

# Managing the domestic sphere: The experiences of Malay women in dual-career family

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**Abstract**— In many societies around the world, including Malaysia, women were limited to roles within the family and domestic tasks, thus domestic sphere is considered the responsibility of women alone. Commitments to the domestic sphere continue to be largely the responsibility of women even though many of them also participate in the paid labour force. The aim of this paper is to explore the experiences of Malay women in dual-career family managing their domestic chores and their child care, as they have decided to pursue their career and to fulfil their family life simultaneously. Ten (10) academic women, who work in public universities in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor areas, have been recruited. The primary data were gathered using a qualitative one to one in-depth interview method. The findings showed that all of them are strongly believed that domestic chores and child care should not be ignored and that they needed to be shouldered together with their career responsibilities. In order to manage the domestic chores, these women have decided to delegate some of them to family members, such as their husbands and children, to their maids or part-time helpers and also they did it by their own. These women had several alternatives, such as sending their children to daycare centres or babysitters, seeking assistance from their extended family or employing a live-in domestic helper, for arranging childcare. With reference to the ways they managed both tasks, this study found that these women have negotiated their religious and cultural identities in order to ensure that they can maintain the traditional perception of themselves as women and at the same time their identity as modern, educated and career women.

**Keywords**— Malay women, academic women, domestic chores, childcare arrangement, dual career family

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE term 'dual-career family' refers to a family that comprises both husband and wife as the heads of household and 'both husband and wife pursue active careers and family lives' [1]. Hicks et al. [2] and Hertz [3] emphasise that dual-career families are those in which both husband and wife are well-educated. They also noted that when many educational and employment opportunities are made available to women, the number of dual-career families is likely to increase [2-3]. In Malaysian context, the labour force statistics [4] have shown that women comprised 4,017.3 million of the

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employed population, and about 61% of working women were married, which may also indicate that dual-career families are a common phenomenon in Malaysia (5-6).

One of the biggest changes resulting from women's participation in the public sphere is that the gender roles in the traditional family system, in which the man is the main breadwinner and the woman is a housewife, have been challenged [7-10]. Women's roles are no longer those of daughter, mother and wife in the domestic realm, but they also have an option to participate in the paid labour force alongside men. Not only that, men are also seen to be involved in helping their wives to run the household and raise their children. However, these studies found that women to be more involved in doing the domestic chores than men without neglecting their careers. Thus, commitments to the family continue to be largely the responsibility of women even though many of them also participate in the paid labour force.

As in many other countries, although men's attitudes to domestic responsibilities has changed to some extent, there is still a perception in the Malay patriarchal society that domestic chores and child-rearing remain women's primary responsibility [12-14]. It is also necessary to understand the influence of Islam in constructing their responsibilities, which have also been accepted in the Malay adat. In general, Malay society has accepted the fact that the division of labour at home commonly involves men being the heads of households and primary breadwinners, as well as taking care of the family physically and emotionally [10-11]. This division of labour at home is the popular assumption in Malay society [15]. Malay women are led by their husbands after marriage and very often they compromise in many situations for the sake of their family [16]. They have been taught and motivated to do domestic tasks such as cooking, taking care of children and household management from an early age [17].

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Studies in countries around the world [7-10,18-20,16], including Malaysia [15,17,21-22] revealed that when many women participate in the paid labour force, they are different in managing their responsibilities than in families with a more traditional structure of 'male

breadwinner and female homemaker'. According to Pleck [23: 418], 'the total burden of work and family roles combined is substantially greater for the employed than the non-employed wife.' With the aim of balancing their family and work responsibilities, working women have set strategies to manage their dual roles in order to excel in both. To manage their domestic chores, most of working women obtaining assistance from their, husbands, children, extended family and domestic workers to do the household chores [15,17,18-20]. Hochschild found that women and their couples in her study have divided the chores into categories so that they could fulfil them according to schedules such as daily, weekly or monthly [24]. According to Abdullah's study of Malay professional women, these women also arranged their household chores according to certain periods [17].

Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Malay academic women in dual-career family managing their family responsibilities as they have decided to pursue their career and to fulfil their family life simultaneously. More specifically, the objectives of this study are (1) to examine the strategies they used to deal with their domestic chores and childcare (2) to find out factors influencing their decisions to choose the strategies.

## II. METHODOLOGY

In the context of this study, which was an exploratory study, a qualitative semi-structured interview was used as a tool to collect the primary data. According to Oakley [25] and Hesse-Biber [26], a researcher can obtain more personal information from the study respondents, particularly pertinent to their private lives, as well as can understand in-depth about the respondents' experiences by using this method. 10 married Malay academic women, who work in the public universities in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor areas, have been recruited. These two urban areas have been chosen because they do not only representing the most modern and metropolitan cities, but also providing many higher educational institutions, job and education opportunities, differences in social stratification, as well as they have Malays as the biggest ethnic group. Their age range was between the aged of 24 and 40 years old. I recruited all the respondents through my friendship networks and the snowballing technique by using the purposive sampling [27].

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A few studies on Malay women professionals in Malaysia, stated that most women who have careers are still responsible for the organisation of their homes and maintaining the traditional perception of themselves as women [17,5-6]. Similarly, all respondents in this study said that being career women does not exempt them from household management, even though they said that it has never been easy for them to be career women and at the same time manage the household duties. For example, Basariah (aged 32) said: '*Doing the household chores for my family is tiring. I feel it's hard, especially when I also have my own career to focus on and I am not a full-time housewife.*' Therefore, it is important for

them to have strategies for carrying out with the competing demands of household tasks so as to create better environments and services for the whole family.

### *Domestic chores arrangements*

In this study, the respondents strongly believe that housework duties should be a shared responsibility with other people. They have decided to delegate some of the household chores either to family members, such as their husbands and children, or maids and part-time helpers. They are also organised their domestic chores routines on a rotational basis, either daily, weekly or monthly because both parties worked. They further explained that to manage and organise the household tasks during workdays presented more challenges than chores that are to be done monthly or at the weekend:

*I don't do all the domestic chores every day. Some simple duties I do it at night daily. The ones which need more time, I do monthly or during the weekends. My husband also assists me to do some of the duties and this really relieves me from the tiredness [laughs].* (Arena, aged 35)

*I have a maid to help me do the household chores. I cannot imagine how I could do all the chores alone, especially when I need to fulfil my work demands as well.* (Halimah, aged 35)

Respondents also mentioned that cooking was one of the primary household tasks that they gave importance and priority to, in spite of a busy schedule. It is a common practice in Malay families to have a hearty meal, fondly prepared by mothers and wives at home. This may consistent with one of the proverbs that describe the word 'womanhood' from Malay society's perspective, namely: '*sebijak mana pun perempuan itu, tempatnya tetap di dapur*' (literally translated as: 'regardless of how smart a woman is, her rightful place remains the kitchen') [28:398]. According to Ibrahim and Hassan, the proverb shows 'the importance of domesticity for a woman' [29:398]. Thus, Malay women continue to bear the burden of cooking responsibilities and this needs to be done by them regardless of their social and employment status. All respondents said that they managed to cook breakfast or dinner. Those who did not cook especially dinner and breakfast during the working day normally bought 'ready food' and had the meals with their families at home. None of them mentioned cooking lunch during workdays; presumably it was common practice for these women and their husbands to have lunch at their workplace, while their children were at school or at their caregivers' homes. However, this routine changed at weekends when most of these women further explained that they cooked all the meals for their families:

*I rarely cook breakfast so I always buy it during the working day. I only cook dinner and we [she, her husband and children] sometimes eat together. However, when I stay at home with my family at weekends, I prepare breakfast, lunch and dinner for my family.* (Mashitah, aged 37)

There were differences between all respondents as to when they performed their cooking responsibility. Seven respondents, who did not have maids, did all the cooking and this task was also a shared responsibility with their husbands. As Arena (aged 35) said: *'Sometimes my husband also helps me with the cooking and he doesn't mind helping me.'* Mashitah (aged 37) also mentioned her husband's involvement in cooking: *'My husband will do the cooking when I can't do it but he cooks only a simple meal.'* Of the three women who had a maid, the maids did the cooking only for their children but not for their husbands. In these cases, the wives cooked for their husbands but only Shakila's husband also did some cooking for the family. Shakila (aged 40) explained: *'My husband didn't like my maid doing the cooking for him, so she [her maid] just cooked for my children during the working days. I did the cooking for my husband and sometimes he [her husband] also did the cooking for our family.'*, Halimah (aged 35) and Emilia (aged 31) shared their experiences by telling me that they cooked meals for their husbands but their husbands were not involved in preparing meals for their families.

Although the respondents appreciated the assistance of their husbands and maids in cooking, they still felt frustrated about being unable to cook meals daily. For these women, serving good quality meals to their families was a top priority. They also added that cooking is what women should do for their families in order to be perfect wives and mothers. This matter was especially stressed by Arena:

*I cannot deny feeling sad when I see my children and husband eating food not from 'air tangan saya'<sup>1</sup> (literally translated as my water hand). But I have to admit that I cannot do it every meal time and every day because I'm also working at the same time. (Arena, aged 35)*

The other chores that most of them mentioned as needing to be done regularly were cleaning and laundry. Those who had no maid expressed their desire to employ a live-in maid to help them do these tasks, although they did not mention this desire when they talked about cooking for their families. All of them except Rashidah (aged 37) did the cleaning and laundry with the help of their husbands. They had created a schedule of cleaning, laundry and other household chores similar to cooking. Only simple cleaning jobs were carried out during the working day, such as washing up the dishes and sweeping the floor. None of them did major laundry or housecleaning tasks except at weekends. Basariah's husband, who works as a teacher, and Mashitah's husband, who owns his own business, did the laundry and cleaning much more frequently than other husbands as they worked flexible hours, from around 7.30 am to 2.00 pm. As Mashitah (aged 37) explained: *'My husband is the one who is in charge of laundry and outdoor house cleaning, especially on weekdays. He*

*works flexible hours so he always helps me to do these tasks and his assistance really reduces my burden.'* In Arena and Yusrina's cases, as their husbands' working hours were from 8.30 am to 5.00 pm, these men helped to clean up the house and do the laundry only when the situation permitted. Arena added that, even though her husband helped her, she still needed to hire a cleaner on a monthly basis to do the major house cleaning because of the size of her house:

*I have to hire a cleaner once a month because my house is big with four rooms and a large dining hall and kitchen too. I still need someone to do the massive cleaning. (Arena, aged 35)*

Rashidah's (aged 37) case was different; she was the only respondent who said that she felt frustrated because most of the cleaning and laundry duties lay on her shoulders. She did not receive any assistance from a maid and got very little help from her husband. However, she did not want to take it seriously as she has set the domestic chores as being the woman's responsibility. The words 'rarely', 'hard to see him' and 'if there is really an emergency' explain her husband's limited participation in and attitude towards sharing the tasks. Rashidah's husband still has the perspective that these tasks are women's responsibility. She only does simple cleaning on work days and a big house clean and laundry at weekends. She employs the services of a cleaner on a monthly basis for a major cleanup.

*I have to do all the chores alone and I will ask someone to come in monthly to help me. My husband helps me but very rarely. Actually it is really hard to see him helping me except if there is really an emergency. He always says that it's my work to do and I know I am responsible for those duties. (Rashidah, aged 37)*

Most of the women also mentioned their children's contributions to household tasks. Several women with pre-school-aged children only taught their children simple tasks as training for them to do household tasks. For the women who had school-aged children, and specifically those who did not have a live-in maid, their children's participation in household chores was such as washing up and sweeping the floor, making their beds and keeping their own rooms tidy. However, all women, whether with pre-school-aged or school-aged children, mentioned that they were not too dependent on their children as they were still young. In fact, respondents who had school-aged children added that the school burden was already heavy and as such they felt it was unfair to further involve them in housework. They further explained that their children's assistance in doing the chores was not regular but spontaneously done when they were assigned to do so, as Basariah and Rashidah remarked:

*I taught my little kids to do simple tasks when we spent time together such as tidying up their toys after they finished playing, putting the clothes in the laundry basket or putting their milk-bottle on the*

<sup>1</sup> This idiom is always used in Malay society to refer to food cooked by a mother for her family. It refers to a belief that the food that cooked by a mother is more delicious and is a blessing for her family. Therefore, Malay women always associated themselves with this idiom when they talked about the responsibility of preparing food for their family.

*table after they finished drinking. (Basariah, aged 32)*

*I only ask my children to help me if I really need it. They are already tired with their schoolwork. They are also engaged in a few after-school activities, for example, tuition classes and religious classes. I would feel pity for them if I asked them to do the domestic chores. (Rashidah, aged 37)*

There were differences in the ways in which those who had maids organised their household routine. As the routines of managing household chores were handled by maids, all the housework duties were done every day except cooking as they did at weekends. These three women seemed less worried about the domestic chores because the maids were responsible for them, and in fact, they and their family members rarely did any domestic chores at home. Emilia (aged 3) said: *'He [her husband] did help me before we had our maid. But now, he doesn't do it anymore. He said that we already had a maid to do so.'*

These women depended more on their husbands and maids or themselves rather than their children to manage their household tasks. All of them have taught both daughters and sons to be equally participated in domestic chores, in which might be different from the traditional way, where the role of women was to focus on household chores, while men related to social activities outside the home [16,17,28-29].

#### *Childcare arrangements*

Sharing the caregiver role with babysitters and neighbours was the first choice of working women in Malaysia, at 52.4%, followed by relatives 22%, 2.5% child centre and mother, 2.1% domestic helpers and 20.5% self-managed [30]. All respondents had their own strategy for arranging childcare, such as sending their children to daycare centres<sup>2</sup> or babysitters, seeking assistance from their extended family or employing a live-in domestic helper, depending on their situations. These three strategies were most likely to be applied as most of them had children under the age of 12.

Those who had live-in maids explained it was worth paying for maids compared to other strategies because they could focus more on their work responsibilities and could stay longer at their workplace if needed without time limitations as their childcare was handled by the maids at home. Therefore, they did not face problems dealing with the fixed hours offered by babysitters or daycare centres:

*I have a maid to help me to take care of my children when I go to my office. This is the best way for me because if I sent my children to the nursery or babysitter, it would cost me a lot. I also have to pick them up following the fixed hours and I have to pay extra if I want to pick my children up after the time has ended. The nature of my work needs me sometimes to be in the office after my working hours; therefore, having a maid is the best solution*

*to take care of my children when I am not around. (Shakila, aged 40)*

*My maid not only takes care of my children but she also helps me to do the domestic chores. I used to send my children to the babysitter but the time was limited and I had to fetch my kids on time. So, having a maid is much easier and I feel very comfortable this way. (Emilia, aged 31)*

Basariah, the only married woman who sent her children to nursery because it combines a daycare centre with pre-school education, which provides a good learning environment:

*When they [her sons] go to nursery, they learn something there. This is good because it is not only a play centre and daycare centre but also a learning centre. (Basariah, aged 32)*

Four respondents who sent their children to babysitters said that the reasons they chose this strategy was because the fees were cheaper compared to nurseries or hiring a live-in maid. They also found that it was much easier to negotiate extra time for childcare with babysitters if they could not pick up their children at a given time. The babysitters can also provide a home environment for their children as they had accepted their children as part of the family. The small number of children that their babysitters were taking care of was also taken into consideration as a reason why this strategy was the best choice. In this study, babysitters and daycare centres were the most popular choices for childcare, which is in accordance with several earlier studies [17,30].

Those women who had school-aged children, they did not face problem about child care because their children were already under the supervision of teachers at school. However, they as mothers still held the responsibility as educators at home, and they faced time limitations for supervising their children's education at home. Although they engaged with their children's learning at home, most of them emphasised that sometimes they lacked sufficient free time to participate in a regular commitment. This situation also brought a feeling of guilt to these women:

*I sometimes feel tired when I reach home. Sometimes, I feel sleepy while I supervise my children at home although I know that I have to focus on them and see their schoolwork. I feel pity for my children because sometimes I'm really tired and I cannot give my whole commitment to them. (Arenia, 35)*

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that the availability of the strategies used by women in this study has enabled them to maintain their family life and their career. Domestic chores and childcare were still considered as the major responsibilities that need to be fulfilled by these women. This study also revealed that domestic chores and childcare were still being done mostly by the women although these responsibilities were claimed to be shared equally with other people. Factors influencing their decisions to choose the strategies were

<sup>2</sup> My respondents described a daycare centre as a nursery when they discussed this issue.

different depending on their situations. They still wanted to fulfil their family responsibilities in order to be perfect wives and mothers.

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