

## **Asian Women's Gender Role, Work-family Balance, and Mental Health**

**By Professor Catherine Tang, Department of Psychology and CFPR Deputy Director, NUS**

***As featured on Lianhe Zaobao, 2 October 2016***

I have collaborated with researchers from the United States, Hong Kong, and China. Over the last three decades, our research team has conducted a number of studies on the influences of gender role perception and paid employment on Asian women's family experience and mental health condition. Our research, which has been conducted in urbanized Asian regions, such as China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, etc., has indicated that in recent decades an increasing number of Asian women have participated in paid employment outside their homes at various life stages. Similar to other Western countries, we find that the employment status of Asian women as compared to Asian men is more affected by their marital status and family life-cycle stages, and is typically contingent on children and domestic responsibilities. Asian women are more likely to hold part-time jobs and to be unemployed or underemployed, particularly during adverse economic conditions. Women constitute the minority in managerial, administrative, legislative, and government ministerial positions. In service industry where women are more likely to be concentrated, youthful and feminine women are often valued more than middle-aged women. Regardless, the barrier facing women getting into senior positions at work is often related to their family responsibilities. Although most Asian countries such as Singapore do have legislations and policies in place to protect the employment rights of women during pregnancy and those with family responsibilities, biases of employers and actual family commitment create the glass ceiling for many women aspiring for work advancement.

Our research team also finds that gender stereotypes and conservative attitudes toward family-work roles are still endorsed by the general public in Asian societies. We note that many Asians still believe that women's proper place should be in the family where they are primarily responsible for household chores and caring of husbands and children. With the increasing number of dual-earner families, men and women nowadays lead very full lives combining their social roles as paid workers, spouses, and parents. Multiple social role involvement is particularly stressful for women in the Asian Countries including Singapore, as the duty of balancing demands of work and family falls disproportionately on them. For example, our research has shown that employed women still shoulder most of the burden of domestic work in providing care for children, sick, and elderly family members even though they hire domestic/household helpers. Asian women themselves also typically evaluate their role experience and performance according to internalized feminine gender role message, and family roles remain the most central among various social roles (Tang & Tang, 2001).

In a recent book on top women leaders with family responsibilities, Halpern & Cheung (2008) found that women leaders in Asia still considered children and/or family their priority. Only a few of these women leaders considered work and family demands to be in conflict. In particular, some of the senior women leaders in China took pride in the recognition of their success in work and family. A happy family was regarded as a measure of the success of their work. Other researchers have also argued that in contrast to American culture, social roles of the individual and family are blurred in Asian culture, where work serves a utilitarian function for the long-term benefits of the family. Thus, family-work conflict is not considered as inevitable. The support of the extended family and the contribution to the family through work may facilitate commitment and satisfaction of both family and work roles.

In line with gender role stress research, Tang and Tang (2001) found that employed working women in Asia who held traditional gender role beliefs tended to report more negative mother role quality and experienced more somatic symptoms than those who endorsed liberal gender role beliefs. Tang, Lee, Tang, Cheung, and Chan (2002) noted that the quality of social roles rather than the number of roles per se was related to psychological health of Asian women. These researchers also found that not all social roles had similar mental health benefits, and paid worker role seemed to have more advantage on women's mental health as compared to intra-familial roles such as wife and mother roles. The expansionist theory (Barnett & Hyde, 2001) reasons that this may be related to the fact that as paid workers, women can bring in additional financial resources to the families, have more negotiation power in obtaining additional help from their spouses or hire domestic helpers, and have increased opportunity to contact with people who can provide social support. Moreover, employment also brings women additional sources of self-esteem, control, and social support outside their families. However, for women who worked in low-reward but high-demand jobs in mainland Asia, their worker role was found to adversely affect their psychological health.

Research has indicated that experiences in one social role may spill over to another social role to bring about exacerbation or buffering of psychological health. Juggling family-work roles can have either beneficial or detrimental impacts on individuals' well-being, depending on the direction and nature of the spillover. In a study on employed mothers in Hong Kong, Tang (2008a) found spillover effects of role experiences on psychological health as well as asymmetrical permeability of family and work boundaries. In particular, positive work experience was found to permeate through family boundaries to the overall quality of family experience to reduce psychological distress. However, positive family experience did not spill over to influence the overall quality of work experience to enhance psychological health. For Taiwanese employees, work demands were related to work-family conflict, whereas both work and family demands were related to family-work conflict. Inability to fulfill conflicting demands from work and family were related to mental ill-health of married employed women in Singapore. In almost all Asian societies, spousal support and workplace flexibility are consistently found to be important in influencing the work-family interface and its mental health outcomes.

The above research findings have social and policy implications for many Asian countries. Given the fact that gender role perception influences work-family experience and mental health status, public education is necessary to promote egalitarian and more flexible gender role attitudes to foster flexible division of labor in the family and parental duties. Policies that facilitate flexible working schedule, gender equity at work, job sharing, child care assistance, work at home and reduced work hours would enable the promotion of better work-family balance. Various business corporations and related service providers can form partnership to provide programs and services for child care services and referral in order to meet work-family challenges.