

Women in Middle-Eastern organisations: career experiences, opportunities and work-life balance

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Abstract

This conceptual paper investigates work/career and family life experiences for women working in the Middle eastern region, and specifically the Gulf countries (GCC). Through a review of the literature on gender, work experiences and work-life balance this article argues that most research is conducted in western contexts and has been criticised for not acknowledging ethnicity, nationality, cultural and religious differences when examining work and career experiences and also when looking at conflicts and opportunities in balancing work and family life tasks and responsibilities (for example, Kamenou, 2008; Rana *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, when examining research on women's work experiences in the Arab World, there is a dearth of studies looking at women's career progression, leadership, the glass-ceiling and work-life balance in this region (with some notable exceptions, for example, Syed *et al.*, 2005; Syed, 2010; Afiouni, 2014; Al Dajani, 2010; Hutchings *et al.*, 2010; Moghadam, 2013; Metcalfe, 2010; Metcalfe *et al.* 2009). In response, this study seeks to provide a crucial insight into a very under-researched area relating to Middle Eastern women's participation in the labour market and their perceptions of the effects of work on their home life and vice versa. It pays particular attention to work identity, role expectations, ambitions and aspirations, career opportunities and barriers, employers' policies and practices, quality of life for the women themselves, but also other family members, including parents, spouses and children. The research also explores the emotional dimensions of work/career and juggling work-life commitments. The authors argue that a new theoretical framework which acknowledges structure, culture and agency in investigating women's careers and work-life balance experiences is appropriate and can be applied well in the Middle-Eastern context. The structural dimension of the framework include organisational and family structures and the agency dimension encompass the strategies, emotions and personal determination on career experiences and opportunities. The interdependency of structure and agency is extended by incorporating culture, which is interpreted as both organizational and social group culture (Kamenou, 2008; Evetts, 2000; Bhopal,1997). This paper focuses on literature on Arab Muslim women in the Middle East but it is envisaged that the future empirical work will include women from other regions, nationalities and religions as well as men, in exploring career experiences and work-life balance perceptions.

Introduction

This paper focuses on women's career experiences and work-life balance in the Middle Eastern context and more specifically in the Gulf (GCC) region. For the purposes of this conference, the paper is conceptual in nature and it will engage with existing literature and research on women in the Arab world. In doing so, the authors will argue that a theoretical framework which

acknowledges structure, culture and agency in investigating women's careers and work-life balance experiences is appropriate and it can be applied well in the Middle-Eastern context.

This work sheds light in an under-researched area in the Middle-eastern region as there is a dearth of studies in this region looking at women's career progression, leadership, the glass-ceiling and work-life balance (with some notable exceptions, for example, Syed *et al.*, 2005; Syed, 2010; Afiouni, 2014; Al Dajani, 2010; Hutchings *et al.*, 2010; Moghadam, 2013; Metcalfe, 2010; Metcalfe *et al.* 2009).

Key themes with regard to women's careers are explored through an intersectionality approach (Kamenou, 2008; Kamenou *et al.*, 2013) which acknowledges the effects of the interaction of a number of 'diversity strands' on the experiences of women (both Arab and non-Arab women) working at different levels and positions in organisations in the Middle Eastern region. Despite recent developments which highlight the need for some austerity measures in the Gulf region, the GCC countries are overall seen as countries of wealth and prosperity. This however may not be the case for women (and men) who are not nationals, i.e. economic migrants may have very different work and career experiences and this would, partly at least, depend on their ethnic origins or nationality. It would be important to explore the diversity of experience for women in this region in terms of career development, career opportunities and experiences in balancing their work and personal lives. It should be noted here that the next step for this specific project is to conduct fieldwork in public and private organisations in a number of GCC countries and this will be done post-conference. A key objective of this study is to explore the factors which can have an effect on both the work experiences of women in the Middle-Eastern region (in terms of

the women's attitudes to work, career strategies, how they perceive themselves and their identity, ambitions etc. and in terms of employers' policies and support in place in their organisations). Their personal life experiences within the home (in terms of balancing work and family commitments, perceptions of their identity as a good mother and wife, expectations from immediate family and extended family members etc.) will also be explored. In addition, the emotional dimensions of women's work/career experiences and balancing work and family life will also be explored. For the purposes of this conference however, the paper will engage with existing literature and propose a theoretical framework within which to examine women's career experiences and perception of their work-life balance in the Middle East. The conference paper will focus on literature on Arab Muslim women in the Middle East but it is envisaged that the future empirical work will include women from other regions, nationalities and religions as well as men, in exploring career experiences and work-life balance perceptions.

This study is crucial in providing an insight in a very under-researched area in the Gulf region in terms of exploring key issues in women's participation in the labour market and their perceptions of the effects of work on their home life and vice versa, paying particular attention to work identity, role expectations, ambitions and aspirations, career opportunities and barriers, quality of life for the women themselves, but also other family members, including parents, spouses and children, etc.

Women's careers and work-life balance experiences

This section engages with some key literature and relevant issues with regard to gender, work experiences and work-life balance issues. The majority of existing work has been criticised for

not acknowledging regional, cultural and religious differences when examining work and career experiences and also when looking at conflicts and opportunities in balancing work and family life tasks and responsibilities (for example, Kamenou, 2008; Rana *et al.*, 2008).

There has been more engagement with issues women typically face in attempting to balance work and family life in a range of literature over the past few decades, including the sociology and management fields. There has also been more recognition that men should be involved in research and debates on work-life balance as they are also directly affected by balancing work and family tasks and they are becoming increasingly engaged with childcare and domestic responsibilities (O'Brien, 2003).

A central critique of work-family life balance discussions has been placed around the problematic notion that a well balanced approach is assumed to be feasible between paid work and our lives outside work (Sparrow and Cooper, 2003). Gambles *et al.* (2006) have argued that the word balance implies a trade-off between the two parts whereas in reality there is great overlap between these two worlds with “no clear-cut distinction between the world of work and the work of family, friends and social networks and community” (Taylor, 2002, p. 17).

Despite the focus and the wide ranging discussions on work-life balance, most debates in the area have typically assumed a naïve view of the ‘life’ aspect in the work-life balance equation. The parameters of the debate have been limited with the focus typically placed on working mothers (Bradley *et al.*, 2005) or in more inclusive debates fatherhood has also received some attention (for e.g. O'Brien, 2003

Women in the Arab world: work and family dynamics

The work cited above is central to this project as there needs to be a relevant context within which to investigate work/career and family life experiences for women working in the middle eastern region, and specifically the Gulf countries (GCC). It should however be acknowledged that the concept of work-life balance has been criticised for being almost exclusively associated with gender, childcare and family friendly policies. With few exceptions (for e.g. Kamenou, 2008; Dale, 2005; Bradley *et al.*, 2005; Healy *et al.*, 2004; Rana *et al.*, 1998), issues around ethnicity, culture and religion have also been absent from the majority of discussions around balancing work and family life. For example, management research focusing on women's experiences, has been wrongly generalised to include all women regardless of ethnicity, nationality, culture, religion or class (Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006). This is particularly important given that work and home life experiences of middle eastern professionals are organised around gender in accordance with cultural and traditional patriarchal structures (Metcalf, 2007).

It is important to recognise diversity of experience based on the above factors and to question the typically western literature on work and family life issues, which focuses on a narrow group of women and men in organisations within the US and Europe. Moghadam (2013) has argued that within the Arab world there are a number of key issues and challenges for working women and these challenges relate to issues within the workplace but also in the attempts to balance their work and family life. The author (*Ibid.*) engages in a broader discussion which highlights the importance of organisational and government provisions in Arab countries and states that

maternity leave for example is not generous, with this having implications in terms of structural support for working women with children. Moghadam (2013) also argues that the women who are better off financially can afford childcare, usually in the form of a nanny, but for their working class and some middle class counterparts this option is not available and this can create more tension and stress when attempting to balance demands at the work and the home front for these women. As women's employment rate activities are lower in Middle East and North African (MENA) countries than in other developing or middle-income countries, it is important that governments prioritise programmes/initiatives which engage with alleviating poverty and encouraging women to enter the labour market (Ibid). This can be greatly aided by instrumental support by governments with regard to childcare and eldercare. In addition, as Moghadam (Ibid.) argues: “legal and policy frameworks need to be in alignment. Specifically, labor laws, family laws, and social policies should complement and not contradict each other”.

Examining the concept of 'boundaryless careers' in the context of female academics in the Arab Middle-Eastern context, Afiouni's (2014) study sheds light on the organisational and cultural factors that can have an effect on the women's career choices and patterns. Within 'organisational factors' the author includes lack of mentoring and university support and within 'cultural factors' she cites Islam, patriarchy and family centrality.

Other research has sought to explore the enablers and constraints to Arab Middle-Eastern women's career development and progression. Omair's (2009) study of Arab women managers identified four career types– 'moderate', 'progressive', 'facilitated' and 'idealistic'. The career constraints experienced by these women varied in accordance with family values and societal

norms, connections to social networks, family status and type of business ownership. Women in the moderate career group experienced the greatest barriers which Omair (2009) suggests this is the cause due to the fact that these women belonged to conservative middle class families with traditional gender roles and also had a lack of social connections. Women in the 'progressive' group also experienced limited social networks but adopted strategies of working hard and regularly moving organisations to facilitate career progression. The careers of women in the 'facilitated' group were seen as more 'progressive' because the women worked in a family owned business. Whereas 'idealistic' career women had access to powerful career-accelerating networks because they belonged to a ruling family group in the UAE.

Other recent work contends that organisational practices which exemplify low power distance (flatter or matrix structures and teamworking) facilitate Arab women's career development but that family influences and individual attitudes are also factors that enable and constrain career progression (Kemp and Zhao, 2016). In a study which explored the career trajectory of Arab women managers Tlaiss (2014) found that the women faced a combination of institutional mandates, societal and cultural challenges but that individual agency played a significant role in driving their careers. Findings demonstrated that participants combined elements of traditional and contemporary paths to progress their careers.

Elsewhere, it has been noted that organisations in the Middle East rarely have official gender or equal opportunity policies and professional training is typically prioritised for male employees (Metcalf, 2006; Metcalf, 2007). A lack of female role models to mentor and support women in their career planning and limited professional and social networking opportunities affect female

professionals' experiences of work and career advancement (Al-Lamki, 1999; Metcalf, 2007; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). It is not surprising then that Marmenout and Lirio (2014) highlight several HR practices which would enhance women's work experiences including a holistic approach to female talent management, flexible work arrangements, increased social support and onsite childcare options.

Whilst these studies provide valuable insights into organisational, societal and personal factors affecting Arab Middle Eastern women's career advancement, they do not offer a rich understanding of how women balance their work and personal lives, the impact on family and home life, wider family attitudes and expectations and issues surrounding home and professional identity/ies. At the same time, Tlaiss (2014) makes the important point that women's agency and personal choice has been underplayed in Arab women's work experiences, the emotional dimensions of this agentic process have also been overlooked. Some key questions include: what are the emotional consequences of juggling work and family life? How are emotions used strategically to advance Arab women's careers and to manage and maintain different family stakeholders' expectations? What type of societal and professional emotion norms and values come into conflict and how do these shape Arab women's perceptions of their identity? For example, how do traditional values of modesty in the home contrast with contemporary notions of management and leadership as assertive, enterprising, confident and outspoken? Syed, Ali and Winstanley (2005) highlight some of the ethnicity issues underlying emotion management in working traditional Islamic women. They explain that in a culture where a woman is required to be modest and restrained and yet her organisation wishes her to be candid, self-assured and

assertive, tensions arise as she attempts to navigate her way along a path of opposing prescriptions (Syed et al, 2005). As the authors note:

“More generally, what might be seen as ‘modern’ work is not designed around the emotional requirement and displays required of ‘modest’ women in Islamic societies”
(Syed et al, 2005: 160-161).

Research has also explored Arab Middle-Eastern women's international management opportunities, highlighting both barriers and facilitators (Hutchings et al., 2010). Hutchings et al. (2014 cite earlier work by Adler: 1984a, 1984b,1984c, 1994a, 1994b) which investigated three primary barriers to women's under-representation in international assignments. These include: company resistance; foreigner prejudice, and women's own lack of interest in these assignments (though the latter has been mainly disputed in further research). A fourth barrier has been identified in further research by others (such as Harris, 2001; 2004; Harris and Brewster, 1999) as the lack of family and other support mechanisms. Hutchings et al (2010) have argued that the research cited above is influential and seminal as it focused on a very under-researched area. However, the authors (Ibid.) note that this research has focused on western women and western multinational organisations (MNCs). Their own study aimed to fill a gap by focusing on Arab Middle Eastern women and their perceptions and experiences of working in international assignments.

Interestingly, the majority of their sample, worked in international agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the authors argue that there is a need for research to engage further with the work/career experiences of women in these sectors and not only focus on MNCs. Hutchings et al. (Ibid.) argued that current research which looks at gender in the Arab Middle East is limited, and even within this work, the majority of the studies focus on political participation, women's family roles and health issues and not as much on management and leadership. The authors argued that when looking at women professionals in the Middle Eastern context it is important to look at what is distinct to female managers in the west and to acknowledge:

"the complexity of Arab Middle Eastern gender and management relations and the need to understand business culture without applying a facile generalisation of a Western typology of organisational gender relations to the Middle East context" (Ibid.)

In gaining a deeper understanding of gender issues which may be specific to the Arab/Muslim world, Syed (2010) has argued that there has been little research and engagement on Islam and gender issues in the context of employment, contending that more research needs to be conducted in understanding the role of modesty in Muslim women's work and personal lives. The role of modesty may be an important dimension when examining the experiences of Muslim

Arab women within the context of work and family life, which as Syed (2010) argued, may have strong practical implications if women are not effectively utilised as an important component of human resources within organisations and labour markets. Al-Hamadi et al. (2007) also contended that religion plays an important role on political and economic organisation in the context of the Middle East and more attention needs to be placed on it as a determining factor in how business is conducted in this context and also to how both women and men operate within the business and social environment of their countries. In a similar vein, Kemp and Zhao (2016) argue that few studies have explored the impact of cultural (including religious) values of women's careers in the Arab Gulf states.

Proposed theoretical framework: agency, structure and culture

This paper argues that it is important to recognise and be sensitive to difference across regions and contexts. However, it is equally important to avoid essentialising experience and not to generalise arguments to all women in the middle-eastern context as research has indicated there is great diversity across the experiences of Arab middle eastern women within both the work and the private sphere.

For the research proposed in this conference paper, a social constructionist framework will be adopted, which acknowledges the interdependency of structure and human agency (Mead 1934; Wright Mills 1953) and recognizes the position of human actors in the creation of a socially constructed reality (Berger and Luckman, 1967; Schilling-Estes, 2004). Within this framework, there is an interaction of structure and human agency, in that structures do not wholly determine

individuals' experiences and with the same token, individuals are not wholly independent of structures in their societies.

The structural dimension of the framework will include organisational and family structures and the agency dimension will encompass the strategies, emotions and personal determination on career experiences and opportunities. The interdependency of structure and agency is extended by incorporating culture, which is interpreted as both organizational and social group culture (see Kamenou, 2008). The organizational culture is defined as the norms and values which dominate in an organizational context and they are seen as typically white and masculine (Evetts, 2000). Social group culture encompasses Evetts's (2000) family and feminine ideologies and Bhopal's (1997, p. 4) conceptualisation of culture which includes "ethnicity, class, gender, religion, language and dress".

When examining work-life balance issues and career experiences, organisational structures and cultures are considered in conjunction with the broader life experiences of women within their home and community's structures and cultures. Their own strategies, attempts and emotions in balancing their work and personal life are also a fundamental component of this framework.

Conclusion

This paper aims to shed light on a very under-researched area within the Middle Eastern region by examining career experiences and perceptions of work-life balance for women in the Gulf region. It will attempt to demonstrate the complexity of the 'life' component of the work-life balance equation for women in this context. This work will question the narrow emphasis of

discussions on negotiating work and life, which typically only focus on time management and childcare (Kamenou, 2008) and ignore broader areas such as the effects of work on the family structure, family dynamics, home and work identity, emotions and cultural and religious factors. Examining these factors within the middle-eastern context is of paramount importance with strong organisational and governmental implications for family and work policies and practices. The existing research conducted by a number of authors is of great value and it will be used as the foundation of the future empirical work which will take place after the conference. This work hopes to contribute further in research in the Arab world and the Middle East by looking at Arab and non-Arab women (and men) working in the Gulf region in a range of private, public and social enterprise organisations and examining their perceptions and attitudes through a framework which acknowledges their agency and strategies in negotiating work and personal life demands but also structural and cultural factors in terms of organisational support and also constraints and family/community responsibilities and again, support.

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