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Work-Life Balance and Sustainable Workforce Well-Being Among Malaysian Women: A Mixed-Methods Study

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ABSTRACT: Women's participation in paid employment strengthens household development, yet overlapping work and family demands may compromise psychological functioning and workforce sustainability. This study examined the contribution of work-life balance and interpersonal conflict management to psychological well-being among Malaysian working women and explored counsellors' perspectives on the processes underlying these relationships. A convergent mixed-methods design combined survey data from 577 working women with semi-structured interviews involving seven counsellors and psychology officers experienced in supporting working women. Survey participants completed the Hayman Work-Life Balance Scale, the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument and the 54-item Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations and multiple regression, while interview data were examined through thematic analysis. Work-life balance was moderately associated with psychological well-being ($r = .585, p < .001$), whereas conflict management showed a weaker positive association ($r = .146, p < .001$). The regression model was significant, $F(2, 574) = 154.153, p < .001$, and explained 34.9% of the variance in psychological well-being. Work-life balance was the dominant predictor ($\beta = .576, p < .001$), followed by conflict management ($\beta = .083, p = .015$). Counsellors described work-family role pressure, emotional strain, coping and boundary management, and the need for counselling and organisational support. Inductively derived themes highlighted women as principal household earners, digital work-life boundaries and counselling as a safe space. Integrated findings show that sustainable workforce well-being requires more than individual coping: women also need workable boundaries, supportive relationships, psychologically safe services and responsive organisational practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's employment is central to household security, organisational capability and inclusive economic development. In Malaysia, women increasingly combine paid employment with responsibilities as partners, mothers, caregivers and contributors to extended-family life. These roles may be meaningful and mutually enriching, but they can also compete for time, attention and emotional resources. The resulting strain is important not only for individual mental health but also for absenteeism, retention, work engagement and the sustainability of the national workforce.

Work-life balance refers to the extent to which individuals can manage participation in work and personal life with limited interference and with opportunities for positive enhancement across domains. It includes work interference with personal life, personal-life interference with work and work-personal-life enhancement [1]. Psychological well-being is broader than the absence of distress. Ryff's eudaimonic model conceptualises it through self-acceptance, positive relations, autonomy,

environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth [2,3]. When work repeatedly enters family and recovery time, women may experience guilt, fatigue, strained relationships and reduced mastery over their environment.

International evidence consistently connects work-family conflict with poorer well-being. A systematic review identified social support, adaptive coping and supportive work environments as protective factors for women experiencing work-family conflict [4]. Among working women, work-life conflict has also been linked to emotional and relational consequences that cannot be addressed through individual effort alone [5]. Recent evidence from China further indicates that work-life balance is an important mechanism linking work-family conflict with psychological well-being [6]. These findings suggest that balance is simultaneously a personal experience and a product of relational and organisational conditions.

Conflict management may provide an additional pathway to well-being. The Thomas-Kilmann framework distinguishes competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating responses on the basis of assertiveness and cooperativeness [7]. These modes are situational tendencies rather than fixed categories of good or poor behaviour. For working women, the capacity to communicate needs, negotiate responsibilities and set limits may reduce interpersonal strain. However, accommodating or avoiding may relieve immediate tension while allowing demands and resentment to accumulate. Understanding the relative contribution of conflict management and work-life balance is therefore necessary for targeted counselling and workplace support.

Much existing research relies on employee self-report surveys alone. Such studies estimate statistical relationships but provide less insight into how work and family pressures are presented in counselling practice. Counsellors occupy a useful observational position because they work across individual, relational and organisational concerns while maintaining professional confidentiality. Integrating survey results with their practice-based perspectives can explain why women who continue functioning at work may nevertheless experience substantial emotional strain.

This study therefore aimed to: (1) examine associations between conflict management, work-life balance and psychological well-being among Malaysian working women; (2) determine the relative contribution of conflict management and work-life balance to psychological well-being; and (3) explore counsellors' perspectives on the pressures, coping processes and support needs shaping women's workforce well-being. The study extends workforce well-being research by integrating statistical evidence with contextual explanations and by identifying implications for counselling and organisational practice.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Study design

A convergent mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative and qualitative strands addressed complementary aspects of the same phenomenon, were analysed separately and were integrated during interpretation. The quantitative strand estimated patterns and predictive relationships among the study variables. The qualitative strand explored how counsellors understood the work, family and psychological processes encountered by working women. Convergence was assessed by comparing whether interview themes confirmed, expanded or contextualised the statistical findings.

2.2 Quantitative participants and procedure

The quantitative strand involved 577 working women recruited through convenience sampling in Malaysia. Eligible participants were adult women who were currently engaged in paid employment. The electronic questionnaire was distributed for voluntary self-completion. No probability sampling frame or regional quota was used. Before completing the questionnaire, participants received information about the study and provided informed consent. Returned questionnaires were screened for eligibility and completeness before analysis. The final sample was adequate for the planned correlational and multiple regression analyses. Given the non-probability recruitment procedure, the findings should not be interpreted as nationally representative of all working women in Malaysia

Table 1. Selected characteristics of quantitative participants (N = 577).

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Marital status	Married	486 (84.2)
Marital status	Single	91 (15.8)

Age	31-35 years	232 (40.2)
Age	36-40 years	129 (22.4)
Education	Bachelor's degree	239 (41.4)
Education	Diploma	175 (30.3)
Employment type	Salaried employee	481 (83.4)
Employment sector	Private	404 (70.0)
Residence	Urban	401 (69.5)
Work schedule	Non-shift	505 (87.5)

2.3 Measures

The self-administered electronic survey comprised the study information and informed-consent section, participant characteristics, and three study measures. Conflict-management styles were assessed using the 30-item forced-choice Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, which profiles five modes: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating [7]. Each mode is scored from 0 to 12. Work-life balance was measured using Hayman's [1] 15-item scale, which covers work interference with personal life, personal-life interference with work and work-personal-life enhancement. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale. Psychological well-being was assessed using the 54-item Malay-language version of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale. The instrument measures autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance using a six-point response scale. Standardised written instructions were provided for all instruments, and participants completed the survey independently without interviewer administration or interpretation of the items. Permission to use the psychological well-being measure and its Malay-language adaptation was obtained by the researcher.

2.4 Qualitative participants and interviews

Seven counsellors or psychology officers were selected purposively because their professional roles provided direct experience of managing concerns involving working women. Selection sought practice-based perspectives across government health services, university and hospital settings, a correctional institution, a government-linked company and a family-development organisation. Their professional experience ranged from approximately five to 18 years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face or through Google Meet, audio-recorded with written consent and transcribed using clean-verbatim conventions. The interview guide examined work and family pressures, psychological consequences, coping and conflict management, and counselling or organisational support. Participants were identified as R1-R7 to protect confidentiality. These participants offered professional perspectives; they were not matched to the women who completed the survey.

2.5 Data analysis and integration

Quantitative analyses were conducted in SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarised participant characteristics and the main variables. Pearson correlations assessed linear associations with psychological well-being. Multiple linear regression estimated the simultaneous and relative contributions of work-life balance and conflict management. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Relevant assumptions, including normality, linearity, independence of residuals and multicollinearity, were examined before interpretation.

Interview data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke [8], with the assistance of ATLAS.ti 24. The researcher repeatedly reviewed recordings and transcripts, coded meaningful segments, grouped similar codes into categories and refined categories into themes. A codebook and analytic memos documented definitions and decisions. Transcripts were checked against the recordings, negative or divergent accounts were examined, and the developing themes were reviewed with experienced researchers and subject specialists. After the strands had been analysed independently, integration was conducted by aligning the principal quantitative results with relevant themes in a joint display. Each comparison was classified as convergence, complementarity or tension according to whether the qualitative evidence confirmed, extended or qualified the statistical pattern. The integrated interpretation, rather than either strand alone, informed the conclusions and practical implications.

2.6 Ethical considerations

This research adheres to the ethics principles established by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, and was conducted carefully to minimize any harm or discomfort to participants. This study was ethically approved by the UKM Human Research Ethics Committee, with reference number UKM.FND.SPS.600-4/2/2/P101478.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Descriptive pattern and bivariate relationships

Among the five conflict-management modes, collaboration recorded the highest mean score ($M = 7.51$, $SD = 1.92$), followed by compromise ($M = 7.09$, $SD = 1.61$), accommodation ($M = 6.65$, $SD = 1.84$), avoidance ($M = 6.53$, $SD = 1.82$) and competition ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 2.19$). The pattern suggests that participants more often favoured cooperative responses than assertive competition. This does not mean that collaboration is invariably effective; its value depends on whether women have sufficient voice and whether the other party is willing to negotiate.

The mean work-life balance score was 3.64 ($SD = 0.62$), while the mean psychological well-being score was 4.13 ($SD = 0.71$) when expressed on the instruments' respective item metrics. Work-life balance showed a moderate positive relationship with psychological well-being ($r = .585$, $p < .001$). Conflict management also had a significant positive relationship with psychological well-being, although the effect was weak ($r = .146$, $p < .001$).

Table 2. Pearson correlations with psychological well-being ($N = 577$).

Predictor	r with psychological well-being	p	Interpretation
Work-life balance	.585	< .001	Moderate positive association
Conflict management	.146	< .001	Weak positive association

The difference in magnitude is theoretically meaningful. Conflict-management skills can improve particular interactions, but work-life balance reflects the broader allocation of time, energy and role participation. A woman may communicate effectively and still experience diminished well-being when workloads, care responsibilities or after-hours demands leave inadequate recovery time. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that work-life balance helps explain the relationship between work-family conflict and psychological well-being [6].

3.2 Predictors of psychological well-being

The two-predictor regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 574) = 154.153$, $p < .001$. The model correlation was $R = .591$ and the predictors jointly explained 34.9% of variance in psychological well-being ($R^2 = .349$; adjusted $R^2 = .347$). Work-life balance was the dominant predictor ($\beta = .576$, $p < .001$). Conflict management made a smaller but independently significant contribution ($\beta = .083$, $p = .015$).

Table 3. Multiple regression predicting psychological well-being ($N = 577$).

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	113.752	7.126	-	15.962	< .001
Work-life balance	1.782	.105	.576	17.012	< .001
Conflict management	.715	.293	.083	2.437	.015

These findings position work-life balance as a core workforce resource rather than a peripheral lifestyle preference. From Super's life-span, life-space perspective, adult well-being is shaped by participation across interconnected roles, including worker, partner, parent and community member [9]. When one role persistently dominates the life space, opportunities for personal growth, positive relationships and environmental mastery may be restricted. Ryff's model similarly implies that well-being depends on functioning meaningfully across life domains rather than maintaining productivity in only one domain [2].

The remaining 65.1% of unexplained variance is also important. Psychological well-being is shaped by personality, health, financial security, relationship quality, job demands, workplace climate and access to support. The regression is cross-sectional and should not be interpreted causally. Nevertheless, the size of the association indicates that balance is a practical priority for counselling services, employers and policy makers concerned with sustainable participation of women in the workforce.

3.3 Qualitative themes explaining workforce well-being

Thematic analysis produced four integrative themes: work-life role conflict; psychological and emotional consequences; coping and conflict management; and counselling and organisational support. Three additional themes arose inductively: women as principal household earners, boundary setting in digitally connected work and counselling as a safe space. Together, these accounts explained how the statistical association between balance and well-being was experienced in practice.

Table 4. Integrated qualitative themes from counsellor interviews.

Theme	Illustrative subthemes	Integrated meaning
Work-life role conflict	Employer and coworker conflict; strained partner and child relationships; multiple roles	Competing work and family demands reduced time, recovery and relational availability.
Psychological and emotional consequences	Stress; anxiety; fatigue; guilt; burnout; reduced performance	Persistent conflict crossed domains and impaired emotional stability and functioning.
Coping and conflict management	Communication and negotiation; emotional regulation; time management; self-care; avoidance or accommodation	Women combined active and protective strategies, although short-term avoidance could defer unresolved problems.
Counselling and organisational support	Safe emotional space; professional guidance; flexible arrangements; supportive supervisors; family-sensitive facilities	Individual coping was strengthened or constrained by access to relational, professional and structural resources.
Inductively emerging context	Principal household earner; digital boundaries; counselling as a safe space	Economic responsibility and constant connectivity expanded the meaning of balance beyond time allocation.

3.3.1 Work-life role conflict and emotional consequences

Counsellors consistently described working women as negotiating simultaneous expectations from employers, partners, children and themselves. Workplace concerns included unsupportive supervisors, negative coworker relationships and toxic environments. Family concerns included unequal domestic responsibilities and strained communication. High self-expectations intensified these pressures. One counsellor summarised the consequences:

“When emotions are disturbed, their work performance is no longer at a good level.” (R3, translated from Malay)

The accounts demonstrate spillover: conflict in one domain affected functioning in another. Counsellors observed stress, anxiety, emotional instability, mental and physical fatigue, and reduced communication. These narratives add depth to the quantitative result by showing that balance is not simply satisfaction with a schedule. It involves the ability to remain emotionally available, recover from demands and perform valued roles without chronic depletion. Similar multidimensional consequences were identified in qualitative research on working women’s work-life conflict [5].

3.3.2 Coping, communication and boundaries

Women were described as seeking professional support, negotiating with partners, communicating with supervisors, managing time and priorities, and practising self-care. Avoidance and accommodation were also reported. These responses may reduce

immediate confrontation, but repeated self-silencing can leave structural inequities untouched. Counselling therefore needs to distinguish between strategic de-escalation and patterns that erode autonomy or self-acceptance.

Digital connectivity emerged as a contemporary boundary challenge. A counsellor explained:

“Set work boundaries too. Now that everything is digital, we can access it anywhere—WhatsApp, Telegram and all kinds of messages.”
(R7, translated from Malay)

This observation helps explain the dominant regression coefficient for work-life balance. Even effective interpersonal coping may be overwhelmed when work is technically available at all times. Clear expectations concerning after-hours communication, response times and genuine periods of disconnection are therefore health-protective practices. Boundary setting should not be framed solely as an individual responsibility because employees may lack the power to ignore messages from supervisors.

3.3.3 Counselling and organisational support

All counsellors identified counselling as an important intervention, particularly for emotional expression, self-understanding, conflict-management skills and referral. One participant described its distinctive function:

“One thing we provide is a safe space for her to share—a safe space she may not find outside the counselling room.” (R2, translated from Malay)

A safe space allows women to acknowledge distress that may be concealed by continued performance at work and at home. Through empathic listening and structured reflection, counselling can support needs clarification, assertive communication, boundary setting and responsible choices. These processes connect with Ryff’s autonomy and environmental mastery and with Reality Therapy’s emphasis on evaluating present behaviour and developing workable plans [10].

Counsellors also emphasised that professional support cannot compensate for harmful workplace structures. Flexible work arrangements, supportive supervisors, childcare and breastfeeding facilities, manageable workloads and respectful communication were described as enabling conditions. Protective-factor research likewise indicates that social and workplace support can reduce the well-being consequences of work-family conflict [4]. Sustainable workforce policy must therefore combine accessible psychological services with prevention-oriented organisational design.

3.3.4 Inductively emerging context

Some women were principal household earners because partners were unemployed, changed jobs repeatedly or contributed inconsistently. This placed economic provision alongside domestic and emotional labour. The resulting burden complicates simplistic advice to reduce working hours or disengage from demanding employment. For these women, sustainable well-being depends on income security, equitable household contribution and practical support.

The inductive themes also reframed counselling as both a remedial and preventive resource. Women may seek help only after distress becomes severe, partly because of limited time, stigma or uncertainty about available services. Organisational counselling, community and family services, and secure online options may improve early access. Services should be culturally responsive and avoid interpreting women’s distress as an individual failure when it arises from unequal role expectations or unsafe work environments.

3.4 Mixed-methods integration

The quantitative and qualitative findings converged on the central importance of balance. The survey established that work-life balance had a substantially stronger statistical association with psychological well-being than conflict management. The interviews contextualised this pattern by showing that balance was shaped simultaneously by workload, family responsibilities, digital connectivity, organisational culture, economic necessity and access to recovery, whereas conflict-management strategies operated more directly within particular interactions and relationships. The strands were therefore complementary: the survey identified a general pattern across 577 women, while counsellors described mechanisms through which hidden distress, guilt, self-silencing and delayed help-seeking could coexist with outward functioning. Table 5 presents the explicit integration of the principal quantitative findings and qualitative explanations.

A point of tension also emerged. Collaboration was the most commonly endorsed conflict-management style in the survey, yet counsellors continued to describe cases involving unequal expectations, low psychological safety and limited negotiating power.

The qualitative strand therefore qualified, rather than contradicted, the descriptive finding: collaborative intent may be present without producing equitable outcomes when the surrounding relationship or organisation does not permit genuine negotiation. Interventions should strengthen communication skills while also examining the structural conditions within which those skills are used.

Table 5. Joint display of quantitative and qualitative integration.

Quantitative result	Qualitative explanation	Relationship	Integrated interpretation
Work-life balance correlated moderately with psychological well-being ($r = .585$, $p < .001$) and was the dominant regression predictor ($\beta = .576$, $p < .001$).	Counsellors described simultaneous role pressure, fatigue, emotional strain, digital intrusion and inadequate recovery.	Convergence and complementarity	Balance reflects access to time, recovery and supportive conditions across work and family domains, helping explain its comparatively strong statistical association with well-being.
Conflict management had a weaker positive correlation ($r = .146$, $p < .001$) and a smaller independent regression contribution ($\beta = .083$, $p = .015$).	Communication, negotiation and emotional regulation were helpful, but avoidance, accommodation and unequal power could leave underlying demands unresolved.	Complementarity	Interactional skills contribute to well-being, but their effects may be constrained by structural workload, role inequality and limited negotiating power.
Collaboration was the most frequently endorsed conflict-management mode ($M = 7.51$, $SD = 1.92$).	Counsellors nevertheless encountered women facing low psychological safety, inequitable expectations and self-silencing.	Tension/qualification	A collaborative orientation does not ensure a collaborative environment; relational and organisational conditions determine whether negotiation is workable.
The model explained 34.9% of the variance in psychological well-being.	Counsellors identified additional influences, including economic responsibility, partner and supervisor support, workplace climate, caregiving and access to counselling.	Complementarity	The unexplained variance is consistent with well-being being shaped by resources and pressures beyond the two measured predictors.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE WORKFORCE HEALTH

First, employers should treat work-life balance as an upstream determinant of psychological well-being. Clear after-hours communication policies, reasonable workloads, predictable flexibility and family-supportive supervision can protect recovery time. Flexibility should be implemented equitably so that its use does not carry career penalties.

Second, employee assistance and counselling services should address the work-family system rather than distress symptoms alone. Assessment may include role overload, relationship communication, caregiving, financial pressure, digital boundary intrusions, workplace safety and the availability of social support. Counselling can help clients evaluate whether present coping protects long-term well-being or merely sustains outward functioning.

Third, prevention should be multilevel. Psychoeducation can strengthen emotional regulation, assertive communication, self-care and help-seeking. Couple or family-informed work may support fairer role negotiation. At the organisational level, leaders

should be trained to recognise psychosocial risks and respond without stigma. These combined approaches position women's well-being as a shared resource for healthy, resilient and sustainable workplaces.

5. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

A key strength is the integration of a relatively large survey with perspectives from counsellors working across diverse service settings. The qualitative strand adds practice-based explanations to the statistical model and highlights contextual themes not fully represented by standardised measures. The use of established instruments and transparent thematic procedures further supports interpretability.

Several limitations should be considered. First, convenience sampling and the absence of a population sampling frame limit population-level generalisation; the sample was concentrated among married, urban, salaried and private-sector women and should not be treated as nationally representative. Second, the quantitative strand was cross-sectional. The terms association, contribution and predictor refer to statistical relationships within the observed model and do not establish temporal order or causality. Reverse or reciprocal relationships remain possible, including the possibility that women with stronger psychological well-being perceive or manage work-life demands more favourably. Third, all survey measures were self-reported and may be affected by common-method variance, recall limitations and socially desirable responding. A global conflict-management score may also obscure differences among the five Thomas-Kilmann modes. Fourth, the qualitative findings represent counsellors' professional interpretations rather than direct accounts from the same survey participants, so integration occurred at the level of findings rather than matched individual cases. Future research should use probability or stratified sampling where feasible, combine self-report measures with organisational or longitudinal indicators, and recruit matched mixed-method samples. Multi-wave longitudinal studies are particularly needed to test temporal ordering and provide stronger evidence concerning possible causal pathways. Organisational support, partner support, burnout and care burden should also be examined as mediators or moderators.

6. CONCLUSION

Work-life balance showed the strongest statistical association with psychological well-being among Malaysian working women, while conflict management made a smaller independent contribution within the cross-sectional regression model. Counsellors' accounts contextualised this pattern by showing that women's well-being was embedded in interacting work, family, emotional, economic and organisational conditions. Communication and coping skills matter, but their effectiveness depends on workable boundaries, supportive relationships, psychologically safe services and responsive workplaces. These findings support coordinated action from women, families, counsellors, supervisors and organisations, while longitudinal research is required before causal conclusions can be drawn.

DECLARATIONS

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Ethical approval and informed-consent procedures are described in Section 2.6.

Data availability: De-identified data may be considered upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to ethical approval, participant confidentiality and institutional requirements.

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