**EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION 2016 CONFERENCE ABSTRACT**

**Stream 7: Contemporary issues of gender equality at work**(Stream organisers: Sophia Belghiti-Mahut, Alain Klarsfeld)

**Title of paper**: Women in Middle-Eastern organisations: career experiences, opportunities and work-life balance

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT:**

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. 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, 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 extreme wealth and prosperity. This however may not be the case for women (and men) who are not nationals, i.e. economic migrants will 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.

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.

The next section presents some key literature in relation to this topic. The conference presentation will further expand on this and will also present the proposed fieldwork (in terms of the methodology and methods to be adopted and the sampling strategy to be utilised).

Literature review

This section engages with some key literature and relevant issues with regard to gender, work experiences and work-life balance issues. It will be argued in the conference presentation (and the main paper) that 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

The work cited above is central to this project as there needs to be a relevant context within which to investigate work and family life experiences for women working in the middle-eastern region, and specifically the Gulf countries (GCC). It should also be acknowledged however that the concept of work-life balance has been criticised as 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 themajority 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).

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.

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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 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”.

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.

This study therefore aims to shed light on this very under-researched area within Gulf region and attempts 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 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.

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