

Balancing Work and Family: Lived Experiences of Professional Working Mothers at Institutions of Higher Education

Siti Kamalia Sabri^{1*}, Syarifah Rohaniah Bt Syed Mahmood²

¹Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA,
UiTM Puncak Alam Campus, 42300, Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
sitikamalia@uitm.edu.my

² Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM),
Jalan Sungai Pusu, 53100, Selangor, Malaysia
rohaniah@iium.edu.my

*Corresponding Author

<https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v21i3.44>

Received: 31 December 2024

Accepted: 3 February 2025

Date Published Online: 1 October 2025

Published: 1 October 2025

Abstract: Democratization in the education system and changes in social norms significantly expanded the roles of women in Malaysia. As the nation modernized, professional working mothers faced escalating demands, highlighting the necessity for a deeper understanding of the work-family dynamic. Balancing professional and domestic roles often resulted in work-family conflict, where competing demands were incompatible. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of professional working mothers at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). In-depth interviews were conducted with six (6) informants selected through the snowball sampling technique. The data were analyzed using Atlas.ti 9 and van Kaam method was modified, which included seven steps such as horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing invariant constituents, validating themes, and constructing textual-structural descriptions. The findings revealed five themes related to lived experiences of the professional working mothers such as setting priorities, facing challenges and expectations, compromise, family management, and work management. The researcher provided several recommendations for future research that could be expanded including adopting qualitative phenomenological approaches to better capture nuanced experiences, promoting flexible workplace policies to support work-family balance, and developing tailored mental health interventions focusing on emotional regulation, self-care, and stress management. These findings provide crucial methodological and practical insights, contributing to future research and the development of effective support systems for professional working mothers.

Keywords: Balancing, Higher education, Lived Experiences, Work and Family, Working Mothers

1. Introduction

The lived experiences of professional working mothers balancing work and family roles have emerged significant scholarly attention, particularly due to their impact on mental health and overall well-being. Work-family balance is essential for ensuring psychological harmony and fostering personal and professional satisfaction (Bataineh, 2019). However, for professional working mothers, navigating the dual responsibilities of career and family often involves unique psychological dynamics shaped by societal, cultural, and personal factors.

In Malaysia, the increasing participation of women in the workforce underscores the importance of understanding the psychological aspects of work-family balance. Women constitute nearly half of the population, and their workforce participation has risen significantly over the years (Ming, 2022).

Democratization in the education system and changes in social norms significantly expanded the roles of women in Malaysia. As the nation modernized, professional working mothers faced escalating demands, highlighting the necessity for a deeper understanding of the work-family dynamic. Balancing professional and domestic roles often resulted in work-family conflict, where competing demands were incompatible.

Lived experiences, such as stress, role overload, and emotional strain, are common among professional working mothers due to their competing responsibilities. The intersection of professional and familial roles frequently leads to internal conflicts and feelings of guilt, particularly when one role appears to undermine the other (Nair et al., 2020). Furthermore, the psychological burden of maintaining harmony between work and family responsibilities can manifest in reduced mental well-being and heightened vulnerability to anxiety and depression (Dorenkamp & Süß, 2017).

In the Malaysian context, cultural and societal expectations add a unique dimension to these lived experiences. Professional working mothers often navigate a dual identity as career-oriented individuals and primary caregivers within a framework of traditional gender norms. These expectations, coupled with the pressures of professional performance, contribute to a complex psychological landscape that warrants further exploration (Arham et al., 2019).

Many studies on work-family balance have largely focused on dual-earner families and the general workforce, with an emphasis on challenges such as work-family conflict (WFC), role overload, and stress (Nair et al., 2020). Similarly, other research has explored the impact of workplace policies and family dynamics on women in developed nations, providing a broad understanding of work-family balance (Zhou et al., 2018). However, there is a significant gap in the literature addressing the unique experiences of Muslim professional working mothers in Malaysia, particularly within educational settings. The sociocultural and religious framework of Malaysia, characterized by traditional gender norms, societal expectations, and Islamic values, compounds the complexity of balancing professional and domestic responsibilities (Arham et al., 2019). These factors necessitate a more focused exploration of the unique challenges faced by this demographic.

Despite the growing body of research on work-family conflict, local studies specific to the Malaysian context, especially those involving Muslim professional working mothers, remain limited. This lack of research undermines efforts to develop culturally sensitive and effective interventions tailored to the needs of this group. Moreover, professional working mothers in Malaysia often face additional challenges, such as entrenched traditional roles, limited institutional support, and rigid workplace policies, which exacerbate work-family imbalance (Sequerah et al., 2019; Jayasingam et al., 2023). Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap by exploring the lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of Muslim professional working mothers in Malaysia, with a particular focus on those in the educational sector. By addressing these issues, the study aims to contribute to the development of targeted interventions and policies that support work-family balance while enhancing the well-being of this underrepresented group.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of professional working mothers at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). By delving into the psychological dimensions of work-family balance, the research seeks to enhance understanding of the internal experiences shaping the lives of professional working mothers and to provide insights into their mental well-being.

2. Literature Review

The lived experiences of professional working mothers encompass various emotional, cognitive, and mental challenges arising from their dual roles in work and family life (citation). Balancing these responsibilities often results in significant psychological strain, including stress, anxiety, and emotional conflict (Bataineh, 2019). A study by Khan et al. (2023) explored the dual responsibilities faced by women teachers, noting that their efforts to share financial responsibilities often resulted in additional stressors. The study emphasized the importance of work-family balance in fostering both personal and professional success, suggesting that access to education and training can enhance women's capacity to navigate lived challenges.

The phenomenon of work-family conflict frequently emerges when competing demands from professional and familial roles are incompatible, resulting in feelings of guilt and role overload. Nair et al. (2020) argued that professional working mothers often face emotional strain due to their inability to meet the expectations of both roles simultaneously. The psychological toll of this conflict can manifest in

reduced mental well-being, heightened anxiety, and susceptibility to depression. Similarly, Dorenkamp and Süß (2017) identified emotional exhaustion and burnout as common outcomes of work-family imbalance, further emphasizing the need to address the lived burden associated with dual roles.

Cultural and societal norms play a significant role in shaping the lived experiences of professional working mothers, particularly in Malaysia. Arham et al. (2019) highlighted the interplay between traditional gender expectations and professional responsibilities, illustrating the internal conflicts faced by women attempting to reconcile these roles. The study revealed that professional working mothers often navigate a dual identity, balancing the demands of career aspirations with the cultural expectation of being the primary caregiver. This duality frequently leads to feelings of inadequacy and emotional stress, further complicating their lived experiences. Adisa, Aiyenitaju, and Adekoya (2021) explored the impact of patriarchy on work-family balance, revealing that traditional gender roles exacerbate psychological stress among professional working mothers. The findings demonstrated that women in patriarchal societies often lack spousal support, which compounds their psychological challenges. For instance, one participant noted:

“Most of the time, I’m stressed – as a doctor after an extremely demanding day at work [...] My husband sometimes feels my profession is overbearing because I don’t get to cook his meals and look after our children, which is expected as the first responsibility of a woman in our society” (Doctor 15, p. 1007). These narratives underscore the societal pressures that perpetuate emotional strain among professional working mothers, highlighting the need for systemic change to alleviate these psychological burdens.

The health implications of work-family conflict are another critical aspect of the psychological experiences of professional working mothers. Deshmukh (2018) reported that high job demands, including long working hours and tight deadlines, led to increased anxiety and depression among 75% of female employees surveyed. Similarly, Dizaho and Abdullah (2016) found that 36% of respondents experienced high levels of depressed mood, which negatively impacted their motivation and professional development. These findings suggest that the psychological consequences of work-family conflict extend beyond emotional well-being, influencing professional growth and career satisfaction.

Moreover, research indicates that behavioral conflict often arises from the psychological strain experienced by professional working mothers. After long or challenging workdays, individuals may exhibit irritability and frustration, which can disrupt family dynamics (Dizaho & Abdullah, 2016). For instance, a mother’s negative experiences at work may lead to strained interactions with her children, further amplifying feelings of guilt and emotional distress.

The current study is grounded in phenomenological philosophy, which emphasizes the exploration of lived experiences to uncover the essence and meaning of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This theoretical lens does not seek to explain or predict outcomes but rather to understand participants’ subjective experiences as they are lived. The study is particularly informed by transcendental phenomenology, which involves bracketing prior assumptions and engaging in epoché to prioritize the voices of informants. This approach aligns with the objective of the present study, which is to explore the essential psychological and emotional structures underlying the experience of balancing work and family roles as a professional working mother.

3. Methodology

This study has employed a qualitative approach to achieve its research objectives. The subsequent subsections provide an in-depth discussion of this approach.

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of professional working mothers balancing work and family responsibilities within Malaysian institutions of higher education. A phenomenological approach was adopted to understand the essence of participants’ experiences, focusing on their psychological, emotional, and social dimensions (Van Manen, 2023). In-depth interviews were conducted, allowing participants to share their narratives in their own words, facilitating the identification of patterns and themes. This approach ensured a culturally and contextually grounded understanding of their challenges and coping mechanisms (Yin, 2016).

3.2 Population and sample study

The study focused on professional working mothers employed as lecturers in Malaysian public universities, specifically Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA, and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit six (6) informants who met the inclusion criteria, such as being Muslim and experienced in balancing work and family responsibilities, working at an institution of higher education (IHE) in Peninsular Malaysia, and agreed to participate in the study. Data saturation was achieved with this sample size, aligning with recommendations for phenomenological research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.3 Demographics of informants

Table 1 illustrates the demographic profiles of professional working mothers who participated in this study, emphasizing key aspects of their personal, educational, and professional backgrounds. The informants, all married Muslim women aged between 37 and 56 years, demonstrated diverse experiences in balancing family and career responsibilities. Their years of marriage ranged from 8 to 33 years, and they had between 2 and 5 children. Academically, the informants possessed advanced qualifications, including master's degrees and PhDs, in areas such as Educational Psychology, Instructional Technology, and Early Childhood Parenting. Professionally, they served as lecturers in institutions of higher education (IHE), assuming leadership roles such as department heads and program coordinators, with work experience spanning 7 to 24 years. The informants' spouses worked in various professions, including civil engineering, journalism, and law enforcement, further adding to the dynamic nature of their family lives.

Table 1

Demographic Profiles of Informants

Pseudonym	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Age	44	44	56	42	37	40
Marital status	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married
Religion	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam
Years of marriage	13 years	12 years	33 years	9 years	11 years	8 years
Number of Kids	3 (2 boys, 1 girl)	2 daughters	4 (2 boys, 2 girls)	2 daughters	5 (3 boys, 2 girls)	3 daughters
Educational background	Master in Educational Psychology	PhD in Instructional Technology	PhD in Educational Psychology	PhD in Early Childhood (Parenting)	PhD in Anthropology	PhD in Psychology
Job titles	Lecturer, IHE	Lecturer, IHE	Lecturer, IHE	Lecturer, IHE	Lecturer, IHE	Lecturer, IHE
Years of working experiences	10 years	10 years	24 years	16 years	9 years	7 years
Additional post	Coordinator Practicum	Coordinator E-learning and Mooc	Head of Department, Faculty	Head of Department, Faculty	Head of Department, Faculty	-
State	Selangor	Negeri Sembilan	Johor	Selangor	Terengganu	Kedah
Spouse Career	Pegawai Tadbir Diplomatik	Mechanical Engineering Worker	Civil engineer	Journalist	Police	Self-employed

3.4 Instruments

The table 2 below signifies the set of interview protocols:

Table 2

List of Interview Protocols

No.	Questions
1	What does work-family balance mean to you?
2	Why are women involved in work-family balance?
3	In your opinion, can work-family balance be handled equally? If yes, how? / Why not?
4	Tell me your story/experience as a parent/wife while having another role in hand. How do you handle this?
5	Tell me your story/experience as a worker while having another role in hand. How do you handle this?

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument, offering flexibility to explore informants' experiences deeply. Open-ended questions guided the discussions, with probes used to clarify responses and uncover emerging themes. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve authenticity. Member checking, expert validation and clarification bias were employed to enhance trustworthiness, while a demographic survey provided contextual background on informants' professional and personal lives, complementing the qualitative data.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Atlas. ti 9, following the modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994). This method includes seven structured steps, such as Horizontalization, where all relevant statements from the interview transcripts were treated with equal importance. Reduction and elimination, statements that were irrelevant, repetitive, or unclear were removed. Clustering and thematizing, the selected statements were grouped into clusters based on similar meanings. Validation of themes, each theme was reviewed against the original transcript to ensure accuracy. Textural description, a description was written for each participant to explain what they experienced. Structural description, This step explained how the experience happened by looking at the conditions that influenced it. Finally, textural-structural description, the textural and structural descriptions were combined to describe the overall meaning of the experience, from both the personal and shared perspectives. This approach helped ensure the analysis remained close to the informant's lived experiences and produced rich, in-depth findings. To ensure the trustworthiness of these findings, several validation strategies were employed. To ensure methodological rigor, this study adhered to trustworthiness criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Expert validation was conducted where two domain experts independently assessed 47 pages of coded data encompassing 13 themes using a structured rubric. Inter-rater agreement rates of 89.47% and 100% yielded an average reliability score of 94.73% (Ozcan, 2021). Member checking was also employed, whereby the list of codes and relevant quotations were shared with participants via email for verification and feedback. Revisions were made accordingly to maintain alignment with informants' intended meanings (Amin et al., 2020; Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the researcher maintained reflexive journaling and consciously bracketed personal biases, reflecting her insider positionality as a working mother.

4. Findings

From the analysis, five themes emerged in describing the lived experiences of professional working mothers at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). The themes are presented and discussed below:

4.1 Lived experiences

4.1.1 Setting priorities

The first emerging theme is setting priorities, which is pivotal in understanding how professional working mothers navigate their dual responsibilities. Five informants, each with unique experiences, shed light on how they balance the demands of their careers with the needs of their families.

P1/DU39 shared:

"We are talking about my late 20s and early 30s, right? So, maybe our priorities were different, and we were struggling to establish our careers. I think I felt that way due to my age and maybe because of my experience abroad. I've changed my expectations because I feel that now, I'm setting clearer boundaries and deciding how much of my time to give. When I was younger, if there was a project, I would give 100%—all in. I'm not saying I'm not giving my best now, but I don't want to be involved in too many things. When people ask me to take on work, I'm more inclined to say no. In fact, last semester was the first time I ever said no to any work-related task."

P2/DU82 reflected:

"In the past, I used to bring work home. By doing so, I neglected my responsibilities as a wife and a mother. That became a turning point for me, realizing that my working hours should only be from 9 to 5. Work needs boundaries. When I'm with my children, I have to stop thinking about work and focus entirely on them."

P4/DU7 discussed:

"Balancing two different aspects—work and family—is quite challenging. We must decide which one to prioritise. Sometimes, we need to prioritise family, especially when a family member is unwell, and work must take a backseat. On the other hand, work is also important because it demands time and attention, which often requires us to sacrifice family needs. As a working mother, my husband and I communicate with each other to navigate such moments."

P5/DU11 emphasised:

"For me, balance is about managing time between work and family. In the morning, it's time for work, so I focus on that. But once work ends after 5 PM, I focus entirely on my family. It's about dividing time and attention between family and career. Family comes first, but without work, how would we support our family."

P6/DU8 explained:

"I consider myself a family-oriented woman because, throughout my career, I rarely bring work home. For me, once I'm home, I just want to spend time with my children and husband, cook for them, and handle other family matters. Even when I do bring work home, it's usually something very light."

Moreover, two informants shift the discussion to another element, which requirement for women to balance work and family, and the level of support as a critical factor in achieving work-life balance.

P3/DU11 clarified:

"Work-life balance, for me as a working mother and wife, is essential to managing both work and family. It's very important to handle both in a way that keeps us as stress-free as possible."

P3/DU39 explained:

"Right now, I'm still trying to find a work-life balance. I think the level of support you have plays a significant role in achieving that. When my kids were younger, my two boys, we lived with my parents. We had our routine, and they had theirs. My parents helped a lot with taking care of my kids. Honestly, I didn't face any issues returning to work after giving birth, even though I was busy and often came home late. My husband was also busy with his work in tourism, often travelling abroad. The support system back then made a big difference in how much balance I felt and how much I could focus on work. Now, things are different because we're living in our own house, without my parents' support. It's challenging, but I'm grateful for what we have, even though it's not the same level of support."

In conclusion, the theme of setting priorities illustrates the experiences that professional working mothers employ to navigate the dual roles of their work and families. The insights shared by the five informants reveal that this process is dynamic and personalised, with factors such as age, experience, work-family boundaries, expectations, time management, and support systems playing pivotal roles. The informants' reflections, including the evolution of priorities over time and the necessity of clear distinctions between work and home responsibilities, underscore the challenges of balancing these competing roles.

4.1.2 Challenges and Expectations

The second theme delves into the challenges and expectations faced by professional working mothers, with six informants sharing their insights on societal norms, cultural expectations, and financial independence.

P1/DU43 highlighted:

"There are certain things that cannot be replaced and are tied to our responsibilities. A child is generally more comfortable with the mother, as the mother tends to be more attentive. If my child is sick, I am the one who loses sleep. This does not mean my husband is not fair—he contributes significantly. However, as women, we often experience guilt and feel the need to perform perfectly in all our roles. Being a career woman is exhausting because we have KPIs at work, and at home, there are no formal KPIs. Instead, we know our responsibilities and strive to spend quality time with our children, understanding them and observing them. I feel I missed out on some of this with my sons, as I now realise when raising my daughter. We don't even have a home of our own. Work-life balance is essential for women because, even though my husband contributes a lot, I do not place expectations on him."

P1/DU125 explained:

"Logically, women are typically the ones managing children, caring for them, preparing breakfast, sending them to school, going to work, attending classes, and so on. Ideally, the child should be close to the mother's workplace to ensure immediate care if something happens. At the same time, women aim to fulfil their professional responsibilities. In most cases, the mother handles everything. If the husband's workplace is nearby, it's manageable, but if it's far, it adds to the burden. A mother's mind is naturally more focused on her children. She wants to ensure her child safely gets to and from school while also balancing her role as a professional."

Meanwhile, the conversation shifted to cultural expectations and societal pressures as P3/DU15 said:

"In our society, especially, women face additional expectations as wives and mothers, particularly within Islamic contexts, where there is greater responsibility toward husbands and children. This is different from men, whose primary role is often limited to working. This reflects an older societal

expectation where men worked, and women stayed at home."

P4/DU11 added the importance of society's expectations and individual commitment:

"Firstly, there is society's expectation, and secondly, individual commitment. When I pursued my first degree, I aimed for a stable career and personal growth. Once we achieve these goals, fulfilling parental expectations such as getting married becomes a priority. This is why women tend to be more involved in balancing responsibilities compared to men."

P5/DU15 agreed about emphasizing societal perspectives:

"This largely depends on the perspectives of the people around us. We must understand that we live in a Malay society, not a Western country. Regardless of how high-ranking a woman's position might be—whether as a director or in another prominent role—once she gets home, she automatically becomes a housewife. This sociological expectation is inescapable."

Meanwhile, P6/DU16 shared her spouse's thoughts on contributing to society after completing her PhD:

"My husband says that I have something valuable to contribute to society. He doesn't pressure me but offers suggestions. By coincidence, a friend called about a job vacancy. I discussed it with my husband, and he encouraged me to try it. However, if you ask me what I truly want, I would choose to be a housewife because I don't want anyone else raising my children. Being from Sabah, if I were to work here, I would need to relocate. My in-laws once suggested, 'Leave your children here, and you go to work.' But I said no—'Let their father stay, but my children will stay with me.'"

Finally, P1/DU47 also added the importance of financial independence:

"I believe financial freedom and having social connections are essential. My husband is not a millionaire, and I have my own financial commitments and loans to manage. I need to finance those and maintain financial independence to do the things I want. When I was a housewife abroad, I felt constrained because I didn't have my own income to make decisions, even for simple things like groceries. Financial independence is important, as is having friends at work and some 'me time,' even amid the busyness."

In conclusion, the theme of challenges and expectations underscores the experiences of professional working mothers as they navigate the intersection of cultural norms, societal expectations, and financial independence. The results indicate diverse perspectives on the internal and external challenges that influenced the experiences of six informants. Emotional and psychological burdens often arise from the pressure to conform to societal standards, while cultural expectations significantly influence the balance between professional and personal roles. The conflict between societal expectations and personal responsibilities further complicates matters and is further exacerbated by the influence of overarching social assessments, particularly regarding the significance attributed to societal efforts after achieving high academic qualifications. Financial independence seems to be a crucial factor in managing these limitations.

4.1.3 Compromise

The third theme focuses on the experience of professional working mothers who must compromise. Six informants shared their experiences of balancing professional and family life through both personal negotiation and dual negotiation.

The compromises of a personal negotiation with their feelings start with P1/DU51 explaining:

"I'm not sure if I can handle it equally or perfectly. There will always be compromises. I know it's

not always going to be balanced because you will struggle with it. But I think that's normal. Sometimes, we need to sacrifice more for either work or home, especially when our children are sick. In such cases, I tend to take more days off and stay at home when they're unwell. Sometimes, you're not even fully aware—you just do whatever you can."

P3/DU23 added:

"Yes, if both spouses can compromise. If the husband allows the wife to work, then let her work. But the wife also has to manage the family. However, the husband must also contribute to family management. If the wife is working but has to handle the entire family on her own, it becomes an extra burden for her."

P4/DU15 also added:

"It can be managed equally if you have an understanding spouse. It really depends on the situation and the spouse's attitude."

On the other hand, P5/DU19 discussed how cultural expectations influence the distribution of responsibilities, particularly in traditional societies:

"It's often not balanced because we still hold onto traditional customs, especially in the East Coast areas like Kelantan and Terengganu, where traditional gender roles are still strong. Women are still expected to handle housework. Although there are some people who have shifted to modern lifestyles where men also contribute to housework, this isn't the norm in these regions."

Furthermore, P2/DU130 discussed how she approaches this balance by accepting her roles voluntarily, which helps maintain a positive mindset:

"It's possible. First, as a woman, you need to approach your responsibilities voluntarily. If you do things begrudgingly, negativity will take over. When you act out of obligation, it creates a fake mindset that affects everything—your relationships at home, with your children, at work, and even your physical health. However, if you accept your responsibilities willingly, you'll be more capable. For example, I would find a school near my workplace and select clinics close to home for convenience, just in case something happens. Once I take on that responsibility, I manage everything from A to Z because I see it as my duty. If I approach it voluntarily, I remain positive. Every action and intention are an act of worship. With proper planning, you can manage both work and family effectively."

P6/DU20 further elaborated that achieving balance is not about an even split but rather managing each role without one negatively impacting the other:

"For me, balance isn't about a 50-50 split. It's about being able to manage your work without it interfering with family life and managing your family without it disrupting your work. I think this is achievable. What I mean is that we complete our responsibilities at work, such as teaching, to the best of our ability, not just doing the bare minimum. Work is our livelihood, so we must give it our best. But when we're at home, we fulfil our roles as mothers and wives just as wholeheartedly. The second factor is having a good support system. Whether it's coworkers, family, a husband, or children, it's important not to favour one over the other, such as prioritizing colleagues over family." [English Translation]

In conclusion, theme three highlights the experiences of six informants as they navigate compromises between their professional and family roles. Personal and dual negotiations shape this process. The findings illustrate how these professional working mothers manage competing demands, with some reflecting on the internal struggle of balancing various roles and others emphasizing the importance of mutual understanding and support from their spouses. Cultural expectations also emerge

as a significant factor influencing the distribution of responsibilities, particularly within traditional societies.

4.1.4 Family Management

In the fourth theme, family management, six informants discuss the sacrifices they make and the support they receive from their spouses as they manage their homes and careers. It encompasses the daily tasks and responsibilities associated with running a household.

P1/DU55 discussed:

"Sometimes I get upset because I can't complete my work as I spend a lot of time with my children, especially when they are small. I had no problems with my two elder children, but with my youngest, I really enjoyed watching her grow. She often wants to play with me, but sometimes I can't make the time. I hope I am a good wife. When it comes to family, I always prioritise his side of the family. I often take days off to attend his family's events like weddings and gatherings. Every Hari Raya Haji, we always return to his hometown, while for Hari Raya Puasa, we take turns. I feel like I've made sacrifices for his family, though not significant ones just trying to prioritise his side."

P2/DU137 discussed:

"If I have to bring work home, I make sure to fulfil my children's needs first, ensuring they've gone to sleep and so on. I handle their daily routines first, like making sure they eat, drink, and pray. I arrange their schedules and ensure everything is in order before I get to my work."

P3/DU31 shared:

"I had to make a big decision. I decided to stop working and stay home to take care of the children because, at that time, my job wasn't permanent. My husband told me I could return to work once our youngest started first grade. Alhamdulillah, that made things less stressful. When it came to school, we made it a principle to choose one close to home. That way, if there's no issue, we can easily pick them up. If my mom is available, she can help, or they can even walk home. Previously, I faced some challenges when my children needed to come home from school while I was still at work. I used to wonder how parents managed when their children needed to come home and they weren't around. Ironically, I ended up facing the same situation."

P4/DU19 also emphasised:

"It depends on where we are at that moment. For instance, if I'm at home, even if there's important work to do, I need to put it aside. Family comes first."

Meanwhile, P5/DU23 stressed her need:

"Husbands and children need to understand that the wife also has responsibilities at the office. For example, sometimes during weekends, my husband suggests visiting his hometown. There needs to be tolerance and understanding between both parties. Wives often understand when their husbands are busy with work, but there are husbands who don't understand when their wives are busy. So, compromise and mutual understanding are essential."

Finally, one informant highlighted the importance of having a support system, especially in situations where work demands attention while at home:

P6/DU24 highlighted:

"It really depends on the situation. For instance, if I'm at work, attending a meeting or a conference, I make it a point to get updates from my husband about what the children are doing—whether they've eaten and so on. I don't neglect my responsibilities as a mother, even when I'm engaged in work-related tasks like meetings or conferences."

In conclusion, the fourth theme, Family Management, highlights the delicate balance that professional working mothers must maintain between managing their careers and fulfilling their family roles. The common experiences underscore personal sacrifices, including prioritizing familial needs and making challenging decisions, such as temporarily withdrawing from employment to concentrate on family. The theme also illustrates how external factors, such as physical context, can influence which responsibilities take precedence at any given time.

4.1.5 Work Management

The fifth theme, work management, emphasises the challenges faced by professional working mothers in managing their careers and maintaining their homes. These challenges include financial support, children who arrive late or are absent, staying late at work, making sacrifices and seeking assistance, and the issue of privacy. This theme encompasses the daily tasks and responsibilities associated with work-related matters. Six informants shared their concerns about various aspects of their work management.

P1/DU55 discussed how she balances her role as a financial supporter to her spouse and children with the challenges of incomplete work tasks:

"As a wife, parent, and worker, I believe I fulfil my roles effectively in one way by contributing financially to the household. I can support my husband and provide for my children by affording certain things, such as stationery or other items they need. However, sometimes I feel upset because I am unable to complete my work as I dedicate much of my time to my children, especially when they were younger."

Next, P2/DU139 talked about how her work responsibilities sometimes interfere with her ability to manage her children's school schedules:

"My experience as a worker and lecturer involves teaching in classes and mentoring students, ranging from undergraduates to those completing their PhDs. This includes supporting them with tasks like handling presentations, preparing for their viva, and so on. At times, this has resulted in late school drop-offs for my children or even my inability to attend certain events."

Meanwhile, P3/DU35 shared her experience of staying late at work and the impact it had on her family.

"My workload is substantial, and there are times when I have to stay late at the office, sometimes returning home at 6 or 7 p.m. However, this occurred mainly after my children grew older. During the first eight years, when my children were younger, I faced much more stress. Now that they are older, they understand when I come home late. They can manage themselves well and refrain from engaging in inappropriate activities. They are independent, and we monitor their movements effectively. Additionally, when I go on outstation trips, my husband takes over the house management without issue."

After that, P4/DU19 discussed the need for flexibility in managing work tasks and the importance of seeking assistance, especially when children's needs arise:

"We can manage additional tasks only after completing the immediate work in front of us. This, of

course, requires sacrifice and energy. However, if something urgent arises while we are at work, we can always seek assistance."

P6/DU24 concerning the importance of seeking assistance:

"If my children are unwell and need to be taken to the clinic, I usually ask a colleague to take notes on important points during meetings. So far, this arrangement has worked well, alhamdulillah."

Additionally, P5/DU23 highlighted about lack of privacy that she faced:

"The intrusion of work into our home life can sometimes be disrespectful to our privacy. For example, having WhatsApp access at home makes it easy for people to contact us at night. This can disrupt our emotions and the attention we give to our children. When I want to spend time with my children, I often receive work-related WhatsApp messages, which is frustrating."

In conclusion, the fifth theme, Work Management, explores the multifaceted challenges professional working mothers face in balancing the demands of their careers with their home roles. The six informants shared a range of experiences that highlight the complexities of this balancing act, including the financial support role that some mothers assume, often at the expense of completing work tasks. They also discussed the difficulties in managing children's schedules, such as school arrivals or absences, and the strain of staying late at work, which further impacts family dynamics. The need for flexibility and seeking assistance emerged as a critical strategy for managing work-related tasks, especially when family obligations demand immediate attention.

5. Discussion

This study explores the psychological experiences of professional working mothers in Malaysia, with a specific focus on the role of prioritization as a critical strategy for managing the dual responsibilities of work and family life. The findings indicate that prioritization is essential for mitigating burnout and maintaining psychological well-being, as it allows mothers to effectively navigate the demands of both career and caregiving roles (Valizadeh et al., 2018; Sabri et al., 2023). Notably, prioritization strategies evolve across different life stages, reflecting a dynamic shift in work-family strategies. This evolution is consistent with the work of Talukder et al. (2018) and Dousin et al. (2022), who emphasize the influence of societal structures and cultural norms in shaping caregiving roles. In Malaysia, caregiving responsibilities are significantly shaped by patriarchal values, which were evident in the experiences shared by informants in this study. These informants described the negotiation of roles within their households, the importance of spousal and extended family support, and the adaptation to societal expectations, which mirrors findings from Adisa et al. (2021) and Valizadeh et al. (2018).

The findings further reveal a complex interaction between individual agency and societal norms, particularly in navigating cultural constraints. While some of the findings align with Vayre and Vonthron (2019) regarding shared financial responsibilities, the current study uniquely contributes to the understanding of how Malaysian mothers exercise agency within a collectivist framework, facilitating their navigation through societal and cultural pressures. This insight offers a deeper understanding of how these mothers balance their professional and familial obligations in the Malaysian context, adding a unique contribution to the global discourse on work-family balance.

Additionally, the study reveals that the psychological experiences of professional working mothers are influenced by societal norms, cultural expectations, and their pursuit of financial independence. Many informants discussed the emotional burdens they face, such as guilt and exhaustion, stemming from the societal pressure to excel in both their career and caregiving roles. This aligns with previous research by Ho et al. (2024), who similarly discussed the emotional challenges faced by working mothers. However, the findings also contrast with Salleh & Sheikh (2021), who attribute women's empowerment to democratized education and shifting social norms. The findings of this study highlight a paradox: despite significant socio-economic changes, traditional gender roles persist, demonstrating the ongoing influence of societal expectations as noted by Singh and Singhal (2016). In contrast, the study also found that financial independence serves as a pathway to empowerment for working mothers, enabling greater

autonomy within restrictive cultural frameworks. This theme emphasizes how Malaysian mothers navigate societal expectations through individual strategies and cultural adaptations, offering culturally specific insights into their experiences.

The theme of compromise emerged as a critical factor in the emotional, practical, and cultural dimensions of balancing career and family roles. Informants shared that managing inter-role conflicts required substantial personal negotiations and sacrifices, which resonates with Nair et al. (2020). A key finding of this study is the role of spousal understanding and negotiation, which, rather than mere redistribution of duties, emerged as central to successful work-family management. This finding reflects a shift in marital dynamics, with both spouses negotiating their roles more actively. Cultural expectations, especially in traditional Malaysian settings, continue to position women as primary household managers, which aligns with Adisa et al. (2021). However, the study also highlights incremental shifts toward shared responsibilities, indicating the evolving nature of family roles. The concept of dual negotiation, wherein women voluntarily adapt their strategies in response to work-family demands, introduces new perspectives on agency and self-determination, offering a contrast to Western-centric research on workplace flexibility.

Family management also surfaced as a central theme in this study, with informants highlighting the sacrifices and support systems that shape their psychological experiences. For instance, many mothers reported prioritizing familial obligations, such as attending events for their husband's family, which aligns with Latip et al. (2022). However, this study also underscores the emotional toll these sacrifices take on mothers, a dimension less explored in prior research. The daily challenges of managing both work and childcare were accentuated by societal expectations in Malaysia, which place a significant burden on women, as observed by Wiens et al. (2023). The importance of spousal and extended family support also emerged as critical in easing caregiving burdens, which is a perspective often absent in Western-centric literature, such as Salleh and Sheikh (2021). Career interruptions due to caregiving responsibilities were noted, highlighting the role of caregiving as both a moral and familial duty within Malaysian cultural norms. These findings are consistent with the works of Kerrane et al. (2022) and Harkness (2022), but offer a deeper cultural understanding of how these norms influence work-family dynamics.

Work management was another prominent theme, with the study revealing that financial strain significantly contributes to work-family conflict. Informants reported that financial pressures are particularly acute when children are younger, but tend to lessen as children grow older and become more independent. This finding offers a dynamic perspective on work-family conflict, in contrast to previous studies such as Martucci (2023), which emphasized the persistent nature of financial stress. Informants also highlighted the critical role of support systems, including workplace flexibility and extended family networks, in facilitating a balance between work and family. Malaysian mothers in particular rely on a collectivist cultural framework to manage their roles, which contrasts with Western-centric studies that emphasize spousal support Salleh & Sheikh, (2021). The intrusion of technology into personal life, particularly for mothers in leadership roles, also emerged as a significant challenge, blurring the boundaries between work and family life, as noted by Felstead and Henseke (2017) and Mols and Pridmore (2021). Informants shared instances where family emergencies took precedence over professional obligations, reflecting the agency and adaptability required to manage competing demands. This theme contributes to the growing discourse on the evolving nature of work-family conflict and highlights the culturally specific strategies employed by professional working mothers in Malaysia, as observed by Lim and Rasdi (2019) and Wiens et al. (2023).

6. Implications

The current findings in this research study have several implications for methodological and practical contributions, adding to the body of knowledge on the lived experiences of professional working mothers.

The methodological contribution of this work lies in its use of a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of professional working mothers. Phenomenology, focusing on informants' subjective experiences, was instrumental in uncovering the deep psychological experiences professional working mothers employ. Using semi-structured interviews with informants, this study captured the nuanced realities of managing work and family, which quantitative research studies often overlook. The research provided rich, descriptive data that allowed for a deeper understanding of the

emotional and psychological dimensions of work-family balance. These strategies highlight the importance of considering individual perspectives in future research on professional working mothers and can serve as a model for similar qualitative studies in different contexts.

The practical contributions of this study provide crucial insights for employers and family systems, particularly in educational settings, to support professional working mothers. The research findings in this study underscore the significance of community and spousal support, and they advocate for initiatives that foster shared domestic responsibilities. Mental health professionals can also use the study's findings to develop tailored interventions for working mothers, focusing on emotional regulation, positive thinking, and self-care practices, all of which are critical to managing stress and maintaining balance between work and family roles.

7. Conclusion

This study underscores the lived experiences faced by professional working mothers in Malaysia, where prioritization and compromise play pivotal roles in balancing career and family responsibilities. It highlights how societal norms, particularly traditional gender roles, continue to exert pressure, while financial independence provides a critical avenue for empowerment. The study reveals the significant emotional toll manifested through guilt, exhaustion, and stress faced by these women, underscoring the need for culturally relevant support systems that address these psychological burdens. Moreover, the study illustrates the evolving nature of work-family strategies, shaped by both personal agency and external factors such as spousal and extended family support.

To address these experiences, the study calls for more flexible workplace policies, including remote work and family leave, to alleviate work-family conflict. Additionally, there is a pressing need for cultural shifts towards shared caregiving responsibilities and greater recognition of the psychological impacts on working mothers. Financial literacy programs aimed at enhancing financial independence, alongside culturally sensitive mental health support, are essential to reduce stress and improve well-being. In light of the findings, further research is crucial to explore the intersection of cultural expectations and professional aspirations, providing deeper insights into the diverse strategies employed by working mothers in different global contexts.

This phenomenological study offers significant insights into the experiences of professional working women managing work and family. Several limitations should be acknowledged such as the study focused exclusively on professional working mothers employed in selected institutions of higher education (IHE) in Peninsular Malaysia. As such, the findings do not comprehensively represent the experiences of professional working mothers in other geographical regions, industries, or organizational contexts, limiting their generalizability.

The researcher chose the informants for this study based on their prior experiences balancing work and family. This exclusion of individuals without such experiences may narrow the perspective to those who have already established some level of coping strategies, potentially overlooking challenges faced by those who are struggling or have failed to achieve balance. Given that the researcher is an active counsellor, the findings may emphasise insights related to psychological and counselling support. This study excluded informants who had not participated in counselling sessions to discuss work-family balance, potentially limiting the diversity of coping strategies and perspectives in the study.

The purpose of the study's findings is to guide the creation and execution of work-family balance-promoting policies. Consequently, they may not be relevant to organizations, institutions, or societies where such policies are absent or do not align with the principles of supporting professional working mothers. The use of a phenomenological methodology inherently prioritises the subjective experiences of the participants. While this approach offers deep insights into individual perspectives, it does not provide a broader statistical analysis or objective evaluation of the phenomenon, which may limit its applicability for comparative or quantitative assessments. In conclusion, these limitations, while inherent to the design and scope of the study, do not diminish its value. Instead, they offer opportunities for future research to build on these findings, explore diverse contexts, and expand understanding of the complex dynamics of balancing work and family among professional working mothers.

8. Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 carried out the field work, prepared the literature review, wrote the research methodology, did the data entry, discussion and conclusion. Author 2 checked the contents of this article and provided suggestions for improvement.

9. Acknowledgement

The authors extend their heartfelt gratitude to the informants of this study for their invaluable insights and enthusiastic engagement.

10. References

- Adisa, T. A., Aiyenitaju, O., & Adekoya, O. D. (2021). The work–family balance of British working women during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, 13(2), 241–260. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JWAM-07-2020-0036>
- Amin, M. E. K., Nørgaard, L. S., Cavaco, A. M., Witry, M. J., Hillman, L., Cernasev, A., & Desselle, S. P. (2020). Establishing trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative pharmacy research. In *Research in Social and Administrative Pharmacy* (Vol. 16, Issue 10, pp. 1472–1482). Elsevier Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sapharm.2020.02.005>
- Arham, A. F., Norizan, N. S., Ridzuan, A. R., & Alwi, S. N. N. N. S. (2019). Work-Life Conflicts among Women in Malaysia: A Preliminary Study. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9(9). <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v9-i9/6337>
- Bataineh, K. A. (2019). Impact of Work-Life Balance, Happiness at Work, on Employee Performance. *International Business Research*, 12(2), 99. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ibr.v12n2p99>
- Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C., & Walter, F. (2016). Member Checking: A Tool to Enhance Trustworthiness or Merely a Nod to Validation? *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1802–1811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Catalog Home »Research design :» Book » Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th Edition). SAGE.
- Dizaho, E. K., & Abdullah, A. (2016). The Impact of Work-Family Conflict on Working Mothers' Career Development: A Review of Literature A Proposed Framework for Tailoring Agile-Based Software Development Processes for Small and Medium Companies View project. *Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 11(10). <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309858703>
- Dorenkamp, I., & Süß, S. (2017). Work-Life Conflict Among Young Academics: Antecedents and Gender Effects. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 7(4), 402–423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2017.1304824>
- Felstead, A., & Henseke, G. (2017). Assessing the growth of Remote Working and its Consequences for Effort, Well-Being and Work-Life Balance. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 32(3), 195–212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12097>
- Ho, P. J., Sim, T. M. Y., Loo, C. K. Y., & Li, J. (2024). Challenges, Experiences, and Potential Supports for East and Southeast Asian Mothers in the Workforce: A Systematic Review. *BMC Women's Health*, 24(1), 422. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-024-03255-0>
- Jayasingam, S., Lee, S. T., Naim, K., & Zain, M. (2023). Demystifying the life domain in work-life balance: A Malaysian perspective. *Current Psychology*, 42, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01403-5/Published>
- Kerrane, B., Banister, E., & Wijaya, H. (2022). Exploring the lived Experiences of Singapore's "opt- out" Mothers: Introducing "Professional Motherhood." *Gender, Work and Organization*, 29(3), 863–879. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12805>
- Khan, S., Thomas, G., Kunbhar, B. A., & Mohamed, N. H. M. (2023). Impact of Work-Life Balance on Working Women in the Banking Sector. *Administrative Sciences*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci13010007>
- Latip, H. A., Rahaman, M. M., Ayupp, K., & Lau, E. (2022). Role conflict and work-life-family (WLF) demands: a perspective of Malaysian family business. *Journal of Asia Business Studies*, 16(4), 589–599. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JABS-09-2018-0264>

- Lincoln, L. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). lincoln1985. In *NATURALISTIC INQUIRY*. SAGE.
- Lim, W. L., & Mohd R R. (2019). “Opt-out” or Pushed Out?: Factors Influencing Married Women Professionals’ Decision in Leaving The Workforce. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 13(9), 785–800. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-04-2019-0063>
- Martucci, S. (2023). He’s Working from Home and I’m at Home Trying to Work: Experiences of Childcare and the Work-Family Balance Among Mothers During COVID-19. *Journal of Family Issues*, 44(2), 291–314. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X211048476>
- Mols, A., & Pridmore, J. (2021). Always Available via WhatsApp: Mapping Everyday Boundary Work Practices and Privacy Negotiations. *Mobile Media and Communication*, 9(3), 422–440. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157920970582>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Method*. SAGE.
- Ming, Y. T. (2022). Women in the labour force. In *Demographic and Socioeconomic Changes in Sabah* (pp. 78–114).
- Nair, S., Jayabalan, N., Subramaniam, M., & Perumal, I. (2020). Article ID: IJM_11_11_061 Cite this Article: Sudhashini Nair, Neeta Jayabalan, Muthaloo Subramaniam and Ilangovan Perumal, Work-Family Conflict among Married Academic Mothers: A Study on Malaysian Universities. *International Journal of Management (IJM)*, 11(11), 649–662. <https://doi.org/10.34218/IJM.11.11.2020.061>
- Ozcan, M. (2021). Factors Affecting Students’ Academic Achievement according to the Teachers’ Opinion. *Education Reform Journal*, 6(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.22596/erj2021.06.01.1.18>
- Salleh, R., & Sheikh, S. S. S. (2021). Women Empowerment and Work-Life Balance of Women Engineers in the Malaysian Energy Sector: A Conceptual Framework. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 124, 08009. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202112408009>
- Sequerah, J., Singh, J., & Singh, K. (2019). The Influence of Work-Life Balance, Perceived Flexibility and Maternity Benefits Towards the Retention of Working Mothers in Kuala Lumpur. *International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering (IJRTE)*, 7(5s), 2277– 3878. www.ijrte.org
- Singh, P., & Singhal, R. (2016). Towards Developing a Framework of Work-Life Balance among Dual-Career Women. *IIMS Journal of Management Science*, 7(1), 76. <https://doi.org/10.5958/0976-173x.2016.00007.5>
- Talukder, A. K. M., Vickers, M., & Khan, A. (2018). Supervisor Support and Work-Life Balance: Impacts on Job Performance in the Australian Financial Sector. *Personnel Review*, 47(3), 727– 744. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-12-2016-0314>
- Van Manen, M. (2023). *Phenomenology of Practice Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing* (Second Edition). Routledge.
- Valizadeh, S., Hosseinzadeh, M., Mohammadi, E., Hassankhani, H., Fooladi, M. M., & Cummins, A. (2018). Coping mechanism against high levels of daily stress by working breastfeeding mothers in Iran. *International Journal of Nursing Sciences*, 5(1), 39–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnss.2017.12.005>
- Vayre, E., & Vonthron, A. M. (2019). Identifying Work-Related Internet’s Uses—at Work and Outside Usual Workplaces and Hours—and Their Relationships With Work–Home Interface, Work Engagement, and Problematic Internet Behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02118>
- Wiens, D., Theule, J., Keates, J., Ward, M., & Yaholkoski, A. (2022). Work–Family Balance and Job Satisfaction: An Analysis of Canadian Psychologist Mothers. *Canadian Psychology*, 64(2), 154–165. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000321>
- Yin, R. K. (2016). Qualitative Research from Start to Finish. In *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* (Second Edition, Vol. 44, Issue 3, pp. 324–325). The Guilford Press. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcsr.12144>
- Zhou, S., Da, S., Guo, H., & Zhang, X. (2018). Work-Family Conflict and Mental Health among Female Employees: A Sequential Mediation Model via Negative Affect and Perceived Stress. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9(APR). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00544>