# Reconciling Work and Family Responsibilities:
# A Global Perspective

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**Abstract.** The issue of reconciling work and family responsibilities is a major concern for working men and women whether they live in industrialized and developed nations or developing nations. Increasingly working adults in developing countries are struggling to reconcile work and family responsibilities. Although they will vary depending on the cultural context, effective family friendly policies require managers to be cognizant of a number of local factors that influence employees' work and personal lives. These factors include culture and traditions, the role of key stakeholders, public policies, community resources and infrastructure, and workplace practices and demographics.

Key words: work, family, responsibility, reconcile, policy

**Abstrak.** Isu memadukan pekerjaan dan tugas keluarga merupakan masalah utama bagi pria dan perempuan yang bekerja baik mereka hidup di negara industri dan maju atau di negara berkembang. Makin banyak pekerja dewasa di negara berkembang berusaha dengan keras memadukan pekerjaannya dengan kewajiban keluarga. Sekalipun hal tersebut bervariasi tergantung konteks budayanya, kebijakan ramah keluarga yang efektif menuntut para manajer untuk bertanggung jawab terhadap sejumlah faktor lokal yang memengaruhi kerja para pekerja dan kehidupan pribadinya. Faktor-faktor ini meliputi budaya dan tradisi, peran kunci mereka yang terkait, kebijakan umum, sumber daya dan infrastruktur masyarakat, dan praktik-praktik di tempat kerja dan demografi.

Kata kunci: pekerjaan, keluarga, tanggung jawab, paduan, kebijakan

With a view to creating effective equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women workers….an aim of national policy is to enable persons with family responsibilities who are engaged or wish to engage in employment to exercise their right to do so without being subject to discrimination and, to the extent possible, without conflict between their employment and family responsibilities. (Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (no.156, Article 3, para 1).

## *International Labor Organization*

The word family comes from the Latin word *familia* and consists of four important interrelated but separate concepts: kin (those related by blood or legal ties), non-kin (those not related by blood or legal ties, but perhaps by dependency, obligation,

affection, or cooperation), household (those who live together, whether kin or non-kin) and the notion of the householder or "head of household" (Rothausen-Vange, 2005). The definition of what comprises "family" varies from country to country but the issue of reconciling work and family responsibilities is a major concern for working men and women whether they live in developed or developing countries.

There have been a number of major global demographic changes for families. Collectively, these globally occurring transformations in labor, industry and urbanization make it important to understand the experiences of work-family conflict faced by working men and women in different countries in widely varying contexts (Hein, 2005). A number of linking mechanisms have been proposed that explain the nature of the relationship between work and family roles (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000), and one of the most prominent is conflict (or interference) (Greenhaus & Singh, 2003).Work-family conflict refers to simultaneous pressures from the

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work and family demands which are mutually incompatible in some respect, such that, meeting the demands of one role makes it difficult to meet the demands of the other (Greenhaus & Singh).

Countries vary in the ways they address work-family conflict, in part due to differences in societal cultures. Hein (2005) identifies a number of historical and current trends that have resulted in work-family conflict since the second half of the twentieth century for working men and women in both developed and developing countries.

The first factor is the separation of home and the workplace which has been caused by the decline in agricultural labor combined with marked urbanization of societies (Hein, 2005; Heymann, Earle, & Hanchate, 2004). Marked changes in urbanization have occurred worldwide over the past century. Whereas 18 percent of the world's population lived in urban areas in 1910, 47 percent did so in 2000. The marked pace of urbanization that has been occurring in all of the world's regions is expected to continue. The United Nations has predicted that by the year 2030, 60 percent of the world's population—including 56 percent of the developing world's population—will live in urban areas. Urbanization plays a key role in the changes that are occurring in work and family life. First, when individuals migrate to urban areas they often move away from the support provided by extended families. Second, families living in urban areas often need to have a large number of adults in the paid workforce in order to subsist, and finally, work environments in urban areas are often designed in ways that make it impossible for children and other dependants to accompany adults to work.

The second factor that contributes to experiences of work-family conflict is the entry of the majority of men and then an increasing number of women into the industrial and post-industrial labor forces. From 1960 to 2000 the percentage of the labor force which is made up of women has increased markedly in many regions. For example, from 27 percent to 43 percent in Australia, 31 percent to 41 percent in Western Europe, 17 percent to 25 percent in the Middle East and from 21 to 35 percent in South America (International Labour Organization, 1999; World Bank Group, 2000). China has seen a modest growth from an existing high level of 42 percent in 1980 to 46 percent and Indonesia currently has a 43.5 percent of women participating in the labor market. This has meant that many societies have undergone a fundamental change in family structures which has resulted in a shift from two people doing two jobs: One paid job and one unpaid job looking after the home and children, to two people doing three jobs (his paid job, her paid job, and the unpaid job of looking after the home and children). The "traditional" family roles (stay at home mother, breadwinner father) are being replaced by workplace structures, roles and resources based on the dual earner model. A review of early childhood care in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam by Kamerman (2002) concluded that women in these countries are increasingly unavailable to provide care at home for young children and the need for non-parental care is likely to increase.

The third factor that has contributed to working men and women experiencing work-family conflict is the declining availability of family assistance to support care of dependents (Hein, 2005). The impact of urbanization, the increased labor force participation of women, and both internal and external migration has meant that the traditional family support for caring of family and domestic tasks is not always available. Heymann (2006) makes the point that there is a mistaken belief that in developing countries working parents can appeal to traditional family solidarity and finding a grandparent to help. She analyzed survey data from 55,000 families in 180 countries around the world as part of the *Project on Global Working Families* and found that extended families are not always available for a number of reasons. For example, grandparents themselves may need to work, or the extended family members may be in need of care, or they live too far away.

Another factor that has contributed to increased levels of work-family conflict has been the increasing care needs of the elderly. For example, an analysis of elderly care giving on the labor supply of co-resident household members based on the *Indonesian Family Life Survey 2000* found that caregiving for elderly household members had a significantly adverse impact on labor supply, particularly for a household's female members (Magnani & Ramma-han, 2007).

Other significant factors that have led to working adults around the world experiencing work-family conflict have been, increasing pressures of work and long work hours, and increased travel times which have put enormous pressure on working families (Hein, 2005, Heymann, Earle, & Hanchate, 2004). This is not just an issue for the industrialized and developed nations. Increasingly working adults in developing countries are struggling to reconcile work and family responsibilities.

Governments, employers, trade unions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) all play a role in reducing the conflict in work and family responsibilities. As Hein (2005) observes, work-family conflicts poses dilemmas for workers which inevitably impact on the workplace. It is recognized that the problem for the workplace will be less where there is greater government and public support for family care responsibilities.

Family friendly policies are defined as those that support employees in meeting their work commitments and their family responsibilities. They are policies where the employer accepts that the family responsibilities will have an impact on employees' working lives and is prepared to accommodate these responsibilities where possible (New South Wales, Department of Industrial Relations, 2003). The objective of this paper is to examine the issues that organizations globally need to consider in developing family friendly policies that will enable employees to reconcile their work and family responsibilities.

## Addressing Work-Family Issues at the Workplace

The difficulties of balancing work and family life are experienced all over the world. Amid unprecedented levels of global mergers, acquisitions and international growth, the challenge for managers across the globe is to respond to the specific work and family needs of their workforce. There are a number of common issues faced by working women and men and their families and a family friendly strategy needs to reflect a course of action that is appropriate to the local environment and the workforce.

Global work/life needs assessments conducted by leading work/life consultants Shapiro and Noble (2001) have identified three surprisingly consistent themes of what employees from around the world identify as being important barriers to reconciling their work and personal lives. The three issues identified included a lack of flexible work policies and practices, the availability and affordability of dependent care, and the negative impact of work overload and long working hours. These three factors could form the basis of understanding how organizations operating in different countries respond.

Workplace diversity issues in organizations, if they exist, typically focus on management challenges related to the multi-cultural mix of the organizational population (which may include managers, employees, suppliers, customers, and various other stakeholders) who participate in the activities of the organization (Barry & Bateman, 1996). Diversity management reflects values of inclusivity, recognizing and valuing the differences between people. Since the early 1990s, the domain of workplace diversity management has emerged to incorporate a broad array of dimensions (Jackson, Joshi & Erhardt, 2003). Dimensions of diversity include gender, race, age, language, ethnicity, cultural background, sexual orientation, religious belief, marital status, family responsibility, educational level, work experience, socio-economic background, and geographic location. These dimensions of workplace diversity should be addressed in w o r k / f a m i l y  m a n a - gement strategies.

According to Spinks (2003) an effective family friendly strategy requires managers to be cognizant of a number of local factors that influence employees' work and personal lives. These factors include the culture and tradition, the role of key stakeholders, public policies, community resources and infrastructure, and workplace practices and demographics. Each of these issues will be discussed in turn.

### Culture and Traditions

The differentiation perspective of cultural change identified by Meyerson and Martin (1987) posits

that organizations are reflections and amalgamations of surrounding cultures, including national, occupational, and ethnic cultures. In developing a work/family strategy, there are particular cultural factors that are critical to the development of a culturally sensitive work/family strategy. These include the role of religion and the faith community, traditional family structures and support, and gender roles. Organizations operate in countries where there are vast variations in cultural characteristics (e.g. social values such as individualism/collectivism, masculinity/ femininity, and gender egalitarianism) (Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). According to Korabik, Lero and Ayman (2003) in countries that have a more traditional gender role ideology (e.g. India), working women are likely to face greater demands than in countries where the gender roles are more equal (e.g. United States). Family related support systems are also more likely to be available in countries that are high on collectivism and where gender roles are more traditional, whereas organizational and government (institutional) support systems are more likely to be available in countries that are higher on individualism.

Triandis (1995) concludes that the core of individualism is the supremacy of individual goals that emphasize personal independency and autonomy, whereas, the core of collectivism is group goals over individual preferences that emphasize interpersonal connectedness and role obligations. Lu, Gilmour, Kao and Huang, (2006) state that it follows that individualists tend to perceive work and family demands as competing for limited personal resources such as time and energy and are thus likely to experience more conflict. On the other hand, for collectivist societies work is not seen as a means of enhancing self but as a means of supporting the family and thus even when work demands are high they are less likely to experience work-family conflict. National cultures are not easily reduced to similarities across a small number of dimensions and differences may be more important than similarities.

*The Role of Key Stakeholders*

Societies vary in relation to the legitimate role gi-

ven to key stakeholders such as the state and organized labor. The term "stakeholder" has been defined as "those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist" and originally included shareowners, employees, customers, lenders and society (Freeman, 1984, pp. 31-32). The stakeholder concept has become widely used in recent years, due to factors such as increased public interest and concern about corporate governance (Metcalfe, 1998; also see Greenwood & De Cieri, 2005). The role of the state in family factors, the role of the state in employment and the role of unions in determining desirable benefits, all influence a society's approach to work/family balance issues. For example, in Singapore, the government has recently developed a more prominent role in promoting family friendly workplaces and established the Singapore Work and Family Unit, which amongst other things has set up grants and tax incentives for workplace child care and also the Family Friendly Firms Award.

*Public Policies*

Public policy in relation to work and family issues has been defined as actions which employ government authority to support work and family initiatives in the community (Bailyn, Drago, & Kochan, 2001). Public policies involve the exercise of power and are a central way that societies respond to major social, economic, environmental and political issues. In particular, employment legislation that covers conditions related to hours of work, vacation, minimum wages, and maternity and parental leave conditions have specific ramifications for a work/family strategy.

In South Korea, it is a requirement by law that employers with more than 300 female employees provide a childcare center. The Indonesian Government through the Equal Opportunity Task Force, Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration has developed a set of guidelines on Equal Opportunity in Indonesia that "…working conditions…should not lead to different treatment of workers due to their family responsibilities and their status within the family (i.e. head of single parent households or not) (Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration, 2005).

### Community Infrastructure

Countries also vary in terms of the community resources and infrastructure that are available to support an employed person's ability to manage their work and personal life effectively. Factors such as healthcare, homecare, childcare and parenting supports, eldercare and care giving supports, supports for persons with special needs, education and employment and training will influence the necessity for organizational involvement in some areas (Sheridan & Conway, 2001). For example, Magnani and Rammahan (2007) observe that in many Asian countries there have been few moves towards setting up universal social safety nets for the elderly as governments have actively encouraged family oriented support systems.

### Demography

Finally, issues concerning workplace characteristics such as workplace demographics and practices covering working hours, vacation days, sick days, leaves, and return to work supports will also influence work/family practices for employees in organizations (Eaton, 2003; Patrickson & Hartmann, 2001). Companies operating in South Africa might need to deal with a number of employees who are HIV positive or who have family members who are HIV positive.

## Challenges for Employers

Haas, Hwang and Russell (2000) have conducted analyses in a broad range of cultural contexts and summarize the broad commonalities in arguments supporting the potential benefits that can accrue to organizations who implement family friendly practices and policies. Family friendly practices can provide an incentive to increase motivation and commitment and thus achieve higher levels of productivity from the current labor pool. Also, these practices can be part of a strategy that supports attracting and retaining the best quality people. In addition, an effective family friendly strategy can enable the best quality people to advance in the or-

ganization. For example, it has been recognized that barriers to women include having to take time out for dependent care responsibilities and a lack of flexibility in career structures (Clancy and Tata, 2005). Finally, companies can obtain community recognition by being seen as a "good" corporate citizen or caring organization (Hudson, 2005). Despite the potential benefits associated with family friendly strategies, there are specific challenges associated with the development of effective family friendly strategies that vary cross culturally. These local demands need to be identified and understood.

Understanding whether a nation is economically successful or struggling, traditional or liberal, religious or not, and whether or not it provides government aided childcare arrangements and parental leave is important. Such information would allow organizations to anticipate the expectations employees bring to the work place and the pressures they face from their family roles. It would also provide some indication of the social support employees may receive from their families and communities as they try to combine their work and family roles (Meera, 2006).

## Conclusion

Managers and human resource practitioners have a key communication role in securing executive /senior manager support to develop family friendly policies in organizations. It is important to develop the case for why this should be of a concern to the company in terms of the linkage between organizational and business objectives (Kelleher & Cobe, 2003). It is also vital to offer practical solutions to facilitate action plans and effectively implement a strategy. An effective motivator for many senior managers is to clearly outline the costs and benefits of action and non-action. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that family friendly policies are good for communities.

Employees around the world are becoming increasingly vocal about their work and family needs. Organisational family friendly policies are impacted by local culture and national policies. However, managers are the most influential factor in shaping a supportive and respectful workplace culture. To be effective, workplace family friendly efforts must be

strategically connected to diversity and performance management. It is also important not to lose sight that collaboration and community partnerships extend the impact of organizational initiatives.

In a thorough review of current work/family research and directions for future research, Bowes (2005) concludes that most of the research that appears in the literature derives from the United States and recommends that investigation of work/family issues in different countries is likely to identify issues that are not currently on the research agenda. In addition, Poelmans, O'Driscoll and Beham (2005) state that from a methodological perspective a salient criticism of the extant work/family research is the "almost total reliance on quantitative, cross sectional research designs"(p. 29) and they recommend additional qualitative research that focuses on different sociocultural contexts.

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