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When your source of livelihood also becomes the source of your discomfort: the perception of work–family conflict among child welfare workers

Når ditt levebrød også blir kilden til ubehag: Oppfatningen av konflikt mellom arbeid og familie blant barnevernsarbeidere

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ABSTRACT

We know from past research that social workers within the CWS are exposed to an array of workplace risks more than any other group within human services. Although several articles tend to focus on the reasons child welfare workers (CWW) leave/stay on their job, we know very little regarding how these workers juggle their roles between the home and the work domain. The present study explored CWW's perception on how they combine the challenges at work with successful private/family life. We collected data through interviews with 16 CWWs across different cities in Norway. The use of thematic analysis produced four overarching themes, 'it goes both ways', 'work-self-identity', 'spill-over effects', and 'on the lookout'. Overall, respondents acknowledge the interconnectedness between the home and the work domain. They maintain that they identify with the job and the field. They also raised issues concerning the negative effects of work on their private lives. Owing to the constant stress and challenges, a few of our respondents are already on the lookout for better alternatives. Findings point towards creating a better working environment for CWW through useful interventions and policies that ameliorate workloads of CWW.

ABSTRAKT



Vi vet fra tidligere forskning at sosialarbeidere i barnevernet er utsatt for en rekke risikoer på arbeidsplassen mer enn noen annen gruppe innen menneskelige tjenester. Selv om flere artikler har en tendens til å sette søkelys på årsakene til at barnevernsarbeidere forlater/blir på jobben, vet vi veldig lite om hvordan disse arbeiderne sjonglerer sine roller mellom hjemmet og arbeidsdomenet. Denne studien utforsket ansatte i barnevernet sine oppfatninger av hvordan de kombinerer utfordringene på jobben med vellykket privatliv/familieliv. Vi samlet inn data gjennom intervjuer med seksten ansatte i barnevernet fra forskjellige byer i Norge. Bruken av tematiske analyse ga fire overordnede temaer, 'det går begge veier', 'arbeid-selvidentitet', 'spill over-effekter' og 'på utkikk'.

KEYWORDS

Child welfare workers; work–life balance; child welfare services

NØKKELORD

Barnevernsarbeidere; balanse mellom arbeid og privatliv; Barneverntjenester

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Samlet sett anerkjenner respondentene sammenkoblingen mellom hjemmet og arbeidsdomenet. De fastholder at de identifiserer seg med jobben og feltet. De reiste også spørsmål om de negative effektene av arbeid på privatlivet. På grunn av konstant stress og utfordringer er noen få av våre respondenter allerede på utkikk etter bedre alternativer. Resultatene peker mot å skape et bedre arbeidsmiljø for ansatte i barnevernet gjennom nyttige inngrep og policyer som forbedrer arbeidsbelastningen deres.

Introduction

Child welfare workers (CWW) especially in the western part of the world, have in recent past been under the scrutiny of the media, angered, and dissatisfied parents, as well as the European court of justice (Dagbladet, 2020). According to the Norwegian child welfare act (as it is in many other European countries), child welfare services bear the responsibility to provide adequate protection of vulnerable children, by protecting them from maltreatment, neglect, and all other sorts of abuse. While the attention is often drawn on the decisions child welfare agencies make concerning vulnerable children and families within their care (Nissly et al., 2005), we rarely hear about the working conditions and well-being of social workers working within the child welfare service (McFadden et al., 2015). After years of exposure to high and heavy workload at work, absenteeism, and presentism, an unfavourable mismatch between efforts and reward (effort-reward imbalance), many CWW often experience psychosocial risks with serious implications for their own general well-being (Wooten et al., 2010). We know from past research that employees who are exposed to a series of workplace stress, burnout, or other damaging workplace risks often run the risk of low performance and poor health and well-being (Leka et al., 2007).

Research within social work especially concerning child welfare services has shown that the field of child welfare is one of the most multifaceted, emotionally demanding, and stressful workgroups within the field of human services (Madden et al., 2014; McFadden et al., 2015). Through several studies conducted among this workgroup, turnover, absenteeism, and the likes are often reported higher than any other workgroup within the field of human services (Olaniyan et al., 2020). In view of the above, the present study will seek to explore work–family conflict among CWW in Norway.

Literature review

Work–family conflict among child welfare workers

Combining work with family life has been part and parcel of adulthood for most people. For social workers (especially CWW), the experience of role imbalance between the home and the work domain is becoming a common phenomenon. Work–family conflict is defined as ‘the degree to which participation in the family role is made more difficult from participation in the work role – termed work-to-family conflict (WFC)’ (Michel et al., 2011, p. 691). Conflicting demands from the home and work domain could lead to the experiences of poor health outcomes. Workers experiencing these conflicting demands ‘may also experience reduced levels of reported life satisfaction and may experience compromised work-related outcomes such as lower job satisfaction and less organizational involvement, commitment and lower job performance’ (Akinbode & Ayodeji, 2017, pp. 9425–9426).

There are several reasons the focus on WFC is important. First, it is one of the most common risks being faced by CWW daily (Baugerud, 2019). The constant exposure to WFC among CWW is so rampant that it appears that it’s essence and impact is being taken for granted within mainstream research among CWW. Secondly, WFC is connected to almost all the other workplace risks among

CWW. When employees are stressed, experience burnout, dissatisfied with work, or show symptoms of trauma as a result of work tasks and demands, it is palpable that all of these will have a way of impinging on workers' role in the home domain. Thirdly, past research has not really paid much attention to WFC, its antecedents and impact among CWW. Despite several publications and focus on different types of workplace risks among CWW (like burnout, stress, secondary traumatic stress, and turnover), our review of the literature revealed no previous qualitative studies on WFC in Norway for example. It is evident that there is a link between what happens at work and the situation of things in the home domain. Moreover, recent reports from Norway and other parts of the world indicate a very high turnover rates among CWW (Baugerud, 2019; Chung & Chun, 2015; Mor Barak et al., 2001). Lastly, because WFC relates to almost every other workplace risk (or that the impact of other workplace risk contributes to the balance/imbalance between the work and the home domain), one cannot really separate the effects of other workplace risks on WFC. Essentially, when we read reports that workers are stressed or experiencing burnout (McFadden et al., 2015), battling secondary traumatic stress, or are thinking of quitting their jobs (Mor Barak et al., 2001), we know that all these work experiences are likely to affect CWW roles in the home domain (Amstad et al., 2011; Barck-Holst et al., 2017; Byron, 2005; Michel et al., 2011). In this regard, the present study will seek to explore the experiences of WFC among CWW in Norway.

There are a handful of relevant theories that could potentially explain the conflicts between the home and the work domain, we will be employing two theories, the job demand-resource model (JD-R) and the role-strain theory. The role-strain theory will inform the conflicts arising when CWWs must juggle between their roles at the work front contra their roles at the home domain. Furthermore, owing to the many intricacies and complexities existing between the home and the work domains, and because the constant interaction between these two domains is never a one-way street, the JD-R offers the possibilities to identify how resources and demands from the work domain influence the home front and vice versa.

Theoretical framework

The job demands-resources model (JD-R)

The main argument of the job demand-resources model (JD-R) surrounds two assumed pathways, i.e. the motivational pathway (or job resources) and the health impairment pathways (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). The impairment pathway is also commonly called 'job demand' and it comprises of 'those physical, social, organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs' (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). The motivational pathway/job resources refer to those aspects of the workplace that stimulates goal achievement, reduction of the impacts of negative work experiences, and encourage growth and development in any given work environment (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

The role-strain theory

According to the proponents of the role-strain theory, the work domain constantly competes with the home domain over three resources namely, limited time, physical energy, and psychological resources (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Small & Riley, 1990). The argument here is that humans only have a given amount of energy and time resources, and that an increase in demand for these resources in one domain, say work (given that individuals only have a limited amount of time and energy resources) will eventually lead to strain, stress and role conflict in another domain, say home (Chapman et al., 1994; Marks, 1977). Several studies have ventured into capturing the essence of focusing on role conflicts among nurses (Wayne et al., 2021), single mothers (Lim et al., 2020), and more recently during COVID-19 pandemic (Musolino, 2020). When social workers must spend long hours on end in trying to solve a case or multiple case, they are likely to find it

challenging to strike a balance between their roles at the home front with families, and their roles as social workers at the work domain (Akinbode & Ayodeji, 2017).

Although one could argue that not all CWW are exposed to serious workplace risks as the ones mentioned above, one cannot however neglect that these findings point to the importance of exploring workplace risks like work–family conflict. Evidence from such will increase our knowledge on the sorts of risks encountered daily by child welfare workers. It will also afford us the opportunity to implement helpful changes and interventions wherever needed. Against this background, the present study will attempt to explore the perceptions of CWW regarding the experiences and effects of work–family conflict. We will be approaching this study focusing on these two research questions:

- How do child welfare workers experience balancing work and family life?
- What are the spill-over effects of work to family and vice versa?

Methods

Sample

The present study was a part of the PhD project of the first author, and it explore the perception of child welfare workers on the impact of work–family conflict in their line of work. The project focused on the importance of individual capacities and group support to the well-being of child welfare workers. A descriptive, exploratory, and qualitative study was conducted with the participation of 16 child welfare workers. The participants were contacted from several child welfare offices from different cities -Bergen, Oslo, Stavanger in Norway and invited to take part in this study. In many of the cases, first author contacted these social workers through their agencies. We also had access to some respondents through a master student who with several years of experience in the field. We sent the information about the study and included an invitation to all child welfare workers to take part. We asked those who were interested in taking part in the study to contact the first author. Since we are interested in workplace experiences, we informed potential participants that we were interested in CWW with three or more years in the field. Data were collected through In-depth interview and the interview guide was developed early in the spring 2019. Interview dates and time were then scheduled after the respondents have contacted us and showed interest in taking part in the study. Fifteen of the 16 participants were women and all of them have 3 years and above experiences in the child welfare services. The majority of them (13) have at least a bachelor's in social work, and eight of them have a master's degree, pursuing a master's degree, or held a doctorate degree as at the time of the interview. See [Table 1](#) for more details of the sociodemographic characteristic of the participants.

Procedure

The interview questions that we developed prior to the interviews took the semi-structured approach to questioning. Since the present study is part of a PhD project, the interview guide included several questions additionally to the ones relevant for the present study. Those relevant questions for the present study surround the aim and focus of the study. Sample questions are; 'What are your experiences with available time and resources you get to follow up a case?'. 'How satisfied are you with your working hours?' 'How has your job as a child welfare worker affected you as a person and your life outside of the workplace?' Owing to logistics and distance between where the respondents live and the first author's, four of the interviews were conducted over SKYPE. The remaining 12 were conducted in the respective cities where the social workers work between June and September 2019. The first author was responsible for taping and transcribing all the interviews. The interviews varied in length, with the longest being 83 minutes and the shortest

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Characteristics	Number
<i>Age (years)</i>	
25–35	9
35–45	3
45–	4
<i>Education</i>	
Bachelor	6
Masters	7
Others	1
<i>Relationship status</i>	
Married/partner	13
Single/divorce	3
<i>Children</i>	
non	2
1–5	4
<i>Work experience</i>	
1–5	2
5–	14

was 37 minutes. The average interview time was 56 minutes. Using line by line coding in Word document, the first author started the analysis by going through participant's accounts guided by the research questions. The Norwegian Data Protection Office approved the project (project no. 345438) and we collected the data following the APA ethical standards and guidelines.

Analysis

We employed thematic analysis in the present study. We made this decision to employ thematic analysis owing to its methodological approach at systematically identifying themes in any given data. It has been described as 'a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insights into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set' (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Since we followed a semantic theme identification, we identified themes within the surface/explicit meaning of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author did all the groundwork of coding and thematic analysis. All authors were subsequently involved in the second and final phase of the analysis. Our themes identification were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedures for conducting thematic analysis: (1) Familiarity with the data (transcribing, reading, and re-reading the interview texts), (2) generating initial codes and linking them to relevant extracts, (3) identifying potential overarching themes and sub-themes, (4) reviewing the validity of the identified themes with reference to the whole data set, (5) setting definition to themes and refining them, and (6) writing the final research report.

Findings

A total of four themes emerged in the CWW experiences: (a) It goes both ways, (b) Work as a self-identity, (c) Spill-over effects, and (d) On the lookout. Each theme contains five, one, four, and three sub-themes, respectively. The sub-themes were created from closely related initial codes. The themes and their sub-themes are presented in Table 2.

It goes both ways

One of the statements that was constantly repeated by the informants was that it goes both ways. Participants expressed that they see the home domain and the work domain interacting all the time. CWWs perceive that difficult cases related to vulnerable children influence how they perceived the

Table 2. Identified main themes and sub-themes.

Main themes	It goes both ways	Work-self identity	Spill-over effects	On the lookout
Sub-themes	Family as a resource. Work as a source. Well-functioning spouse and family. Importance of balance. Difficulties holding agreements.	Identifying with work.	Physical effects of work. Psychological effects of work. Consciousness of work effects. General health.	Dissatisfaction with the system. Child welfare being very demanding. Turnover

vulnerability of others that may not be on risk. They see the home domain and the work domain interacting all the time. As one of our informants puts it

It goes both ways after all. I think it is good to have the normality in relation to children. And both for my own children, with activities and attending school. Because my work allows me to witness lives of vulnerable children, I can become paranoid that all children are having a difficult time at home, or have been treated so badly, but this is usually not the case. Fortunately, I have few numbers regarding maltreatments and the likes. (INFORMANT ONE)

Most of our informants expressed the joy they derived from working in the field. It appears that the roles they found themselves playing while at work is responsible for what they experience in their private lives with their loved ones. Thus, they also shared that their work indeed influences their private lives. The idea that the interaction between work and home domain is inestimable is also emphasised by another informant,'

I think primarily the job in the child welfare services leads to personal development, because you see a lot of people in different situations, and you learn a lot from it, especially as you meet people in crises ... Although it is not always profitable. The job can give you poor health because the stresses are so great. Yes, on the one hand, you learn a lot and get personal development, on the other it wears you out a lot. (INFORMANT EIGHT)

Getting to know that working in the child welfare services could contribute to workers' personal development is probably encouraging and motivating especially for the potential future workers as well as the newcomers in the field. It is also very encouraging to know that the pendulum swings both ways in terms of one domain impacting the other. Almost all the informants maintain that work influences the home domain and vice versa,

Well I think it probably goes both ways. This is because I have a job that requires a lot of me, right, I stress and eventually it can sit in my body. Because it is very static since you sit very quietly. Physically speaking, it is not a good job, but for the quality of life and for my personal commitment to develop, it is good. (INFORMANT FOURTEEN)

When workers can cope very well with the stressful nature of events at work, we know that it is not only an individual effort. Oftentimes, having someone to go home to, people to call when it matters, and the idea of knowing fully well that someone will be there for you could go a long way. So, in this regard, having a well-functioning family or partner seems to weigh as much as having good co-workers and leader at work. In the words of one of our informants,

And I think it's one of the wisest, having a well-functioning home to work in the child welfare services. I have spoken to a colleague and my manager about the need to have a partner who is understanding. And we have had situations where employees have had to ask the manager to know when exactly they would finish at work so that they could decide if they would be able to pick up the kids themselves in the kindergarten/school, or if they must call their partners and ask them to pick up the kids. (INFORMANT FOURTEEN)

Work-self-identity

Although most of our informants agree that their work could be stressful most of the time, they seem to acknowledge and accept their work to be part of whom they are as a person. Not only did our

respondents showed that that their work life has become parts of their lives, but they also mentioned that their families have also accepted this way of live.

After all, that job is a big part of my life in a way. I'm used to working like that and my family is used to it like that. My husband and I have great understanding of what we both work on and we are a good team like that. (INFORMANT FOURTEEN)

The realisation that working in the child welfare has become part of who they are is presented in an ordinary fashion, i.e. neither negative nor positive attributions to the fact that their lives and how they carry on with their day-to-day activities is shaped to a large extent by the nature of their jobs.

I have always been keen on being professional and I get good feedback. My job has become part of my personality. So, I have found and placed my own identity in the job. When I come home after work, I am so tired that I can do nothing but take off my makeup and go to bed. And some weekend I just slept all the way and maybe get up at 5pm, it just feels like a kind of exhaustion, all the energy is just sucked from me I am not good at turning off the self when I'm not at work. That job takes a lot of my life and that has led to the negatives of my life. There are a lot of things I do no longer, because of the job. (INFORMANT SIX)

This realisation and acceptance of the way work life interacts with family life is also evident in the way our informants talk about other activities they do outside of work. Although most of our respondents complain that they often have too much to do all the time at work, some of them still have time to study part time. Talking about studying in addition to a job that takes so much energy and time from you, one would expect complaints and cry for compassion. Some respondents just seem to accept the way it is.

I think that for my part, I study next to the job, so I think my job is a big part of my life. I'm interested in my subject and I think about issues, young people, and my colleagues, and I think it takes up a lot of my life, and I think it's okay. (INFORMANT NINE)

Spill-over effects

Aside from identifying with working in the child welfare sector, another thing that our informants reiterated throughout the interviews is the impact and effect of the nature of their work on themselves and their family lives. For the purpose of clarity, we have sub-divided the spill-over effect of work on family into four categories sub-themes namely, physical effect, psychological effect, consciousness of work effect, and general health effect. Concerning the physical effect of work on self and family life, our informants mentioned that they experience relaxing at home after work. Sometimes these workers experience both the physical and psychological effects at the same time, or more like inseparable in terms of how these effects occur. For instance, one of our informants said this.

In the past I had it good to a greater extent. I was very good at resting when I'm not at work. But after working for several years, I notice to a greater and greater extent that I can stress myself ... I can lie down in the middle of the night and something work related will just pop up ... maybe I should have done this and that, of course I could not possibly do anything about these worries at two o'clock at night. I can't make the phone call or write that letter. But this happens more and more often. Maybe I have become less skilled, or perhaps it is some form of secondary trauma or strain over time. (INFORMANT ONE)

When a worker with vast experience in the field gets to the point of doubting their own skills and relevance, it is something one ought to take seriously. The doubts are the results of years of experiencing stress time and again at work. This co-existence of physical and psychological effects is also evident in one of the informants' explanation of her experiences as a mother outside of work.

... .. Especially after I became a mother myself it became even more difficult because I put myself in the parental role even when I am at work. I spent so much time trying to make things right at work that I miss out on exercising and being social. I just stay home, also thought a lot about work when I was on leave. Then I thought about the youths in care, how they were doing, wondering if I had done enough for them, these thoughts never stops (INFORMANT TWO)

Although several of our informants talked about the nature of their work and its effects on their family lives, only few appears to analyse the cost of continuing in this line of work. One of them is this informant.

After 4 years, I started to struggle a little. I noticed that I was stressed a lot. I felt a lot of pain in my body, so I trained a lot. I started to worry a lot, thinking about things at home. Because we don't have enough time in the office, I took the job home. And the idea that you can luck things into a drawer at work at the end of every workday only works if you know that you have done everything that you need to do. Also, I began to feel heart palpitations, began to get scared of forgetting things. Although I never forget anything, I used lots of 'post it' notes to help me remember things. And one day suddenly I was driving on the wrong side of the road, then I thought that I should probably talk to my doctor and my manager to get some time off from work. Otherwise it will be my children who will be needing help from the child welfare services soon, because I know that I was burning out. (INFORMANT FIVE)

Most of the participants in this study also lamented on the negative effect of the nature of their work on their general health. It appears that respondents feel these effects in different forms in their everyday lives. Ranging from general tiredness, inactivity, to reduction in social lives, or just being there for their loved ones. While these respondents feel the physical effects of the work stress on their health and social lives, others also recount stress impact on their bodily functions. Another informant also said this concerning the impact of her work on her health;

No, that's why I was on sick leave. I started to get quite a lot of trouble with nausea and difficulty breathing, heart pounding and ... it became very troublesome. So, it's really stress level really all the time. In addition to this, there are many strong stories that one hears on the job that are difficult to bring home. There is a lot of misery, yes there is. I think during periods I had been so tired that I had no energy following up own children. so many problems that I have simply shy away from, more like letting things slide. Would have done a lot more at home if I wasn't so tired. (INFORMANT TEN)

Additionally, our respondents also expressed the sheer anxiety settling in on them even when everything seem fine. It appears that several of our respondents display skepticisms toward moments of positive experiences. This is perhaps because they are very sure that those positive experiences will never last.

I have gone many rounds with myself on how I can have such a job when I have three small children myself. Because it goes beyond what you have the time and the energy to. One thing is to be home, I remember my husband telling me that 'you are here, but you are not here because you are completely in another world', I think so much about other things. So if we sit down and have dinner and the kids say something to me and say like 'Mom! Hello, are you there?' I sit and think about the meeting I would have the next day or ... (INFORMANT SEVEN)

Lastly, not all our informants share notion that there is a negative impact of work on health. One of our informants described her work as a source of better health.

Positive yes because I get to challenge myself a lot with what I work with in my field and get to develop a lot as a professional person and as a human being. This is because you meet many different types of people, collaborative partners, youth and families. That way I would say that it has a positive impact on my health. (INFORMANT FIFTEEN)

On the lookout

Although most of our respondents said nothing about leaving their present work nor did they share any plans to do so in the foreseeable future, quite a number of them explained that the heavy workload and high demand placed on them has made them to engage on looking for better options elsewhere. This decision is reinforced by what they describe as dissatisfaction with the system, child welfare being a very demanding line of work, etc.

Informants were very conscious of the differences in what is required of them and what has become the cultural practice in terms of what workers do and how they carry out their tasks. They show dissatisfaction with never ending tasks.

It's a bit divided. Some people experience the same thing. Also, there are some others who work more, they come on Sundays and write, work a little at night, take home their PC. Yes they probably think that yes we just have to do the job. Then they get such flexible hours and can pass it off to another time. But I think that in the child welfare services there will always be acute situations, and then we have to work overtime, I totally understand that. But regular case handling is no overtime job. So in relation to the Working Environment Act it is against the law to work overtime all the time. So right there I think there is a mismatch between expectations of me at work and what I do. (INFORMANT SIXTEEN)

Their dissatisfaction with the status quo is shown in their attempts at exploring other work options. 'I have applied for a few other jobs, but I have not applied in very many. The reason for that is that there are few things I'm interested in. I also hope it will improve'. One of the few participants that expressed their plans to leave made the decision to quit at the time of her interview.

I decide to quit. Because it takes ... I think it has been a lot of stress in only three years. Three years is not much in a professional life, but things do not work. I am very fond of my colleagues and my closest manager because I think they are nice people. I think the system is not working well. There is too much difference between the municipalities as well, for example I had a mother who came to me from another municipality. And in that municipality, they have decided that she would lose the care of her children. But then when she came to us, the decision was not the same. And looking at that, I think it's so scary. It means that the question regarding whether or not you lose the custody of your child depend largely on the municipality you reside. (INFORMANT TWO)

Her reason as she stated were too much workload and dissatisfaction with the system in general.

Discussion

The focus of the present study surrounds capturing how child welfare workers in Norway experience balancing work and family life. Additionally, the study also explored what spill-over effects of work to family and vice versa exists among this group of social workers in Norway. The analysis reveals four overarching themes, 'it goes both ways', 'work-self-identity', 'spill-over effects', and 'on the lookout'. These four themes and their interconnections appear to be obvious in many ways. The work and the field resonate well with who they are or else it probably would have been difficult to stay long on the job. Most of the participants maintain that they have become one with their work. Not only that, but they also believe that their partners/family have also come to terms with who they are as a result of their work within the CW. This self-identification with the job could also have given birth to their perception of seeing these domains (work and home) constantly interfering with each other. Although some of the participants complain about ill health as a result of too much demand from work, they also ascribed personal commitment and development to experiences from work. Additionally, they reflected that the work domain often disrupts who they want/hope to be outside of the work domain than the other way around. These findings are in line with earlier research on WFC (Akinbode & Ayodeji, 2017). Several of the participants showed that they were able to cope despite the many stress and workload associated with the job and the impact this is having in the home domain, but a few also reported looking out for better alternatives. These results are consistent with the JD-R model which holds that employees who experience high demand at work coupled with less control are more likely to report stress, ill health and other types of health complaints (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Although most of the respondents from the present study maintain that the pressure and demands go both ways, they also mentioned that they experience spill-over effects of the high workload at work in their home domain. These experiences probably explain the reason a few of them reported being on the lookout for better alternatives (McFadden et al., 2015).

Findings from the present study are also consistent with the role strain theory which posits that given a limited number of resources (time and energy), employees experiencing a higher demand from one domain are more likely to report a conflict or imbalance in another domain (Chapman et al., 1994). When participants in the present study report experiencing high stress, sleeplessness,

paranoia, worries, burnout, ill health, and inability to properly carry out their roles outside of the work domain, it becomes safe to ascribe these experiences to the high job demands and workloads they all must deal with at work. One common assertion among our participants was that they always had too much to do at work and that this was often the case. Additionally, findings from the present study are also in line with results from previous studies on work–family conflict (Littlechild et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2018). Furthermore, Baugerud and colleagues (2018) recently conducted a study on secondary traumatic stress (STS), burnout, and compassion satisfaction among CWW in Norway. They found that WFC was the strongest predictor of STS among CWW. Although the present study does not include STS, but some of the participants described some experiences that could be deemed traumatic. The authors also found a positive relationship between WFC and role conflict, and a negative relationship between WFC and organisational commitment, co-worker support, supervisor fairness, anxiety attachment and organisational culture. All these relationships were found to be significant. These findings point to the importance of WFC especially at it is connected to several workplace variables.

Previous research has shown that CWW often report higher challenges in terms of the spill-over effects of work on the home front compared to their counterparts within the field of human services (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008). Although most of the respondents showed high commitment to their work through their reported work-identity, they also described several negative experiences at work that makes it difficult to juggle work with family life. Past research has also shown that making serious decisions about the custody of vulnerable children, determining the fate of families and teenagers alike usually come with a huge price for most CWW (Baugerud et al., 2018; Lipsky, 2010). Some of our participants recounted how they were often unable to switch off the thoughts of work and how this influenced the quality of life at the home front. While showing a high degree of work-identity and commitment would be described as something positive, Greenhaus and colleagues (2003) maintain that it is not often the case. These authors concluded that conflict usually arises dependent on where the workers invest their time and resources. Workers who are more engaged with work duties than their roles at home experience the highest WFC according to Greenhaus and colleagues (2003). This probably explains why respondents in the present study expressed both identity as well as several workplace risks. These findings point towards encouraging CWW to maintain a balanced work and home life. It also shows that action must be in place to reduce workloads among CWW while stimulating positive work environment..

Limitations and strengths

One clear limitation of the present study is found in its scope and sample size. This makes it difficult to generalise findings to a different work group and work settings. However, we must not forget that the aim of the present study was never to generalise, but to give voice to this group of workers who have perpetually experience high and heavy workloads with complex intricacies in their everyday work life as a CWW. To our knowledge, the present study is the first qualitative study to explore work–family conflict among CWW in Norway. Additionally, no previous study has investigated/discuss work-identity vis-à-vis work–family conflict especially among this work group in Norway.

Future studies and conclusion

Future studies could explore the role of work-identity in workers' experiences of work–family conflict. Or perhaps more qualitative studies (including male respondents) that explore the solutions or factors that would ameliorate workers' exposure to, and the effect of WFC on CWW. The existing knowledge of the importance and impact of work-identity will in this sense be very useful in helping workers deal with the potential negative spill-over effects of work–family conflict.

Evidence from the present study and also from past research provides evidence to support the notion that reducing the conflict arising between the work and the home domain will not only

go a long way in reducing the everyday risks confronted by CWW but will also stimulate a work life nested in a secured and conducive work environment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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