CHAPTER FOUR

THE TIME BIND—WORK AND FAMILY INTERFACE

Perhaps the most significant social development that has affected family life globally is the entry of women into paid work. Opportunities for women in the labour force increased with the transformation from a manufacturing to a service-based economy since the 1980s (Menaghan & Parcel 1990). In addition, as cost of living increased, majority of families relied on more than one earner to maintain their standard of living (Heckert, Nowak & Snyder, 1998:690).

The labour force participation rate for females in Singapore has been increasing steadily since 1970. This is accelerated by the increase in opportunities in formal education and enhanced skills training for females. Encouraged by the momentum of the feminist movement in the west, women in Singapore looked toward paid work as a means to self-actualization. The outcome is a shift in the structure of the family, from a single-income husband-as-breadwinner & wife-as-homemaker model to the modern dual-income family.

The tension between work and family has been documented in numerous studies (see Perry-Jenkins et al. 2000, for a good summary of the work done in 1990s). Role strain and role overload that results in work-to-family and family-to-work spillover is a common outcome (Mennino et al. 2005; Rogers and May 2003; Small and Riley 1990). Work-to-family conflict is particularly accentuated for younger to mid-life workers as they are at most vulnerable points in their lives with work and family demands peaking (Grzywacz et al. 2002). Research in this area also showed that work-to-family conflict is more prevalent than family-to-work conflict (see Hill et al. 2004). An implication of globalization and expansion of traditional economic borders is the rise of business-related travels. Evidence informs that, more often than not, frequent business travels have a negative impact on family harmony as this extreme form of work commitment takes the worker away from the family for extended periods and, in the process, disrupts family rituals (Hill et al. 2004). Similarly, non-standard work schedules which have become more common as we move towards a ‘24/7’ service orientation
have shown to be detrimental for family relations (Perry-Jenkins et al. 2007; Davis et al. 2006; Strazdins et al. 2006). Concurrently, there is strong support for flexi-work policies which grants workers a greater sense of control of their schedules and results in a healthier work-family balance (Grönlund 2007). However, it is often women who take advantage of pro-family job flexibilities (Singley and Hynes 2005).

The impact of work on Singapore families is similar to what has been observed in other developed capitalist economies. With the rise of a ‘24/7’ organizational culture driven by competition within a borderless global economy that transcends several time zones, expectations from paid work has increased tremendously in contemporary Singapore. Concurrently, the demands from the family have also increased, particularly for younger families where the wives embrace a more liberal gender ideology. When women were not as educated or involved in paid work, the Parsonian nuclear family structure with husband-as-breadwinner and wife-as-homemaker was ideally functional (Parsons and Bales 1955). There was a clear division of labour along gender lines, and the work-family conflict was minimized as home-work and childcare were taken care of by the full-time domestic manager. In contemporary Singapore, and particularly among younger families, the dual-income family dominates. This is a result of the demands arising from the cost of living (where increasingly, families are finding that they need two incomes to sustain a desired lifestyle) as well as the changing aspirations of a more educated and worldly generation of Singapore women. Paid work yields economic, social and negotiation power. Thus, it is not surprising that women in Singapore strive to sustain their involvement in paid work. However, as noted by Siberstein (1992), the foray of women into the traditional male world of paid work is asymmetrical, and is not reciprocated by an increased participation of men in domestic work. As a result, there is a serious gap in the family when the wife/mother works full-time.

This gap contributes significantly to the tensions in contemporary family, and is conceptualized as a work-family conflict. In this chapter, we will see how paid work affects quality of marriage and contributes to sustaining marriages.