

A Qualitative Study on Understanding the Burden and Miseries of Work Stress on Husband-Wife Relationship

Syed Ali Mohib¹

*Assistant Director Social Welfare Department
Government of Sindh*

Abstract

Work stress is becoming the new norm in the workplace. A large number of employees complain about the aggravation of the workload and work demands from the workplace suppressing their family lives. This research study tries to understand the nature of burden and miseries caused by work stress on husband-wife relationship. A lot of studies have been conducted to investigate the quantitative factors of work stress impacting husband-wife relationship. However, this study is particularly focused upon the understanding of the couple experiences regarding their interpretation of the work stress felt by them in the role of husband and as a wife and how this work stress is translating into their marital relationship. The study was based on in-depth qualitative interviews with the couples to understand the burdens and miseries of the couples from work stress and purposive sampling was used for identification of cases. The research analyzed the data using thematic analysis to identify the themes and patterns emerging from the qualitative data and the findings are reported by emphasizing on the qualitative factors that remain unexplored by several quantitative researchers.

Keywords: Husband-wife relationship, Work stress, Work-family conflict, Qualitative study

Introduction

Work stress is an immense issue affecting individuals, families, and their relationships. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines workplace stress as a person's response to pressures and demands at work that seem beyond their control and threaten their ability to cope. Due to contemporary job requirements, pressure at work is bound to arise. Nonetheless, constructive pressure within the workplace assists employees in concentrating, feeling motivated, and being able to perform their duties and learn. But this varies from one person to another based on individual qualities or access to these resources. However high level of stress results in job-related strain. Stress is found to have negative consequences on an employee's health, business performance, and interpersonal relationships.

The WHO categorizes work stress in two broad categories; the first category is related to the work contents such as workload, work pace, working hours, and lack of control over work processes. The second category is work context which includes work-life balance among others like confusion over employee roles, insecure job surroundings, and unsupportive bosses and co-workers. Work-life conflict may be further explained by cases of conflicting responsibilities experienced at both work and home, lack of support for job-related matters while at home, and absence of organizational policies that favor work-life balance (WHO, 2024).

The universality of marriage institution is found in almost every culture in this world. However, there is significant variability in terms of the customs of marriage governing the number of marriage partners, ceremonies, and family units. The traditional role of the family as an institution has transformed. Before industrialization, the male member was involved in economic activity while the women assisted the male member in the farm work. However, with the intense pressure of economic factors and to meet labor demands, women have become an active part of

the economic functions along with the males. This transformation has brought significant changes in the overall composition of the family institutions that have increased the concept of nuclear families, urban migration, increased level of education, independence, and autonomy in tajabierms of decision-making, and small family sizes and low birth rates (Ember, Gonzalez, & McCloskey, 2021).

The capitalist mode of economy values every individual concerning its contribution to the formal economic production activity. When the women were not part of the formal labor force their contribution to the economy was neglected and remained unacknowledged. However, the participation of women in economic functions comes at a significant cost which will be explored in this research study. Earlier, as women were the only ones to manage the household chores and perform the rearing and caring activities. And the male members were responsible for looking after the household finances. However, the relentless exploitative nature of 21st-century capitalism has reduced the value of any individual equivalent to a component in the machine who considers himself alienated from the overall economic process and activity. The human perspective of the consequences of the capitalist mode of production is often discussed and highlighted. However, this paper will be unique in exploring the concept of work stress concerning its impact on the family institution primarily focusing on the husband-wife relationship.

Research Problem

The 21st-century capitalist mode of the economy has impacted all the sociological institutions and the institution of family is also witnessing significant changes and transformation and trying to adjust itself to the challenges of the current mode of economy. Husband and wife being the core part of a family are also being impacted by the consequences of the capitalist mode of production. Therefore, this study aims to understand the burden and miseries caused by work

stress on middle-income families specifically focusing on the husband-wife relationship. To support the necessity of this research, it is important to mention that no such studies have been conducted on the same topic in Karachi, Pakistan. The concept of work stress is often associated with the subject of psychology and the sociological aspects of this concept remain unexplored. Therefore, it is important to understand how work-related tensions spill over human relationship particularly husband-wife relationship. This study is based on qualitative research, which can help the researcher to explore all the dimensions of the problem at hand collectively and comprehensively.

Research Objectives

1. To learn about the miseries caused by work stress on husband-wife relationship in middle-income households.
2. To understand and explain the nature of the burden that husbands and wives faces due to high levels of work stress.

Research Questions

1. How does the burden of work stress add to the miseries that husband-wife face in their relationship?
2. How do husbands and wives cope with the hardships of rising work stress?

Scope of Study

The study focuses on understanding the burden and miseries of work stress affecting the husband-wife relationship. This study will record the concept of work stress from a sociological perspective and understand the qualitative aspects of the problem. This will be a comprehensive study comprising of middle-income couples in Karachi, Pakistan to understand the level of burden and miseries they witness from work stress.

Literature Review

To gain detailed insight into the issue, several research articles and reports from various disciplines were reviewed. The following literature explains and justifies the problem concerning secondary literature.

The bi-directional relationship between work stress and marital relations. The study tried evaluating the positive and negative relationships across jobs and marital roles with their antecedents and outcomes. On the note of the research, relationships in marriage would go through strain due to stress from the job, data was collected utilizing quantitative questionnaires whereby different hypotheses were evaluated by linear regression analysis (Amponsah, 2011).

There is a huge impact of how individuals interact and perceive tension in managing work and life issues. The investigations were done among workers through open-ended interviews that were qualitatively based so that their job conduct could be analyzed comparatively. For data interpretation, thematic analysis was used. The study concluded that different work experience groups have different influences on interpersonal relationships and work-life balance (Murthy, 2014).

The night shift affects registered nurses' personal lives and how they handle social, familial, and domestic problems. The researcher used the qualitative, phenomenological method to interview registered nurses. The research study found that working the night shift employment caused stress in their homes, families, and social lives. The study recommended scheduling flexibility, planned rest periods in comfortable lounges, healthy workplaces, childcare services, and other support activities to cope with the issue (Vitale, Ganesh, & Vu, 2015).

The research explored the stress witnessed by working women in Pakistan including various factors causing stress among women specifically job-related. The study concluded that

work-related demands cause stress among working women specifically due to unmet family demands (Kausar & Anwar, 2015).

The research interrogated the effects of job stress on family relationships. The study found that in the short term, daily job stressors influence family interactions through their impact on the employed person's mood, thoughts, and coping behaviors. However, in the longer run, family relationships can be shaped by those experiences in both positive and negative ways. In some spouses, cross-over effects appear to represent accommodations of the employed partner under stress by increased provision of social support and involvement with children (Repetti & Wang, 2017).

The study investigated work, stress, and relationships by applying the crossover process model. The qualitative methodology of inquiry was adopted to explore the crossover process. The analysis of data revealed the presence of both negative (e.g., strain) and positive (e.g., well-being) crossover experiences between the couples. The crossover model followed a five-step process which included work event experienced, impact of work event, transfer of impact to partner, impact on partner's wellbeing and work performance, and dyadic outcomes. The research concluded the presence of both negative and positive crossover of emotions in which negative work stressors were the most common initiator of crossover (Brough, Muller, & Westman, 2018).

The study on work-family conflict among married female professionals in Pakistan aimed to determine work requirements affecting family by exploring work-family conflict (WFC) and family demands affecting work life. The study suggested effective ways to reduce work-family conflict by developing comfortable environment for employees (Khursheed, Mustafa, Arshad, & Gill, 2019).

To investigate the impacts of two types of work/family conflicts (i.e., work-family conflict and family-work conflict) on teachers' job and life satisfaction, a quantitative methodology was used to collect data from 560 junior high school teachers. The outcome of the study stated that both work-family and family-work conflicts are not directly related to junior high school teachers job satisfaction and life satisfaction. However, they significantly negatively influence job satisfaction and life satisfaction via psychological capital and emotional exhaustion (Li, Lin, Zhang, & Tian, 2021).

The study explored the partners individual differences, stress and behavior predict change in relationship satisfaction using the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model. The data was collected from longitudinal studies of married couples to test VSA model of change in relationship satisfaction. The study found that changes in marital satisfaction was mediated and moderated with the experiences of both partner's stress. Also, both partners stress moderated the strength and even direction of the association between behavior and changes in marital satisfaction over time (McNulty, Meltzer, Neff, & Karney, 2021).

The review of previous literature indicates that this phenomenon has received limited attention. Hence, this study seeks to explore the burden and hardships associated with work stress and their impact on husband-wife relationships.

Theoretical Framework

Bodenmann's Stress Model

Bodenmann (2000) and Bondemann et al. (2007) suggest that minor stress originating outside the relationship and spilling over into the marriage are particularly toxic for close relationships as these stresses lead to mutual alienation and slowly decrease relationship quality

over time. These stresses often lie largely outside of conscious awareness having minor impacts which are not easily perceivable.

Bodenmann's stress model explains that external stress affects relationship quality by:

- Decreasing quality time partners experience together, resulting in weakening of feelings of togetherness and self-disclosure.
- Decreasing the quality of communication by promoting negative interaction and withdrawal.
- Increasing risk of psychological and physical problems such as sleep disorders, sexual dysfunction and mood disturbances.
- Increasing the likelihood that problematic personality traits will be expressed between partners in the form of rigidity, anxiety, and hostility.

These processes result in alienation towards a state of lacking mutual knowledge about each other.

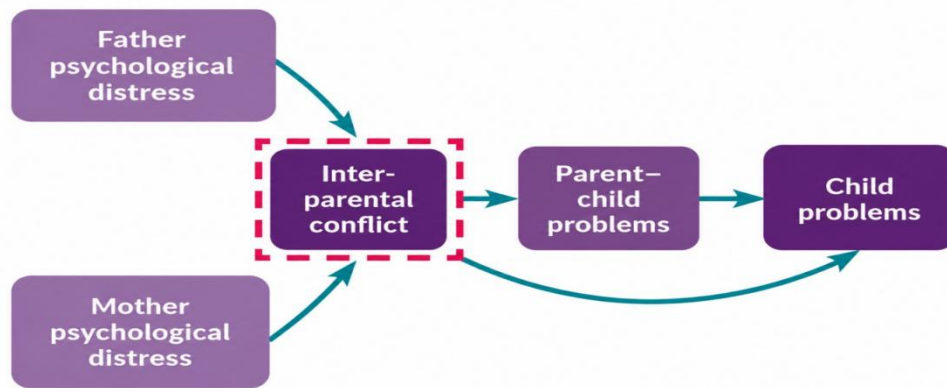
Family Stress Model (FSM)

To understand the influence of work stress on family relationships, the study uses the Family Stress Model (FSM) (Conger et al., 1994). The Family Stress Model suggests that economic stress leads to spousal conflicts. The model attributes this to the fact that both the husband and the wife face psychological stress individually. Consequently, if such couples have children, then the existing spousal conflicts are translated into parent-child problems.

In the context of this study, the Family Stress Model explains how work stress acts as a driver of economic stress which ultimately leads to family dysfunctionality. Such conditions may result in spousal conflicts (individual mental disorders and domestic violence), parent-child problems (childhood trauma and poor inter-communication), and inadequacy of affording basic

costs (quality diet, safe accommodation, good clothing, and recreational activities) (McClelland, 2000).

Figure 1



Source: Prepared by author (2026)

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design refers to the document explaining the research process and methods employed by the researcher to study the phenomenon scientifically and rationally. This study employs the qualitative research design to understand the role of work stress on husband-wife relations and how it impacts husband-wife relations targeting the middle-income group segment in Karachi, Pakistan.

The research study explores how the problem of rising work stress is putting stress on family relationships with a special emphasis on the husband-and-wife relationship. The study investigates the qualitative aspects of the phenomenon of work stress which is largely ignored by policy makers and psychology researchers. As used by Murthy (2014), the qualitative research method focusing on in-depth interviews is used to understand the phenomenon of work stress adding burden and miseries in the relationship of husband and wife.

Sampling

Palinkas et al. (2013) highlighted the usage of purposive sampling in qualitative research for the identification of the cases of interest in the research. This research has utilized the purposive sampling technique to select 6 individuals in total for the research study. In total, the cases of 3 couples (3 males and 3 females) are studied. All the couples were in heterogeneous relationships. The couple belonged to Karachi, Pakistan. Two of the couples were newly married i.e., for 1 year. However, one couple was married for 29 years. All the males were working and only one female was working in all three couples. The reason for selecting one working couple was to understand the diverse nature of stress when both couples are working. Also, the reason for selecting two young couples is to acknowledge that the research wants to study the phenomena in the present economic circumstances. However, one older couple is selected to understand the difference between the dynamics of work stress faced by young and older couples.

The following are key features of the couples selected for the research study:

- Geography: Karachi, Pakistan
- Marital Status: Married
- Income Group: Middle income

According to James Crook University Pressbooks, there are no set standards for selecting the sample size in qualitative research. However, the exact sample size depends upon the research questions covered by the researcher. The focus to determine the sample size includes the research questions needed to be satisfied from the literature review and primary research, the theoretical framework used, the design of the study, the sampling technique, resources in hand, and the time limit.

Data Collection

The data was collected through open-ended unstructured questions through in-depth interviews with the spouses. The husband and wife were interviewed separately to maintain the confidentiality of their responses and restrict any kind of influence on each other. The interviews were audio recorded with the prior permission of the respondent and notes were taken of the discussion. The research tool that is used is the in-depth interview guide.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of analyzing the data collected through primary research methods. It involves the patterns and directions that must be identified and sorted concerning the research objectives. The data collected from the in-depth interviews was analyzed to find patterns and common trends from the data collected. The data was separated according to the themes and further analyzed to understand the pattern, including the impact and role of work stress on husband-wife relations in middle-income groups in Karachi.

Thematic analysis is one of the best methods to describe the meaning of the qualitative research. The themes are identified from the qualitative data description from the interviews conducted during primary research. The process involves the coding of the transcripts and it helps in understanding the meaning of the studied phenomenon. Furthermore, the codes support the creation of sub-themes which are also known as axial codes. Lastly, the process of making major themes or master themes is performed to group the axial codes or sub-themes into comprehensive master themes that reflect the meaningful, credible, and practical results from the qualitative data description to be aligned with the research objectives (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016).

The audio of the interviews was recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Word along with handwritten notes. The transcriptions were first cleaned and refined, followed by the procedure of coding. At first, the open codes were identified from all 6 interviews, followed by the identification of the axial codes or sub-themes and lastly, the major themes were identified to compile the codes into comprehensive themes.

Following are the details of the length of interviews of each participant and each couple:

Table 1

Length of Interviews

Couple Number	Participant Number	Length of Interviews	Total Length of Couple Interviews
Couple No. 1	Participant No. 1	29 minutes 42 seconds	58 minutes 6 seconds
	Participant No. 2	29 minutes 18 seconds	
Couple No. 2	Participant No. 3	25 minutes 59 seconds	59 minutes 19 seconds
	Participant No. 4	33 minutes 6 seconds	
Couple No. 3	Participant No. 5	17 minutes 30 seconds	35 minutes 18 seconds
	Participant No. 6	17 minutes 48 seconds	

The total length of the six interviews conducted for the research study is 153 minutes 37 seconds.

Following is the ages and gender composition of the participants involved in the research study:

Table 2*Gender and Age of Participants*

Participant Number	Gender	Age
Participant No. 1	Female	27 Years
Participant No. 2	Male	28 Years
Participant No. 3	Female	26 Years
Participant No. 4	Male	28 Years
Participant No. 5	Male	55 Years
Participant No. 6	Female	52 Years

Results**Multidimensional Nature of Work Stress**

The first theme identified is related to the multidimensional nature of work stress faced by the respondents collectively. It is further divided into three sub-themes which are (1) *Gender roles and expectations*, faced by the respondents due to the societal distribution of work in which the males and females are expected to perform a certain role assigned to them in the society; and (2) *Financial strain and responsibilities*, which is related to the challenges of financial pressures and responsibilities exerting influence on the couples mental health; and (3) *Work-life conflict*, which is related to the difficulty in managing work and life balance in their everyday lives.

Gender Roles and Expectations

The female participants reported that they had to suffer from the dual work burden. Firstly, they had to meet the expectations of the employers in case they were working. Additionally, they had to meet the household expectations to do the household chores.

A female participant was reported saying,

“It’s about responsibility. It’s about the thought that you understand that it is not about me. It’s about my partner.”

The females were expected to perform dual work that was adding stress to their overall well-being. Similarly, the husbands were also experiencing a different kind of stress that was related to the gender roles in society. The husbands were responsible for providing for their families and the inability to provide for their families sufficiently was making them stressed.

One male participant was reported saying

“Half of my paycheck I send around to family usually a large sum of my money.”

Furthermore, Pakistan as an Islamic conservative society also witnesses the large presence of gender roles and expectations that are to be met by both genders.

Financial Strain and Responsibilities

The husbands mostly reported financial strain and responsibilities as the major cause of work stress among them. They complained that their employers were not compensating them appropriately in exchange for their labour. Also, the husbands who were living with joint family system experienced strain due to financial responsibility.

A husband quoted as saying,

“I have to look after my three sisters. What we earn, we manage our expenses with it.”

Work-life Conflict

Every participant who was engaged in employment activity reported experiencing work-life conflict in their everyday lives.

One husband who was engaged in multiple jobs was quoted as saying,

“Schedule is mostly tight due to multiple jobs.”

Furthermore, the employers exerted pressure on the employees to meet the tight deadlines that caused work stress among participants.

This work stress was translated into a feeling of tiredness and exhaustion among participants.

Another husband reported that

“Cannot spend enough time to each other due to tiredness. Cannot attend celebrations outside the home.”

The work stress was leading to compromise of spending quality time with family and friends. Also, the husbands were expected to skip events and celebrations due to their tight work schedules that was ultimately impacted the couple's relationship. Also, it led to complaints from the relatives.

Consequences of Work Stress on Well being

The second theme identified is related to the consequences of work stress on the well-being of couples. This theme is further divided into two sub-themes which are (1) *Impact on social life*, which is related to the consequences of work stress on couples' social lives; and (2) *Impact on mental health*, which is related to the consequences of work stress on couples' mental health.

Impact on Social Life

The couples reported that the work stress was negatively impacting their social lives. The couples were unable to attend the family events. Sometimes, they had to compromise family time. The wives were reported to attend the events without their husbands with kids to avoid complaints from relatives. The personal life of husbands was also severely affected as they were unable to relax and suffered from anxiety and depression.

One husband shared his thoughts about the impacts on his social life,

“I was not able to spend time with my family. Stress impacted my behavior and daily life matters. Aggressiveness and clumsiness were common impacts.”

One wife complained about her husband's work schedules,

“Yes, people complained when there were important celebrations. We told people that my husband doesn't have time due to job nature.”

Impact on Mental Health

The work stress was adding to the deterioration of mental health, especially for couples. The husbands were trying to cope with the work stress by smoking cigarettes or eating betel nuts to release their mental pressures.

One husband was reported as saying,

“In the past, I had a strategy that I smoked.”

Another husband admitted that

“I use betel nut (chaalia or supari). It harmed me mentally and physically. I got weak physically. I had piles (Bawaseer) and I underwent surgery. I spend the time in tension and stress.”

One wife narrated the impact of her husband's stressful routine,

“When a husband does not have enough time for his children. Yes, it does. But now we are habitual to it. It not only affects physical health but also mental health.”

Managing Work Stress and Relationship

The third theme identified is related to the balancing of work stress and relationships by the couples. This theme is further divided into three sub-themes which are (1) Prioritization and setting boundaries, which is related to the prioritization and setting boundaries between their work life and personal life; and (2) Mutual understanding and compromise, which is related to the understanding and compromise by the couples due to the pressure exerted from work stress; and

(3) Communication and emotional support, which is related to the open communication and emotional support to tackle work stress by partners.

Prioritization and Setting Boundaries

The husbands were delineated that the work stress was impacting their personal lives. To cope with the increasing work stress, they had to set boundaries between work and home. It was made possible by the prioritization of family over work. The husbands tried to prioritize their family over work and tried to strike a balance between the two of them. There was a realization among husbands that work stress is sacrificing their personal lives, and their families don't deserve this stressful behavior resulting from work stress.

One husband said,

“When I am done with all my work and then I come home, and I do not bring any official work home.”

Another one said,

“Well, I will prioritize my wife because she is more important than my work.”

Mutual Understanding and Compromise

All the couples reported that mutual understanding and compromise were the most effective tools that helped them to manage the work stress negative consequences. When one partner was feeling stressed and pressured, the other partner tried to understand the situation and avoided burdening him. Understanding each other in difficult times and giving personal space to each other proved to help tackle the problems of work stress. Similarly, both partners realized that compromising in stressful situations was necessary to avoid any major negative outcome. As the relationship tested the patience of both partners and the external factors such as work stress was not in their control but the reaction to it was under their control.

One female was reported as saying,

“Sometimes there are such situations when it is necessary that only I should compromise in such situations. I think that we should equally get the appreciation that we are also compromising when it happens in a couple relationship.”

One male discussed his handling of work stress,

“Every job is stressful. You have to work in stress, but I don’t bring it home because my spouse does not deserve to be exposed to me when I am stressed. After all, it is not her fault.”

Communication and Emotional Support

The couples reported that open communication between each other was extremely effective. It helped them to understand each other’s needs and wants. It also supported them in realizing the stressful experiences of each other. Both partners become the emotional support system for each other in time of need. This emotional support made the stressful work schedules manageable for each other.

A wife reported,

“Being supportive is very significant. This is the way how you only cope up otherwise issues will arise.”

Another wife shared her experience,

“Communication is the most important. I don’t bring that stress at home. I live in that moment. I talk to my loved ones about my feelings. He has such support and that space that he talks and expresses his concerns. So, I feel like stress tests you and brings you closer to one another.”

A husband shared his coping strategy,

“I shared about workload in the factory. Wife and children understand and were cooperative.”

Discussion

After analyzing the cases of three couples, several key points were identified from the two theoretical frameworks that were applied to gain an understanding of the issue.

First, Bodenmann's Stress Model was partially relevant to our study because the model suggested that minor stress could have harmful consequences for a couple's relationship. However, we have observed that the couples deal with the situation with mutual understanding and compromise and provide each other with emotional support by becoming a support system for each other in changing situations. However, the stress from the work resulted in anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions between the couples but it didn't translate into a major outcome.

Second, the Family Stress Model suggested spousal conflicts due to economic stress, but it was also not reported among the couples because the couples readjusted themselves according to the changing needs and dynamics of the workplace and provided each other the needed emotional support by understanding each other vulnerabilities rather becoming rigid and translating it into negative spillover.

Concerning the literature, our research verified the Amponsah (2011) study that work stress had negative outcomes on marital relationships. The Murthy (2014) study was also found true in our case because different work experiences impacted the couple's relationship differently. The study conducted by Vitale et al. (2015) was also found relevant because the couple who were working extra hours were facing difficulties in their family lives. Also, the female complained due to unmet family demands as reported by Kausar & Anwar (2015). The suggestion of Repetti & Wang (2017) was found relevant to the social support helping couples to cope with increased work stress. The study conducted by Li et al. (2021) was also confirmed that work stress negatively

influences emotions by generating psychological clang and emotional exhaustion among couples. The implications of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model adopted by McNulty et al. (2021) also confirmed that the couple's stress moderates the strength and direction of the behavior and marital satisfaction over time.

Practice Implications

The research study offers avenues for future qualitative researchers and policymakers to gain an insight into how an issue such as work stress which is psychological, impacts the wellbeing of family relationships. As the research study primarily investigated the impact of work stress on the husband-wife relationship, and the couples belonged to the middle-income group, the impact of work stress concerning other income groups, such as the low-income group and high-income group, could also provide a valuable insight into how they are affected from work stress and how they cope with it. As this research study only focused on the relationship of couples and their coping mechanisms due to the work stress impact shows that every economic or psychological phenomenon has a social impact too. The societal institutions such as families, when faced with such situations deal with the changes at the microlevel of society. Future researchers can investigate the impact of work stress on different types of families, i.e., joint, and nuclear family systems or single parents, since the impact of work stress is not equal for every family. Also, the impact of work stress on other family members can be explored. Hence, policymakers need to consider the various sociological aspects while framing economic and psychological policies and programs to target the relevant group and community. Similarly, the success or failure of any policy is also dependent upon the microlevel dynamics of society. To conclude, this research study opens the avenues for policymakers to study psychological or economic issues such as work stress

from the sociological perspective and its impact on the sociological institution. This combined lens can be fruitful for an effective and efficient policy and framework for the future.

Conclusion

This research study tried to understand the burden and miseries caused by work stress on the husband-wife relationship. As husband-wife relationship is the primary relationship in the family institution based on which other relationships are built and interconnected. Therefore, the study seeks to explore the experiences of husband-wife suffering from work stress and its impact on their interpersonal relationship. The study concluded that work stress has increased due to the present economic conditions and environment of competitiveness. However, the relationship dynamics have also evolved with it. The couples have adjusted their lives to manage their hectic routine, compromise and mutual understanding was found to be the key in tackling the challenges emerging from the work stress. However, the long-term sustainability of the work stress remained a challenge for the couple's mental and emotional well-being.

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¹ Corresponding author email: alimohib110@gmail.com