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AN OVERVIEW OF THE STATE INFLUENCES ON WORKERS' WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of the state as a policy maker in the emergence and development of work/non-work policies in the Malaysian public sector organisations. State policies on work/non-work provisions can play an important role in determining the way workers manage their work/non-work lives (Den Dulk et al., 1999; Poelmans et al., 2003). Poelmans and Sahibzada (2004) and Korabik et al. (2003) suggest that people in collectivistic[1] countries do not expect support from their organisations and instead expect support from their family. Hence, this study examines to what extent people in collectivistic country like Malaysia expect support from their organisations for their work-life integration as compared to their family members. Adopting qualitative case study in three public sector organisations in Sabah, Malaysia, findings show that the State, as a policy maker, is the main provider of work/non-work arrangements for public sector workers. It is evident that the role of the State is not just important in terms of providing work/non-work provisions such as maternity / paternity / parental leaves but also in implementing and supporting beneficial work practices and arrangements e.g. flexitime and crèche. Although these arrangements were found to be beneficial, particularly for workers with young children in integrating their work-life responsibilities, this study also found that the needs of single workers with parental/siblings commitment were not met by the State. Additionally, familial and communal supports are also expected to be available outside the work environment.

Keywords: Work-life integration; The State; public sector policy; workers; Malaysia.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the role of the state as a policy maker in the emergence and development of work/non-work policies in the Malaysian public sector organisations. State policies on work-life provisions can play an important role in determining the way workers manage their work/non-work lives (Den Dulk *et al.*, 1999; Poelmans *et al.*, 2003). There are different State approaches and these tend to vary according to different theories of State intervention. Factors such as social expectations about men's and women's roles, overall approaches to State–market–family relationships; and family-, gender-, and employment-supportive policies (such as public provisions for maternity and parental leave and benefits, family leave, and tax policies and social programmes that include publicly funded childcare) were found to be important in influencing the way workers managed their work/non-work lives (Korabic *et al.*, 2003). According to Korabic *et al.* (2003), a country's gender role ideology has an important role to play in determining their commitment to work/non-work life provisions. They expect that institutional support (i.e. organisational support and governmental support) will be more readily available and extended family support systems less available in

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[1] Collectivistic indicates the degree of social/community integration and indigenous nations tend to be collective where the original culture has not become fractured (Hofstede, 1994). In collectivist cultures, the family is viewed as the most important in-group.

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countries that are higher on individualism and egalitarian gender–role ideologies. They argued that people in countries with high levels of individualism and more egalitarian gender role ideologies have an enhanced sense of entitlement such that they expect support from their organisations and countries in the form of work/non-work life policies. As Poelmans and Sahibzada (2004: 417) state, "Incongruencies between the country´s involvement in family affairs and companies' apathy for the same issue are likely to result in frustrated expectations and higher levels of work-family conflict, especially among individuals with a strong sense of entitlement". Hence, the suggestion is that people in collectivistic countries such as in Malaysia do not expect support from their organisations and instead expect support from their family. This assumption will be discussed in the paper.

2.0 STATE APPROACHES IN WORK-LIFE ISSUES

Work-family issues are found in the policy discourse of most Western nations and expressions such as 'family-friendly workplaces', 'flexible workplaces' and 'work-life balance' are now commonplace in the lexicon of industrial relations and welfare policy (Blunsdon & McNeil, 2006). Although some countries already have an established integrated family and employment policy, for example, France and Sweden (Fagnani, 2005; Hardman, 1998), in Malaysia, so-called work/non-work policies are still in their infancy. The Malaysian Government launched the 'Family First' campaign in 2003.

One of the major drivers behind the introduction of work/non-work arrangements at the state level in the UK, for example, has been the increased participation of women in paid employment (Dex and Smith, 2002). Work/non-work arrangements are therefore expected to be more available in workplaces with a higher proportion of women. Women have become increasingly involved in paid employment and men have become more involved with the care of the family. In many countries, the increasing labour force participation of women means that the working couple is emerging as the norm rather than the exception. In addition, changes in marriage and divorce patterns are increasing the number of single parents who are the main breadwinners for families. In the Malaysian context, women form a substantial force in the labour market.

In the Ninth Malaysian Plan (9MP) (Economic Planning Unit, 2006), efforts were undertaken to provide an enabling environment to ensure more effective participation of women in national development. Women were equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to enable them to be more competitive and versatile to meet the challenges of a knowledge-based economy. Although women's labour market participation in Malaysia has been increasing, from a mere 30 per cent in 1970 (Subramaniam & Selvaratnam, 2010) to 49 per cent by 2011 (Economic Planning Unit, 2011), according to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), Malaysia is one of the few countries in the Asia-Pacific, where women are still under-represented in the labour market (UNESCAP, 2007; Malaysia Department of Statistic, 2011). Under-utilisation and under-representation of women's participation is influenced by the prevailing societal culture and religious traditions (Omar & Davidson, 2001) whereby cultural norms and traditions influence women to prioritise family commitments (Rowley *et al.*, 2010). Hence, the Malaysian Government continuously endeavours to encourage greater female participation in the labour force and socio-economic development of the country. As women's labour market participation is much lower in Malaysia compared to other countries, this may suggest that work-life integration is achieved within households by women working in the domestic sphere.

As the greater involvement of women in the labour market requires a better integration of work and non-work responsibilities, effective labour market policies encompass more than job creation. In Malaysia, measures have been introduced to ensure the provision of necessary support facilities to enable women to enter the labour market. However, despite the Government's effort to attract women to the labour market through the establishment of, for example, flexi-time, extended maternity leave, and extended paternity leave, and encouragement for employers to establish on-site crèches, Subramaniam and Selvaratnam's (2010) study on workers' perception of work-life arrangements found a gap still exists between workers' practical needs and the availability of work/non-work arrangements in Malaysia. The interaction between the State as policy maker and workplaces as the implementer of work/non-work arrangements was not examined. Hence, the question is raised: to what extent does the State as employer and policy-maker support and influence the emergence and development of work-life arrangements in Malaysia?

Several studies map the instrumental support at a national level, that is, the level and nature of public work-life policies: childcare facilities, leave arrangements and policies regarding working hours (Den Dulk, 2001; Kovacheva *et al.*, 2007; Saraceno *et al.*, 2005). However, less is known about their impact on workers' work-life integration. Raghuram *et al.* (2001) found that national differences relating to cultural values impact on the structure of work and adoption of flexible work arrangements. For instance, part-time work is more prevalent in low-power distance (the degree to which unequal distribution of power and wealth is tolerated) and individualistic countries, whereas telecommuting is found more frequently in low masculinity countries

such as Norway and Sweden. Additionally, shiftwork has been found to be systematically related with cultural values (low uncertainty avoidance, high power distance, high collectivism), whereas temporary work has not been related with any value orientation (Raghuram *et al.*, 2001). In many developed countries, State policies relating to work-life arrangements, such as flexible working hours, job sharing, on-site crèche, longer maternity and paternity leaves, career break, and working from home have been found to help workers' successfully integrate their work-life roles and responsibilities (Thornthwaite, 2004, Coussey, 2000, Glass & Estes, 1997). In Malaysia, given the increase in dual-earner households and women's participation in the labour market, the Government as a State-employer provides standard work-life provisions to all public sector organisations to cater to such groups' work-life needs in order to maintain their active contribution to the economy. This raises the question: to what extent does the Government as a State-employer in Malaysia support public sector workers integration of work-life spheres?

3.0 THE MALAYSIAN STATES AND WORK-LIFE POLICIES

In Malaysia, the 'Family First' campaign was launched at the national and State level in 2003 among civil servants to better integrate work/non-work roles and responsibilities. The Malaysian Government through its 9MP (2006-2010) Chapter 15 urges society throughout the nation to uphold the values of caring for family and community. Its aim is to recognise the family as a social priority and a basic unit in the society that needs to be protected and supported by the community and nation. Table 1 shows the Government awareness of the need to integrate work-life responsibilities when the Government emphasised workers' quality of work-life through Hajj leave[2]. Following that, the number of work-life arrangements provided to fulfil workers' needs and desires to better manage their work-life spheres increased. This demonstrated the Malaysian Government's awareness of the non-work sphere being equal in importance to the work sphere. Since then, although the development of work-life arrangements has been relatively slow, it has improved over four decades. Table 1 shows the standard provisions related to work-life arrangements that all public sector organisations should implement.

Table 1: Work-life Standard Provisions by the State for Malaysian Public Sector Workers

STANDARD PROVISIONS
Five working day week[3]
60 – 90 days paid maternity leave[4]
7 days paid paternity leave[5]
Parental leave (up to 5 years)[6]
40 days Hajj leave[7]
3 days bereavement leave (unrecorded leave)[8]
Longer lunch break on Friday
Leave to take examinations[9]
Leave for sports involvement[10]
Flexible start and finish time[11]
Annual air fares for officers to visit hometown ('balik kampung') if working in another state / region (Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah or Sarawak)[12]
Financial assistance for childcare at public sector working premises[13]

[2] Hajj is the annual pilgrimage to Makkah (Mecca), Saudi Arabia. It is the fifth pillar of Islam, a religious duty that must be carried out at least once in a lifetime by every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to do so.

[3] Service Circular No.13, 2005

[4] Service Circular No. 14 2010

[5] Service Circular No. 9, 2002 (effective 1 January 2003)

[6] Service Circular No. 15, 2007, Service Circular No. 9, 1991, Service Circular No. 2, 1998

[7] General order 34, 35 and 55 Chapter 'C', Service Circular No.4, 1984, Service Circular No. 9, 1991

[8] Enacted under Service Circular No. 10, 2002 (effective 1 January 2003), this provision was introduced to allows workers to pay their last respects and assist at their immediate family member's funeral.

[9] The purpose of this leave is to enable workers to take any examination that can enhance their quality of life. It is enacted under General Order 44 and 57 Chapter 'C' and Service Circular No. 9, 1991 (effective 1 January 1992)

[10] Enacted under General Order 46 and 57 Chapter 'C', Service Circular No. 11, 1980, Service Circular No. 5, 1985 (effective 18 December 1980), this provision is introduced to enable workers to participate in sports.

[11] Service Circular No. 2, 2007

[12] Service circular No. 22, 2008. 'Balik kampung' is the tradition of visiting one's hometown and family members. The reason for the Government's support of this tradition is to enable workers who might be working away from their families (immediate and extended) to maintain a close relationship with them, to remind them of the importance of the family institution, and to enhance a sense of belonging. In other words, this provision will remind workers of their obligation towards their family as well as their responsibilities at work.

The Government has implemented various work-life benefits for its civil servants. This includes the implementation of a five day working week to enable working parents to have more quality time with their family; extended paternity leave from three days to seven days; extended unpaid parental leave up to five years; and special bereavement leave provision for three days for funeral arrangements for immediate family death.

In the private sector, labour costs are low relative to those in industrialised countries, while productivity remains high. Basic wage rates vary according to location and industrial sector. Supplementary benefits, which can include bonus, free uniforms, free or subsidised transport, performance incentives and other benefits, vary from company to company. Salary rates and fringe benefits offered for management and executive level personnel also vary according to the industry and employment policy. In addition to salaries, most companies also provide fringe benefits, such as free medical treatment, personal accident and life insurance coverage, free or subsidised transport, annual bonus, retirement benefits and enhanced contributions to the Employees' Provident Fund.

Generally, workers in Peninsular Malaysia are covered by the Employment Act 1955 and workers in Sabah and Sarawak are covered by the Sabah Labour Ordinance and Sarawak Labour Ordinance, respectively. However, these laws and regulations are meant for workers working in the private sector. Regulations regarding the work/non-work elements provided by the Government have been enforced to all civil servants throughout the country. This paper focuses on the rules and regulations related to work/non-work policies under Malaysian Government agencies.

General Order (GO), a public sector services handbook containing rules and regulations related to human resource and the Service Circular (SC) have been established to provide guidelines for implementing terms and conditions of employment specified by government. The SC is issued every year to indicate additional provisions, amendments or cancellations. The Letter of Service Circular (LSC) is also issued from time to time as an additional provision.

4.0 RESEARCH METHODS

The research adopted a qualitative case study research design of three organisations – higher learning institution (Unico), medical services (Hospico) and revenue services (Custco). The data collection was based on in-depth interviews with seventy one employees from Unico, Hospico and Custco and three Human Resource Managers from each respective organisation. For ethical reason, the organisations and interviewees will remain anonymous and thus, pseudonyms are used. Unico is a higher learning institution with 1599 workforces. Meanwhile, Custco is a government agency responsible for administrating the nation's tax revenue policy and employed 752 people. Hospico, on the other hand, is a centre of specialist services for women and children and had 1076 workers.

In addition to the statutory provision of work and non-work arrangement as outlined by the Government (see Table 1), public sector organisations are able to implement additional work-life arrangements. In some cases, this means that they offer extra provisions for employees to aid the management of employees' work and non-work lives. As illustrated in Table 2, these arrangements vary from one organisation to another depending on the nature and the background of the organisation.

Table 2: Work-Life Provisions by Organisations

WORK-LIFE PROVISIONS UNDER ORGANISATIONAL DISCRETION	AVAILABILITY IN THE CASE STUDIES		
	UNICO	HOSPICO	CUSTCO
Crèche	√+	-	√++
Fitness centre / sports facilities	√	-	√
Fitness-related activities	√	√	√
Prayer room/ Mosque	√	√	√
Religious-related activities	√	√	√
Adjustable shift working hour*	√	√	√

Flexitime:
    Staggered start and finish time*
    Flexible working time*
	√	√	√

Early finish time in the month of Ramadan for Muslim married women**	√	√	√
Workers' housing quarters	-	√°	√°°
Family involvement related activities	√	√	√

[13] Service Circular No.4, 2007

Notes:

⁺ not located on the site

⁺⁺ located at workers' housing area

* applicable only to certain occupations / jobs

** not applicable to those who work shift hours

° limited unit and only to certain medical officers and/or single clinical workers

°° limited unit

5.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The State's standard work-life provisions which are to be implemented by all public sector organisations are as shown in Table 1. These policies include childcare assistance for workers who earn salaries of less than RM2000.00 a month and encouragement for the setting up of an on-site crèche in all public sector workplaces. Additionally, flexible working arrangements are also highlighted whereby the Malaysian Government, in its endeavour to encourage more women to participate in paid work, has initiated the implementation of staggered start and finish times for public sector employees.

The Malaysian Government's awareness of the life (non-work) sphere being of equal importance to the work sphere can be seen from the varied improvements instituted in work-life arrangements provided. These include: enhancement of maternity leave entitlement from 42 days, before the year 1998, to 90 days, to allow working mothers more time to recover after giving birth and to breastfeed their infants before returning to work; extension of paternity leave from three to seven days which indicates the Government's awareness of working fathers' need to integrate their work and non-work responsibilities; increase in parental leave by up to five years reflecting awareness of the importance placed on parenting responsibilities amongst working citizens and the government's support of this; and the introduction of annual free air tickets for workers and their immediate families to visit their hometown targeted at those posted to regions far from their hometown (Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah or Sarawak). National initiatives and policies, such as the 'Family First' campaign, are designed to help employees to accommodate and integrate both work and non-work responsibilities. In view of all these provisions and the related findings from this research it is believed that the influence of the State is important in ensuring the effectiveness of workers' integration of their work/non-work lives, apart from the terms and conditions of employment (Warhurst *et al.*, 2008).

It is evident that the role of the State is not just important in terms of providing work-life leave provisions such as maternity, paternity and parental leaves, but also in implementing and supporting beneficial work practices and arrangements e.g. flexitime and on-site crèches. Although these arrangements were found to be beneficial, particularly for workers with young children in integrating their work/non-work lives, this study found that work-life conflict also occurred among workers with parental/sibling commitments, whose needs were not met by these arrangements. Hence, the State and related organisations should also consider developing and putting in place elderly/family care related provisions. Although Korabik *et al.* (2003) argued that workers in individualist countries expect support from management while collectivistic societies expect support from the family, this study found that both institutional and familial supports were expected to help workers in work/non-work integration. In addition, for workers with financial wealth and ability, communal supports (i.e. paid helper and private crèche) were also needed and expected when institutional and familial supports were absent. As Malaysian society is known for being highly collectivist and placing strong emphasis on the extended family (Hassan *et al.,* 2010), institutional supports (organisational and Government) are expected at work. Additionally, familial (spouse and family) and communal supports (neighbours and paid help) are also expected to be available outside the work environment. Within the context of this research, it is seen that the gender ideology as suggested by Korabik *et al.* (2003) is somewhat different in a multi-ethnic and multi-religion society like Malaysia, as workers expect support not just from their organisations but also from their family and the community. Thus, the State as a policy maker and public sector organisations as implementors and deliverers of public services, need to be proactive if they want to enhance work/non-work arrangements.

Additionally, despite public sector organisations being authorised to implement all the best policies in terms of work-life arrangements, working hours in most of these organisations are invariably high and there is general acceptance of this culture, resulting in there being very little difference in terms of work-life integration. Unlike the situation in European countries where the European Working Time Directive has been introduced to guide workers on maximum work hours allowable, e.g. doctors should not work more than 48 hours per week in hospitals (Morris-Stiff *et. al.,* 2005), in Malaysia, there is no such working time directive issued, except for the General Order Chapter G (1974) which only mentions working time and overtime in general without specifying the maximum hours one can work, regardless of working pattern. The absence of a working time directive which sets the maximum working hours allowable in the national agenda has resulted in workers working long hours at the organisational level (Ibrahim, 2015).

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6.0 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The State's role in influencing the emergence and development of work/non-work policies to retain female participation in the labour market has grown. Although female labour participation has increased in Malaysia, it remains relatively low compared to that in other Asia-Pacific countries (UNESCAP, 2007). Consequently, the Government, as a State employer, is endeavouring to attract more female workers into the labour market and increase their contribution to the country's economy and productivity by establishing several work-life policies and proclaiming their introduction through the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry.

The State as policy maker is the main provider of work/non-work arrangements for public sector workers. Public sector organisations which act as Government machinery to deliver services to the people, need to be proactive if they want to enhance work-life arrangements. Through national policies e.g. the 'Family First' campaign, both work and non-work responsibilities are assumed to be integrated.

Offering work-life provisions at the State level does not automatically result in positive work-life integration experiences for employees in Malaysia. Hence, a range of other supports i.e. from superiors, colleagues, family (and extended family), neighbours and paid help are also needed to assist in smooth work-life integration. This emphasises the need to understand work-life issues from a multi-level perspective. A multi-level approach not only provides in-depth analysis of the degree to which workers integrated, conflicted or alternated between their work/non-work lives but also assists in analysis of the influence of factors at the macro- (role of the State), meso- (role of trade unions and organisations) and micro- (individual perspective) levels, thereby providing in-depth understanding of the work-life spheres from multiple levels.

In Malaysian society, the family institution and family responsibilities are strongly upheld. The most widely applied work-life policies in Malaysian public sector organisations are those related to maternity leave, parental leave, and flexitime arrangements – which are particularly useful for 'married employees with children' as compared to other groups of employees. The priorities of the State in introducing and providing these work-life arrangements suggest that the Government is trying to attract and increase female participation in the labour market, particularly in the public sector. This implies that the State's work-life provisions were gender biased and that this strategy was aimed to encourage women with children to continue working or to return to work after childbirth. The Government's over-emphasis on attracting and retaining working mothers has resulted in an imbalance in provisions for other groups of workers. For example, apart from the 'annual *balik kampung* package', there are no other work-life arrangements provided for employees with parent and/or sibling care commitments. Furthermore, provisions for elder care referral services or leave to provide elder care are neglected in the national agenda. The State, as a policy maker, needs to ensure that all groups of workers, regardless of gender or status, are catered for when it comes to enhancing and implementing work/non-work arrangements.

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