbands appreciated their wives for carrying both the roles and encouraged them to do well in jobs. The present findings also lend credence to previous research findings that have found social support to be significantly associated with work-family conflict (Adebayo 2006).

Conclusion & Suggestions

World over a dual-career woman faces the obvious dilemma of work-family conflict. As a mother-wife, she must conform to the traditional ideal of a hard-working woman ready to subjugate her own interests to family's happiness and in her occupational role she must be result-oriented, independent, persistent and innovative. The domestic role of a woman requires a co-operative attitude as against the competitive spirit demanded by the work role. Thus, two polarized roles may arise due to conflicts in obligations, attachments, and desires and so on relative to one's domestic network on the one hand and work associated on the other. The loyalties, interests and aims differ between home and work place and demand two different types of individualities from women.

To successfully pursue her dual roles, the working homemaker has to work within a strict time schedule and arrange things more systematically which itself necessitates greater mental and physical alertness. Coupled with her interaction with the outside working world, it induces changes in her behaviour, perception and life style. She is likely to become more rational, pragmatic and individualistic in her outlook which may lead to changes in her work-division, marital relationship, and relations with in-laws and authority patterns within the family. A woman's employment out side home implies two things; her decreased availability to others and also increased demands placed upon others to enable successful performance of

her two roles. In case of conflict between the job and the home roles, it is mostly the job role that gets curtailed while the wife-mother role always predominates. How rich or poor a woman may be, her primary role is towards husband, home and children. Some women do not want to sacrifice their profession to the family because of their high socio-economic status, strong job-commitment and high degree of independence but such cases are found to be rare in our study. Normally the geographical and professional mobility of women is very limited in Kashmir because of the family bonds.

Despite obstacles, a satisfying balance between work and family life is achievable.

Despite obstacles, a satisfying balance between work and family life is achievable. To find workable solutions communication with superiors, peers and subordinates in the work situation and with family members needs to be strengthened. Women are indeed a 'special needs' segment for which customized solutions are to be looked for such as flexible working hours, transportation, housing, childcare facilities and part-time employment opportunities. For this the rules of the workplace need to be adequately overhauled and also changes need to be brought about outside the workplace in the form of increased support from spouses, families and legislation. A wife, by virtue of her employment and economic independence, should also avoid playing the so-called "male-role" at home. As long as

wife does not attempt to establish superiority over the husband and make undue demands on him, as long as the dominant position of the husband in the family is not questioned, as long as the woman does not place career above her family roles, the extra burden for the woman through profession may not lead to open conflicts.

Working women must understand that opportunities will not land in their laps. They have to create them and if need be fight for them. If women have the drive, efficiency and single-minded devotion to their career, they can overcome the barriers to the top. They should understand that 'women' and 'profession' are not two mutually exclusive terms. A woman can be a home maker and a professional at the same time and she should be proud of being both. Empowerment and opportunities, education and encouragement by family members, supportive husbands and in-laws make for a seamless transition to a status where she commands both respect and admiration.

Since the role conflict problems are living and dynamic in nature, there can be no final and permanent solution to these problems. As more and more women would be adding on a new role to the traditional role of a home maker, the incidence of different types of role conflict would be more common in future. There is therefore, always need for further research in the area so as to bring out, from time to time, the factors responsible for the role conflict situation and work out coping up and accommodation strategies. Future research could be aimed at the

further development of the forms of role conflict, their operationalisation, examination of the extent of each and determination of their causes and consequences. For follow up research, the present pilot study could be expanded to cover unmarried women and unemployed mothers. It would be rewarding to examine some comparisons in the work-family interface using more objective indices.

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