

Does work-life balance matter for working others' engagement at work? A case of working mothers in Windhoek, Namibia

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Background. Working mothers are committed to advancing the mandate of the organisations that employ them, yet they also bear the pre-existing and important responsibilities of household care and child-rearing. This can impact their ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Objective. To investigate the global concept of work-life balance among working mothers in Namibian, with a particular interest in how it influences their work engagement.

Methods. In this cross-sectional survey, a positivist approach was used to collect data from working mothers in Windhoek ($n=200$), using purposive sampling.

Results. There was a significant inverse relationship between family-to-work conflict and work engagement. We also found a significant inverse relationship between work-family conflict, family-to-work conflict and working mothers' vigour at work, one of the dimensions of work engagement. Family-to-work conflict was found to negatively affect working mothers' absorption at work, another dimension of work engagement.

Conclusion. Organisations, regardless of size, should recognise the important roles played by working mothers and implement interventions to mitigate negative spillovers between homes and work responsibilities, ultimately enhancing work engagement.

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Student author biography

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The Declaration of Philadelphia asserts that labour is a necessary component of daily life and is essential to a person's dignity, wellbeing and growth.^[1] For many people, being able to obtain and keep a job that pays a living wage is crucial to improving their quality of life.^[2] Labour not only provides financial and social security but also plays a substantial role in people's daily lives, offering a sense of purpose.^[2] According to the International Labor Organisation,^[3] the percentage of working women has significantly increased due to a reduction in women's economic dependence on men. However, it could be argued that this development also introduced the work-life conflict dilemma between two important roles, household and child-rearing tasks v. paid work. The occupational health psychology paradigm asserts that work-life balance is crucial for employee wellbeing in all facets of life.^[3-6] The absence of balance signifies a conflict,^[7] creating the potential for working mothers to be ineffective in either role. This imbalance can have disastrous consequences for both their homes and the organisations they work for.

In the domain of work, Amah^[8] reported that work-family conflict has been shown to lead to poor engagement in work and poor job commitment, which inevitably leads to poor job performance. This can

be disastrous for organisations, increasing the likelihood of employee dissatisfaction and turnover.^[8] The ideal situation is to have working mothers who are engaged in their work roles while effectively managing their personal responsibilities.

According to Schaufeli *et al.*^[9] the term 'work engagement' refers to a happy, contented mental state that is marked by vigour, dedication and absorption. It is a sense of devotion and commitment to one's work and responsibilities. They posited that the foundation of work engagement lies in the substantial mental and physical energy, tenacity and resilience exhibited by employees when tackling challenging and demanding tasks at work, commonly referred to as vigour.^[9] Another aspect of work engagement is employees' sense of belonging, acceptability and the pride and purpose they derive from their job, which is known as dedication. The last aspect of work engagement is absorption, focusing on an employee's complete concentration and deep involvement in their task.^[9]

The benefits of having engaged employees include improved employee safety, better employee health, increased employee satisfaction, lower absenteeism and higher retention rates.^[8] For organisations to have and benefit from engaged working mothers, it is crucial to investigate

the effects of work-family conflict and family-to-work conflict on the engagement of working mothers. This effort is essential to mitigate the negative spillovers that may arise from either role.

Despite the increasingly common problem of managing work and family life demands among women, particularly working mothers,^[7] there is a lack of literature addressing the work-life balance of working mothers in the Namibian context. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between work-family conflict, family-to-work conflict and work engagement among working mothers from diverse work sectors in Windhoek, Namibia.

Methods

A cross-sectional research design was used, and a purposive sampling technique was employed to select 200 working mothers. A working mother was defined as a woman who combines a career with the added duty of raising a child and other home responsibilities.

The survey encompassed the following sections:

- 1) The nine-item **Utrecht work engagement scale (UWES-9)**,^[10] which is used to assess work engagement. The UWES-9 is a self-reported measure with three subscales: vigour, dedication and absorption. All items were graded on a five-point scale, with 1 being the worst (never) and 5 being the best (always). Internal consistency values ranged between 0.60 and 0.88 for vigour, 0.75 and 0.90 for dedication and 0.66 and 0.86. for absorption.
- 2) The **work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict questionnaire**^[11] was used to measure the extent to which work demands interfered with family life and vice versa. According to Netemeyer *et al.*^[11] the Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.86, which reveals satisfactory internal consistency reliability.

The data was analysed using SPSS^[12] and stored on a password-protected computer accessible to the researchers only.

The research proposal and instruments were reviewed by the Department of Psychology and Social Work Ethics Review Committee and were approved.

Participants willingly took part in the study and had the freedom to withdraw at any time, without facing any adverse consequences. Data was reported as an aggregate, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.

Results

Most of the participants were between the ages of 31 and 40 years, with the majority holding a master's degree as their highest qualification. Overall, 79.5% of the participants had one child between the ages of 0 and 12 months, while 19.5 % indicated having two to three children. Only 1% of the participants had more than four children.

The Pearson correlation coefficient test was used to determine the relationship between work-family conflict, family-work conflict, and work engagement.

Table 1 shows a significant, inverse relationship between work-family conflict and work engagement ($r = -0.13, p < 0.01$; small effect). Moreover, family-work conflict has a significant inverse relationship with work engagement ($r = -0.25, p < 0.01$; small effect). As far as the dimensions of work engagement are concerned, work-family conflict was found to have a significant inverse relationship with vigour ($r = -0.22, p < 0.01$; small effect).

Work-family conflict (spillover of work into the home setting) did not affect the work engagement of working mothers in Windhoek, Namibia. Further, the work-family conflict did not correlate with dedication and absorption as dimensions of work engagement.

Family-to-work conflict had a significant, inverse relationship with vigour ($r = -0.30, p < 0.01$; medium effect) and with absorption ($r = -0.19, p < 0.01$; small effect). No significant relationship was found between family-to-work conflict and dedication as a dimension of work engagement.

Discussion

The lack of a significant relationship between work-family conflict and work engagement suggests that, for the participating working mothers from diverse work environments, their work roles do not substantially interfere with their family responsibilities. However, the inverse relationship between family-work conflict and work engagement indicates that, to some extent, family-to-work conflict influences working mothers' engagement negatively. It also signifies a spillover of personal family factors that impede the level of work engagement among working mothers. This is consistent with previous findings, which showed the existence of a negative relationship between family-work conflict and the performance of the employees.^[11]

In tandem with the Job Demands Resources Model, the identified significant negative relationships provide evidence that various family factors, which could be conceptualised as demands, exert more detrimental effects on the overall engagement of working mothers, both in general and within the workplace.

Interestingly, vigour, a specific dimension of work engagement was affected negatively by both work-family conflict and family-to-work conflict. Employees who take on tough and challenging tasks at work exhibit vigour.^[13] The present study provides evidence that numerous, yet unidentified, demands exist within the home and work settings of working mothers, influencing their ability to mentally engage with work (i.e. show mental resilience and a willingness to put effort).

Several studies that used the Job Demands Resources Model as a framework have consistently demonstrated that resources positively influence work engagement.^[13] Employers should offer adequate and appropriate support to their employees, such as flexible working arrangements and on-site childcare, to reduce the negative spillover effects from the family to the work setting. Our demographic data showed that 79.5 % of participants had one child between the ages of 0 months to 12 months. Employers should constantly evaluate if mothers with infant babies are adjusting sufficiently and offer support accordingly to enhance work-life balance.

Table 1. Pearson Correlations of the study variables

Variables and path	Correlation coefficient
WFC-WE	-0.13
FWC-WE	-0.25**
WFC-vigour	-0.22**
WFC-dedication	-0.11
WFC- absorption	0.01
FWC-vigour	-0.30**
FWC-dedication	-0.14
FWC-absorption	-0.19**

WFC = Work-family conflict; WE- Work engagement; FWC = Family-work conflict
 **Correlation is significant at a 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From a workplace context, it could be argued that working mothers will experience demands in the workplace depending on their specific job profiles. Van den Broek *et al.*^[14] argued that the balance between job resources and demands enables the categorisation of different job profiles. These include demanding jobs (characterised by more demands than resources), resourceful jobs (with low demands and high resources), poor jobs (low demands and low resources) and rich jobs (involving high job demands and high job resources).^[14] It is important and necessary for organisations to continually evaluate the job profiles of working mothers and ensure a consistent flow of resources. A supportive and conducive work climate and organisational culture must continually reinforce the importance of the different roles women play in society and the workplace.

The study provides a different perspective on the work-life balance dilemma among working mothers by evaluating the family-to-work and work-to-family conflicts as possible causes of work disengagement among working mothers. Further studies should assess the specific demands in the workplace and in the family role that impact the engagement and effectiveness of working mothers in both roles. In this regard, a qualitative study is recommended.

Further, the study comprised a mixed sample of women from diverse work contexts and arrangements in Windhoek, Namibia. It is recommended that future research investigate the pattern of work-life balance in other parts of Namibia and compare, empirically, whether the work-life balance and work engagement pattern are similar across different geographical locations.

The study focused on work-life balance as an independent factor that could have a bearing on the work engagement of working mothers. However, other than the work-life balance variable, there could be several other factors that could influence the engagement of women in the workplace. This could include supervisor support, job resources and collegial support.

Conclusion

The study provides evidence that work-family conflict and family-to-work conflict influence the work engagement of working mothers to some

extent. The conceptualisation of work-family and family-to-work conflict will differ per home setting and work settings, indicating that interventions catered towards the two constructs, will differ.

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