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Work-Life Balance in an International Context

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Abstract

Interest in Work-Life Balance (WLB) has been increasing in major organizations all around the world; however, there are various problems of implementing the WLB policies and practices. This paper aims to present the background of WLB in three countries, USA, UK, and India and discuss the potentially problematic WLB issues in each country. In fact, this paper emphasizes that the different forms of WLB should be applied for implementing WLB in different countries and cultures.

Keywords: work-life balance; work-life integration; and international context

บทคัดย่อ

ถึงแม้การสร้างสมดุลระหว่างชีวิตกับงานได้รับความสนใจมากขึ้นในองค์การต่าง ๆ ทั่วโลก การนำนโยบายและแผนงานการสร้างสมดุลระหว่างชีวิตและงานไปปฏิบัติยังคงมีปัญหาซึ่งแตกต่างกันไปตามแต่ละประเทศ บทความชิ้นนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อบรรยายให้เห็นถึงลักษณะของการสร้างสมดุลระหว่างชีวิตและงานในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา อังกฤษ และอินเดีย รวมทั้งอภิปรายปัญหาในการนำนโยบายการสร้างสมดุลระหว่างชีวิตกับงานไปปฏิบัติในแต่ละประเทศดังกล่าว

Work-Life Balance in an International Context

From an international perspective, the effectiveness of Work-Life Balance (WLB) practices in each country is different due to the influence of different cultures. To elaborate on this influence, this paper provides a comparison of WLB in three countries: the USA, the UK, and India. The main commonality between the 3 countries, the USA, the UK and India is

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that they put high value on "rolling back of state control" and "economic liberalism" that concentrates on individuals and families (Jarvis, 2005). This economic principle highly impacts work-life issues in that both governments want to reduce public spending and emphasize "self-reliance" (Jarvis, 2005). In addition, the economic principle of the three countries significantly influences work-life issues in terms of the history of WLB, the ideologies of the family, government response, welfare relevant to WLB, organization response, and WLB problems. However, even though they share a common ideology, they have some differences in detail.

WLB in the USA

In the USA, organizations have paid much attention to work-life issues. The trends of work-life balance have derived from an increase in female labor in the workforce. According to Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport (2006), this change in demographic workforce happens due to four factors. First, one income from male labor is no longer sufficient to survive or maintain standards of living in the USA. Second, the feminist perspective of the housewife role influences female participation in the labor market. Third, organizations have increasingly demanded female labor due to economic growth. Finally, there are men's needs to spend more time with their families.

A US family structure is considered as a nuclear family. The nuclear family consists of parents (usually a male and female) and their children. Even though the family structure is a nuclear unit, the responsibility of taking care of members of family extends to the care of elderly relatives. According to Bailyn, Drago, and Kochan (2007), more than 20 percent of households indicate that they are responsible for some or all of the care of elderly relatives. This issue potentially affects a work-life conflict which requires attention in addressing WLB issues.

Although, a number of the US workplaces have been increasingly interested in WLB, compared with other countries, the US government does not sufficiently and fully support this issue. In fact, the state does not provide national maternity, paternity or parental leave policy (Jarvis, H.,

2005). Additionally, there is no national health service (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). As a result, employees highly depend on health and medical insurance through their organizations. Moreover, part-time workers are not protected by the Federal Labor Standards Act relevant to US labor law (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006).

Welfare relevant to parental leave which the USA provides is based on The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 (Jarvis, 2005; Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006; Bailyn, Drago, & Kochan, 2007). The act states that organizations with more than 50 staff must provide unpaid leave for 10-12 weeks to cover pregnancy and maternity (Jarvis, 2005). In addition, the USA government has attempted to reduce work hours. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1940 indicates that all hours beyond forty per week will be counted as overtime on the wage of 50 percent per hour (Bailyn, Drago, & Kochan, 2007). However, the USA has no national maternity paternity or parental leave policy or a national system for early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Jarvis, 2005).

Because of the pressures from employees, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and research organizations, significant organizations adopt work-life balance initiatives so called "family-friendly policies" (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). The work-family policies include flexibility, child care services, parental leave, and telecommuting. Large organizations also have internal work family and employ external consultants to support and advise employees about work-life issues (Bailyn, Drago, & Kochan, 2007; Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006).

A macro problem of WLB in USA includes lack of state support. Due to economic liberalism in the USA, WLB issues tend to be an individual responsibility more than a state concern. Although The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) was successfully passed in 1993, it provides unpaid leave and is not available to all employees (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). In addition, funding for childcare was passed in 1990, but minimal childcare support is still a concern. Moreover, since the USA has no national health service, US people need to work as full-time workers in order to obtain medical insurance from their companies. This issue

negatively impacts on WLB. For example, even though some female workers after giving birth desire to spend more time with their children, they hesitate to reduce their work schedule to be part time due to a concern that there is no protection for part-time workers in terms of medical insurance (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). Besides a lack of sufficient state support, global economic pressures associated with competitiveness and productivity might create difficulties for achieving WLB.

At the organizational level, even though significant US organizations adopt WLB policies, the work-life problems still remain in small organizations which have inadequate resources to implement the WLB policies. In addition the policy is not sufficient because it does not change the whole system (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006).

US organizations have made a considerable put an effort to be in the list of 100 best companies for working mothers. Paradoxically, this effort strengthens the perception of WLB policies as policies for women. This perception coupled with the traditional breadwinner role hinders men taking up the WLB policies. In addition, the main reason that negatively affects the use of WLB policies is that US employees are concerned about jeopardizing career advancement and job security (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006).

WLB in the UK

Even though, in history, British women have participated in the labor market, the issues associated with family care have been of recent interest in the UK. Especially during the 1950s, a significant influence on work-life issues was John Bowlby and others' works related to the importance of the mother-child relationship for child development (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). In addition, there are growing needs of employers for female labor market participation. At the same time, a concern that they have the longest work hours in Europe leads to effort to deal with work-life balance in the UK (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006).

Like the USA, the UK family structure is a nuclear family. According to Lewis (1997), ideologies of the family are very strong with the

assumption that women have responsibility of taking care of children and elders in the family. In addition, there is the assumption that women's income is not essential for the family. However, this ideology has been changed. Surveys reveal that statistically the percentage of working women who are married or who cohabit has increased. 19% of those with a child under five are working full time, rising to 28% of those with a child aged 5-10 years, and 39% of those with a child 11-15 years. The figures for part-time work are respectively 39%, 48% and 42% (Gregory, 2005).

The UK government has attempted to address work life balance in terms of benefits to both employees and employers and "good for business" (Roper, Cunningham, & James, 2002). In addition, the UK government encourages employers to voluntary action as "business case" (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). Work-life balance paralleled with productivity and competitiveness are introduced as a "two–pronged" approach in the UK. Moreover, due to concerns of child poverty, the government stimulates affordable childcare and maternity leave to support lone mothers and mothers on low income (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). Besides maternity leave, father care involvement has been recently promoted. The benefits for fathers include two weeks' paid paternity leave and unpaid parental leave (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006).

According to Jarvis (2005), welfare relevant to parental leave and early childhood care in the UK is associated with a new framework for 2003 and 1998 called the National Childcare Strategy. The new framework for 2003 provides up to 52 weeks of maternity leave for which 26 weeks are paid. In addition, further unpaid parental leave depends on length of service, age of child, and notice to employer. The National Childcare Strategy in 1998 requires local authorities to arrange a place for all 3-5 year olds for two-and-a-half hours daily. However, public day care for 1-3 year olds is rare. Most of the day care is private. Moreover, there are rights for parents with children under six years old to request flexible working hours (Bond, 2004; Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006).

In the UK, large organizations adapted working practices in response to pressure from women in the 1980s. However, due to economic recession

in the early 1990s, employers started to be concerned about WLB costs which slowed down WLB trends. The policies and benefits of WLB are similar to those in the USA, but WLB in the UK is more innovative (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006).

The problems of implementing WLB in UK include long working hours, the effectiveness of WLB policy, the use of WLB policy, and the practical implementation of WLB. First, the evidence that UK has the longest working hours in Europe reveals an inconsistency with the successful work-life balance (Bond, 2004). The long working hours seem to be a culture which is very difficult to change. Second, the WLB policy does not affect the whole structure, culture, and practices. Indeed, the policies tend to be individualistic rather than changing the whole system (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). Third, WLB policy is not sufficient, since there is a problem of use of the policy. For example, the problem with attitude, when WLB policy is perceived as a policy for women, hinders the use of WLB for men. In addition, without a supportive culture, WLB policy can not fully assist WLB employees (Bond, 2004). Finally, even though UK employees who have children under six years old have rights to ask for flexible working hours, in practical terms, it is still problematic. The findings from Bond (2004) indicate that refusing time off or an arrangement greatly affects access to WLB.

WLB in India

The major factors which stimulate an interest in WLB in India include global competitiveness, emergence of IT outsourcing, and advancing urbanization and industrialization. Globalization has brought India an opportunity of being an IT outsourcing destination (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). This opportunity also affects the development of urbanization and industrialization. As a result, the developing economy in India requires a large workforce, including female workers. In addition, the growing proportion of educated women drives a trend of increasing female workers' participation in the Indian labor market.

Indian culture is identified as "collectivism" (Komarraju, 1997). Indian people highly focus on a network of family and friends. According to

Komarraju (1997), most Indians put a high value on cohesiveness of family and want to live together in their families even in problematic situations. Generally, collectivistic cultures, including Indian culture, are commonly composed of extended families. Different from a nuclear family, extended families can include parents and their children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. However, because of civilization and influence from western countries, Indian extended families have changed to be nuclear families, especially in urban areas (Komarraju, 1997). This change has also changed women's role from an emphasis on social duties to being dual earners (Komarraju, 1997).

The Indian government has issued legislation assisting WLB. The legislation includes Maternity Benefits (1929, 1961), The Contract Labor Act (1970), and The Equal Remuneration Act (1976) (Komarraju, 1997). Maternity Benefits (1929, 1961) provide fully paid leave for six weeks before and six weeks after childbirth. In addition, six weeks of paid leave is given to a woman who has a miscarriage. The Contract Labor Act (1970) requires an organization with 20 or more female employees to provide a créche or on-site child care center. The Equal Remuneration Act (1976) requires equal pay for male and female workers doing the same jobs and prohibits any other discrimination against women on the ground of gender. Even though the government has made an effort regarding addressing WLB issues, the problems of limited state welfare support and limited social security still remain (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006).

Major organizations in India have begun to introduce work-life policies to employees (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). In addition, human resource policies offer a great deal, such as flexibility in planning family events, travel support for vacations, and large number of days for "causal leave", to support dual-earner families (Komarraju, 1997). Moreover, some public-sector companies have had "paternalistic" policies which concern the well-being of workers as members of extended families (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006).

Even though some public-sector companies have addressed WLB issues, in private-sector companies, employees have experienced

negotiations regarding WLB policies through unions (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). In addition, due to global competitiveness, cutting the costs of implementing WLB policies is a concern. At the family level, the limitations of changing roles in the families are a problem. For example, in Indian culture, working women remain fully responsible for housekeeping which is not shared by their husbands.

In conclusion, the main problem of WLB in India is that global competitiveness drives longer working hours without sufficient support from government, the private sector, and the culture.

Conclusion

These three countries share common factors which increase attention to WLB issues. The factors include global competitiveness and increasing female labor force participation. In terms of government and organization support, both the USA and the UK have a problem with inequalities in absolute income. However, while the UK workers with low incomes have national healthcare support, the US full-time workers, not part-time workers, need to depend on the medical insurance of their organizations (Jarvis, 2005; Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). In comparison of family structure, Indian people have the most close-knit structure families which help the care of children and the elderly. Finally, the three countries have a similar problem with WLB practices in terms of the inconsistency of their support systems. Therefore, there is a need to create a holistic model which considers the whole system of operation in regard to WLB practices.

Table 1: Summary of WLB in the Three Countries

Issues	USA	UK	India
History of WLB	Female labor force participation.	- Growing needs of employers for female's participation in the labor market - Studies on child development - The longest working hours in Europe	- Global competitiveness - Emergence of a IT outsourcing - Advancing urbanization and industrialization - An increasing number of female employees

Issues	USA	UK	India
Ideologies of the Family	- Nuclear family structure	- Nuclear family structure - Nuclear family structure	- Extended family structure - Collectivism: cohesiveness of the family
Government Response	- No universal entitlement to paid maternity leave - Lack of national health service	- Needs for women's care of family - Government's approach emphasizes WLB and competitiveness - Stimulates affordable childcare, maternity leave, and father involvement - Funding for WLB consultants	- limited working hours - limited state welfare support and social security
Welfare relevant to parental leave and childhood care	- No national maternity paternity or parental leave policy - The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993: unpaid leave for 10-12 weeks covering pregnancy and maternity - No national system for early childhood education and care (ECEC) - A maximum working of 40 hours (FLSA of 1940)	- A new framework for 2003: 52 weeks maternity leave (paid 26 weeks) - 1998 the National Childcare Strategy: a place for all 3-5 year olds for two-and-a-half hours daily - The right of parents of children under six years to request flexible working hours - A maximum working week of 48 hours (the Working Time Regulations 1998)	- Maternity Benefits (1929, 1961): full paid leave for six weeks before and six weeks after childbirth - The Contract Labor Act (1970): a crèche or on-site child care center in an organization with 20 or more female employees - The Equal Remuneration Act (1976): equal pay for male and female workers doing the same work
Organization response	- Developing family friendly policies - Use of external consultants Contradictions between workplace culture and formal policies - Individualistic rather	- Adapting working practices - Economic recession slowed down a WLB trend. - Inequities between men and women	- HR policies supporting dualearner families - "Paternalistic" policies

Issues	USA	UK	India
	than changing the whole workplace system	- Individualistic	
Problems	- Lack of state support - Global economic pressures - Inadequate resources - Whole system - Negative perceptions	- Long working hours culture - Effectiveness of WLB policy - Use of WLB policy - Practical implementation of WLB policy	- Negotiations - Cutting costs - Limitations on changing male and female roles in families

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