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WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT AMONG WORKING SINGLE PARENTS

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Abstract

This study aims to describe work-family conflict among employed single mothers. Single mothers carry dual responsibilities as breadwinners and primary caregivers, making them vulnerable to conflicts between work and family demands. This study employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The participants consisted of three employed single mothers who had children currently attending school. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that all participants experienced work-family conflict in the forms of time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behavior-based conflict. Time-based conflict emerged due to limited time available for child caregiving as a result of work demands. Strain-based conflict was characterized by physical and emotional exhaustion, feelings of guilt, anxiety, sadness, and sleep disturbances. Meanwhile, behavior-based conflict was relatively low because the participants were able to adjust their behavior according to the demands of their roles at work and within the family. The study also found that the level of work-family conflict was influenced by individuals' ability to manage dual roles, coping strategies, and social support from family and the surrounding environment. Therefore, social support and adaptive abilities play important roles in helping single mothers cope with both work and family demands simultaneousl.

Keywords: Single Mothers, Dual Roles, Work-Family Conflict

Introduction

Family and work are two fundamental domains in an individual's life that significantly contribute to personal well-being, social functioning, and overall life satisfaction. These two domains are closely interconnected and often influence one another in various ways. For most adults, work serves not only as a means of generating income but also as a source of social recognition, self-development, and personal achievement. Through employment, individuals are able to fulfill their economic responsibilities, support their families, and achieve personal and professional goals (Wandani & Margaretha, 2022). At the same time, family functions as an essential source of emotional support, affection, and social connection. It is within the family environment that individuals develop interpersonal relationships, receive psychological support, and perform various social responsibilities that contribute to their overall quality of life (Ras et al., 2024).

Ideally, the domains of work and family complement one another and function in a balanced manner. A harmonious relationship between occupational and family responsibilities enables individuals to maintain psychological well-being while fulfilling their obligations in both domains. Achieving such balance is increasingly important in modern society, where individuals are expected to perform multiple roles simultaneously. However, maintaining equilibrium between work and family responsibilities is often challenging. Increasing workplace demands, organizational

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expectations, economic pressures, and family obligations frequently require individuals to allocate substantial amounts of time, energy, and emotional resources to both domains. Consequently, many individuals experience difficulties in meeting the expectations associated with their work and family roles simultaneously.

The incompatibility between work-related demands and family responsibilities often results in a condition known as work-family conflict. According to Rahmadhani et al. (2025), work-family conflict refers to a form of role conflict that occurs when work demands interfere with an individual's ability to fulfill family responsibilities, such as through excessive workloads, extended working hours, or inflexible work schedules. Conversely, family-to-work conflict occurs when family and household responsibilities negatively affect work performance and productivity. These two forms of conflict illustrate the bidirectional relationship between work and family domains, where pressures originating from one domain can adversely affect functioning in the other. As a result, individuals experiencing work-family conflict may encounter increased stress, emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, lower family satisfaction, and difficulties in maintaining overall well-being.

The issue of work-family conflict has become increasingly relevant due to social and economic transformations that require many individuals to participate actively in the workforce while simultaneously fulfilling family obligations. Although work-family conflict can affect a wide range of individuals, certain groups are particularly vulnerable because of the unique responsibilities they carry. One such group is single parents. Single parents are individuals who raise and care for their children without the presence, support, or shared responsibility of a spouse due to divorce, death, separation, or other circumstances (Vegasari & Amalia, 2020). Unlike individuals who share parenting responsibilities with a partner, single parents are required to assume complete responsibility for both family maintenance and child-rearing, often with limited assistance from others.

As sole caregivers and providers, single parents must perform multiple roles simultaneously. They are responsible for earning a living, managing household tasks, caring for their children, making important family decisions, and providing emotional support to family members. Sundari (2023) explains that single parents frequently assume the roles of breadwinner, caregiver, household manager, and emotional supporter at the same time. These overlapping responsibilities require effective time management, emotional regulation, and considerable adaptability. Balancing such demands can be particularly challenging when occupational responsibilities compete with family obligations, thereby increasing the likelihood of experiencing work-family conflict.

Previous studies have demonstrated that single parenthood is associated with numerous challenges that may intensify role conflict. Sugitanata and Aminah (2025) found that single parents often face complex difficulties in various aspects of life. In addition to financial challenges resulting from reduced household income, they frequently experience emotional stress, psychological fatigue, limited social support, and difficulties managing both work and family responsibilities. Furthermore, Mufidah and Hidayati (2022) argue that the absence of a spouse with whom responsibilities can be shared forces single parents to devote substantially greater amounts of time, energy, and attention to family and occupational obligations compared to individuals who still have a partner. Consequently, single parents are more likely to encounter pressures that increase the risk of work-family conflict.

Although both single fathers and single mothers may experience these challenges, the present study specifically focuses on employed single mothers. This focus is justified for several reasons. First, single mothers constitute a considerably larger population than single fathers in Indonesia. Data from Statistics Indonesia indicate that in 2022 there were approximately 7.9 million single mothers and 2.7 million single fathers nationwide (BPS, 2022). The substantially larger number of single mothers highlights the significance of this group and underscores the importance of understanding their experiences in greater depth.

Second, cultural and social expectations continue to position mothers as the primary caregivers responsible for child-rearing and household management. These expectations remain deeply embedded within Indonesian society and influence how maternal roles are perceived and performed. When a woman becomes a single mother, she is required not only to fulfill traditional caregiving responsibilities but also to assume the role of the primary economic provider for the family (Primadani & Arsal, 2025). Consequently, employed single mothers often face more complex role demands than many other groups, as they must simultaneously satisfy the economic needs of the household while ensuring the physical, emotional, and developmental well-being of their children.

The challenges experienced by employed single mothers are further intensified by their extensive involvement in daily parenting activities. Mothers are generally expected to monitor their children's education, provide emotional support, manage household routines, and attend to various caregiving responsibilities. As noted by Tahir (2025), because mothers tend to be more actively involved in day-to-day childcare activities, the likelihood of experiencing role conflict becomes increasingly significant when they must perform these responsibilities without the support of a partner. In many cases, employed single mothers may be forced to prioritize one role over another, leading to feelings of stress, guilt, and role overload.

Despite facing similar circumstances, not all employed single mothers experience work-family conflict to the same degree. The level of conflict experienced may vary depending on individual and contextual factors. Social support from extended family members, workplace flexibility, economic conditions, children's ages, and individual coping abilities can all influence how effectively single mothers manage competing role demands (Sabanari & Huwae, 2025). These differences suggest that work-family conflict is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by a combination of personal, family, and occupational factors. Therefore, understanding the subjective experiences of employed single mothers is essential for obtaining a more comprehensive picture of how work-family conflict develops and manifests in their daily lives.

Based on the foregoing discussion, research on work-family conflict among employed single mothers is important and necessary. Investigating this phenomenon can provide a deeper understanding of how employed single mothers navigate multiple responsibilities, the forms of conflict they experience, and the factors that contribute to the emergence of such conflicts. Furthermore, this study is expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on work-family conflict by providing insights into the unique experiences of employed single mothers. The findings may also serve as a valuable reference for policymakers, organizations, families, and other stakeholders in developing appropriate support systems and interventions that can help employed single mothers achieve a more balanced integration of work and family responsibilities.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is a type of research that aims to describe, explain, and interpret social phenomena and situations in depth (Fadli, 2021). Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical measurement and statistical analysis, qualitative research emphasizes understanding meanings, experiences, concepts, characteristics, symptoms, and descriptions of a particular phenomenon. It is conducted in natural settings, adopts a holistic perspective, prioritizes the quality and depth of information, utilizes various methods of data collection, and presents findings in a narrative form (Tabrani, 2023). Through this approach, researchers are able to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences.

In line with the purpose of this study, a phenomenological method was employed. Phenomenology is one of the qualitative research methods used to reveal the shared meanings that constitute the essence of a concept or phenomenon consciously and individually experienced by a group of people in their everyday lives (Suyanto, 2019). This method is particularly appropriate for exploring how individuals perceive, understand, and interpret their experiences within a specific context. The use of phenomenology in this study is based on the assumption that phenomenology is concerned with phenomena as they appear and seeks to uncover the essential meanings embedded within those experiences (Maulana & Budiyono, 2024). Therefore, the phenomenological approach was considered suitable for exploring the lived experiences of employed single mothers in managing their dual responsibilities and understanding the dynamics of work-family conflict they encounter.

Data collection in qualitative research can be conducted through various techniques, one of which is interviewing. Interviews are widely used because they enable researchers to obtain detailed information directly from participants regarding their experiences, perceptions, and viewpoints related to the research topic. According to Ardiansyah et al. (2023), interviews are a data collection technique involving direct interaction between researchers and participants to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and perspectives. Depending on the objectives and design of the study, interviews may be conducted in structured, semi-structured, or unstructured forms.

Based on these considerations, this study utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection technique. Semi-structured interviews provide researchers with a set of guiding questions while still allowing flexibility to explore issues that emerge during the interview process. This flexibility enables participants to express their experiences more openly and comprehensively, thereby generating richer and more meaningful data. Through this technique, the researcher was able to explore participants' experiences of balancing work and family responsibilities, the forms of work-family conflict they encountered, and the factors that influenced those experiences.

The informants in this study were employed single mothers who were raising their children independently and had children who were still pursuing formal education. These participants were selected because they possessed direct experience related to the phenomenon under investigation and were therefore able to provide detailed information regarding the challenges, responsibilities, and conflicts they experienced in balancing their work and family roles. By focusing on this group, the study sought to obtain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of employed single mothers and the dynamics of work-family conflict within their daily lives.

Results

This study involved three participants who were employed single mothers with different occupational backgrounds and family circumstances. Based on the interview findings, various forms of work-family conflict were identified among the participants. The conflicts primarily related to time constraints, economic pressures, childcare responsibilities, and emotional burdens arising from their dual roles as mothers and sole breadwinners. Although all participants experienced work-family conflict, the forms and intensity of the conflict varied according to their individual circumstances and coping strategies.

The first participant, Mrs. FA, worked as an elderly caregiver in Surabaya. As a single mother, she reported experiencing a significant burden associated with performing dual roles as both a mother and a father to her children. During the early stages of single parenthood, she frequently felt worried and uncertain about her family's future. However, over time, she gradually adapted to her circumstances and attempted to maintain a more positive outlook. Her primary motivation for continuing to work was to secure her children's education and future well-being.

The findings revealed that Mrs. FA experienced substantial time-related conflicts between work and family responsibilities. Her occupation as an elderly caregiver required her to be available both during the day and at night depending on the needs of the patient. Consequently, she had very limited opportunities to spend time with her children and could only return home approximately once every seven months. This situation led her to feel that she was unable to provide adequate attention, supervision, and direct communication to her children.

Work-family conflict also emerged when her children experienced health or educational problems. Due to the geographical distance between her workplace and home, Mrs. FA was unable to be physically present when her children needed her support. In such situations, she relied on assistance from other family members to care for them. She also observed behavioral changes in her children, including becoming more withdrawn and easily upset, which she attributed to the lack of maternal attention. Emotionally, Mrs. FA reported experiencing both physical and psychological exhaustion. She frequently cried, experienced sleep difficulties, and struggled with feelings of guilt because she could not always be present for her children. Despite these challenges, she attempted to cope through prayer, religious practices, and support received from her family and children. Economic considerations remained the primary reason for maintaining her employment in Surabaya, as she believed the income earned there was more sufficient to meet her family's needs than employment opportunities in her hometown.

The second participant, Mrs. WI, became a single mother following the sudden death of her husband and was responsible for raising four children on her own. The loss of her spouse represented a major life challenge, as she was required to assume complete responsibility for the family's economic and caregiving needs. According to Mrs. WI, the greatest pressure she experienced involved balancing childcare responsibilities with work demands. She believed that her children required her presence, attention, and emotional support, while at the same time she needed to work to provide for the family.

To manage these competing demands, Mrs. WI attempted to separate work-related issues from family matters. While at work, she focused entirely on her job and avoided bringing family concerns into the workplace. Conversely, when at home, she tried to become a patient and understanding mother for her children. This strategy helped her maintain a degree of balance between her occupational and family roles.

Nevertheless, the burden of being a single parent affected both her physical and psychological well-being. During the initial period following her husband's death, she experienced sleep disturbances and excessive worry about her family's future. Over time, however, she gradually learned to accept her circumstances and adapt to her new role. Similar to the first participant, Mrs. WI

experienced limited time with her children due to her demanding daily schedule. She had to wake up early in the morning to prepare meals and manage household responsibilities before going to work. After returning home, she still needed to complete domestic tasks and care for her children. On some occasions, she was required to work even during holidays, reducing the amount of quality time she could spend with her family.

Despite these challenges, Mrs. WI consistently attempted to maintain a warm relationship with her children. She avoided expressing frustration toward them and instead explained that her work was necessary to support the family's needs. However, she frequently experienced feelings of guilt because she believed she was not able to spend enough time with her children. Family and community support played a crucial role in helping her cope with these challenges. Such support included emotional encouragement, financial assistance, and help with childcare responsibilities.

The third participant, Mrs. DA, described her experience as a single mother as a continuous struggle to meet the needs of her son, Angga. Following the departure of her husband, she felt compelled to work hard to ensure her child's well-being. She stated that she was willing to undertake any lawful job that could provide income for her family. Mrs. DA strongly believed that "time is money," and consequently devoted most of her time to work. She often worked from morning until late at night and had very little time for rest.

Unlike the other participants, Mrs. DA reported experiencing fewer difficulties in balancing work and childcare because she often integrated both responsibilities. She frequently brought her son with her while working so that he would not feel lonely and could remain under her supervision. In addition, she made efforts to attend important school-related activities, such as collecting report cards and fulfilling her son's educational needs. Through these strategies, she perceived that work and parenting responsibilities could be carried out simultaneously.

Although she did not report significant difficulties in dividing her time between work and family, she nevertheless experienced considerable physical fatigue due to her demanding work schedule. Emotionally, she admitted that she often cried while working because she reflected on the hardships she had endured as a single parent. However, she preferred not to display vulnerability in front of her child and instead chose to remain strong for his sake. To cope with stress and life pressures, she relied on prayer and spiritual practices as well as sharing her experiences with close friends.

Furthermore, Mrs. DA reported that she paid little attention to negative judgments from others and preferred to focus on her primary goal of raising her child. For her, her child's happiness represented the highest priority. Consequently, she continuously sought to provide emotional support, fulfill her child's needs, and maintain open communication despite her demanding work responsibilities.

Overall, the findings indicate that all three participants experienced work-family conflict, although the nature and intensity of the conflict varied. Time constraints, emotional strain, childcare responsibilities, and economic pressures emerged as the primary themes across participants' experiences. Nevertheless, social support, personal coping strategies, and a strong commitment to their children's well-being appeared to play important roles in helping them manage the challenges associated with being employed single mothers.

Discussion

This study aimed to obtain a deeper understanding of work-family conflict among single mothers by examining their experiences based on the dimensions of work-family conflict proposed by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985). Data collection was conducted in May 2026 and involved three participants who met the predetermined criteria, namely employed single mothers with children who were still attending school. The participants, identified as Mrs. FA, Mrs. WI, and Mrs. DA, demonstrated different experiences and levels of work-family conflict depending on their occupational circumstances, family responsibilities, and individual coping strategies.

The findings indicate that all three participants experienced work-family conflict; however, the forms and intensity of the conflict varied across individuals. The conflict emerged from the simultaneous demands of employment and family responsibilities, particularly those related to childcare and meeting their children's needs. These findings can be understood through the three dimensions of work-family conflict proposed by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), namely time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behavior-based conflict.

The first dimension identified in this study is time-based conflict. The findings revealed that all participants experienced time-based conflict, although at different levels. This type of conflict occurs when the time devoted to one role reduces the amount of time available for fulfilling another role. Among the three participants, Mrs. FA experienced the highest level of time-based conflict. Her employment as an elderly caregiver required her to work far from her children and to maintain an unpredictable work schedule, limiting opportunities to communicate with and accompany her children. The considerable geographical distance between her workplace and home further intensified the conflict, as she was unable to be physically present when her children faced educational or health-related problems. Similarly, Mrs. WI experienced time-based conflict due to the necessity of balancing employment, household responsibilities, and childcare simultaneously. Her daily routine required her to manage domestic tasks before and after work, and she occasionally had to work during holidays, reducing the time available for family interactions. In contrast, Mrs. DA reported a relatively lower level of time-based conflict because she attempted to integrate her work and parenting roles by involving her child in many of her daily activities. These findings suggest that greater work demands and reduced opportunities to spend time with family increase the likelihood of experiencing time-based conflict among single mothers.

The findings support the theoretical perspective of Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), which states that conflicts arise when the time required to perform one role makes participation in another role more difficult. For single mothers, who are solely responsible for both economic provision and childcare, time becomes a particularly limited resource. Consequently, difficulties in allocating sufficient time to both domains often become one of the most prominent forms of work-family conflict.

The second dimension identified in this study is strain-based conflict. All participants reported experiencing emotional and psychological strain resulting from their dual roles as mothers and sole providers. However, the nature and intensity of these experiences varied among participants. Mrs. FA reported substantial emotional pressure characterized by physical and mental exhaustion, feelings of guilt related to her limited presence in her children's lives, sadness, and sleep disturbances caused by concerns about her family. Likewise, Mrs. WI experienced significant emotional strain, particularly during the early period following her husband's death. Feelings of confusion, anxiety, and sleep difficulties emerged as she struggled to adapt to her new responsibilities while simultaneously meeting her children's needs. Although Mrs. DA also reported emotional distress, including sadness and episodes of crying when reflecting on the challenges she faced after losing her husband, she demonstrated a greater acceptance of her circumstances and viewed her struggles as part of her

responsibility as a mother. As a result, the emotional strain she experienced did not appear to significantly interfere with her ability to fulfill her daily roles.

These findings indicate that psychological pressure is a common consequence of single parenthood, particularly when mothers are required to manage financial responsibilities and childcare without the support of a partner. The results further suggest that strain-based conflict is influenced not only by external demands but also by how individuals perceive and cope with stressful situations. Although all participants experienced emotional challenges, their coping strategies, levels of acceptance, and support systems influenced the degree to which these pressures affected their daily functioning.

The third dimension examined in this study is behavior-based conflict. In contrast to the previous dimensions, behavior-based conflict appeared to be relatively low among all participants. The findings suggest that the participants were generally able to adjust their behaviors according to the demands of different roles and were capable of distinguishing between workplace and family expectations. Mrs. FA described herself as maintaining a relatively consistent personality across work and family settings, although work-related fatigue occasionally affected her interactions with her children. Mrs. WI reported displaying different behaviors in different contexts, becoming more patient and nurturing when interacting with her children while maintaining a more cheerful and professional demeanor at work. Nevertheless, she was able to regulate her emotions and prevent workplace pressures from negatively affecting her family relationships. Similarly, Mrs. DA demonstrated a clear separation between work and family matters and consistently prioritized providing attention and support to her child despite experiencing various occupational pressures.

The relatively low level of behavior-based conflict among the participants suggests that they possessed effective adaptive abilities in managing multiple roles. Their capacity to regulate emotions, adjust behaviors according to situational demands, and separate occupational responsibilities from family interactions appeared to reduce the likelihood of experiencing behavioral incompatibilities between work and family domains. These findings indicate that behavior-based conflict may not necessarily become a dominant issue when individuals develop effective coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that work-family conflict among employed single mothers is influenced not only by the magnitude of work and family demands but also by individual abilities to manage and balance these competing roles. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Loupatty and Kusumiati (2024), which reported that single mothers experience role conflict as a consequence of simultaneously managing occupational and family responsibilities. Their study also identified time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behavior-based conflict as major dimensions of work-family conflict, with varying levels across individuals depending on occupational demands, childcare responsibilities, and personal role-management capabilities.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study are supported by Fadhilah and Sijabat (2022), who found that time-based conflict and strain-based conflict are among the most common forms of conflict experienced by working mothers. Limited opportunities to spend time with children, high job demands, and psychological pressures associated with multiple responsibilities often contribute to fatigue, stress, and concerns regarding family well-being. Similar patterns were evident among the participants in this study, all of whom reported difficulties balancing work and family responsibilities and experienced emotional pressures associated with their dual roles.

However, this study also revealed that behavior-based conflict tended to be relatively low among all participants. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Hasanah and Ni'matuzahroh (2018), which demonstrated that some single parents are able to manage occupational and family roles effectively, resulting in relatively low levels of work-family conflict. The adaptive abilities, emotional regulation skills, and coping strategies demonstrated by the participants in the

present study appear to have helped them separate work-related demands from family responsibilities, thereby minimizing the occurrence of behavior-based conflict. Consequently, although time-related and strain-related conflicts remained prominent, behavioral incompatibility between work and family roles did not emerge as a major challenge for the participants.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that work-family conflict among employed single mothers is a multidimensional phenomenon characterized primarily by challenges related to time allocation and psychological strain. Nevertheless, personal resilience, adaptive coping strategies, and social support play important roles in helping single mothers navigate the demands of both work and family life. These factors may reduce the impact of work-family conflict and enable single mothers to continue fulfilling their responsibilities despite the significant challenges they face.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, it can be concluded that work-family conflict is a real and unavoidable experience among employed single mothers due to their dual responsibilities as both breadwinners and primary caregivers. The participants experienced work-family conflict in the form of time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behavior-based conflict, although the intensity and manifestation of these conflicts varied across individuals according to their personal circumstances and life experiences.

The findings revealed that time-based conflict and strain-based conflict were the most dominant forms of conflict experienced by the participants. Limited opportunities to spend time with their children, demanding work responsibilities, and the necessity of managing childcare independently created significant challenges in balancing work and family roles. As a result, the participants frequently experienced difficulties in fulfilling the expectations associated with both domains simultaneously. These challenges were accompanied by various forms of emotional and psychological strain, including physical and mental exhaustion, feelings of guilt, anxiety, sadness, and sleep disturbances.

In contrast, behavior-based conflict appeared to be relatively low among the participants. The findings suggest that the participants were generally able to adjust their behaviors according to the demands of different roles and effectively separate workplace responsibilities from family matters. Their ability to regulate emotions and adapt to varying role expectations helped minimize behavioral incompatibilities between work and family domains.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the level of work-family conflict experienced by employed single mothers is influenced not only by occupational demands and family responsibilities but also by individual capabilities in managing multiple roles. Factors such as adaptive coping strategies, emotional regulation, and social support from family members and the surrounding environment play a significant role in helping single mothers navigate the challenges associated with balancing work and family life. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening personal coping resources and social support systems in reducing the negative impact of work-family conflict among employed single mothers.

Overall, the study suggests that while work-family conflict remains a common challenge for employed single mothers, the presence of effective coping mechanisms, strong adaptive abilities, and supportive social networks can help them manage their dual roles more successfully and maintain their responsibilities in both work and family domains.

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