

# **A Study on the Relationship of Social Support, Stress and Work-family Conflict Facing Women University Teachers**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper is the product of an investigative research on the relationship and interactive effects of social support, stress and work-family conflict facing women teachers of the universities in public and private sectors of Pakistan. The sample comprised 250 women teachers from three public and three private sector universities of Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. This study implies the focus of developing a preventive counseling package to help the women employees in coping with their work-family conflict. Multiple research questions were explored in this regard. Descriptive characteristics of the sample were analyzed as well as the correlation and independent sample t-test was applied to seek out whether there was a significant difference in the stress and work-family conflict facing women teachers in public and private sector universities. The findings revealed that teachers of public sector universities experienced more work-family conflict in comparison to teachers employed in the universities of private sector. The age and marital status were also the factors that revealed significant differences in the experience of stress and work-family conflicts. In light of these findings, the suggestions have been given for the plausible interventions that are extremely important to assist women in their capacity to cope with impending demands, and this study lays emphasis on the great need for social support networks as well as employers' support because these can markedly help in managing the stress and work-family conflict of the women employees.*

**Keywords:** Social Support, Stress, Work-family Conflict, University Teachers, Women employees of Pakistan

## **INTRODUCTION**

Stress and strains have direct cumbersome effects on the mental health of the individuals. Mental health is illustrated as the capacity of an individual to respond to multifarious experiences of life with patience, flexibility and sense of purpose.

This can be described as the ability of an individual to maintain a balance between its life and the surroundings in which it survives. A mentally healthy individual experiences conflict in lower frequencies and is usually able to cope with its conflicts in an efficient manner (Onah, 1993). There erupts a state of stress and strain on Pakistani women's mental health as they strive to strike a balance among the manifold challenging demands and pressures on their time and energy. Stress is a natural reaction to the looming outside threats and this is evident when humans encounter a threatening physical or emotional situation. This can have adverse health effects on women. This is especially true when this stress is experienced for a prolonged period of time or when this stays unresolved and unmanaged (Lazarus, 1966). Stress for prolonged period of time not only hyper-activates the bodily systems but also causes multiple psychosomatic diseases. Due to all these concerns, this is inevitable to ignore this grave phenomenon among an important sector of Pakistani society, known as working women. Akinboye et al. (2002) have stated that though stress contributes its crucial role on both women's physical and psychological health and is consequently an unhealthy and futile response pattern to change. Further they have identified the significant causes of stress at workplace, including new administrative policies and management technique, office policies, long work hours, redundancies, bullying, harassment, etc. The National Women's Health Information Centre NWHI (2003) in its international annual survey reports has identified the causes of stress like traumatic accident and death, daily life hassles, the workplace pressures, and family responsibilities. The association has also labeled the work-family conflict as leading cause of stress and strain for working women. Work-family conflict can be described as the strain or conflict that usually occurs when Pakistani women employees in their dual roles try to cope with the impending needs of their spouses, children, elderly parents, parents-in-laws as well as of the increasing demands from their employers. This scenario is referred to as work-family conflict.

There are multidimensional workplace characteristics that can also lead to higher levels of work-family conflicts. These have been identified in the researches as number of hours worked per week, the amount and frequency of overtime required, an inflexible work schedule, unsupportive supervisor, and an in-hospitable organizational culture for balancing work and family all increase the likelihood that women employees will encounter the state of conflict between their work and family role (Greenhaus & Bentell, 1985). According to Baruch and Barnett (1997) women who had multiple life roles (e.g., mother, wife, employee) were less depressed and had higher self-esteem than women who were more satisfied in their marriages and jobs compared to women and men who were not

married, unemployed, or childless. They have, however, argued that a lot more depends on the quality of role rather than on the quantity of roles, played by an individual. This suggests that there is a positive association between multiple roles and positive mental health, provided that women experience adequate support and appreciation from her surroundings. The research studies from western literature have revealed that there are certain factors that operate effectively to overcome stress and work-family conflicts. Among the identified factors the most predominant one seems to be the social support networking. This has been narrated as the "sum of the social, emotional, and instrumental exchanges with which the individual is involved having the subjective consequences that an individual sees himself/herself as an object of continuing value in the eye of significant others" (Ross, 1999). Highlighting the importance of social support in the mental health of women, New York Reuters Health (2005) reported that "feeling loved and supported by family and friends appear to protect women, but not men, from major depression" (Aaronson, 1989). Thus, the current research is a primary systematic endeavor to unravel the dynamics of stress and social support in their interactive effects with work-family conflict so that effective management measures to cope with it can be suggested. Social support has multidimensional perspectives. For instance, Hagihara, Tarumi, and Miller (1998) have defined social support as "the provision and receipt of tangible and intangible goals, services, and benefits (such as encouragement and reassurance) in the context of informational relationships (e.g., family, friends, co-worker and boss)". It has been presented as a complex construct denoting varying levels of support across different cultures (Vanx, 1988; Barker, 2001). Social support has also been inferred as the physical and emotional comfort given to individuals by their family, friends, co-worker and significant others. It is a perception that we are part of a community of people who acknowledge value and care for us (Gordy, 1996; Barling, 1990). There are multiple sources of social support such as regard rendered by those around us, acknowledgements of the efforts made by an individual and appreciation for something extended (Alarie, 1996). The research so far has revealed two possible effects of social support. The first one is known as direct effects whereas the second one is labeled as buffering effects. The direct pathway indicates that levels of social support effectively works to improve levels of well being, or enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem (Balvin, 1993; Graham, 1998; Cohen, 1998; Morse, 1997), whereas the buffering hypothesis describes that social support happens to affect health in the context of exposure to acute or chronic stressor (Alloway & Bebbington, 1987; Barling, 1998; Barnes, 2002). There are several research studies that have equally established that lack of social support can lead to mental disorders.

Multiple researches in the international research have attempted to explore the phenomenon of work-family conflict (Quigley, 2003; Cochrane & Bal, 1989; Balvin, 1993; Maktabi, 2004). Still the reported data from Pakistani society in the domain of work-family conflict for women is never systematically collected, analyzed and presented. The current research study is, therefore, an endeavor to bridge this research gap. It investigates some hypotheses to unravel this phenomenon of great concern. Out of the articulated objectives of the study, this paper explores, first of all, whether there is a significant relationship between stress, social support and work-family conflict. Secondly, this hypothesizes that there is a significant difference in perceived level of stress between young and old women. Thirdly, this explores that there is no significant difference in the level of work-family conflict between married and single women. This also investigates that there is no significant difference in the work-family conflicts between working women of public and private sector universities.

## METHOD

The current research has been conducted following descriptive survey design. This design is the major procedure employed in realizing the articulated research objectives of the study.

### *Sample*

The sample of the study consists of two hundred and fifty (250) women teachers of universities in the range of ages 25-65 ( $M = 47.8$ ,  $SD=13.1$ ). Convenience sampling technique has been used to select the samples. The teachers taken as sample were from six public and private sector universities in Lahore, Pakistan.

### *Measures*

The foremost section in the questionnaire contained the bio-demographic information of the respondents.

### **Work-Family Conflict**

Work-family conflict intensity was measured using the interrole conflict scale of Pleck et al. (1980). This scale consists of eight items based on the three most prevalent aspects of work-family conflict, namely excessive work time, schedule conflicts, and fatigue or irritability. Five-point scaled response options ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) were used. The reliability coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) for this work-family conflict scale was 0.84.

### **Social Support Scale**

Perceptions of support from supervisor, co-workers, husbands, and friends and relatives were measured. Items developed by Caplan et al. (1975) were used for all four sources of support, inserting the appropriate source for each set of items. The scale of Caplan et al. (1975) was used by Greenglass et al. (1988). Unlike some procedures which measure social support indirectly (for example, as number of social contacts), these sub-scales were chosen because they can directly assess the respondent's perception regarding the level of social support received. There were four items in each of the sub-scales. Each respondent was requested to state the extent of support received from spouse, using five-point Likert scaled response options. The reliability coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) for the social support subscales were 0.86.

### **Indigenous Job Stress Questionnaire**

A brief job stress questionnaire was used reflecting job stress, job stressors, psychological and somatic stress responses and modifying factors at the same time. The scores for each job stressor, modifying factors and psychological and somatic responses were individually calculated by the standardized method. These scores ranged from 0 to 5, with a lower score indicating a higher job stress level. The total health risk score demonstrated by the questionnaire was a comprehensive index of job stress, and comparable to the standardized score indicated by 100 points. This was considered the mean score for the general Pakistani population. That is, if the score for an occupational group is 120 points, the risk with individuals in that occupation may involve some stress-related problems which are considered to be 20% higher than that of the general Pakistani population.

### *Procedure*

The data were collected from six public and private sector universities of Lahore, Pakistan. The complete hired and employed lists were collected from the Registrar's office and the component of female workers were highlighted. Then through Convenience sampling procedure, the sample was selected from six universities (three universities from public sector and three universities from private sector). The permission from the directors, chairpersons was sought prior hand in addition to the consent forms that were duly filled by the participants before the data collection. The participants were informed that the data sought from them would be fully used for academic research purposes and they had the right to withdraw during the data collection procedures without any penalty. The demographic questionnaires and other sections of the questionnaire dealing with

perceived stress, social support and work-family conflict were fully explained before the participants gave written responses on them. Each participant was given generous time of two to three hours to fill the questionnaires. If the participants found any ambiguity or confusions, they were thoroughly explained. The confidentiality of the data was fully ensured. The participants who were sought for the study were absolutely cooperative and none refused to respond on the questionnaires. The data collection was completed in six months' time.

## RESULTS

The result was arrived at by analyzing the data for descriptive and inferential analyses. The descriptive features like frequency and simple percentage method were used to analyze the bio-data of the respondents. In order to find out the differences, the independent sample t-test was used, while Pearson product moment correlation was used to find the association between social support, perceived stress and work-family conflict. The findings of the study based on the test results of the following hypotheses have now been presented in the tables:

- $H_A$  -1: There is a significant relationship between age, stress, social support and work family conflict.
- $H_o$  -2: There is no significant difference in the perceived level of stress between young and old women.
- $H_o$  -3: There is no significant difference between married and single women with respect to the effect of social support on work-family conflict.
- $H_o$  -4: There is no significant difference between married and single women with respect to perceived work-family conflict.
- $H_o$  -5: There is no significant difference between the women teachers of public and private sector universities.

*Table I. Correlations between Study Variables*

Relationship	r	p
Stress and Work-family conflict	0.53	.03
Social support and Work-family conflict	-.72	.23
Social support and stress	-.048	.05



*Table II. T-Test Summary Table Showing the Difference between Young (40 Years and Below) and Old (41 Years and Above) Women in Their Level of Stress*

Variables	N	Mean	S <sub>D</sub>	D <sub>f</sub>	Calculated t-value	Critical t-value
Young women (40 years & below)	120	28.2	2.37	248 8	2.0	1.96
Old women (41 years & above)	130	25.2	2.08			

\*p < .05

The result of table II shows that the calculated t-value of 2.00 is greater than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. The hypothesis is, therefore, rejected. This indicates that there is a significant difference between young and old women with respect to stress, based on age.

*Table III. T-test summary showing the difference in the effect of social support between married and single women*

Variables	N	Mean	S <sub>D</sub>	D <sub>f</sub>	Calculated t-value	Critical t-value
Married women	180	19.5	4.18	248 8	2.58	1.96
Single women	70	16.2	4.02			

\*p < .05

The result on table III shows that the calculated t-value of 2.58 is greater than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. The hypothesis is, therefore, rejected. This indicates that there is a significant difference between married and single women with respect to the effect of social support on work-family conflict.

*Table IV. T-test summary showing the difference between married and single women on perceived work-family conflict*

Variables	N	Mean	S <sub>D</sub>	D <sub>f</sub>	Calculated t-value	Critical t-value
Married women	180	19.5	4.18	248 8	1.98	1.96
Single women	70	16.2	4.02			

\*p < .05

The result of table IV reveals that the computed t-value of 1.98 is greater than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. The hypothesis is, therefore, rejected. This indicates that there is a significant difference between married and single women on their perceived level of work-family conflict. The reason may be that single women can devote more attention and time to work as well as family than married women. This result shows that single women experienced less work-family conflict compared to married women. In the other words, married women experienced more work-family conflict compared to single women.

*Table V. T-test summary showing difference in work-family conflict between women teachers of public and private sector universities*

Variables	N	Mean	S <sub>D</sub>	D <sub>f</sub>	Calculated t-value	Critical t-value
Public Sector (teachers)	150	13.01	6.37	248	2.09	1.96
Private Sector (teachers)	100	12.52	6.09	8		

\*p < .05

Table V shows that the calculated t-value of 2.09 is greater than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. The hypothesis is, therefore, rejected. This indicates that there is a significant difference between public and private sector university teachers with respect to the perceived level of work-family conflict. The mean scores of the table indicate that women teachers of public sector universities experienced greater work-family conflict compared to women teachers of private sector universities.

## DISCUSSION

The result of the first hypothesis revealed that there is a significant relationship between age, stress, social support and work-family conflicts. This finding implies that the women employees who are exposed to excessive strain and stress usually experience poorer social support and, as a sequel, they have greater work-family conflicts. This finding explains that age seems to contribute significantly to determination of perceived level of stress as experienced by working women. Salawu (2004) also revealed the same corresponding finding. Almedia (2002) cited by Salawu (2004) reported a significant difference in stress



across ages owing to the fact that the demands are different and the middle life is assumed to be of the most productive years in one's life. Aremu (1999), and Almedia (2002) also reported that young and old women happen to experience and perceive varying levels of stress. This can be attributed to the varying nature of responsibilities that women have to discharge across different age spans. Also evident is the fact that as an individual matures, the capacity to cope and overcome stress relatively increases. The degree and the manner in which the stress is perceived also differ across different ages. This is due to the fact that the way stress level is appraised changes as the person matures (Salawu, 2004). Certain studies have also revealed that past experiences significantly change the level of subjectively experienced stress and also creates the differences in the reaction to stress, partly because of the practice effects or owing training in the familiar experiences. Thus, age seems to inculcate better skills to cope with stress. This is also due to the fact that the more one stays at a position; the more one grows older and learns to cope with work-family related stress, (Mcgrath, 1997; Zames, 2003). Contrarily speaking, Aremu (1998) is of the view that young working women have better energy level and can cope with the work-family conflict in an efficient manner. The present findings are also standing in sharp contrast with the research findings by Ogunlanoh (1986), Aboderin (1998) Fasakin (2002) and Asuzu (2004). The researches by them reported no significant differences in the perceived level of stress experienced by working women based on their age. The possible reason of this is the fact that not just the age is the determining variable in stress adjustment rather this is the ability to cope and manage the stress and work-family conflicts that make the difference. This is also hypothesized in the current research study that there will be no significant difference in the level of work-family conflict between married and single women. This hypothesis has been supported as the differences in the demands from one's children and spouse and those from their parents or from the extended families with whom they are living are perceived to be the equally imposing pressures and strains.

The result of the findings from another hypothesis reflected convincing significant differences in the effects of social support between marital statuses of working women. This finding indicates that married and single women experience the effects of social support quite differently and this finding is in correspondence with the findings by Alarie (1996), Aremu and Hammed (1998) Sherbourne and Hays (1990), Kendler (2005), and Aremu (1998). These researchers reported that working women who have favorable marital life, and have supportive husbands get help their spouses in meeting with the financial expenses. They experience greater life satisfaction and better capacity to cope with stress and consequently reduced levels of work-family conflicts. Kessler and Mcleod (2002) have maintained

that strong social networking ensures greater social support for emotional well-being of the working women. Further researches have shown that social support from families and especially from spouses is more significant than that from friends (Kendler, 2005; Alarie 1996).

These present findings substantiate that being integrated into social networks, and receiving high level of social support are important for quality of life, sound mental health and well being of the women (Kessler & Mcleod, 1997; Cohen, 1998; Stansfeld & Sprooton, 2002; House & Kahn, 1985). In contrast to this, lie the research findings by Stansfeld and Sprooton (2002), Afolabi and Imhonde (2002), and Alarie (1996), who observed that intimate relationships may be stressful as well as stress-relieving. The findings by Hoffman (1996), and Kee et al. (1999) have also shown that lack of social support has been viewed as the leading cause of common psychological problems among working women. This is primarily due to the reason that social support provides the channels to overcome distress.

This also investigates that there will be no significant difference in the work-family conflicts between working women of public sector and private sector universities. It also indicates that work place settings create the differences in the way work-family conflict is experienced (Greenhaus & Bentell, 1985; Okonweze, 2005; Alarie, 1996; Aremu & Hammed, 1998; Aremu, 1998; Kendler, 2005). These researchers have discussed that work related characteristics have ample bearings on the perceived work-family conflicts. This phenomenon can be explained with the view of Baruch and Barnett (1987) who explained that women who had jobs on contract and were uncertain about the permanent status of their jobs, they would possibly keep on putting in greater efforts to keep their employers satisfied. As a result, family related issues are poorly entertained in such private sector organizations.

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The foregoing discussions lead to conclude that the teachers of public sector universities experienced more work-family conflict as compared to the teachers in the private sector universities. It also emerges that the age and marital status were also the factors that revealed significant differences in the experience of stress and work-family conflict. Pakistani society like societies of many other developing nations is facing greater challenges in work and family lives with the incorporation of more and more women employees. The nature of the dual roles that women play in eastern culture aggravates work-family conflicts. Several challenges for women employees with reference to organization and society exist. In this context, social support is greatly needed as a coping strategy for individuals

to conciliate between work demands and family responsibilities. It is clear from this study that stress and work-family conflicts tax the employees and make their situations quite adverse. This stress and work-family conflicts collectively produce anxiety, burnout, depression and distress, which consequently affect the performance level of the women employees. The current research study also showed that different types of support, such as emotional, practical and informational supports from different sources, such as the family, co-workers/employees etc. are more advantageous to health and well-being. Therefore, the current study is expected to be useful for creating awareness of the employers of labor in the Pakistani work sectors to establish family supportive programmes. Such management measures can significantly help in reducing stress and work-family conflict for women employees. This can hopefully help improve the health outcomes for women. The work place counselors can also be sensitized about this issue. The social support networking for women has to be enlarged as this will greatly improve their mental health and general well-being. In fine, it may be recommended that Pakistani women should integrate themselves into various social networks and high level of social support. Hopefully, this will markedly help in managing the stress and work-family conflict of women employees.

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