

Balancing the Roles: Societal/Cultural Gender Expectations and Roles Conflict Among African Working Women

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Abstract: In addition to the home duties that women have to fulfil every day, today's women just like men work full time jobs. Does this suggest a gender role uprising? Working women are faced with contradicting role expectations both at work and home. Attempting to fulfil one role to perfection requires sacrifice of another which in turn result in less attention being given to the other role. The views, values and expectations of the society towards a woman also impacts on and contributes to roles conflict both at home and at work. This in turn results in dissatisfaction either at work or in life in general. During this process, the wellbeing of a woman is also affected as the juggle between work and home duties brings a strain to the woman as a whole. Previous research show that most studies on work family conflict focused on the western contexts which may not truly reflect the work family conflict in Africa. Thus, this paper uses existing literature on African women and conflicting roles from researchers like Whitehead & Kotze (2003), Dobson (2011), Muasya, (2016)Epie and Ituma, (2014)and Annor, (2014) to discuss and review the societal impact on work and life role conflict and life balance among working women in Africa. It also adds onto the research on how the role conflicts at work and home can influence or affect wellbeing of the woman in general. Hence, the paper discusses the relationship that exist between the multiple roles of women and satisfaction (both at work and in life) and how this role conflicts affects their wellbeing. The paper also explores the role played by societal/cultural gender expectations in this role conflict.

Keywords: Working Women, Role Conflict, Societal/Cultural Gender Expectations, Satisfaction, Wellbeing and Health.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The societies we live in have always set what can be called "societal expectation standards" to both the girl and boy child. Hence social constructs of how a boy or girl should behave or what they should do and not do are visible in most societies even today. Traditionally, boys and girls roles in the society have always been separated. There has always been gender roles shaped by the societal expectation for both men and women which defines what men and women should do and not do as well as what their attributes and expectations should be. For example; girl children have toys they are expected to play with while boys have their own too. When it comes to education boys have always been associated more with science related courses while girls would be encouraged to choose courses like home economics which are more in line with female home duties.

(Monteiro, 2015) avers that the society gets conditioned to the differences created by gender roles which is later considered as normal and shared through generations. Therefore the idea that men are worth more than women in some specialised areas of work is nothing but a mere custom which is carried out and passed on to other generations. However, with the changing societies and level of education available today, girls or women are not restricted as to what to study or work as anymore. (Dobson, 2011) compares the literacy rates of urban versus rural women in Botswana and the findings of this study shows that 90 percent of Botswana women in urban areas are literate with 79 percent literacy rate for all women over the age of 15 nationwide, 5% more than boys nationwide. This highlights the high number of girls found in schools than boys today. Therefore, it's not astonishing to find women in different professions today including those that were considered as male dominated jobs in the past. In contrary, (Roca et.al, 2018) explains that despite the fact that nowadays the number of girls getting primary education is almost the same as that of boys in many African countries, the chances of getting into university are five times lower for women than for men in countries such as Nigeria. This is proof enough that women still face gender challenges even today.

Women are and have always been an important part of the family and its wellbeing. Having a family and working are two important aspects in everyone's lives too and a conflict between the two significantly

affects the other. With both family and work roles women find themselves in conflicting roles. Hence trying to find a balance between the two roles is a vital subject to look into. (Burke, 2001: Kopp and Ruzicka, 1993) explain that it's easy for men to find a balance in their work roles as compared to women who are faced with both work and home responsibilities. In other words, men are faced with fewer roles than women hence they are less likely to experience this multiple role conflict that women are experiencing. Traditionally, women were not expected to work but rather to take care of the home and care for children while men fend and provide for the family. However, (Park et al., 2013) asserts that Joan Williams pointed out that 'the gendered system of organizing market work and family that began at the turn of the nineteenth century, in which men worked outside of the home while women supposedly stayed behind to rear the children and tend the home, remains entrenched in the American mind'. Women of today are different, they do not want to depend on their male counterparts for their survival.

Today, women fill up the existing gender gap as most women are becoming an economic force to be reckoned with by holding high positions at both community and national level countrywide. An increasing percentage of women can be found in high positions across African countries. For example, as per (De Bruin, 2000) in (Whitehead, 2003:77) during the year 2000, 40% of the economically active population of South Africa were women. Although more men (60%) than women (40%) were employed, there were more professional women (55%) and administrators (69%) than men. Even though this does not compare to the number of men in managerial and political positions around the world this is evident enough that women power do exist in the work industry and will increase with time. Still, (Roca et al., 2018) maintains that although the number of women entering higher education in sub-Saharan Africa has increased, gender inequality remains a problem. Their study on African women working in the global health shows that only 30% of science professionals in sub-Saharan Africa are women.

However the irony of the matter is; when women get to work they have the same work time and roles as men which adds onto the traditional roles that they already have or are expected of them to do at home. (Whitehead, 2003) quotes (Burke, 2001) who expresses that women are the ones who experience the conflicting roles between their work and family as they are still faced with multiple home responsibilities after work as compared to men. Hence, women go through the strain of trying to find a way to juggle and balance work and home duties together, (Whitehead & Kotze, 2003: Dobson, 2011: Tucker, 1999: Muasya, 2016: Somashekher, 2018). As (Somashekher, 2018) puts it; working women do not only experience a change in their roles at home but find themselves under the pressure of trying to balance the roles at both work and home. Hence, when conflict between the two life domains occurs, the consequences are reflected in both professional and domestic life.

While the increase in participation and higher positions held by women in professional jobs as compared to the past may be seen as some sort of development in the position of women in the society and family, (Sunita Malhotra and Sapna Sachdeva, 2005) as quoted in (Somashekher, 2018) however explains that this economic independence has not brought women freedom from their nurturing roles in the family. This implies that even today women are still faced with conflicting roles and societal pressure on their expected roles as women irrespective of their positions both in the society and at work. (Muasya, 2016) asserts that most studies on work and family roles conflict gives the impression that role conflict and life balance is not an issue in African societies but rather makes it look like it's only a western thing. Therefore, the relationship between women's work lives and their non-work pursuits and societal influence/expectations in Africa needs further exploration as the conflict resulting from this is a significant source of strain for nearly all the working women.

Balancing The Roles: Satisfaction At Home And Work And Wellbeing Among African Working Women

Roles conflict when there are pressures from two or more different roles whereby commitment to one role results in suffering of the other role. Thus, role conflict suggests a lack of coherence between different expectations from a job or roles. (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985:77) maintains that an examination of the literature on conflict between work and family roles suggests that 'work-family conflict exists when the time devoted to the requirements of one role makes it difficult to fulfill requirements of another, when strain from participation in one role makes it difficult to fulfill requirements of another and when specific behaviors required by one role make it difficult to fulfill the requirements of another'. Women's roles at home include and are not limited to being a wife, mother, housekeeper, sister, friend and a member of the community. Thus, women are faced with the responsibility of fulfilling these multiple roles to the expected level. One vital exception about these roles though is that they don't carry the same meaning and value to all women, what's important to one woman can be different to another. As shown by (Whitehead and Kotze, 2003)'s study, the importance of a role and the time spent on is closely linked to the life-priorities and life-stage of the woman hence the roles differ and are forever changing as per the priorities of each woman. Location is one contributory factor to this, women in urban areas do not experience the same role conflict as those in the rural areas. In rural

areas working women normally have their parents and extended family members to help with the family roles while at work which is hard to get in urban areas as everyone is there for greener pastures.

(Muasya, 2016) explains that work-family balance is the opposite of work-family conflict and when there is less conflict resulting from the two roles “satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with minimum role conflict” is achieved as described by (Clark, 2000:751). Life-balance according to (Whitehead and Kotze, 2003) is therefore not “one, single ultimate experience”, but a series of individual experiences over time, which can better be described as “life-balance moments”. (Whitehead and Kotze, 2003)’s study on career and life balance of professional women in South Africa shows that life balance among working women is something that most women are aware of and acknowledge its importance but still find it difficult to achieve due to differing priorities and societal expectations. The study reveals that life balance among women is always changing and what represents life balance according to one person varies with another. Thus, life balance or life satisfaction as described by women roles can be closely linked to the amount of time dedicated to what one considers as their priority roles.

Work family balance and satisfaction in life can be affected by one’s work. (Bellavia & Frone, 2005) as quoted in (Amstad et al., 2011) found three categories in which work family conflicts can be grouped into; work-related, family-related and domain-unspecific outcomes. According to the authors;

both directions of work–family conflict have been found to be associated with work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment., intention to quit, burnout, absenteeism, work-related strain and organizational citizenship behavior as well as family-related outcomes, such as marital satisfaction, family satisfaction and family-related strain. Finally, the third category; domain-unspecific outcomes also has been found to be related to both directions of work–family conflict; these outcomes include life satisfaction, psychological strain, somatic complaints, depression and substance use or abuse, (Amstad et al., 2011: 152).

(Muasya’s, 2016) study on work–family balance choices of women working in Kenyan Universities revealed a relationship between work and life satisfaction among workers. Moreover, the results from (Muasya’s, 2016; Epie and Ituma’s, 2014 and Annor’s, 2014) studies on work family balance among working women in Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana respectively share the similar sentiment on the importance and need for family-friendly work organisations and institutions in Africa as a way of supporting workers to achieve satisfaction both at work and at home and minimize roles conflict. As shown in Muasya’s study, as women pursue formal employment in urban areas they go through the challenge of having to hire domestic workers to care for their children as compared to the past where family members assisted. Hence, work family friendly policies in work organisations should be there to address conflicts resulting from work and family roles. Roca et.al (2018) explains that globally, better work conditions and policies for women has promoted an integration of women into the workplace hence most women have managed to overcome the existing gender barriers to become successful. This, they explain that is not the case in sub-Saharan Africa where young women have to invent their own successes.

(Annor’s, 2016) study contradicts past studies which maintained that most work family conflicts are a result of either family or work demands or both. He rather argues that family pressure appear to have stronger influence on work family conflict as compared to work pressure. He further explained that this suggests that ‘the cultural context may influence the manner in which an individual attributes conflict to a particular domain’. For example; it’s common for family members to have multiple jobs at the same time as a way of generating enough income for their families. Because of this, time spent at home is less but more at work. But in African societies where levels of unemployment are high and salaries are low this would be considered as sacrificing one’s time for the family’s survival, (Annor, 2014). Hence, the demand or the pressure from the family is likely to lead to work family conflicts more than work demand.

Moreover, (Whitehead and Kotze, 2003)’s study noticed a close relationship between women’s life balance and their wellbeing. Women who experienced a lack of balance between their work and life roles experienced conditions like insomnia, fatigue, regular ‘flu and colds, as well as more serious conditions, such as panic attacks, depression and cancer, (Whitehead and Kotze, 2003). Faragher, Cass and Cooper (2005) however suggests that there is growing evidence that current trends in employment conditions may be eroding levels of job satisfaction and directly damaging the physical and mental health of employees. They attribute this to automated and inflexible work practices which leaves workers with less and less control over their workload and this in a way increases feelings of job insecurity.

(Whitehead and Kotze, 2003:81) identified two factors vital for experiencing a balance in life among working women; internal and external factors. Internal/influencing and external/supporting factors are described as;

“the level of self-awareness at which a person lives life; the ability to “know and understand yourself”; the ability to take responsibility for your decisions and life choices; the ability to understand and deal with personal fears; the application of proactive coping strategies; a positive attitude towards life and dealing with chosen demands; and a level of trust in others who assist and support you”. While the identified

external/supporting factors are described as societal views and attitudes, organizational values and support and the existence of support structures like friends, family, housekeepers etc.”

The study concludes that internal factors are vital in one’s life in order for them to achieve a life balance as it cannot be achieved even with the presence of supporting factors alone. Hence, this is what differentiates women who experience or achieve life balance from those who do not. With internal factors established a woman is able to make decisions concerning their multiple roles and their life in general hence a balance in their life can be experienced or even achieved. Nonetheless, we all belong to some sort of group or society, thus, how our societies view us or the values within our societies carry so much meaning to us. It is what we identify ourselves with or what we find identity in. With that being said, a society is important in the fully functioning of a woman. Therefore, it is vital for a working woman to get support from both the family and their work place for them to be able to perform their numerous roles. As confirmed by many studies on work-life roles conflict lack of support from work may lead to dissatisfaction in life, less commitment at work and reduced wellbeing, (Amstad et al. 2011; Schaufeli et al., 2009; Faragher, Cass and Cooper, 2005; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2008). Hence it is vital to have organizational values that support and promotes life balance among working women and with this good work results and less work-family conflicts will be achieved.

Contrary to expectation though, (Annor’s, 2016) study on work-family demands and support which examined direct and moderating influences on work–family conflict revealed that social support increased the effects of demands on work- family conflict rather than reducing the effects of demands on the work–family conflict. The study’s findings contradicts those of previous studies by suggesting the importance of social support in reducing work–family conflict. (Annor, 2016) explains that though social support is conceptualized in this study as an antecedent of work–family conflict, it is plausible that work–family conflict may be a precursor of social support. This explains the fact that sometimes the family/social support puts a lot of pressure or demand on the working women which then results in work conflicts. Annor further explains that the finding from the present study may be explained by the reciprocity that characterizes family relationships in the Ghanaian context. Specifically, employees who receive support from sources within the family domain may be expected to reciprocate in kind. For example, though grandparents may help in caring for young children it is expected that recipients (employed parents) of such support would cater for the financial, health, and material needs of the support provider. Thus, family support may be associated with additional burdens on employees.

Working Women And Societal/Cultural gender Expectations

Societal views and attitudes towards women’s roles play a significant part in how women view their place, roles and their importance both in the family and society at large. Societal expectations therefore contributes to conflicting roles women find themselves in both at work and at home. In response to this, (Somashkher, 2018) explains that coping with the role conflict which working women find themselves in requires not only a change in the woman’s overall thinking and competence but also requires a change in the mindsets of their expected roles by both the family and society. (Whitehead & Kotze, 2003)’s study on career and life balance of professional women in South Africa revealed that that the beliefs and attitudes of ones’ society influenced how they viewed the importance of their roles as women both at work and at home. And that conflicting views still existed within the society with regard to their work and family roles as women. I personally see this pressure from the society, family and work and the multiple roles as a total strain on the woman’s health and wellbeing as it’s not easy to satisfy all at the same time.

Today, education has turned out to be a significant factor in women’s life in general. One would think because women are now more educated and liberated in making decisions about their lives this would decrease the role conflict and societal expectations that they have experienced since from the past. However, (Dobson, 2011) asserts that even today with most women obtaining high educational qualifications and holding full time careers, cultural role expectations remain a vital part of their everyday lives. Participants in her study about how women in Botswana juggle work and home based roles revealed that because of role expectations at home and the pressure from work sometimes their work life cause conflicts in their homes or relationships with their spouses. Thus, women are faced with the challenge of trying to fulfil their cultural expectations and trying to negotiate a change in their multiple role life. In Dobson’s words this “illuminates a generation negotiating cultural consistency as well as change”.

Nonetheless, through education women have been able to defy the odds and secure jobs in what used to be male dominated work areas. Nowadays there are more single mother headed families in both rural and urban areas in which mothers are faced with the responsibility of being both a mother and father figure to their children; a caretaker and a provider hence all decisions about their children’s future are made by them. Because of this, women have to juggle both work and home roles as well as fulfil the cultural expectations which in this case leads to a change in their roles in order to meet their priorities. As explained by (Schaufeli et al., 2009:157) human capital theory argues that people prioritize and make choices on how to spend their time and resources

on daily activities(e.g. work, family and leisure). Thus, working women in urban locations are likely to alter their roles according to their schedules and availability both at home and at work.

For example; a full time working mom is likely to have a helper who takes care of the kids while she is at work and the mother will then dedicate their time after work to helping kids with homework and getting their uniforms and lunch box ready for the next day. Studies have also proven that most women who get support from their spouses report negative family and work conflicts, (Muasya 2016; Dobson, 2011). Today, more men especially in urban areas are more involved in helping their working women with home chores which is not likely to be the case with rural areas. This has been proven by Dobson's study where a difference in role practices among women in urban areas and those in the rural areas was noted. Conversely, today's women in urban areas can be said to be culturally liberated in the sense that they value girls' education hence they do not mind investing in their girl child education which has no subject restriction as compared to the past where boys were sent to schools for specific courses and girls either dropped out or remained behind to do home chores or even get married. Dobson, (2011) suggests that this could arise as an indicator for a tolerant culture among women in what have always been male dominated professions.

(Annor's, 2016) study contradicts past studies which maintained that most work family conflicts are a result of either family or work demands or both. He rather argues that family pressure appear to have stronger influence on work family conflict as compared to work pressure. He further explained that this suggests that 'the cultural context may influence the manner in which an individual attributes conflict to a particular domain'. For example; it's common for family members to have multiple jobs at the same time as a way of generating enough income for their families. Because of this, time spent at home is less but more at work. But in African societies where levels of unemployment are high and salaries are low this would be considered as sacrificing one's time for the family's survival, (Annor, 2014). Moreover, women are raised in societies where a successful career and having a family is seen as the most important part of life. So because of the multiple roles from work and family young women often find it hard to pursue available career development opportunities. An expecting mom, breastfeeding or one with small children may find career opportunities which require them to relocate or travel a lot a disadvantage on their family role. Hence, the demand or the pressure from the family is likely to lead to work-family conflicts more than the work demand.

II. CONCLUSION

The literature depicts different ideas when discussing trends in role conflict and balancing the roles among working African women. It suggests that support from both work and home is important in balancing the roles and life satisfaction. Still it also proposes that support from home can put pressure on working women and be demanding hence can be more of a strain at work more than work affecting home roles. It suggests an increase in the number of women in education and important positions as well as change in attitudes towards women's roles but when it comes to gender disparity it suggests that we are still far from reaching a gender revolution as societal gender role expectations still exists even today. I argue that it is vital for the society and both men and women to see women as equally able as men despite the challenges they face. This will help to close the gender gap that still exists between the two and also reduce the gendered role conflict experienced by women. It is important to note that the studies discussed here are not the only researches done on work family conflict in Africa and they do not necessarily reflect the work family issues in the entire African continent. Hence, the findings of these studies should not be used to generalize the family work issues situation in Africa. Moreover, there are some differences in work family issues due to cultural differences in African countries.

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