Importance of Cultural and Organisational Contexts in the Adoption of Work-Life Balance Policies: Case Studies of Palestinian Telecommunication Companies

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores the nature of Work-Life Balance (WLB) policies offered within a developing country (Gaza, Palestine), by two telecommunication companies. The cultural context is described, in which two semi-public companies have developed a particular set of family-friendly policies. Then ideas are explored on why the adoption of Work-Life Balance (WLB) policies in these organisations may have taken a particular pathway, and may resemble organisations in other Muslim and Arab countries.

Design, methodology and approach: Using the value assumptions of critical realism, two qualitative studies have been undertaken in which 17 managers, and 32 employees were interviewed in the two companies. These interviews were then subjected to standard qualitative analysis.

Findings: Reasons for the provision WLB benefits identified by respondents were often different in kind and degree from those found in studies in Western countries. Furthermore, perceived reasons for the introduction of these benefits differed between groups of employees, namely managers and professional employees. Generally, WLB benefits supported women in an Islamic and Arabic culture, in ways which were resonant with this cultural setting, but which also reflected both local trade union pressures, government regulations, and international influences.

Research limitations and implications: This study, the first of its kind in a Muslim, Arabic culture deserves replication with both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. If the findings of this initial study are replicated, there may be important implications for both public and private management, and for international firms investing in Arab countries.

Practical Limitations: This interpretation is a value-based approach, resulting from the subjective analyses of the researchers, and further generalisations must be based on replication studies.

Social Implications: The findings of this study do have important implications, since they appear to show that the ethos and range of WLB benefits, and the reasons for their implementation can be quite different when Arab and Western countries are compared. These initial results, if replicated, could be
an important guide for international investors considering WLB benefits in Arab countries.

**Originality and Value:** This is a pioneering study, using a critical realist methodology, and the research model could have wider implications for cross-cultural studies of Work Life Balance.

**KEYWORDS:** Work Life Balance, Family-Friendly Policies, Flexible Working, Palestine, Telecommunication Sector, Arab Context, Cultural Factors.

**Introduction**
This paper explores the methodology and findings of qualitative research on the nature and delivery of Work-Life Balance policies in two semi-public telecommunications companies, using semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 17 managers and 32 employees in the largest telecommunication organisations in Gaza, Palestine.

At the beginning of the study it was clear that in contrast with a number of Western countries (i.e. countries in which a majority of the population are of European origin), the pressures of labour unions could be important in the adoption of Work-Life Balance (WLB) policies. Islamic religious beliefs and practices, and individual social relationships in Palestine; and networking with international organisations also seemed to be responsible for the adoption of certain WLB policies into the organisation. These ideas have been explored in the qualitative case studies.

It appears too, from previous research that the introduction of human relations policies into Arab countries may transcend the commercial decisions of particular organisations, and is likely rooted in the culture, politics and religion of Arabic cultures (Branine & Pollard, 2010). The present study explores and develops this existing knowledge in the possible relationships between macro-level conditions and developments in HRM policies within organizations in the field of Work Life Balance (WLB) policies, which have not been studied before in an Arabic context.

The concept of WLB in Western studies refers to individual satisfaction in multiple life roles, and the abilities of individuals to balance and manage simultaneously two or more aspects of life, involving work, family and
personal roles (Eikhof et al., 2007; Glass and Finley, 2002). For this purpose, various WLB policies have been developed and offered by organisations in many Western countries, such as part-time working, school term-time working, childcare benefits, and maternity leave (Bond et al., 2002; Lewis and Campbell, 2008). The research question addressed in the present article is the extent to which Western findings on WLB provision are relevant for an Arabic country, and the degree to which cultural context is important in the development of WLB policies in one large telecommunication organisation.

The Context of the Current Study

Palestine represents the south-western part of a geographical region in the eastern part of the Arab region. Much of Palestine’s daily life has been controlled, directly or indirectly, by Israel which took over much of Palestine in 1967. Following an uprising against Israeli rule in 1987, much of Palestine’s infrastructure, trade and industry was disrupted or destroyed, and there have been severe economic problems, made worse by the Israeli bombardment of Gaza in 2014.

The two parts of Palestine, the Gaza Strip and West Bank are under continued sanction, banned from free trade with Israel, and exports and imports to and from other countries were (and still are) blocked (MAS, 2012). More than 250,000 Palestinian workers were unable to work in the Israeli labour market, and the unemployment rate reached 26% in the West Bank and 33% or more in the Gaza Strip in 2011 (Abu-Eideh, 2014). The male unemployment rate in Gaza has certainly increased since September, 2014 to well over 50%, although accurate figures are hard to obtain.

The percentage of women in the workforce in the Palestinian labour market has however increased over time, but this proportion has been variable, reflecting economic instability. The most recently available figures (prior to the extended blockade of 2014) show that the number of paid women in the workforce had risen to around 20% (ETF, 2014; PCBS, 2014). This is largely due to the employment of women who are educated and multilingual, with skills in demand by international, and well-established national or public organisations.

Palestine like many Arab countries, is characterised by its ‘polychronic’ culture (Aycan, 2000; Hofstede, 2001). Individuals generally still live in a
relaxed manner in which formal bonds of role and status are fluid rather than rigid (but subject to Islamic norms of interpersonal conduct between genders) - even within the workplace, roles, customs and norms from the wider society often impinge on life in the workplace. Individuals in Palestine (as in other Arab countries) feel less pressure to achieve high efficiency at work, which consequently makes the integration between their personal and working lives both fluid, and challenging for Western models in which WLB practices are often premised on a rigid separation of work and family life (Budhwar & Mellahi, 2007).

The religion of Islam informs a comprehensive system of values and ethical behaviours, and governs all aspects of life, including the relations between individuals, and within society as a whole (Kamali, 2003; Abuznaid, 2006). As a Muslim it is mandatory to follow and practise the Five Pillars of Islam which involve accepting God’s will, and the standards of conduct given in the final message to Prophet Muhammad; reciting the five daily prayers; giving to charity; fasting for a month during Ramadan; and if health and means allow, making a pilgrimage once in one’s lifetime to Mecca (Lundblad, 2008; Kamali, 2003). Much social, cultural and political life is organised around these five pillars of Islam, which guide the conduct of both law-makers and entrepreneurs.

Organisations in Palestine work according to the Palestinian Labour Law, enacted in 2005 (PGFTU, 2012). Several regulations relate to WLB practices, including paid maternity and child care leave for women (usually 3 months), with mothers now having the right to take unpaid child care leave for a year (MAS, 2011). But according to the main trade unions, there is still a need for further development, especially in respect of the limited application of flexible WLB policies by smaller firms. There are several unions representing health care, industry, telecommunications and banking sectors (EFT, 2014). As in many Western countries, WLB “regulations” are often advisory rather than compulsory, and only larger or more progressive organisations offer WLB benefits which come near to meeting the aspirations of women who seek more permanent executive, managerial or professional positions (Catalyst, 2017).

**Theoretical Framework**
In Western countries, the regulatory advice of labour laws is usually one of the main reasons why WLB policies are adopted. In 2000 a range of actions (including advisory rather than legislative programmes) encouraged the WLB debate such as the launch of the UK Government’s first Work–Life Balance Week, and the introduction of family-friendly legislation (Maxwell and McDougall, 2004; Den Dulk et al., 2012). Since then, the momentum of interest has been sustained and organisational interest in parental leave, paid paternity leave, part-time working and flexi-time has increased (De Menezes et al., 2009; Hyman and Summers, 2007). The Spanish case provides an interesting exception to the “Western” WLB model in which employers were not governed by regulations from government in adopting WLB practices: there was no particular stimulus from concern of government for the ‘work and family principle’ as a motivation for adopting WLB practices (Pasamar and Alegre, 2014; Poelmans et al., 2003). In the US there has also been less involvement of public policy concerning the nature of society and its welfare systems, a reflection of the nature of the capitalist system in general in America - WLB policy has largely been left to market forces which constrain individual enterprises (Orloff, 1993; Osterman, 1995).

The Palestinian Authority has tried to establish regulations in order to ensure the provision of basic rights of the workforce, right to maternity leave and breast-feeding hours in all sectors of the economy (The Labour Law of Palestine, 2005 – PGFTU, 2012). This is not the complete story however, because compliance with such basic practices might not be the same as in other Arabic countries, since whatever the guiding principles concerning family welfare derived from Islam, implementation is usually at the discretion of the owners or managers of organisations, and governments in Arabic countries do not see it as their role to monitor ‘non-compliance’ (Budhwar & Mellahi, 2007; Al-Hamadi et al., 2007). Adoption of the guiding principles of WLB benefits is, by and large, voluntary in Arab countries previously studied, such as Jordan (Abubaker and Bagley, 2016a).

The role of, and pressure exerted by, labour unions has been under debate in Western contexts (Prowse and Prowse, 2006; Bewley and Fernie, 2003; De Menezes et al., 2009). In one comparative study which utilised two different data sets, the 1998 data showed that the presence of an active
labour union had a positive effect on the provision of specific WLB practices, including: parental leave, paid leave, and childcare support. However, according to the more recent data from 2004, new findings showed a changing picture, with unions becoming increasingly marginal actors in the process of introducing and implementing WLB policies: employer-led initiatives often placed them in a defensive position (Kirton and Greene, 2005; De Menezes et al., 2009). Additionally, commentators indicated that trade unions whilst negotiating for wage levels at a national level, lacked power and influence on conditions in the workplace itself (Gambles et al., 2006; Prowse and Prowse, 2006). Unions have modernized their policies and practice, but ironically they have done so at a time when their capacity to intervene is greatly reduced (Gregory and Milner, 2009).

In Palestine however, there is some evidence that the unions are capable of playing a stronger role in the adoption of WLB practices, particularly in larger organisations, than in Western countries. This reflects the increasing number of individuals joining specialised unions in sectors such as telecommunications and finance. However, the actual influence of unions on workplace conditions in Palestine has not been systematically studied. While the economy of Palestine remains weak (PCBS, 2014), most of the employed workforce tends to concentrate on the primary issue of financial reward (wage and salary levels) rather than on the implementation of other work related practices and benefits.

In many Western countries, an increase in competition for skilled workers has resulted in businesses turning to WLB practices as a means to attract and retain workers (Hyman and Summers, 2007; Dex and Smith, 2002; Davis and Kalleberg, 2006; Milliken et al., 1998; De Cieri et al., 2005; Kirby and Krone, 2002). The ‘poaching’ of labour, as we may term it, is a noted characteristic in certain sectors of Western economies, particularly of those who have a high level of skills that are in relatively short supply (Poelmans and Caligiuri, 2008). Under conditions of prosperity and fairly full employment, studies have found that such a relationship (between recruitment needs and WLB provision) does exist (CIPD, 2009; Wood et al., 2003).
In the case of Palestine, the current study was expected to find what Wood et al. (2003) had found: that is, only a weak relationship between the need to retain skilled employees and the provision of WLB practices, except workers with special technical skills who are in limited supply. This factor is particularly influential in international organisations seeking employees with a high level of English Language proficiency, IT skills, and telecommunication and engineering backgrounds – such individuals remain in short supply in Palestine. The issue of a limited supply, may put well-qualified women into a position of relative power within the employee/employer relationship, as they possess the specific skills required by such organisations to compete effectively on a national and global basis.

This may be a reversal of the well documented Western paradigm in which males are dominant in workplace power relationships, as identified by Butler (1990, 2004). Butler shows that Western society is ‘gendered’ in many of its social institutions, with females outstripping men in specialised roles in organisations being a ‘deviant’ case. O’Connor (2001) comments that women’s power concepts in Western organisations are limited, and women usually in many industries normally occupy lower status, and more poorly rewarded positions. In contrast, it may be that due to the influences of Arab culture, and the interpersonal norms of Islam, a more relaxed approach to WLB already exists in relation to acceptable behaviours at work, due to the fluidity and interchange of work and home roles – practices which are “female friendly”. This factor combined with the unique skills sets possessed by the Palestinian women studied, may reverse the traditional power relationship, enabling these women to exert pressures employers enabling them to achieve the working terms and conditions they desire, without compromising their employment security.

For some researchers, gender is central to WLB, since economically active females typically assume more family responsibilities (Lewis, 2006; Den Dulk et al., 2012 and 2013; Dex and Smith, 2002). However, there are still debates on these issues: for example, a comparative study found that European organisations with predominantly female employees were twice as likely as those with mostly male employees to offer Flexible Working
schedules and Unpaid Leave, and they were almost four times as likely to offer some kind of Dependency Care Benefit (Davis & Kalleberg, 2006).

However, these and other researchers have found that women usually work on routine production lines, or at low levels within organisations and consequently only had limited power to influence the adoption of WLB practices (Milliken et al., 1998; Ingram & Simons, 1995; Pasamar & Alegre, 2014). The only real influence these women have is the employer’s continued need for their inexpensive labour. Women in such situations have a possible direct effect on managerial decisions in applying some WLB practices, as for example, was the case in service sectors of the UK economy such as the NHS, in secretarial positions, and the retail sector, where women predominate in the workforce (Dex and Scheibl, 2001; Dex and Smith, 2002). Organisations in these areas encounter a high degree of pressure from women to implement WLB practices. In various industrial sectors in Western organisations, the innovation of WLB policies is linked to the existence of a higher proportion of women in the workforces (McKee et al., 2000; Bergman and Gardiner, 2007). These and other researchers argued that employers’ ‘enlightened’ response is not wholly driven by market interests (Dex and Smith, 2002; Maxwell and McDougall, 2004; Wood, 1999; De Menezes et al., 2009; Hyman and Summers, 2007; Den Dulk et al., 2012).

Chandra (2012) comments that for many the purpose of work is to engender “a better life and for improving the well-being of the family”, (p1), and highlights the pressures of managing the process of balancing work and family life, while acknowledging that the perception of the importance of work varies between Eastern and Western cultures. Chandra argues that the notion of gender stereotyping prevalent in Western organisations tends to be less overt in the Middle East and Asia which is frequently more influenced by cultural and religious norms. Nevertheless, facets of male dominance in the workplace and the link to the notion of ‘masculine commitment’ seems to be perpetuated across all cultures. The difference is that in Western countries there is greater emphasis on WLB being a female issue, with policies linked to traditional ‘female’ activity such as child or elder care.

Since the present study, concentrating as it does on the policies of two large organisations in the telecommunications service sector of Palestine
which employs a relatively high percentage of women, it might be expected that in Palestine, women might constitute an essential factor driving organisations to adopt certain WLB practices, particularly in regard to those practices which concern the welfare of children. This is because in Arabic countries it is women who are traditionally responsible for caring for the home and for children, receiving little support from men in such roles (Aycan & Eskin, 2005). This traditional pattern of role obligations is well understood in Arab organisations.

A key question for this and future research is the degree of responsiveness of employers to the implementation of WLB practices in order to address various cultural factors, and the business or financial advantages that can be associated with the implementation of such policies. The theoretical model emerging from this review is that there are several, perhaps interacting factors influencing the type and quality of WLB benefits. Firstly, market forces only partially influence the kind and quality of WLB benefits in both Western and Arab organisations. The company’s concern with supporting women employees may to some degree reflect union pressures, and politically-driven government regulations; and the company’s provision of WLB benefits may reflect generally accepted religious principles (e.g. the values of Islam), or the employer’s benevolence; and the desire of the employer to present themselves as an “ethical” company, which treats both employees and customers well (Abubaker & Bagley, 2016b).

**Research Methods**

In order to gain both an initial and an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of the employers and employees on how employers implement, adopt and administer WLB policies, the case study strategy is a fruitful way of approaching a novel research topic (Yin, 2003). Thus purposive sampling of employers and employees was used in two case studies, seeking to interview senior and middle managers, as well as a cross-section of employees, with a particular focus on female employees, who hypothetically were those most likely to need, and to use WLB benefits in relation to family and child care issues. The two largest telecommunications companies in Gaza, Palestine were approached, and agreed to participate. The two companies are “semi-private” in that half of the shares are owned by government, the remaining
stock being held by local organisations. Both companies have a strong public profile, and are known for their apparently progressive human relations policies in relation to their relatively high proportion of female employees. These policies were publicly aligned to their reputation in the market place.

The findings presented in this article result from the analysis of 49 interviews with 17 managers and 32 employees. The interview sample comprised 12 women (22 per cent) and 37 men (78 per cent), which broadly reflects percentage of gender distribution in the Palestinian Telecommunication sector, and in the Palestinian workforce (PALTEL, 2013). No special sampling frame was used, but as many managers as possible were approached, and a group of employees were recruited on an opportunistic basis. None of those approached declined to be interviewed.

The interviews were carried out across most of the directorates of the Telecommunication Company, and this included top management: the VP, and heads of HR, financial, procurement, marketing, and IT departments. Employees came from a range of staff: for example, administrative officers, sales people, accountants, IT, HR people, and others. A number of the employees we interviewed had either supervisory or managerial responsibility for staff, but in our interviews we sought their views from the perspective of being a collaborative member of the company, rather than as managers per se. Management clearly expected that the interviews would show the most positive features of their organisation, although in the interviews we recorded accounts of both positive and negative views and experiences. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. The recorded and transcribed fieldwork interviews (in Arabic) were translated to English and transcribed, coded, and analysed according to the methodological guidelines of King (2004), and Bryman & Bell (2007).

The interviews involved a semi-structured approach that ensured that the issue of WLB policies was central, although participants were not constrained in terms of raising other employment issues they believed to be relevant and important (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The semi-structured interview was also vital to cover the most important interview questions within the limited time which was available with top management. In adopting such a non-directive approach, we asked interviewees to define for themselves what
constituted the reasons for adopting WLB policies in their organisation. Consistent with a critical realist model of research (Easton, 2010; Abubaker & Bagley, 2016b; Bagley, Sawyerr & Abubaker, 2016), we did not make initial hypotheses, or explore researcher-derived categories on reasons for adopting WLB policies. Critical realism accepts the values implicit in the research process, but does not necessarily accept existing theories: rather, this approach seeks to and understand the sub-layers of meaning and motivation involved in the adoption of WLB policies, such as religious and cultural values. Thus we allowed participants in their own way to explain the meanings and ‘sense’ regarding such an aspect or reasons behind deployment of WLB policies in the organisation. Our analysis results from the idiosyncratic explanations of our respondents, and our understanding of WLB policies emerges from the participants’ perceptions of their working environment. At this stage of the research we aimed to obtain a holistic picture of each organisation, and found that human relations within them were very similar, so that we could combine both case studies into a single model.

Findings

Both groups of managers tended, overall, to cite six key factors as to why their companies adopted WLB policies. These were: 1) Social and cultural factors; 2) Regulations of the government; 3) Needs of women employees; 4) Competitors’ policies and the need to recruit skilled personnel; 5) International networking; and 6) The pressures of the labour union. The identification of social and cultural factors (including religious values, norms and practices), and of international networking are new findings, and are discussed below in more detail. These six factors and their impact on the adoption of WLB policies are listed in the following table, which highlights the sometimes conflicting opinions of managers, and employees.
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‘Strong’ in the above table means that the majority of managers and employees agreed on the postulated relationship. ‘Weak’ means, that a minority (or indeed, very few) agreed on the relationship. The ‘-’ is used when there were no participants mentioning such a relationship. Regarding the impact of social factors, Palestine is polychromatic in nature (Hofstede, 2001; Aycan, 2000) which is reflected by the fact that most individuals do not clearly separate their work and social life. Both companies, for example, had adjusted their policies in order to accommodate these cultural factors:

It is normal in Palestine for people, whether they are managers or employees, to have personal visitors or to speak to family and friends on the phone during working hours …. It is accepted and common in most of organisations. (Manager 5 and Employee 2).

The findings suggests too that the adoption of social policies may also derive from a ‘benchmark’ whereby organisations follow what has already been established in previous organisations (Francis & Holloway, 2007). Otherwise,
as Manager 5 stated, “The organisation becomes outside of the accepted mode of acting”; and this might not be acceptable for the employees. The social policies at MobileCom and PalTel are a potential challenge for international management, and while management does not prohibit the acts derived from these cultural norms, it establishes some regulations on how they should be applied:

You can manage and control the intrusion of private life into the workplace, but it is difficult to avoid because it is common in the entire society. People have little respect for working time and are used to integrating their personal life into their working life. (Manager 8).

This highlights a unique cultural system in Palestine (and perhaps elsewhere in the Arab world?) in which people frequently place their private life and the demands of their family above the demands of their work. This is the norm within this cultural context and almost certainly would not be in accordance with organisational requirements in a Western context (c.f. Lu et al., 2010; Spector et al., 2004). Even if the religious policies conflict with the demands on working time, such as ritual washing (wudu) and praying two or three times in the working day for around 40 minutes in total, the organisation has little choice but to grant such entitlements (Kamali, 2003).

We are a Muslim society…Prayer and Hajj for example, are compulsory policies for all Muslims and they are obliged to follow these policies in order to fulfil their religious duties … They are very common in most of the organisations and it would be a shame to prevent someone to have them. (Employee 4, and Manager 6).

Government regulations were identified as another of the reasons behind adoption of WLB policies, and this was certainly the case in the leave policies: “The adoption of most of the leave policies is related to the rules and the regulations of the Palestinian Labour Law.” (Most of Participants). This is consistent with many studies in Western countries (Maxwell & McDougall, 2004; Budd & Mumford, 2001). The impact of labour laws certainly informs the structure of HR policies and strategies of the Palestinian companies studied:
Leave policies are derived from the regulations of the labour law. … This can be seen in the employment contracts, HR policies and other documents where such policies are highlighted according to the Palestinian labour law. (Managers 1 and 5).

Working hours, length of holidays, and contractual work are aligned with the guidelines of Palestinian labour law (PGFTU, 2012). But with regard to flexible policies, in contrast to many Western nations their existence in the telecommunication companies were not dependent on government regulation. The government ministries in Palestine have been working on establishing many regulations concerning employment, auditing systems, and inspectors of employment conditions (MAS, 2011). However, the progress of labour law enactment is slow, reflecting various economic and political circumstances - unlike Western countries such as Germany or Sweden (Thévenon, 2011). In the development of parental leave, Palestinian labour law (PGFTU, 2012) does prescribe, which fits the unpaid leave format which government recommends:

The organisation complies with government rules and regulations and the changes introduced in 2005 which give women a right to reserve their place at work for a year after giving birth. (Employee 7, Manager 6).

The unpaid parental leave policy reflects social and cultural changes such as an increase in the number of female workforce, a decrease in the influence and use of extended family culture, and pressure of women’s non-profit organisations – many women graduates in Palestine are sought after by the NGOs which deliver education, health care and social support. (MAS, 2011).

There are two different viewpoints which emerged in the current interview data with regard to the relationship between the adoption of WLB policies, and the existence of a labour union. According to most managers’ views, the labour union has strong membership, a vigorous lobby combined with other unions in Palestine, and also works co-operatively with the telecommunications industry, who are seen as ‘model’ employers. This meant, according to the managers, that union pressure on this particular sector of industry, was minimal:
The Labour Union only manages and runs social activities in the organisation. Obliging the organisation to provide additional benefits to the employees is not their focus... No, I don’t think things have been introduced, such as “financial and flexible policies” because of the labour union. I think management has introduced them to assist women and to the benefit of the organisation. (Managers 3 and 5).

The voice of the workers represented by the labour union, in this view, is expressed strongly only with regard to social and family activities. This would be in line with several Western studies that also emphasize the limited voice of labour unions in the organisation (Budd & Mumford, 2006; Prowse & Prowse, 2006). As many managers observed in the two companies, because they offer policies which individuals demand, the role of the labour union within the organisation is rather limited:

What are the labour unions going to discuss? Every benefit that the employees can think of is available. Employees here are receiving a greater number of benefits than in any other workplace. What is the maximum benefit on the agenda of the labour unions? They are less than what the organisation itself offers. (Manager 8).

Certainly, the initiatives of the management are responsible for the adoption of many WLB policies, in order to assist with organisational strategies and objectives. The labour union has a limited voice in this respect. The employees’ views were often consistent with those of the managers. The employees however believed in addition that the labour union plays a vital role in raising interest in and the adoption of many WLB policies:

The Labour Union played a role in improving the workplace environment, and this is mainly reflected in financial WLB policies and study leave, but we cannot say that MobileCom adopted leave or childcare policies because of the pressure of the union. (Employee 1).

Since at the time of the study, the Union having been established for six years, the employees insisted that the Union has shown a significant pressure in improving financial policies, study leave, and other benefits. In the past there were advocacy organisations on behalf of workers. Hence, as asserted
by many employees: “It is up to the company whether they take our consideration or not... but I agree it was fundamentally the decision of the management rather than our voice.” (Employee 13). In the view of several employees, the role of the labour union was now quite strong:

We have now a union body in the organization that has a strong relationship with other unions, and most employees are members and work under its umbrella ... The union played a strong role in the negotiation process with management and if they don’t agree about some issues, they have the power to suspend work or call us to go on strike. (Member of the labour union, Employee 8).

The voice of the labour union appears, according to employee accounts, to have contributed to the process of enhancing individual benefits within the organisations, in a co-operative endeavour in consulting with management. This finding is different from most of the recent studies in Western countries (De Menezes et al., 2009; Prowse & Prowse, 2006). In Palestine the government and non-profit organisations appear to have strengthened the role of labour unions, and the extent of union membership and its pressures on employers. The presence of women as members of the labour union committee may also have strengthened the ability of women to negotiate leave and childcare policies. Because of certain cultural factors - mainly because of a paternalist management style (discussed later) - the relative position of managers and employees showed some contradictions.

International collaboration and networking emerged in the research as a reason for adopting WLB practices. Networking cannot be classified as a strategic alliance (Cullen et al., 2000) since MobileCom and PalTel had no specific partnerships with any international organisation (apart from the marketing of European-manufactured mobile phone equipment, with a special relationship with Scandinavian manufacturers). But participants emphasized that an increased awareness, and adoption, of some leave WLB and childcare policies, were associated with co-operation and networking with a major European providers of telephone equipment:

Many of our management team visit these international organisations and vice versa, to learn about the latest developments in different fields … the leave policy that offers men
holidays to look after their wives are derived from our experience with companies such as Erikson … It is also from the current CEO who also has work experience at NASA. (Manager 4 and Employee 5).

International experiences and collaborations have enabled the two companies to bring in knowledge (and visiting personnel) from developed countries. This has had an impact upon employment strategy and the policies associated with its implementation. These contextual features, and the unique international style of a particular company influenced the adoption and changes of WLB policies:

The networking with international organisations requires a high level of standards and proficiency to enable us to interact and communicate with them. Without this capability level in respect to the management system the organisation would remain outside of this type of collaboration or any network. (Manager 3)

This finding is in line with other studies (Aycan, 2000; Elsmore, 2001; Sultan, Weir & Karake-Shalhoub, 2011) on changes in organisational policy in order to fit in with cultural differences within the various regional offices of an organisation. To have a working model that fits its role as part of an international organisation, it seems necessary that the two Palestinian companies should offer WLB benefits. “Additionally, every year an international organisation such as H-GROUP, acts as a consultant in MobileCom.” (Employee2). It offers advice on how to develop working arrangements in, for example, departments such as HRM. “H-GROUP was improving the system of promotion, leave policies and childcare services.” (Employee 14 and Manager 2). Thus, this company plays a role in the development of both its own and international WLB policies. It should be noted that the existence of paternity leave policies for men does exist in some organisations in Palestine, especially the international ones like the UN, UNDP and the Arab Bank (Manager 3). This offers further indication that international factors have an impact on WLB policies. This policy is neither required by Palestinian law nor is it in high demand by a masculine-oriented Arabic culture.
Various insights emerge from the findings concerning the relationship between competition in the market and the adoption of WLB policies. Most of the managers commented along the following lines:

The adoption of any policy in our organisation relies on our strategy and employee demands, rather than from any pressure deriving from competitors in the market. We are innovative. (Manager 5). Increasing financial policies, childcare and family holidays have been the organisation’s strategy for a long time, but we adopted them recently to compensate workers for their performance during the year. (Manager 3).

The WLB policies at MobileCom arise, ostensibly, from the organisation’s own initiatives to improve the working conditions of their employees. External pressure, such as the introduction of WLB policies as a response to changes in the competition for labour, was downplayed by management. This finding is in line with a few studies conducted in Western countries (Osterman, 1995; Coughlan, 2000;). The employees however, did stress that the adoption of financial WLB policies was also due to the competition and the entrance of new companies in the market:

Why did the organisation adopt family holiday this year? We heard about it three years ago … and why were many managers asked to sign a contract with the organisation guaranteeing that they will not leave the organisation for at least five years; this is due to the entrance of new competitors in the marketplace. (Employee 6).

There are new telecommunication companies emerging in Gaza, along with an increase of non-profit institutions, all offer a competitive salary and less working hours for well-qualified women graduates with proven experience. Given the increasing competition for skilled labour and an increase in opportunities for the workforce to find employment elsewhere, it is not surprising to see the growing focus on adopting WLB policies to retain employees. This finding is in line with many studies in Western countries (Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Dex & Smith, 2002). Several employees insisted also:

Current provisions such as, financial and flexible policies are in place because of the high concern about retention, and sometimes
attraction of employees… If you are flexible, you will retain and keep people in workplace, especially the highly skilled males and females in the workforce. (Employees 2 and 6).

Flexible and childcare policies appear to be vital for the two companies studied, in order for them to compete with other institutions (such as the many NGOs in Palestine) in attracting and retaining female employees. Females in Arab society appear to be more attracted to employment in public organisations, and to any organisation that offers limited working hours to enable them to fulfil family commitments. Therefore, the competing commercial organisation might feel pressured to apply some favourable policies for their female workforce. There is certainly, from the evidence of the case studies, a clear relationship between the presence of women in the workforce and the provision of various WLB policies in both companies: “It is the consideration of women, which is behind the adoption of many policies of WLB.” (Most of the participants). This response is consistent throughout, and was especially emphasized with regard to childcare provision, and flexible hours and leave policies. This is in line with studies from Western countries (Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Dex & Smith, 2002). An increasing number of married women have exerted a strong pressure on the organisation to include many WLB policies:

About six years ago the childcare policy was adopted by the organisation. Before that, we did not have these benefits. I am sure that this was because the number of women at MobileCom was low at that time. The policies are the result of an increase in the number of women employed, and especially married women who were choosing to have babies. (Manager 1).

When Arab women married, they used in previous decades to stay at home, or work where they had limited working hours (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010). Given this cultural element, the organisation feels pressured to increase WLB facilities in the workplace in order to fulfil the needs of female employees. Numbers of participants added that women workforces have the power to negotiate and discuss their particular family needs with managements:

As women, we have put forward a proposal, with supporting documents, to indicate the level of difficulties encountered in the
meetings that have occurred with management. They were respectful and appreciative with respect to our demands. (Employee 17).

The evidence then is that in the two case studies the female workforce has the power to negotiate and potentially obtain the policies they seek in order to satisfy personal and family requirements. This could be due to the shortage of highly skilled employees, and also to the existence of labour unions that support the female workforce. This is unlike many Western countries, such as the UK, in which the legislation clearly states that the organisation and managers have merely to ‘reasonably consider’ requests (Hyman & Summers, 2007).

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This study has examined some of the declared reasons behind the adoption of several WLB practices in two Palestinian organisations, compared with the many reasons behind such adoption in Western organisations, including regulations of government, the pressure of labour unions, and the extent of women participating in the workforce. According to the evidence from the present study, Islamic values, and a cultural pattern of social relationships in Palestine have played a major role in the emergence and adoption of a number of WLB policies in the organisation. Additionally, networking with international organisations may also have been responsible for what may be termed the ‘importation’ of certain WLB policies into the organisation. These factors, along with others which play a role in the adoption of WLB policies in the Telecommunication organisation in Palestine are outlined in the following diagram.
The Reasons for Adopting WLB Policies in the Telecommunication Organisations

This diagrammatic representation of theory incorporates several influential factors, which may interact with one another in influencing WLB adoption including international and networking factors, the latter having a strong impact upon building organisational policies. These are, in combination, potentially new theoretical contributions in respect of the reasons for adopting WLB policies in a developing economy within an Arabic and Islamic cultural framework. In offering a contribution to the scarce literature on the adoption of work-family programmes, the present research extends models of causal factors developed in a Western context. This new model, however, supports some work (Den Dulk et al., 2012; Den Dulk, 2013) on the adoption of WLB policies in the West, in showing that this adoption is not limited to philosophies of enhancing business performance.

Rather, the organisations studied here, offered many different WLB policies because of religious and cultural factors which were not intrinsically beneficial for organisations, such as receiving personal visitors, and using phones for personal use for quite lengthy periods during office hours. Understanding the social and religious obligations which employers feel the
need to accept, will be valuable guides to multinational companies investing in, and setting up businesses, in Arabic countries. The current findings also point to the importance of understanding and considering different levels of general social, cultural, religious systems of any society for understanding the reasons behind the need to adopt particular HR policies within a nation. Misunderstanding some factors could lead to significant difficulties in multinational development.

This research supports some previous studies in Western countries on the importance of the percentage of female employees (Hyman & Summers, 2007), and the role of government (Maxwell & McDougall, 2004), in explaining the diffusion of WLB programmes in the current context. This in itself is an interesting finding, given that both institutional and cultural factors are markedly different from those in Western settings. In fact, in Palestine the female workforce impacted significantly on company practice, probably more so than in organisations in the Western context, notwithstanding the limited percentage of women in the workforce. This is due to cultural factors concerning the female workforce, with societal norms which pressure well-educated women not to give up homemaking and child care roles, even when they occupy work roles outside of the home. Without some flexibility in the WLB system, the women (who in the Telecom industries have valuable skills and experience) might leave the workforce permanently, and this is the case even where women remain a relatively small percentage of the labour market in comparison with those in Western countries.

This study clarifies the most salient factors which influence organizational WLB adoption in two case studies in the telecommunications industry, in a developing country. This study offers the potential for extending existing knowledge of the relationship between macro level conditions and developments in HRM policies within organizations: the development of WLB policies is not limited to business case philosophy but also involves institutional pressures within the cultural context.

The present study in addition, makes several contributions in the field of work-life research. It provides detailed information about the context and the stance of various interlocutors concerning WLB practices. There is in fact no
previous case study research on organizational WLB practices in Palestine, and there are few studies of any kind which have employed a detailed methodology in describing any Arabic society. This study therefore offers the basis for further research on the most salient factors determining organizational WLB adoption in developing countries in the Middle East.

Additionally, and from a methodological perspective, this study identified some cultural factors, which researchers should take into consideration when investigating aspects of business and marketing in Palestine, and in other Arab and developing countries. This research for example, has identified the importance of the paternalistic cultural style or “Fatherhood system”, and the influence and charisma of individual, prestigious figures in management, which has implications for research carried out in other Arab contexts. Managers who construed their world in this style, however, failed to present the power of labour unions and market competition as reasons of adoption of WLB policies. Managers presented different reasons behind such adoption when interviewed by the researcher (i.e. not the ‘real’ reasons) – this seems to be a common reconstruction of knowledge in Arab cultures, since such frankness might undermine their presentation of personal power in the organisation, and in society.

Albeit that this study offers deeper insights into the phenomena of WLB policies in the Palestinian telecommunication sector, it is uncertain without further research (for which the present study may be a valuable starting point) of the generalizability of the findings beyond purely Arab contexts. Although this qualitative enquiry has provided satisfactory data to enlarge on some existing theories, yet the findings and contributions of the study should be read within a context that is “relatively” unique: further research could be carried out in different settings which might contribute to the acquisition of a deeper understanding of the studied issues. A quantitative research methodology could be essential at this stage (this is after establishing a strong background for the current topic by using a qualitative approach) in order to examine the current topic in a wider range of industries. We are impressed, for example by the quantitative research of Al Dalayeen (2017) on workers’ benefits in Egypt, and would like to replicate this work in the context of Palestine.
References


