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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Working Women's Work Engagement and Life Satisfaction in Sabah, Malaysia: Marital Status as the Moderator

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ABSTRACT

Work engagement is a vital practice that should be encouraged among employees and employers, particularly within large companies or organizations. This importance arises from the fact that such entities typically have multiple divisions and sub-divisions, including departments and sections. Work engagement plays a crucial role in fostering effective teamwork among employees and employers across these various departments. While the interplay between work engagement and life satisfaction has been explored in both Western and non-Western studies, there is limited research on this topic within the context of Sabah, Malaysia. Moreover, research focusing on the relationship between work engagement and life satisfaction in Sabah remains relatively sparse. This study aims to investigate the role of marital status as a moderator in the relationship between dimensions of work engagement and dimensions of life satisfaction. A total of 348 female government servants participated in this research, which employed a snowball sampling method. Data collection was concentrated in the district of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. Questionnaires, both online and physical, were distributed among the participants. The findings suggest that marital status moderates the relationship between work engagement and life satisfaction among female government servants in Kota Kinabalu. Furthermore, marital status partially moderates the relationship between their dedication to job responsibilities and their cognitive life satisfaction.

Contribution/Originality: This study is among the few that have explored the relationship between work engagement and life satisfaction among women working in government sectors in Sabah, Malaysia. Additionally, it examines the role of marital status as a moderator among the targeted female respondents employed in Sabah.

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1. Introduction

Working women, defined as those who participate in the labor force, have opportunities to work in diverse fields such as medicine, administration, education, research, engineering, sports, and culinary arts. This is also true for Malaysian working women (Akhtar et al., 2020). Female participation in the labor force is crucial (Salleh et al., 2022), and their contributions to economic stability are significant (Abraham et al., 2017). When discussing productivity and positive teamwork among colleagues, the concept of work engagement or employee engagement is often highlighted (Satata, 2021). Work engagement and employment engagement are similar concepts related to work demands and resources.

Despite the recognition of the importance of female participation in the labor force, statistics in Malaysia show that women's participation remains significantly lower than men's, with women below 60% and men above 80% (DOSM, 2023). Several factors contribute to this low participation rate. A study by Salleh et al. (2022) found that many Malaysian women exit the labor force due to marital status, particularly after marriage. Married career women often face multiple responsibilities and experience work-life conflict (Arham et al., 2019). Additionally, cultural norms contribute to Malaysian women leaving the labor force (Heintz et al., 2018), particularly in their 30s, and deciding not to re-enter (Salleh et al., 2022). Work engagement is a key factor in reducing employees' tendency to resign from their workplace. Panatik et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of work engagement in helping employers retain employees within an organization. In terms of life satisfaction, this element is essential for fostering positive emotions and a love for one's work (Marziah et al., 2017).

According to Howell et al. (2012), life satisfaction is influenced by individuals' socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, marital status, religiosity, and other relevant factors. Given the still low female labor participation rate in Malaysia, especially in Sabah (Peng et al., 2022), research on work engagement and its association with life satisfaction among working women in Sabah is essential. Marital status affects employees' levels of work engagement and life satisfaction. Numerous studies have shown that married working women are less affected by work engagement due to cultural norms, such as gender roles where men are expected to be the breadwinners, contributing to inequality in income and job positions, including decision-making roles (DOSM, 2023). This understanding is important because married working women often experience work-life conflict (Arham et al., 2019).

1.1. Research Objectives

This investigation delineates three primary research aims. The first aim involves scrutinizing the direct correlation between work engagement and life satisfaction. The second aim examines whether the cohort of married individuals moderates the association between work engagement and life satisfaction. Lastly, the investigation explores whether the cohort of unmarried individuals moderates the relationship between work engagement and life satisfaction.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Work Engagement

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Kuok et al. (2017) assert that the concept of work engagement has evolved and has been subject to various criticisms by researchers. Maslach et al. (1997) associate work engagement with coping mechanisms for employee burnout, given that it is considered a positive attribute (Schaufeli et al., 2002) . However, Schaufeli et al. (2002) contend that work engagement should not be viewed solely as a response to burnout. They identify three dimensions of work engagement: Vigor (VI), Absorption (AB), and Dedication (DE). Vigor (VI) refers to individuals exhibiting high levels of energy and commitment toward their job responsibilities. Absorption (AB) describes individuals who are fully concentrated and deeply immersed in their work. Dedication (DE) reflects a sense of pride and inspiration in one's work, which is particularly significant for women, as they are often stereotyped as being suited only for traditionally feminine roles (Panatik et al., 2016; Heintz et al., 2018). According to Kahn (1990), work engagement not only influences workers' motivation to excel in their roles but also enhances their cognitive, physical, and emotional skills, directing these skills positively beyond the workplace. This broader impact underscores that work engagement is not solely about retaining employees but also about fostering their overall development.

2.2. Life Satisfaction

Veenhoven (2012) posited that life satisfaction is synonymous with happiness and subjective well-being. According to Veenhoven (2012), happiness consists of two components: the "hedonic level of affect" and "contentment." These components are distinguished for specific reasons. Veenhoven (2009) suggested that happiness is contingent upon individuals' perceptions of the ideal life they aspire to. He elaborated that individuals might feel self-content without recognizing the need for certain aspirations that other societies consider actual happiness. Conversely, individuals might possess these aspirations that lead to happiness, yet remain unaware of the potential uncertainties or effects on their well-being. Veenhoven (2012) introduced the term "overall judgement" to encapsulate both components, equating it with "overall happiness," which he classified as life satisfaction.

Veenhoven (2008) also referenced the concept of subjective well-being, initially introduced by Diener et al. (1985b), equating it with life satisfaction. In the field of psychology, subjective well-being is studied to understand human behavior, while in sociology, it is considered a crucial element for examining how individual or group behaviors can influence broader societal dynamics.

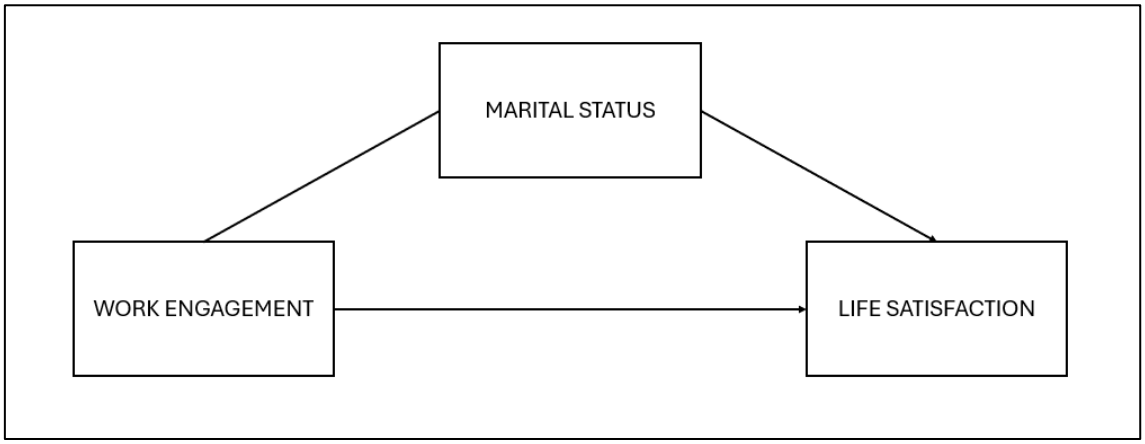
2.3. Theoretical Framework

In this study, spillover theory was employed due to its relevance to women with careers (Riley et al., 1990; Lee et al., 2021). Spillover theory is commonly associated with work-life conflict (Riley et al., 1990). However, it can also be applied to work engagement, as the theory encompasses two types: negative spillover and positive spillover (Lambert, 1990). This study focuses on positive spillover, which involves two domains: work and family. When a worker experiences positive emotions at work, these emotions can extend into the home domain, and vice versa (Lambert, 1990).

Based on Figure 1, researcher conceptualized a framework, which marital status moderates the relationship between work engagement and life satisfaction.

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Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Arham et al. (2019) and Marziah et al. (2017)

3. Research Methods

This study employs a quantitative research design to investigate the relationship between work engagement and life satisfaction, with marital status as a moderating variable. In this context, work engagement serves as the independent variable, marital status as the moderating variable, and life satisfaction as the dependent variable. The study's questionnaire was distributed among female government servants in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

Sample size sufficiency is a critical issue in the application of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), the proposed data analysis technique detailed at the end of this section. According to Hair et al. (2010), a sample size of 200 provides sufficient statistical power for data analysis. Sample size plays a crucial role in obtaining consistent and meaningful estimates and interpretations of results. Although no exact guidelines have been established for sample size, Hair et al. (2010) recommend a general guideline of five observations per parameter.

Kline (2011) suggests that larger samples are required for models with more parameters. However, when the sample size exceeds 400, goodness-of-fit measures tend to exhibit poor fit, making SEM statistical analysis overly sensitive (Hair et al., 2010). Consequently, a sample size of approximately 300 is considered adequate. In line with these recommendations, this study's target number of usable responses is 300, with a maximum of 400.

3.1. Research Instruments

The researcher utilized the Work Engagement Scale, with work engagement as the study's independent variable. This scale was originally developed by Schaufeli et al. (2010) and later employed by Peláez-Fernández et al. (2022). In their study, Schaufeli et al. (2010) reported a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.91 for the Dedication (DE) dimension, while Peláez-Fernández et al. (2022) reported a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.86 for the same dimension. The scale used a Likert Scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

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Based on Figure 2, researcher used dedication dimension that have been used by Peláez-Fernández et al. (2022) and Schaufeli et al. (2010) to investigate respondents' level of work engagement in their workplace.

Figure 2: A dimension Adapted from Schaufeli et al. (2010)

Dedication (DE)

1. *To me, my job is challenging.*
2. *My job inspires me.*
3. *I am enthusiastic about my job.*
4. *I am proud on the work that I do.*
5. *I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose.*

Diener et al. (1985b) indicated that the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) items have good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. This finding is supported by recent studies, such as those by Degges-White et al. (2020), where the Cronbach's alpha for the SWLS items exceeded 0.8. Additionally, Rashid et al. (2021) reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 in their study, which also utilized the SWLS as a measurement tool. In the current study, the researcher employed the SWLS items to assess life satisfaction, the dependent variable, using a Likert Scale ranging from 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Based on Figure 3, researcher used Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) by Diener et al. (1985c) to investigate respondents' level of life satisfaction in their workplace.

Figure 3: Satisfaction With Life Scale by Diener et al. (1985a)

1. *In most ways, my life is close to my ideal*
2. *The conditions of my life are excellent.*
3. *I am satisfied with my life.*
4. *So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.*
5. *If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.*

3.2. Pilot Study

This study utilized a pilot study involving 50 respondents selected through random sampling, as outlined in the study by Marziah et al. (2017). The researcher distributed questionnaires to 50 working women employed in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The results of the pilot study, including descriptive statistics and reliability analysis, were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS IBM version 28. These results are presented in Figure 4, Table 1 and Table 2.

Based on both Table 1 and Table 2, both Cronbach's Alpha values indicate a high level of reliability. The researcher focused on Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items for further analysis.

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Figure 4: Respondents' Marital Status and Highest Education Level

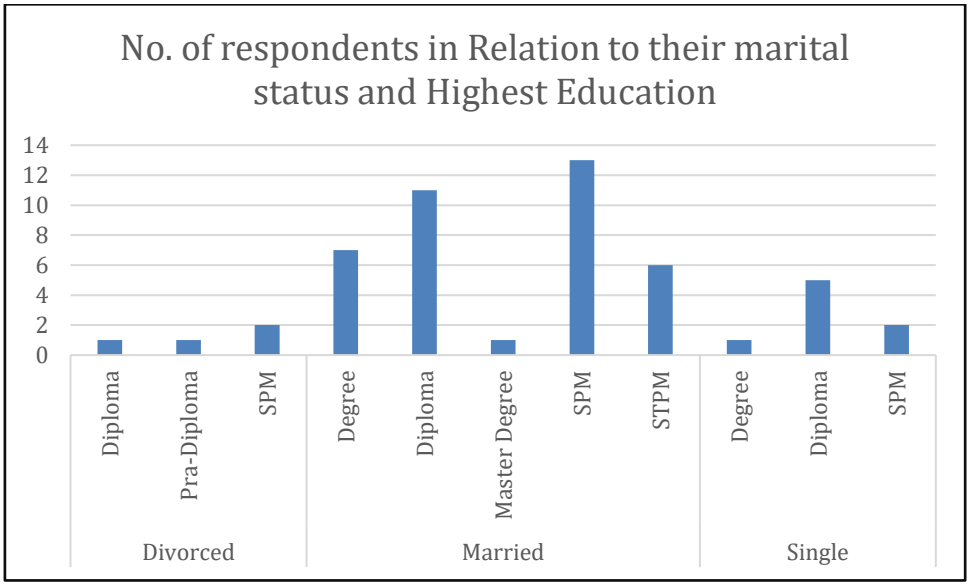


Table 1: Work Engagement Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.838	.839	5

Table 2: Life Satisfaction Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.760	.802	5

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The following outlines the process for obtaining approval from the selected government sectors:

3.3.1. Government Sector 1: Sabah State Education Department (Kota Kinabalu)

The researcher initially sent an email inquiry to request permission to collect data for research purposes. Subsequently, the officer-in-charge advised the researcher (handling the director's responsibilities during the director's absence) via WhatsApp and email to apply for a research approval letter through ERAS 2.0 (Education Research Application System 2.0) as the first step. The documents required for submission (uploading into the system) to obtain approval from ERAS 2.0 are listed below:

a. Researcher's confirmation letter as an active student at Universiti Malaysia Sabah
b. Researcher's research proposal
c. A revised Questionnaire (Malay Version)
d. A form provided by ERAS 2.0 that needs to be signed by researcher's supervisor or head of academic faculty

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The researcher was required to wait up to five working days for the approval from the system. Upon receiving the approval letter from ERAS 2.0, the researcher informed the officer-in-charge of the department and submitted the approval letter. The distribution of questionnaires to female respondents was then carried out with the assistance of the officer-in-charge (administration officer). The completed questionnaires were collected within one month.

3.3.2. Government Sector 2: Sabah State Registration Department (Kota Kinabalu)

The researcher sent an email inquiry requesting permission for data collection, exclusively for research purposes. Subsequently, the officer-in-charge informed the researcher via phone call and WhatsApp that the director had granted permission for data collection. Additionally, the researcher provided a consent form to the officer-in-charge (assistant director) to acknowledge that full consent from the government sector had been obtained. The assistant director assisted the researcher in distributing the questionnaires to respondents. The completed questionnaires were returned within one month.

3.3.3. Government Sector 3: Sabah Meteorological Office (Kota Kinabalu)

The researcher sent an email inquiry requesting permission for data collection, solely for research purposes. Subsequently, the officer-in-charge informed the researcher via phone call and WhatsApp that the director had granted permission for data collection. The researcher also provided a consent form to the officer-in-charge to acknowledge receipt of full consent from the government sector to collect the data. The officer-in-charge (assistant director) assisted the researcher in distributing the questionnaires to the respondents. The completed questionnaires were returned within one month.

After the data collection, data analysis was executed by using SEM (Structural Equation Modelling).

4. Results

4.1. Socio-Demographics (Descriptive Statistics)

From Table 3, the distribution of female government servants by marital status is as follows: married respondents constitute the largest group at 68.7%, followed by single respondents at 23.6%. Widowed respondents account for 3.2%, while divorced respondents represent 4.6%.

Table 3: Female Government Servants' Marital Status

	Frequency	Percent
Married	239	68.7
Single	82	23.6
Widowed	11	3.2
Divorced	16	4.6
Total	348	100.0

From Table 4, female government servants of other ethnicities constitute the largest group at 34.2%, followed by those of Kadazan-Dusun ethnicity at 30.2%. Female government servants of Bajau ethnicity are third, comprising 17.0%.

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Table 4: Female Government Servants' Ethnicity

	Frequency	Percent
Kadazan-Dusun	105	30.2
Bajau	59	17.0
Murut	5	1.4
Others	119	34.2
Malay	33	9.5
Chinese	25	7.2
Indian	2	.6
Total	348	100.0

From Table 5, female government servants practicing Islam represent the largest group at 75.6%, followed by those practicing Christianity at 21.3%. Female government servants practicing Buddhism are the third highest, accounting for 3.2%.

Table 5: Female Government Servants' Religiosity

	Frequency	Percent
Islam	263	75.6
Christian	74	21.3
Buddhist	11	3.2
Total	348	100.0

From Table 6, female government servants aged between 34 and 41 years constitute the largest group, comprising 30.7%. This is followed by those aged between 42 and 49 years, representing 28.2%. The third largest group is female government servants aged 50 years and above, accounting for 21.3%.

Table 6: Female Government Servants' Age Range

	Frequency	Percent
18 - 25 Years Old	8	2.3
26 - 33 Years Old	61	17.5
34 - 41 Years Old	107	30.7
42 - 49 Years Old	98	28.2
50 Years Old and Above	74	21.3
Total	348	100.0

4.2. Dedication (DE) – One of Dimensions in Work Engagement Scale

According to Table 7, the mean scores for each item predominantly reflect an "Agree" response. The lowest mean score among all items in Table 7 is 3.95, corresponding to the item, "I am enthusiastic about my job," which is categorized as "Neutral." Conversely, the highest mean score of 4.28 is associated with the item, "*I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose*."

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Table 7: Items in Dedication Dimension

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
To me, my job is challenging.	348	4.07	.762
My job inspires me.	348	4.00	.774
I am enthusiastic about my job.	348	3.95	.782
I am proud on the work that I do.	348	4.22	.756
I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose.	348	4.28	.712
Valid N (listwise)	348		

Note: 0 = Strongly Disagree, 1 = Disagree, 2 = Not Sure, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

4.3. Cognitive Life Satisfaction (CLS) – One of Dimensions in Life Satisfaction

According to Table 8, the mean scores for each item predominantly reflect a "Neutral" response. The lowest mean score among all items in Table 8 is 2.58, corresponding to the item, "*If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing*," which is categorized as "Not sure." Conversely, the highest mean score of 3.78 is associated with the item, "*I am satisfied with my life*."

Table 8: Items in Cognitive Life Satisfaction Dimension

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.	348	3.52	.867
The conditions of my life are excellent.	348	3.66	.923
I am satisfied with my life.	348	3.78	.895
So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.	348	3.72	.954
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	348	2.58	1.481
Valid N (listwise)	348		

Note: 0 = Strongly Disagree, 1 = Disagree, 2 = Not Sure, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

4.4. Marital Status Moderates Work Engagement and Life Satisfaction

Based on Figure 5, married group acts as the moderator variable between the relationship between work engagement (independent variable) and life satisfaction (dependent variable).

Based on Figure 6, unmarried group acts as the moderator variable between the relationship between work engagement (independent variable) and life satisfaction (dependent variable).

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Figure 5: Sub-Conceptual Framework I

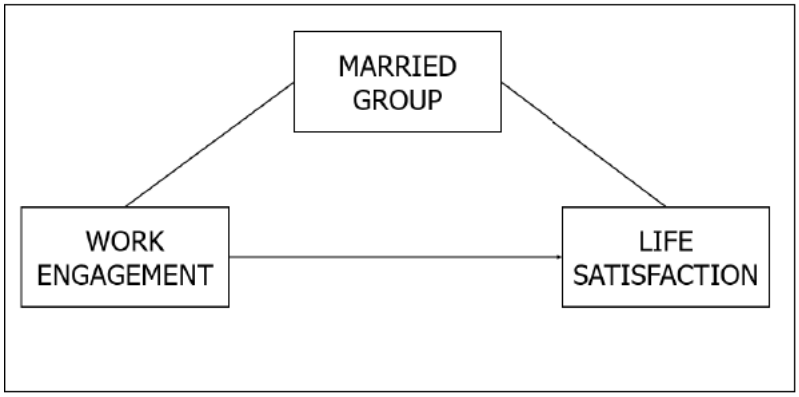
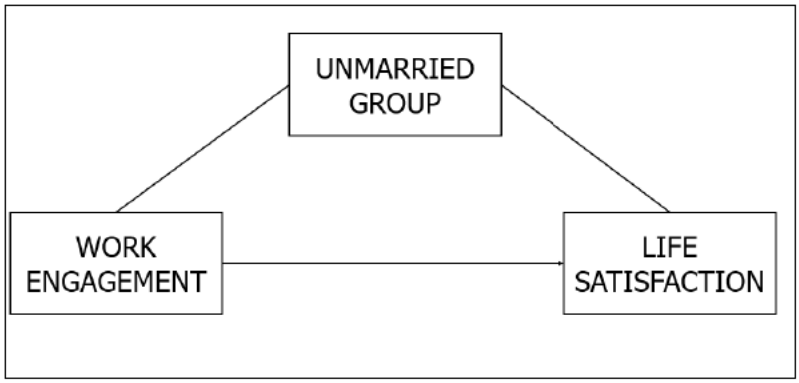


Figure 6: Sub-Conceptual Framework II



Based on Table 9, the relationship between the two groups—married and unmarried—was analyzed using SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) with AMOS IBM SPSS software. Significant differences were observed between the groups, with the Z-score value indicating a significance level of less than 0.001 (two-tailed). This result suggests a notable difference in the estimates between the married and unmarried groups. Specifically, the married group exhibits a stronger moderation effect on the relationship between Work Engagement (WE) and Life Satisfaction (LS) compared to the unmarried group. While the unmarried group also shows a strong moderation effect, it is not as pronounced as that observed in the married group.

Table 9: Moderation Result Analysis

			Married		Unmarried		
			Estimate	**P**	**Estimate**	**P**	**z-score**
LS	<---	WE	0.531	0.000	0.430	0.000	-0.871

5. Discussion

5.1. Female Government Servants and Their Dedication towards their Job Scopes

Female government servants are dedicated to performing their jobs and responsibilities and take pride in their accomplishments. In Malaysia, government employment is highly

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regarded and provides significant opportunities, particularly for women. Generally, government employees in Malaysia benefit from favourable incentive schemes, annual salary increments, monthly retirement allowances, and advantageous conditions for purchasing assets such as homes, land, and vehicles. These benefits offer women in government positions greater opportunities to exercise their independence and improve their lifestyles.

However, the results indicate that female government servants may not always feel enthusiastic about their job roles. This lack of enthusiasm can be attributed to their job performance being closely linked to their grade positions. Many female government servants in Malaysia appear to prefer remaining in their comfort zones, focusing on financial stability, and working until retirement rather than seeking promotions or engaging in higher-level responsibilities, which may involve working with different colleagues.

Since married female government servants constitute the largest group of respondents, their enthusiasm for their job roles may be influenced by additional factors, such as marital status and other responsibilities, including being a wife and mother. These personal responsibilities can contribute to an overwhelming emotional burden. While government employment offers financial stability and various privileges, it appears to provide limited encouragement for enthusiasm in job roles.

5.2. Female Government Servants and Their Cognitive Life Satisfaction in Relation with Their Job Scopes

Regarding female government servants' cognitive life satisfaction in relation to their job scopes, the results indicate that they feel neutral about their life satisfaction from a cognitive perspective. However, many female government servants are uncertain whether they would choose to remain in their current situation if given the chance to start their lives over. This suggests that female government servants may desire alternative options and ways to achieve the life satisfaction they truly seek.

Long-term employment in government positions, characterized by stability in finances and privileges but limited progress in other areas, may lead to dissatisfaction and a desire for self-development opportunities. For married female government servants, previous literature suggests that this group tends to exit the labor force earlier than their retirement age, particularly if their spouses earn more and they have children to care for. This situation has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, early exit from the labor force allows married female government servants to focus on personal well-being, become full-time housewives, or explore flexible work opportunities. On the negative side, it may also result in increased dependency on their spouses for financial support to meet their own needs and wants.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, female government servants in the state of Sabah, Malaysia, generally exhibit a neutral level of cognitive life satisfaction. Additionally, their work engagement, particularly their dedication to their job scopes, primarily hinges on financial stability and the benefits of incentives and monthly retirement allowances. To enhance female government servants' life satisfaction and work engagement, it is recommended that awareness of the importance of women’s empowerment be promoted. This can

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encourage more women to develop leadership skills and pursue higher-grade positions, rather than remaining in the same grade for extended periods.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researcher provided consent form to selected government sectors and signed by officer-in-charge, before he or she distributed or release the questionnaire link to the female respondents. All respondents in the study are voluntary.

Acknowledgement

Elpidia Juli is a PhD Candidate from Universiti Malaysia Sabah and have completed her doctoral thesis. She was supervised by Dr. Md Sayed Uddin and Dr. Trixie Marjorie Tangit. The process of data collection and analysis was fully conducted solely by the PhD Candidate with supervision.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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