Perceptions of work-family conflict among married female professionals in Hong Kong

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Abstract *Married female professionals with children (*n = 50) were interviewed to examine their experience of work-family conflict and the human resources policies they would like to see implemented at their workplace to assist them to balance their home and job demands. The results revealed that the traditional nature of the Hong Kong family, compounded by long working hours, had led to an exhausting lifestyle for almost all the female married professionals. When asked about the HR practices that might be appropriate to help alleviate work-family conflict, the overwhelming preference was "flexible hours" (*n = 30). Given these findings, it is suggested that changes in work patterns towards a flexible schedule would be beneficial for both employers and employees.*

Introduction

For Hong Kong, as elsewhere, the percentage of married women who participate in the workforce is increasing. Employment statistics indicate that the Hong Kong labor force grew by 22 percent from 2.8 million in 1991 to 3.4 million in 2001. The increase was much larger, in both absolute and relative terms, for women than for men. For example, during this period, the labor force participation of women increased by 39 percent compared with 12 percent for men (Hong Kong By-Census, 2001).

Similarly, participation rates among married women continued to expand, so that by 2001 over 50 percent had entered the workforce. There was change, as well, in the types of jobs held by married women. Between 1991 and 2001, female incumbents of positions classified as "manager" or "administrator" grew from 50,390 to 92,614. In addition, the number of women who considered themselves to be "professionals" rose from 30,815 in 1991 to 51,461 in 1996 and to 65,485 in 2001 (Hong Kong By-census, 2001). Thus, not only do married women appear to remain in the workforce in greater numbers, but a larger percentage seems to be employed in higher level positions.

This trend roughly mirrors what is happening in North America and Europe (Wallerstein, 2000; Dex and Joshi, 1999). The growth in the labor force participation of married women with children has ignited considerable interest in how they manage the often conflicting demands of work and family (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Kossek and Ozeki, 1998; Lewis and Cooper,

1987). What differentiates Hong Kong women from their Western counterparts, however, is the prevailing work and management culture in which they are employed. Whereas, in the West, researchers would be able to list up to 20 benefits related to work-family balance (Ng and Chiu, 1997), in Hong Kong such benefits remain hopelessly unrealistic (Lui, 1996; Wright *et al.*, 2000). Thus, unlike Lewis (2001), this paper cannot argue for a restructuring of workplace cultures.

Not only in Hong Kong, but also throughout Asia, both men and women tend to work (with some exceptions) in corporate cultures characterized by authoritarian management and weak labor legislation. The rights and the protections often taken for granted in Western societies do not exist (Chiu and Ng, 1999; Mellahi, 2001). It is little use, then, to produce a "wish-list" of policies/programs/activities that would benefit the working woman. The culture is not nearly ready to accept these ideas (Chiu and Ng, 1999).

Similarly, the social roles of women still tend to be very traditional. Relative to Western societies, where change has been slow but perceptible (*Canadian HR Reporter*, 2000), in Asia there has been little movement toward increased sharing of family responsibilities in marriage. The tasks of child and home care fall predominantly on the female (Aryee, 1993a; Yalom, 2000). Other research work confirms the fact that women tend to spend many more hours than men on household responsibilities (Lewis and Cooper, 1987; Pleck, 1985; Staines *et al.*, 1973; Tebory and Illgen, 1975). Siu and Chu (1994) indicated that in Hong Kong the male-dominant Chinese culture demands that wives perform a range of household tasks and rear children.

Taking these cultural realities into account, this research adopted Soper *et al.*'s (1996) gradualist approach to organizational transformation, by isolating one, or a small number of key policies/programs that might address work-family balance in Hong Kong. While this research examines perceptions, the focus will be on what can be realistically expected.

Previous research

The literature on women, work and the family is voluminous and complex. It is widely acknowledged that inter-role conflict is a more pressing issue for parents than for childless couples (Holahan and Gilbert, 1979), and that employed parents (both mothers and fathers) have multiple roles, which compete for their time and energy (Higgins *et al.*, 1992).

Work-family conflict has been of interest to researchers for many years (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). There is research evidence that women experience more inter-role conflict than men (Dex, 1998; Duxbury and Higgins, 1991; Greenhaus *et al.*, 1989; Gutek *et al.*, 1991; Wiersma, 1990). However, Bedeian *et al.* (1988), Frone *et al.* (1992), Lobel (1991) and Voydanoff (1988) found little or no gender difference in levels of work-family conflict.

The extensive research on the roles of men and women in "a gender-stratified" social system has shown that women tend to support family at the expense of work (Aryee and Luk, 1996; Karambayya and Reilly, 1992). Although Becker and Moen (1999) reported that couples tend to "scale back" their work involvement by not pursuing "high powered" careers at the same time as raising a family, it is the wife who typically "scales back" the most. Nevertheless, it was burn-out in wives, resulting from a combination of work and family stresses (Aryee, 1993b), that led Higgins *et al.* (1992) to the conclusion that work conflict was an important predictor of family conflict. Indeed, Kanter's (1977) observation that work and family cannot be considered as separate entities seems to have held true for more than two decades (Boles *et al.*, 1997; Cooke and Rousseau, 1984).

Some of the earlier studies (e.g. Hertz, 1986; Hochschild, 1989) show that, among dual-earner couples, women seem to bear the burden of adapting to work and family demands on a daily basis. Although in Western society women are increasingly dealing with job-related demands, which can place limits on the performance of their family role, men are becoming more involved with their family (Pleck, 1985). However, in the Chinese socio-cultural environment, the fast-changing demography of the family has not affected the relatively static sex roles. Men have not assumed traditionally female household roles as women have joined the paid labor force. Aryee *et al.* (1999) noted that daily life in Hong Kong is influenced by the philosophical traditions of Confucianism. Married managerial women in Hong Kong have to face the triple responsibilities of child care, housework, and a demanding career.

Discussions of the potential stress associated with combining the roles of family and work have long been commonplace (Lewis and Cooper, 1987). The work of Decker and Borgen (1993) and Parasuraman *et al.* (1992) confirmed the view that work-family conflict is closely associated with overall life stress. Thus, achieving a balanced life style has long been an important concern for many dual-career couples (Skinner, 1980; Lambert, 1990).

Parental demands also create stress (Matsui *et al.*, 1995), especially in situations where levels of social support are low (Ganster *et al.*, 1986). While a flexible work schedule seems to reduce stress levels (Guelzow *et al.*, 1991), self-identity remains an important variable (Carlson *et al.*, 1995). For example, if a woman wishes to spend more time with her family because her identity is tied to this aspect of life, but is prevented from doing so, she "may feel hollow and unfulfilled" (Carlson *et al.*, 1995, p. 27). Thus, unpleasant moods can spill over from work to family life and vice versa (Williams and Alliger, 1999), leading to dysfunctional coping strategies often associated with burn-out (Leiter, 1991).

Work-family conflict, as a source of stress, has been linked to many undesirable effects and has become a problem that organizations can no longer ignore (Higgins *et al.*, 1992). Wortman *et al.* (1990), for example, found that women who experience low role conflict score highest on measures of mental

health and role satisfaction. Earlier, similar findings by Houseknecht and Macke (1981) suggest that family experiences which "accommodate" the wife's employment lead to better marital adjustment.

For some time, work-family conflict has been shown to be negatively related to employee work outcomes such as absenteeism and turnover (Bowen, 1988; Galinsky and Stein, 1990). Consequently, management of the work-family interface has become a managerial concern in the Western industrialized economies, leading to the adoption of family-friendly or family-responsive policies. One such policy is work schedule flexibility (Galinsky and Stein, 1990). As early as 1981, Orpen reported that flexitime was related positively to job satisfaction. These findings are supported by other studies. Rothausen (1994), for example, reported work schedule flexibility to be negatively related to intention to quit (Aryee *et al.*, 1998), while Scandura and Lankau (1997) found flexible work hours to be related to higher organizational commitment.

Obviously, there are other family-friendly work arrangements that might be implemented (Chiu and Ng, 1999), but in the main flexibility, i.e. control over work time, is perceived as the most important job characteristic. Accordingly, it has been suggested that women in Hong Kong should try to work for an organization that best accommodates their family obligations (Ngo, 1992).

Methodology

Given the influx of mothers into the labor force and the unique Chinese socio-cultural environment, it is argued that a better understanding of the family and work problems of Hong Kong married professional women will be of great benefit to both practitioners and policy makers. To that end, data were obtained from one-hour, face-to-face or telephone interviews with 50 married "professional" women about their experience of managing the work-family interface. The criteria for participation were: (a) the individuals were females at least 30 and not more than 50 years of age; (b) they were in a profession requiring higher education and/or specialized training; (c) they earned a minimum of HK$20,000 per month; and (d) they were married and with a child or children.

The sample interviewed in this study was initially identified through social networking among local professionals. The sample was also chosen through the snowball method (Singleton and Straits, 1999), whereby each respondent was asked for an introduction to two colleagues or friends.

This approach works well in Asia, where business is based on relationships, and where questionnaires are often viewed with suspicion (Weiss, 1994). The major problem with such an approach is that it is difficult to generalize from data collected in this way (Wright and Nguyan, 2000).

Respondents were asked a series of mainly open-ended questions that focused on their work and family roles, and supplemented by demographic data on age, highest educational qualification, number of children, age of children, employment of domestic helper, job title, average hours worked and monthly

income. The interview allowed each subject, from her own perspective, to share her experiences of what had occurred in her work and family life.

Research questions

RQ1. Think for a minute about what your ideal job would be like? What is that job? Is it the job you have now?

RQ2. Do you face any major family-work conflict? – None; mild; intense; extremely intense?

RQ3. Specifically, what kinds of conflicts between family and work do you experience as a woman who has a child and works full-time as a professional? Do you have any persistent problems that you do not seem to be able to solve?

RQ4. All things being considered, would you consider yourself more work-centered or family-centered?

RQ5. Are there any policies you would like to see implemented at your workplace or by the government that would help people like you manage your work and family lives?

RQ6. What women-friendly HRM policies you would like to see implemented in your organization?

The interview questions included a brief examination of the subject's significant life and job experiences. Feelings, thoughts, motivations, plans, and hopes were explored. Areas of concentration in the interview were issues identified in the literature on work-family conflict.

This research used the interview as a data-gathering technique because it has been shown to be efficacious in collecting systematic data about the life-experiences of women (Baruch and Barnett, 1986; Denzin and Yuma, 1994). The data collected are "thick", meaning that the researcher is able to comprehend "the lived reality" of their subjects. Thick data gain credibility as a result of "prolonged engagement" with participants (Sturges, 1999).

The data were qualitatively analyzed. They were segregated by question, so that all responses to each question were listed together. Then, each entry was read and similar answers were isolated. This categorization technique is similar to that used by Wallerstein (2000). Basic descriptive statistics were conducted using content analysis, and qualitative data from the interviews were evaluated for salient trends, themes, and patterns (Patton, 1980). This data analysis method produced a set of bar graphs that illustrated respondents' concern for work-family balance. By allowing the respondents to state what they felt was most important, the bias generated from rank-ordering a previously generated list is avoided.

Research findings

The demographic profile of the respondents is presented below:

(1) *Age*

- Range – 30-50, mean 41.4 years

(2) *Children*

- Max. two/respondent;
- 36 – ten years and under;
- 32 – 11-15 years;
- 12 – 16-20 years;
- five – > 20 years.

(3) *Education*

- Postgraduate degree – 16;
- Bachelor degree – 26;
- Diploma – eight.

(4) *Salary*

- Range 23-80K, mean HK$44,240.

(5) *Average hours worked*

- Range 25-60, mean 48.5.

It is to be noted that only nine respondents worked 40 or fewer hours per week (mean 48.5), all had children (an average of two) and a majority (42 out of 50) possessed a post-secondary education at either the degree or the diploma level. Respondents reported an average monthly salary of HK$44,240.

Although not indicated, all respondents employed a full-time domestic helper. Comments obtained through the open questionnaires, therefore, should be interpreted in this light.

Table I presents the occupational composition of the respondents. While the nomenclature is wide-ranging, most titles would fit the category of "professional". The possible exceptions are "technician" and "executive assistant". These respondents' salaries, however, ($40,000 and $30,000 respectively) were similar to "personnel officers" ($27,000), "general manager" ($23,000) and "merchandising manager" ($35,000), so they were left in the sample.

The ideal job

When asked to describe the characteristics of their ideal job (RQ1), a "good" salary was mentioned 23 times, followed by "flexibility" in terms of hours of work or work schedule ($n = 16$) and shorter working hours ($n = 12$). Other characteristics did not appear to be important, although recognition/appreciation and "good" benefits were listed seven times (Figure 1).

Title	No. in position
Administrator	9
Personnel manager/officer	9
Director	8
Senior executive	6
Manager	6
Accountant	3
Consultant	2
Immigration officer	1
Lawyer	1
Merchandiser	1
Career counselor	1
Technician	1
Executive assistant	1
Dental surgeon	1

Table I.
Job categories by title
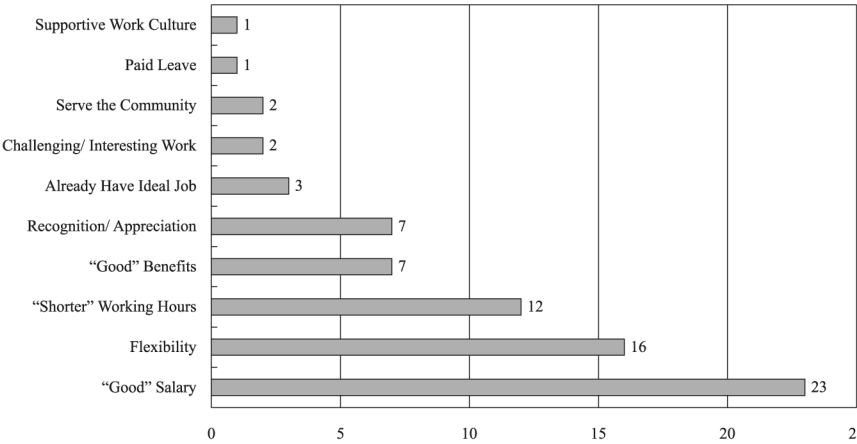
Figure 1.
Characteristics of the "ideal job"

These results are consistent with the general perception that money is the most important feature of an ideal job. This factor, however, was followed closely in perceived importance by two related items, flexibility and shorter working hours.

Level of work-family conflict
RQ2 explored the idea that involvement in a work role might lead to difficulties in managing the work-family interface. A four-point scale was used (none, mild, intense, extremely intense) to examine perceived work-family conflict. From the data (Figure 2), there appears to be a consensus among a majority of the respondents $(n = 41)$ that work-family conflict was either "intense" or "extremely intense". Only nine respondents characterized this conflict as either "mild" $(n = 5)$ or "none" $(n = 4)$.
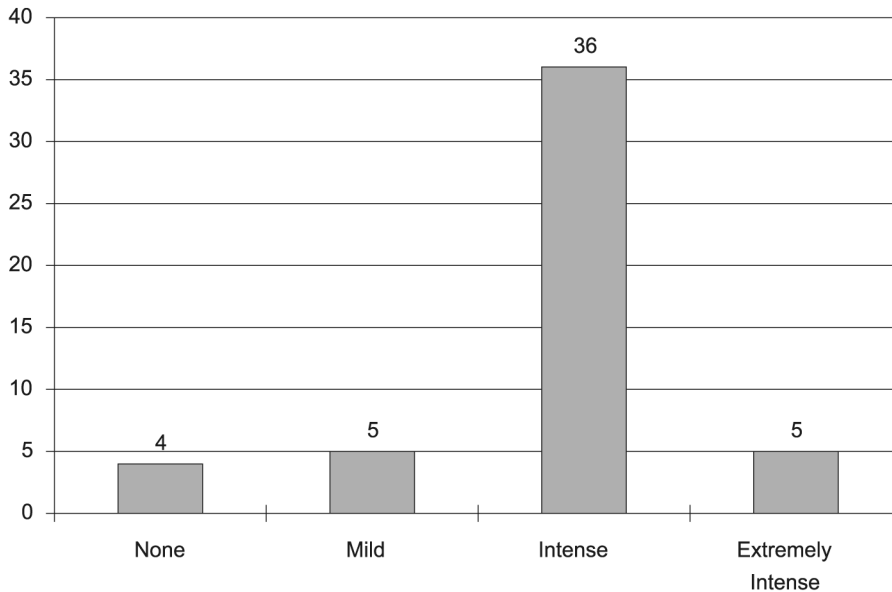
Figure 2.
Level of work-family
conflict

Sources of work-family conflict
In response to a question that explored sources of work-family conflict, the interview data indicated four main sources (Figure 3):

(1) Little support from husband ($n = 17$).
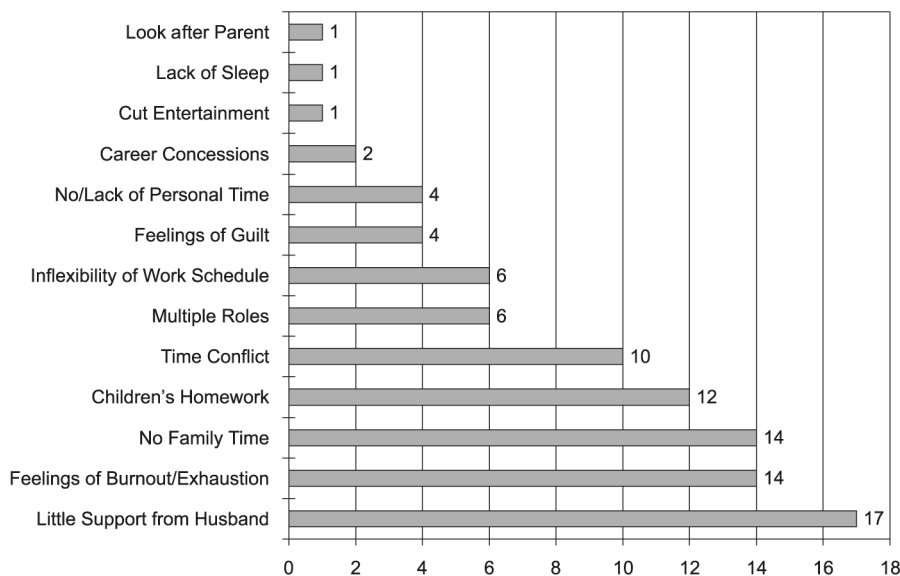
(2) Feeling of burnout/ exhaustion ($n = 14$).

Figure 3.
Specific problems
causing work-family
conflict

(3) No/little family time ($n = 14$).

(4) Children's homework ($n = 12$).

The other perceived reasons for conflict (Figure 3) were not mentioned often, although ten respondents referred to "time conflict".

These pressures appear to be endemic in Hong Kong culture. The traditional nature of the Asian family, compounded by long working hours and the well-known tyranny of Hong Kong's school system (Cheung, 2000), might easily lead to a lifestyle characterized by exhaustion and little or no family time.

Work versus family orientation
In terms of work-family priorities, the majority of respondents appear to be "family-centered" ($n = 26$) followed by "both work" and family-centered ($n = 16$) (Figure 4), Thus, this sample exhibits the traits of the traditional Chinese married female. According to the philosophical traditions of Confucianism – the home sphere is for women, while the work sphere is for men. Aryee *et al.* (1999) noted that Hong Kong women are perceived as responsible for domestic chores and child rearing despite the fact that they are now economic providers in the family.

Suggested HR interventions
In response to a question about the HR activities that might be appropriate to help alleviate work-family conflict, the most popular responses were "flexible hours" ($n = 30$), or alternatively, greater control over the work schedule ($n = 7$) (Figure 5). When these results are coupled with answers to the final question, which sought to pin-point specific "women-friendly" work practices, they present a clear picture (Figure 5).

Not only are flexible hours important, but also parental leave to deal with family issues ($n = 29$) (Figure 6). It should be noted, however, that other responses also relate to time as the central issue. Training during office hours
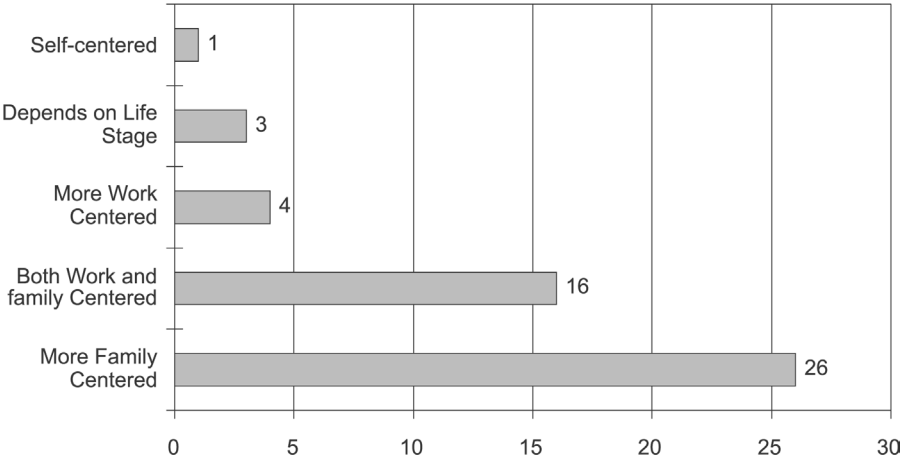

Figure 4.
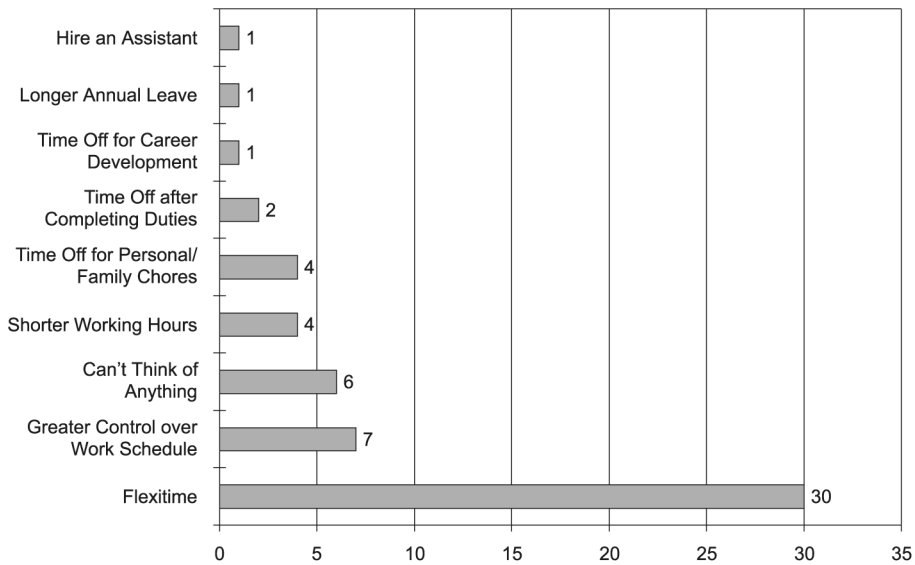Work versus family orientation
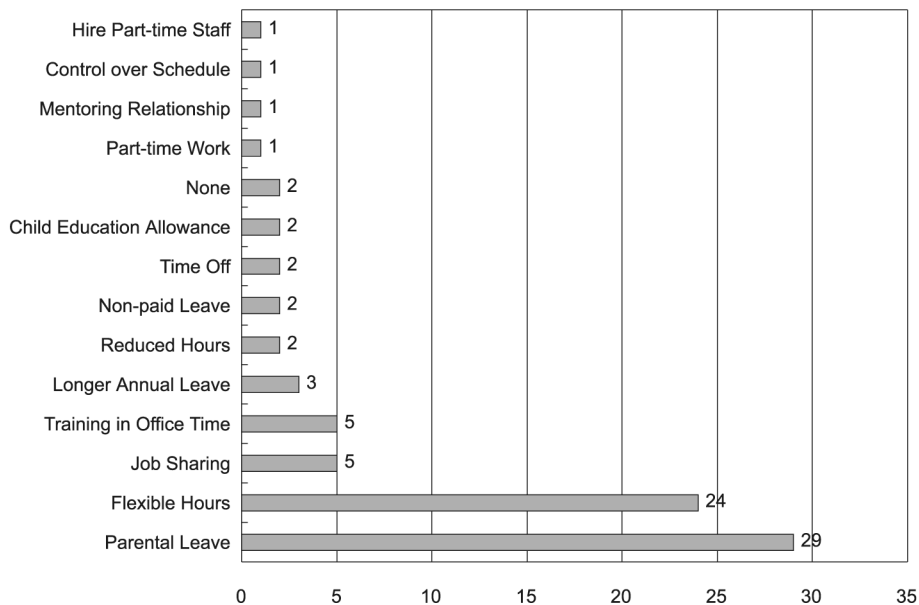
Figure 5.
Suggested HR
interventions

Figure 6.
Choice of women-
friendly work
arrangements

($n = 5$) and job sharing ($n = 5$), for example, are both related to time, as are "time off" ($n = 2$), "reduced hours" ($n = 2$), "non-paid leave" ($n = 2$), and "longer annual leave" ($n = 3$). The consensus is that a more flexible work schedule (defined in various ways), leading to more time for family matters, would be the most desirable solution to work-family conflict.

Discussion

This study examined Hong Kong married female professional women's experience and sources of work-family conflict and their preferred family-friendly policies. The results of this study give a general picture of married female professionals in Hong Kong as being family-oriented, but needing to work long hours. When combining work role and family role, they end up having a very intense life style, since each of the roles demands their time, energy and commitment. Their main problem is to find the time to juggle both family and work roles. In the Chinese socio-cultural environment, they feel they have little support from husbands and organisations. They still have a traditional relationship with the husband in which he gives limited time to family matters (Siu and Chiu, 1994). They work in a business environment rooted in the "command and control" era (Ng and Chiu, 1997; Wright *et al.*, 2000), where family-oriented policies are not prevalent (Ng and Chiu, 1997). Thus, a significant percentage of them feel that they suffer from exhaustion and burn-out.

The influx of mothers into the workforce has led to difficulties in managing the work-family interface that should no longer be overlooked. The issue of how to respond to the multiple roles of women in the workforce needs to be considered, so they may experience a higher level of job satisfaction, especially given the growing recognition that employees are a competitive resource (Pfeffer and Ross, 1990), and the finding that work-family balance is positively related to employee work performance (Tompson and Wener, 1997). Organisations (particularly those in Hong Kong) should develop more awareness of the needs of their employees, especially married women employees, in order to help them balance work and family responsibilities.

The evidence from this study, supported by a wide variety of previous research, strongly suggests that workplace flexibility in terms of hours worked and of more control over how time is spent, represents two issues that appeal to Hong Kong women professionals with children. Flexitime, in many variations, has been adopted in a large number of organisations in the developed Western economies with generally favourable reactions by both management and employees (Nollen, 1989).

As the findings reveal a clear preference on the part of women for time flexibility so as to better manage work-family concerns, organisations in Hong Kong should no longer ignore flexibility as a family-responsive policy. A two-pronged approach would simplify the complexity of the work-family issue. Cutting through the complexity by concentrating on the "doable" may be the most sensible option for Hong Kong companies. What is "doable" is clear: managers need to create better conditions for women in terms of time flexibility. Implementing family-friendly policies is a win-win situation for both employers and employees. For example, Orpen (1981) reported that flexitime caused a significant increase in job satisfaction.

The results of this study have practical implications for organisations. They will help to make organisations and their management more aware of the importance of family-friendly work arrangements for assisting employed mothers to deal with their conflicting roles of worker, spouse and parent. Organisations can perhaps gain competitive advantage, especially when seeking to retain the best talent, by facilitating the recruitment and retention of women employees through the implementation of workable (i.e. culturally acceptable), family-friendly work arrangements.

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