

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Progress of the World's Women 2000, a report released by the United Nations Development Fund For Women (UNIFEM), says that much progress has been made in the pursuit of gender equality of women in the labour force in many countries since the mid-1980s. The report points out that the rate of employed women in paid work in industries and services has risen since the mid-1980s in much of the world (UNIFEM, July 20, 2000). This development is expected to continue as more women attain tertiary qualifications.

In 1994, women comprised 46 percent of the labour force in United States – up almost 10 percent over the last generation (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1995). Throughout the industrialized world, at least one third of the labor force is made up of women. In short, the United States and other industrial nations consider women working for income to be the rule rather than the exception (Macionis, 1997).

International trends show increased opportunities for women to participate in the labour market resulting in changes in household structure (Rudman, 1999). The decision of women to pursue a career after marriage has redefined traditional spousal roles. Dual-income families are increasing in number, as more and more women like

men decide that they want to achieve their ambitions. These women are concentrating more on career development than family development, seeking self-sufficiency, high achievement, better social status, and financial gain (Johnson, 1996).

However, for most women, their participation in paid work has not meant the total abandoning of their traditional roles as the primary caregiver to the children and husband, as well as the management of the household. These multiple roles create constraints and difficulties for the women, thereby resulting in role strains and role conflicts in both work and family domains.

In Malaysia, the past few decades after independence has see much progress achieved in the expansion of education as a result of the tremendous economic development. This has created more education opportunities for women which resulted in an increased number of women in paid employment (Aminah Ahmad, 1998). Today, because of their contribution to the work force, women have gained due respect from the government as well as the private sector.

Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia said, “the Malaysian Government does not promote women just to prove to the world that we don’t discriminate against them. Instead, the government has always appointed women on merit” (The Sun, May 27, 2001).

However, balancing career and family commitments has been a difficult issue for most working women because of society’s expectation of women to continue to fulfill

their traditional gender roles in addition to their work responsibilities. Under these circumstances, individuals have to face the work-family conflict as defined by Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snock & Rosenthal (1964) as being “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressure from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect”. Generally, work-family conflict is one of the sources of pressure that has negative influence on women, such as poor work performance, lack of family cohesiveness, health problems, and job dissatisfaction.

In the past, many Malaysian women may have willingly accepted their roles in the family, only wanting to be virtuous wives and caring mothers. However, this traditional mode of thought has changed with time. Malaysian women now are better educated and contribute significantly to the country’s economic development. By entering the work force, women are now taking on a modern and diverse role. As a result, women’s participation in the workplace has tended to have a negative impact on their traditional role performance in the family.

Shouldering heavy responsibilities from their multiple roles such as managing the household, nurturing children, caring for their husbands, plus a heavy workload at the workplace; make women experience role strain that leads to stress in their daily lives (Reskin & Padavic, 1994). As a result, combining paid work and family work has been difficult for women in all social classes as well as in all work sectors. These role conflicts, and role strains experienced by most working women are also commonly

found among married women college lecturers in Malaysia, who are the focus of this study.

In Malaysia, women who work as lecturers in higher education institutions are generally well-respected, but they are nevertheless subject to the gender role attitudes of the traditional patriarchal system which imposes strong demands on a woman's energy, time, and devotion. The married women lecturers in the private college were the focus of this study, due to a number of reasons. Married women lecturers, by virtue of the demands of their profession, are likely to decide to further their studies. As these women lecturers enroll in the universities, their role demands multiply.

Taking on a student role in addition affects the woman's traditional role in the home as well as her professional role. Therefore, it can be seen that the woman's traditional roles conflict with her professional role as a lecturer as well as her role as student, enhancing the possibility of conflict in three domains, namely work-family-study conflict.

It is common for professional married working women in Malaysia's cities and big towns, for example, Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya to generally possess more non-traditional gender role attitudes. Due to the downsizing of the urban family, the nuclear-family has put some pressure on men to become more involved with their children as a consequence of their wives' enrollment in higher education.

Despite the assistance from the men in the family, most married women college lecturers who are currently pursuing higher degree courses experience limited time to manage their multiple roles. These women find balancing work, home, and studies very exhausting. For Malaysian women, this balancing act is more complicated because of the interplay of multi cultural norms, values and beliefs of the various ethnic groups.

## **1.2 THE STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM**

In a developing country like Malaysia, women's participation in the workplace has increased tremendously (Aminah Ahmad, 1999). Women are no longer confined to lower rung occupations, due to the equal access for them to educational opportunities. As a result, they also participate actively in the professional sectors.

As modern career women have a high degree of commitment to their careers, they tend to improve their positions in the workplace, either by taking extra courses according to the needs of their jobs, or they aspire to pursue further education for a higher degree in the hope of getting a higher income job. In pursuing higher degrees, women have to take up an additional role of student, in addition to being a worker, wife, and mother. This study focuses on women who despite having multiple roles, still aspire to pursue higher education to either fulfill their own ambitions or for career advancement.

This study explores the constraints and difficulties faced by Malaysian professional working women, particularly women in the educational sector pursuing higher degrees while having responsibilities from the work and family domains. In addition, the study also reflects the multi-racial composition of Malaysian society. Women from the three main ethnic groups, namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian face different sets of constraints in life as a result of the social, religious and cultural factors in their societies.

### **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- a. What are the changes in today's society that have influenced Malaysian professional working women's traditional role performance in the family?
- b. What are the constraints experienced by Malaysian professional working women in the domains of work, family, and studies?
- c. What is the impact of their studies on work-family responsibilities, and the impact of work-family conflict on their studies?
- d. - What are the expected constraints faced by Malaysian professional working women balancing the responsibilities of family, work and studies?

- e. How does race, religion, and culture influence the constraints faced by these Malaysian professional working women?
- f. How do relationships suffer as a result of these Malaysian professional working women pursuing higher education while juggling multiple roles?
- g. What are the resources made available to ease the demands of work, family, and study roles?

#### **1.4 RESEARCH APPROACH**

In this study, the ethnographic methods of data collection by means of participant observation, informal discussion and informal interviews have been employed. Emphasis has been on description and interpretation of data. The material gathered from informants was re-organized according to some dominant themes. Most of the information was gathered through observation, field notes, informant's reports, and an explicit effort on the researcher's part to examine the material from a sociological and cultural perspective.

### **1.5 RESEARCH INFORMANTS**

The sample (key informants) consisted of three Malaysian married women lecturers from the Technocyber Private College in Selangor. The informants represent the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. Each of these women lecturers occupies a status set and role set simultaneously in their every day social life and work. They are burdened with both traditional and modern roles as a worker, a wife, and a mother.

These women besides having responsibilities in the house and workplace, are also post graduate students, pursuing higher degrees in local universities. Most of the time, they face immense pressure in trying to balance their domestic commitments, workload in their jobs and their studies. The constraints are further complicated by social, religious and cultural factors.

### **1.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

As a theoretical framework for the study, the analysis of gender role according to the structural functionalist theory (Parsons, 1951) and Maslow's (1954) theory of motivation provide a suitable theoretical rationale for the analysis of constraints professional working mothers face in the pursuit of higher education. The relevance of these theories to my study can best be understood by detailing the application of these theories in a working mother's daily life.



According to functionalists, gender role refers to the behaviour that is prescribed for the female and male members of the society. Functionalists maintain that for much of human history, a woman's reproductive role has dictated that her gender role should be domestic. In contrast, men's biological make up suits the roles of economic provider and protector of the family. A woman's place is in the home, taking care of the children and performing menial household tasks (Parsons, 1951).

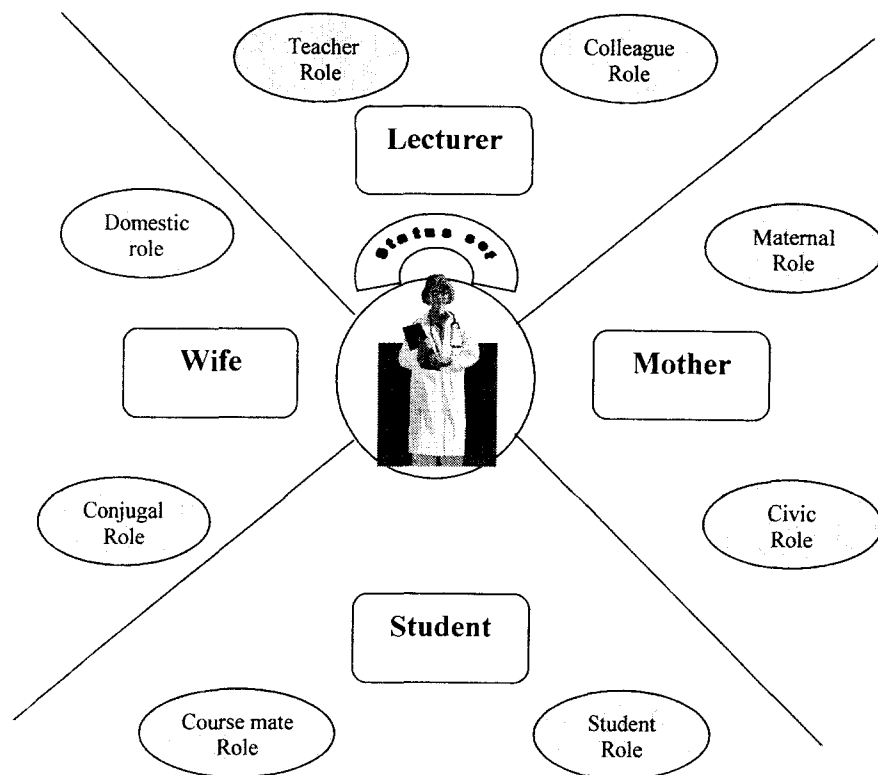
Today, social change has caused women to work outside the home for a variety of reasons. Certainly the main reason for work is economic necessity. Dual-incomes means a more comfortable life for the couples. Women also work for self-fulfilment or to pursue a career. Studies find that work helps increase a woman's self esteem and gives her a sense of control in her life. Work helps her family economically thus reducing financial stress (Bailey, 2002).

With work, an additional status is given to the woman as an employee of her workplace. Attached to every status is one or more roles. Robert Merton (1968) introduced the term 'role set' to identify a number of roles attached to a single status. Roles are the action element of statuses which includes behaviour, responsibilities, and privileges that are expected of individual occupying a specific status. Everyone occupies many statuses simultaneously. The term status set refers to all the statuses a person holds at a given time (Renzetti and Curran, 2000).

As most working mothers can testify, parenting as well as working outside the home is taxing both physically and emotionally. The behavioural expectations attached to one role interfere with one's ability to carry out the expectations of another role, therefore, the women under study experience role conflict. The role conflict would have been intensified if the woman also experienced role strain that often accompanies the status of her position in the workplace. Role strain results from the fact that a single status is usually composed of multiple roles that at times may be incompatible. Thus, experiencing difficulties in meeting role demands (Goode, 1960). Role strain can further lead to stress if demands are perceived as taxing a person's resources (Home, 1998).

Figure 1 illustrates the status set and corresponding role sets of the informants. Four statuses are presented, each linked to a different role set. First, she occupies the status of "wife" with corresponding roles in relation to her husband, with whom she plays the conjugal role as life partner, and domestic role in terms of managing the households. Second, she also holds the status of "mother": nurturing her children at home as well as supervising their school work at home. Third, as a "lecturer" in the private college, she has a teacher's role and a colleague's role. Fourth, her studies as a student in the local university (student role), she takes on the role of course mate. Of course, these are only some of her status and role sets she might be playing. She may also be a caring daughter, a respectful daughter in-law, and an active member of a community service centre. Overall, in this study, the role theory has successfully

brought out the constraints and difficulties faced by a working mother in balancing the family life, work and study.

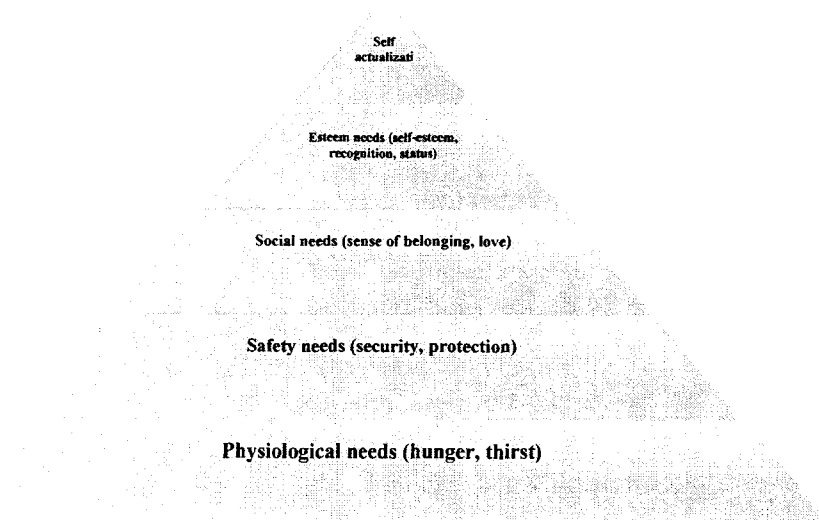


**Figure 1.1: Example of Status Set and Role Set of an Informant**

The Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory plays a smaller part in the analysis of data, mainly in the last stage of the writing. Abraham Maslow (1954) uses a hierarchy of human needs to explain the factors that motivate human behaviour, feelings, and aspirations.

Maslow sought to explain why people are driven by particular needs at particular times. His answer is that human needs are arranged in a hierarchy, from the most pressing to the least pressing (Kotler, 1986).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is shown in Figure 2. In their order of importance, they are physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. A person will try to satisfy the most important needs first before moving to the next level. For this study, data analysis showed that the first three level of the hierarchy has been met so far



**Figure 1.2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

by the informants. Thus, these working mothers strive to achieve the highest level in the hierarchy, that is the self-actualization need. Maslow's basic position is that as one becomes more self-actualized, one develops wisdom and struggles to achieve the best for self in a wide variety of situations.

In this study, each of the informants has put in great effort in balancing multiple roles while doing their higher degrees. The concept of self-actualization would rationalise the sacrifices made by them in order to reap the rewards to be gained upon the completion of the degrees being pursued.

### **1.7 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The study is significant in the following ways:

First, professional working women have been studied in the light of work-family conflict, in past studies. But, in this study, the focus is on work-family-study conflict. The new element of study multiplies the complexities already existent in work-family conflict.

Second, the study has served to outline the traditional expectations of Malaysian society that imposes strong demands on a woman's time and devotion with regards to her multiple roles in the home and the workplace.

Third, this study is unique in looking into three different ethnic groups, where cultural values and upbringing are different. Thus, this study would add in a modest way to the pool of knowledge on multiculturalism in Malaysia.

Finally, the findings from the study will be useful for designing of work place, programmes and other services to meet the needs of Malaysian women so as to minimize the negative impact and maximize positive effects of having multiple roles in home, and study roles. Thus, the quality of Malaysian women's personal, family, work and study lives would ultimately improve.

### **1.8 THE LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

The present study has several limitations. One is the small sample size. This study focused on three informants whose professions are in academia. Due to the small sample size, the findings for this study may not be representative of all professional working women.

Another limitation is that the informants in this study were selected from one setting that is a private college in Selangor. These three lecturers basically share a common workplace, the same employer, colleagues and students. As a result, the conclusion

derived from the study may be biased towards this group of academicians rather than overall professional working women.

Also, due to the time factor, all observations, discussions, and informal interviews were done only with informants, the research did not focus on the views of the people closely related to the informants who may have being affected by the pursuit of informants' higher education. These people are informants' husbands, children, employers, and last but not least, their colleagues in the workplace, could have given a more holistic picture.

## **1.9 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

1. Constraints – The conflict, strain, depression, frustration, and desperation of the working mother turned student as a result of juggling multiple roles as a lecturer, mother, wife, and student.
2. Professional working mother – refers to the working women in this study who are lecturers of a private college. The Malaysian society regards the profession of lecturing to the university level of students as a prestigious and professional job.

3. Higher education – refers to postgraduate degrees being studied by the working mothers in this study that fits with their educational and career development aims.
4. Local universities – refers to the public universities which are owned by the Malaysian government for Malaysian students who do not have enough money to pay for private universities. Some of the local universities include the University of Malaya, the University of Technology and the National University of Malaysia.
5. Multiple roles – refers to the working mothers in this study occupying more than one role at any one time as a lecturer role, wife role, mother role, and student role.
6. Work-family-studies conflict

The existing situation of work-family conflict is aggravated by an additional role as a student. The constraints of each domain of work, family, and studies influence and affect one another. The effect of this inter-conflicting situation works in a vicious cycle. Thus, the term work-family-studies conflict has been coined in this study.



**Conclusion**

In this chapter, a short description is provided to show the effect of work and family roles on Malaysian women. Further effort was made to discuss the impact of work-family constraint on studies and vice versa. To some extent, the balance among work, family, and study had been affected by the interplay of social and cultural norms in the society.