

Dedicated and Unsatisfied in Life among Female Government Servants in Malaysia: How Long Until they Reach the Top?

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors influencing female public sector employees' dedication and career progression in Sabah, Malaysia. A quantitative analysis was conducted on survey data from 348 female government workers in Kota Kinabalu, examining their experiences with work-life conflict, work engagement, and marital status. The research reveals a crucial finding: although these women are highly committed and engaged in their work, this dedication paradoxically correlates with lower overall life satisfaction. This indicates a profound disconnect between their professional contributions and personal well-being, suggesting a systemic issue where their hard work may not be met with the recognition and fulfillment they seek to "reach the top". Drawing on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the results indicate that these women have met mainly their basic security needs through stable government employment, but struggle to achieve the higher-level needs of esteem and self-actualization. This research provides valuable insights for policymakers, urging them to implement initiatives addressing these underlying issues to foster a work environment where female government servants can achieve professional advancement and personal well-being.

Keywords: Life Satisfaction, Female Government Servants, Government, Sabah, Malaysia

Introduction

In contemporary society, the professional lives of women are under intense scrutiny, particularly concerning the factors that impact their work-life conflict and overall well-being (Juli *et al.*, 2024a; Juli *et al.*, 2025). A global trend of declining life satisfaction has been observed among women (Milovanska-Farrington *et al.*, 2022; Ghosh, 2023), especially those actively pursuing careers (Khadri *et al.*, 2023). Addressing this global trend issues are highly crucial and important, because ensuring female's well-being (such as closing gender gap) in the workforce's well sustained is one of the indicators in Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) – SDG 5 as what stated by Abd Karim *et al.* (2022) and Mahdi *et al.* (2023), which this is also a direct indicator of economic well-being and social equity (Bakar *et al.*, 2016; Vallabhaneni *et al.*, 2023). This discussion frequently highlights the significant influence of

external elements such as marital status (Marziah *et al.*, 2018), work-life conflict (Arham *et al.*, 2019; Juli *et al.*, 2024a), and work engagement (Juli *et al.*, 2024b).

Empirical results have always shown that employed women have lower life satisfaction than unemployed women. While women's involvement in the labor force is crucial for economic development, in Malaysia, it remains lower than that of men (Kuppusamy *et al.*, 2023), despite the fact that women outnumber men and have greater academic success (Peng *et al.*, 2022; Salleh *et al.*, 2022; Juli *et al.*, 2024b). This has produced a persistent "gender gap" in labor force participation, a trend which is duplicated in most other countries (Joshnloo *et al.*, 2020). Acknowledging and understanding of the root cause of this "gender gap" is highly critical and essential of achieving Malaysia's goal of becoming high-income nation which aimed between year 2028 and 2030 (World Bank, 2025). This goal can only be achieved by maximizing the human capital, where Malaysian women carried consistently the highest number (DOSM, 2020, 2023), especially in public sectors (Baqutayan, 2020; Salleh *et al.*, 2022; Juli *et al.*, 2024c).

This tendency for women to leave the labor force prematurely, typically to attend to family and domestic duties (Salleh *et al.*, 2022), is a serious problem in Malaysia, and marital status is among its key contributory factors (Marziah *et al.*, 2018; Juli *et al.*, 2024c). It is particularly acute in Sabah, where the labor force participation rate of married women is much less than that of married men, an indication of an extreme gender bias (Peng *et al.*, 2022). Besides local pressures, women in Malaysia and especially women in Sabah have to contend with a range of other issues. These include bumping against the "glass ceiling" that delays their career advancement, gender discrimination in the workplace, and social stigmas that tend to confine them to traditional domestic roles. These pervasive issues are likely to lead to lower life satisfaction, and they point to the urgent need to more clearly understand how these elements combined impact the well-being of working women in Malaysia. The current Malaysian government has attempted to address these issues by providing equal opportunity in education and by allocating a 30% quota for women in decision-making roles in the public sector (Kuppusamy *et al.*, 2023). Despite these efforts, a large gender gap remains in political empowerment and managerial positions, according to the Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI) scores (DOSM, 2023, 2024). To contextualize the study, it is important to understand the complex interplay of these variables. Work-life conflict, defined as an inter-role conflict where demands from work and personal life are incompatible, is more prevalent among women than men, especially for those who are married with children (Arham *et al.*, 2019). In Malaysia, studies have shown that working women often experience more work-life conflicts due to their dual responsibilities at home and in the workplace, with married women and those with children being particularly affected. This is consistent with findings from other countries, where high social expectations for women to manage household and professional duties contribute significantly to work-life conflict. This conflict, in turn, is a major reason why many women, particularly married ones, exit the labor force early (Peng *et al.*, 2022).

Work engagement is a positive and fulfilling state of mind characterized by dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, 2012), crucial for employee productivity and retention. However, research on work engagement among women in Malaysia remains sparse, especially within Sabah's public sector (Juli *et al.*, 2024b). Work engagement is not just about productivity, but also about the psychological conditions that allow individuals to bring their full capabilities to

their work. For women, appreciation and recognition are vital for sustaining work engagement (Panatik *et al.*, 2016). As evidenced in Malaysian contexts, women often face a "glass ceiling" (Dastane *et al.*, 2017; Khadri *et al.*, 2023) and limited opportunities for career advancement, which can dampen their dedication despite their qualifications.

Finally, life satisfaction, a subjective evaluation of one's quality of life, has been extensively linked to women's experiences with equality, marriage, and career issues. The relationship between marital status and life satisfaction is particularly complex. While some studies suggest that married women have higher life satisfaction than unmarried women, others argue that this depends on various factors, including financial independence and the quality. In Malaysia, there is evidence that married working women with careers struggle with work-family conflict, which can lead to dissatisfaction in their marriages and lives. Given these complexities, this study considers marital status as a critical moderating variable to understand better its influence on the relationship between work-related factors and life satisfaction.

This study aims to bridge a notable gap in the existing literature by investigating the specific influences of work-life conflict and work engagement on the life satisfaction of female government servants in Sabah. While the challenges faced by women in general are well-documented, limited research specifically examines the experiences of women in Sabah's public sector, particularly in the context of these three variables. This study focused on dedicated, but yet unsatisfied in life among female government servants provides practical advantage: it hinders rising, most committed and possessed high quality work traits among employees (female government servants) to unleash their full potential by offering a blueprint for policy intervention. By focusing on this under-researched demographic, this study aims to produce new insights and a new body of knowledge that will be valuable to policymakers. The goal is to inform the creation of more effective policies and initiatives by organizations such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Human Resources, helping female government servants achieve a higher level of life satisfaction and recognition for their dedicated service. This research hence, providing actionable data to boost employees retention, improve public service efficiency and lastly to translate government's 30% quota ambition (Syahirah Ss *et al.*, 2016; Hughes Mm Fau - Paxton *et al.*, 2019) into a lived reality especially for female government servants.

Literature Review

The Evolving Landscape of Women's Work and Well-being

Women's professional lives and overall well-being, particularly those pursuing careers, have become a subject of intense academic scrutiny. A global trend of declining life satisfaction has been observed among women, especially those actively pursuing careers. This discussion frequently highlights the significant influence of external elements such as marital status, work-life conflict, and work engagement.

In Malaysia, women's participation in the labor force is crucial for economic development, but even though they outnumber and outperform men academically, their participation remains lower compared to that of men (Salleh *et al.*, 2022). This has resulted in a persistent "gender gap" in labor force participation, a trend which is also observed in

most other countries. This phenomenon of women leaving the workforce prematurely, often to manage family and household duties, is a major concern in Malaysia, with marital status being a primary contributing factor. This issue is particularly pronounced in Sabah, where married women have a much lower labor force participation rate compared to married men, indicating a significant gender bias. Aside from domestic pressures, Malaysian women, and Sabah women specifically, experience a host of other problems. These include the "glass ceiling" that bars them from climbing the career ladder, gender discrimination in the labor market, and social stigmas that effectively confine them to traditional domestic roles. These pervasive issues have a tendency to lead to lower levels of life satisfaction, which point to the urgent need to understand how these factors collectively impact the well-being of working women in the region. The Malaysian government has attempted to address these issues through equal opportunities in education and the provision of a 30% quota for women occupying decision-making roles in the public sector. Despite these interventions, there is still a large gender gap in areas like political empowerment and managerial positions, as reflected in the Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI) scores. To place the study in context, it is important to understand the complex interplay of these variables.

Work-Life Conflict and Its Global and Local Impact

Work-life conflict (Hartman, 2016), as an inter-role conflict in which work and personal life demands are incompatible, is more common for women than men, particularly for married women with children. This concurs with evidence from other nations, where lofty social expectations for women to balance domestic and work responsibilities are major contributors to work-life conflict. In Malaysia, research has indicated that employed women tend to have more work-life conflicts given their double roles at home and in the workplace, with married women and those with children being most vulnerable. This conflict, in turn, is one of the significant reasons why many women, especially married women, leave the workforce early (Salleh et al., 2022).

Work-life conflict is a bi-directional construct (Hartman, 2016), and it can happen both as work-to-life conflict (WLC) and life-to-work conflict (LWC). For instance, negative experiences at the workplace can spill over and influence personal lives, and the reverse as well. This conflict is understood based on three dimensions: time-based, behavior-based, and strain-based. Time conflict occurs when time allocated to one role interferes with the ability to fulfill another, leading to forgone family time or leisure activities (Greenhaus et al., 1985). Behavior conflict arises when behavior appropriate for one role is inappropriate for another, such as trying to use problem-solving abilities acquired at work in the home, where they are ineffective (Greenhaus et al., 1985). Finally, strain-based conflict includes the stress, tension, and fatigue from one domain, making it difficult to perform well in the other. Research by Aazami et al. (2016) found that Malaysian working women aged 20 were most affected by the time-based aspect, while those aged 30 were most affected by the strain-based aspect. These findings refer to the complex nature of work-life conflict and its varying impacts on women by life stage and age.

Work Engagement and Life Satisfaction: Global and Malaysian Perspectives

Work engagement, a positive and fulfilling psychological state of vigor, dedication, and absorption, is instrumental in employee productivity and retention. However, the link between work engagement and life satisfaction is complex. While a positive direct correlation

is presumed, studies have shown that the correlation can be moderated by other factors, including personal situations and the quality of the work environment. High work engagement can lead to exhaustion and burnout in certain cases, and this, in turn, can decrease life satisfaction.

There are three dimensions of work engagement: Vigor, Dedication, and Absorption. Vigor refers to having high levels of energy, enthusiasm, and persistence when doing work. Dedication entails commitment, inspiration, pride, and experiencing meaning in one's work. Absorption refers to the state of full concentration and immersion in work such that time flies. Research by Hakanen et al. (2012) and Peláez-Fernández et al. (2022) proved that work engagement is a predictor of life satisfaction. However, the current study reveals a critical paradox: while female government servants are highly dedicated and engaged in their work, this dedication is associated with lower life satisfaction. This finding contrasts with the traditional view that engagement leads to satisfaction. It suggests a fundamental disconnect where their hard work may not be met with the personal fulfillment they seek.

In the Malaysian context, the concept of work engagement is still developing, and a 2017 report by Aon Hewitt showed that Malaysia's engagement scores were among the lowest in the region, despite steady improvement. A study on employees working from home in the Malaysian service sector found that dedication, among the main dimensions of work engagement, had no direct effect on employee well-being. This contrasts with the positive effects found for vigor and absorption, indicating that a positive emotional state (dedication) might be less impactful in an isolated work setting.

Theoretical Contribution and Research Gaps

This study aims to bridge a notable gap in the existing literature by investigating the specific influences of work-life conflict, work engagement, and marital status on the life satisfaction of female government servants in Sabah. While the challenges faced by women in general are well-documented, limited research specifically examines the experiences of women in Sabah's public sector, particularly in the context of these three variables.



Figure 1: Hierarchy of Needs Theory

The theoretical framework for this study is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943; McLeod, 2024). According to this theory, individuals must satisfy a series of needs, from basic physiological and safety needs to higher-level needs of esteem and self-actualization. This research indicates that female government servants, through their stable employment, have

met their physiological and safety needs mainly. However, they struggle to achieve higher levels of esteem and self-actualization, so they experience lower life satisfaction despite being highly dedicated to their jobs. This greater disconnection reveals that a good career is not enough for ultimate happiness for these women. This research provides valuable suggestions for policy-makers who are now obliged to create programs sensitive to these issues to provide a workplace where female government officials can achieve professional success and personal satisfaction.

Research Methodology

The sampling design in this study employed a non-probability convenience sampling technique in the collection of data from an available population that was suitable for the study and met the study's particular needs. The research was conducted in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, on female government servants working in federal government departments like the Jabatan Pendaftaran Negara Negeri Sabah, Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri Sabah, Jabatan Meteorologi Sabah, and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). In total, 348 female government officials participated in the study. The sample size was satisfactory based on the SEM guidelines, with a minimum of 330 participants. A questionnaire for a survey to quantify a few crucial variables, namely, work-life conflict, work engagement, and life satisfaction, was used as the research instrument. Before testing the hypotheses, research instruments were rigorously tested for reliability and validity. One pilot study was carried out among 50 female government employees to examine the questionnaire's readability, comprehensiveness, and interpretability before real data collection was done. Based on the pilot study, the reliability analysis had Cronbach's Alpha for all variables above 0.70. Work Engagement was 0.896, Work-Life Conflict was 0.969, and Life Satisfaction was 0.747. This rigorous process ensured that the tools were valid and reliable for the intended study population.

Data Analysis and Results

The data from the 348 female government servants in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, were analyzed quantitatively. The primary statistical method employed was correlation analysis. The following sections detail the key findings from these analyses.

Descriptive Statistics

The demographic data in Table 1 revealed key characteristics of the respondents. The majority were married (68.7%). The largest ethnic group was categorized as "Others" (34.2%). A significant majority of the participants practiced Islam (75.6%). In terms of professional background, most held a Bachelor's Degree (60.3%), were in Grade 41-48 positions (78.4%), and had salaries ranging from RM 4502 to RM 6002 (26.1%). The average age of the respondents was between 34 and 41 years old (30.7%), and most had 1-2 children (31.9%).

Table 1

Socio-Demographic Profile of Majority Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Percentage
Marital Status	Married	68.7%
Ethnicity	Others	34.2%
Religion	Islam	75.6%
Education	Bachelor's Degree	60.3%
Grade Position	Grade 41-48	78.4%
Salary Range	RM 4502 - RM 6002	26.1%
Age	34-41 years old	30.7%
Number of Children	1-2 children	31.9%

Key Findings and Hypothesis Testing*Work-Life Conflict, Work Engagement, and Life Satisfaction*

The analysis revealed that work-life conflict and work engagement had a statistically significant relationship with life satisfaction. However, a key finding was a negative association between work engagement and life satisfaction. This paradoxical result indicates that higher levels of dedication and work engagement among these female government servants correlated with lower satisfaction levels in their personal lives. Similarly, as work-life conflict increased, life satisfaction decreased, confirming a negative correlation between the two variables. The study concluded that female government employees did not achieve their self-actualization needs, as their work did not provide the fulfillment they sought.

Table 2

Correlation Analysis Between Work-Life Conflict, Work Engagement and Life Satisfaction

		WLC	LS	WE
WLC	Pearson Correlation	1	-.373**	-.337**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001
	N	348	348	348
LS	Pearson Correlation	-.373**	1	.429**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001
	N	348	348	348
WE	Pearson Correlation	-.337**	.429**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	
	N	348	348	348

Table 2 shows that there are statistically significant relationships between the three variables: Work-Life Conflict (WLC), Life Satisfaction (LS), and Work Engagement (WE). A moderate negative correlation of -0.373 was found between WLC and LS, indicating that life satisfaction tends to decrease as work-life conflict increases. Similarly, a moderate negative correlation

of -0.337 was observed between WLC and WE, suggesting that higher levels of work-life conflict are associated with lower work engagement. Conversely, a moderate positive correlation (extremely weak, which is considered negative) of 0.429 between WE and LS. All these relationships are statistically significant with a p-value of less than 0.001.

Discussion

This study reveals a complex and paradoxical relationship between work-related factors and life satisfaction among female government servants in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The quantitative analysis confirmed that work engagement and work-life conflict significantly influence life satisfaction, but not in the ways one might expect. The most striking result is that a higher level of work engagement paradoxically correlates with lower life satisfaction. This contradicts the general assumption that dedication and enthusiasm for one's job lead to personal fulfillment. Similarly, an increase in work-life conflict directly leads to decreased life satisfaction, confirming a negative correlation between these two variables. These results suggest a profound disconnect: while these women are committed to their professional roles, their jobs are not providing the sense of personal fulfillment and well-being they seek.

The demographic data provides crucial context for this paradox. Most respondents are 34-41, married, and have a bachelor's degree. This age group is often categorized as being in "midlife," a phase where individuals, particularly women, begin to prioritize meaningful connections and personal fulfillment outside of work, rather than just career advancement. For this group, a stable job is not the main source of satisfaction. The work-life conflict they experience, particularly the strain-based dimension, highlights this struggle. They feel too tired and stressed from work to perform household duties or be a good friend or family member, leading to lower life satisfaction.

Framed within Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the findings indicate that these women have successfully fulfilled their basic physiological and safety needs through stable government employment. However, they struggle to achieve higher levels of esteem and self-actualization. This struggle explains why their dedication to work is not translating into happiness; a secure job, while meeting basic needs, is not enough to achieve a sense of respect, accomplishment, and personal fulfillment. This disconnect underscores the need for a re-evaluation of how professional success is measured for women and how employers can support their holistic well-being.

Conclusion

This study provides new knowledge by shedding light on the intricate relationship between work-related factors and life satisfaction among female government servants in Sabah, Malaysia. Our research conclusively demonstrates that for this demographic, a high level of work engagement does not guarantee high life satisfaction; in fact, the opposite is true. This paradox and the negative impact of work-life conflict indicate that these dedicated women are not achieving personal fulfillment despite their professional commitment. The moderating role of marital status is a critical finding, showing that married women are more intensely affected by the relationship between work-related factors and life satisfaction. These findings, interpreted through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, suggest that while stable government employment meets their foundational needs, it falls short of providing the esteem and self-actualization necessary for true happiness.

This research offers valuable insights for policymakers at all levels, particularly for government bodies such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Human Resources. To foster a work environment where female government servants can achieve professional advancement and personal well-being, policymakers must move beyond traditional support systems. We recommend implementing initiatives that address mental health, work-life balance, and professional recognition, ensuring that the dedicated service of these women is met with the fulfillment they deserve.

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