

# WEPAU

## *Working women and family responsibilities in Sarawak: A Case of Miri*

by

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## ABOUT WEPAU

The Women's Economic Policy Analysis Unit ("WEPAU") was founded in April 1999 in response to a growing void - within Australia and internationally - in the gender analysis of the economic and social policy issues that confront women. To most effectively address this void, WEPAU was established as an inter-disciplinary research program, spanning two divisions of Curtin University, the Curtin Business School (CBS) and the Division of Humanities.

WEPAU is committed to producing high quality quantitative and qualitative feminist research on a broad range of issues that women identify as undermining their ability to achieve equity and autonomy in the current context. Meeting this commitment is enabled by the breadth of experience and expertise brought to WEPAU by an increasing range of researchers.

Through its academic and consultancy research into women's experiences of social and economic policies WEPAU provides a meaningful gender analysis of policy. An analysis strongly put forward via active contribution to government policy debates.

Our broad objectives include:

- Identifying the cases and causes of women's disadvantaged social and economic status and to contribute appropriate policy initiatives to address this disadvantage;
- Demonstrating the way in which social factors, particularly gender, influence the construction of economic theory and policy;
- Extending current theory and research by placing women and their social context at the centre of analysis;
- Contributing an interdisciplinary approach to the understanding of women's position in society. In turn, this should enable the unit to better reflect the interrelatedness of the social, economic and political discourses in policy and their consequent implications for women;
- Fostering feminist research both nationally and internationally;
- Expanding linkages with industry;
- Establishing and supporting a thriving Curtin University postgraduate research community with a common interest in feminist scholarship.

For further details see: <http://www.cbs.curtin.edu/research/wepau/> and/or contact WEPAU at [wepau@cbs.curtin.edu.au](mailto:wepau@cbs.curtin.edu.au).

# *Working women and family responsibilities in Sarawak*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia is a multi racial country made up of 11 states in the Malay Peninsular (West Malaysia), together with another two on the northern part of the island of Borneo; Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia). Ethnic Malays and other indigenous peoples make up 65 per cent of the Malaysian population. Other groups comprise the Chinese, 26 percent, and ethnic Indians, about 7.5 per cent. Indonesians, Europeans and Australians make up the other 1.2 per cent of the population, as revealed in Census 2002. ([www.statistics.gov.my/English/profile](http://www.statistics.gov.my/English/profile))

This study is carried out in Sarawak and concentrated in the city of Miri. Sarawak had a population of approximately 2.2 million in 2002 (about 9 per cent of the total Malaysian population). It is also comprised of a number of different ethnic groups, each with its own unique culture and traditions. Miri had a population of about 240,000 in 2002. (Department of Statistics, 2003)

The 2002 census showed that women made up approximately 49.1 per cent of the total population in Sarawak and the number of women entering the labour force has increased steadily over the years. This paper is concerned with assessing whether women's growing presence in the labour force has come at a cost to themselves, or to their children, for whom they are usually the primary care givers. International Labour Organisation strategies include equitable sharing of family responsibilities between men and women and the adoption of other supportive measures to reconcile productive and reproductive activities (Women's International Network, 1995). But, as we argue in this paper, before these strategies can be realized in Sarawak there is a need for a better understanding of the interplay between women's paid work and their family responsibilities.

Most Malaysian studies of work-family have been based on the experiences of women in West Malaysia. The current study changes the focus to women in East Malaysia, where, to the authors' knowledge, no research on work-family conflict issues has been conducted. The study explores the issues which arise for working women in Sarawak as they try to balance paid work with unpaid family commitments. The study also seeks to identify the similarities and differences between the experiences of women in Sarawak and those of their sisters in West Malaysia.

## **2. BACKGROUND: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE SARAWAK LABOUR MARKET**

This section provides a brief overview of the important features of women's involvement in the Sarawak labour market, drawing especially on the detailed description provided by Austen and Shrestha, (2004).

The labour force participation rate among women in Sarawak is currently 53.2 per cent. Although this is substantially less than men's (86.1 per cent), it is higher than the national average for women (of 46.9 per cent). Women's labour force participation rate in Sarawak follows a typical pattern: decreasing in the age groups where women are most likely to be heavily committed to the care of young children, and again when women are older. For example, the participation rate among women aged 30-34 years is 55 per cent. It rises to 60.5 per cent among women aged 40-44 years, before falling to 48.4 per cent among women aged 60-64 years. (see Austen and Shrestha, 2004, Table 2)

Among the women who are employed in the urban areas of Sarawak (such as Miri), wholesale and retail trade and manufacturing are key industries. Together these two industries accounted for 37.5 per cent of total female employment in the urban parts of Sarawak in 2001. (Austen and Shrestha, *op.cit.*, Table 11)

Reflecting on this (as well as the predominance of agricultural activities across the State as a whole), the agriculture, service and sales-based occupations feature prominently in the employment of women in Sarawak. Fully 66.0 per cent of women were employed in these 3 occupational groups in 2001. Very few women are employed in the higher status (and higher paying) occupational groups, such as legislators, senior officials and managers. (Austen and Shrestha, *op.cit.*, Table 12)

Malaysia experienced a period of rapid economic growth between 1970 and 1995 and this contributed to a fall in the national unemployment rate from 8.0 per cent to 2.8 per cent. The period also witnessed an increase in women's participation in the labour force - from 32.2 per cent to 47.1 per cent. In 2001 women accounted for 44 per cent of the country's workforce (Population Census 2000).

Aminah & Gregory, (1997) identified a range of factors that promoted women's involvement in the Malaysian economy, aside from the country's general economic performance. These include: increased years of education for women, improved mother & child health care, greater access to family planning and improved gender-based economic incentives and employment policies.

### 3. BACKGROUND: LITERATURE ON WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT IN MALAYSIA

The Malaysian government has been encouraging women's participation in the labour force. This has been frequently emphasized through the media, where the important role that women play in the development of the country is often emphasised.

However, as more married women enter the labour force, concerns have also been expressed in an emerging literature on work-family conflict over how these women cope with their multiple roles as a wife, mother and employee and how women manage to carry out each of these roles efficiently. Although the opportunities for women in employment in Malaysia have been 'formally' promoted and encouraged, cultural and religious values tend to do otherwise. Women's primary role is still considered as the primary care taker of the family and men's on the other hand, lies in being the economic provider. For example, Malaysian women are more likely to feel guilty if home responsibilities are not carried out efficiently. Women's status is still considered secondary to that of men and, thus, they are often excluded from important economic and political activities (Noraini Noor, 1999; *Topical Issue of Malaysia Women & Gender*, 2001). In terms of employment opportunities, men are more likely to be promoted and there are no specific legislations that state equal pay for equal work except for the administrative directive issued in 1969 for government employees. (*Topical Issue of Malaysia Women & Gender*, 2001)

Married Malaysian women who have taken the initiative to claim a role outside the home may be experiencing difficulties in coping with paid (work place) and unpaid work (domestic chores). Malaysian men although they may be supportive of their wives working because of extra family income might not accept an equal sharing of household tasks. Several recent studies indicate that Malaysian women still bear the major responsibility for doing most household tasks and experience varying levels of work family conflict (see Rahmad Ismail & Fatimah, 1999; Roziah Omar, 2003; Noor Rahamah, 1996; and Noraini M Noor, 1999)<sup>1</sup>. Noraini M Noor (1999) and Aminah Ahmad (1996) argue, additionally, that the experience of many Malaysian women fits within the spillover model, whereby their satisfaction or dissatisfaction at work influences their well being at home.

However, in the study of Noraini Noor (1999), married working women did not express high levels of distress in managing multiple roles. Noraini Noor believed that this outcome was due to both religious and cultural values in Malaysia. That is, the women in Noor's study accepted their role conflict as 'trials from God' and were of the view that their religion had protected them from negative role experiences. Another reason given by Noraini Noor was that Malaysian women,

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<sup>1</sup> These findings parallel those produced in the United States (see, for example, Cotrane, 2000) and Singapore (see, for example, Straughen, 1997)



unlike our Western counterparts, were less expressive and open in admitting their personal problems, especially regarding to their family matters.

Other Malaysian studies have reported of working women employing strategies to cope with their paid and unpaid commitments to minimize work family conflicts. These strategies included, first, finding substitutes for childcare and household tasks to ease the burden of unpaid commitments (Noor Rahamah, 1996, Husna Sulaiman & Lam, 1990, Noraini Noor, 1999). The substitutes included grandparents, close relatives, nurseries and maids.

Attitudes can also be adopted and changed in order to cope with the demands of multiple roles. Hall (1972) identifies 3 types of coping behaviour for dealing with interrole conflict: Type I coping (structural role redefinition); Type II coping (personal role redefinition); and Type III coping (reactive role behaviour). Type I coping (structural role definition) involves 'redefining the expectations held by other people so that fewer conflicting demands are placed upon the person'. Type II coping (personal role redefinition) involves 'changing the person's perceptions of his or her role demands rather than attempting to change the environment'. Type III coping (reactive role behaviour) involves 'attempts whose aim is to meet all of the role demands experienced'.

Aminah (1995) adopted Hall's method of study and applied it to a study of the work-family conflicts experienced by 82 professional women from research institutions in West Malaysia. In her study the most commonly adopted coping method was Type III (reactive role behaviour), followed by Type II (personal role redefinition). For example, she showed that many of the women in her study group changed their own attitudes/approach to work (for example, by trying to meet all the demands from their multiple roles through careful planning, scheduling and organizing). They also altered their perceptions of role expectations (for example by establishing priorities, portioning and separating roles and reducing the standards of some domestic chores).

A similar theme of adjusted expectations and standards was evident in the results of Husna Sulaiman and Lam's (1990) study. They interviewed professional women on how they allocate their time on both paid and unpaid work. Their results showed that the women, apart from the 8.5 hours spent at paid work, dedicated approximately 4.8 to 5.6 hours per weekday to family care and interaction. They spent more time with their children on recreational activities, verbal and affectionate interaction and academic stimulation than on physical care. Household tasks were given minimal time, with many of these tasks delegated to household helpers. Similar findings were reported in Noor Rahamah (1996).

## 4. METHODOLOGY

As noted in the introduction this study explores the issues which arise for working women in Sarawak as they try to balance paid work with unpaid family commitments. The study also seeks to identify the similarities and differences between the experiences of women in Sarawak and those of their sisters in West Malaysia.

The approach taken in this study was to interview 28 working women about their experiences (if any) of work and family conflict, and how they attempted to resolve this conflict.

The study focused especially on the experiences of middle-class working mothers, which we defined as women who earned an income of RM 1,500 and above per month and who had a least one child aged 9 years or under. We chose working women with younger children especially having pre-school children for this study due to the more intense care demands of this age group as they were thought to face the most challenges in balancing their career and home lives. All participants were married and living with their husbands.

The women included in the study all lived in Miri. To ensure the representation of the main employment areas in the city, 7 women each were recruited from the banking, hotel, hospital and education sectors.

The study participants were identified by way of *network sampling*, and were contacted through friends and relatives.

The women were initially given questionnaires that explored their demographic characteristics, and these were followed by in-depth interviews, conducted by the paper's authors.

### ***Limitations***

Before the results of the study are reported, it is important to note that several factors limit the ability to generalise the results. First, since this study only included middle class working women from selected industries in the city of Miri, its findings cannot be viewed as representing Sarawak women in general.

Another limitation concerns a methodological issue. Direct questions were posed to the participants asking them to estimate the amount of time they spent on specific tasks. This might result in over-estimation of the time allocated to frequently performed tasks (Press & Townsley, 1998, cited in Cotrane, 2000) and lower estimates for less performed tasks (Shelton & John, 1996, cited in Cotrane, 2000)<sup>2</sup>. It has also been found in previous studies of such issues that both male

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<sup>2</sup> However, commonly this problem is large only when the period of recall is long

and female respondents tend to overestimate their own contributions to tasks in direct-question surveys.

## 5. RESULTS

This section reports the outcomes of the interviews with the women in our study group, together with some brief details of their demographic characteristics, where this will assist an understanding of the comments that are made. The first sub-section, Work and Family Commitments, summarises the comments the women made about their reasons for working, the value of paid work in their lives, and the challenges they confront in their home lives as a result of their paid work roles. The second sub-section presents the information gathered on the women's unpaid family commitments, especially how these were negotiated and discharged. The final sub-section reports the results of the interviews when the discussion turned specifically to the possible conflicts between mothering roles and career.

### 5.1 Work and Family Commitments

Most women across all sectors said they chose to work because they wanted to be financially independent. Although most of them recognised their spouses as the main breadwinner of the household, however, they still preferred to work and earn their own income in order to have more freedom in their spending. Stephanie, a 31 year old working as a hotel banquet sales manager commented,

*I earn my own income; therefore I can do whatever I want with it without having to depend on my husband.*

Suzie a branch manager of a bank emphasized the importance of receiving respect in the family by earning her own income:

*When a woman is not financially secured, she will be accorded less status in the family. Furthermore, the husband will perceive her as an unequal in terms of knowledge acquisition if she is not employed. The husband will give more respect to an employed wife as she is financially secure and will not always ask for money from him*

The other common reason mentioned was to supplement their husbands' income. Grace, a secretary for sales department at a hotel explained:

*Last time money compared to now, you know...one ringgitt can share three people but now...*

Some women said they worked because they wanted to socialize outside the home and did not like the idea of being a full time housewife. According to these women, being a housewife is boring, unbearable and tiring.

Elsie considered herself as an incompetent housewife and had no interest at all in staying at home

*Looking after kids is tiring...I am not a good cook...very tiring, cannot cope...I think working outside is better than working at home. Even if I had the money and I need not work, I will hire somebody to cook and look after my kids, I will only supervise, I am not interested in household chores.*

Having made the decision to work, how do these women meet the heavy demands of both family and workplace? Did their commitments at work imposed constraints onto their role as a mother and wife?

When the women were asked if their work environments were demanding and affected their roles as wives and mothers, there was a mixed response across the 4 sectors. Women from the financial sector for example, all said their jobs were demanding and had imposed some form of constraints on their family life. Daphne, who has been with her bank for 21 years summed up the stressful work environment which these women had to face:

*It's all in one kind of job where I have to attend to customers, oversee the staff, managing the staff's time plus my own as well. I have to foresee that the running of work from the moment the bank open till it closes. I have to face the challenge of the day, e.g., difficult customers; I have to be quick to think of what they actually wanted and to solve it immediately. It really needs a lot of patience to know how to weigh your personal feeling and your job, especially when dealing with the staff. It's a delicate matter when they will be quick to point a finger at you when you make a small mistake. It is not easy to manage people because you cannot make everybody happy.*

These women, mostly assistant managers, very often had to stay back after work to complete their duties. Bringing work home was also very common. Mabel, an assistant head of a business centre felt exhausted when she arrived home after 6.30pm on most days. She felt guilty for not spending much time with her children. When she had to bring work home, she attended to it only when the children were asleep. On other occasions, she even brought her children with her to work on Saturday afternoons. Far too often, her husband and children had to adjust their life to fit into her work schedule and they planned their family activities around her time. She expressed gratefulness for having an understanding and supportive husband who respected her career decisions. Elise, another assistant manger had learnt to separate work from home.

*Yes my job is quite demanding. Sometimes when I need to work extra hours such as on marketing activities...my husband used to be unhappy. Now he is in the same field and position as I am, he understands. Time management is important and I learn to separate work from family. I tell myself as well as my staff with families, focus on home when at home and when at the office, focus on work. If not, you will not be happy.*

Daphne who has been with her bank for 21 years planned to quit in the next 3 years. Being the main contributor to the household income of a family of 5 children, she commented:

*I am not really happy with my job now because I am doing 3 person's job, but do I have a choice? The only time I have with my family is during weekends. Sometimes, even when I have visitors, I'm still called back to work. I would like to spend more time with my children; however they understand why I have to work. I have discharged well all my responsibilities towards my children and husband except in the area of time.*

In spite of the various reasons given by these women for wanting to work; such as financial independence, to supplement their husbands' income, the need to socialize, the dislike for household chores and etc, to all these women, their family is still the priority to them followed by career. When asked if should they were put in a situation where they had to make a choice between their family and career, all of them expressed openly their strategies to sacrifice their paid commitments/career.

Wendy, a restaurant manageress, who worked on shifts at her current hotel was planning to leave her job soon because her request to work 'normal working hours' had been turned down by the management. The 'abnormal working hours' had reduced her ability to spend more time with her family. Lucy, a 31 year old nurse with 2 pre-school children, was offered a training course in Kuala Lumpur to upgrade herself. She gave it up as she felt her children were too young and she could not afford to be away from them for more than a week. Stephanie, the hotel banquet sales manager said she was happy with her work and had made no plans for her career in the next 3 years. She reasoned that she is "not yet ready to bear the responsibilities that came with the promotion. My three children are all below the age of five."

55 year old Daphne was thinking of retiring.

*I would love to get out of here within the next 3 years, even if I am given the opportunity to advance, I'll still go...my only constrain to move up would be whether I want to shoulder the responsibilities or not. I don't think it's worth it because it will take away precious time from my children, husband and family.*

## 5.2 The Distribution of Unpaid Commitments

Even though these working women are busy working outside their home, their roles as a mother and wife still prevailed. Having a full time job would mean finding substitutes to perform unpaid commitments such as household chores<sup>1</sup> and childcare tasks<sup>2</sup>. We discussed in this section the distribution of unpaid commitments in the family and the working women's attitude towards such arrangements.

The working women in our study spent an average of 29.7 hours per week compared to their spouses, an average of 13.6 hours, on unpaid commitments. Even though both couples hold full time jobs, the contributions by women were more than double that of their spouses. Besides spouses, many of the women had engaged foreign maids, relatives, babysitters and tuition schools to share the burden of their unpaid commitments. In some households with older children, especially elder daughters, these older children also contributed to the unpaid tasks. Thus, these mothers had high reliance on external and internal help. Foreign maids and relatives contributed the most, an average of 72.2 hours and 30.8 hours per week respectively to childcare and household tasks.

The hiring of a live in foreign maid to help out with household chores is a common practice in Malaysia. It is estimated that there are approximately 2 million foreign workers in Malaysia, of which 160,000 are hired as domestic helpers. (*The Growing Problem of Domestic Abuse of Foreign Workers in Malaysia*, 2000) Almost all of the women in the 3 sectors other than the service sector have a live in foreign maid.

Women from the service sector did not engage foreign maids mainly due to the women's lack of trust in them. Similar concerns were expressed by women in the financial sector who had engaged foreign maids but voiced their lack of trust in their maids to care for their children. They 'coped' with this by not leaving the care of their children entirely to the foreign maids. Family members such as grandparents or close relatives were usually at home to "keep an eye" on the maids.

Elsie, a 36 year old assistant bank manager, mother to 3 pre-school children ranging from the age of 5 to 1 years old reported the importance of her own parents staying with her to look after her children. Although she engaged a full time maid at home who took care of most of the household tasks and helped out with the childcare, she still did not trust her: "If they (her parents) are not around...we will have a hard time". When her parents went on holiday for two weeks recently, both she and her husband had to take two weeks leave as well to stay at home with the children.

Some of these women also performed their unpaid commitments either by themselves or with the help of older children, relatives or spouses. For example, the women from the service sector did not engage any maid to help them out, many of them reported they are able to cope because (a) family size is small; (b) children and spouse help out; and/or (c) they can manage on their own.

Having a live in maid or getting help from relatives did not completely free the women in our study from childcare and household duties. For those with maids, the maids mainly concentrated on household chores such as house cleaning, cooking and ironing. As for childcare tasks, a minority of the maids helped with the feeding, dressing and bathing of the children. Thus many of the women, especially those without maids still had to perform many of the unpaid commitments. The division of unpaid commitments was also very much gender based, consistent with many international findings. From the interviews, all the women stressed the importance and the need for equal distribution of household labor; however, results indicated that all of them are still performing more of these duties compared to their spouses. The question then is; how do they come to terms with such conflict?

Emmy, a 40 year old teacher with 5 children commented;

*Having the husband involved in household tasks is very important as it is one of the ways that can help the women to balance their work and family, it is a win-win situation as marriage is about compromising, sharing and from here the family responsibility is not neglected.*

Sandra 34 years old who has an 11 year old son, works in the hotel as a sales and public relations manager holds similar views.

*...there are a lot of changes these days, equally important that both take care of the children and household chores because we are setting example for the children, they get involved and it will help change their mind set, they will not think this is a woman's job and that is a man's job.*

In practice however, the equal distribution of household tasks had been difficult to achieve. Tracy, a 42 year old mother of 3, has an unsupportive husband that refuses to contribute to any childcare or household tasks.

*... he does nothing except home maintenance, married but still have to bear the burden alone...so unlucky.*

As pointed out by Hochschild (1989), many women especially those from non-traditional marriages would want their husband to have a more equal share in household tasks but they also realize that they cannot assert force into such an arrangement. Very often, the women will end up accepting such inequality. This is because they either grow weary of such arguments or they are forced to make

a choice between wanting equality and upsetting the marriage. Some of the complaints noted from the women included:

*... I make noise often...not much improvement...you have to get used to it, is not easy to change another person. When you get married...better stick to it, otherwise, you will not be happy.*

*...my husband works shifts plus I know his character...even when he reads newspaper, he will just leave it and not fold it properly...once in a while, I will make a lot of noise, he will help a little...*

*I am used to doing housework and I accept it. I sometimes ask my husband, he will do the task but later no more...I have to keep reminding him so I give up. I might as well do it myself.*

*We are both breadwinners, but I accept I have more responsibilities for childcare. ...each time it comes out to be the same, so better don't talk so much.*

Some of the women actually did not expect their spouse to contribute especially when it comes to household tasks. The various reasons include; (a) there is enough help, such as from maids and relatives; (b) their spouses would not handle the tasks efficiently; and (c) their spouses are too busy.

Natasha, 33 year old Geography teacher, who is married to a Chinese man and has a child aged 5, commented that her husband is a typical 'Chinese Man' (traditionally brought up who will not get involved in any household tasks but rather concentrate only on working outside to bring income back to the family) who does not lend a helping hand in the house. She does not expect her husband to get involved in the task as it will not make any difference, especially where the husband is not familiar with the task. However, she would prefer her husband to help out in what she considers to be the heavy tasks, like home maintenance and gardening.

When it comes to childcare, most of the women expected higher participation or involvements from their spouses. More than half expressed the importance of getting their spouses involved in childcare. Amelia, a 28 years old nurse whose husband is very often away from home said,

*My husband spends 2 weeks offshore, if he does not take care of the child, how does anak (child) feels love from the father?*



Daphne a mother of 5 children had similar thoughts:

*...it is only right that a husband should have time in bringing up children especially in the early days of childhood when they can learn to associate with their fathers and for character building...*

From the interviews, the spouses, on average spent 10.5 hours and 3.1 hours respectively on childcare and household tasks per week. They spent the most time playing with the children, followed by helping with their children's homework.

Thus, these women seemed to be more successful in getting their spouses to contribute to childcare tasks rather than household chores.

### **5.3 Motherhood Versus Career**

All the women in the study group had relied on substitutes such as maids, relatives, babysitter and tuition centres to look after their children when they were at work. Seeking help from relatives (including grandparents and aunts) was the most popular choice of childcare arrangement followed by maids, tuition centers and babysitters. The majority were happy with the childcare arrangements they had in place and these were decided jointly with their spouses.

The women also considered it important for working mothers to spend time with their children. Some of the reasons specified for this belief included: (a) the need to establish bonding with children especially when they are little; (b) to monitor and discipline them; and (c) to maintain a close relationship and stay "in tune" with them.

Very few of the women directly reported feeling guilty for not being a full-time mother to their children. The women accomplished their motherhood needs via a range of strategies, the most common of which was to spend as much time as possible with their children after work and during the weekends. Many mentioned the importance of spending 'quality' rather than 'quantity' time with their children.

*...time spent must be quality time, where you really listen and attend to them and communicate with them in anything. By quality time, I mean giving them my full attention.*

*When I am at home, I cannot do anything else except looking after them, ...to me if you spend the whole day with the children does not mean that is quality time...of course a little bit more is advantage...but if you really spend your time to educate them when you are home, you also play your part as a mother...even if you stay at home, you are not fulltime, you have to do some housework and in the afternoon, they take naps, your actual time with them is not that long.*

The few women who openly confessed guilty feelings relating to motherhood also expressed a sense of helplessness with their situation. Daphne, for example, wanted to spend more time with her children but, as the main contributor to the household income for a family of 7, she is unable to stop working. "...whatever responsibilities I have towards my children and husband, I believe have discharged them well, except for time".

Tracy, a secondary school teacher whose husband refused to contribute to doing any household tasks also expressed her frustration, "I wish I have the choice to just quit and concentrate on the family but I can't, my job is my security." For Tracy, having an unsupportive husband meant that it was important to have a job and to be financially independent. This gave her something to fall back on should anything go wrong with her marriage.

As for the other women, especially those who choose to work to avoid staying at home, their rationale in doing so is that they need to work to provide a better future for their children, and they saw that having others to look after their children would be "good exposure" for them. Whatever the strategies, most of the participants in our study seemed to have achieved positive outcomes from their combination of work and family. An important factor contributing to this appears to be the presence of very supportive family members who helped the women to balance their work and family commitments.

## 5.4 Summary

There are some similarities between the findings from this research project and those produced by studies conducted in West Malaysia (Rahmad Ismail & Fatimah, 1999; Roziah Omar, 2003; Noor Rahamah, 1996; Husna Sulaiman and Lam, 1990; Noraini Noor, 1999), as well as the United States (Coltrane 2000) and Singapore (Straughen, 1997). First, the women in our study performed more hours of unpaid work than their spouses. Second, the working women in this research project demonstrated a reliance on female substitutes to perform their unpaid obligations. These included relying on close relatives, older siblings, foreign maids, babysitters and tuition schools. Leaving childcare to close relatives is reported to be the most popular choice in this study. Third, our participants tended to spend more time playing with their children and helping them with their homework than physical care of the children. Much of the physical care of children, such as feeding and bathing and routine domestic chores (that is, cleaning the house, ironing and laundry) are delegated to female others.

Most of the working women in our study appeared to share gender ideologies that were egalitarian with regards to the division of unpaid labour but, in practice, they were also clearly socialized to accept that their spouses are still the breadwinner and, thus, they saw that their spouses' emphasis still should be at work rather than home. As pointed out in the work of Roziah Omar (2003), Noraini Noor (1999) and Yun (1984), Malaysia is still very much a patriarchal society whereby religion and

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cultural values reflect that males are very much in authority and that women's preferred domain is at home.

It is tempting to conclude that the working women represented in our research are very 'traditional', accepting that their main responsibility is to take care of their families, their careers come second. This is demonstrated by the comments many of them made, that family is still their main priority and if required they are willing to sacrifice their career. Indeed many of them are putting their future career plans on hold as their children are still young and, for some, they are planning to switch jobs to give them more flexibility to be with their family.

However, it must be noted that even though the women in our study accept that their main responsibility lies at home, and that they are still the main care giver in the family, this did not prevent them from pursuing their paid commitments. The most frequent response given by the participants when asked why they worked was to enjoy the financial independence, followed by to supplement their husband's income. A majority of our participants believed that to be financially secure is important as it improves their status in the family (money equal power equal status). One participant summed it all up by saying:

*When a woman is not financially secured, the husband will ultimately grant her a lower status in the family. The husband will give more respect to a wife who is employed and financially secured, who will not always ask for money from him*

This finding differs from Noraini Noor's (1999) study. Her participants in West Malaysia gave 'economic need' as the most important reason for pursuing paid work, followed by 'interest', 'wanting to taste the fruits of one's labour and 'feeling compelled to work after investing so much time and money in education'.

The women in our study were unlike the traditional housewife, who is financially dependent on her spouse and often granted lower status and negotiating power in the family. Our participants, although they are living in a society whereby their status is secondary to a man's, try to obtain equal status within their marriage relationship. They also are part of an environment that allows them to pursue such an ideology through participation in paid work. The delegation of unpaid tasks to others (maids, close relatives, babysitters and tuition schools) has enabled them to embrace both career and family. They managed to perform their multiple roles fairly well.

Most of the women in the study appeared comfortable with their family lives. All of them acknowledged the importance of spending time with their children and the majority of them were happy with their current childcare arrangements. These appeared to fit well with their working schedules. Only a few women reported feeling guilty for not being a full-time mother.

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## 6. DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this research project was to try to find out implicitly if there might be any conflict experienced by working women in Sarawak in balancing both paid and unpaid commitments, and to compare this with the findings of studies of West Malaysian women. During the interviews, we observed many examples of women adopting coping strategies to help them deal with work-family conflict, and many of these strategies appear to accord with the key elements of Hall's (1972) model of coping with multiple roles. The following table is adapted from Hall's model and some examples that coincide with the coping strategies of Hall's are listed in the final column.

Type of coping	Coping strategy	Examples from current research
Type I (Structural role redefinition)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Role support from outside role set. Employing outside help to assume certain role activities</li> <li>2. Role support from member of role set. Receiving help from role senders (usually in family) in performing activities necessary to meet role demands.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Hiring maids, babysitters and tuition schools to help with childcare and household tasks.</li> <li>➤ Getting spouses, children and close relatives to help with childcare and household tasks.</li> </ul>
Type II (Personal role redefinition)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Change attitudes towards roles or develop a new attitude which helps reduce conflicts.</li> <li>2. Partition and separate roles. Devote full attention to a given role when in that role. Attempt to minimize simultaneous overlap of roles</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 'Even if I have a choice, I will still work, it's a learning process and I find fulfillment in what I do. I can't imagine myself not working.'</li> <li>➤ 'I tell myself; when I am at home, focus at home, when you come to office, focus on work.'</li> </ul> <p>'Do not mix family and work...I want to be a good mum, I can do it, I want to be a good employee, I also can do it.'</p>
Type III (Reactive role behaviour)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Plan, schedule, organise better. Increase efficiency of role performance.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 'If you get your priority right, there will always be time for everything, it is not that we do not have time but we do not use the time carefully.'</li> </ul>

In summary, similar to some studies carried out in West Malaysia (Noraini Noor, 1995; Husna Sulaiman & Lam, 1990), the majority of the middle class women represented in this study were able to balance work and family commitments fairly well with the help of supportive family members and by engaging maids, babysitters, tuition centers and relatives to share their unpaid commitments. Family work is still sharply divided by gender with our participants spending more time on unpaid tasks than do their spouses. Even though many unpaid tasks are delegated to others, they are still responsible for monitoring and supervising the work. Although the

working women in our study didn't explicitly express that they had major difficulties in coping with both paid and unpaid commitments, which could be due to both cultural and society values, we perceived that they were, however, constantly adopting different means to minimize role conflicts.

Further research on this issue in the East Malaysia context is warranted. As noted in Section 4, this study was limited in its scope and size. We hope to overcome these limitations in further research by extending our analysis to other sectors and to lower income women, to examine how different or similar the findings would be. We also plan to expand the research to working women from other parts of Sarawak, in order to accomplish a more thorough view of how women balance their work and family life in East Malaysia.

#### NOTE

1 Household chore consist of laundry, ironing, cooking, cleaning the house, gardening, preparing food for the pets and home maintenance.

2 Childcare tasks consists of helping children with their homework, playing with the children, dressing and bathing the children, feeding the children and chauffeuring children from nursery tuition centres and etc.

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