

DOES MARITAL STATUS SERVE AS A TIPPING POINT FOR FEMALES IN THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARDS BALANCING FAMILY AND WORK?

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ABSTRACT

The number of females working in the hospitality sector has significantly increased over the past two decades, during which women in general have achieved much progress in their careers. However, many females are facing challenges in balancing their time between their careers and families. Amongst these challenges include long working hours, demanding customers and stressful work environment, all of which negatively affect their work–family balance (WFB). Females in general feel frustrated when they are unable to provide care to their children and families because of their work. This situation often leads to ‘win-lose’ outcomes and prevents them from achieving WFB. Previous studies have identified many cases of WFB but have not examined the issue of marital status from the female perspective. By conducting in-depth interviews, this study examines how single and married females working in the hospitality sector perceive the concept of WFB and how they try to achieve such balance. This study offers some recommendations for HR managers that can help them improve the productivity of their employees and enhance the competitiveness of their organizations.

Keywords: Females, Marital Status, Attitudes, Hospitality Sectors, Work-Family Balance.

INTRODUCTION

WFB has become a primary social challenge in the current era (Halpern, 2005). Unfortunately, whether businesses should help their workers balance their time between work and family is still being debated. Most positions in the

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hospitality sector are taken up by females. Despite fulfilling their economic roles, these women also need some time to provide care to their families and children. Therefore, these women generally have poor WFB, which reduces their productivity, increases their turnover rate and negatively affecting their service quality.

The hospitality sector has a problem in retaining its employees (Chan et al., 2018). Many women also choose to leave this sector because of their low pay, low job satisfaction, poor working environments and lack of motivation. Many females also quit working their jobs in this sector because of their night shifts or for other personal reasons. However, previous studies have rarely examined the topic of WFB from the perspective of females working in hospitality organisations. The lack of WFB can produce 'win-lose' outcomes. Single and married women also have different needs for WFB, thereby necessitating a further investigation on this topic. Accordingly, this study explores the attitudes of these women towards WFB and proposes some suggestions that can help them achieve such balance. HR practitioners may also benefit from the findings of this work that can help them improve their extant policies and increase the productivity of workers in their organisations.

INDUSTRY BACKGROUND

The casino business is one of the largest businesses in Macau and creates many job opportunities for people at home and abroad. The frontline positions in this industry, including hoteliers and dealers, are dominated by females who are working different shifts. Given that gambling is an important business in Macau, this study examines the attitudes of single and married females working as casino dealers towards the concept of WFB in hopes of providing insights for HR practitioners that can help them increase the value of their businesses.

With the increasingly intense competition amongst casino hotel operators, employing highly skilled and qualified frontline staff is crucial in achieving visitor satisfaction and encourages revisit intention. However, the long working hours, odd shifts and great demands of visitors have made working in the casino business a tiresome venture. Many female employees even claimed that working overtime and in different shifts leads to high levels of stress, low commitment and work withdrawal (Deery & Jago, 2015). Married females also complain about working in irregular, rotating shifts that greatly lessen their time with their family and children. Specifically, married females spend less time with their spouses whilst single females spend less time with their friends and families. Overall, the job nature of these female workers disrupts their WFB. Some cases reveal that having a quality WFB can help HR managers retain their best talents, promote their productivity and transform their new recruits into valuable assets for the company.

Limited studies have investigated the expectations of single and married females with regards to WFB. In Macau, the labor force is mostly composed of females. Specifically, amongst the 57,757 full-time employees in the country, females account for 31,854 or approximately 55.2% of all job posts available in the country, a huge percentage of which can be found in casino hotels (Chan et al., 2018). Most of these workers earn an average of MOP 18,000 every month. However, despite this salary, many female workers eventually leave their posts because of stress, thereby creating challenges related to high turnover, absenteeism and low productivity for organisations. Many married females working in this

sector have to sacrifice their time with their family while those single females have to sacrifice their social life and their career drive. To fill the research gap in this field, this study aims to examine the perceptions of females casino employees towards WFB, identify the challenges encountered by female casino dealers in their daily work situations, contrast the perspectives of single and married females towards WFB and provide some recommendations for HR practitioners that can help them update their policies to help their employees achieve WFB.

WFB BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUALISATION

WFB has been well defined in many academic fields (Frone, 2000; Greenhaus & Allen, 2006; Grzywacz et al., 2005). Many researchers define this concept as the absence of work-family conflict or the frequency and intensity to which work interferes with family or vice versa. Clark (2000) defined WFB as the extent to which individuals are equally engaged in and satisfied with their work and family roles. Greenhaus & Allen (2006) defined WFB as the extent to which the effectiveness and satisfaction of an individual in his/her work and family roles are compatible with his/her life priorities. However, very few studies, including Greenhaus, Collin & Shaw (2003) suggest that workers seek 'equality' between their work and family lives. Indeed, having meaningful experiences in both work and family is crucial for each individual (Marks et al., 2001; Marks & MacDermid, 1996).

Greenhaus & Allen (2006) argued that WFB over emphasizes the satisfaction of individuals with their work and family. Although satisfaction within and across different life domains is important, defining balance in terms of satisfaction is conceptually problematic. Many problems in WFB can be found in organisations, families and other contexts where individuals perform their activities. Frone (2003) defined WFB as the state in which an individual does not face any conflict or interference between his/her work and family roles. Over the past two decades, WFB has been conceptualised as an inter-role phenomenon and as the orientation of an individual across his/her different roles. WFB also integrates a range of life activities with a special attention to self and to personal and spiritual development as well as expresses the unique wishes, interests and values of an individual.

The definition of WFB considers two components of equality, namely, input and outcomes. A positive WFB suggests equally high levels of attention, time, involvement and commitment whilst a negative WFB implies a low level of attention, time involvement or commitment. These inputs reflect the role engagement level of an individual in terms of his/her time and psychological involvement. In other words, an individual with WFB is more engaged in his/her work role than in his/her family role, especially from the female perspective.

Many studies suggest that social support can be conceptualised as emotional and instrumental supports. Social support refers to the behaviors and attitudes of family members in their daily household activities, such as relieving employees of their household tasks or accommodating their work requirements. Meanwhile, emotional support refers to the expression of one's feelings to enhance the affect or behavior of others.

Employees can derive support from different sources in the workplace, including their supervisors and co-workers (Voydanoff, 1988). These sources of support present another problem for WFB. Organisations and supervisors need to understand that the family duties of their employees are positively related to their satisfaction or WFB. Therefore, they can implement family-friendly policies to

increase the satisfaction and WFB of their employees. Many organisations also provide work-family benefits to their employees, including job sharing, open communication, job protection, parental leaves, flexi-time schedules, resources and services, paid family leaves, dependent care assistance, shorter standard work weeks, childcare centres, support groups for working parents, day-care facilities and canteen facilities. Many scholars also suggest that flexible work arrangements allow individuals to integrate their work and family responsibilities in time and space and are instrumental in achieving a healthy WFB.

Although many studies are gender neutral, they all suggest that the aforementioned variables have a greater impact on women at work than on men. Females continue to serve as the primary providers for their families and their children. With the increasing dominance of women in the workforce (Wan & Chan, 2012), many studies have begun to focus on WFB and its related problems, including work stress. However, evidence from female casino dealers working in Macau is lacking.

GLASS CEILING EFFECT FOR FEMALES WORKING IN THE CASINO INDUSTRY

Large pool females engaged in the casino hotel business manage the external interfaces of work and careers of home and children. Many females working as casino dealers in Macau work for long hours because their establishments operate 24/7. Jobs in casinos are generally demanding and the staff may have limited prospects and a low job security. Working in shifts is considered the main challenge for workers in this industry that greatly disrupt their family and social lives. Many females, especially the Chinese, often have responsibility in both their jobs and families (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). Compared with males, females show a lower level of acceptance, a higher chance of being assigned to shifting schedules and tend to feel sleepy when working in a risk-exposed environment.

Marital status may also affect the WFB of female employees. Previous studies show that married individuals generally exhibit higher quality of life scores and improved mental and physical health compared with single individuals.

Shifting schedules may negatively influence marital relationships because of the family burdens and complementary duties of females. This setup can also influence the relationship of other non-married couples. Female employees with a responsibility to care for their families often struggle in separating their work from their families because the consistent and unpredictable needs of their children clash with their work schedules (Forster 2000; Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2009). Therefore, many females lack of interest in developing their career as frontline workers in hotels. Meanwhile, given that some single females wish to start a family, working in night shifts or irregular working hours may negatively affect their social life. This study advances the understanding on the WFB of female frontline casino hotel employees and contributes to improving the WFB policies and practices of these organisations.

EFFECT OF MARITAL STATUS ON WFB

In general, married females are less satisfied with their WFB compared with single females. Given their inflexible work schedules and they need to look after their families, these married females often have limited satisfaction with their

WFB. Some researchers find that the role of females in industrial societies recently went through a significant change (Hannah, 1966; McGee, 1962; Mckee & Sherriffs, 1959; Rossi, 1996). Innes & Sharp (1962) mentioned that married females have a mental disorder compared with single females because they have no choice but to work under pressure just for the sake of earning a living. Moreover, married females are emotionally unstable in their jobs and tend to face challenges when trying to achieve WFB. Many studies indicate that women have different ideas regarding the appropriate amount of time they need to spend at work and with their families (Voydanoff, 1988; Gutek, Searle & Klepa, 1999; Milkie & Peltola, 1999).

Married females with children report a substantially lower WFB whilst their single counterparts have a considerably high level of WFB (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). The presence or absence of children in the family may explain the significant differences in the degree of WFB amongst working females. Therefore, the different expectations of single and married females towards WFB should be investigated.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Major Problems Preventing Females from Achieving WFB

This research adopted a descriptive approach with a qualitative research design. A total of 30 female frontline employees working in a casino in Macau were recruited as samples. This sample included a mixture of single and married females aged between 18 years and 45 years. Most of the interviewees shared that they need to have equal time between their family and their work and remarked that having WFB is good for their health and psychological wellbeing. They also mentioned that they can provide financial support and take care of their families simultaneously.

Many of the interviewees identified their shifting schedules and stressful working environments as major problems that lead to their dissatisfaction with their WFB. They felt remorse if their children fell ill or if they were unable to take care of their families because of their irregular working shifts. They also felt unhappy, stressed and pressured in their jobs because of their long working hours, high workload and demanding customers and supervisors. Many of them complained that they have no choice but to take these irregular, inflexible shifts six days a week. Therefore, their work schedules clearly affect their personal lives.

Given that casino dealing is considered an unskilled job, female workers in such environment have no choice but to tolerate their working conditions. Many of the interviewees complained about the unfair policies in their workplace and shared that their needs were often ignored by their organisations. Most of them were facing a win-lose situation in both their jobs and families.

Meanwhile, the single female interviewees believed that the income from their casino dealing can compensate for their poor WFB. These females generally prioritise their careers over spending more time with their families.

Many of these interviewees also complained about their poor working environments. For instance, the patrons of their casinos are allowed to smoke inside their establishments. These female employees, especially those working in night shifts, also face sexual harassment from drunken gamblers. They said that the support of their colleagues and managers can help them increase their job satisfaction and achieve WFB.

Differences in the Perceptions of Single and Married Females

Married employees shared that salary could not compensate for the negative effects of their work on their WFB. Despite earning an acceptable amount of income, these employees had to sacrifice their relationships with their spouses or children. Meanwhile, single employees believed that money can compensate for their poor WFB. In terms of career expectations, married females wanted to earn a living to provide an improved quality of life for their children and their families whilst single females only focus on themselves and have very few commitments. Married employees also prefer to focus on their families than on their careers whilst single females only aim for career achievement.

Nevertheless, both groups agreed that having a friendly environment, teamwork, organisational support for family, five working days a week and workload adjustment can improve their WFB.

The interview results provide some recommendations for both single and married females. Most of the interviewees thought that having a favorable working environment could help them achieve WFB. However, many interviewees complained about their rotating shifts. Organisations should listen to the concerns of their married female employees and provide them some flexibility in their work to achieve or maintain their WFB. In this way, these females can earn a living whilst living a high-quality life. Having friendly work colleagues can help create a friendly working environment and facilitate teamwork. Meanwhile, having a good work supervisor can reduce the stress levels of employees. If organisations provide their employees with flexible schedules (i.e., extended lunch breaks), then they can promote their WFB. Most of the interviewees also suggested that their organisations should adjust their present workload and reduce their working hours. Five working days is recommended for married females and HR managers can even organise certain activities where their employees can spend time with their families. Having a supportive work atmosphere where transparency is practiced and the concerns of all employees are addressed can also lift the spirits of employees and help them endure physically and mentally demanding jobs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HR MANAGERS

Despite long working hours and poor working conditions, many married females still want to earn a living and stay loyal to their organisations. If organisations can provide healthy a working environment for their female employees that can support their families, then they can promote the job satisfaction of these employees and consequently improve the quality of their services, thereby leading to a 'win-win' situation for both parties. HR managers must understand the 'needs and wants' of their female employees and try rotating their shifts. They should also ensure that each of their employees is shouldering an equal amount of workload. If married females need to take care of their families, then single females can step in and provide internal support. HR managers can also organise company events and activities that support their female employees to increase their sense of belongingness in their organisations.

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