



JABATAN PERDANA MENTERI
JABATAN PERKHIDMATAN AWAM

Kompendium Rekomendasi
POLISI KESEJAHTERAAN
PSIKOLOGI
PERKHIDMATAN AWAM

Kesejahteraan Sosial





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PENDAHULUAN

01 **FAMILY SUPPORT EMPOWERMENT AND WORKPLACE WELL-BEING**

Tajuk ini mengkaji peningkatan penyertaan tenaga buruh wanita Malaysia dan cabaran yang terhasil dalam mengimbangi tanggungjawab kerja dan keluarga di bawah dasar sedia ada. Berdasarkan data tinjauan daripada 740 wanita bekerja sepenuh masa di enam industri, kajian itu mengkaji bagaimana konflik kerja-keluarga, strategi mengatasi dan pengayaan kerja-keluarga mempengaruhi kesejahteraan psikologi, niat pusing ganti serta kepuasan kerja, keluarga dan kehidupan. Analisis mengenal pasti jurang kritikal dalam rangka kerja dasar semasa Malaysia, termasuk cuti bersalin dan paterniti terhad, waktu kerja berperingkat tegar, sokongan penjagaan anak yang tidak mencukupi dan peningkatan isu kesihatan psikologi di tempat kerja. Menggunakan alat pengurusan strategik, terutamanya gambar rajah Ishikawa dan rangka kerja Hilangkan-Kurangkan-Tingkatkan (ERRC), bab ini mendiagnosis punca konflik kerja-keluarga dan menggariskan penambahbaikan dasar berasaskan bukti.

02 **INTERVENSI KRISIS BERASAKAN MODEL RPSD KE ARAH MASYARAKAT SEJAHTERA PSIKOLOGI**

Krisis merupakan ancaman besar kepada kesejahteraan masyarakat, sama ada dalam bentuk bencana alam, tragedi nasional, konflik keluarga, tekanan ekonomi mahupun krisis psikologi individu. Impaknya bukan sahaja menjejaskan keseimbangan emosi dan mental, malah melemahkan daya tahan sosial masyarakat. Malaysia telah berdepan pelbagai episod krisis seperti kehilangan MH370, tragedi tanah runtuh Batang Kali, serta peningkatan kes perceraian dan masalah psikososial dalam masyarakat. Namun, mekanisme intervensi krisis yang dipraktikkan masih tiada garis panduan lengkap dan disesuaikan dengan konteks tempatan. Model Intervensi Krisis RPSD (Rapport, Penaksiran, Sokongan, Daya Tindak) dibangunkan untuk mengisi jurang ini yang menyediakan garis panduan berstruktur, mudah diadaptasi dan praktikal untuk digunakan oleh kaunselor, petugas

01



FAMILY SUPPORT EMPOWERMENT AND WORKPLACE WELL-BEING

Ruhaya Hussin, PhD



FAMILY SUPPORT EMPOWERMENT AND WORKPLACE WELL-BEING

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Studies on women's psychological health and well-being have received much attention due to the increasing labour force participation of women (Wang & Lu, 2023; Atiq, Iqbal, & Rasheed, 2018; Rubio, Osca, Recio, Urien, & Peiró, 2015). Evidence on the impact of work has shown mixed results over the years, with work being either a benefit (Matthews & Power, 2002) or a threat (Shagirbasha, Iqbal, Madhan, Chaudhary, & Dhall (2024) to women's psychological health. In the early years, studies mainly focused on the negative aspects of work-family integration, highlighting work-family conflict. Recent studies have begun to explore its positive aspects, introducing the concept of work-family enrichment.) Lee, Zvonkovic & Crawford (2014) recognise that work-family conflict (time-, strain- and value-based) and work-family enrichment are different constructs that can occur simultaneously.

As more women are in the labour force and the nature of work is changing due to technological advances, the balance between work and family responsibilities has become more complex. The increase in dual-earner families and changes in the workplace nature, such as teleworking and flexible working hours, have increased the challenge of managing the demands of work and family responsibilities and impacted the well-being of employees. In response to these changes, the development of comprehensive policies is crucial to meet the diverse needs of the labour force. These include introducing flexible working arrangement, granting adequate leave for caregiving responsibilities and ensuring access to psychological health resources. Such policies can help mitigate work-family conflict, improve work-family enrichment and ultimately enhance the overall well-being of employees. Addressing these issues prepares Malaysia to better support its employees and adapt to the changing

nature of work, ultimately creating an inclusive and supportive work environment.

2.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Women constitute nearly of Malaysia's population (approximately 11.4 million) and represents a comparable proportion of the national total labour force. The female labour force participation rate rose markedly from 30.8% in 1957 (Economic Planning Unit, 2006-2010) to 55.3% in 2020 (Economic Planning Unit, 2021-2025), driven by multiple socio-economic factors. The New Economic Policy, introduced in 1969 to eradicate poverty, had transformed Malaysian society from an agrarian-based economy into an industrialised one. Historically, even before the colonial era, Malaysian women were actively involved in economic activities, working alongside men in agriculture and trade. However, colonialism shifted labour dynamics by assigning women primarily to domestic roles. The wave of industrialisation in the 1970s significantly changed the labour landscape, leading to urban migration and increase the number of dual-income families due to the escalating living costs. The increasing participation of women in the labour force underscores the need to examine the implication of their dual roles on mental health and overall well-being.

Despite improvements in the socio-economic status of dual-earner families, juggling work and family responsibilities continues to pose challenges for Malaysian working women, particularly in relation to childcare. These include limited childcare support, coordination of children's extracurricular activities, school transportation, and complex scheduling demands (Stivens, 2020). These work-to-family and family-to-work conflicts have been found to adversely affect job and family satisfaction (Rahman, Ali, Jantan, Mansor, & Rahaman, 2020; Aazami, Akmal, & Shamsuddin, 2015). The findings indicate that the landscape of work-family policies in Malaysia has evolved, yet significant gaps still remain. Existing provisions such as maternity leave and flexible working arrangements are inadequate to address the specific challenges faced by Malaysian working women, including limited childcare support, inadequate parental leave, and restricted access to flexible working hours (Noor & Mahudin, 2016). Additionally, the traditional gender roles continue to place a disproportionate burden on women particularly in managing work and family responsibilities.

In light of these particular challenges, this chapter examines the experiences of Malaysian working women in navigating work-family conflicts. In particular, it highlights on the impact of these conflicts on women's well-being and the role of coping mechanisms and work-family enrichment in improving quality of their work-family life. The findings aim to highlight the existing policy gaps and provide strategic, evidence-based recommendations to facilitate better work-family integration and enhance the overall quality of life of Malaysian working women.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

In this study, a correlational design was used to obtain self-report data from 740 working women from six different industries in Malaysia using purposive sampling. The participants are full-time employed women in Malaysia, who worked at least 30 hours per week. They were recruited from different industries including city hall, education, finance, health, and legal.

The questionnaire consisted of ninety-two items measuring nine constructs and sixteen demographic variables. Three domains comprised the predictor, moderator and outcome variables. All constructs were assessed using existing measures from the literature. Constructs included work-family conflict (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000), coping (Aryee, Luk, Leong, & Lo, 1999), work-family enrichment (Hanson, Hammer, & Colton, 2006), psychological strain (Kalliath, O'Driscoll, & Brough, 2004), turnover intention (Bozeman & Perrewe, 2001), job satisfaction (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins & Klesh, 1979), family satisfaction (Alfonso, Allison, Rader & Gorman, 1996), life satisfaction (Alfonso, Allison, Rader & Gorman, 1996) and negative affectivity (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs in the present study were in the acceptable range ($\alpha = .66$ to $.94$).

After ethical approval was granted, potential organisations were approached by telephone, email and/or letter and asked to participate in the present study. The questionnaires were distributed in paper form and via an online platform to all participating organisations, depending on their preferences. The questionnaires were translated into Malay using a translation and back-translation process.

4.0 ANALYSIS RESULTS

Before testing the research models, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted to confirm the factor structure of all scales. Multivariate analyses were then conducted to analyse the direct effects of work-family conflict, coping and work-family enrichment on the well-being of working women. Hierarchical regression was then used to analyse the moderating effects of coping and work-family enrichment on the relationship between family conflict and well-being. In addition, structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test the mediating effect of work-family enrichment on the relationship between work-family conflict and well-being.

The CFA results showed that the work-family conflict scale included two directions - work-to-family conflict (WFC) and family-to-work conflict (FWC) with three types of conflict in each dimension (WFC time, strain and behaviour and FWC time, strain and behaviour). The coping scale comprised four dimensions (planful problem solving, support seeking, positive reappraisal and escape avoidance) and work-family enrichment was divided into two dimensions; work-to-family enrichment (WEF) and family-to-work enrichment (FWE). The CFA results also showed that the one-factor model of job, family and life satisfaction fit the data well. The General Health Questionnaires (GHQ), turnover intention, and negative affectivity questionnaires each had two dimensions; with the dimensions "social dysfunction" and "anxiety/depression" for the GHQ scale, the dimensions "intention to leave" and "intention to stay" for the turnover intention scale, and the dimensions "NA fear" and "NA distress" for the negative affectivity scale.

4.1 Hypotheses Testing

WFC strain ($\beta = 0.16$), FWC strain ($\beta = 0.11$), planful problem solving ($\beta = -0.17$), support seeking ($\beta = -0.11$), and escape avoidance ($\beta = -0.11$) were significantly related to social dysfunction. In addition, FWC strain ($\beta = 0.12$), planful problem solving ($\beta = -0.17$) and escape avoidance ($\beta = 0.09$) were significantly related to anxiety/depression. Only WFC strain ($\beta = 0.19$) and escape avoidance ($\beta = -0.09$) were significantly related to intention to leave. WFC time ($\beta = -0.10$) and strain ($\beta = -0.12$) were significantly related to intention to stay. On the other hand, WFC time (β

= -0.13), WFC strain ($\beta = -0.15$) and WFE ($\beta = 0.22$) were significantly related to job satisfaction. WFC behaviour ($\beta = -0.16$), FWC strain ($\beta = -0.15$), FWC behaviour ($\beta = 0.12$), support seeking ($\beta = 0.08$), and WFE ($\beta = 0.24$) were significantly related to family satisfaction. Finally, FWC strain ($\beta = -0.13$), support-seeking ($\beta = 0.11$) and WFE ($\beta = 0.18$) were significantly associated with life satisfaction.

Regarding moderating effects, as expected, individuals high in escape avoidance reported lower social dysfunction even when FWC time was high, $t(738) = -2.67$, $p < 0.001$. In addition, as hypothesised, individuals high in WFE reported lower social dysfunction even when WFC time was high, $t(738) = -6.23$, $p < 0.001$. While for mediating effects, WFE and FWE were found to mediate the relationships between FWC time and social dysfunction, intention to leave, intention to stay, job satisfaction, family satisfaction, and life satisfaction. The results suggest that both moderating variables (escape avoidance and WFE) and mediating variables (WFE and FWE) significantly influence the relationship between time-based WFC and FWC on several outcome variables. These outcome variables include social dysfunction, intention to leave, intention to stay, job satisfaction, family satisfaction, and life satisfaction. Consequently, the following policy recommendations focus on addressing these variables to better support work-family enrichment and increase employee well-being.

4.2 Analysing Research Findings Using Strategic Management Tools

Malaysia has made remarkable progress in increasing female labour force participation, which has risen from 30.8% in 1957 to 55.3% in 2020. This progress has been driven by national initiatives such as the New Economic Policy (NEP) and broader socio-economic changes that have opened up new educational and employment opportunities for women across the country. Despite this progress, many women continue to struggle with the daily challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities, a burden that often remains invisible in policy discourse. These ongoing struggles reflect critical flaws in current work-family policies. These include restrictive maternity and paternity leave provisions, limited availability of flexible work arrangements, and a lack of accessible, affordable childcare facilities in communities. In the

absence of such structural support, women are often left to manage the competing demands alone, leading to increased work-family conflict, a deterioration in mental and emotional well-being, and reduced satisfaction in both work and family life.

4.2.1 Ishikawa/Fishbone Diagram: Identifying Causes of Work-Family Conflict

The challenges faced by working women in Malaysia in terms of work-family conflict are multidimensional and embedded in various structural, institutional, cultural and workplace domains. When analysing the findings using the Ishikawa diagram (fishbone diagram), these challenges can be categorised into six main dimensions: Policy, Procedure (process), People, Environment, Technology and Measurement. Each of the seven issues highlighted below contributes to the impairment of employee well-being, ineffective coping and the exacerbation of work-family conflict.

4.2.1.1 Limited Duration of Maternity Leave

In the policy category, Malaysia's current policy of 90 days of maternity leave remains inconsistent with the World Health Organisation's recommendation for six months of exclusive breastfeeding. This discrepancy poses a structural challenge for mothers trying to balance work commitments with family responsibilities, as an early return to work can disrupt the bond between mother and child and affect the health of both mother and child. The procedural rigidity of the existing framework, i.e., extending leave beyond 90 days often requires unpaid leave or financial sacrifice, forces many women to return to work before they have fully recovered physically and emotionally. This affects maternal well-being and increases vulnerability during the critical postpartum period. In terms of people dimension, a lack of awareness among employers and policy makers about the long-term health and developmental benefits of extended maternity leave contributes to inadequate institutional support. Collectively, these conditions lead to increased stress levels and limit mothers' ability to effectively manage the dual demands of paid work and caregiving.

4.2.1.2 Insufficient Paternity Leave

The current policy provisions for paternity leave in Malaysia remain extremely limited, offering only 1 to 20 days of leave, which is often combined with other forms of non-paternity leave such as bereavement leave, examination leave, religious leave, parental leave and court leave. These inadequacies reinforce entrenched gender norms that view childcare primarily as a woman's responsibility. As a result, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of caring responsibilities, intensifying work-family conflict and reducing opportunities for shared coping mechanisms within the household. At the people's level, this imbalance is further deepened by prevailing societal attitudes rooted in traditional conceptions of masculinity and fatherhood, which discourage active paternal involvement. The environment and culture in many Malaysian workplaces provide limited support for fathers in early childcare, leaving mothers to juggle multiple roles with minimal support from their spouse. This situation places additional emotional strain on women and erodes their ability to manage the dual demands of employment and caregiving.

4.2.1.3 Rigid Flexibilisation of Work and Family (Staggered Working Hours)

While staggered working hours are commendable in principle, there is considerable rigidity in both the design and implementation of the policy. Existing procedures and guidelines tend to be too generalised and do not consider the diverse caregiving needs of employees, i.e., whether they care for infants, school-age children or elderly dependents. In sectors such as healthcare, retail and manufacturing, where operational demands limit the ability to schedule flexibly, this procedural rigidity presents a major practical challenge. For many working women, particularly those on low incomes or working shifts, the inability to adapt work hours to caregiving responsibilities intensifies time-related conflicts. This in turn undermines the use of adaptive coping strategies such as planning or household negotiations. Over time, the accumulation of such stressors negatively impacts their emotional well-being and their ability to effectively manage their work and family responsibilities.

4.2.1.4 Lack of On-Site Childcare Facilities

The lack of binding policies and regulations for structured financial incentives for on-site childcare provision continues to discourage employers from investing in such services. At the procedural level, the lack of clear operational guidelines and implementation frameworks further hinders the adoption of workplace childcare solutions. From a people perspective, key decision makers often underestimate the long-term organisational benefits of such facilities, including improved employee retention, reduced absenteeism and greater workforce stability. From an environmental perspective, employers face real or perceived barriers in terms of cost, space and infrastructure, particularly in smaller organisations or densely built-up environments. In the absence of accessible childcare in the workplace, many working mothers are reliant on external arrangements, which adds logistical and emotional pressure. These combined responsibilities diminish their coping capacities, increase role strain and ultimately affect their psychological well-being.

4.2.1.5 Cultural and Social Expectations

Deeply ingrained gender norms in the Malaysian socio-cultural environment continue to assign the primary responsibility for caregiving to women. These prevailing expectations determine how people perceive and implement family-friendly policies in the workplace. Even when such policies are available, societal attitudes, particularly in relation to masculinity and caregiving, often discourage men from utilising them. Consequently, the burden of balancing work and family typically falls disproportionately on women, who can only manage these dual demands with limited support. This imbalance contributes to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion resulting from role overload and a lack of effective coping mechanisms, such as spousal involvement or collegial understanding. Over time, this dynamic reinforces a persistent cycle of work-family conflict, particularly for women in dual-income households, further undermining their well-being and long-term participation in the labour force.

4.2.1.6 Insufficient Support for Women with Health Complications After Childbirth

From a policy perspective, the standardised application of the duration of maternity leave does not take into account the different medical needs after childbirth, particularly in the case of complications such as postpartum depression or surgical recovery. People, including direct supervisors or Human Resource managers, may lack empathy or awareness to make adjustments or medical extensions. This results in women returning to work prematurely and physically or psychologically unprepared, increasing vulnerability to burnout. The lack of support for such recovery affects women's ability to function effectively at work and at home, severely impacting both well-being and resilience.

4.2.1.7 Limited Access to Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

People related factors become critical when employees do not have access to adequate social, psychological or organisational support systems. In the absence of support mechanisms such as peer support networks, empathetic supervisors or family-friendly practices in Human Resource, women in particular are often left to navigate work-family conflict in isolation. At the procedural level, there are still gaps in the provision of institutional resources, including limited access to Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), counselling services or psychological support in the workplace. Without such infrastructure, employees find it difficult to apply effective coping strategies such as emotion regulation, positive reappraisal or help-seeking behaviours. This deficit contributes to increased anxiety, disengagement and lower job satisfaction, which ultimately affects both individual well-being and organisational productivity.

The application of the Ishikawa diagram enables a systematic diagnosis of the multi-layered and interrelated causes of work-family conflict in the Malaysian context. The interplay of rigid policies, inadequate procedures, uninformed or unsupportive individuals and environmental constraints contribute to significant coping difficulties and impaired well-being among working women. Addressing these causes requires comprehensive, inclusive workplace culture reforms,

family-friendly policies and mental health infrastructure to ensure that female employees are supported in both their professional and family roles.

4.3 Eliminate, Reduce, Raise, and Create (ERRC) Framework: A Strategic Management Tool to Analyse Policy

The ERRC (Eliminate, Reduce, Raise, Create) framework provides a strategic lens for redesigning work-family integration policies to meet changing societal needs. By systematically eliminating outdated practices, reducing systemic inequalities, raising standards and creating innovative solutions, the ERRC framework ensures a structured yet flexible approach to policy reform. This method is particularly important when addressing the challenges faced by Malaysian families where cultural values, economic considerations and workplace dynamics intersect.

4.3.1 Eliminate

4.3.1.1 Eliminate The 360-Day Cap on Maternity Leave

The limit of 360 days maternity leave for Malaysian civil servants for life as stipulated in the Public Service Circular 1/2024 may not be sufficient to meet the diverse and recurring needs of women with multiple pregnancies. It also does not adequately recognise the physical and psychological differences in postnatal recovery depending on the birth experience. Such lifelong limitations are inconsistent with the principles of gender-equitable policy making and may unintentionally discourage women from utilising the full length of leave needed for adequate recovery and early childcare (ILO, 2020). In contrast, countries such as Sweden and Norway adopt a more progressive approach by granting maternity leave per child without imposing a lifetime cap, recognising the different recovery and care requirements of each individual birth (OECD Family Database, 2023). Removing the current cap would not only signal a stronger commitment to maternal health and family well-being but would also contribute to greater labour force retention and gender equity in public services.

4.3.1.2 Eliminate Gender-Specific Assumptions in the Classification of Paternity Leave

Under the current Malaysian Public Service Policy, paternity leave is categorised alongside other types of leave such as community service and bereavement (Malaysian Public Service Circular 1/2024). This classification implicitly reinforces the perception that childcare is primarily the responsibility of mothers. A growing body of research demonstrates that active father involvement in early childcare contributes positively to children's developmental outcomes and promotes gender equality in households and the workplace (Huerta et al., 2013; Koslowski et al., 2021). Replacing this bundled classification with a clear and standardised entitlement to paternity leave would reflect greater institutional recognition of fathers' role in childcare and signal a broader commitment to gender-equitable family policies.

4.3.1.3 Eliminate Rigid Definitions of Staggered Working Hours

While staggered working hours are a step towards greater flexibility, they remain constrained by fixed blocks of time that do not adequately accommodate the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of family responsibilities. Empirical research by Chung and Van der Lippe (2020) shows that rigid forms of flexibility where working hours are set solely by employers or supervisors, are of limited effectiveness in alleviating work-family conflict. For flexibility to be meaningful, employees must be able to negotiate their working hours in line with their personal needs and the demands of caregiving. Rigid schedules should therefore be reconsidered in favour of more adaptable, context-dependent arrangements that better support work-life integration.

4.3.2 Reduce

4.3.2.1 Reduce Reliance on Unrecorded or Discretionary Leave for Family Commitments

In the Malaysian public service, employees often rely on unrecorded or informal leave categories to fulfil parental responsibilities. These leave arrangements are usually granted on an ad hoc basis and are at the discretion of individual employers or supervisors. Such discretionary

practises lead to uncertainty and anxiety among employees and discourage them from fully utilising available leave entitlements. As noted by Allen et al. (2021), reliance on discretionary leave mechanisms undermines policy effectiveness as access to them tends to be inconsistent and lacks transparency. Reducing reliance on informal arrangements through the introduction of formalised carers' leave would improve both equity and predictability of leave access, thereby strengthening institutional support for working parents.

4.3.2.2 Reduce Inequalities in Access to Flexible Working Across Job Roles

Access to staggered working hours or flexible working arrangements is generally more feasible for administrative employees, while such options remain limited for frontliners, law enforcement officers and early childhood educators. As Kossek et al (2011) emphasise, unequal access to family-friendly policies in the workplace contributes to increased work stress and reinforces existing inequalities in the workplace. The Malaysian study by Ahmad et al. (2016) also recommends that the government improve flexible working policies in the public sector by incorporating both flexible time and location options and supportive strategies that enable employees to effectively manage their non-work responsibilities. To ensure equal access to all employment categories, current policies should be reviewed and adapted to include task reorganisation and improved scheduling systems that make flexibility practicable across roles.

4.3.3 Raise

4.3.3.1 Raise the Minimum Maternity Leave Duration To 180 Days

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of a baby's life. The current maternity leave policy for Malaysian civil servants, limited to a maximum of 90 days per birth, falls short of this international standard and covers only half of the recommended duration. Empirical evidence from Rollins et al. (2016) and The Lancet (2023) demonstrates that inadequate maternity leave is a significant barrier to sustained breastfeeding, compromising both the child's nutrition and the mother's health. Extending the duration

of maternity leave to 180 days would bring national policy in line with global health guidelines and improve maternal and child health in the public sector.

4.3.3.2 Raise Paternity Leave To At Least 30 Paid Working Days

The current upper limit of 20 days of unrecorded paternity leave in Malaysia which often depends on the utilisation of other leave categories is still low by international standards. Countries such as Finland and Japan, for example, grant between 54 and 70 days of paternity leave (OECD Family Database, 2023). Research by Koslowski and O'Brien (2022) shows that extended paternity leave contributes significantly to promoting gender equality in the household, improving father-child bonding and facilitating maternal recovery in the postpartum period. In line with these findings, Malaysia should consider increasing the formal entitlement to paternity leave to at least 30 paid working days to better support shared caregiving responsibilities and improve family well-being.

4.3.3.3 Raise Incentives and Regulatory Enforcement for On-Site Childcare

The Public Service Circular 2/2012 provides guidelines for the establishment of childcare facilities in government workplaces, yet implementation remains limited and inconsistent. The lack of legal requirements or specific financial incentives may have contributed to low levels of compliance by public sector organisations. Empirical findings by Yusof et al. (2021) show that access to on-site childcare facilities has a positive impact on employee productivity and promotes a better work-life balance. The introduction of targeted fiscal measures such as tax incentives or operational subsidies modelled after Singapore's Workplace Childcare Centre Scheme in Singapore could improve institutional compliance and expand equitable access to childcare services across government workplaces.

4.3.4 Create

4.3.4.1 Create a Malaysian Psychology Act

Despite remarkable progress in Malaysia's work-family policies, many working parents continue to suffer from unmet psychological and emotional needs in the workplace. Key supports such as maternity and paternity leave, flexible working arrangements and access to childcare remain inconsistent, inaccessible or of insufficient duration. Women are disproportionately affected by these gaps in policy, as they often bear the primary burden of caregiving without systematic support. The resulting burden contributes to increased stress and burnout and emphasises the lack of a legal framework that explicitly integrates mental health into workplace well-being.

The introduction of a Malaysian Psychology Act is both timely and necessary. Such a law should encompass industrial and organisational psychology, formally recognise work-related psychological injuries including burnout and chronic stress, and establish professional standards for psychologists working in organisations. The Act would not only serve as a legal instrument but would also bring about a fundamental shift in the way psychological well-being is understood and protected in the workplace. It would enable regulators to enforce mental health standards, ensure culturally appropriate and gender-sensitive practices, and address the realities of different Malaysian families. By embedding psychological safety into the broader architecture of labour and family policy, the Act would help ensure that no employee is left unprotected and no family is forced to choose between economic stability and emotional well-being.

The application of the Eliminate-Reduce-Raise-Create (ERRC) framework provides policy makers with a strategic tool to break down rigid policy structures, such as lifetime limits on maternity leave and entrenched gender norms in childcare. At the same time, it offers a way to address inequalities in access to family-friendly policies and reduce over-reliance on external childcare providers. By raising standards for maternity and paternity leave and promoting evidence-based, responsive and adaptive policy making, families can be better supported with the flexibility and resources necessary for their well-being.

By integrating the ERRC framework, Malaysia can take meaningful steps towards more equitable and supportive work-family policies. The framework provides a transformative lens through which work and family policies can be redefined, anchored in the principles of inclusivity, equity and flexibility. Its structured approach facilitates the removal of institutional barriers, the reduction of inequalities in the workplace, the raising of caregiving standards and the creation of a sustainable, family-centred Malaysian Psychology Act. The ERRC model goes beyond addressing existing gaps and promotes a culture of shared responsibility and adaptability that reflects the evolving needs of contemporary families. By incorporating ERRC principles into policy refinements, Malaysia can promote a more integrated approach to work and family life, one that promotes employee well-being while supporting the broader goals of societal development and economic resilience.

5.0 POLICY REFINEMENTS AND EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS

Malaysia's work-family policies have made remarkable progress in recent years, particularly with the introduction of statutory maternity and paternity leave, yet significant gaps and inconsistencies in policy options and their implementation remain. While the existing framework is a step in the right direction, it often does not fully address the needs of working parents and their families. This inadequacy is evident in several areas, including the limited duration for maternity leave, the minimal provisions for paternity leave, the absence of flexible working arrangements and insufficient on-site childcare facilities (see Table 1). The proposed informed policy refinements and evidence-based recommendations aim to alleviate the time-based conflict between work and family by promoting comprehensive family leave policies, supportive childcare, flexible working arrangements, and establishment of Malaysian Psychology Act as illustrated in Figure 1. By drawing on international best practices and aligning with ILO guidelines, these recommendations aim to create a working environment that recognizes the diverse needs of working women and supports their ability to manage their time more effectively.

5.1 Parental Leave Policies

Malaysia's current maternity leave policy for civil servants, as outlined in Public Service Circular 1/2024, provides for fully paid maternity leave of 60 to 90 days per birth, with a cap of 360 days over the employee's entire period of service. This directive replaces Circular 5/2017 for the public sector. In contrast, in the private sector, the Employment Act 1955 (Act 265, Amendment 2023, Sections 37 and 40) prescribes a fixed maternity leave of 98 days, which is in line with the minimum standards of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Whilst the flexible offer in the public sector appears progressive, it does not meet the full range of maternal and child health needs, particularly when compared to more generous international models, such as in Norway.

No	Existing Policy	Public Sector	Private Sector
1	Maternity leave	- 60 to 90 days, fully paid per birth, with a cap of 360 days over the entire service	- Fixed maternity leave of 98 days
2	Paternity leave	- 20 days of accumulated unrecorded leave per year - Bundled with other unrecorded leaves	- 7 days for each confinement - 5 confinements only
3	Flexible working arrangements	- 45 hours per week including breaks - schedule working days between 4 to 6 days a week and rest days between 1 to 3 days a week	- Flexible working arrangements with varying hours of work, days of work or place of work
4	On-site childcare facilities	- Fee subsidies and comprehensive implementation standards governed by Public Sector Circulars	- Subsidies vary - Require action at the employer or employee level

Table 1 : Malaysia existing policies in public and private sectors

The limited duration of maternity leave poses a major challenge for breastfeeding mothers. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of an infant's life, yet the maximum 90-day maternity leave in Malaysia covers only half of this recommended period. This puts considerable pressure on mothers to stop breastfeeding prematurely when they return to work. Research has shown that insufficient maternity leave is closely linked to early cessation of breastfeeding, with mothers who return to work within three months significantly less likely to fulfil WHO breastfeeding recommendations due to lack of time and insufficient support at work (Dagher, McGovern, Schold, & Randall, 2016; The Lancet, 2023). The lack of flexible time to express breast milk, particularly in workplaces without breastfeeding-friendly policies, further reduces the likelihood of continued breastfeeding (Amin et al., 2011). Furthermore, existing maternity leave policies do not adequately accommodate women who experience complications during labour or who require an extended recovery period, increasing the risk of premature return to work and compromising maternal well-being. These limitations indicate that the current policy framework does not fully support maternal health, continuity of breastfeeding or work-life balance and is not in line with international best practise. The ILO recommends maternity leave of at least 14 weeks (98 days), preferably 18 weeks (126 days) or more, compensated with at least two-thirds of the woman's previous earnings (Addati, 2015).

In addition, the Public Service Circular 1/2024 allows male civil servants to take up to 20 days of accumulated unrecorded leave for paternity purposes, but this leave is bundled with other forms of unrecorded leave such as for bereavement, elections, or community service-making it difficult for fathers to secure time off for early childcare. While this provision is an improvement on previous measures, including Civil Service Circular 9/2002 and the Employment Act 1955 (Act 265, Amendment 2023, Section 60FA), it remains insufficient to promote a family-friendly workplace culture.

The limited paternity leave discourages fathers from actively participating in early childcare and reinforces traditional gender norms by placing a disproportionate caregiving burden on women. This undermines efforts to promote gender equality and shared parental responsibility. Globally, there is evidence that extended paternity leave

promotes bonding between father and child, supports maternal recovery and strengthens family cohesion. In the Malaysian context, paternity leave has been found to positively influence employee satisfaction, concentration at work and the quality of parent-child interaction (Ren & Siew, 2023).

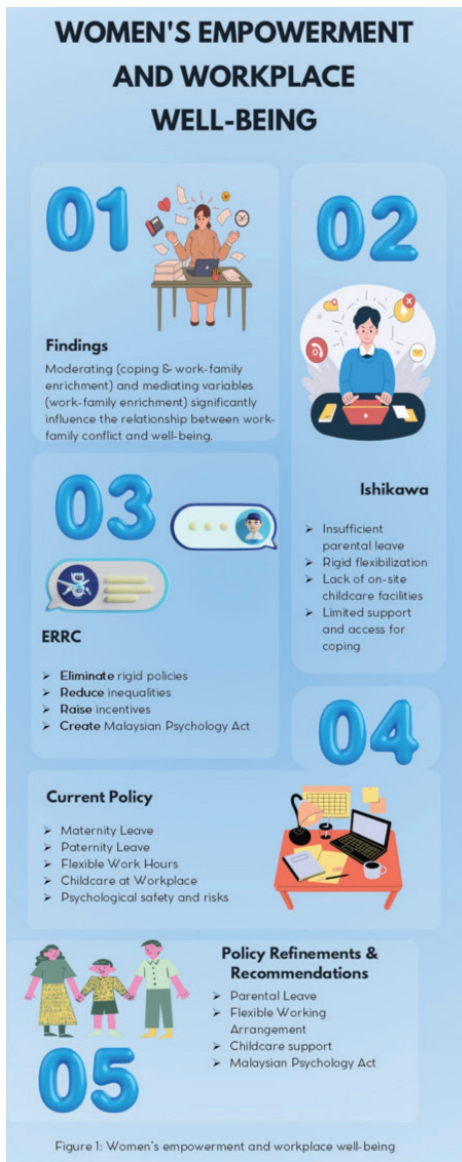


Figure 1: Women's empowerment and workplace well-being

These shortcomings suggest that current maternity and paternity leave policies require a more holistic, inclusive approach. To align with international standards and promote gender-equitable caregiving, it is recommended that fully paid maternity leave in the public sector be extended to at least 180 days per birth to support exclusive breastfeeding and adequate postpartum recovery. The lifetime cap of 360 days should be removed to ensure equal access for multiple pregnancies. In parallel, a formal entitlement to at least 30 days of paid paternity leave should be introduced, distinct from other types of unrecorded leave, to support early paternal involvement. Malaysia can also look to international models, such as Sweden, where parents are entitled to 480 days of shared leave per child, of which 390 days are paid at 80% of salary, with 90 days reserved exclusively for fathers (Duvander, Halldén, Koslowski & Lindquist, 2024), and Norway, which offers up to 49 weeks of fully paid parental leave or 59 weeks at 80% of salary, with a mandatory 15-week father's quota (Kenzheali, 2024).

By adopting such refinements, Malaysia would demonstrate a stronger commitment to maternal and child health, gender equality and inclusive family policies, while improving employee well-being and retention in the public sector.

5.2 Flexible Working Arrangements

The staggered working hours policy outlined in Malaysian Public Service Circular 1/2024, which replaces the provisions of the Employment Act 1955 (Act No. 265, Amendment 2023, Sections 60P and 60Q) and Public Service Circular 5/2019, aims to introduce greater flexibility to help employees balance work and family commitments. Its effectiveness as a family-friendly workplace measure remains limited, particularly when compared to the diverse caregiving needs of employees. The policy allows employees to choose from predefined working hour bands, but this rigid structure often fails to accommodate the dynamic and unpredictable nature of family life, particularly for those caring for young children, elderly relatives, or family members with special needs.

This limited flexibility leads to ongoing conflicts between work and family for certain groups of employees. A study by Chung and Van der Lippe (2020) show that employer-determined flexibility such as fixed, staggered working hours often does not provide the adaptability needed to respond to the changing demands of caring. Furthermore, access to staggered working hours is not evenly distributed across roles. Employees in operational, frontline or customer-facing positions, or those subject to strict deadlines, may not be able to benefit from such arrangements. Similarly, policies may not fully address the needs of employees with caregiving responsibilities during non-standard working hours (e.g. evenings or weekends), thereby excluding a significant proportion of the workforce from meaningful flexibility.

These restrictions diminish the potential of staggered working hours as an effective tool for integrating work and family life. As Kossek et al (2011) argue, flexible working arrangements are most effective when combined with complementary policies, such as on-site childcare and remote work options. Without such support, staggered work hours alone provide only minimal relief and may even lead to unintended negative consequences. In some cases, the blurred boundaries between work

and home life, especially for non-traditional work hours can reduce the intended benefits of the policy. Poor implementation of flexible work policies can intensify work-family conflict and affect employee well-being (Allen et al., 2021).

To address these shortcomings, the introduction of a more comprehensive remote working policy is essential. This is especially important in Malaysia's densely populated urban centres, where traffic congestion places a significant time and financial burden on employees. Remote working not only alleviates commuting stress but also increases productivity and allows employees, especially those from low-income households, to better manage their time and caregiving responsibilities. International examples show the effectiveness of such policies: Estonia has introduced robust teleworking measures supported by digital infrastructure and tax incentives, while Denmark's flexicurity model offers employees both job security and the freedom to work remotely (Jekabsone, Skribane & Sproge, 2021). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has also recognised remote work as a viable mechanism for promoting work-life balance and reducing gender inequalities, provided it is voluntary, reversible and based on clear, mutually agreed terms and conditions regarding working hours, data protection and remuneration.

In addition, establishing a clear legal framework for flexible or compressed working hours would significantly improve employees' ability to reconcile work and family life. Flexible working arrangements allow employees to adjust their work schedules to suit their specific caregiving responsibilities, thereby reducing role conflict and increasing job satisfaction. This flexibility is particularly important in Malaysia's cultural context, where strong family ties and commitments are highly valued. Policy models from countries such as the Netherlands and Germany offer useful benchmarks. The Dutch Flexible Working Hours Act grants employees the right to request changes to working hours, location and work scheduling, with employers legally obliged to accommodate such requests (Dijkhoff, 2018). The German Working Time Act supports flexible scheduling and part-time work as part of a broader effort to accommodate diverse work-life needs (Bispinck, 2006). Consistent with ILO recommendations, flexible working arrangements are an important policy tool to improve the labour market participation of women and caregivers, and to meet the needs of increasingly diverse family structures.

In light of these findings, Malaysia is recommended to adopt a multi-tiered approach to workplace flexibility. This should include (i) the formal integration of remote working policies with infrastructure support and regulatory safeguards, (ii) the introduction of a legal entitlement to flexible or compressed work schedules, and (iii) the development of sector-specific guidelines to ensure that flexibility is accessible to different occupational groups. These refinements would not only improve the effectiveness of existing policies such as staggered working hours, but also promote a more inclusive, gender-sensitive and equitable work and family policy landscape.

Childcare Support

Despite the existence of various policy frameworks and circulars that support the establishment of childcare facilities in the workplace in Malaysia, many government agencies continue to lack on-site childcare facilities. This persistent shortfall is primarily due to the absence of binding legal obligations and the lack of robust financial incentives for employers to establish such facilities. Policies and guidelines such as Public Service Circulars 38/2013 and 1/2023 for the civil service, along with the Guidelines for the Establishment of Childcare Centres (TASKA) and Kindergartens (TADIK), offer fee subsidies and comprehensive implementation standards—including building safety, staff qualifications, and coordination with the Department of Social Welfare, yet compliance remains voluntary. As a result, implementation is inconsistent and depends on the discretionary capacity of individual departments.

The lack of accessible on-site childcare poses major challenges for working parents, particularly mothers, who continue to take on the majority of caregiving responsibilities. In the absence of affordable and convenient childcare solutions, many parents are forced to rely on external providers, which are often costly and logistically burdensome. This exacerbates parental stress, disrupts work-life balance and disproportionately affects single parents and dual-income households. The gap between existing policy instruments and their practical implementation emphasises a broader structural issue: without mandatory provisions or material support, policies intended to improve the integration of work and family remain ineffective.

These conditions have wider implications for gender equality, employee well-being, and labour market participation. Without support

for childcare in the workplace, women's retention in the labour force and career advancement are hindered, reinforcing gender inequalities in the workplace. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has repeatedly stressed the importance of affordable childcare for women's full economic participation. The ILO Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183) explicitly recognises childcare in the workplace as a critical component of enabling parental employment and promoting decent work standards. International models such as those in Sweden and Germany show how employer-provided childcare supported by financial incentives, legal requirements and institutional support can contribute to higher female labour force participation and greater equity in the workplace (Lee, Duvander, & Zarit, 2016).

To bridge the current implementation gap in Malaysia, stronger legislation is needed to institutionalise workplace childcare in the public sector. The government should introduce targeted incentives such as start-up grants or operating grants to offset the cost of setting up and maintaining childcare facilities. These incentives would reduce the financial burden on employers while signalling a national commitment to family-friendly workplace reform. In addition, developing and enforcing regulatory standards for workplace childcare facilities in terms of health, safety, employee training and quality of care would help ensure parental confidence and children's well-being. A coordinated national strategy that aligns legal, fiscal and operational mechanisms is necessary to make on-site childcare a standard and equal part of the Malaysian employment landscape.

5.4 Establishment of Malaysian Psychology Act

Despite progress in strengthening physical safety standards through the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1994 and the Employment Act of 1955, Malaysia's current legal framework remains inadequate in addressing psychological safety and emerging psychosocial risks. Conditions such as burnout, chronic stress and emotional trauma resulting from workplace discrimination, excessive workload or rigid work structures are not explicitly recognised as compensable injuries under existing social protection mechanisms such as SOCSO. This legal gap disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, particularly working mothers who often manage dual caregiving and professional roles.

The absence of legal protection for mental illness has a tangible impact. Employees exposed to untreated psychological health problems can suffer from reduced productivity, emotional exhaustion and long-term deterioration in mental health. For mothers returning to work early or caregivers having to juggle conflicting responsibilities, the lack of legal recognition and systemic support contributes to increased role strain and undermines their overall well-being. While the Public Service Circular No. 1/2024 provides administrative provisions such as staggered working hours and maternity leave, the lack of statutory enforcement limits their effectiveness and leads to inconsistent implementation across sectors and agencies.

This inconsistency reflects a broader structural issue without a standardised legal framework based on psychological evidence, mental health protection in the workplace remains subject to managerial discretion and cultural bias. There is currently no legal mechanism to standardise responses to psychological harm, assess psychosocial risks or provide recourse for employees who experience mental health problems in the course of their work. Consequently, existing policies are insufficient to address the complexity and prevalence of mental health issues in Malaysian workplaces.

To address this gap, the establishment of a Malaysian Psychology Act is both timely and necessary. Such a law would officially recognise psychological injuries as legitimate work-related health problems, provide a legal basis for their assessment and compensation, and transform mental health from an arbitrary welfare benefit to a fundamental labour right. For example, research has shown that short maternity leave is associated with increased postpartum mental health problems and lower breastfeeding continuity (Dagher et al., 2016; Ishak et al., 2020). A legally grounded policy framework would legitimise recovery time, parental bonding and mental health support as entitlements rather than organisational privileges.

In addition, the law should expand SOCSO's jurisdiction to include psychological health injuries such as chronic stress, burnout, and trauma due to workplace factors. This would allow employees to apply for leave or compensation based on verified psychological diagnoses, ensuring legal protection and systemic support. Such provisions are crucial for groups such as public servants working under rigid schedules,

caregivers facing a double burden and mothers returning to work before full recovery.

The Malaysian Psychology Act should not only protect employees but also regulate the profession of industrial and organisational (I/O) psychology. Currently, the field is fragmented, with inconsistent qualification standards, unregulated practice and limited ethical oversight. The Act should create a statutory body responsible for accrediting I/O psychologists, enforcing ethical standards and ensuring the quality and integrity of workplace interventions. This would enable the development of national guidelines for psychosocial risk assessment, psychological first aid and employee mental health screening, and promote a culture of evidence-based and ethically sound workplace psychology practices.

At the institutional level, a Malaysian Psychology Act would create the legal infrastructure to integrate psychological principles into the mandates of regulatory agencies such as the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) and the Public Service Department (JPA). This would enable these agencies to apply psychology-based indicators when assessing workplace well-being and organisational health.

Additionally, Malaysia's diverse socio-cultural context requires a mental health framework that is both gender and culturally sensitive. Traditional gender norms, multi-generational family responsibilities and different religious perspectives influence the way work-family conflict and the burden of caring responsibilities are experienced. The proposed Act should therefore include gender-specific protections, such as protection against pregnancy-related discrimination, support for mental health recovery after childbirth and the promotion of shared parental responsibility through equitable leave entitlements. It should also allow for culturally appropriate psychological interventions that address the realities of life in Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-faith communities.

The Malaysian Psychology Act would serve as a legal and institutional bridge by transforming fragmented policies into enforceable protections, aligning administrative tools with psychological science, and ensuring that employee well-being is treated as a legal right rather than a discretionary benefit. This would be a crucial step towards a resilient, inclusive and psychologically safe workforce.

6.0 CONCLUSION

As more Malaysian women join and succeed in the workforce, their lives are increasingly reflected in a daily balancing act between work responsibilities and the emotional and physical demands of caregiving. National policies have made progress, yet many working mothers still face silent struggles, feeling pressurised to return to work after giving birth, struggling to find quality childcare, or managing household responsibilities with limited workplace flexibility. These are not only logistical challenges, but also emotional burdens that gradually affect well-being. The results of this study show how unresolved work-family conflict and inadequate support systems affect women's well-being in terms of their work, family life and psychological health.

This chapter not only diagnoses the problems but also offers a clear solution. Firstly, parental leave arrangements need to be extended and harmonised. Extending maternity leave to over 90 days and granting fathers at least 30 days of paid paternity leave would encourage shared responsibility at home and promote a healthier post-natal recovery. Secondly, flexible working arrangements must go beyond rigid, staggered working hours. The right to telework or compressed working hours would allow families to better adapt their work to their reality. Third, on-site childcare should be encouraged through enforceable standards and incentives, as this would reduce the daily burden on parents and encourage the retention of qualified employees. Finally, the enactment of a Malaysian Psychology Act is crucial. Recognising work-related psychological stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion as real and reimbursable is long overdue. Such a law would place psychological health at the centre of employment protection and ensure that workplaces are not only productive but also compassionate.

In essence, this study is a reminder that policies need to reflect people's lives. Behind every statistic is a woman who wants to care for her family without jeopardising her well-being, a father who wants to be more actively involved, or a professional who needs flexibility to care for an elderly parent. By focussing our policies on the individual and the psychological realities, we not only improve the work-family balance, but also create a society where people feel supported and valued and where they can thrive in every aspect of their lives.

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