

Work-Life Balance: Understanding the Complaints of Low-Paid Migrant Workers in London: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

The notion of work life balance has been acknowledged as a source of realizing satisfying experiences in all areas. However, despite this recognition, low paid migrant workers struggle to balance work and family life. Thus, often complain being too busy to have a good quality of family life. This study, therefore, sets out a theoretical perspective drawing upon work life balance and understanding the complaints of low paid migrant workers. It explores the link between work life balance and low paid migrant workers. The study focuses on two constructs: work life balance and the low paid migrant worker. Work life balance is when a person is committed to work and also satisfies family life with organisation and individual dimensions. Whereas, low paid migrant worker is confronted with poor working conditions, working longer as well as unsociable hours. Finally, the findings from the linkage between work life balance and low paid migrant workers demonstrate that low paid migrant workers attempt to balance quality of work and quality of family, however, these low paid migrants continue to struggle.

Key words: work life balance, migrant worker, family life, quality of life.

Introduction

This study examines work life balance for low-paid migrant workers in London. In the last few years, there has been increasing pressure on organisations to create workplace policies in order to assist employees in balancing work as well as family life. However, in both private and public sectors, promoting productivity, job satisfaction and company loyalty may be achieved through flexible work schedule and family-friendly program (Saltzstein *et al.*, 2001). Recent changes in demographic and sociological workplace, particularly, the emergence of work life balance (Guardian Newspaper November, 2000; Financial Times September, 2001; Sunday Times, January, 2002 in Michael *et al.*, 2002; Crompton and Lyonette, 2006; Beauregard and Henry, 2009) have forced organisations to find suitable approaches because conventional approaches are no more suitable to provide balance quality work life and quality family life

Low paid workers

Researchers (Datta *et al.*, 2006; Cathy *et al.*, 2007) have proposed the notion of low paid migrant workers often work in dirty, hard and dangerous jobs, thus, these workers do the work of at least two people often marked in contract cleaning and hospitality work. For example, the study of Cathy *et al.* (2007) found that Angela, a Portuguese cleaner that worked in bank offices complained that she had to clean 20 offices in her shift and only managing to empty the rubbish bins in 3 hours after which she had to clean the desks, vacuum the floor and clean the bathrooms and kitchens.

In another case, Pedro, a Brazilian office cleaner complained of pain and swelling in both arms due to workload (Cathy *et al.*, 2007). From this viewpoint, the low paid migrant worker is conceptualized as workers that earn less than poverty threshold wage an hour and also 1 in 5 earn less than a living wage an hour (Datta *et al.*, 2006). Indeed, these categories of workers are keeping London working, e.g., cleaners, hotel workers, as well as care assistants (Evans *et al.*, 2005), but who are confronted with poor working conditions, working long as well as unsociable hours, and without access to pension scheme, sick pay or maternity leave.

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However, low paid migrant workers contribute significantly to London's economy and their presence is not sufficiently recognised. For example, Evans *et al.* (2005) argued that London Underground relied on several low paid migrant workers to clean the trains each night for early morning rush hours. In addition, every high-class hotel in West End used several cleaners, porters, kitchen staff and maids to efficiently run their operations from policy perspective on the contribution made by low paid workers. It is against this backdrop, that organisation needs to find the best practice to support low paid migrant workers may be introducing flexible working options as well as equality policies that recognizes their valued contributions to the workplace (O'Connell and Russell, 2005). In fact, favorable workplace that promotes work life balance results to possible benefits for both employers and employees (Auster, 2001; Drew *et al.*, 2003; Grady and McCarthy, 2008).

Work life balance is the process for reconciliation of work, family as well as individual self-demands and time (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Seemingly, work life balance is viewed as a belief that as work is crucial to everyone in a society, achievement and enjoyment is also important to everyone in the society (Joshi *et al.*, 2002). This belief of work balance has attracted a hot topic of debate among scholars and practitioners. Indeed, some commentators contend that work life balance attract better employees which reduces work life conflict among existing employees (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). Other suggests that work life imbalance damage employee's families for working longer hours (Guardian Newspaper November, 2000; Financial Times September, 2001; Sunday Times, January, 2002 in Michael *et al.*, 2002).

However, despite several published papers that have been written on work life balance, there has been few papers on work life balance for low paid migrant workers in London either theoretically or research is to examine work life balance, and understanding the complaint of low paid migrant workers in London.

Research Problem

Work life balance is recognised as not only about families and childcare, nor about working less, but it is about working smart, about being fresh enough to give a person all he or she needs for both work and home, without risking one for the other. It is necessary for everyone, at whatever stage in life (Houston, 2005). Regardless of this, many low paid migrant workers work long hours, and in fact, some have more than one paid job in order to guarantee family survival (Datta *et al.*, 2006). Again longer hours of work are also driven by responsibilities for dependents, and caring for family members living overseas. This research addresses the problem of lack of knowledge of individual orientation across different life roles

Theoretical perspective

This section explores the theoretical perspective, the main focus being to investigate how low paid migrant workers may find a balance of quality work life and quality family life. Evans *et al.*, (2007) quotesthe following complaints of low paid migrant workers in London:

'...I was too exhausted. In the first month I had bleeding from my nose, I was tired and weakened. Every day that I had to go there I wanted to cry. They gave this list of rooms that one has to clean. Every morning we have to go the office and to stand in the queue to get this list of rooms and uniform. It does make one feel like a Cinderella...' ⁴⁶(Evans *et al.*, 2007)

'...Very hard, train work is very hard, picking trains, because we've got a lot of rubbish inside that I open before coming here and afterwards we have to take all that rubbish outside to the bin room. Because you know carbon dioxide, sometimes if you use like cotton, white cotton, cleaning your nose you see there is a black carbon deposit of the electricity down here and the train will be using it..., put your hand on the wall or you use some glove to clean it, before you know it its black. It's no good for our health ...' ⁴⁸(in Evans *et al.*, 2007) ⁴⁹

The above information stressed the pain of low paid migrant workers doing more than one person work for low wages. In fact, research

⁴⁶Zofia, a chambermaid from Poland

evidence confirmed that a sizeable proportion of people working in London are poor migrants, often working in elementary jobs (Evans *et al.*, 2005). As Evans *et al.*, note migrants represent 35 percent of London population and 29 percent account for working age population. Undoubtedly, migrants fare differently in London labour market, in one exception, 36 percent of migrants from Japan and 23.1 percent of migrants from Germany are hired to fill managerial positions. On the other hand, migrants from India and South Africa end up in low paid jobs (Evans *et al.*, 2005)

However, larger proportion of low paid job in London is filled by migrants. For example, Evans *et al.* (2005) argued that about 46 percent of London elementary work such as laborers, postal workers, catering staff, and cleaners are occupied by migrants. Again, migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe as well as South Asia even with their skills and qualification find it hard to secure a well-paid work upon arrival in the UK. Datta *et al.*'s (2007) survey found that a sizeable proportion of working age migrants that live and work in London e.g., Ghana, (50.3 percent), Ecuador (59.5 percent), Serbia and Montenegro (45.6 percent) and Bangladesh (45.2 percent), end up in low paid occupational jobs such as personal services, sales and customer services, processing and plant operatives as well as elementary occupations.

Surprisingly, British media identify London migrants as benefit scroungers when in fact, low paid migrants workers contribute significantly to London economy and their presence is hardly recognised (Evans *et al.*, 2005). For example, Evans *et al.* (2005) argued that London Underground relied on several low paid migrant workers to clean the trains each night ready for early morning rush hours. In addition, several five star hotel in West End used several cleaners, porters, kitchen staff and maids to efficiently run their operations (Evans, *et al.*, 2005). More importantly, notwithstanding, the income tax and National Insurance contributions, still these low paid migrants are denied Income Support or Unemployment Benefit (Evans *et al.*, 2005).

Work life Balance

In the last few years, work life balance has increased popularity with increasing number of scholarly as well as popular press articles promoting the need for work life balance (Caproni, 1997; Guest, 2016). Indeed, Kalliath and Brough (2008) in *Work Life Balance*, a review of the meaning of the balance construct states that the popularity of work life balance is characterized by the worry of overwork of unbalanced work-family linkages that may result to illness as well as performance outcomes for individuals, families and organisations. In fact, overwork is now a problem of work life balance affecting men and women irrespective whether their normal hours work are particularly unsocial (Roberts, 2007). To this end, having a balance between home life and work life is now a common priority for several people. As Sturges and Guest (2004) note, the work of Scase and Goffee (1989) and Schein (1996) states that UK workers are now interested in career that improves personal lifestyles, thus, to integrate personal needs, family needs and career requirements.

However, Schor's (1991) bestselling book *The Overworked American*, states that workers have become the culprit of a work and spend culture. Employees are working longer hours, an additional 163 hours on average about an extra month work per year, thus, dual earner couples are more likely to face time squeeze (Schor, 1991 in Michael *et al.*, 2003). Similarly, In Britain, the damage workers have caused their families for working longer hours as attracted wider concern (Guardian, November, 2000; Financial Times, September, 2001 and Sunday Times, January, 2002 in Michael *et al.*, 2002). This is attributed to the British working culture as compared to other European countries. While the average hours worked has been steady, the percentage of working for more than 48 hours has increased leading to the rise in concern in the quality of home as well as community life (Guest, 2002).

As Guest (2016) note, working culture is perceived to be high in single- parent's families, the privatization of family life as well as the paucity of local resources and facilities. For example, in advanced economies there is a rise

in women in all social classes engaged in paid job, and again, the pressures as well as demands of work is associated with longer hours leading to less quality of family life. The attendant consequences of this is a rise in juvenile crime, rise in drug abuse, reduction in concern for community, and community participation, and most importantly, unwillingness to take care of elderly relatives (Guest, 2002; 2016).

The increasing concern for work life balance is also attributed to attitudes and values of people in work. In fact, this is aimed at Generation X workers that want a balance between work and rest of life (Guest, 2016). According to Guest (2016), the views of some management scholars without strong empirical evidence posit that employees are unwilling to commit to organisations due to the changing nature of psychological contract at work. With this in mind, the notion of work life balance is driven by family-friendly employer policies of flexible working hours, home working and assisted nursery places in order not to destroy the economic success of both the family as well as the employer (Michael *et al.*, 2016).

Based on this, Schor's findings focuses on employers policies and employees motives. Employers demand high performance, whereas, employee's decides to work longer hours to meet materials ambition and servicing personal debt (Michael *et al.*, 2003). From this view point, firms in the US that adopt high performance practices adopt flexible working time as well as career breaks practices in order for employees to be able to balance work demand s to family or non-work goals (Osterman, 1995 in Michael *et al.*, 2003). To this end, work life balance is viewed as sufficient time to satisfy commitment at both work and home (Guest, 2016).

Definition of Work Life Balance

Work life balance has no universal definition. Estes and Michael (2005) in Alexandra and Lesley (2009) sees work life balance as organisational support for dependent care, family or personal leave as well as flexible work hours that include time to start and finish, compressed work week, working from home, sharing work, family leave programs, on-site child care and financial and or informational

assistance with childcare services (Alexandra and Lesley 2009)

In another study, Greenhouse *et al.* (2003) perceive work life balance as the extent to which a person is engaged in and equally satisfied with his or her work role and family role. Seemingly, Kirchmeyer (2000) view work life balance as achieving satisfying experiences in all domains, thus, requires personal resources e.g., energy, time as well as commitment. In a similar vein, Clark (2000) defines work life balance as satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with limited conflict between these roles. Drawing on these definitions, it is clear all the definitions focus in finding a balance between quality work life and quality family life.

Dimensions

Work life balance is associated with organisation and individual dimensions; Organisational dimension of work-life balance underscores the demands and culture of work, and the demands and culture of home. According to Guest (2016), demands of work is attributed to either too low or too high and the culture of work underpins the organisational culture that support suitable policies as well as practices e.g., occasional time-off and demand for long and irregular hours and the need to time off to deal with family issues.

However, the demands of home relates to the individual commitment as well as duty outside work which may exist in the family, community or the choice of holiday activities (Guest, 2016). For example, Guest (2016) posits that in the family, the demands of home vary. For young and single people, the demand is low, whereas, for those with children and partners, the demand is high. Additionally, the culture of home relates to the expectation of people at home in terms of commitment and responsibility to child care, care of elderly relatives and cooking or decisions as to whether these family commitments are carried out by family members of contracted out (Guest, 2016).

The individual dimension of work-life balance is characterized by orientation to work, work life as central interest to personality and the need for achievement and tendency to work involvement (Guest, 2016). Again, higher

demand is placed on women in the home and at the same time age and life-stage and career-stage influences willingness to accept certain kinds of demand at work and at home (Guest, 2016).

Linkage between Work life balance and Low Paid Migrant

"I do not have much time of that. Besides it is relatively expensive for me and I have a family in Poland. Life of a Pole in England looks more or less in the following way. I leave home for work at 6.45; take some over time and am back home at 7.30 so after 11h of hard physical work I do not have much desire for sociability"⁴⁷ (Datta *et al.*, 2006)

This quote above is a typical example of a low paid Polish construction worker (Mirek) who struggles to balance work and family life due to family commitment (Datta *et al.*, 2006). Thus, low paid migrant workers complain of being too busy to have a quality family life. However, in other exceptions, hard work is also influenced by differences between migrants (Datta *et al.*, 2006). For example, Datta *et al.*, argued that Nivaldo, a Brazilian construction worker in London balanced work and social life. With this in mind, the authors (Datta *et al.*, 2006) assert that hard work and social life may be driven by migrant's social exclusion, thus, friendship is a determining factor for migrants involvement in social life.

Datta *et al.*, in their survey interviewed a Brazilian construction worker who summed it that friendship is required to survive in England:

"You learn to value friendship, because you need friends here. You are all by yourself here and not being able to speak English; you are no one, if you stay at home, it's worse because you get into depression, so you have to go out in spite of the difficulties" (Datta *et al.*, 2006).

Despite creating friendship to balance quality family life and work commitment, Datta *et al* work confirmed that migrants still complain that few friendship networks posed a challenge for social life. For example, Joshua, Ghana social worker complained of lack of social life due to few friends. In a similar vein, Carlos from Honduras agreed with Joshua's assertion.

Faith organisations play a significant role for migrant's socialization outside of work. Datta *et al.* (2006) posits that a sizeable proportion (43 percent) of migrants interviewed agreed to be part of faith organisations such as Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh organisations. Interestingly, these organisations were divided along ethnic as well as nationality groupings. For example, Brazilians worship in St Ann's Catholic Church in the East End every Sundays, Columbians worship in St Ignatius church in Seven Sisters in Bethnal Green, while several Nigerians and Ghanaians worship in local Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Lambert, Southwark and Greenwich. As Datta *et al.* (2006) note, migrants attend these faith organisations due to mental, spiritual and material support, for both existing and new migrants. This is confirmed by Christina, from Ghana:

"You enjoy it, it's like everybody from my country goes to church, you see people, so you don't get lonely, you see people on Sunday from your country., you go on your dialect., everything's like., you don't really get bored., because you just go to church and you see people., but I enjoyed it, everybody around you, where you see people from your own country, you talk in your own language and it's fun, I enjoy it" (Datta *et al.*, 2006)

However, Datta *et al*'s (2006) findings show that low paid migrant workers' attempts to balance quality of work and quality of family life are fragile, where these low paid migrants are just getting on with life, and with that burden placed more on women. Drawing on this premise, transnational mothers, and to a lesser extent transnational fathers whose nurturing is overseas, choose to transfer money. Financial security replaces emotional influences (Datta *et al.*, 2006). Again, migrants with fewer responsibilities struggled to balance life and work in London due to cost, long working hours, loneliness as well as exclusion

Conclusion

This study has attempted to provide understanding of work life balance and low paid migrant workers in a way that may guide future thinking in this area. This study has reviewed some of the current published works focusing

⁴⁷ Polish construction worker

on work life balance and low paid migrant workers that have been proposed in order to better understand the constructs in this area. Research evidence confirmed that a sizeable proportion of people working in London are poor migrants doing more than one person job for low wages (Evan *et al.*, 2005). A number of studies have been proposed that a sizeable proportion of working age migrants that live and work in London e.g., Ghana, (50.3 percent), Ecuador (59.5 percent), Serbia and Montenegro (45.6 percent) and Bangladesh (45.2 percent), end up in low paid occupational jobs such as personal services, sales and customer services, processing and plant operatives as well as elementary occupations.

However, the theoretical viewpoint discussed in this study is not far-reaching. Several other studies discuss work life balance. Schor (1991)

in *The Overworked American* pointed out how workers have become the culprit of a 'work and spend culture'. In Britain, low paid migrant workers work longer hours have caused serious damage to their families, thus, these workers complain of being too busy to have a quality family life (Datta *et al.*, 2006). With this in mind, work life balance provides sufficient time to satisfy commitment at both work and home (Guest, 2016).

Finally, there is the need for further studies on theory-based empirical work. The work of Datta *et al.* (2006), Cathy *et al.* (2007) and Datta *et al.* (2007) are good examples of theory-based empirical work. The challenge for work life balance for low paid migrant workers will be to develop valid measures of the variables of work life balance.

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