

Empowering superwomen: Counseling in modern work-family dynamics of Malaysian professionals



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Abstract This study explores the relationship between the need for counselling services, work-family conflict, social support, and mental health among professional women in Malaysia, considering the moderating role for the effects of the need for counselling services on the relationship between work-family conflict and mental health, as well as the relationship between the need for counselling services and social support on mental health. Involving a sample of 362 individuals, this study employs statistical analysis to explore the relationships between the relevant variables. The findings indicate a significant relationship between the need for counselling services and the mental health of professional women in Malaysia ($p < 0.05$). However, there is no significant relationship between work-family conflict and mental health ($p > 0.05$). Further analysis also confirms a significant moderating role for the need for counselling services on the relationship between work-family conflict and mental health, as well as for the relationship between the need for counselling services and mental health ($p < 0.05$). The results of this study contribute significantly to understanding the factors influencing the mental health of professional women in Malaysia. Practical implications include emphasizing the importance of counselling services in supporting their mental well-being, as well as the need for better support strategies in managing work-family conflict. By understanding these factors, supportive measures can be designed to enhance the quality of life for women professionals in this country.

Keywords: professional women, psychological support, career-family balance, mental health, organizational counseling

1. Introduction

Professional women globally, including those in Malaysia, face challenges related to balancing work demands and family responsibilities. Studies from the United States, such as those by Smith and Johnson (2020), highlight high pressure on women in achieving this balance. In Singapore, research by Chen and Wong (2019) shows similar challenges in the IT industry. In Europe, studies by Müller et al. (2018) outline issues in fields such as medicine and law. Addressing mental well-being, studies by Jones and Smith (2020) in the U.S. and García-Ael et al. (2021) in Spain indicate pressure on women in balancing work and personal life. The implementation of flexible work structures and support programs can assist women globally in managing these challenges (Smith & Johnson, 2020; Chen & Wong, 2019; Müller et al., 2018; Jones & Smith, 2020; Garcia, 2023).

Person-centered therapy (PCT) by Carl Rogers is crucial in helping professional women overcome work-family conflicts. PCT emphasizes empathy and unconditional positive regard, enabling women to explore conflicts and seek solutions. Studies have shown that work-family conflict negatively impacts mental well-being, as shown by Ahmad and Omar (2019) in Malaysia's hospitality industry. Globally, studies such as those by Smith and Johnson (2021) in the U.S. and Chen and Wong (2019) in Singapore emphasize the need for awareness and support to address these challenges (O'Neill, & Follmer, 2020).

Research by Tan et al. (2020) in Malaysia reveals the negative impact of work-family conflict on women in the IT field, emphasizing the need for holistic approaches. Rochat (2023) reported a link between work-family conflict and psychosocial stress in Malaysian professional women, stressing the importance of better support strategies. Integrating findings from these studies can lead to effective strategies to increase the mental well-being of professional women globally (Tan et al., 2020; Rochat, 2023).

This study aims to investigate the impact of work-family conflict, social support, mental health, and the need for counseling services among professional women in Malaysia. Several research questions are posed to address this objective:

I. The first research question seeks to determine the levels of counseling service needs, work-family conflict, and mental health status among professional women in Malaysia.'

II. The second research question explores whether there is a significant relationship between the need for counseling services and mental health among professional women in Malaysia, with a null hypothesis (Ho1) indicating no significant relationship.

III. The third research question investigates the existence of a significant relationship between work-family conflict and mental health among professional women in Malaysia, with a null hypothesis (Ho2) suggesting no significant relationship.

IV. The final research question examines whether there is a significant moderating relationship between the need for counseling services and work-family conflict on mental health among professional women in Malaysia, with a null hypothesis (Ho3) proposing no significant moderating relationship.

In summary, this study aims to comprehensively explore the dynamics of work-family conflict, social support, mental health, and counseling service needs among professional women in Malaysia, with each research question addressing specific aspects of this multifaceted issue.

This study aims to understand how work-family conflict impacts the mental health of professional women in Malaysia and highlights the importance of counseling services as moderators to mitigate these effects (Smith et al., 2020). An examination of the interplay between work-family conflict and social support contributes to the development of theories for understanding how social support influences mental well-being (Smith & Lee, 2019). Emphasizing the role of counseling services as moderators enhances the understanding of how interventions can alleviate the negative impacts of work-family conflict and bolster the positive effects of social support (Yahya et al., 2020).

Moreover, this study aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality by addressing the challenges faced by working professional women, promoting family empowerment, and supporting mental health care (Khetrapal & Bhatia, 2020). Addressing work-family conflict is vital for women's health, especially considering their unique biological experiences, such as pregnancy and the postpartum period (Ibrahim & Zaimah, 2021).

2. Methods

This study employed a survey design using quantitative methods. The survey questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms and was also sent via email to female professionals obtained from the Human Resources Department of a governmental agency in Malaysia. The study focused on professional women in Malaysia with grades 41 and above, spanning various fields such as administration, academia, and technical roles. It aimed to understand the challenges they face, particularly regarding work-family conflict, and how these challenges impact their mental well-being. By emphasizing the importance of counseling services as moderators, this study seeks to improve support programmes for Malaysian professional women. It explores the link between work-family conflict and mental health, as well as the moderating role of counseling services, thus providing valuable insights into enhancing their overall well-being.

The population of this study consisted of 3,711 female professionals across Malaysia as of July 2023. These individuals were identified through the Human Resources Department. A cluster sampling method was applied, taking into account Malaysia's geographical breadth and topography, which is divided into 14 states. A total of 362 respondents participated in the study, representing all states. The sample size determination was guided by recommendations for structural equation modeling (SEM), where Hair et al. (2010) suggested a minimum of 200 respondents, while Krejcie and Morgan (1970) recommended a sample size of at least 346 for a population of 3711. To ensure reliable correlations and adhere to Roscoe (1975) guidelines, a sample exceeding 300 was targeted.

The research instrument comprised five sections covering respondent demographics, attitudes toward psychological assistance, work-family conflict, and mental health status. Counseling service needs were measured using the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Questionnaire developed by Fischer and Farina (1995). This 10-item Likert scale questionnaire assesses openness and the value of seeking help for emotional issues, with higher scores indicating a more positive attitude. It has demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .90, and strong validity across various studies (Adnan, 2013; Vogel et al., 2005; Taherdoost, 2016). Mental health was assessed using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) developed by Goldberg and Williams (1988), which consists of 12 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicate poorer mental health. The GHQ-12 has demonstrated high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .90 and an internal consistency reliability index of .85 (El-Metwally et al., 2018; Farhan, 2021), and it is validated for use in the Malaysian context (Zulkefly & Baharudin, 2010). Work-family conflict was measured using the Work-Family Conflict Scale developed by Gutek et al. (2010), which consists of 8 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This scale was translated by Adnan (2013) and demonstrated high validity and reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78 and an internal consistency reliability index of 0.90 (Othman, 2000).

The data collection procedure involved obtaining approval from the Human Resources Department to conduct the study. Survey questionnaires and informed consent forms were distributed to selected respondents via email. Official letters of notification were also sent to all involved centers to inform and encourage participation among professional women. This method ensured minimal information loss and maximized the response rate.

For data analysis, SPSS was used to perform initial data exploration and describe respondent demographics. Subsequently, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using IBM-SPSS-Amos was employed to assess the relationships between the different variables. A pilot study involving 60 selected female professionals demonstrated the effectiveness of the research methods, showing strong reliability across the key constructs: counseling service needs (Cronbach's alpha = 0.956), mental health (Cronbach's alpha = 0.964), and work-family conflict (Cronbach's alpha = 0.978). Early feedback from participants enabled adjustments that enhanced the research design and ensured the stability and robustness of the measurements.

3. Results

According to their demographic profile, the 362 professional women who participated in this study are a diverse group, with the majority of them being married, between the ages of 30 and 49, and Malay. Most had a bachelor's or master's degree and much job experience; 45.9% had more than 25 years of experience, and 31.8% had 11–15 years. Nearly half are childless, but some have several dependents, which reflects the variety of family duties they balance. The majority of the respondents work seven to ten hours a day in both urban and rural locations. These demographic data are crucial for comprehending how work–family conflict, social support, and mental health interact, emphasizing the need for specialized counseling services to assist these women in successfully juggling their home and professional life.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is crucial for validating measurement models in empirical studies. In our research, we used the pooled-CFA method to analyze all the constructs efficiently together. Through various fit indices, including SRMR, d_ULS, d_G, chi-square, and NFI, we assessed how well the proposed model fit the data. The analysis revealed similar fit levels between the proposed and tested models, deepening our understanding of their validity and adequacy. Model fit tests are essential for hypothesis testing and model validation (Table 1).

Table 1 Results of the saturated model and the estimated model.

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.073	0.073
d_ULS	4.817	4.817
d_G	4.078	4.078
Chi-Square	7111.170	7111.170
NFI	0.713	0.713

Note: This table shows the results of the "saturated model" and the "estimated model".

The results reveal that both models exhibit equivalent levels of fit to the data. Identical SRMR values indicate similar suitability to the data, whereas d_ULS (d_G) values suggest equal complexity in explaining variable relationships. Additionally, matching chi-square values indicate no significant difference between the proposed models and the observed data, signifying a good fit. Similar NFI values further support the validity of both models in explaining variable relationships. In summary, these findings confirm that both models perform similarly in fitting the data and explaining variable relationships.

In the pooled-CFA method, all the factors studied, such as work-family conflict and social support, are combined and analyzed together. This helps us understand how these factors are related to each other all at once. By doing so, we can overcome problems in model identification and analyze our data more effectively. Pooled CFA makes our analysis easier and helps us better interpret our results.

Convergent validity analysis examines factor loading to ensure strong relationships between indicators and measured variables, with values above 0.7 considered valid. It is vital for assessing measurement models such as pooled-CFA, ensuring accurate representation of intended concepts. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to assess model fit to the observed data. Convergent validity verifies strong relationships between indicators measuring the same construct, whereas discriminant validity ensures distinct constructs. Construct validity is essential for accurate, reliable data interpretation.

In the context of pooled CFA, analyzing model fit is important for assessing the combined measurement model. Several criteria are used for this purpose, including RMS Theta, SRMR, and NFI. The RMS Theta values of the model exceed the desired threshold, but the SRMR and NFI values meet the fit criteria. Therefore, the model demonstrates a relatively good level of fit, although it is not perfect (Table 2).

Although the model does not meet all fit criteria, these results are still acceptable, with some studies supporting this view. Hair et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of assessing model fit holistically, whereas Hau & Wen (2004) demonstrated that a model can still be acceptable even if it does not meet all criteria, as long as the values of several fit indices are sufficient. Therefore, the model provides a reasonably good representation of the observed data, albeit not perfect.

Discriminant validity analysis in the pooled-CFA measurement model is essential to ensure that each construct in the model is truly distinct from one another. Two main criteria are used for this: the Fornell–Larcker criterion and cross-loading. The Fornell–Larcker criterion and cross-loading analysis validate our measurement model. The Fornell–Larcker criterion

indicates stronger correlations within variables than with others do, confirming discriminant validity. Cross-loading analysis confirms that the indicators measure the intended variables consistently, confirming construct validity. Thus, our model meets the criteria for discriminant validity, ensuring uniqueness and indicator reliability. These findings enhance confidence in our analysis.

Table 2 Standardized root mean square values.

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.073	0.073
d_ULS	4.757	4.757
d_G	4.022	4.022
Chi-Square	7090.786	7090.786
NFI	0.714	0.714

Note: The table above shows the standardized root mean square.

Reliability analysis is an important step in ensuring that the constructs measured in the combined measurement model (pooled CFA) are consistent and reliable. Two main criteria used are the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR). First, the AVE measures how well the indicators within a construct can explain the variance of that construct itself. The desired AVE value is above 0.5. The analysis results show that the AVE values for all the constructs exceed 0.5, meeting the criterion for convergent validity. Second, CR measures the internal consistency of the constructs. The desired CR value is above 0.60. The analysis shows that the CR values for each construct reach or exceed the value of 0.60, indicating sufficient reliability.

Taking into account both of these criteria, it can be concluded that all the constructs in the combined measurement model meet the required reliability standards. This indicates the reliability and consistency of the indicators in measuring the intended variables, as well as sufficient internal construct reliability. Reliability and validity analyses are crucial for ensuring that study results can be trusted and interpreted correctly. With values meeting the established criteria, the data in the model are deemed valid and reliable for measuring the intended variables.

After confirming model fit, we assessed data normality via skewness and kurtosis tests, ensuring reliability within normal ranges. This spared extra outlier checks, saving time and resources while increasing researcher confidence. Normal data distribution ensures more valid and reliable research outcomes, supporting accurate statistical analyses and fostering trust in the data.

Multicollinearity in the pooled-CFA model is checked by examining correlations between endogenous and exogenous variables. If the VIF value surpasses 5, it signals significant multicollinearity. However, all the independent variables in this analysis have VIF values below 5, indicating no significant multicollinearity.

The absence of VIF values surpassing the threshold indicates that there is no strong correlation between the independent variables in the model. Therefore, the analysis results can be interpreted without concern for bias or skewness due to multicollinearity. Understanding and addressing multicollinearity via tools such as the VIF is crucial for ensuring analysis validity and reliability. With no multicollinearity issues present, researchers can confidently proceed with structural equation modeling (SEM), ensuring that the analysis results are not impacted.

After analyzing unidimensionality, validity, reliability, and multicollinearity in the combined measurement model (pooled-CFA), the next step is to incorporate all the constructs into a structural model for analysis via structural equation modeling (SEM). In this analysis, critical aspects of the SEM were evaluated to understand the relationships between the main constructs: counseling service needs, mental health, and work-family conflict.

Assessing R square and adjusted R square values provides insights into the variation in endogenous constructs explained by exogenous constructs. These values indicate the strength and importance of the combined or simultaneous influence of exogenous constructs on endogenous constructs (Table 3).

Table 3 Blindfolding results for the variables counseling service needs, mental health, and work-family conflict.

	SSO	SSE	$Q^2(=1-SSE/SSO)$
Counseling Service Needs	3620.000	3244.142	0.104
Mental Health	4344.000	3715.770	0.145
Work-Family Conflict	2896.000	2896.000	

Note: The table above presents the prediction relevance (Blindfolding) for the variables counseling service needs, mental health and work-family conflict.

In summary, the analysis highlights the factors affecting the psychological well-being of professional women in Malaysia. High levels of counseling service needs, moderate work-family conflict, and social support, alongside moderate mental health status, were observed. This study aimed to assess how counseling service needs, work-family conflict, and social support

influence the mental health of professional women. While counseling needs were high, work-family conflict and social support showed moderate significance, emphasizing the crucial role of counseling services in addressing mental health concerns. Despite being less influential than the need for counseling, work-family conflict and social support remain important. Enhancing workplace social support and ensuring the availability of quality counseling services are essential to improve the mental well-being of professional women in Malaysia. These insights provide valuable directions for interventions to enhance mental well-being and alleviate work-family conflict effects (Table 4).

Table 4 Level of counseling service needs, mental health, and work–family conflict.

	Standard deviation		Intepretation
	Min		
Counseling Service Needs	2.942	1.065	High
Mental Health	2.770	1.098	Medium
Work-Family Conflict	3.252	1.349	Medium

Note: The table above presents the level of counseling service needs, mental health and work-family conflict.

This study contributes empirically to psychology and human resources knowledge, providing a foundation for effective interventions to increase the mental well-being of professional women in Malaysia. This finding supports further research and program development for real benefits to this demographic.

Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 were tested via multiple linear regression analysis, which employs the *t* statistic to assess relationship significance. High *T* statistic values ($|O/STDEV|$) and low *p* values indicate statistically significant relationships between counseling needs, work-family conflict, social support, and mental health among professional women in Malaysia. The table below summarizes the analysis results (Table 5).

Table 5 Analysis of the moderator variables.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics ($ O/STDEV $)	P Value	Results
H ₁	Counseling Service Needs-> Mental Health Ho1: There is no significant relationship between the need for counseling services and mental health among professional women in Malaysia.	0.263	0.269	0.052	5.031	0.000	Significant Rejected
H ₂	Work-Family Conflict -> Mental Health Ho2: There is no significant relationship between the need for counseling services and mental health among professional women in Malaysia.	0.077	0.077	0.061	1.262	0.208	Not significant Accepted
H ₃	M1 -> Mental Health Ho4: There is no moderating role of need for counseling services on Work-Family Conflict and Mental Health among professional women in Malaysia.	0.138	0.141	0.059	2.344	0.019	Significant Rejected

Note: The table presents the analysis of the moderator variables.

The analysis aimed to test hypotheses about relationships between variables. The results revealed a significant link between counseling service needs and mental health among Malaysian professional women (*t*-statistic: 5.031, *P*-value: 0.000). However, no significant relationship was found between work-family conflict and mental health (*t*-statistic: 1.262, *P*-value: 0.208). Additionally, moderator M1 significantly influences the relationships among counseling service needs, work-family conflict, and mental health (*t*-statistics: 2.344, *P*-values: 0.019).

In summary, these findings emphasize the crucial impact of counseling service needs on mental health among professional women in Malaysia, highlighting the need for adequate support systems. Further investigation is needed to understand nuanced relationships, particularly with respect to the influence of work–family conflict on mental well-being.

4. Discussion

This study significantly contributes to understanding the factors influencing the mental well-being of professional women in Malaysia. This study underscores the importance of providing easy access to counseling services and considering cultural and contextual factors in addressing work–family conflict dynamics to enhance mental well-being. Through rigorous

statistical analysis, the study identified significant relationships between counseling service needs, work-family conflict, and mental health, highlighting the moderating role of counseling services in managing stressors.

From a counseling theory perspective, the findings align with the concept of individual needs for emotional support during work-family conflict, emphasizing the crucial role of counseling services in stress management (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This aligns with previous research indicating that access to counseling services can significantly reduce workplace stress and enhance employees' psychological resilience (Lapierre & Allen, 2012). Furthermore, studies suggest that individuals experiencing work-family conflict often suffer from emotional exhaustion, which counseling interventions can alleviate by providing coping strategies and emotional regulation techniques (Michel et al., 2011).

The importance of counseling services is further supported by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping, which highlights that individuals facing stress require effective coping mechanisms. This is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where cultural expectations about gender roles often place additional strain on professional women (Hassan et al., 2020). By addressing these challenges, counseling services play a vital role in mitigating the adverse effects of work-family conflict and fostering overall well-being.

Moreover, recent findings suggest that mental health issues among professional women are exacerbated by organizational demands and a lack of institutional support (Allen et al., 2020). Organizations that provide structured counseling programs report better employee productivity and job satisfaction, emphasizing the need for proactive intervention strategies (Cooper et al., 2018). As such, this study's findings reinforce the literature that advocates for integrated mental health policies within workplace environments to support professional women effectively.

5. Conclusion

This study delves into the mental well-being of professional women in Malaysia, exploring the intricate interplay between counseling service needs, mental health, and work-family conflict. While not all the relationships were statistically significant, the research underscores the importance of considering Malaysia's unique cultural and organizational contexts in understanding these dynamics.

Practically, the study emphasizes the critical need for accessible counseling services and strategies to address work-family conflict, offering valuable insights for policymakers and organizations seeking to support the mental health of professional women. By recognizing the moderating role of counseling needs and the impact of work-family conflict, tailored interventions can be developed to enhance the well-being of professional women in Malaysia, contributing both theoretically and practically to the field. Future research should explore longitudinal data to determine the long-term effects of counseling services on mental health outcomes. Additionally, cross-cultural studies could provide comparative insights into how different work environments impact professional women's well-being globally.

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Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and complied with national and international research ethics standards. Ethical approval was obtained from the UNIMAS Research Ethics Committee, and all participants provided informed consent before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality of participants' information was strictly maintained throughout the study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

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