

Family-friendly policies in the workplace and their effect on work–life conflicts in Hong Kong

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As in many other big cities, employees in Hong Kong face competing demands from their work and family and are under a tremendous conflict between work and life. Recently, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has put a lot of effort into promoting family-friendly policies, but the availability and effectiveness of these policies are largely unknown. The social distribution of work–life conflicts across social status and the dimensions of stratification in Hong Kong have already been documented. This paper examines these issues by way of a telephone survey of over 1000 employees in Hong Kong. We argue that certain groups of workers are particularly vulnerable to work–life conflicts, and target interventions must be devised to address their needs. Moreover, we also suggest that a regulatory approach to implementing family-friendly policies must be undertaken once implementation on a voluntary basis has failed, owing to the low availability of family-friendly policies in the Hong Kong workplace. Lastly, we show the effectiveness of three measures – namely flexible work time, a five-day work week and career breaks – in reducing both work–life conflicts and their negative consequences. We argue that more rigorous randomized intervention must be undertaken to provide more conclusive evidence so as to convince employers to implement these policies in their enterprises.

Keywords: effectiveness; family-friendly policies; Hong Kong; social status; work–life balance; work–life conflict

Introduction

A challenge faced by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government is how to help employees cope with work–family conflicts. Hong Kong has no explicit ‘family policy’ (Shae and Wong 2009), but in his 2006–2007 Policy Address, the Chief Executive, Mr Donald Tsang, proposed that ‘an integrated, holistic and high-level Family Commission responsible for policies and initiatives relating to family support’ may be ‘worth considering’ (Hong_Kong_SAR_Government 2006). In December 2007, the Family Council was set up as an advisory body to the Government for examining family-related policies and promoting a culture of loving families in the community, because the Government recognizes that family is the cornerstone of the society. Thus, its family policy aims to enhance family harmony so as to build a harmonious community that will alleviate social problems. Means to enhance family harmony include promoting family core values, engendering a culture of loving families and both creating and supporting a general pro-family environment. Obviously, providing a family-friendly workplace would be an important way to increase family harmony.

As in many other countries and cities, employees in Hong Kong face competing demands from their work and family. Increases in the number of dual-earner families and single parents in the workplace have perpetuated the interference between work and

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family. In particular, long work hours are common among Hong Kong employees, since over one-quarter (25.8%) work for more than 50 hours per week (Chung, Pang and Tong 2010). Moreover, employees in Hong Kong are more likely to worry about the effects of long work hours on their personal lives than are their counterparts in London and in three cities in the USA (Wharton and Blair-Loy 2006). In 2006, a five-day work week initiative was implemented in phases in Hong Kong and work hours substantially decreased in the period from 2006 to 2010 (Chung et al. 2010), but it is still common for employees to work unpaid overtime in the evenings. Specifically, 63% of employees regularly work unpaid overtime, and 52% work late in the evenings (Welford 2008). A number of studies in Hong Kong have demonstrated that the work–family conflict in Hong Kong is at least similar to or even worse than that in western countries (Aryee and Luk 1996; Ngo and Lau 1998; Aryee, Fields and Luk 1999; Aryee, Luk, Leung and Lo 1999; Hang-yue, Foley and Loi 2005).

The Employment Ordinance is the major legal vehicle in Hong Kong for governing the terms and conditions of employment. It provides for various types of leave, including rest days, statutory holidays and annual leave so that employees can enjoy their personal lives, including their family lives. It also provides for 10 weeks of paid maternity leave and prohibits heavy, hazardous or harmful work or termination of employment during pregnancy. As mentioned above, the Hong Kong SAR Government also introduced the five-day week for civil servants in July 2006; by July 2007, about 90,000 government staffs (about 65%) were working five days a week. Although the Government has encouraged the private sector to follow in its footsteps, and in fact, according to a survey conducted by the Labor Department, the percentage of organizations adopting the five-day work week has increased from 36.5% to 61.5%, the Government has not set a target for the implementation of this measure.

The Labor Department has been acting as a facilitator in encouraging employers to adopt more family-friendly employment policies so as to improve the work–life balance among employees. The department has launched major publicity efforts, such as (1) organizing seminars or briefings to promote family-friendly policies, (2) promoting these policies to human resources practitioners and the trade representatives of employers through a network of 19 human resources managers clubs in various trades and industries and committees on nine industries and (3) staging roving exhibitions at various locations across the territory. Besides these on-going initiatives, the department also produced a series of newspaper supplements and a booklet with real-life examples to showcase exemplary family-friendly policies. In 2010, the Family Council also launched a Family-Friendly Company Award Scheme in which companies will be recognized for the family-friendly measures they implement for their employees. Lastly, in his 2011–2012 Policy Address, the Chief Executive, Mr Donald Tsang, announced that the Hong Kong SAR Government would take the lead in promoting paid paternity leave by examining how this provision could be implemented among civil servants. But despite all these efforts, the availability of family-friendly policies among Hong Kong employees and their effectiveness remain largely unknown. To fill this research gap, the objective of this study is to document the availability of family-friendly policies and their effectiveness, especially in alleviating work–life conflicts and their harmful consequences in Hong Kong.

Literature review

Work–life conflicts

Work–family conflict has been identified as one of the most pervasive and problematic workplace stressors (Kelloway, Gottlieb and Barham 1999), with detrimental effects on

both health and family (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Brauchli, Bauer and Hämmig 2011; Knecht, Bauer, Gutzwiller and Hämmig 2011; Ohta et al. 2011; Rupert, Stevanovic, Hartman, Bryant and Miller 2012). There are two types of such conflict: strain-based conflict, which occurs when participating in one role produces stress that is carried into the other role, and time-based conflict, which happens when participating in one role impedes time spent in the other role. In addition, conflict can occur in two directions: from work to family or from family to work. In this study, we focus on the first direction of conflict to assess how family-friendly policies in the workplace could alleviate work–family conflict. It has been argued that *work–life conflict* is the more appropriate term than *work–family conflict*, because employees who do not have family care responsibilities are also vulnerable to stress arising from the conflict between roles in the work and non-work domains, including family, friends and leisure (Kossek and Lambert 2005; Schieman, Milkie and Glavin 2009; Waumsley, Houston and Marks 2010). Therefore, in this study we focus on work–life conflict.

Similar to stressors in general, research has documented the unequal distribution of work–life interference across the dimensions of stratification, especially age, gender, education and occupation and social status. Age has been found to be negatively and linearly associated with work–life conflict (Mennino, Rubin and Brayfield 2005; Winslow 2005; Voydanoff 2007), although other studies have found that middle-aged workers have the highest levels of conflict (Grzywacz, Almeida and McDonald 2002; Bellavia and Frone 2005). Findings have also been mixed regarding the relation between gender and work–life conflict (Grzywacz et al. 2002; Bellavia and Frone 2005; Mennino et al. 2005; Winslow 2005; Knecht et al. 2011; van Veldhoven and Beijer 2012); it is possible that gender and age interaction has contributed to these inconclusive findings (Schieman et al. 2009). Education has also been found to be positively related to work–life conflict (Grzywacz et al. 2002; Mennino et al. 2005; Schieman, Whitestone and Van Gundy 2006; Knecht et al. 2011), with its effects mediated by occupation or work conditions (Mirowsky and Ross 2003). Finally, work–life conflict is significantly greater for employees in high-status occupation categories (e.g. professionals, executives, managers) than their peers in lower status occupations, the so-called ‘stress of higher status’ hypothesis (Grzywacz et al. 2002; Bellavia and Frone 2005; Mennino et al. 2005; Schieman et al. 2006, 2009). Thus, the first objective of the current study is to document the social distribution of work–life conflicts across social status and dimensions of stratification in a Hong Kong population-based survey of workers.

Social distribution of work–life conflicts hypothesis

Based on the literature discussed above, the following hypotheses are supposed:

- Hypothesis 1:* Age is negatively associated with work–life conflict.
- Hypothesis 2:* Females are more likely to report work–life conflict than males.
- Hypothesis 3:* There is an interaction effect between age and gender on work–life conflict.
- Hypothesis 4:* Education is positively related to work–life conflict.
- Hypothesis 5:* Work–life conflict is significantly greater for employees in high-status occupation than those in low-status occupation categories.

Availability of family-friendly employment practices

Family-friendly employment practices are created to help employees cope with work–family or work–life conflicts. More and more employers are providing family-friendly employment programs in reaction to the fact that today there are more women, dual-earner

couples and single parents in the workforce (Goodstein 1994; Bond, Thompson, Galinsky and Prottas 2002; Golden 2006), and all these employees are anticipating more of these programs to help them cope with family demands. Family-friendly employment practices have been developed to create a work environment that is family friendly so that employees can gain greater control over when and where they work. These practices may include providing flexibility in work time, place or load (flexibility policies), and reducing work hours. But it is unclear whether these practices are as accessible to workers in Asian countries as in western countries, especially since it has been argued that their availability depends on both a government's approach to welfare (den Dulk 2005; Gornick and Heron 2006) and cultural values (Raghuram, London and Larsen 2001; Peters and den Dulk 2003).

To our knowledge, the availability of family-friendly employment practices in Hong Kong has not been examined systematically. One study was based on a report from human resources representatives, which may not represent most employees' experiences, and the low response rate may also have led to systematic bias (Siu and Philips 2006). Often discrepancies also appear between what employers report and what employees convey regarding the availability of these practices (WorldatWork 2007). Flexibility policies can range from flexible work time or location to part-time work to a compressed workweek. Other types of family-friendly practices related to limiting work time include a five-day work week, maximum number of work hours, extra leaves such as extended paid maternity and paternity leave, and extra paid leave (for birthdays, weddings or condolences).

Effects of family-friendly practices

Accessibility to flexibility policies has been positively associated with lower levels of interference between work and life (Allen 2001; Bond et al. 2002; Gajendran and Harrison 2007), as well as a number of work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright and Neuman 1999; Allen 2001; Bond et al. 2002; McNall, Masuda and Nicklin 2010; Lu, Kao, Chang, Wu and Cooper 2011), reduced absenteeism (Dalton and Mesch 1990), increased retention (Allen 2001; Batt and Valcour 2003; Pavalko and Henderson 2006; McNall et al. 2010), stronger organizational commitment (Lu et al. 2011; Wang, Lawler and Shi 2011) and enhanced productivity (Eaton 2003; Hill, Erickson, Holmes and Ferris 2010; Bloom, Kretschmer and Van Reenen 2011). But the beneficial effects of flexibility policies are not universal, since these policies do not necessarily reduce the conflict between work and family for professionals (Baltes et al. 1999). Regarding policies that reduce work hours, maternity leave reduces turnover (Glass and Riley 1998; Waldfogel 1998), while paternal leave may enhance the management skills of male managers (Haas 2003).

Most researchers undertaking study of work–life conflicts appear to have accepted a simple mediation model that hypothesizes that family-friendly practices reduce work–life conflict, and reduced conflict in turn leads to desirable outcomes in health and work (Grandey and Cropanzano 1999; Hammer, Bauer and Grandey 2003; Frye and Breugh 2004). In other words, the effect of family-friendly practices on desirable work or health-related outcomes (e.g. high retention and productivity) is mediated by work–life conflict (Allen 2001; Hammer et al. 2003). Thus, the second objective of the study is to examine the mediating role of work–life conflict in the relationship between family-friendly practices and both work- and health-related outcomes. On the basis of the literature reviewed above, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: Work–life conflict mediates in the link between family-friendly practices and both work- and health-related outcomes.

Data and method

Data for this study came from the *Work–Life Balance Survey of the Hong Kong Working Population 2010*, which involved telephone interviews with 1009 participants in Hong Kong in 2010. We conducted secondary data analysis by using data obtained in this survey. This survey was funded by Community Business Limited and conducted by the Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong. Eligible participants were aged 15 or older and working at the time of data collection. Interviews were conducted in Cantonese (94.7%) or English (5.3%), so participants had to be sufficiently fluent in either of these languages to complete the interview. We successfully interviewed 74.3% of all eligible participants. Ages ranged between 17 and 75; 49.2% of the sample were women.

Measurement

Four items assessed work–life interference. Respondents were asked whether in the previous 12 months they had encountered any of the following four problems because of a disturbed work–life balance: ‘I do not have any private time for recreation activities or sports at all’, ‘I do not have time to spend with my partner or family’, ‘My work has affected my relationship with my friends’ and ‘I feel stressed out, depressed, and exhausted after work’. Response choices were *yes* or *no*. The first two were related to time-based conflicts, while the last two considered strain-based conflicts. These items were summed, with higher scores indicating greater work–life conflict (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.68$). These items were similar to those used in other studies (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Schieman et al. 2009).

Productivity and work quality, mental health, physical health and somatic symptoms were assessed to indicate the negative consequences of work–life conflicts. To assess these items, respondents were asked whether in the previous 12 months they had encountered any of the following four problems because of a disturbed work–life balance: ‘Productivity and work quality have declined dramatically due to long working hours’, ‘I have prolonged fatigue levels, sleepiness, and extreme tiredness’, ‘I easily get physically sick or I need to take more sick leave’ and ‘I have insomnia and a poor diet as a result of work pressures’. All responses were dummy coded as 1 = *yes* or 0 = *no*; the items were summed, with higher scores indicating greater negative consequences of work–life interference (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.64$).

The availability of nine types of practices were also assessed: a five-day work week, paternity leave, extended maternity leave, career breaks, extra paid leave, flexible work time, option to sometimes work remotely or at home, a compressed work week and part-time work. The first five types were related to reducing work hours, and the last four to work flexibility. Participants were asked, ‘What types of work–life initiatives does your company currently provide?’; interviewers then read out the options one by one in randomized order. The availability of each form of practice was dummy coded as 1 = *yes, it is* and 0 = *no, it is not*. Analysis was conducted using each practice as a separate variable.

We included age, gender, education and occupation to measure social status and the dimension of stratification. We contrasted the 46–55-year-old age category with these other age groups: 17–25, 26–35, 36–45 and 56 and above. Gender was a dummy variable, with female coded as 1 and male as 0. We then contrasted the modal category of high school graduate (38.1%) with these other categories: less than high school, post-high school certificate, college graduate and postgraduate degree (MA, PhD). To assess occupation, we contrasted the modal category of professional, manager or executive (30.3%) with other categories, including trader or proprietor, skilled white-collar worker, unskilled white-collar worker, skilled blue-collar worker and unskilled blue-collar worker.

Method

First, we performed descriptive statistical analyses on items related to work–life conflict and the availability of family-friendly policies. Second, we carried out multiple regression analyses to assess the relation of work–life conflict to age, gender, education and occupation. The interaction of gender and age groups was then entered to examine their effect on work–life conflict. Third, to use multiple regression analyses, we adjusted the effect of the availability of individual family-friendly policies on work–life conflict and its negative consequences after controlling for age, gender, education and occupation. Finally, we examined the mediating role of work–life conflict in the relationship between family-friendly policies and negative outcomes using multiple regression analyses by including the work–life conflict as one of the independent variables.

Results

Prevalence of work–life conflict and family-friendly policies

As Table 1 shows, at least one-quarter of respondents reported one of the four items related to work–life conflict. Almost 40% of respondents (37%) reported that they did not have time to spend with their partners or families, while almost 30% said that their work had affected their relationship with their friends. Table 1 also shows that the most popular family-friendly policy was a five-day work week (46%), followed by career breaks (35%) and flexible work time (28%). Only about one-tenth of respondents reported that paternal leave, a compressed work week or extended maternity leave were available to them.

Social distribution of work–life conflict

Table 2 shows that the results of the multiple regressions and model outcomes were significant. Model 1 suggests that, compared with 45–55-year-olds, those aged 26–35 and 36–45 reported a significantly higher level of work–life conflict. Moreover, individuals with a college degree reported significantly higher levels of work–life conflict than did their peers who were high school graduates. Also, traders or proprietors reported fewer work–life conflicts than those who were professionals, managers or executives. We also added four interaction terms between gender and all four age categories into the model, none of which were significantly associated with work–life conflict.

Table 1. Prevalence of work–life conflict and family-friendly policies.

<i>Work–life conflict</i>	
I do not have any private time for recreation activities or sports at all	28.0%
I do not have time to spend with my partner or family	37.0%
My work has affected my relationship with my friends	29.0%
I feel stressed out, depressed and exhausted after work	25.7%
<i>Family-friendly policies</i>	
Five-day work week	45.7%
Paternity leave	11.0%
Extended maternity leave	10.0%
Career breaks	35.4%
Extra paid leave	24.1%
Flexible working time	28.2%
Option to sometimes work remotely or at home	22.9%
Compressed work week	10.4%
Part-time work	12.9%
<i>N</i>	1009

Table 2. Regression of work–life conflict on socio-demographic variables and occupation.

	<i>Unstandardized regression coefficient (standard errors)</i>
Age	
46–55 (reference)	
17–25	0.23 (0.14)
26–35	0.26* (0.12)
36–45	0.34* (0.12)
56+	–0.16 (0.16)
Women	–0.04 (0.09)
Education	
High school graduate (reference)	
Less than high school	0.10 (0.18)
Post-high school certificate	0.06 (0.13)
College graduate	0.08* (0.12)
Postgraduate degree	–0.10 (0.18)
Occupation	
Professional, manager, executive (reference)	
Trader or proprietor	–0.59* (0.22)
Skilled white-collar worker	–0.08 (0.12)
Unskilled white-collar worker	–0.05 (0.13)
Skilled blue-collar worker	0.02 (0.15)
Unskilled blue-collar worker	0.21 (0.16)

* $p < 0.05$.***Family-friendly policies, work–life conflict and outcomes***

Among the nine family-friendly policies, only three were significantly associated with work–life conflict or its negative outcomes. As Table 3 shows, the availability of flexible work time, a five-day work week and career breaks were significantly associated with lower levels of work–life conflict as well as its negative consequences. Moreover, the last column of Table 3 indicates that the effects of both a five-day work week and career breaks on the negative consequences of work–life conflict were completely mediated by such conflict, while the impact of flexible work time on the negative consequences of work–life conflict was partially mediated by such conflict.

Table 3. Mediating role of work–life conflict in the link between family-friendly policies and both work- and health-related outcomes.

	<i>Unstandardized regression coefficient (standard errors)</i>		
	<i>Work–life conflict</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>
Family-friendly policies			
Flexible work time	–0.18* (0.09)	–0.32** (0.09)	–0.21** (0.07)
Work–life conflict			0.58** (0.03)
Family-friendly policies			
Five-day work	–0.34** (0.09)	–0.26** (0.09)	–0.06 (0.07)
Work–life conflict			0.58** (0.03)
Family-friendly policies			
Career breaks	–0.23** (0.09)	–0.18* (0.08)	–0.05 (0.07)
Work–life conflict			0.59** (0.03)

Note: All models were adjusted for age, gender, education and occupation. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Discussion

In the past few years, the Labor Department of the Hong Kong SAR Government has put much effort into promoting family-friendly policies in Hong Kong through various means. Our research, however, suggests that their availability is not widespread. For instance, even though the Government launched a five-day work week in 2006, only half of employees in Hong Kong enjoy this measure. Flexibility in time and place is also crucial for employees in coping with demands from caring for elderly parents to young children, but only 28% and 23% of employees, respectively, had access to flexible work time and the option to work remotely. The Government has argued that the major barrier to implementing family-friendly policies is resistance from employers of small and medium enterprises (fewer than 50 employees), which account for over 98% of total business units in Hong Kong. These employers are concerned about costs and practicality issues as well as manpower constraints in adopting and implementing family-friendly policies.

US data, however, show that workplaces with fewer than 100 employees provide more access to flexible work measures than those with more than 100 workers ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007](#)). It is unclear why small organizations should be in a better position to support flexibility measures for their employees, and future studies should be undertaken to address this issue. Moreover, it has been shown that work flexibility options could be used to supplement higher wages or even used as a tradeoff for them ([Baughman, DiNardi and Holtz-Eakin 2003](#)); therefore, these measures might save overhead costs for employers.

The bottom line is that these employers are unsure about the benefits of family-friendly policies with respect to productivity, retention and morale. Therefore, it is important to demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of implementing such policies in small and medium enterprises through a rigorous research design. A recent study has shown that policies that emphasize results rather than time spent at work reduce turnover ([Moen, Kelly and Hill 2011](#)), while initiatives to increase employee control over schedules substantially reduce work–family conflict ([Kelly, Moen and Tranby 2011](#)). In other words, more and better intervention studies are needed to demonstrate how family-friendly policies could reduce turnover and improve work loyalty and productivity for a wide variety of jobs. These encouraging findings urge us to conduct similar studies among employees of small and medium enterprises in Hong Kong so that evidence can be provided to convince such employers. We especially need to pay more attention to the particular vulnerabilities of such enterprises. Our results indicate that because many employees lack access to family-friendly policies, there is huge room for improvement in implementing them.

The observations regarding age suggest that work–life conflict peaks among those aged 36–45. This finding is consistent with findings on women in the USA ([Schieman et al. 2009](#)). Our findings also partially support the high-status hypothesis, that employees with a university education are more likely to report work–life conflict than their counterparts who are high school graduates. All these results are useful to identifying groups at high risk for work–life conflict, who could be targeted for family-friendly measures in the workplace or intervention by social service organizations and employers.

Our main finding is that out of the nine family-friendly policies we examined, only three were significantly associated with less work–life conflict and the negative consequences of such conflict. It seems that our results are not consistent with previous studies that have found a wide range of benefits associated with the availability of family-friendly policies ([Dalton and Mesch 1990](#); [Allen 2001](#); [Bond et al. 2002](#); [Eaton 2003](#);

Casper, Fox, Sitzmann and Landy 2004; Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Our findings are, however, in line with some reviews of the effectiveness of family-friendly programs in which many such policies are either not associated or negatively associated with an increase in retention rates, minimization of work stress and improvement of productivity (Sutton and Noe 2005; Ryan and Kossek 2007). It has been argued that besides the availability of family-friendly policies, support from supervisors is very important for successfully implementing these policies. It makes a significant difference if supervisors encourage and support employees who seek to use a specific policy. In fact, supervisor support itself is associated with lower levels of work–life conflict (Thomas and Ganster 1995; Allen 2001; Poelmans, Chinchilla and Cardona 2003; Casper et al. 2004; Webber, Sarris and Bessell 2010; Kossek, Pichler, Bodner and Hammer 2011; Munir, Nielsen, Garde, Albertsen and Carneiro 2012; Sachau, Gertz, Matsch, Palmer and Englert 2012). It has been suggested that supervisors are the key persons for implementing family-friendly policies effectively (Hopkins 2005). First, they often have a final say on whether an employee can utilize a policy. Second, they must arrange cross-training among employees so that human resources can be given greater flexibility. Third, supervisors are also responsible for publicizing the policies and making sure that all employees understand them. Future studies should thus be undertaken to include this variable and assess whether there is an interaction effect between supervisor support and the availability of family-friendly measures on both work–life conflict and its negative consequences.

Moreover, the availability of family-friendly policies does not necessarily reduce work–life conflict, especially if they are not supported by organizational cultural norms. Informal organizational culture and norms are one of the three pillars affecting how work–life conflict can be reduced in the workplace (Kossek 2006). Even worse, these policies may not be helpful if they are not linked to other employment policies such as core work hours, job security and pay and promotion. Specifically, almost 40% (39%) of employees in one study felt that using flexibility policies would jeopardize their job advancement (Bond et al. 2002). Therefore, discovering how to cultivate a family-friendly culture in the workplace is essential, since otherwise those policies may either be underutilized or result in negative consequence for their users. Even more important is the question of why some organizations do not attempt to create a more supportive work–life culture. Therefore, future studies should examine the antecedent institutional and organizational factors as to why organizations are reluctant to adopt such a culture. In general, more research is needed to examine how to develop standards for effectively implementing family-friendly policies in the workplace. Currently, all employers in Hong Kong have no policy requirement to implement any family-friendly policy other than the paid 10-week maternal leave.

Compared with European Union countries, Hong Kong's employment policy regarding family-friendly policies is predominately voluntary and privately based; this is, namely, 'a minimalist market-based employer approach', where employers have a wide degree of freedom to determine voluntarily the manner and extent to which they will choose to financially support their workers' family needs (Block, Berg and Belman 2004). In theory, employers in the free market will provide family-friendly options to employees who need those measures to resolve their work–life conflicts if they find these measures are feasible and affordable. In return, employees will increase their retention and productivity so as to give their employers a competitive advantage compared with those employers who do not provide such options. It has been argued that this free market has not worked in the USA because employers vary substantially in their susceptibility to competition as well as in their ability to respond to the needs of their employees (Glass

2009). Consequently, many employers do not offer their employees any family-friendly policies, and even if they do, workers might fail to use them because of low supervisor support and a non-supportive organizational culture.

Besides the market-based approach, a regulatory approach has been adopted in European Union countries so that employers are forced to provide such family-friendly options to their employees (Gornick and Meyers 2003). But both the Hong Kong SAR Government and the private sector may fear that regulation would lower productivity, increase job loss and decrease capital investment in Hong Kong. Recently, a minimum wage was implemented in Hong Kong using the regulatory approach. Before the Minimum Wage Ordinance, which came into force in May 2011, provided a statutory minimum wage for employees, the Government attempted to encourage employers to adopt this measure on a voluntary basis, but it failed completely. Setting maximum work hours or implementing a flexible work environment could follow the step of a 'minimum wage ordinance'; that is, a voluntary basis would be attempted first, and if it failed, then a regulatory approach would be used. In this study, we found that a five-day work week was strongly associated with lower levels of work–life conflicts and their negative consequences; one reason for this is the universalism of this measure (Ryan and Kossek 2007). This means that this measure is perceived as available to all employees without any negotiability. Therefore, a regulatory approach would have a greater chance of success in reducing work–life conflict because it would ensure universalism in implementing such measures.

One limitation of the current study is that employees' views on using family-friendly measures were not collected. Actual experiences with those policies and the reasons employees do not use them may provide insight into how to improve their utilization and effectiveness. The research community needs better data on the availability and use of family-friendly policies so that a better understanding of the obstacles to implementing them can be obtained. The current study has provided initial findings regarding the availability of family-friendly policies and their effectiveness on work–life conflict, but additional higher quality research on such policies needs to be conducted. Until this step is taken, our knowledge on how to implement these policies effectively in the workplace will remain limited.

Conclusion

The Hong Kong SAR Government has been taking a leading role in the promotion of family-friendly practices in the workplace. Nevertheless, this study shows that the availability of such practices in Hong Kong is rather inadequate, and a large proportion of the working population in Hong Kong is suffering from different forms of work–life conflicts. Certain groups are particularly vulnerable, which might be the result of the changing economic structure in Hong Kong. To effectively address the situation, the Government should provide targeted intervention to these groups. Apart from introducing policy that increases the availability of family-friendly practices, vigorous study should be done to provide more evidences on the positive work-related outcomes to enhance the receptiveness of family-friendly practices in the private sector. In addition, future studies should also investigate the effects of other contextual variables such as supervisor's support and corporate culture on the adoption rates of family-friendly policy by employees. This paper also suggests that when market incentives fail to induce private sector to adopt family-friendly practices, the introduction of regulatory framework is appropriate as universal implementation will enhance the adoption of such policy.

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