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Balancing Work-Family Roles: The Experiences of Solo Parent School Administrators

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Abstract. The rising educational attainment for women and economic uncertainty gave rise to high maternal employment rates and the global labour force participation of women. Often working mothers, are put into the complexities of work and family life, resulting in stress and perplexity of values and priority. The phenomenological paper intends to explore the day-to-day life experiences and the balance of work-home life of school administrators involved in solo-parenting in the Diocesan Schools of Negros Occidental, Philippines. The data were collected using an in-depth interview from four school administrators chosen through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis following Lichtman's three Cs: coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing was used to analyse the data. The findings show that playing the role of an administrator and being a solo parent at the same time is both a challenging and rewarding task. School administrators employed various coping mechanisms such as seeking external help and involving in productive activities to manage daily stressors. In the absence of their spouse, time management is essential, and spending quality time with children is always a priority. The findings may provide baseline data for designing and implementing stress management programs to ensure the balance of work-family roles.

Keywords. Education, solo-parenting, work-family balance, school administrators, phenomenology, Philippines

1. Introduction.

The rising educational attainment of women and economic uncertainty gave rise to high rates of maternal employment and to the global labour force participation of women. Based on 2014 estimates of International Labour Organization (ILO), the world female (ages 25 and above) labour force participation rate increased from 53.1 % to 54.2% from the year 1992 to 2012 as a result of the rising enrolment in education (Verick, 2014). Among Asian countries, the Philippines ranked 29th when it comes to women's labour participation. According to World Bank Global Economic Prospects (2020), from the year 1990 to 2020, the Philippines has a mean of 47.71 percent female participation rate with a minimum of 45.52 percent in 2017 and a maximum of 49.52 percent in 2014.

Education is usually the highest reason why women plan to participate within the labour pool (Mahpul & Abdullah, 2011). In fact, labour participation rates are positively related to rising women's educational attainment (Blau, Ferber & Winkler, 2016). Women who endowed in education are more likely to enter and remain within the labour force to compensate with what they invested, and women who anticipate long labour participation are possibly to pursue higher education (Winkler, 2016). According to the Economic Organization Cooperation and Development (EOCD) (2020), the

employment rate of highly educated mothers is 82%, 70% were with medium level educational attainment, and 46% with low-level educational attainment in 2019.

One of the key aspects of women's rising labour participation is the increasing rates of women with children which was doubled from 28 percent in 1980 to 53 percent in 1999 (McRae, 2003). It resulted in the decrease in the number of the normal models of families during which fathers are those working and mothers remain at home to care for children (Houston, 2005). However, working women with children especially those pursuing leadership positions often resulted in work-family role conflict (Blair-Loy, 2009); 56% of employed mothers indicate "very" or "somewhat" difficulty to balance work and family (Parker & Wang, 2013). As mothers, they're expected to devote their time, attention, and energy to perform the bulk of everyday jobs associated with children and family functioning (Christopher, 2012); which always seems to be in conflict with the ideal worker. People and employers expected ideal workers to be committed wholeheartedly to their work on the expense of their non-work and family obligations (Turner & Norwood, 2013).

A school leadership position is demanding work that needs an immense commitment of your time, energy, and emotions (Blair-Loy, 2009). School administrators specifically principals are required to attend administrative meetings, sustain with current and best practices in education, attend after-school meetings and events, and handle discipline problems. they're expected to boost the achievement levels of students, plan development opportunities for teachers and staff, balance an ever-decreasing school budget, maintain a good teaching-learning environment (Helterbran & Rieg, 2003); and always within the process of constructing decisions for the school (Bush, 2003). And together with these complex tasks, they're expected to always ignite the flame that sets the tone of the daily school setting (Helterbran & Rieg, 2003). These scenarios put female school administrators into the complexities of work and family life, leading to stress and perplexity of values and priority.

Various researches were conducted regarding work-life balance and stress of working mothers and also the stress related to it. Yet, there's a lack of knowledge about the lived experiences and work-life balance of solo parent-school administrators. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) Report (2020), solo parenthood has various reasons and different forms: overseas work, abandonment, widowhood, incarceration, legal or factual separation, annulment, adoption, or a toddler out of wedlock because of poor education. But in this study, solo-parenthood is the results of the absence of a husband due to the nature of work. Parenthood is challenging under normal conditions. But with one parent, the challenges are multiplied. Hence, this study ventured into an inquiry on the day-to-day life experiences of female school administrators involved in solo parenting. Specifically, the aim of this study is to look at the perceived challenges and rewards of solo-parent female school administrators, how they address stress and manage the balance of work-family roles.

2. Method

This study utilized the qualitative research design using the phenomenological approach to collect more insights into the prevailing lived experiences of school administrators involved in solo-parenting.

Phenomenology examines the experiences of unique individuals in an exceedingly given situation, thus exploring not what's but what's preconceived to be (Groove, Burns & Gray, 2009). Moreover, qualitative research doesn't forecast what's to happen within the future; rather, it's an analysis that has a depth of understanding for those that have an interest within the events of a selected setting and time (Zeeck, 2012). School administrators endure demanding schedules, especially when blended in an equally busy schedule, absence of spouse and active children. A qualitative approach to the present study is deemed appropriate to present rich

descriptions to accurately describe the phenomenon of the lived experiences of solo parent school administrators.

Purposive sampling was employed in the selection of the participants using the subsequent criteria: female school administrator with children of a Diocesan/Catholic School; and, spouses are OFW or working far from home for an extended period. In agreement with Michalos (2014), purposive sampling is an intentional selection of participants supported by their ability to elucidate a selected theme, concept, or phenomenon. Four participants were engaged in interviews for the study. All four participants were school administrators of a Catholic School for over five years and whose husbands were OFW's, and one was a military and assigned to a different region. All of them consented to the interview after being oriented about the character and objectives of the study. The name and identities of the participants were omitted during this report for privacy purposes.

Before the scheduled interview, each participant was given the interview inquiries to facilitate the method. The interviews have supported the availability and preference of the participant. The researcher also reinforced that participation was voluntary which participants can decline to answer a matter or stop the interview at any time. The interview was conducted using semi-structured, virtual individual in-depth interviews. Virtual interviews were employed in observance of the health protocol because of the pandemic.

Guided by the interview protocol, the researcher explained the aim of the research, the duration of the interview, the interview approach (content, confidentiality, consent, and recording methods), and also the use of the information. Before the interview begins, the participants got the chance to clarify any points and were asked to sign the written consent to verify their willingness to proceed. All interviews were done privately and their responses to the interviews were audio-recorded with permission from the participants. During the interview, participants were advised that they might state their responses in a language they're comfortable with to express their thoughts clearly. Additionally, words like "Can you elaborate or explain the thought further?", "Would you give me an example?", or "Is there anything would love you to add?" were used for probing.

The interview ended with a debriefing which re-iterated the aim of the study which the information will be presented within the professional community. The researcher likewise emphasized the observance of confidentiality with regards to the interviewee's identity and responses. Finally, the researcher expressed her appreciation to the interviewees for their cooperation. All interviews were afterward transcribed, reviewed, and analysed. Thematic analysis was employed using Lichtman's (2013) three Cs: coding, categorizing and conceptualizing to unveil themes transcribed from their narratives.

3. Results

The aim of the paper was to explore the day-to-day lived experiences of school administrators involved in solo-parenting. The research resulted in three major themes describing the lived experiences of solo-parent female school administrators which emerged out of the experiences shared by the participants: the challenges of role conflict, loneliness, and guilt; rewards of being a solo-parent administrator; and coping strategies to balance work-family roles.

Challenges of Being a Solo Parent - School Administrator. Solo parenting is too challenging and so an administrative position is. A unifying theme in the stories of the participants about their struggles in facing the demanding tasks of being a solo parent and a school administrator were role conflict, loneliness, and guilt.

Role Conflict. The majority of the participants experienced role conflict because of the pressures and expectations of the people around them. They were often caught between their roles as a school administrator and a parent. They expressed the following:

“Every time my husband leaves to work abroad, I carry all the responsibilities of home managing and child-rearing. During the time when my children were preschoolers, I had to go home early to attend to their needs. But there were also times, when my work demands my time and dedication, especially during the time when our school was scheduled for re-certification which demanded much of my time and focus.”

Their commitment to work is often in conflict with their devotion to the family especially in spending quality time with their children since their husbands are often away for work.

“There was a time when my child got sick, (she was 3 years old that time), and my husband was on board and I had a scheduled parent meeting that day. I really don’t know what to do. I cannot cancel the meeting at the same time my sick daughter needs me”.

Loneliness and Guilt. Being left alone by their spouses most of the time, carrying all the responsibilities of the family, and faced by work pressures at the same time create sadness and loneliness. The majority of the participants experienced sadness and loneliness every time their spouses left for work.

“It took me a month or more to overcome the absence of my husband. It’s good that we have now an internet connection, it lessens the distance and loneliness.”

“When I encountered work conflict and pressures, I have no one to share with. It made me feel lonely, and this loneliness sometimes affects my mood in dealing with the people at home.”

Loneliness was also felt by the participants when they were challenged of making family decisions alone.

“Rearing the children alone, when my husband had to leave us for a year or more to work in another country was difficult. I often struggle in making all the decisions for the family most of the time, especially in making decisions for my children”.

The loneliness that the participants experienced was sometimes associated with the feeling of guilt. “*Kabudlay guid*” (it is really hard) shared by one participant.

“When problems arise, I often never told my husband because I don’t want to add burden to him, and this makes me feel guilty”.

Guilt also felt by participants every time they lack time with their children because of increased workload. When night comes and alone, they felt guilt for not spending enough time on family needs especially of the children.

“Kasubo batyagon nga may ti-on nga nagakaubos ang akon tiempo sa ulobrahon sa eskwelan kag gabi na makapuli kag tulog na ang mga kabataan. Wala na ako kabalo kung ano na ang ila mga experiences sa sina nga adlaw. Kag amo ni ang pinakasubo nga bahin sang akon pagkanaanay. Wala na sa ila tupad ang ila amay, may ti-on pa nga indi ko sila mahatagan sang akon tiempo.” (It's sad that there were times that I spent much of my time with my school responsibilities and went home late when my children were already asleep. I have no idea what happened to them during the day. It is the saddest part of being a mother. In the absence of their father, I can't give my time to them).

In addition, guilt was felt by participants when they cannot fulfill work role demands because they had to prioritize family matters.

“There were instances that I was forced to delegate my administrative responsibilities to my colleague because I need to accompany my child to her school activities.”

Hence, guilt was also felt by them as a result of prioritizing one role from the other.

Rewards of being a solo parent administrator. Despite the many challenges encountered by participants, there were also perceived rewards from being a solo parent and a school administrator at the same time.

Sense of pride. The feeling of pride that they have managed to perform their work and family responsibilities successfully. One participant expressed a certain level of fulfillment.

“My children are now professionals and already working. They become good and God-fearing persons, seeing them happy and fulfilled is the most rewarding aspect of my life. I told myself: “Good job self, you reared your children well”.

Another participant shared that she felt so fulfilled seeing how their children manage their own family life, and the way they reared their own children.

“Seeing my children become good parents, and how they discipline and rear my apos (grandchildren) the same way we reared them made me feel so proud as a mother”.

Expert time managers. Being a school administrator and a solo parent at the same was never easy as shared by the participants but it made them become excellent time managers. According to them, time management was the key to how they won the battle of work-family role conflicts.

“I've been a school administrator for more than ten years, and my children were all achievers both in curricular and co-curricular activities in school”.

To cope with their responsibilities, proper scheduling is very important. They make sure not to mix their work and family tasks.

“I do not bring my work at home and so my family problem at school. I make sure that I finished my work at school so that I can spend quality time with my children whenever I am home, and “I make sure to finish my works at school so my time at home will be intended for my family alone”.

Coping strategies to balance work-family roles. School administrators involved in solo parenting are embattled with numerous stressors that stem from a multitude of work and family demands. The participants believed that they need to resort to coping strategies to manage work-family pressures. Their coping strategies include prayer and meditation, proper scheduling, open communication, seeking external help, and involving themselves in some productive activities.

“Being a school administrator in a Catholic school made me a prayerful and meditative person. Prayer is my weapon to battle loneliness, guilt, and stress. I also join religious organizations such as Legion of Mary”.

The participants shared that work scheduling and seeking external help were likewise their way to manage work-family balance.

“I always make sure not to mix my school works with my family time. I never bring my school work at home and I hired a house helper to help me do household chores so that my time at home is shared with my children. Spending quality time with my children is always a priority”.

Some participants resort to productive activities to manage stress such as physical exercises, baking, online selling, and gardening.

“Joining Zumba class with friends during the weekend helps me cope with stress and socialize. It also my bonding activity with my 14 years old daughter, because she is also joining the Zumba.”

4. Discussion.

The results of the study yielded many notable insights about the day-to-day life experiences of school administrators involved in solo parenting. The results suggest that school administrators who were involved in solo parenting battled numerous challenges and struggles to reconcile work dedication with their commitment to family. They were confronted by role conflict, loneliness, and guilt. In the absence of their husband, their parental role was doubled because they carry all the burdens and responsibilities of the family which is supposed to be shared by a couple or parents. In addition to it, they were expected to devote their time and energy to managing the school.

A work-family conflict could be a bi-directional style of work-life conflict during which the role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Blair-Loy (2009), stipulated, that work-family conflict arose when work devotion schema contradicts family devotion schema. When a work-oriented woman spends such a lot of time attending to family needs she violates work devotion schema. and when the work-dedicated woman who eludes or delegates family responsibilities violates the family devotion schema.

From the angle of a social role theory, the tensions experienced by career-minded mothers can be theorized as a type of inter-role conflict that results from these apparently competing role demands of being a career woman and a mother (Dex & Joshi, 1999). The participants recalled that role conflict arose when their time and commitment were both needed by family and work at the same time.

The loneliness felt by the participants was often caused by the pain of separation when their spouses had to leave them for work. They were alone facing family responsibilities and solving family problems, especially on children's health. In their avoidance not to disturb and add burden to their working husband, they kept family problems with them which resulted in their feeling of guilt. This agrees with the statements of Delmonte, Gabon R., Gabon V., and Dela Cruz (2014) that loneliness, grief, hurt, guilt, sadness, and depression often felt by solo parents.

It is also worth noting that while participants were experiencing challenges, they were also experiencing a level of fulfillment. Seeing their children achieved their dreams, become good persons and responsible parents are the foremost rewarding part of motherhood. Women who successfully manage their work and family lives are likely to gain a greater sense of satisfaction from their dual roles as working mothers (Huang, 2019). Being a solo-parent school administrator most of the time, made them become expert time managers. For them, proper scheduling of works is very important so quality time for the family won't be jeopardized. Moreover, Delmonte, et al. (2014), noticed that single parents become extremely self-reliant and superior time managers because they depend on nobody with her personal needs.

Consequently, participants employed the importance of coping strategies in balancing work-family roles. Time management and prayer are the dominant coping strategies. They regard prayer as a strong strategy to deal with loneliness and guilt. The hiring of house helpers and well-managed time through proper scheduling of work are the two strategies that allow them to spend quality time with their children. Joining productive physical activities during weekends with their children like gardening, baking, and physical exercises is a way of socializing and spending quality time.

5. Conclusion.

The participant's narratives indicated that the day-to-day life of school administrators involved in solo-parenting is often in a dilemma of complexities of work and family roles which resulted in role conflict, loneliness, and guilt. The participants recalled that role conflicts arise when their time is required by family and school work at the same time.

Moreover, the loneliness and guilt experienced by the participants were the results of the pain of separation from their spouses who are working. In the absence of their spouse, time management is very important and spending quality with children is always their priority. The way they balance their roles made them feel like successful career mothers which instill pride and fulfillment.

In balancing their work-family roles school administrators employed various coping strategies. They engaged themselves in prayer to deal with loneliness and guilt, involved in productive physical activities as the simplest ways of socializing and bonding with their children.

The findings of this study contribute to the research literature in terms of the experiences of career-oriented mothers and bear practical significance in understanding how working mothers can prosper amidst work-family roles conflict to engage within the concurrent pursuit of career and motherhood aspirations. Moreover, these may provide baseline data for designing and implementing stress management programs to ensure the balance of work-family roles.

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