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Job Demands, Job Satisfaction and Women's Job Performance among Malaysian Public Servants

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the relationship between three job demands (workload, role conflict and emotional labor) and women's job performance and assessed the role of job satisfaction in this relationship for women working as public servants in Malaysia. Based on the Job Demands-Resources Theory and the Conservation of Resources Theory, the three job demands were described as three different work conditions rather than as one stress construct. A survey that utilized a quantitative cross-sectional design was completed by 714 participants, of which 572 valid responses were obtained after the survey data were cleaned. With the exception of workload, the direct effects of the job demands on job satisfaction and job performance were analyzed using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with a bootstrap procedure. The results of the analysis revealed that emotional labor in the performance of women public servants was positively significant ($\beta = 0.290$, $p < .001$), while role conflict in job satisfaction was negatively significant ($\beta = -0.168$, $p = .014$). Job satisfaction of public servants had a positive and significant effect on the job performance of women public servants ($\beta = 0.458$, $p < .001$). Role conflict did not have a positive effect on performance and workload did not have either a positive or negative effect on job satisfaction or job performance. Additionally, the mediation analysis showed that role conflict was negatively significant to the job performance of women public servants with job satisfaction as a mediating factor ($\beta = -0.077$, 95% CI [-0.137, -0.012]), while the emotional labor and workload indirect effects were not significant. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the effects of job demands are demand-specific. Emotional labor was positively associated with women's job performance but was not significantly related to job satisfaction, whereas role conflict negatively affected job satisfaction and indirectly affected job performance through job satisfaction. Workload showed no significant direct or indirect relationships. The study discusses role clarity and job satisfaction as significant human resource concerns in women's performance and outlines a demand-specific explanation of the public sector.

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1. Introduction

Women fulfill important roles across all aspects of the modern public service, participating in each of the major strands of administrative functioning, client service, accountability and efficiency. Admittedly, the nature of public service work is demanding. Employees are expected to work at a high volume, manage differing and even conflicting role expectations and maintain the degree of autonomy over their emotions and behaviors that is required for politeness and civility toward clients, management and colleagues. Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory describes how demanding work conditions may result in strain due to persistent and poorly managed effort [1], [2]. Conservation of Resources (COR) theory offers a complementary perspective and suggests that employees may view demanding work conditions as a threat to the depletion of their resources [3].

Public service is a useful context to consider this matter. Formal rules backed up by legal frameworks and layered reporting structures along with the need to fulfill service standards and obligations may continually challenge employees to maintain acceptable performance, all at great personal cost [4]. A job demand may very well not result in an observable drop in performance. Employees may experience an emotional cost, a loss of satisfaction and a diminished motivation to perform, all while meeting the standards expected of them. For women, this is an especially important consideration. Gyllensten and Palmer [5] highlighted gender differences in the experience and sources of workplace stress, while Burke [6] demonstrated the relevance of occupational conditions to women's work stress and health. Bond et al. [7] further showed that gendered working conditions are associated with health and work-related outcomes. Together, these studies indicate that women's workplace experiences should not be treated as identical to those of the broader workforce.

Most stress-performance literature describes workplace stress in a broad or general manner. Such broad descriptions can mask how differences in demands can be meaningfully differentiated. Workload and role conflict are both characterized by incompatibility, but, unlike role conflict, emotional labor involves work demands that require the regulation of emotional displays. The demands listed above may have differing effects and outcomes. There are also demands that may be time consuming and taxing and demands that may be characterized by uncertainty and/or emotional regulation.

A second limitation relates to mechanism. Job satisfaction is one of the most well-researched positive correlates of employee performance, but asserting job satisfaction mediates all stress-performance relationships is incorrect. It has also been shown that workplace stressors have an impact on job satisfaction [8] and the meta-analytic studies state that there is a strong positive relationship between job satisfaction and job performance overall [9]. However, the more detailed conceptualization is whether job satisfaction is the channel through which some job demands are converted to performance. In the case of role conflict, it may first negatively impact the employee's perception of the job, but performance may be impacted in the case of workload due to an increase in effort. Emotional labor may contain both positive and negative aspects depending on the goal of the emotional regulation and the subsequent service delivery.

Despite extensive research on workplace stress and performance, limited attention has been given to whether specific job demands operate differently through job satisfaction, particularly among women in the Malaysian public service. To address this gap, this study aims to examine the pathways and relationships between workload, role conflict, emotional labor, job satisfaction and women's job performance within the Malaysian public service. This study makes three contributions. First, it differentiates workplace demands and shows that the same category of 'job demand' may produce different behavioral and attitudinal responses. Second, it tests job satisfaction as a demand-

specific mediator, rather than a generalized mediator. Third, it provides a more elaborate account of emotional labor by analyzing whether, in some cases, emotional labor can complement and enhance job performance. These contributions extend the application of JD-R and COR theories by demonstrating that different job demands may operate through distinct pathways in the Malaysian public-service context. The focused model addresses three research questions: (1) How are workload, role conflict and emotional labor related to women's job performance? (2) How are these job demands related to job satisfaction? and (3) Does job satisfaction mediate the relationships between the three job demands and women's job performance?

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Theoretical Grounding

JD-R Theory allows researchers to delineate work characteristics in terms of the effort they require and the resources available to manage them [1], [2]. Not all job demands are negative. Job demands become costs when effort must be sustained beyond recovery or compensated by the availability of resources. The contemporary form of JD-R Theory acknowledges that the meaning and consequences of a demand are dependent on the person, the situation and the context of work [2]. For this reason, the theory is applicable in differentiating workload, conflict of roles and emotional labor from merging them into a single stress index.

In this regard, COR Theory adds further relevance by focusing on the protection and loss of valued resources [3]. Demands may consume time, energy, emotional capacity and certainty to the extent of causing disruption to an employee's functioning. This theory has applicable value in the current study because it describes why performance can be stable while an attitude resource such as satisfaction with the job can be deteriorating. An employee may invest effort to preserve performance of the task, but this effort may alter the employee's satisfaction with the job. Job satisfaction is a mechanism of evaluating demands.

JD-R and COR offer two cornerstone propositions that underpin the formulation of the model. First, because different demands have distinct requirements for coping with them, they should be analyzed separately. Second, in the case of the demand-performance and satisfaction-performance relationships, it should be assumed that an indirect relationship is present until it is determined empirically that a direct relationship is more significant.

2.2 Workload, Job Satisfaction and Women's Job Performance

Workload describes the quantity and speed at which work is completed within a certain amount of time. The Quantitative Workload Inventory defines workload as the combination of quantity and speed at which work must be completed by the employee. High workload can cumulate over time, resulting in workers needing to exert more effort than what is required to complete a task and possibly having less time for recovery. Similar recent studies describe demanding workloads as having a relationship with recovery and other strain-related outcomes [11]. In a JD-R framework, high workload is expected to consume energy and attention, thus decreasing the ability to perform the task.

The impact of workload on performance is not always immediate. In rule-bound circumstances, employees respond to increases in workload by working faster, exerting more effort or ensuring the required tasks are completed. Although this may sustain performance in the short term, it can adversely impact the job satisfaction of the employee. It is expected that high workload will have negative satisfaction, efficient recovery and an adequate balance of work demands and capacity.

Accordingly, the study tests both the direct relationship with performance and the relationship with job satisfaction.

H1a: Workload is significantly associated with women's job performance.

H2a: Workload is significantly associated with job satisfaction.

2.3 Role Conflict, Job Satisfaction and Women's Job Performance

Role conflict is characterized by discrepant, contradictor or competing demands placed on employees. Frameworks for role conflict attribute dysfunctional work outcomes to the presence of incompatible role demands [1]. Unlike the case for inadequate workload, when role conflict exists, employees may be uncertain about which demands should take priority.

Role conflict is likely to impact levels of job satisfaction. Public sector employees must balance multiple lines of accountability and address competing demands from their superiors and comply with policies and requests, as well as satisfy the expectations of the citizens they serve. Conflicting demands will likely result in diminished perceptions of fairness, clarity and control and a sense of underachievement. Several studies have documented the adverse impacts of job stressors and conflicting demands on job satisfaction and other undesirable work attitudes [8], [13]. In the present study, it is anticipated that role conflict will have a direct impact on job performance, since attending to conflicting demands is likely to increase uncertainty among employees, which will in turn result in slower and more fragmented attention and employees being unable to satisfy all demands.

H1b: Role conflict is significantly associated with women's job performance.

H2b: Role conflict is significantly associated with job satisfaction.

2.4 Emotional Labor, Job Satisfaction and Women's Job Performance

Emotional labor is the regulating and expressing of feelings at the behest/directive of the employer/organization. The Emotional Labor Scale operationalizes many dimensions of emotional display and emotion-regulation behavior [14]. Expressing emotions and regulating them on a frequent basis can become a demand, as employees are expected to conceal their feelings, express emotions that are contrary to how they feel and/or regulate their emotions continuously. Pugliesi [15] linked emotional labor with work stress, job satisfaction and well-being, while Kim and Wang [16] examined its relationship with burnout through a job demands-resources perspective. Seery and Corrigall [17] further associated emotional labor with work attitudes and emotional exhaustion. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that emotional labor can generate both psychological and attitudinal consequences.

However, emotional labor should not be confused with emotional dysfunction. Maintaining a calm, patient and polite demeanor, whilst remaining professionally composed, can be directly related to success in an occupation that involves a service/assistance oriented role. Research has increasingly identified diverse forms of emotional labor and has begun to identify the discrepancies in their impacts [18]. For public servants who come into contact with citizens and stakeholders on a daily basis, emotion regulation poses a dual challenge and opportunity. It imposes a psychological cost, while also serving as a competence and platform of professionalism in the public service. Because these competing factors make the relationship more circuitous, the aim of the present study is to see if emotional labor is related to job satisfaction and performance, rather than assuming a negative relationship will exist.

H1c: Emotional labor is significantly associated with women's job performance.

H2c: Emotional labor is significantly associated with job satisfaction.

2.5 Job Satisfaction as a Mediating Mechanism

Job satisfaction is an employee's overall positive judgment of their job. The structure has been rigorously studied and has strong job performance ties [19]. A major meta-analysis showed a positive true-score association between overall satisfaction and performance, verifying that the way employees' evaluate their work relates to the way they perform it [9]. In public service, satisfaction is critical because continued performance relies on consistency, commitment, service orientation and the willingness to engage with formal restrictions and continue to put in effort.

Satisfaction is a mediator because first, job demands may alter an employee's evaluation of their work. Overly burdensome, contradictory or emotionally taxing work may result in lowered satisfaction, which would then lead to lowered motivation, persistence and reduced effort on the job, all of which would negatively affect performance. This particular demand may be specific, but role conflict, which would compromise work clarity and consistency, is demand-specific and therefore may operate through satisfaction. The closing of the service gap may at times require psychologically taxing emotional labor and that effort may in fact strengthen service performance. These effects must be studied separately.

H3: Job satisfaction is significantly and positively associated with women's job performance.

H4a: Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between workload and women's job performance.

H4b: Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between role conflict and women's job performance.

H4c: Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between emotional labor and women's job performance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study used a quantitative cross-sectional method to test hypotheses regarding job demands, job satisfaction and women's job performance. The sample was female employees working in the Malaysian public service. This sample was chosen because the nature of public service incorporates defined processes and methods, multiple reporting lines, obligations to provide a service and interactions with many internal and external stakeholders. These combined factors lend themselves to the possibility of different job demands producing distinct direct and attitudinal effects.

A purposive, non-random sampling technique was employed to reach women working in the Malaysian public service. The survey was completed by 714 respondents. After the survey was cleaned for incomplete or poorly answered questions, 572 respondents were kept for analysis. This number satisfied the minimum required sample size to conduct the proposed PLS-SEM analysis. Because purposive sampling was employed, results were not generalizable to the broader population. Rather, the findings of the study describe relationships among the constructs of the evaluated group.

Respondents were assured of the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study and of the protection of their electronic informed consent prior to completing the questionnaire. The reporting source stated that no formal institutional ethical clearance was obtained for the anonymous survey. It was explained to respondents that there would be no right or wrong answers to the questions and that the data would be used for research. These harm-reduction strategies attempted to controls the evaluation apprehension and common-method bias.

3.2 Measures

The survey included demographic and multi-item measures for focal constructs. All substantive items utilized a 5-point Likert agreement scale. Each construct was modeled reflectively using 5 indicators. Items were drafted to fit the current state of the Malaysian work environment. However, the drafting of the items preserved the concepts behind the measures.

Items for workload were drafted from Spector and Jex's Quantitative Workload Inventory [10]. Role conflict was measured with items from Rizzo, House and Lirtzman [12]. Emotional labor was assessed with items from Brotheridge and Lee [14]. Job satisfaction was measured with items reflecting Brayfield and Rothe [19]. Women's job performance was assessed with items reflecting Williams and Anderson [20]. The performance measure assessed the respondents' perceived capacity to perform work with ease, fulfill responsibilities, uphold standards and accomplish work outcomes.

3.3 Data Analysis

PLS-SEM was used given that the study aimed to estimate the strength of the relationships in a predictive, variance-focused framework. It also contained multiple direct and indirect relationships and a latent variable model. In line with stated best practices for PLS-SEM reporting, the measurement model was evaluated prior to evaluating the empirical results for the structural model. Indicator reliability was assessed with outer loadings, while composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were used to assess the internal consistency and assess convergent validity, respectively. Discriminant validity was assessed with the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, for which values below the conservative thresholds indicate empirical differentiation of the estimated constructs [22].

The structural model was then analyzed by standardized path coefficients along with bootstrapped samples and their respective standard errors, t-values and p-values. The value of R^2 was reported for assessing the variance accounted for in the endogenous constructs, while f^2 was reported for available substantive effect-size estimates. Mediation was assessed in terms of bootstrapped specific indirect effects. The 95 percent confidence interval from the bootstrap was the definite criterion; an indirect effect was considered significant if the interval did not include zero [23]. Since the design is cross-sectional, the term 'effect' is to be interpreted in the statistical sense of PLS-SEM and under no circumstance should it be interpreted as directional causality.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Measurement Model

The five focal constructs demonstrated sufficient reliability and convergent validity. Across constructs, indicator loadings retained in the measurement model ranged from 0.544 to 0.940 for workload, 0.855 to 0.912 for role conflict, 0.821 to 0.873 for emotional labor, 0.842 to 0.909 for job satisfaction and 0.893 to 0.925 for women's job performance. All CR values exceeded 0.70 and all AVE values exceeded 0.50, indicating supportive internal consistency and convergent validity [21]. The relatively low loading of WL2 (0.544) was above the minimum retention threshold used in the source analysis and was retained in the measurement model together with other stronger loadings.

Table 1
Measurement Model Summary

Construct	Loading range	CR	AVE
Workload	0.544–0.940	0.884	0.611
Role Conflict	0.855–0.912	0.942	0.766
Emotional Labour	0.821–0.873	0.929	0.722
Job Satisfaction	0.842–0.909	0.946	0.778
Women's Job Performance	0.893–0.925	0.960	0.828

4.2 Discriminant Validity and Model Explanatory Power

HTMT values among the focal constructs ranged from 0.106 to 0.644 and fell below 0.85 consequently supporting discriminant validity [22]. The highest focal HTMT value was observed for workload and role conflict (0.644). As supplementary fit diagnostics, the source model reported SRMR = 0.062 and NFI = 0.983. The structural model accounted for 9.8 percent of the variance in job satisfaction (R^2 = 0.098) and 25.9 percent of the variance in women's job performance (R^2 = 0.259). The R^2 values indicated that the satisfaction demand variables moderately accounted for the satisfaction variance, whereas job satisfaction, together with the direct paths and demand variables, significantly accounted for the performance variance.

Table 2
HTMT Ratios among Focal Constructs

Construct	EL	JS	RC	WJP	WL
Emotional Labour (EL)	—				
Job Satisfaction (JS)	0.196	—			
Role Conflict (RC)	0.530	0.300	—		
Women's Job Performance (WJP)	0.171	0.470	0.106	—	
Workload (WL)	0.598	0.222	0.644	0.140	—

4.3 Direct Relationships

Table 3 indicates direct relationships. The positive and significant association between emotional labor and women's job performance (β = 0.290, t = 5.432, p < .001) provides support for H1c. Performance was not significantly related to workload (β = -0.014, p = .868) or role conflict (β = -0.104, p = .069) at the 5 percent level. Hence, H1a and H1b are not supported. The role conflict path was negative and almost reached significance. Hence, role conflict is not significantly related to performance.

Concerning satisfaction, role conflict was significantly negatively related to job satisfaction (β = -0.168, t = 2.452, p = .014), thereby supporting H2b. Both workload (β = -0.174, p = .074) and emotional labor (β = -0.006, p = .927) were not significantly related to job satisfaction. Hence, H2a and H2c are not supported. Job satisfaction was the strongest significant predictor of women's job performance in the focused model (β = 0.458, t = 11.538, p < .001), thereby supporting H3. Available f^2 values indicated a small effect for emotional labor on performance (0.081), a very small effect for

role conflict on satisfaction (0.017) and a comparatively larger effect for job satisfaction on performance (0.255).

Table 3
Direct-Effect Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	t	p	Decision	f^2
H1a	Workload → Women's Job Performance	-0.014	0.084	0.167	0.868	Not supported	—
H1b	Role Conflict → Women's Job Performance	-0.104	0.057	1.820	0.069	Not supported	—
H1c	Emotional Labour → Women's Job Performance	0.290	0.053	5.432	< .001	Supported	0.081
H2a	Workload → Job Satisfaction	-0.174	0.097	1.784	0.074	Not supported	—
H2b	Role Conflict → Job Satisfaction	-0.168	0.068	2.452	0.014	Supported	0.017
H2c	Emotional Labour → Job Satisfaction	-0.006	0.067	0.091	0.927	Not supported	—
H3	Job Satisfaction → Women's Job Performance	0.458	0.040	11.538	< .001	Supported	0.255

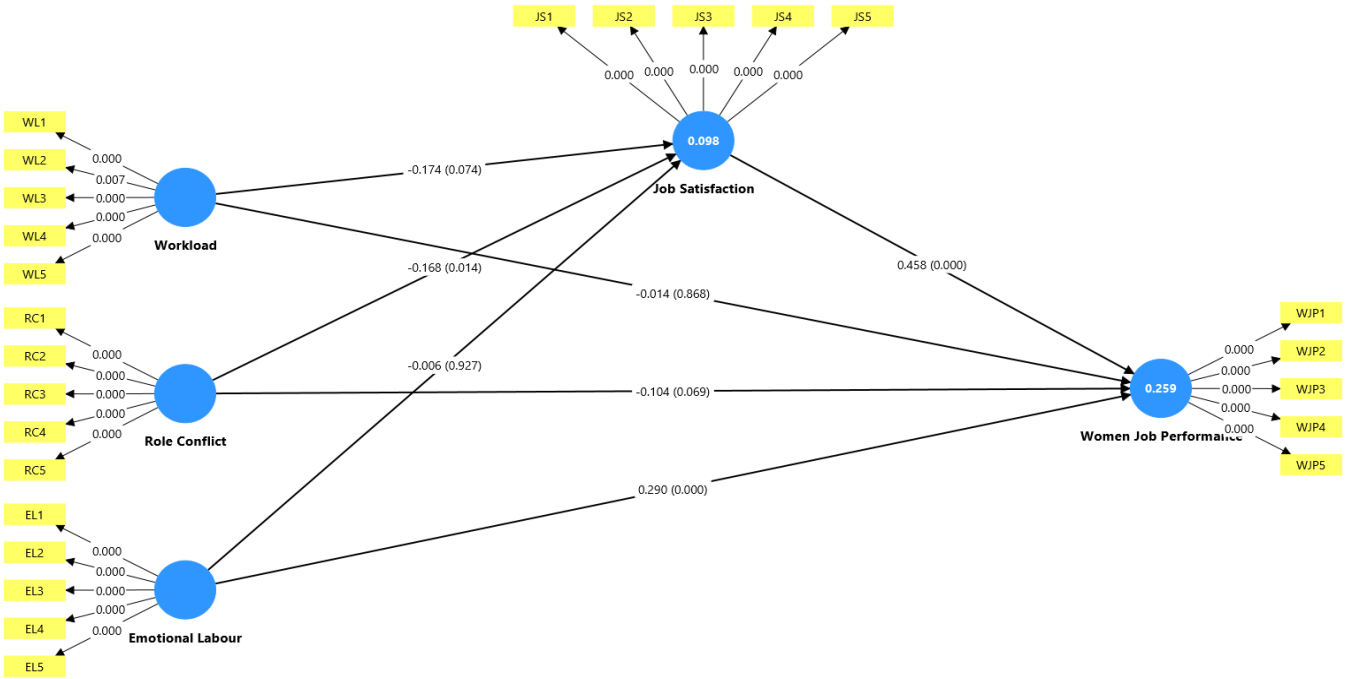


Fig. 1. PLS-SEM model for the direct and mediated relationships

Note: Structural-path labels show standardized coefficients with p-values in parentheses; values inside endogenous constructs are R^2.

4.4 Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapped indirect effects showed that job satisfaction significantly mediated only the relationship between role conflict and women's job performance. The indirect effect was negative and statistically significant (β = -0.077, t = 2.403), with a 95 percent confidence interval from -0.137 to -0.012 that excluded zero. Thus, H4b was supported. As the direct role-conflict – performance relationship was not significant at $p < .05$, while the indirect effect was, this is best described as indirect-mediation; in traditional terms it is full mediation.

The indirect effect of workload was not significant (β = -0.080, 95% CI [-0.147, 0.031]), thus H4a was not supported. The indirect effect of emotional labor was also not significant (β = -0.003, 95% CI [-0.066, 0.051]), thus H4c was not supported. Confidence interval decisions are important as they show that, in this dataset, only role conflict operates through job satisfaction, whereas the other two job demands do not operate through this affective pathway.

Table 4
Bootstrapped Mediation Results

Hypothesis	Indirect path	β	SE	t	95% CI	Decision	Mediation
H4a	Workload → Job Satisfaction → Women's Job Performance	-0.080	0.044	1.831	[-0.147, 0.031]	Not supported	None
H4b	Role Conflict → Job Satisfaction → Women's	-0.077	0.032	2.403	[-0.137, -0.012]	Supported	Indirect-only / full

	Job Performance						
H4c	Emotional Labour → Job Satisfaction → Women's Job Performance	-0.003	0.031	0.092	[-0.066, 0.051]	Not supported	None

5. Discussion

5.1 Direct Effects of Job Demands

The results do not provide support for the three job demands operating as a single stress block. Workload was found to have no significant relationship to job satisfaction or women's job performance. This does not mean workload is of no concern. In a cross-sectional public service setting, employees may be able to sustain performance criteria and job evaluations that are adequate despite more work. Where there are formal procedures and a stated expectation of clear outputs, a situation that would otherwise be the cause of work overload, can evoke compensatory work effort on the part of the employee and thus ensure that tasks are completed. More research on stress has demonstrated that performance can be sustained in a situation where an individual's expectations of their occupation are strong, even when work is stressful [24]. Thus, this result should not be interpreted to mean that job performance can be used as an indicator of whether workload is within reasonable limits.

Role conflict demonstrated the opposite pattern. There was no significant direct relationship with women's job performance, but role conflict was negatively associated with job satisfaction. This means that conflicting expectations impact the perception and evaluation of the job first. Women public servants, because of unclear instructions and multiple conflicting job demands, may feel that their work lacks direction and purpose and is less satisfying, even though formal requirements remain. This is consistent with classic role theory and the negative impact of stress on satisfaction at work [8]. It helps to understand why the performance coefficient, while negative, did not reach the 5 percent significance level. The more immediate impact of role conflict in this model is on satisfaction, rather than performance.

The most interesting conclusion was the positive relationship between emotional labor and performance. Generally, emotional labor is described as a demand since managing feelings can be burdensome and can lead to emotional dissonance and/or exhaustion [15-17]. Public service requires emotional calmness and self-control, courtesy and patience. In fact, these behaviors can be a performance in and of themselves. Thus, the positive coefficient suggests that women who reported greater emotion-management requirements also reported greater performance. This should not be interpreted as evidence that emotional labor is inherently beneficial. It, in fact, reinforces the notion and the dual-function theory that emotional labor also involves considerable effort and actively aids in the processes of professional interaction. The emotional labor-job satisfaction relationship also supports this position in that emotional labor was performance-related, but did not impact how women felt about their jobs.

By comparison, job satisfaction had the largest direct relationship to women's job performance. This result is in line with the broader satisfaction-performance literature [9] and indicates that even in a public sector workplace characterized by formal rules and regulations, performance remains highly evaluative and job-related. Employees who feel satisfied are more likely to stay committed to the organization, maintain a high level of service and show greater diligence and attention in fulfilling

their duties. Therefore, managing performance should also incorporate the overall job satisfaction of employees.

5.2 Why Job Satisfaction Mediates Role Conflict Only

The mediation of role conflict provided the most theory-based research findings of the study. Job satisfaction mediated the relationship between role conflict and women's job performance. Conversely, job satisfaction did not mediate the relationships between workload and emotional labor.

Job satisfaction as a mediator depends on the demand. For example, the mediating role of role conflict is undermined by lack of clarity and inconsistency. Employees experience role conflict if they receive incompatible demands. Such employees may rightfully believe that their work environment is not fair, not manageable and ultimately not worthwhile. These concerns affect job satisfaction, which then becomes the pathway through which role conflict is associated with job performance. An important indirect pathway in combination with a non-significant direct path suggests an indirect-only process. Role conflict matters to performance primarily because it affects the employees' evaluation of the job. This extends JD-R and COR theory.

The absence of workload mediation indicates a different coping mechanism. The workload-to-satisfaction path was negative but insignificant, while the workload-to-performance path was essentially zero. Employees may respond to increased workload through mechanisms other than changes in job satisfaction. Such responses may include improved time management, increased effort or other short-term coping strategies before longer-term exhaustion or work-family imbalance emerges.

The path of emotional labor was positive and direct to performance, but there was no relationship to satisfaction. This pattern proposes that the regulation of emotion may be relevant as a job requirement or supporting skill in the provision of a service. It may also suggest that the integration of all dimensions of emotional labor may mask the effect of the strategy employed. Research that distinguishes surface acting, deep acting and naturally felt emotion has shown that emotional labor strategies can have different consequences [18]. A future model that separates these strategies could explain why emotional labor is positively associated with performance in this sample.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

First, the study puts forth a demand-specific interpretation of JD-R Theory. The findings show that, unlike emotional labor, workload and role conflict should not be considered equivalents 'stress' factors. Their relationships differ in both magnitude and direction and only one demand works via the proposed attitudinal mechanism. This supports the more recent JD-R emphasis on context and demand-specific processes [2].

Second, the study adds to the demand-performance relationship literature and particularly to the role of job satisfaction. Satisfaction is undoubtedly an important construct--it is the strongest direct predictor of performance in the model--however its mediating function is more circumscribed. This provides a more tempered view as to how demands may negatively affect performance. It suggests satisfaction is particularly pertinent when a demand creates a lack of role coherence and evaluative certainty.

Third, the study contributes to the research and literature on women's work stress. The findings suggest that role conflict and demanding work conditions, even when performance is not adversely affected, can lead to a lack of satisfaction. This distinction matters for women public servants because

performance systems may capture if work is completed, but not the psychological cost associated with the work. Hence, the findings help us move beyond the simple stress-performance model and consider the different dimensions involved in the relationships between stressors and outcomes, as well as the mechanisms.

The fourth consideration is related to the emotional labor outcome. This outcome challenges a one-sided strain interpretation. Emotional regulation can be costly, but in a service occupation, this can be encapsulated in competent performance. The finding of a positive direct coefficient does not detract from the existing risks of emotional dissonance; rather, it indicates that future research should differentiate the functional display demands of public work from the harmful effects of particular regulation demands.

5.4 Practical Implications

The results indicate that human resource interventions in the public sector should address role clarity between competing demands rather than relying on generalized workload reduction. Managers should locate instances of competing directives, overlapping duties and conflicting expectations toward women employees from multiple stakeholders. Some means to manage dissatisfaction of role conflict may include the presence of formal escalation pathways, additional written priority directives, role clarification discussions and more consistent management tasks.

Job satisfaction should be viewed in a different light and understood in the context of human resource outcomes as an indicator of performance rather than of employee welfare. Given that satisfaction strongly predicts performance and carries the role-conflict effect, interventions that improve recognition, fairness, developmental opportunity, supervisor communication and the meaningfulness of work may serve to protect performance. The mediation result supports this conclusion. Organizations can weaken the performance impact of role conflict by addressing how employees experience and evaluate their jobs.

The emotional labor finding supports a more balanced service-management approach. Employees should be trained in the regulation of emotions. Service recovery, communication and recovery after emotionally draining work should also be included in service training. Managers should also understand that there is a cost to employees who are performing well in terms of the emotional work.

Finally, the non-significant workload results do not support the increase of workloads. A cross-sectional null workload relationship means that workload was not significantly related to satisfaction or performance in this model at this point in time.

Human resources managers should continue to monitor overtime, recovery, absenteeism, burnout and work–family conflict because their outcomes indicate the effects of the workload that performance outcomes do not.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

The findings are qualified by several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish temporal order and precludes causal inference. Furthermore, the mediation results should be interpreted as statistical associations supported by theory rather than evidence of a causal process. Second, all variables of interest in this study were self-reported and therefore common-method bias and socially desirable responding cannot be completely ruled out, despite the procedural precautions taken. Future research should combine employee-reported demands and satisfaction with supervisor-rated performance indicators.

Third, the statistical generalization is limited due to purposive sampling of women public servants in Malaysia. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized to male employees, private-sector employees or public servants in other national contexts without further empirical testing. Public service includes heterogenous occupational groups, including administration, education, healthcare, technical services and enforcement. There are opportunities for multi-group or occupation specific studies to determine if the same demand pathways hold in these contexts. Fourth, emotional labor was modeled as a single reflective construct. Future studies should distinguish the effects of surface acting, deep acting and naturally felt emotion, because the positive performance relationship may be driven by emotional regulation rather than emotional labor.

Finally, the model explains only a small part of women's job satisfaction and job performance. Additional factors that could be studied include emotional exhaustion, burnout, engagement, work–family conflict and organizational capital, as well as perceived justice in the workplace.

Longitudinal designs would be helpful when trying to analyze whether sustained effort, workload or role conflict would result in lagged outcomes while employees initially maintain performance.

6. Conclusion

It can be concluded that job demands show a selective relationship to women's job performance instead of a general relationship to job performance in the Malaysian public service. There were no associations between workload and job satisfaction or performance. Role conflict was negatively associated with job satisfaction but was not directly associated with women's job performance, while job satisfaction was positively associated with performance. Emotional labor was positively associated with women's job performance but was not significantly associated with job satisfaction. Role conflict and performance were connected indirectly through job satisfaction. This finding suggests that reduced job satisfaction represents an important pathway linking role conflict with performance.

The results allow us to rethink stress-performance relationships in the following ways. Employees can maintain performance even when job demands have negative impacts on how they experience their jobs. Emotional labor may involve psychological demands while also being positively associated with performance in service-oriented work. For human resource management, job satisfaction and role clarity should be at the core of performance management. Public organizations should aim to move beyond generalized stress reduction to specifically identify the demand and outcome and the psychology through which that demand impacts performance.

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Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

Declaration of generative ai and ai-assisted technologies
During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used generative AI tools for language refinement, editing support and manuscript organization. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed, verified and edited by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity and final content of the manuscript.

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