

## Women, work and management in the Middle East

The role and position of women in the Middle East continues to be the subject of much interest in discussion in the public arena and despite questions about their under-representation in work and management, their experiences remain under-researched and under-represented in the academic literature (Metcalfe *et al.*, 2009; Kemp *et al.*, 2013; Kemp and Madsen, 2014; Varma and Russell, 2016). In the past decade, the Middle East region has witnessed significant economic, demographic, generational, socio-cultural and political shifts that have had implications for women's experiences of/at work and highlight the tensions in the role and agency of women as agents of transformational change. Instances such as the 2010 "Arab Spring" revolution saw significant political and economic turmoil resulting from efforts pushing for democratisation and equality (Moghadam, 2014; Bastian *et al.*, 2018). For example, discussing the online activism of Arab feminists during the citizen revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, Newsom and Lengel (2012) outline the different uses women made of online social media to support social change, and their particular role in empowering themselves and others in order to challenge hegemonic and patriarchal norms and political oppression (p. 33). However, women's own positions regarding existing socio-political structures have been fragmented and despite some women's support for the revolution as a way of dissenting against the patriarchy, there is still support (from both men and women) of traditional views that result in societal segregated roles (Abdalla, 2015b). In the context of the strength of the role of religion and cultural norms in shaping the gender social order, and how their relationship governs women's lives and work in the Middle East (Moghadam, 2003), these efforts set a different tone for the global understanding of the narratives of dissent from women in the Arab world.

In the field of work, business and management, despite the increasing number women in labour markets in the Middle East, women's experiences of work and management in the region remains under-represented in academic literature with most influential works having mostly been developed in the past decade (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Elamin and Omair, 2010; Hutchings *et al.*, 2010; Metcalfe, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011; Metcalfe *et al.*, 2009; Omair, 2008, 2010; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010; Scurry *et al.*, 2013; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014; Kemp *et al.*, 2015; Kemp and Zhao, 2016). These discussions have noted the role of patriarchal regimes in the organisation of social and organisational life, noting that socio-cultural and political features, as well as institutional regimes create constraints for working women in the region. An important aspect of these discussions pertains to the diversity in the experiences of women, which are "compounded in an Arab Middle Eastern context by religiously and culturally defined attitudes and practices" (Jamali *et al.*, 2005: 583). This poses different challenges to women that include the impact of gendered understandings about their identities, lack of opportunities to develop networks, demands to balance work and life commitments, struggles with legitimacy at work, and limited opportunities for career progression. At the same time, women navigate these environments so it should not be assumed that their experiences can be universalised or be simply understood in terms of how they may be framed by socio-cultural features and institutional arrangements.

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Drawing on the previous discussions and building on extant discussions, in this paper we expand considerations about context. Whilst mainstream business and management scholarship tends to adopt universalising approaches when exploring dynamics of work and management, recent discussions ([Garavan et al., 2016](#); [Budhwar et al., 2018](#); [Cooke, 2018](#)) allude to the fundamental importance of context (e.g. national, cultural, institutional and regional influences) to understand what shapes and drives these dynamics and the role they play in shaping and developing work settings and organisations.

### Contextualising the Middle East

The Middle East is a vast region and it remains a point of debate which countries constitute it. For the purpose of this paper, we consider the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. As Metcalfe, Hutchings and Cooper have argued:

The social and political context, particularly in those regions that have very different governance and institutional structures, needs to be carefully unravelled in order to appreciate the complexity of HR and business systems and gender relations (2009, p. 232).

Despite commonly referring to “the Middle East”, to suggest that all Middle East nations can be generalised in terms of the political, social, cultural and economic context would be an over-simplification. As [Al-Omari \(2008\)](#) and [Williams \(2010\)](#) argue, Arabic being the predominant language and Islam being the dominant religion are the only common features of countries within the region. Differences are very apparent, for example, the Arab Gulf States (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) are more reliant on foreign labour than other Middle Eastern countries ([Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017](#)) which impact the dynamics of women, work and management in these nations. Wealthier economies, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, diversify away from reliance on income from natural resource to increase human capital; necessary to continue women’s access to education and improve women’s status both society and workplace ([Haghighat, 2014](#)).

In addition, parallels could be drawn in relation to the socio-cultural institutions that underpin work within the region and affect the lives of everyone, especially women, when it comes to work and management. For example, [Sidani and Feghali \(2014\)](#) argue for the need to understand varieties within countries in this region; in their work, they drew on indicators about female labour force participation and female income levels to cluster different Arab countries to identify similarities and differences that shape the roles of and opportunities for women. Their findings suggest that both differences and similarities can be found based on social characteristics (e.g. access to educational opportunities), economic structure (e.g. lack of dependence on oil revenues) and political intervention (e.g. regulatory reforms and measures aimed at increasing women’s participation and involvement in the business and work).

The analytical strategy of identifying similarities and differences has also been argued and developed by other scholarly work that looks at the Middle East region ([Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014](#); [Hennekam et al., 2017](#)), which takes inspiration from sociological theories to suggest that we can develop a more insightful understanding of what shapes the work and management experiences of women the Middle East region by developing analyses that focus on three levels: *the macro-societal level*, which considers the patriarchal regime, *the meso-organisational level* which surfaces the impact of work policies and practices, and *the micro-individual level* which reflects relational dynamics and individual agency.

*Macro-societal level*

Culture and religion have historically been used to frame discussions about the role and participation of women in social, political and economic life in the Middle East (Sidani, 2005). An underpinning idea in these discussions is the positioning of Middle Eastern societies as shaped by a particular form of Islamic patriarchy, which brings together traditional cultural understandings of gender roles and conservative religious views about social life, that regulate the separation between private and public domains. More broadly, patriarchies refer to complex cultural and temporal structural regimes (e.g. familial, educational, organisational, legal, etc.) that favour men over women and result in women experiencing inequality, discrimination and disadvantage in social and economic life (Cain, 1978; Kandiyoti, 1988; Malhotra *et al.*, 1995; Oppenheim Mason and Malhotra Taj, 1987; Hennekam *et al.*, 2017). In particular, the idea of Islamic patriarchy is linked to a distinct cultural articulation of patriarchy that is embedded in religion-based social, political and economic order and how it is perceived to define legitimate personhood and access to resources and opportunity.

In the Middle East, this sees the tension linked to the employment of women growing in prominence (Metcalf, 2007) whilst the role of patriarchal regimes continue to be critical in defining and organising societal structures and social relationships in the region (Joseph and Slyomovics, 2001). In this respect, whilst women's participation in the labour-force provides evidence of societal modernisation (Stockemer and Sundström, 2016), the terms of this modernisation have been brought into question. For example, in their paper about the experiences of Saudi women doctors working in Saudi Arabia, Vidyasagar and Rea (2004) found that despite their expertise and professional success, women doctors struggled with the barriers resulting from the institutional and legal system, which sanctions male superiority, and sex segregation in all aspects of social, work and economic life.

In analytical terms, it is important to note that, perspectives on patriarchy in extant literature often take a Western, secular perspective (Syed and Metcalf, 2017), which by virtue of adopting a linear projection, reproduce historical dichotomies, such as East versus West, where the former is portrayed as conservative, powerless and oppressed and the latter as liberal, emancipated and in control. There is, however, some shift in the discussions about patriarchy in the Middle East, where arguments about the strength of age-based kinship values and relationships (Joseph, 1996) have been broadened to include how changes to the socio-political and economic landscape of the region, in particular as a result of the pressures of economic globalisation, has led to patriarchal dynamics becoming fluid and in transition (Moghadam, 2003, 2004, 2007; Badran, 2005).

In the context of the patriarchal structure of society, Islam has been presented not only as the dominant religion but as a principal feature in the organisation of social order and one of the common features of Middle Eastern countries (Al-Omari, 2008). However, there are tensions in relation to the assumed generalisation that whilst problematic, is also related to a nuanced understanding of context; for instance, Sidani (2005:502) notes that, whilst: "not all Arabs are Muslims and most Muslims are not Arabs [...] the role of Islam in Arab societies cannot be denied. Ultimately, the argument pertaining to the role of Islam is articulated as a framework required to understand the role, participation and involvement of women in work. For instance, Islam regards men and women as equal but different in relation to social and economic roles (Metcalf *et al.*, 2009); as such, it should not automatically be assumed as oppressive. Furthermore, the way religion is interpreted by men rather than religion itself is what has created a prohibitive framework for women (Metcalf, 2007). There is evidence, however, that institutional and socio-cultural practices in the region do result in disadvantage to women (Hutchings *et al.*, 2012; Metcalf *et al.*, 2009). Gender stereotypes,

biases, a lack of female role models and cultural pressure, such as family and societal expectations that a woman's role in the family are expected take priority over women's careers and impact women's liminality in society (Metcalfe, 2007).

Some scholars (Haghighat, 2014) note that religiosity and societal principles cannot be solely responsible for the marginalisation of women. For instance, Kandiyoti (1991) has argued that discussions about the focus on Islam as a conservative ideology that shapes socio-cultural dynamics have failed to highlight the role of the state in the articulation of policies that promote gender inequalities in the Muslim world. Indeed, there is merit in considering the challenges that negative perceptions about organo-religiosity place on women in the Middle East region; however, the impact of the lack of governmental equality framework or legislation in the region (Hutchings *et al.*, 2012), also needs to be considered. Perhaps a more nuanced analysis needs to recognise a shift in gender relations but also acknowledge the evidence that men continue to dominate positions of power in the Middle East and because a large majority of men continue to hold a view that supports inequity towards women (UN Women, 2017), there is limited scope for radical change to the structural inequalities that affect them.

Table I presents a brief overview of the cultural factors affecting women in the Middle East. The first column shows the Social Institutions and Gender Indicator (SIGI), where data are available. Data obtained from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provide a measure of the societal discrimination against women. A score of 0 reflects no discrimination whereas the closer the number is to 1, the more

	SIGI	Family code	Gender equality index
<i>The Levant</i>			
Iraq	0.26	0.5	0.525
Jordan	0.31	0	0.478
Lebanon	0.29	1	0.381
Palestine	NA	0.8	NA
Syria	0.42	0.8	0.554
<i>Northern Africa</i>			
Algeria	NA	0	0.429
Comoros	NA	NA	NA
Djibouti	NA	NA	NA
Egypt	0.43	0.5	0.565
Libya	NA	0	0.167
Mauritania	0.40	0.5	0.626
Morocco	0.11	0	0.494
Somalia	0.46	0.5	NA
Sudan	0.60	1	0.575
Tunisia	0.20	0	0.289
<i>The Arab Peninsula and the Gulf States</i>			
Bahrain	NA	1	0.233
Kuwait	NA	0.8	0.335
Oman	NA	0.5	0.281
Qatar	NA	0.8	0.542
Saudi Arabia	NA	1	0.257
United Arab Emirates	NA	0	0.232
Yemen	0.56	1	0.767
Iran	NA	0.8	0.509

**Table I.**  
Contextual social  
factors

prevalent discrimination is. The second column, Family Code, considers the percentage of early marriage, gender equality of guardianship over children, gender equality and legal age of marriage, parental authority following divorce, and restricted civil liberty. An index of 0 reflects no discrimination against women and, conversely, an index of 1 represented high discrimination against women (OECD, 2017). The final column, Gender Equality Index, obtained from the [United Nations Development Programme \(2016\)](#) reflects how reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market impact inequality between men and women. The closer the score to 0, the lower the level of gender inequality. These to be macro-level indicators provide an overview of the context and impact the meso-organisational and micro-individual levels ([Banihani and Syed, 2017](#)).

### *Meso-Organisational level*

As previously noted, the Arab Gulf states are the most reliant on foreign labour, attracting migrant workers from around the world. One of the most important tensions at the meso-organisational level is related to gendered prejudices and biases that disproportionately affect women expatriates ([Adler, 1984](#); [Altman and Shortland, 2008](#); [Ridgway, 2017](#)). Neither Islam nor the reliance on oil are accountable for women's employment rights in the Middle East, but rather a combination of factors converging in the region discourage a more gender-equitable ideology ([Price, 2015](#)). In their work reporting on the experiences of skilled migrant women in Qatar, [Rodriguez and Ridgway \(2018\)](#) note that gender regulation is institutionalised and politicised in ways that reinforce not just gender discrimination that affects women but intersectional discrimination that disproportionately impacts foreign women. This could help us understand some other experiences reported by the authors in their previous work ([Scurry et al., 2013](#); [Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014](#)) where they found that policies of localisation, which aimed to increase the number of locals in the workforce, led to organisations not investing in management development of expatriates, with many reporting experiences of career stagnation. In this respect, multinational corporations operating in Middle Eastern countries are faced with conflict between macro socio-political structures and the need to increase diversity at meso-organisational level in order to maintain global competition ([Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014](#)). While some progress has been made through training, mentoring and family policies, there has been limited exploration of how organisational policy and practice aid or hinder women's careers ([Metcalf, 2007](#)).

Women's work experiences are shaped by organisational systems underpinned by institutional and cultural barriers that dictate employment rights, development and progression ([Metcalf, 2008](#); [Metcalf et al., 2009](#)). Nevertheless, a notable lack of workplace practices to prevent discrimination and harassment as well as supportive measures such as flexible working offered by organisations ([Hutchings et al., 2010](#)) leads to limited positive organisational support for women in work and management. In the Arab Gulf states, for example, recent studies note the gender disparities in employment conditions, particularly selection criteria and wage differentials ([Al-Waqfi and Al-Faki, 2015](#)). [Table II](#) presents a brief overview of the contextual factors affecting women's employment in the Middle East. The first column shows the participation of women in the labour force ([United Nations Development Programme, 2016](#)). The second column reports on the number of females in top management positions ([World Bank Group, 2017](#)). The third and fourth columns depict each country's position on equal remuneration and discrimination in employment ([International Labour Organisation, 2017](#)).

Women tend to be employed in junior level roles, their organisational inferiority being reflected in lower wages and thus suggesting that they are valued less than men ([Banihani and Syed, 2017](#)). In a study of perceptions of the glass ceiling in Lebanon,

**Table II.**  
Contextual factors  
affecting  
employment

	Female labour force participation(%)	Females in top management	Equal remuneration	Discrimination in employment
<i>The Levant</i>				
Iraq	15.1	2.3	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Jordan	14.2	2.4	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Lebanon	23.5	4.4	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Palestine	17.8	NA	NA	NA
Syria	12.2	NA	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
<i>Northern Africa</i>				
Algeria	16.8	NA	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Comoros	35.3	NA	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Djibouti	36.5	14.2	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Egypt	22.8	4.9	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Libya	27.8	NA	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Mauritania	29.1	4.5	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Morocco	25.3	4.3	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Somalia	33.2	NA	Not ratified	Ratified; in force
Sudan	24.3	3.4	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Tunisia	25.1	8.5	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
<i>The Arab Peninsula and the Gulf States</i>				
Bahrain	39.2	NA	Not ratified	Ratified; in force
Kuwait	48.4	NA	Not ratified	Ratified; in force
Oman	30	NA	Not ratified	Not ratified
Qatar	53.6	NA	Not ratified	Ratified; in force
Saudi Arabia	20.1	NA	NA	Ratified; in force
United Arab Emirates	41.9	NA	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force
Yemen	25.8	1.6	NA	Ratified; in force
Iran	16.2	NA	Ratified; in force	Ratified; in force

Rishani *et al.* (2015) reported that women, in comparison to their male counterparts, were more likely to perceive men as more competent, despite not expressly relating competency and gender. Similarly, men were more likely than women to attribute responsibility to organisations rather than surrounding culture, for underrepresentation in top positions. These findings suggest that organisations are perceived as isolated microcosms where despite reflecting societal assumptions, individuals themselves do not recognise their role in the dynamics that they help to perpetuate.

Other cultural assumptions also have an impact on women's experiences of work and management as management practice reflects social attitudes. The success women enjoy in their careers is heavily influenced by the overarching societal cultural factors, such that career success is measured in terms of upward progression, an arguably masculine notion (Tlaiss, 2015). In this case, men are often associated with leadership and decision making, resulting in women not being taken seriously as leaders and being excluded from decision making within organisations (Sidani *et al.*, 2015; Abalkhail and Allan, 2016; Alhejji *et al.*, 2016). In particular, expectations about leadership styles and managerial characteristics are influenced by societal gendered expectations; for example, social expectations that women display modesty and an orientation to not display intelligence conflict with behaviours typically associated with management and leadership (Abdalla, 2015a).

Conversely, there is a theoretical challenge central to the study of the Middle East through the prism of Western(ised) organisational theory and constructs, including gender. A recent study by [Yaghi \(2018\)](#) argued that the workplace injustice needs to be explored not just in terms of gender roles and expectations but considering the nuanced and sophisticated organisational, psychological, and political features of the Middle East. This study found no evidence of glass ceilings and posit the need for glass paradigms to be explored in the context of individual countries rather than generalising the entire Middle East region. Whilst we could argue that [Yaghi \(2018\)](#) oversimplifies and even overlooks how these features are in themselves gendered, and that women may not be reporting experiences that reveal the prevalence of the glass ceiling because of their own agentic understanding of the implications of doing so in a male-dominated environment, an important point in this work is the idea that we need to pay more attention to exploring organisational phenomena through constructs that are contextually meaningful.

### *Micro-individual level*

Literature about women in the Middle East has highlighted the complexity and tensions they experience, in particular navigating career demands with limited support whilst also facing inequality and discriminatory employment practices ([Tlaiss and Kauser, 2018](#)). According to [UN Women \(2017\)](#), the region is noted for having some of the lowest levels of women's labour participation in the world. However, [Sidani and Feghali \(2014\)](#) have argued that over-generalisation of the commonalities between countries in the Middle East, alongside understatement of inter-country varieties has led to a lack of recognition in the literature about the ways women are becoming more aware of how their societal roles are changing, as well as their increased labour market participation. For instance, [Tlaiss and Dirani \(2015\)](#) note how women in Lebanon overcome social barriers and challenge the status quo by capitalising on their agency and individual capabilities to increase access to training and learning. Women's mobility can be seen as an indicator of important shifts in their agentic efforts to increase their human capital, as well as economic and social mobility. However, whilst organisational change is needed to increase the number of women entering the workplace, the main challenge remains social acceptance and support of women to manage both work and family responsibilities ([Hutchings et al., 2010](#)).

Going back to the importance of understanding the features of the context, there is evidence ([Tlaiss, 2014](#)) that women recognise their positioning within patriarchal regimes and identify ways to navigate institutional boundaries to progress their careers. In this respect, issues such as kinship structures and dynamics, both serve to regulate women's participation in social and economic life but also facilitate it. For example, "wasta" is a unique contextual feature of the Middle East region that exemplifies a patriarchal practice described as "an informal system of connections or personal relations" ([Abalkhail and Allan, 2016: 170](#)). Wasta compounds the barriers that women face because whilst women may exert agency by seeking new employment ([Tlaiss, 2014](#)); wasta, which is often facilitated by male family members, is a tool necessary to secure employment opportunities ([Bailey, 2012; Abalkhail and Allan, 2016](#)). The role of wasta can override some of the disadvantages experienced by women whilst also reallocating the marginalisation to less prominent or wealthy members of society ([Hutchings et al., 2010](#)). Furthermore, the segregation of women in societies in the Middle East results in women not being able to develop or access networks to exert agency through wasta ([Ridgway, 2017](#)). As such, wasta can also have a negative effect on women's careers because it reinforces corrupt and nepotistic behaviours ([Abalkhail and Allan, 2016](#)), thus emphasising other forms of inequality, such as that emerging from social status.

At the micro-individual level, other important tensions emerge as a result of the pressures from economic globalisation and its resulting dynamics of global mobility of

labour (Rodriguez and Scurry, 2018; Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2019). Differences in the experiences of local women and expatriate women are important to understand as each group influences the reconfiguration of the disadvantage faced by the other. For instance, whilst the increasing number of expatriate women forces societal shifts related to the terms of the presence of women in the public domain and at work, the pushback sees a strengthening of regulatory regimes aimed at what is considered a threat to national identity and values. These tensions remained largely unexplored in the literature. However, in the context of the driving forces of economic globalisation and the reform and modernisation efforts in the Middle East, there is much needed discussion about how experiences of work and management unfold in contexts where the social and economic rights of women are constrained by cultural, institutional, structural and political factors.

### Concluding points

The diverse voices of women in the Middle East are not sufficiently documented so more discussion is needed that problematizes their experiences of/at work and management. This would help to enhance our understanding of how these experiences come to be and how women navigate the nuances of the socio-cultural and political environments. Moreover, these discussions need to be inclusive of differences within and between groups of women in the Middle East in order to account not only for complexities related to how the socio-cultural and political features of the context impact on their experiences, but also to show how this interplays with wider dynamics of work and management.

Given the focus of extant work, we recognise important avenues for developing and advancing discussions in the area of women, work and management in the Middle East. Conceptually, a clearer interrogation of constructs that consider alternative ontologies is important not just to challenge generalisations and misrepresentations but also to let women from the Middle East articulate the meaning of their experiences and tell their own stories of work and management. Some of the works we alluded to in this paper challenge established understandings with respect to issues such as equality, leadership and the role of gender. Whilst it would be tempting to come down on these arguments with the full force of Western theories and concepts, engaging with the potential for epistemological encounters seems more important in order to open spaces for interpretations and representations that are meaningful to the realities of social life and work experienced by women in this region. Methodologically, more attention needs to be placed to exploring questions that aim to build theory by interrogating what contextual features, and situated policies, practices and dynamics tell us about how the world of work and management is understood in this region. The theme of patriarchy is a central issue in the framing of discussions about women's lives and experiences in the Middle East; however, very limited attention is placed on the strategies women use to navigate the nuances of the socio-cultural and political dimensions of work. Arguably, this reduces the analytical richness of their experiences and limits the scope of understanding of their agency.

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