

Working Mothers' Experiences in the Middle East, an Empirical Study.

Developmental Paper

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Summary: The literature on gender and careers highlights that societal, cultural, religious, and gender-norm expectations create significant barriers to women's career development. Research in the Middle East also emphasizes gender inequality and rigid gender roles as obstacles to women's career advancement. Some studies in the region identify childcare responsibilities as a barrier; however, there is a lack of thorough examination of this issue. This study aims to investigate the experiences and perceptions of working mothers in the Middle East through the lens of Acker's (1990) gendered organisation theory, using a social constructionist onto-epistemological approach to analyse data from semi-structured interviews to explore how prevailing structures impact working mothers' experiences with career development. The research will further expand on existing literature and provide a non-Western understanding of gendered organisation theory and experiences.

Track: Gender in Management

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Introduction:

This paper examines the experiences of career development and advancement of working mothers in the Middle East through the lens of Acker's (1990) gendered organisation theory. Gendered organisation theory is primarily drawn from Western society, culture, religion, and gender norms. Consequently, exploring the experiences of working mothers' career development in an Eastern context will provide valuable insights into the social construction of organisations and an understanding of the effect society, culture, religion and gender norms in the Middle East have on working mothers' perceptions of their career development. This study is positioned within the social constructionist onto-epistemological paradigm, and data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews. The examination begins with a review of existing literature on gender and careers, gender and careers in the Middle East, and Acker's (1990) gendered organisation theory. Then, it explains the studies' methodological approach.

Gender and Careers:

The literature on gender and careers highlights three key themes impacting a woman's career and reflects the gendered norms, processes, practices, and structures within organisations. The first theme is the mostly negative view on disruptions or shocks to careers (Sabelis and Schilling, 2013, Akkermans et al., 2021), and generally, women experience more disruptions/shocks in life than men, such as childbirth, for example. This negative view stems from masculine norms, which tend to see careers as linear instead of rhythmic, and linear career paths are considered the ideal. Both Akkermans et al. (2021) and Sabelis and Schilling (2013) conclude that changes, whether "shocks" or "disruptions" to a conventional linear career path, can be overcome if normalised. By encouraging a positive mindset towards career changes and promoting societal acceptance and normalization of rhythmic careers, women may encounter less resistance when navigating career shocks or disruptions.

The second theme examines the significant role men play in women's careers, whether negatively through male dominance in organizations (Acker, 1990) or positively by becoming the primary caregiver. When fathers take a step back from their careers and take on more familial responsibilities, to be more present in their children's lives or support the mother's career, they sometimes face challenges from co-workers due to traditional societal gender norms (Kelland et al., 2022). Kelland et al. (2022) recognise these challenges as "Fatherhood forfeits." The forfeits are mockery, perceived idleness, and being viewed with suspicion by co-workers for choosing fatherhood over work. In an organisational culture where it is normalized for fathers to step back from their careers to become primary caregivers, through training and changes in societal gender norms, for example, more mothers might then be able to focus on career development without the additional obstacle of societal role expectations.

The third theme in the literature on gender and careers relates to the combination of cultural and familial circumstances that lead to women sacrificing career development downwards to adapt and meet their expected familial responsibilities. In Raman Kadiyil et al. (2020) study on career development research in the West and its applications to non-Western societies such as India, they find culture as a driver. There is a view that Asian countries are collectivistic and Western countries are individualistic (Raman Kadiyil et al., 2020). Collectivistic cultures tend to have certain parental expectations stemming from traditional values influencing women's career development (Raman Kadiyil et al., 2020). This

combination of cultural and familial circumstances leads women in the East to be pushed out of successful careers and satisficing career development downwards by stepping off their career ladder to adapt and meet expected familial responsibilities.

A commonality among these three key themes impacting women's career development is the societal, cultural, religious, and gender-norm expectations of certain behaviours from women and mothers. When mothers deviate from these expected behaviours, such as pursuing a non-traditional career path or balancing work and motherhood through the support of the father (Kelland et al., 2022), they face obstacles from external factors, such as pressure from co-workers or friends/family to sacrifice career development to play the more traditional expected motherhood role (Raman Kadiyil et al., 2020).

The Gendered Organisation:

Acker's (1990) gendered organisation theory argues that the documents constructing organisations and their substructures, such as job descriptions, job evaluation documents, and labour contracts, are permeated with gender biases, contributing to gender inequality within organisations. These gendered documents, processes, and practices result in disparities, including women occupying lower-paying positions, receiving unequal pay, and facing limited career advancement. They promote men's bodies and their ability to fulfil the abstract notion of the ideal worker. The ideal worker is an employee available to work full-time without external obligations. This ideal favours men, who are not expected to bear primary care responsibilities, allowing them to meet the ideal worker standard more readily. Women, therefore, assume external obligations that allow men to meet the ideal worker requirements. Acker (1990) describes this as women taking on the unpaid work of social reproduction while men take on the paid work in organisations. Finally, Acker (2006) finds that class hierarchies in organisations with the intersection of gender and race are created through organisational practices. They appear in the form of restricted opportunities and behavioural expectations. Recruitment and hiring practices are examples of such restricted opportunities, as judgement is frequently used, favouring men as more competent and suited for jobs than others. However, men are only sometimes seen as ideal workers for all positions. For instance, they are typically favoured for higher-paying roles that offer autonomy.

Gender and Careers in the Middle East:

Studies have explored gender and careers in the Middle East, primarily focusing on women's career development. From the research available, one of the key issues to women's career development in the region is gender inequality, which is found to be from forces such as strongly defined gender roles, culture, and religion (Abalkhail, 2018, Raman Kadiyil et al., 2020, Metcalfe, 2007, Metcalfe, 2008, Tlaiss, 2015). The following studies are examples of such research. Tlaiss (2015) examines training and learning opportunities, finding organisational discrimination and gender-biased cultures as barriers to women's learning. Abalkhail (2018) explores women's perspectives and access to senior leadership roles, demonstrating strategies for supporting women's advancement in higher education and reveals organisational discrimination influencing learning and career development. Alhejji et al. (2016) investigate the forces influencing gender equality through a case study of a British multinational corporation (MNC) in Saudi Arabia. Metcalfe (2007) identified childcare responsibilities as one of the key barriers to women's career development. However, there has been limited exploration into this specific career development barrier. It is essential to gain

more insight into the experiences of working mothers and career development to understand better how to support their career longevity and advancement in the Middle East.

Methodology:

This research explores working mothers' experiences and perceptions of career development and advancement in the Middle East. Most methodological research and texts, such as Huberman and Miles (2002), suggest qualitative strategies to examine perceptions and experiences. Qualitative research enables individuals to construct their understanding and interpret their perceptions by providing participants with a platform to share their experiences, such as through interviews (Bluhm et al., 2011). This method empowers the interviewees to explain in their own words their perceptions of working in organisations in the Middle East. It is, therefore, positioned within the social constructionist onto-epistemological paradigm. Social constructionism, wherein social actors accomplish social phenomena through social actions (Bryman, 2015), is the most suitable paradigm for this study as the working mother's (social actor) perceptions construct reality to understand their experiences working in organisations within the context of Middle Eastern society, culture, religion, and gender norms (Bryman, 2015). The power effect epistemological mode developed by Whittle and Reissner (2025) helps to explain how data collected from semi-structured interviews will be treated. Through the social constructionist perspective, the power effect mode "treats interview accounts as responses to a prevailing system of thought or social structure." (Whittle and Reissner, 2025). Data from interviews will be analysed to make knowledge claims of how society, culture, religion, policy, and gender norms in the Middle East construct discourses that are evident from the responses of mothers working in organisations, and if and how these effect the career development of mothers (Whittle and Reissner, 2025).

A mixture of purposive and snowball sampling will be used in this study to ensure only necessary data is collected, and target sample sizes are met (Douglas *et al.*, 2022) to reach data saturation (Saunders and Townsend, 2016). Purposive sampling will guarantee that categories of cases within the sample universe are represented in the final sample; this method ensures that relative homogeneity. A homogenous sample population shares the same or similar characteristics that are relevant to the study objective and outcomes. Homogenous data is found to lead to quicker saturation for the objective of a study (Saunders and Townsend, 2016) generally with depth and breadth (Fusch and Ness, 2015). The homogenous qualities of the invited purposive participants are; gender, country/region (Kuwait, Middle East), similar backgrounds (mothers), and shared career experiences (working in organisations in Kuwait) (Douglas *et al.*, 2022). A homogenous sample is beneficial to understand how one group of people with many similarities experience a phenomenon (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022), however, diversity in a sample can represent minority groups within a population and then more accurately represent the experience of all mothers working in organisations in the Middle East. Therefore, a fully homogenous sample is not always the aim, even if it will likely lead to data saturation faster and require less interviews (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

Snowball sampling ensures that the target participant number is met by facilitating access to hard-to-reach target populations (Reissner and Whittle, 2022) (Fereshteh, Mahin and Hamideh, 2017). There are so few interviews with working mothers in the Middle East that their accessibility remains unclear. A limitation to snowball sampling is the possibility of interviewees recommending participants from the same circles; this may lead to unwanted

homogenous qualities within the sample, such as the same ethnic or socio-economic background (Parker, Scott and Geddes, 2019). To mitigate this, not all recommended potential participants will be invited to interview to ensure appropriate variation (Parker, Scott and Geddes, 2019). Possible sources to locate working mothers in the Middle East for participation are organisations such as the Women's Surgeons of Kuwait (WSK), contacting large private and public entities for employee access, and online recruitment methods such as social media and word of mouth.

The interviews will be conducted face-to-face or through technological tools such as Zoom, depending on the participant's preferences and circumstances. Allowing for interview flexibility gives participants a sense of autonomy and comfort with their setting. Online interviews save participants time unlike in an in-person meeting (Hanna, 2012). Some disadvantages to online interviews are the required familiarity with technology and the necessary technological tools which can be costly. The study will begin with one to two pilot interviews, assessing if the questions flow well, identify misunderstandings, and address any problems that may emerge from the interview process (Bryman, 2019). The interview questions can then be refined through clarifying, rewording, removing/adding questions based on pilot interview feedback (Bryman, 2019; Mikuska, 2017). Pilot testing improves the richness and breadth of responses, future management of unexpected behaviours, and provides feedback to develop the interviews (Roulston, deMarrais and Lewis, 2003). Before interviews begin, participants will provide their demographic information such as gender, country, education, ethnicity, organisation, occupation, and children with their informed consent, information sheets, and privacy notice forms. The interviews are structured with main questions to understand the overall experience and follow-up questions for more in-depth understandings (Rubin, 2004).

Tentative Conceptual and Empirical Contributions:

Insights gained from in-depth interviews will document the experiences of working mothers in the Middle East and contribute suggestions for improving their career development. These improvements could lead to greater career longevity and fulfilment for mothers, more equal opportunities in supervisory positions, and ultimately contribute to the local economy, recognizing the working mother as an often-untapped valuable resource. The proposed research and findings will also provide important implications for regional organisational management, policies, and practices, expanding the understanding of gendered organisations in the Middle East while highlighting the need for further research with consideration and sensitivity to culture, society, and religion.

This study will continue to be developed by expanding the review of extant literature available on gender and motherhood and gender and careers in the Middle East. Interview data will be analysed, and preliminary empirical findings will be presented.

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