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## Social Support for Working Mothers Experiencing Work-Family Conflict: A Descriptive Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

In Enugu, South-eastern Nigeria as in most parts of the sub-Saharan Africa, the traditional gender-role socialization ceaselessly saddles mothers with greater percentage of family responsibilities such as domestic chores despite their inroads into paid employment leaving them at a cross road between work and family demands. Combination of these dual roles results in work-family conflict, hence the need to give this segment of women who combine work and family responsibilities social support. Thus, this study relying on descriptive data explored the significance and percentage of social support given to these women by their spouses, children, siblings, mothers, relatives and house helps. The study comprised a cross-sectional survey of 581 working mothers (304 secondary school teachers, 81 bankers, 118 nurses and 78 other health workers such as medical doctors, pharmacists and laboratory scientists) between 26 and 59 years and mean age of 37.27 drawn from 24 state government secondary schools, 3 Fidelity Bank branches, University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital and National Orthopedic Hospital within Enugu State in the South-eastern part of Nigeria using Multi-stage sampling. Chi-Square as a statistical test revealed a significant social support for these mothers,  $X^2(5) = 135.94$ ,  $p < .01$  with the highest percentage of social support from house helps (29.91%), followed by spouses (23.52%), children (19.63%), relatives (16.89%), siblings (7.76%) and the least social support from mothers of these working mothers (2.28%). These findings have demonstrated the importance of the unrecognized contributions of house helps to Nigerian workforce, and implications of spouses, children and other relatives' social support for resolving work-family conflict among working mothers.

**Keywords: Social Support, Working Mothers, Work-Family Conflict.**

### Introduction

Women's participation in the workforce is increasing all around the world (Davidson & Burke, 2004) resulting in transformation of traditional gender roles and raising concerns about work-family interface among women (Elloy & Smith, 2003). This transformation of traditional gender roles is contrary to the prevailing condition whereby many women in Nigeria as seen in some other cultures are socialized into believing that being a wife and raising a family should be their paramount priorities, and financial independence and career secondary (Pines, 1989), thereby forcing women who have demanding careers investing more hours in home

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activities than their male colleagues (Cinamon & Rich, 2002). Generally, work and family play major roles in the lives of adults who divide their time and energy between these two demanding spheres (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003) especially today as dual-career family is on the increase (Arnett, 2004, Barnett, Garies, James & Steele, 2003), hence more women than men likely to have work-family conflict because of traditional gender role socialization which saddles them with more family responsibilities (e.g. domestic chores) despite their inroads into paid employment. Work-family conflict is a form of inter-role conflict in which role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect (Flippo, 2005), and occurs when demands from work role affect one's ability to meet the demands associated with family role and vice versa (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The conflict occurs when the employees especially working mothers extend their efforts to satisfy their work demands at the expense of their family demands or vice versa (Cole, 2004). Work-family conflict has generally been recognized as bidirectional, that is, work can interfere with family and family can interfere with work (Grandey, Cordeiro & Crouter, 2005). Work interference with family and family interference with work are related but distinct constructs (Ajiboye, 2008). Work interference with family occurs when participation in work responsibilities makes it difficult for an employee to carry out family responsibilities (e.g. cooking, washing, child care e.t.c.). The antecedents of work interference with family lie in the work domain and include stressors such as the number of weekly hours devoted to work, flexibility of working hours, work-role conflict (Barnas & Major, 2000, Carlson & Kacmar, 2000), and work interference with family is primarily determined by excessive work demands and predicts negative family outcomes (Adebola, 2005). Family interference with work occurs when participation in family responsibilities makes it difficult for one to meet work responsibilities. The antecedents of family interfering work lie in the family domain and include stressors such as low levels of spousal support, the number of weekly hours devoted to the family activities (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000), and the number and ages of children (Lewis & Cooper, 1998). The foremost family-related variable that interferes with work behavior expectations is number of children at home (Pleck, 1980). Given that child care responsibilities normally rest on women, working wives with more children are likely to experience greater family interference with work (Voyandoff, 1988). And having young children at home is consistently related to role strain and time shortage for women (Voyandoff & Kelly, 1984). Family interference with work is primarily determined by family demands and predicts negative work outcomes (Adebola, 2005). Conflict between work role and family role has dramatic effects on individuals (Fu & Shaffer, 2001, Burke & Greenglass, 2001). Among working mothers, work and family responsibilities interact closely that separating the two nearly becomes impossible, resulting in higher

levels of work-family conflict relating to lower levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, higher levels of turnover and burnout (Allen, Herst, Bruck & Sutton, 2000), hence the need for social support to enable them cushion off the consequences such as strain emanating from combining the two roles. Social support refers to interpersonal relationships and social interactions that help to protect individuals from the effects of stress (Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985, Nielson, Carlson & Lankau, 2001), and consistently been related to increased health and well-being (Cohen, 1988, House, Landis & Umberson, 1988). Social support in either the work or family domain acts as a buffering effect for conflict experiences in either role (Lampierre & Allen, 2006), and found to have direct effect on work-family conflict (Allen, 2001). Against this background (role of social support in cushioning off the negative effects of combining work and family roles), this study relying on descriptive data has considered the significance and percentage of those who actually give working mothers social support in order to cushion off consequences of work-family conflict.

### **Related Literature**

Researchers (e.g. Gutek, Searle & Klepa, 1991) in gender role theory have shown that women are likely to consider family role as part of their social identity since the expectations placed upon them in the family role have not diminished despite the increase in their roles in the workplace. Thus, when work impinges on family demands, women are likely to develop negative attitude toward the work because the job is more likely to be viewed as threatening to a central social role and vice versa resulting in work-family conflict. And work-family conflict intensifies when the work and family roles are salient or central to the person's (woman's) self-concept and when there are strong negative sanctions for noncompliance with role demands (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In order to reduce work-family conflict's threat to women's social identity as they combine work and family responsibilities, social support such as emotional support provided by spouse/partner has the beneficial effect of promoting overall emotional well-being of employees (working mothers) which may have helped in dealing with conflict in both family and work domains (Sevarajan, Cloniger & Singh, 2013) as increased spousal support was found to be associated with lower levels of work-family conflict (Erdwins, Buffardi & Casper, 2001) and particularly influential in reducing family to work conflict (Thomas & Ganster, 1995, Aycan & Eskin, 2005). Similarly, research evidence (e.g. Aryee 1996, Aylcan & Eskin, 2005) demonstrated that spousal support was a negative predictor of work-family conflict. In addition, researchers (e.g. Adams, King & King, 1996, Frone & Markel, 1997, Carlson & Perrewew, 1999, Byron, 2005, Boyar, Maertz, Mosley & Carr, 2008, Sieger & Wiese, 2009)) found family-related social support to play beneficial role in reducing work-family conflict. Against this

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theoretical background, this present study relying on descriptive data examined the significance of the sources of social support to working mothers caught between the cross role demands of work and family.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The study was conducted between 2010 and 2014 among 581 working mothers (304 secondary school teachers, 81 bankers, 118 nurses and 78 other health workers such as medical doctors, pharmacists and laboratory scientists) drawn from 24 state government secondary schools, 3 Fidelity Bank branches, University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital and National Orthopedic Hospital within Enugu State in the South-eastern part of Nigeria. Multi-stage sampling (cluster and criterion) was used to select the participants. Following the cluster and criteria set for the sample selection, the working mothers selected for the study were aged between 26 and 59 years with mean of 37.27, had spent at least a year as employees in the organizations, were married and living with their husbands, had at least one child, and were living with at least one of their children. Widows and divorcees were not included. A total of 438 (75.39 percent) of the participants had at least one person providing social support by assisting them with domestic chores while the remaining 143 (24.61 percent) had nobody providing social support by assisting with domestic chores.

### **Instrument**

The instrument was a self-report questionnaire which comprised two sections.

#### **Section A**

This section measured demographic information which included name of organization, years of experience on the job, educational qualification, number of hours spent on the job every day, age, marital status, number and ages of children.

#### **Section B**

This section asked the participants to indicate if anybody provided social support by assisting them with domestic chores. Moreover, the section asked them if they were assisted to state exactly who did. This section enabled the researcher to identify sources of the social support.

### **Procedure**

In all the schools, the principals who served as research assistants administered the questionnaire on the identified teachers who met the study criteria and had volunteered to participate. The participants were instructed to take a copy of questionnaire home, study it carefully,

complete and return it to the principals within one week. The researcher then collected the questionnaires from each principal. Of the 356 copies of the questionnaire administered, 304 (85.4 percent) copies were properly completed and returned, 43 were returned but were not properly completed, and nine were not returned at all. Therefore, the 304 copies properly completed and returned were used for the present analysis.

In the bank ( Okpara Avenue, Ogui Road and Enugu State University of Science and Technology branches of Fidelity Bank), the branch supervisors of the bank facilitated the sample selection by helping to identify those who met the set criteria. This was to ensure that all the participants combined work and family responsibilities. However, of the 89 copies of questionnaire distributed, 81 (91.01%) copies were properly filled and returned with the assistance of the branch supervisors in the bank who served as research assistants. The 81(91.01%) copies that were properly filled and returned were used for analysis. In the hospitals, of the 201 copies of questionnaire distributed, 196 (95.93%) copies were properly filled and returned with the assistance of the Chief Nursing Officers and Heads of other units who served as research assistants. The 196(95.93%) copies that were properly filled and returned were used for analysis. A total of 581 copies of the questionnaire from the schools, bank and hospitals were used for data analysis.

**Results**

**Table 1: Chi-Square Table on Social Support for Working Mothers**

Source	Observed	Percentage	X <sup>2</sup>	P
Spouses	103	23.52%	135.94	<.01
Children	86	19.63%		
Siblings	34	7.76%		
Mothers	10	2.28%		
Relatives	74	16.89%		
Domestic Help	131	29.91%		

As shown in table 1, there was a significant difference in the sources of social support to the working mothers, X<sup>2</sup>(5) = 135.94, p <. 01. The highest social support came from house helps (29.91%), followed by spouses (23.52%), children (19.63%), relatives (16.89%), siblings (7.76%) and the least social support from mothers (2.28%).

The overall findings from the study indicated that beside help from house helps, spouses gave the highest social support in comparison with other family members (e.g. children, siblings, mothers, relatives such as cousins, nephews, nieces, aunties).

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## **Discussion**

The present findings are in congruence with previous research findings (e.g. Greenhaus & Beutell 1985, Grzywacz & Marks, 2000, Erdwins, Buffardi & Casper, 2001, Aylcan & Eskin, 2005, Boyar, Maertz, Mosley & Carr, 2008) which revealed that spousal support was associated with lower levels of work-family conflict and also they support the finding that social support for working women could come from other people and family members than spouses (Kim & Ling, 2001), thus giving credence to the availability and affordability of house helps, benefits of spousal support and extended family system in Nigeria. As revealed by the present findings, the highest percentage of social support in terms of taking care of domestic chores came from house helps. Thus an indication of the pivotal role played by this neglected segment of Nigerian population. Despite being an oil producing country, Nigeria is one of the poorest nations in the world, ranking 178<sup>th</sup> out of 228 countries in Gross Domestic Product per capita because of ravages caused by bribery and corruption (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). Moreover, illiteracy and unemployment levels are very high. These together with the high levels of poverty, make domestic workers, (commonly known as house helps) readily available at a very affordable rate. The house helps are usually hired on permanent basis to take care of non-job (domestic) responsibilities thereby giving working Nigerian mothers enough time to focus on work responsibilities. It suffices to say that in Nigeria there are no adequate, rules, regulations and laws guiding the processes of engaging domestic servants despite their immense contributions to the Nigerian workforce. In addition to spousal support ranking second in the social support given to Nigerian working mothers, the kind of family system practiced in the South-eastern part of Nigeria somewhat gives a plausible explanation. That is, while the family structure in Nigeria, as in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa is definitely changing (Bigombe & Khadiagala, 2003, Mokomane, 2012) the South-eastern part of Nigeria is one of these areas where the extended family system is still predominant. This family system—which comprises the couple, their children, parents, siblings, in-laws, nephews, nieces, cousins and other extended family members living together—differs from the nuclear family system which is predominant in most Western countries. The social support and reciprocal care giving by relatives inherent in the extended family system means that many of the working women studied had, at least to some extent, assistance with domestic responsibilities coming from children, siblings and other relatives than their spouses. This gives credence to Nigeria as a collectivist culture (Hoftsed, 1997, Gorodincheke & Roland, 2010) enjoy help from other people that are not even family members, experience fewer conflict between work and family (Grzywacz, Areury, Marin, Carrillo, Burke, Coates & Quantt, 2007) and the view that work and family issues

are related to cultural values, norms, beliefs and assumptions (Poelmans, 2005).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Although much of the related literature show that people especially women who occupy multiple roles inevitably experience conflict which in turn may lead to considerable strain and stress on them, their families and their work (e.g. Oomens, Geurts & Scheepers, 2007), there is a segment that argues that social support in either the work or family domain acts as a buffering effect for conflict experiences in either role (Allen, 2001, Lampierre & Allen, 2006). In addition, the findings of this present study have indicated that many of the working women studied had, at least to some extent, assistance with domestic responsibilities coming from house helps, spouses, children, siblings and other relatives, hence supporting previous findings on the role of social support in reducing work-family conflict. In view of these, there is a need for the Nigerian Government, Ministry of Labor and Productivity and other related bodies to make and implement adequate policies that will regulate hiring of domestic servants (house helps). This will help in keeping proper records of the amount of contributions made by this neglected segment of the population to the Nigerian workforce and national development. This will help to prevent child labor and abuse, labor exploitation and thus promoting the welfare of these house helps. Social support from spouses and children ranking second and third has shown that although there is deep seated traditional gender-role ideology in South-eastern Nigeria, yet there is an indication that while husbands are becoming more androgynous, children are obedient which resulted in their social support to their wives and mothers. To this end, efforts should continue in order to sustain and promote this trend because it will create more understanding and unity in families. In addition, the social support from other relatives has demonstrated the need to protect and promote the extended family system in order to enhance the benefits accruing from such family system.

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