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Research Article

Caring at both ends: A forward-looking framework of eldercare, work-family conflict and organisational support for Malaysian employees in an ageing society

Mehrunishah Begum[1*], Vimala Kadiresan[2], Adlina Suleiman[3]

[1]School of Business & Technology, IMU University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

[2]Business Department, Faculty of Business, Economics and Accounting, HELP University, Shah Alam, Malaysia

[3]Management and Science University (MSU), Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author email: Mehrunishahhamid@imu.edu.my**

ABSTRACT

Malaysia became an ageing nation in 2021 and is projected to become an aged nation by 2048, while dementia cases are expected to more than triple to 668,000 by 2050. A growing share of employees therefore combine paid work with the care of older parents. Almost half of Malaysian employees in a large national sample reported caregiving responsibilities, and family responsibilities are the main reason Malaysians, most of them women, remain outside the labour force. Yet Malaysian law makes no specific provision for carer's leave, and management research has focused far more on childcare than on eldercare. This conceptual paper integrates the caregiver stress process model, conservation of resources theory, the work-home resources model and life course theory to develop the care-work trajectory framework. The framework treats eldercare as an unfolding sequence that begins before care starts, with anticipation, and that can end in withdrawal from paid work. Eleven propositions explain how eldercare demands generate anticipatory, time-based and strain-based work-family conflict; how flexible working arrangements, family-supportive supervision and eldercare-specific support weaken these effects; and how disclosure, filial obligation, culturally congruent support, gender and emerging care technologies condition them. Contrasting Asian and Western approaches to eldercare, and drawing on carer policies in five jurisdictions and megatrends to 2050, the paper sets out implications for employers and policymakers and a research agenda for preparing Malaysian workplaces for an aged society.

Keywords

Eldercare;

Work-Family Conflict;

Caregiver Stress Process;

Life Course;

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1. INTRODUCTION

Consider a 48-year-old accountant in Petaling Jaya. Her father has early-stage dementia, her brother lives in Johor, and twice this month she has left the office at short notice because her father wandered out of the house. She has not told her manager why. Situations like hers are becoming common, yet they rarely appear in management research or in workplace policy.

Population ageing is reshaping working life across Asia, and Malaysia is ageing faster than most. The country became an ageing nation in 2021, when residents aged 65 and above reached 7 per cent of the population (The Star, 2026b). By 2026 that share had risen to 8.4 per cent (Thinagar, 2026), and the government expects Malaysia to become an aged nation,

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with 14 per cent of the population aged 65 or above, by 2048 (Malay Mail, 2025a). The total fertility rate fell to 1.67 in 2025 and has remained below replacement level since 2013, so each generation of working adults is smaller relative to the generation it will care for (Malay Mail, 2025a). Dementia adds to the pressure. An estimated 202,000 to 216,000 older Malaysians lived with dementia in 2022, and the number is projected to reach 668,000 by 2050 (Malay Mail, 2025b).

Much of the resulting care falls on people who are also employees. In a survey of 17,286 employees in 230 Malaysian organisations, 49.6 per cent reported primary or secondary caregiving responsibilities, and those caring for older adults had higher odds of psychological distress and comorbid illness than non-caregivers (Chan et al., 2023). National labour data point to the cost of combining care and work. Of the 7.11 million Malaysians outside the labour force in mid-2026, 43.3 per cent cited housework and family responsibilities, and women made up 69.5 per cent of those outside the labour force (Thinagar, 2026; The Star, 2026a). The Human Resources Minister has acknowledged that caregiving responsibilities 'can have a very real impact on an individual's ability to remain in employment' (The Star, 2026a).

Malaysian policy has begun to respond, but unevenly. Since 1 January 2023, Sections 60P and 60Q of the Employment Act 1955 have allowed employees to apply for flexible working hours, days or location, with employers required to decide within 60 days and give reasons for refusal (Chau, 2023). The Malaysia Care Strategic Framework and Action Plan 2026-2030 aims to train 50,000 skilled caregivers and calls on families, employers and communities to share caregiving responsibilities (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2025). However, the Employment Act contains no dedicated entitlement to carer's leave, and commentators have noted that support for employees caring for ageing parents lags well behind support for parents of young children (The Star, 2026b). By contrast, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Germany, Japan and South Korea have all legislated carer-specific leave or workplace duties (Carers UK, 2024; European Union, 2019; Frisina Doetter and Rothgang, 2017; Cho et al., 2019; HLS Global, 2025).

The research base has not kept pace with these changes. Reviews of eldercare and work show that combining paid work with care for an older person carries distinctive demands, including unpredictability, emotional strain and long duration, that differ from those of childcare (Barnes-Farrell et al., 2019; Lam et al., 2022). Most of this evidence comes from North America, Europe and Australia, and very little addresses Asian societies where filial obligation is strong and formal long-term care is limited. Existing models are also largely static. They explain conflict among current caregivers but say little about how care unfolds over time, how employees anticipate future care, or how emerging technologies may change the experience. Malaysian studies have documented the prevalence and health of working caregivers (Chan et al., 2023) but have not specified the organisational mechanisms that could reduce their strain.

1.1. Research Questions

RQ1: Through which mechanisms do current and anticipated eldercare responsibilities affect the well-being, performance, careers and labour-market participation of Malaysian employees?

RQ2: Which organisational resources weaken these effects, and under what conditions?

RQ3: How do disclosure, cultural values, gender and care technologies shape the experience of combining eldercare and work in Malaysia?

RQ4: What can Malaysia learn from international carer policies and from projected megatrends to 2050?

1.2. Contributions

Our main contribution is the care-work trajectory framework. Rather than treating eldercare as a fixed condition, it follows care as it unfolds, from anticipation through active care to the point where some employees leave work altogether. Grounding this in life course theory lets us bring the future into models of work-family conflict, which have mostly looked at the present. To build the framework, we connect two literatures that have grown up largely apart: the gerontological work on the caregiver stress process and the organisational work on conservation of resources (COR) and the work-home resources model. We also add two forward-looking propositions, on anticipated eldercare and on care technologies, and contrast Asian and Western perspectives on eldercare to show why support must be culturally congruent in a society where Islamic, Confucian and Hindu traditions all treat care for parents as a moral duty. Finally, we set Malaysia's policies against those of five other jurisdictions to see what lessons travel. The eleven propositions are written in positive, directional form, as the journal recommends, and the paper relates most closely to Sustainable Development Goals 3, 5 and 8.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Eldercare as a Workforce Issue

A substantial international literature shows that eldercare affects employment. A systematic review of labour-market outcomes found that caregivers overall are about as likely as non-caregivers to be in work, but they work fewer hours, and those with heavy caregiving responsibilities are significantly more likely to leave the labour market (Lilly et al., 2007). The effect is therefore not uniform. It depends on the intensity of care, which suggests a threshold beyond which work becomes unsustainable. A multidisciplinary review of eldercare and work proposed an organising framework in which eldercare responsibilities have antecedents and consequences at individual, family, organisational and community levels, with feedback between them (Barnes-Farrell et al., 2019).

More recent reviews have identified the specific demands and resources involved. A scoping review of 92 publications identified six primary challenges for working carers: high or competing demands, psychosocial and emotional stress, geographical distance, the

carer's own health, returning to work, and financial pressure (Spann et al., 2020). A systematic review of 45 studies of working caregivers of older people, organised around the job demands-resources model, found that the most important workplace resources were supportive supervision, family-supportive supervisor behaviours, flexible work arrangements, a family-supportive culture, eldercare programmes and job autonomy, while unsupportive work-family cultures acted as demands (Lam et al., 2022). An international scoping review of caregiver-friendly workplace policies found that support services were the most commonly offered (69.3 per cent of workplaces), followed by flexible schedules (48.9 per cent), financial assistance (39.8 per cent), unpaid leave (30.7 per cent) and paid leave (27.3 per cent), and that stigma and low awareness were the main barriers to use (Ireson et al., 2018).

2.2. The Malaysian Context

Several features make Malaysia distinctive. Eldercare is overwhelmingly provided by families, formal long-term care is limited and largely privately funded, and there is no national long-term care insurance scheme (The Star, 2026b). Malaysians spend an average of 5 hours 12 minutes a day on unpaid domestic and care work, rising to 6 hours 7 minutes for women (Thinagar, 2026). In Asia and the Pacific more broadly, women perform about 80 per cent of unpaid care work, 4.1 times as much as men (International Labour Organization, 2018). Malaysian employees who care for older adults are more likely to work in clerical and sales roles (Chan et al., 2023), where flexibility may be more limited than in professional roles. The Malaysian Employers Federation has argued that accommodating employees with genuine caregiving duties can reduce recruitment and training costs and preserve institutional knowledge, while employer groups have stressed that solutions must vary by industry (The Star, 2026a).

2.3. The Caregiver Stress Process

The caregiver stress process model provides the gerontological foundation of the framework (Pearlin et al., 1990). It distinguishes primary stressors, which arise directly from the care recipient's needs, such as cognitive impairment and dependence in daily activities, from secondary stressors, which proliferate into other areas of the carer's life. Job-caregiving conflict is identified as a key secondary role strain. The model also specifies resources, such as coping and social support, that mediate between stressors and outcomes. Its central insight for management research is stress proliferation: the strain of care does not stay at home but spreads into work, and the extent of that spread depends on the resources available. Consistent with this view, employees caring for less independent relatives experience more career disruption when workplace support is limited, and this disruption is linked to lower well-being (Bainbridge and Broady, 2017).

2.4. Resource-Based Explanations of the Work-Family Interface

Work-family conflict is a form of inter-role conflict in which the demands of work and family roles are incompatible (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). It takes time-based, strain-based and behaviour-based forms, and family demands such as care hours and the number of

dependants are reliable predictors of family-to-work conflict (Byron, 2005). Work and family can also enrich one another when resources gained in one role improve performance in the other (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). COR theory explains these effects in terms of resources. People strive to obtain, retain and protect valued resources, and stress arises when resources are threatened or lost (Hobfoll, 1989). The work-home resources model applies this logic to the work-family interface: demands in one domain deplete personal resources such as time, energy and mood, while contextual resources such as supportive supervisors and flexible schedules replenish them (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). Eldercare is a clear case of resource loss, and COR theory's prediction that initial losses make further losses more likely helps explain why some caregivers spiral towards exit.

2.5. Life Course Theory and the Temporal Dimension

Life course theory adds time. It emphasises that lives unfold in historical time and place, that the timing of transitions matters, that lives are linked through relationships, and that individuals exercise agency within the constraints they face (Elder, 1998). Applied to eldercare, these ideas change the picture considerably. Care becomes a trajectory rather than a state: it usually begins with worry about what lies ahead, moves through onset and intensification, and ends with bereavement or a move into institutional care. The idea of linked lives means that a parent's health transitions turn into the employee's career transitions. Timing matters too. Malaysian employees most likely to care for older adults are aged 45 to 54 (Chan et al., 2023), a stage at which many are approaching senior roles. Research on anticipated work-family conflict shows that people form expectations of future conflict and that these expectations influence their career plans (Cinamon, 2006). Eldercare is therefore likely to shape careers before care formally begins.

2.6. Boundary Management and Workplace Support

Work-family border theory describes how people move between domains and how the permeability of borders affects balance (Clark, 2000), while boundary theory distinguishes between people who integrate and those who segment their roles (Ashforth et al., 2000). Eldercare places unusual pressure on these borders, because emergencies and appointments arrive without warning and often during working hours. Workplace support can help. A meta-analysis found that the use of flextime and flexplace was associated with lower work-family conflict, although effects were modest (Allen et al., 2013). Another found that family-specific supervisor and organisational support were more strongly related to lower conflict than general support (Kossek et al., 2011). Family-supportive supervisor behaviours, comprising emotional support, instrumental support, role modelling and creative work-family management, are measurable and trainable (Hammer et al., 2009).

2.7. Visibility, Culture and Gender

Eldercare is often invisible at work. Research on invisible identities shows that concealment is psychologically costly and limits access to support (Clair et al., 2005), and that disclosure depends on expectations of acceptance or stigma (Ragins, 2008). The stigma and low awareness that limit the use of caregiver-friendly policies (Ireson et al., 2018) suggest that

many carers remain hidden. Culture shapes how care is experienced. The dual filial piety model distinguishes reciprocal filial piety, based on affection and gratitude, from authoritarian filial piety, based on obligation and self-sacrifice (Yeh and Bedford, 2003). In Malaysia's Malay, Chinese and Indian communities, caring for parents is widely regarded as a moral duty, so the form of that duty is likely to influence whether care is experienced as meaningful or as a burden. Gender shapes who provides care and who bears its costs. Women in Asia and the Pacific perform four times as much unpaid care as men (International Labour Organization, 2018), and the Malaysian care framework reports that 63 per cent of women outside the workforce cite housework and caregiving (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2025).

2.8. Cultural Perspectives: Asian and Western Approaches to Eldercare and Work

Most theories of eldercare and work were developed in North America and Western Europe, and they carry assumptions that do not always travel. Comparative social policy offers one way to see the difference. European research distinguishes between countries where families carry care responsibilities because there is little alternative (familialism by default), countries where the state supports families to provide care through leave and cash payments (supported familialism), and countries where public services take over much of the care (defamilialisation) (Saraceno and Keck, 2010). East Asian welfare systems have been described as productivist, subordinating social policy to economic growth and relying heavily on families for care (Holliday, 2000). Malaysia sits closest to familialism by default. Formal long-term care is limited, there is no national care insurance, and families provide most care (The Star, 2026b). Recent initiatives, including the national care framework and a proposed Senior Citizens Bill that would require adult children to support their parents financially (Heng, 2026), suggest a move towards a more explicitly supported, and legally reinforced, form of familialism.

The values underneath these systems differ too. In individualistic Western settings, caring for an older parent is often framed as a personal choice, negotiated among siblings and frequently shared with paid services. In much of Asia, it is framed as a moral duty. Malaysia is distinctive because three traditions converge on this duty. In Islam, kindness to parents (birr al-walidayn) is paired with the worship of God in the Qur'an (17:23); in the Confucian tradition, filial piety (xiao) is the root of virtue; and in Hindu thought, care for parents is a sacred debt (pithru rina) expressed through selfless service (seva) (Heng, 2026). A phenomenological study of low-income Malay adult children caring for parents in Kuala Lumpur found that Islamic teachings on the honour and divine reward of caring for parents were a key way of coping with the strain of balancing care, career and family (Alavi, 2008).

These differences shape caregiver outcomes, but not always in the expected direction. A meta-analysis of ethnic differences in the United States found that ethnic minority caregivers held stronger filial obligation beliefs than White caregivers, and that Asian American caregivers used less formal support and reported more depression (Pinquart and Sörensen, 2005). The updated sociocultural stress and coping model explains this pattern.

It proposes a common core stress process across cultures, in which the care recipient's impairments drive burden and health outcomes, with cultural values acting mainly through social support and coping styles. One finding stands out: values centred on obligation tend to matter more than feelings of family closeness (Knight and Sayegh, 2010). A strong cultural duty to care can therefore bring meaning and pressure at the same time. This supports the distinction between reciprocal and authoritarian filial piety (Yeh and Bedford, 2003) and suggests that a sense of duty without adequate support may increase rather than reduce strain.

Culture shapes the work-family interface as well, not just caregiving. Scholars have argued that work-family theories built and tested in the United States need to become culture-sensitive (Powell et al., 2009). In a comparison of managers across regions, long working hours were more strongly associated with work-family stressors among Anglo managers than among Chinese managers, consistent with the view that in more collectivist societies, work is seen as serving the family rather than competing with it (Spector et al., 2004). A cross-national meta-analysis found that family-to-work conflict, the direction most relevant to eldercare, is higher in more collectivistic cultures and in countries with a larger economic gender gap (Allen et al., 2015). For Malaysian employers, these findings imply that support designed on Western, individualistic assumptions, such as leave framed purely as a personal entitlement or counselling that treats care as a private problem, may fit poorly with employees who experience care as a shared family and religious obligation. Table 1 summarises the contrasts.

Table 1. Western, East Asian and Malaysian perspectives on eldercare and work

Dimension	Western (individualistic)	East Asian (Confucian)	Malaysia (plural)
Core value	Autonomy; care as personal choice	Filial piety (xiao); care as moral duty	Islamic birr al-walidayn, Confucian xiao and Hindu seva; care as religious and moral duty
Main care provider	Family shared with formal services	Family, especially daughters and daughters-in-law	Family, mainly women; domestic helpers in some households
Welfare logic	Supported familialism or defamilialisation	Productivist welfare; family first	Familialism by default, moving towards supported familialism
Legal duty to parents	Rare	Present in some systems (e.g. Singapore's Maintenance of Parents Act)	Senior Citizens Bill proposed
Typical workplace response	Carer's leave as an individual right; employee assistance programmes	Limited; growing statutory leave in Japan and South Korea	Right to request flexible work; no carer's leave
Implication for support	Individual entitlements fit cultural norms	Family-inclusive, face-saving support needed	Culturally congruent support recognising family and religious duty

Source: Synthesised by the author(s) from Saraceno and Keck (2010), Holliday (2000), Knight and Sayegh (2010), Heng (2026) and The Star (2026b).

2.9. International Carer Policies and Practices

Table 2 compares Malaysia with five jurisdictions that have legislated carer-specific provisions. Broadly, these countries have taken three routes. The most common is short-term carer's leave for emergencies and appointments. The United Kingdom introduced a day-one right to one week of unpaid carer's leave a year from April 2024 (Carers UK, 2024), the European Union requires member states to provide five days of carers' leave a year (European Union, 2019), and Germany provides up to ten days of acute care leave per care recipient with a care support payment of typically 90 per cent of net earnings, funded by long-term care insurance (Frisina Doetter and Rothgang, 2017). Some countries go further and offer longer care leave or reduced hours. South Korea allows up to 90 days of family care leave a year, of which up to ten days can be taken singly, together with a right to reduced working hours for family care (Cho et al., 2019), while Germany allows longer unpaid leave or reduced hours for up to 24 months, supported by interest-free loans (Frisina Doetter and Rothgang, 2017). Japan has taken a different, more proactive path by placing a duty on employers. Since April 2025, Japanese employers have been required to provide information on family care leave to employees around the time they reach age 40, as well as when an employee reports a care need, and to make efforts to offer telework to family caregivers (HLS Global, 2025).

Table 2. Carer policies: Malaysia and selected jurisdictions

Jurisdiction	Instrument	Key provisions for working carers
Malaysia	Employment Act 1955, ss. 60P-60Q (from 1 January 2023); MyCare 2026-2030	Right to request flexible hours, days or place, with a decision within 60 days; no dedicated carer's leave; national target of 50,000 skilled caregivers
United Kingdom	Carer's Leave Act 2023 (from 6 April 2024)	One week of unpaid carer's leave a year from day one; employers may postpone but not refuse
European Union	Work-Life Balance Directive (EU) 2019/1158	Five days of carers' leave a year; right to request flexible arrangements for care
Germany	Care Leave Act (Pflegezeitgesetz)	Up to 10 days of acute care leave with care support payment (typically 90% of net pay); longer leave or reduced hours up to 24 months with interest-free loans
South Korea	Equal Employment Opportunity and Work-Family Balance Assistance Act, amended (from 2020)	Up to 90 days of family care leave a year, including up to 10 single days; right to reduced working hours for family care
Japan	Child Care and Family Care Leave Act, amended (from April 2025)	Employers must inform employees about family care leave around age 40 and when a care need arises; effort duty to offer telework to family carers

Source: Compiled by the author(s) from Chau (2023), Carers UK (2024), European Union (2019), Frisina Doetter and Rothgang (2017), Cho et al. (2019), HLS Global (2025) and Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (2025).

Japan's approach is particularly relevant to the trajectory framework, because it targets the anticipation stage by informing employees before care begins. Japan's long-term care insurance system, in place since 2000 and funded partly through premiums from age 40, has also been proposed as a model for Malaysia (The Star, 2026b). Compared with these

jurisdictions, Malaysia relies on a general right to request flexible working and on employer discretion.

2.10. Megatrends Shaping the Future of Eldercare and Work

Looking ahead, several long-term trends will shape how eldercare and work fit together (Table 3). Demographic ageing will increase the number of older people needing care; worldwide, about two in three people who reach older age are likely to need support with daily activities (World Health Organization, 2024). Falling fertility and smaller families will reduce the number of siblings who can share care. The rise of dementia will increase the intensity and duration of care. Women's rising labour-force participation will reduce the pool of full-time family carers, and the ILO projects that 2.3 billion people worldwide will need care by 2030 (International Labour Organization, 2018). Care technologies, from medication dispensers and motion sensors to trackers and telehealth, are also spreading. A systematic review of 56 studies found that carers of people with dementia generally appreciated assistive technology, but that their experiences varied and raised issues of competence, acceptance and ethics (Sriram et al., 2019).

Table 3. Megatrends shaping eldercare and work in Malaysia

Megatrend	Evidence	Implication for employers
Demographic ageing	65+ at 8.4% in 2026; aged nation (14%) projected by 2048	More employees, especially in mid-career, will have eldercare duties
Smaller families	Fertility rate of 1.67 in 2025, below replacement since 2013	Fewer siblings to share care; heavier load per employee
Rise of dementia	Cases projected to rise from about 210,000 (2022) to 668,000 (2050)	Longer, more intensive and less predictable care
Changing gender roles	Women perform about 80% of unpaid care in Asia-Pacific; 69.5% of Malaysians outside the labour force are women	Risk of losing women from the workforce unless care is shared and supported
Care technologies	Monitoring, medication and telehealth devices spreading; carers generally value them	Potential to reduce time conflict, but new boundary pressures

Source: Compiled by the author(s) from Malay Mail (2025a; 2025b), Thinagar (2026), International Labour Organization (2018) and Sriram et al. (2019).

2.11. Research Gap

Several gaps stand out from this review. Malaysian research has described working caregivers in some detail, but it has not modelled the organisational mechanisms that shape what happens to them. The gerontological and organisational literatures on caregiving and work have rarely spoken to each other. Most existing models are static, with little room for anticipation, technology or the way care changes over time. And comparative policy analysis has seldom informed theory on eldercare and work in Asian settings. Table 4 summarises the key evidence on which the framework draws.

Table 4. Key evidence informing the framework

Source	Context and design	Key finding relevant to the framework
Chan et al. (2023)	Survey of 17,286 employees, 230 Malaysian organisations	49.6% had caregiving duties; carers of older adults had higher odds of distress and illness
Lilly et al. (2007)	Systematic review of labour-market outcomes	Carers work fewer hours; heavy carers are more likely to leave work
Lam et al. (2022)	Systematic review of 45 studies, JD-R framework	Supervisor support, flexibility, family-supportive culture and eldercare programmes are key resources
Spann et al. (2020)	Scoping review of 92 publications	Six primary challenges, including competing demands, emotional stress and financial pressure
Ireson et al. (2018)	International scoping review, 88 workplaces	Support services most common; stigma and low awareness limit use
Allen et al. (2013); Kossek et al. (2011)	Meta-analyses	Flexibility use and family-specific support are related to lower conflict
Pearlin et al. (1990)	Theoretical model	Primary care stressors proliferate into job-caregiving conflict

Source: Compiled by the author(s) from the sources cited.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a conceptual paper that combines the theory synthesis and model-building approaches described by Jaakkola (2020). The domain theory is work-family conflict. The caregiver stress process model, COR theory, the work-home resources model and life course theory serve as method theories that supply the mechanisms, while research on boundary management, invisible identities, filial piety, gender and the sociocultural stress and coping model supplies the boundary conditions. The framework is designed to meet Whetten's (1989) criteria for a theoretical contribution by specifying the relevant constructs, their relationships, the logic connecting them and the conditions under which they hold.

Literature was identified through searches of Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed and Google Scholar using combinations of the terms eldercare, informal care, working carers, caregiver stress process, work-family conflict, work-family enrichment, flexible working, family-supportive supervisor behaviour, disclosure, filial piety, anticipated work-family conflict, assistive technology and Malaysia. Priority was given to systematic and scoping reviews, meta-analyses, foundational theoretical works and Malaysian studies. The Malaysian context was established from Department of Statistics Malaysia data as reported in national media, the Employment (Amendment) Act 2022, and the Malaysia Care Strategic Framework and Action Plan 2026-2030. The international comparison drew on legislation and official or professional summaries for the United Kingdom, the European Union, Germany, Japan and South Korea, and on reports by the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization. Cross-cultural perspectives were drawn from comparative welfare research, the cross-cultural caregiving literature and cross-national studies of the work-family interface. Statistical and policy information was checked against at least two sources where possible. No primary data were collected, and ethics approval was therefore not required.

Generative AI disclosure: Claude (Anthropic; model Claude Opus 5.5) was used on 8 November 2026 to assist with literature searching, structuring the argument, drafting and language editing. The prompts used are available from the corresponding author on request. The author(s) verified all references and policy information against the original sources and take full responsibility for the content.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: THE CARE-WORK TRAJECTORY FRAMEWORK

4.1. OVERVIEW

Fig. 1 presents the framework. Its starting point is the care-work trajectory, defined as the sequence of anticipation, active care and possible withdrawal through which an employee's eldercare responsibilities unfold alongside paid work. In the anticipation stage, expected future care generates anticipatory work-family conflict that can shape career decisions before care begins (Proposition 9). In the active stage, eldercare demands generate time-based and strain-based conflict (Proposition 1), which affects well-being and work behaviour and can lead to reduced hours or exit (Proposition 2). Three organisational resources weaken these links: flexible working arrangements (Proposition 3), family-supportive supervision (Proposition 4) and eldercare-specific support (Proposition 5). Five conditions shape the process: caregiving disclosure (Proposition 6), filial obligation (Proposition 7), gender (Proposition 8), care technologies (Proposition 10) and the cultural congruence of organisational support (Proposition 11).

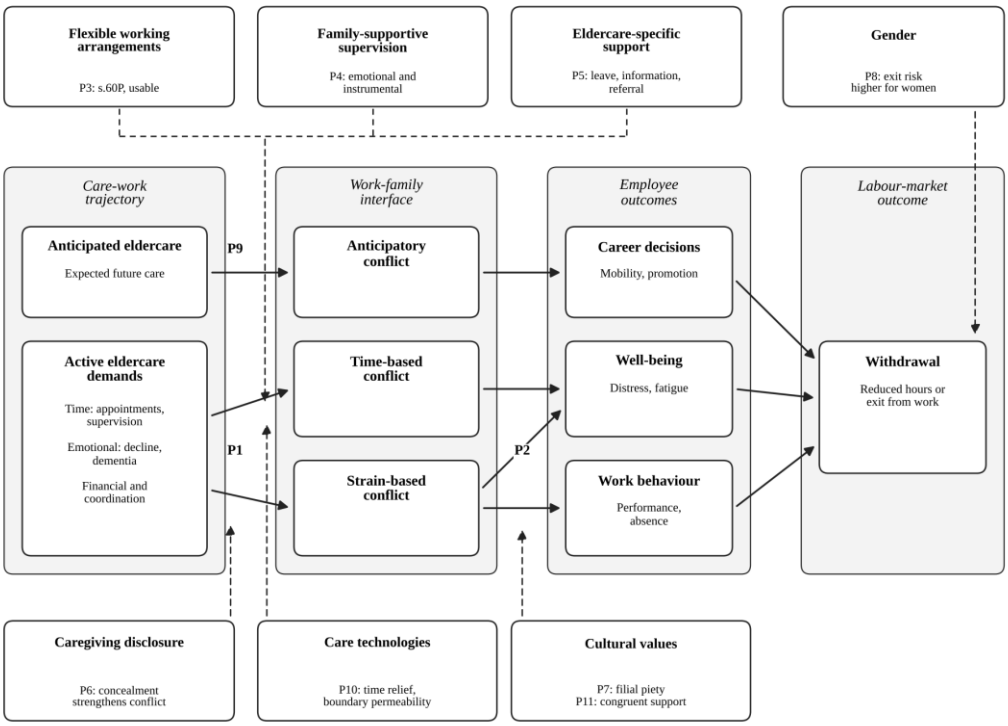

Fig. 1. The care-work trajectory framework for Malaysian employees with eldercare responsibilities

Source: Developed for this study.

Thinking in terms of a trajectory matters for two reasons. Eldercare is dynamic: demands usually grow as a parent's health declines, so an arrangement that works well at the start may break down a year later. The trajectory view also brings the future into the present. Employees who expect to care for a parent may already be adjusting their careers, and organisations that wait until care becomes visible may have lost the opportunity to retain them.

4.2. Eldercare Demands and Work-Family Conflict

In stress process terms, the care recipient's needs are primary stressors, and work-family conflict is a secondary role strain into which those stressors proliferate (Pearlin et al., 1990). Time demands, such as accompanying a parent to appointments, arranging transport, supervising medication and covering gaps in other care, consume the resource of time and generate time-based conflict. Emotional demands, such as watching a parent decline, managing dementia-related behaviour and making decisions about residential care, deplete energy and mood and generate strain-based conflict (Hobfoll, 1989; Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). The dependence of the care recipient is a key driver of these effects (Bainbridge and Broady, 2017). In Malaysia, the limited availability of affordable formal care means that families absorb demands that might elsewhere be shared with services.

Proposition 1: The intensity of eldercare demands, reflected in the care recipient's dependence and the time and emotional load of care, is positively related to both time-based and strain-based family-to-work conflict among Malaysian employees.

4.3. Consequences for Well-Being, Performance and Employment

Sustained conflict erodes well-being and work behaviour. The higher odds of distress and illness among Malaysian employees caring for older adults (Chan et al., 2023) are consistent with this pathway, as are the emotional and health challenges identified in international reviews (Spann et al., 2020). Conflict also affects performance through lateness, absence and presenteeism. When conflict cannot be resolved, employees reduce their hours or leave. International evidence shows that this step is concentrated among those with heavy caregiving responsibilities (Lilly et al., 2007), which suggests that withdrawal follows a threshold pattern: employees absorb rising demands until conflict exceeds their remaining resources, at which point exit becomes likely. COR theory's concept of loss spirals explains this pattern (Hobfoll, 1989).

Proposition 2: Eldercare-related work-family conflict is negatively related to employee well-being and work performance and positively related to reduced working hours and exit from paid employment, and the relationship with exit is strongest at high levels of caregiving intensity.

4.4. Flexible Working Arrangements

Flexible working arrangements allow employees to reallocate work across time and place. Sections 60P and 60Q of the Employment Act 1955 give Malaysian employees a formal

route to request them, although employers may refuse with written reasons (Chau, 2023). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that the use of flexibility, rather than its mere availability, is associated with lower conflict (Allen et al., 2013), and flexible arrangements are among the most important workplace resources for working carers of older people (Lam et al., 2022). For eldercare, temporal flexibility, such as the ability to change start and finish times or to take short absences, may matter more than remote work, because many care tasks require the employee's physical presence elsewhere.

Proposition 3: The approved and actual use of flexible working arrangements, particularly temporal flexibility, weakens the positive relationship between eldercare demands and time-based work-family conflict.

4.5. Family-Supportive Supervision

Policy is filtered through supervisors, who in practice decide whether flexibility is granted and whether employees feel able to ask for help. Family-supportive supervisors provide emotional support that reduces strain and instrumental support, such as rearranging schedules and arranging cover, that reduces time conflict (Hammer et al., 2009). Family-specific support has stronger effects on conflict than general support (Kossek et al., 2011), and supervisor support for eldercare is identified as a key leader-level resource for working carers (Lam et al., 2022). In Malaysian workplaces, where deference to managers remains strong, the supervisor's stance is likely to be decisive.

Proposition 4: Family-supportive supervisor behaviours weaken the positive relationships between eldercare demands and both time-based and strain-based work-family conflict.

4.6. Eldercare-Specific Support

General well-being programmes rarely address the practical problems of eldercare. Eldercare-specific support includes short carer's leave, information about care services and government schemes, referral to accredited providers, and counselling with expertise in ageing and dementia. Such support reduces the coordination burden and uncertainty that drive strain, consistent with the finding that employer eldercare programmes and awareness of referral services are important organisational resources (Lam et al., 2022). International practice shows that support services are the most common caregiver-friendly policy (Ireson et al., 2018). The national care framework's goal of training 50,000 skilled caregivers (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2025) creates opportunities for employers to connect employees with accredited services.

Proposition 5: Eldercare-specific organisational support, including carer's leave, care information and referral services, is negatively related to strain-based work-family conflict among employees with eldercare responsibilities.

4.7. Disclosure

Organisational resources help only those whose needs are known. Employees who conceal caregiving cannot request flexibility or supervisor support, and they expend additional

effort managing the concealment (Clair et al., 2005). Disclosure is more likely where employees expect acceptance (Ragins, 2008), and stigma is a major barrier to the use of caregiver-friendly policies (Ireson et al., 2018). Concealment is therefore expected to intensify conflict, while supportive supervision may make disclosure safer.

Proposition 6: Concealment of eldercare responsibilities strengthens the positive relationship between eldercare demands and work-family conflict, and family-supportive supervision is positively related to disclosure of eldercare responsibilities.

4.8. Filial Obligation

The meaning employees attach to care influences its cost. Reciprocal filial piety, grounded in affection and gratitude, may allow employees to experience care as meaningful and to carry patience and purpose into work, consistent with work-family enrichment (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Yeh and Bedford, 2003). Authoritarian filial piety, grounded in duty and self-sacrifice, is more likely to be experienced as a demand that cannot be refused, adding to strain. This distinction may explain why similar caregiving loads produce different outcomes for different Malaysian employees.

Proposition 7: Reciprocal filial piety is positively related to family-to-work enrichment among employees with eldercare responsibilities, whereas authoritarian filial piety strengthens the positive relationship between eldercare demands and strain-based work-family conflict.

4.9. Gender

Eldercare is unequally distributed and so are its consequences. Women perform most unpaid care in Malaysia and the wider region (International Labour Organization, 2018; Thinagar, 2026), and they account for most of those outside the labour force for family reasons (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2025). Life course theory suggests that gendered expectations accumulate over time (Elder, 1998), so that women who reduce work for childcare may also be expected to reduce it for eldercare. Malaysian data show that men also report substantial caregiving roles (Chan et al., 2023), but we expect the labour-market consequences to fall more heavily on women.

Proposition 8: Gender moderates the relationship between eldercare-related work-family conflict and withdrawal from paid work, such that the relationship is stronger for women than for men.

4.10. The Future: Anticipated Eldercare

The trajectory framework holds that eldercare affects careers before care begins. Employees who expect to care for a parent, for example because a parent's health is declining or because they are the sibling expected to provide care, may anticipate conflict and adjust their careers accordingly (Cinamon, 2006). They may decline promotions that bring longer hours, turn down transfers away from their parents' home town, or avoid roles that require travel. These decisions are rarely visible to employers, who may interpret them

as a lack of ambition. As Malaysia ages and families shrink, the number of employees in this anticipation stage will grow. Japan's requirement that employers inform employees about family care leave around age 40 (HLS Global, 2025) illustrates a policy that targets this stage, by reducing uncertainty about the support that will be available.

Proposition 9: Anticipated eldercare responsibilities are positively related to anticipatory work-family conflict, which in turn is positively related to career-limiting decisions such as declining promotion or mobility, and early information about available support weakens this relationship.

4.11. The Future: Care Technologies

Care technologies are likely to become a significant part of eldercare in the coming decades. Remote monitoring, medication dispensers, motion sensors and telehealth can reduce the need for physical presence and allow carers to check on a parent from work, potentially reducing time-based conflict. Evidence suggests that carers generally value such technology, but that its effects depend on competence, acceptance and ethical concerns (Sriram et al., 2019). Technology may also increase the permeability of the boundary between work and care, as alerts and calls reach employees throughout the working day (Clark, 2000). COR theory suggests that technology will act as a net resource only where carers have the skills to use it and the control to manage when they respond.

Proposition 10: The use of care technologies is negatively related to time-based work-family conflict but positively related to boundary permeability, such that care technologies reduce overall conflict only when employees have the competence to use them and control over when they respond to care-related alerts.

4.12. Cultural Congruence of Organisational Support

Setting Asian and Western perspectives side by side makes one thing clear: the form that support takes matters as much as how much of it there is. Support built on individualistic assumptions treats eldercare as a private problem to be solved by the employee, often through leave or counselling. In Malaysia, where care is widely experienced as a family and religious duty (Heng, 2026; Alavi, 2008), such support may be under-used, partly because employees do not see their situation reflected in it and partly because collectivist norms make it harder to ask for individual concessions. Culturally congruent support, by contrast, recognises care for parents as honourable rather than as a distraction from work, allows flexibility for family-wide care arrangements and religious occasions, and can extend information and referral services to the wider family. The sociocultural stress and coping model suggests that culture affects outcomes mainly through social support and coping (Knight and Sayegh, 2010), so support that works with these cultural resources is likely to be more effective than support that ignores them.

Proposition 11: Culturally congruent organisational support, which recognises eldercare as a family and religious duty and accommodates family-wide care arrangements, is more strongly related to disclosure of eldercare responsibilities and to lower work-family conflict among Malaysian employees than support designed on individualistic assumptions.

4.13. Theoretical Implications

The framework adds to theory in three related ways. By bringing the caregiver stress process model together with COR theory and the work-home resources model, it shows that job-caregiving conflict is at once a secondary stressor, in the gerontological sense, and a process of resource depletion, in the organisational sense. That combination lets us say exactly where in the stress process organisational resources such as supervision and flexibility do their work. Life course theory, in turn, introduces time into models of work-family conflict. The anticipation stage in particular pushes work-family theory beyond conflict that people experience now to conflict they expect, and to the career choices that expectation produces. The framework also responds to calls for culture-sensitive work-family theory (Powell et al., 2009) by bringing cultural and technological conditions into resource-based accounts. It shows that culture enters the care-work trajectory not only as a source of obligation but also through the fit between employees' values and the support their employers provide. The dual filial piety model shows that the same demand can deplete or enrich depending on its meaning, and the analysis of care technologies shows that a single resource can simultaneously relieve time demands and increase boundary permeability.

4.14. Practical Implications

For employers, the trajectory framework implies that support should be matched to the stage of care. Table 5 sets out recommended practices for each stage. In the anticipation stage, employers can provide information about available support to all employees in mid-career, following the Japanese model, so that employees do not limit their careers unnecessarily. In the active stage, they can make Section 60P flexibility genuinely usable, train supervisors in family-supportive behaviours, offer short carer's leave and connect employees with accredited care services. In the withdrawal stage, they can offer phased leave, reduced hours with a right to return, and re-entry pathways. Throughout, normalising disclosure, for example by acknowledging National Caregiving Day on 29 October (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2025), can make support reachable.

Table 5. Recommended employer practices across the care-work trajectory

Trajectory stage	Recommended practice	Linked proposition
Anticipation	Inform mid-career employees about carer support before care begins; discuss career plans without penalty	P9
Active care	Make s.60P flexibility usable, especially temporal flexibility; train supervisors in family-supportive behaviours	P3, P4
Active care	Offer short carer's leave, care information and referral to accredited providers	P5
Active care	Support carers in using care technologies and agree norms for responding to alerts during work	P10
Throughout	Normalise disclosure; guarantee confidentiality; acknowledge National Caregiving Day	P6

Trajectory stage	Recommended practice	Linked proposition
Throughout	Frame eldercare as honourable; accommodate family-wide care arrangements and religious occasions; extend information to family members	P11
Withdrawal risk	Offer phased leave, reduced hours with a right to return, and re-entry pathways; monitor exits by gender	P2, P8

Source: Developed for this study.

Policymakers have several options, and the international comparison shows that none of them is untested. The simplest would be a statutory right to a few days of short carer's leave, unpaid or partly paid, as in the United Kingdom and the European Union, since the most common need is time off for emergencies and appointments. A Japanese-style duty to inform employees about carer support in mid-career would reach people at the anticipation stage. The flexible working guidelines could include specific guidance on caregivers, with a preference for temporal flexibility. And the debate on a national long-term care financing system, which commentators have linked to the Japanese insurance model (The Star, 2026b), should consider how care support payments, as in Germany, could replace lost income during carer's leave. Data collection is also needed. Adding questions on eldercare to the Labour Force Survey would allow the effects of policy on working carers to be monitored.

4.15. Limitations and Research Agenda

The framework is conceptual, and its propositions need empirical testing. Table 6 sets out a research agenda. Longitudinal designs are especially important, because the trajectory concept implies that relationships change as care intensifies. Validated measures exist for work-family conflict and enrichment (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006), family-supportive supervision (Hammer et al., 2009), filial piety (Yeh and Bedford, 2003) and anticipated conflict (Cinamon, 2006), but measures of eldercare-specific disclosure and of care-technology use at work need to be developed. The framework treats Malaysian employees as a single group, whereas ethnicity, income, sector and the availability of siblings and domestic help are likely to shape both demands and resources. The policy landscape is also changing, and the effects of Sections 60P and 60Q and of the national care framework on carers remain to be evaluated. The international comparison, too, is illustrative rather than exhaustive, and the transferability of foreign policies to Malaysia's institutional context requires careful study.

Table 6. Research agenda for testing the propositions

Proposition	Focus	Suggested design
P1, P2	Demands, conflict and withdrawal	Multi-wave panel of employed carers, tracking care intensity, conflict and exits
P3-P5	Organisational resources	Multilevel study of carers nested in teams and organisations with different support policies
P6	Disclosure	Mixed-methods study of disclosure decisions and their consequences
P7	Filial obligation	Cross-ethnic survey using the dual filial piety scale

Proposition	Focus	Suggested design
P11	Cultural congruence	Comparison of support uptake and outcomes across Malay, Chinese and Indian employees and across Western-designed and locally adapted programmes
P8	Gender	Linked employer-employee data on exits and reduced hours by gender
P9	Anticipated eldercare	Longitudinal study of mid-career employees before and after care onset
P10	Care technologies	Field study or experiment comparing carers with and without monitoring technology

Source: Developed for this study.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Malaysia's transition to an aged society means that caring for older parents will become a normal part of working life for a large share of employees, and dementia will make that care longer and more demanding. We have argued that eldercare is best understood as a trajectory that begins before care starts and can end in exit from work, and that its consequences depend on the resources employers provide and the conditions in which care takes place. Usable flexibility, supportive supervisors, eldercare-specific support and early information can keep carers healthy, productive and in work, while silence and inflexibility push them, especially women, out of the labour force. Because Malaysian employees experience care as a family and religious duty rather than a private choice, support borrowed unchanged from Western models is unlikely to be enough. The eleven propositions offer a basis for testing these claims, and the international comparison shows that Malaysia has policy options available. For employers like the one in our opening example, the question is not whether this will affect their workforce, but whether they will notice in time.

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