

## Empowering women in the workplace: Assessing female employees' readiness for flexible work arrangements



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### ABSTRACT

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The paper examines assessing female employees' readiness for flexible work arrangements and empowering women in the workplace. The adoption of flexible work arrangements (FWA) practices in Asian countries is prominent. Despite the recognized benefits that FWAs can provide in terms of employee's well-being and business sustainability, their implementation is still relatively limited. Hence, the purpose of this study is to identify the factors (family responsibilities, FWA benefits, career advancement, company policy, and supportive workplace) that influence Malaysian female employees' readiness for FWAs. In this study, the Person-Environment (PE) Fit Theory is employed as a framework to comprehend an individual's readiness for adopting FWAs. To gather data, 200 surveys were distributed online to female employee respondents using the convenience sampling method. The data analysis was carried out. The findings demonstrate an association between female employees' readiness for FWAs and FWA benefits, career advancement, and company policy. However, family responsibilities and supportive workplaces indicate insignificantly on female employees' readiness in relation to FWAs, warranting further investigation. This study provides valuable insights to various stakeholders, like organizations, practitioners, policymakers, and the government, in understanding and addressing the readiness of female employees for FWAs and serves as a research foundation for more informed decision-making across organizations in Malaysia. Female employees often face challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities, and if a company could provide flexible arrangements, it could create a supportive environment that can help retain skilled female professionals.

**Contribution/ Originality:** The most recent Malaysian research on flexible work arrangements (FWAs) was conducted in 2016. The results of the past literature were outdated and might not be on par with current Malaysia's population growth and needs. Therefore, it is important for this study to examine the contemporary issues that influence female employees' readiness for FWAs post-COVID-19 pandemic.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of female labor force development has received much attention since 1970 (Warren, 2007). According to research by Zaimah et al. (2013) there is an increase in female participation in the labor market. It has changed the traditional role of women and increased new roles for household managers, making them competent members of

the workforce. The main factors contributing to married female employees' decision to leave the workforce are non-flexibility at the workplace and the inability to achieve a healthy work-life balance (Kaur, 2004). This is because married women prioritize spending quality time with their families (Cole, 2006). It would be another option for married women to consider leaving the workforce because they tend to face lower pay and career discrimination compared to male employees (Kossek, Gettings, & Misra, 2021) which can contribute to unfair treatment and decreased motivation to remain in the workforce.

Modernization in the 21st century has to bring more and more females into the labor market. However, the dynamic work environment today has encountered female employees facing a great challenge in balancing between their work and family (Yadav & Jadhav-Tilekar, 2021). As employees recognize the value of flexible work arrangements in achieving better work-life balance, there might be increasing pressure on companies to provide these options. According to Abdul Ghani (2018) female employees tend to exit the workforce in their late 20s to early 30s because of family responsibilities. Furthermore, the findings from Life at Work Survey conducted by TalentCorp (2016b) show that there is a deficiency in the adoption of work-life practices in organizations, particularly when it comes to providing extended maternity leave and other work-life balance benefits for female employees. This eventually created a huge gap for female employees in balancing their work responsibilities and personal lives.

Interestingly, the data indicates that female employees have the potential to make a significant economic contribution to Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the range of 6 million to 9 million Ringgit Malaysia annually (Abdul Ghani, 2018). This implies that engaging female employees in a diverse and talented workforce can have a positive impact on their work productivity and the country's economic growth.

Additionally, there is a gender disparity in Malaysia's labor force participation rate (LFPR). Among high-income countries, Malaysia's female workforce participation rate falls below the 25th percentile (Lee, 2021). This is supported by the report of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2022) which indicates that the female LFPR in 2022 (52.74%) in Malaysia is lower compared to Singapore (63.2%), Thailand (58.69%), Vietnam (69.1%), and Cambodia (69.6%) (The Global Economy.com, 2023). Based on the latest Malaysian female LFPR in 2022, female LFPR was recorded at 55.6% and male LFPR stood at 82.5%. Thus, the Malaysian government aspires to increase labor participation by women to 59% by 2025 (FMT Business, 2023) which will be a challenge to be achieved.

Besides, Monster Malaysia's survey found that 75% of Malaysian working mothers are quitting their jobs due to a lack of flexibility in their work arrangements, and 60% of them leave the job due to concern about inadequate childcare options. While 55% of them quit their job because of difficulties in achieving a satisfactory work-life balance (Hiredly, 2023). In this survey, the majority of the working mothers in Malaysia (85%) are hoping for a better work-life balance and have employers who can promote a more supportive and inclusive working environment for them (46%) (Hiredly, 2023). As a result, most female employees, especially those who have family commitments, are showing their interest in FWAs in order to balance work and family. They felt their quality of life improved because working remotely helped them better manage work and family obligations (Kossek et al., 2021; Mercer, 2023).

For many organizations, making the shift to a remote workforce is a new and challenging experience after the pandemic (Mercer, 2023). Only 10% of the companies in Malaysia are implementing FWA practices (Mercer, 2023; Shaari & Amirul, 2022; TalentCorp, 2016a). However, Malaysian organizations were less interested in female employees' needs for FWA practices in the workforce several decades ago. Therefore, it is an urge for the organizations to implement and understand the requirements of FWAs in Malaysia for retaining and increasing females in the workforce.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic compelled organizations to adopt the new working norm of completing most of their office work virtually. Initiatives have been offered by the government to support FWA practices for the

current post-pandemic period. They have offered tax reductions for the organization that is implementing FWAs and providing childcare centers in the workplace and tax deductions for the organization that is hiring and training female employees in the workforce recently.

In the rapidly evolving technology of today, FWA practices are easily adopted in an organization with the help of technology devices. FWAs will remain a key feature of our workplaces well after the pandemic is over. This is a win-win situation for employers and employees. FWA practices can help female employees manage childcare and eldercare services while also allowing them to concentrate more on work and increase productivity (Parker, 2019). Female employees can be considered predominant users of FWAs practice because they hold important roles in the family and are competent people for the organization (Parker, 2019). The adoption of these practices in the organization helps not only in retaining talented female employees but also reduces employees' stress levels (Chin, 2022).

Little research has been conducted on the variables that affect female employees' readiness for FWAs, though. The most recent Malaysian survey was completed in 2016, so the results might not be in line with Malaysia's population growth during the past few years. Therefore, it's crucial to examine the issues in order to comprehend what influences female employees' readiness for FWAs.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Person-Environment (PE) Fit Theory

PE fit theory was first introduced by Plato (Kaplan, 1950) and further discussed by Holland (1959) and Dawis, England, and Lofquist (1964). The concept describes those individuals' behaviors or attitudes are determined by their characteristics and the environment (Kaplan, 1950). The study identified that there is an exchange process in needs-supplies fit in the PE framework proposed (Caplan, 1987). Based on Caplan (1987) the view of the employees in needs-supplies fit may be presented by asking, "what can I get out of this job?" and the perspective of the employers may be asked "what do I have to provide to keep this employee?". According to Edwards (1996) the PE fit theory explains in individual demands relative to the available abilities and resources to meet those demands. The perspective suggested by Voydanoff (2007) is that a flexibility schedule can provide employees with resources to manage their work and family demands (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022). Besides, the theory also pinpointed that the readiness of female employees for flexible work arrangements was highly dependent on the conditions surrounding them (Isa, Musa, & Chong, 2016).

### 2.2. Female Employees' Readiness for Flexible Work Arrangements

The term FWAs in human resource management is referred to as allowing employees to perform tasks outside the core of business hours, which differs from traditional working methods, including flexible scheduling, telecommuting, and compressed workweeks (Austin-Egole, Iheriohanma, & Nwokorie, 2020; SHRM, 2015). As a whole, female employees' readiness for FWAs is defined as how well-prepared and willing female employees to engage themselves effectively in various forms of FWAs offered by their employers (Mallow, 2023). Their readiness is mostly affected by a combination of individual, organizational and contextual factors that impact their ability to adopt and make the most flexible work options.

### 2.3. Family Responsibilities

Within the context of gender discrimination, women tend to be more prevalent in domestic tasks, whilst men are more prevalent in higher occupational positions. The research conducted by Kaur (2004) indicated that Malaysia and other countries in Asia have a higher tendency for married female employees to leave the workforce because of marriage and childbirth. The influence of Islamic culture in Malaysia has always emphasized the traditional role of a

female as a wife, mother, and household maker (Jerome, 2013). Thus, the study in Hijjas (2013) revealed that women are expected to follow their husband's opinion and are only allowed to work with their husband's support.

Based on the Isa et al. (2016) study, it showed that flexible work options can influence working mothers to balance their work and family responsibilities. Another study conducted by Hammer, Neal, Newsom, Brockwood, and Colton (2005) and Subramaniam, Ali, and Overton (2010) also identified that female working adults have an interest in FWAs practices that could help reduce their professional and personal obligations. Women in their 30s are interested in FWAs due to childcare and elderly care responsibilities (Ehrlich, Möhring, & Drobnič, 2020; Subramaniam et al., 2010). It has been proven that those with significant caregiving responsibilities might be more motivated to seek flexible arrangements. This is supported by Isa et al. (2016) who found that family responsibilities and individual's readiness for FWAs is positively correlated. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forth:

*H<sub>1</sub>: There is a positive relationship between family responsibilities and female employees' readiness for flexible work arrangements.*

#### 2.4. FWA Benefits

The research conducted by De Menezes and Kelliher (2011) indicated that FWAs practices have reduced stress and improved productivity as studied in several industries. Additionally, it has been determined that these policies' use of flexible scheduling and remote working is a highly significant predictor of lower employee turnover. Furthermore, some studies indicated that employees who participated in flexibility had a better level of job satisfaction than employees who did not (Noble, Richman, & Johnson, 2011).

Female employees tend to perceive more benefits compared to males in terms of improving retention, recruiting, and productivity if they are involved in FWAs practices (Charron & Lowe, 2005). According to Mohd Isa et al. (2016) perceived benefits in FWAs have a greater impact on female employees' readiness to FWAs if the practices are adopted in the organizations. FWA benefits can meet the demands of female employees, which can help them balance work and family. The studies from Noble et al. (2011) pinpointed that employees who are involved in flexibility have a higher level of job satisfaction than employees who are not. Besides, once the employees understand the FWA benefits, it could motivate them to become more open to and interested in adopting such arrangements, especially working mothers and caregivers (Kossek et al., 2021). The following hypothesis is thus generated:

*H<sub>2</sub>: There is a positive relationship between FWA benefits and female employees' readiness for flexible work arrangements.*

#### 2.5. Career Advancement

According to Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) female employees tend to have less power as compared with male employees in organizations. The studies by Tabassum and Nayak (2021) determined that there is an effect of stereotypes on gender, whereby people believe the good managers are male employees. The research from Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008) also revealed that the gender bias existing in the work environment has created limitations for female employees' career development.

The findings from the Hiredly (2023) survey found that 40% of working mothers in Singapore, 38% in Malaysia, and 34% in the Philippines indicated that there is a lack of career advancement for them due to family responsibilities.

Based on the Ibarra, Carter, and Silva (2010) study, it is clarified that female employees' career advancement is slower than that of male employees because of childcare responsibilities. Additionally, past research by Kiaye and Singh (2013) also identified that the barriers to women's career advancement are due to inadequate support for women's multiple roles. If the organizations recognize female employees who excel in FWAs, they are more likely to pursue both FWAs and advancement in their careers. Individuals who are ready for FWAs may believe that

flexible work can enhance their work-life balance and thus lead to increased performance, which might positively affect their career growth. To prove this, the following hypothesis is developed:

*H<sub>1</sub>: There is a positive relationship between career advancement and female employees' readiness for flexible work arrangements.*

2.6. Company Policy

Reese (2020) suggested that flexibility and family-friendly policies can retain and attract female employees in the workforce and be able to increase female participation at all levels of the labor market. The research on Skills and Labour Market Change identified that policies are necessary for encouraging females to have careers and families in raising their LFPR (McDowell, 2013). Research conducted by Stavrou and Ierodiakonou (2013) found that FWAs used as a family-friendly policy can increase employees' emotional intentions and loyalty. However, the findings from Isa et al. (2016) revealed that company policy has no relation to the readiness of female employees towards FWAs. To verify whether company policy has a significant impact on female employees' readiness for flexible work arrangements, the following hypothesis is developed:

*H<sub>2</sub>: There is a positive relationship between company policy and female employees' readiness for flexible work arrangements.*

2.7. Supportive Workplace

According to Jackson (2021) a family-supportive workplace allows employees to strike a balance between their career and family obligations. The study from Kossek and Lee (2008) indicated that formal FWAs practices can create a friendly and flexible culture in an organization. The survey conducted by Hiredly (2023) also identified that the reason 55% of working mothers leave a job is due to an unsupportive work environment. Female employees struggle to find a work-life balance. Therefore, creating a culture that is conducive to flexible work arrangements is highly dependent on leaders showing empathy for their people (Mercer, 2023).

The study from Kiaye and Singh (2013) also proved that FWAs have created virtual organizations that allow their employees to experience more harmony in work-life balance (Kossek et al., 2021) hence, it increases employee morale as well as productivity. It is also supported by a study conducted by Isa et al. (2016) which shows that female employees are ready for FWAs with sufficient support from their organizations. Hence, the following hypothesis is developed:

*H<sub>3</sub>: There is a positive relationship between a supportive workplace and female employees' readiness for flexible work arrangements.*

The research framework is shown in Figure 1.

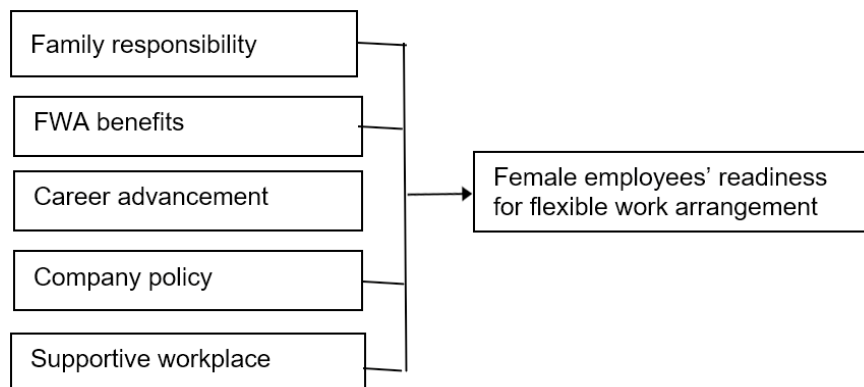


Figure 1. Research framework.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

A total of 200 survey forms are distributed online to female employees who are aged 18-65, regardless of marital status, education background, and race, in various industries like manufacturing, services, hospitality, etc., based on the convenience sampling method. It is a simple and quick way to reach the target respondents. The questionnaire consists of 52 items and is divided into three sections. Section a questions are developed to obtain demographic information about the respondents. The remaining 42 items in Section b and Section c is related to the factors (family responsibilities, FWA benefits, career advancement, company policy, and supportive workplace) that influence female employees' readiness for flexible work arrangements, which are adopted from Isa et al. (2016). All variables are measured from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree." The collected data was analyzed using multiple regression analysis to test the hypotheses.

**Table 1.** Results of descriptive statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	Std. deviation
FR	200	3.992	0.722
B	200	4.122	0.634
CA	200	3.809	0.741
CP	200	3.735	0.879
SW	200	3.813	0.891
RFWA	200	4.094	0.691

Note: FR = Family responsibilities, B = FWA benefits, CA= Career advancement, CP = Company policy, SW = Supportive workplace, RFWA = Female employees' readiness on flexible work arrangements.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the results of the mean and standard deviation analysis for five independent variables and one dependent variable in this study. Overall, FWA benefits have the highest mean value, which is 4.122 as compared to other variables, and a standard deviation value of 0.634. While company policy has the lowest mean value as compared to other variables, the mean value is 3.735 and the standard deviation is 0.879. The standard deviation of the items is high, suggesting greater variability in the dataset.

**Table 2.** Results of reliability analysis.

Variable	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Family responsibilities	5	0.826
FWA benefits	5	0.811
Career advancement	6	0.792
Company policy	9	0.91
Supportive workplace	8	0.934
Dependent variable	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Female employees' readiness for FWAs	9	0.906

#### 4.2. Reliability Analysis

As indicated by Table 2, Cronbach's Alpha testing results for all of the variables are considered reliable above the threshold of 0.7 (Taber, 2018).

**Table 3.** Results of Pearson correlation analysis between the independent and dependent variables.

Variable	R	Sig.
Family responsibilities	0.457**	0.000
FWA benefits	0.554**	0.000
Career advancement	0.554**	0.000
Company policy	0.577**	0.000
Supportive workplace	0.508**	0.000

Note: \*\*, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

#### 4.3. Pearson Correlation

Based on Table 3, the correlation coefficient of company policy shows a higher coefficient value, which is 0.577, with readiness for FWAs as compared to other independent variables. Family responsibilities show the lowest coefficient, which is 0.457 with the readiness for FWAs. Based on the r-value obtained, it can be concluded that all the independent variables have shown a moderately positive correlation with female employees' readiness for FWAs.

**Table 4. Results of multiple linear regression coefficients.**

Coefficients							
Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
Variable	B	Std. error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
FR	0.054	0.061	0.056	0.874	0.383	0.624	1.603
B	0.274	0.071	0.251	3.869	0.000	0.608	1.644
CA	0.238	0.059	0.255	4.041	0.000	0.643	1.555
CP	0.272	0.069	0.346	3.922	0.000	0.329	3.040
SW	-0.005	0.068	-0.007	-0.076	0.94	0.328	3.047
R = 0.709; R <sup>2</sup> = 0.503; F = 39.218; Sig. = 0.00							

Note: a. Dependent variable: RFWA.  
FR = Family responsibilities, B = FWA benefits, CA= Career advancement, CP = Company policy, SW = Supportive workplace, RFWA = Female employees' readiness on flexible work arrangements.

#### 4.4. Multiple Linear Regression

Table 4 shows that 50.3% of readiness for FWAs is explained by variables such as family responsibilities, FWA benefits, career advancement, company policy, and supportive workplace. The significant value of 0.000 indicated that family responsibilities, FWA benefits, career advancement, company policy, and a supportive workplace have a statistically significant relationship with female employees' readiness for FWAs. Family responsibilities (H1) and a supportive workplace (H5) have a p-value of more than 0.05, which indicates there is an insignificant relationship with female employees' readiness for FWAs. As such, H2, H3, and H4 are accepted except for H1 and H5. Overall, career advancement is the strongest predictor in terms of female employees' readiness for FWAs.

### 5. DISCUSSION

The results show that family responsibilities have a p-value greater than 0.05, which is insignificant to female employees' readiness for FWAs. Thus, hypothesis 1 is rejected. Most of the previous research indicates that family responsibilities are one of the reasons female employees leave their workforce. The research from TalentCorp, Subramaniam et al. (2010) and Isa et al. (2016) indicated that family responsibilities have a significant influence on female employees' readiness for FWAs. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to economic uncertainty and an unprecedented pace of growth in technology, has triggered businesses to rethink their recruitment approaches to stay competitive. During the pandemic period, not only female employees but also male employees are required to take care of their children and, at the same time, perform their work at home. Both male and female employees are busier with these practices as compared to working in the workplace. Hence, the increase in family responsibilities in this pandemic does not cause female employees to get ready for the adoption of FWA practices since many households and other family obligations are shared equitably by their partners. FWA benefits and female employees' readiness for FWAs are interrelated. Thus, hypothesis 2 is accepted. The result is supported by Isa et al. (2016) who claimed that perceived benefits in FWAs have a greater impact on female employees' readiness to adopt FWAs. This is because female employees are more eager to work in remote or flexible work settings that cater to their needs.

Career advancement also shows a significant relationship with female employees' readiness for FWAs. Thus, hypothesis 3 is accepted. Most of the research, such as Ibarra et al. (2010) and Isa et al. (2016) indicated that female

employees have experienced less career development due to childcare responsibilities; therefore, career advancement is not a significant predictor of the readiness of female employees' for FWAs. However, the results from this study identified that career advancement is the significant factor that influences female employees' readiness for FWAs. Under work-from-home practices in this pandemic, female employees can take care of their children, complete the work at the same time, and maintain productivity. Hence, career advancement is a significant factor that influences female employees' readiness for FWAs because female employees are ready for FWA practices. After all, it can maintain their career advancement. The result shows that company policy has a significant role in shaping female employee's readiness for FWAs. Thus, hypothesis 4 is accepted. Female employees often face challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities, and if a company could provide flexible arrangements, it could create a supportive environment that can help retain skilled female professionals. The result is supported by McDowell (2013) who identified that FWA policies can encourage females to increase their LFPR in the workplace. Hypothesis 5 is rejected, which shows that a supportive workplace does not have a significant relationship with female employees' readiness for FWAs. There are many challenges with the work-from-home policies in the pandemic. A supportive workplace can provide the foundation for enabling flexible arrangements for female employees, but it may not be the main determinant. It also depends on the job roles and the industry, which can impact female employees' readiness to adopt FWAs.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In Malaysia, a large number of employees, including female employees, will soon have the choice to adopt FWAs on a long-term basis. The organizations need to conduct a more in-depth conversation to determine which job roles should permanently switch to remote working, especially for female employees, in order to ensure they are treated fairly at the workplace. The organizations can offer more FWA benefits, such as a gender-neutral policy that aims to accommodate the various needs of female employees and allows them to adopt FWAs. If policies support flexibility, female employees are more likely to contribute their expertise over the long term. Additionally, the government and policymakers must also be more proactive in assisting organizations that are still having difficulty converting to a fully remote or hybrid model that is suited for female employees in order to retain and attract talented, skilled females.

## 7. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are some recommendations for future studies to improve the accuracy of the results. It is recommended that future researchers use more time to reach the target respondents. Due to time constraints, the survey form is distributed through convenience sampling to reach the target respondents. It is suggested that the survey form be equally distributed to target respondents in each of the age categories, from 20 years old until 60 years old and above. Besides, it is recommended that the future researcher increase the sample size of the respondents to 300 respondents and more in future research. Different perspectives from the large pool of respondents with diverse backgrounds and experiences could increase the accuracy and depth of the collected data and lead to further investigation in future research endeavors.

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**Transparency:** The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

**Data Availability Statement:** Upon a reasonable request, the supporting data of this study can be provided by the corresponding author.

**Competing Interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Authors' Contributions:** All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.



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