

# **The Experience of Female Saudi Workers with Children: Factors That Shape Their Ability to Balance Motherhood and Their Careers**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Little is known about how women in Saudi Arabia negotiate between two competing roles as mothers and as professionals. The aim of this study was, therefore, to explore factors that shape the ability of female employees in Saudi Arabia to maintain a balance between motherhood and their careers. Guided by the Work-Family Boarder theory, the study assumed a qualitative study design where a convenience sample of three women from Saudi Arabia completed in-depth interviews to collect data on their work, family life, and maintaining a balance between the two. Data analysis was carried out through a thematic analysis of their responses. The findings indicated that the work-motherhood balance was influenced by family-related factors such as parenting and marital issues, work-related factors such as challenges in the workplace and work structure, as well as, self-related factors including health, happiness and engaging in hobbies. Notably, all participants indicated that coping strategies such as prioritizing, exercise, time management, meditation, and spending time with the family helped them maintain the work-motherhood balance.

Keywords: Female Saudi Workers, work/life balance, Work-Family Boarder theory.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Maintaining optimal work/life balance is critical in today's life where an individual faces a lot of external and internal demands that relate to the lifestyle and the competitive nature of life in general (Murthy & Shastri, 2015). As such, people require a certain peace of mind if they are to meet those demands. The benefits of achieving work/life balance are multipronged to the extent that it has been associated with health effects (Naithani, 2016). Accordingly, scholars have increasingly continued to explore the family/work balance both in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the world as it has been shown that despite the fact that work and family are separate domains, they significantly impact one another (Karassvidou & Glaveli). Notably, Al-Asfour et al. (2017) indicated that there is minimal knowledge concerning women in careers in the Arab world. Available literature has explored challenges faced by women in the workforce (AlGhamdi, 2014; Alsubhi et al., 2018), care economy (Moghadam, 2015), and initiatives for women development in Saudi (Alsubhi et al., 2018; Moghadam, 2015). Previous studies have focused on women from different faculties such as education (Alsubhi et al., 2018), medicine (AlGhamdi, 2014), and telecommunication industry (Abubaker & Bagley, 2016) among others.

The focus of this study is to explore factors that shape female workers employees' ability to balance motherhood and their careers. While previous research across the world has focused on the difficulties experienced by women as they negotiate between two competing roles as mothers and as professionals, little is known about the same about women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Given that Saudi Arabia workforce is male-dominated, female employees may find it difficult in the struggle for balance. Therefore, the focus of the present study is to fill this gap in the literature. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following question: What factors shape female workers ability to balance their careers and motherhood?

Women, like men, encounter many challenges in their efforts to negotiate work/life issues. However, women in Saudi Arabia have to overcome an extra barrier. Like other Arab countries, Saudi Arabia adopts Islamic religious principles and its associated traditional cultural rules (Alsubhi et al., 2018). Traditionally, the excessively patriarchal and male-dominated Saudi society usually discourages the participation of women in formal jobs in the public sphere (Alsubhi et al., 2018). However, the last few decades have seen a significant change in that more women continue to access education and job markets (Alsubhi et al., 2018). In general, the Arab woman is responsible for the care of children and homes. Such beliefs have impacted the careers of many women in Saudi Arabia. For instance, AlGhamdi (2014) reported a study that concluded that in 1996, women were more inclined to changing their careers or their job responsibilities for the sake of their families and children. At that time, the typical alteration was a reduction in the number of working hours (AlGhamdi, 2014). All the same, Moghadam (2015) observed that some wealthy Saudi women in the Arab region resort to a nanny to assist in caring for the children just like women in the western world do. However, there is a major difference in that women in Saudi and the Arab region at large are yet to achieve labor market attachment with their numbers in the workforce still lower as compared to other regions.

A brief review of the literature is first provided before the description of the theoretical framework; work-family border theory.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The relevant literature from the search concerning the understanding factors that shape the working mothers ability to manage work/family balance can be divided into two themes: traditional beliefs about the role of a woman and the associated conflicting work/family roles and systematic challenges for women

### 2.1 Traditional Beliefs about the Role of a Woman and the Associated Work/Family Role Conflict

Traditional beliefs regarding female roles in the society can influence the ability of a woman to maintain a work/family balance. The traditional Saudi women often find themselves trapped in a society whose traditional cultures create limitations for women in terms of how they can get into jobs (Al-Asfour et al., 2015). However, Saudi women still believe they have the potential to contribute to the development of their country (Al-Asfour et al., 2015; Almunajjed, 2010). Notably, advancement in job positions is also difficult for Saudi women as traditionally, very few women occupy positions such as managers of companies or lead public organization's (Al-Asfour et al., 2015). All these issues show that Saudi women in the workforce do not enjoy independence and autonomy which appears not to exist in the cultural context as determined by their traditional beliefs about women and work.

Unfortunately, getting into employment does not mean that one abolishes her role as a wife or a mother (Al-Asfour et al., 2015; Bahudhailah, 2015). Therefore, those who get into careers often find it strenuous to balance between their role as wives and mothers and their role as career women (Al-Asfour et al., 2015). However, achieving family/work balance is almost impossible due to the society's expectation of a woman and work demands (Alsubhi et al. 2018). For this reason, female workers may be forced to make changes to their careers including reducing their working hours or changing careers (AlGhamdi, 2014). In a study of female physicians in Saudi, two-thirds of the participants indicated that their work had negatively impacted their relationships with spouses or children while only 4.9% who indicated that their relationships were not negatively impacted indicated dissatisfaction with their work-life balance (AlGhamdi, 2014). Given the responsibility and expectations the society places on the Saudi woman in relation to the family and children, Saudi women who are employees and have children have an increased need of ensuring that they maintain an appropriate work-life balance.

### 2.2 Systemic Challenges Facing Career Women

In general, women in Saudi Arabia face multiple challenges in their professional lives. A significant portion of literature has focused on the challenges faced by women who get into careers in Saudi Arabia. Even after overcoming the cultural barriers, Saudi women who choose to get into different careers find themselves in male-dominated careers and often find themselves working in traditionally female-oriented fields (Al-Asfour et al., 2015). Therefore, they often find themselves outnumbered by men (AlGhamdi, 2014; Al-Asfour et al., 2015)). Male-dominance presents a challenge for women more so those who are married and with children. For instance, AlGhamdi (2014) reported that some women may face discrimination which ultimately influences their satisfaction levels. According to AlGhamdi (2014), 51% of those who had faced discrimination or negativity as a result of their marital status were unsatisfied with

their career/family balance as compared to 32.9% of those who had not faced such negativity (AlGhamdi, 2014). Pregnancy also presents a significant challenge to Saudi women because although they recognize that childbearing is important, they may find it difficult to perform their work-related duties after pregnancy (Al-Asfour et al., 2015). If they ask for more days off, they might end up losing their jobs (Al-Asfour et al., 2015). Employee support, therefore, appears to be a defining factor regarding the ability of women to manage work/motherhood balance.

Other challenges facing career women include mobility. Although women in Saudi can drive, Krane and Majid (2018) noted that women driving is still new and not all women have access to vehicles. As such, mobility is a significant challenge as they have mainly depended on husbands, brothers, sons or hired drivers (Al-Asfour et al., 2015). Such an issue can influence the woman's ability to find time for work and family as any delays could significantly influence their abilities to assume the two roles effectively. However, as Almosaed (2008) noted, the reshaping process evident in Saudi in that some of the society's traditions, values and morals are open for discussion means that women are at a position to do more than they did in the past. The recent uplifting of the female driving ban represents one of the society's traditions that have been reviewed.

### 3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The roles of being a worker and a family person are separated by boundaries that help create a work-life balance. This is the tenet of a new theory of work-life balance referred to as work-family border theory as developed by Clarke (2000). The work-family border theory provides a rich analysis of the nature of work and family domains with a focus on the borders between the two as well as the permeability of this border and how it can be moved or managed (Karassvidou & Glaveli, 2014). Such adjustments make people achieve work-family balance.

According to the work-family border theory, when the role, commitments, and responsibilities of one role cross the border, the result is an overlap in the personal and professional roles that an individual plays (Clarke, 2000). The crossing results in conflicts which ultimately affect the balance. Interestingly, the flexibility of the boundaries has an impact on the level of conflicts between the two roles and how they relate. Frequent overlapping of the roles results in a lot of conflicts but when they are segmented and divided, conflict is less likely and when it occurs, it is unlikely that it will result in major issues being observed in the person trying to maintain the work-life balance (Clarke, 2000). Although the border's strength, permeability and crossing are important, Karassvidou and Glaveli (2014) noted that the theory provides little information regarding factors that contribute to those elements.

In summary, the work-family border theory argues that work and family domains are distinct and separated by a border which when breached, conflicts arise and therefore the need to come up with a way to avoid overlapping of the two role domains. This theory can, therefore, offer a plausible explanation regarding how women who have children and still in different careers navigate between their role in their careers and their families. It is suggested that the work-family border theory is in particular applicable to women with children as they are more likely to face more role demands as compared to those without children. Notably, they are not only mothers but they may be also wives in careers in a country where the belief that women should not work is held by many. All these issues help highlight the demands Saudi women have to meet and the complexity of their roles.

## 4.0 METHODOLOGY

This study represents a qualitative research. Approaches in qualitative research are used to study social phenomenon to gain a deeper understanding. In this study, a phenomenological approach was assumed as the interest was to understand the lived experiences of Saudi women in relation to how they maintain a work/motherhood balance. This approach was considered appropriate as phenomenology explores lived experiences thereby helping analyze the perspective of individuals experiencing a given phenomenon (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Through qualitative phenomenology research, the unheard, who in this case are the Saudi women, gain a voice as the goal was to collect data regarding their experiences.

### 4.1 Sample

Finding female participants for research in Saudi Arabia is challenging and therefore finding a conventional sample may be difficult. For this reason, convenience sampling, a method of sampling that depends on availability and accessibility of potential participants was employed (Etikan et al., 2016). In this case, the researcher leveraged his personal connections with the goal of identifying women who would be interested in the study and target them as potential study participants. Through emails and phone calls, the potential participants were informed about the study and its objective. They were also guaranteed confidentiality. In the end, three women agreed to participate in the study and formed its sample.

### 4.2 Data Collection

Three in-depth interviews were conducted via Skype with Saudi women working in various professionals. Table 1 summarizes demographic data of the three interviewees. Although the sample could be considered relatively small, the interviews continued until data saturation. The interviewer encouraged the interviewees to discuss their work, family life and how they managed to balance between the two. The average time taken to complete an interview was 45 minutes. The interviewer took notes during the interviews which were also audio recorded with the permission of respondents for reference.

The interview questions were developed based on the available literature and the objective of the study. From the two, a newly constructed questionnaire was used as a guide. Demographic data including age, number of children, professional field and academic level was collected. The researcher then collected data on family-related factors, work-related factors, self-related factors and coping strategies concerning work/motherhood balance. The researcher used open-ended questions with the goal of permitting the maximum information flow. Notably, the interviewer asked some probing questions with the goal of guiding the interviewees to the main purpose of the study.

### 4.3 Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate method for analysis in the current study. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), thematic analysis is the most prevalent data analysis method in qualitative research. In general, thematic analysis entails the identification of patterns, also referred to as themes, in qualitative data. The interview transcripts were analyzed

by reading them repeatedly. This allowed the researcher to code the data as well as in identifying relevant themes. The systematically coded data was recorded. Special attention was paid to details concerning factors that influenced the ability of the participants to manage and maintain a work/motherhood balance. To identify recurring themes emerging from the data, content analysis was carried out based on how frequent themes occurred.

## 5.0 RESULTS

This study explored factors that influenced the ability of Saudi women to maintain a work/motherhood balance. Of the three women, the oldest was 39 years and had three children, the youngest was 28 years and had two children while the other one was 35 years old and had one child. The average age was 34. Two out of three of the participants had masters' level education while the other one had a bachelor's degree. All the women worked in different professional fields; translation, information management systems, and healthcare. Table 1 below summarizes the demographic data of the study participants.

Age	Number of children	Education level	Professional field
28	2	Bachelor	Management information systems
35	1	Masters	Healthcare
39	3	Masters	Translation

Table 1: Summary of demographic data of the three participants. The youngest was 28 years old while the oldest was 39 years. The number of children ranged from one two three.

From the analysis of the answers to the interview questions as provided by the participants, four themes were identified. These themes include family-related factors, work-related factors, self-related factors, and coping strategies

### Family-Related Factors

Through this theme, issues relating to the family and the role as a mother and a wife were identified. Similar information provided by the respondents was subdivided into sub-themes including parenting issues, the effect on marriage and adjustments.

### *Parenting Factors*

One of the questions posed to the respondents was 'do you think you are a good mother?' This question elicited responses ranging from 'yes' and 'I am trying' to 'I am afraid I am not'. One woman who said she thought she was a good mother indicated that 'my family and I are quite better and happier'. The other one said 'yes' adding 'I hope I am'. The woman who said she felt she was not playing her role as a mother added that she felt guilty of the same. Notably, all three women indicated that they felt they were significantly involved in parenting with one indicating that she was 70% involved. Areas of involvement identified by the respondents included guidance, motivation, and providing a loving environment. One of the respondents even claimed that 'my children are proud and happier with me working'. Despite claiming involvement, one respondent, a mother of two, claimed that she had a nanny who helped with

children and cleaning. Two of the respondents indicated that they do not think a nanny helps despite the fact that one of them used to have a nanny. To her, day-care centers are more helpful. However, one of the two who had no nannies had a younger sister who babysat her son.

### ***Marital issues***

In relation to challenges in maintaining their roles as spouses and working women, the respondents indicated that they believed they play an important role as wives. Notably, spouse support was important. One respondent stated that she found her husbands to be 'supportive' and 'encouraging when I feel bad from work'. Another participant also claimed to have a very supportive husband and that her job affected her marriage positively. The other woman claimed that despite the fact that her husband appreciates her work, he felt that she spent more time at work but she did not believe she does. The same respondent claimed that her marriage had been affected by her work.

### **Work-Related Factors**

The work-related issue's theme describes concerns of the employees in relation to their job or workplace. Similar themes from the respondent's accounts were further subdivided into subthemes as follows:

#### ***Challenges at the workplace***

On being asked if they found their workplaces to be challenging, the respondents indicated that they found them challenging from 'sometimes' to 'yes very challenging'. Some of the identified challenges included having to take work home sometimes as indicated by one respondent. However, the other two claimed that they did not have to take work home.

#### ***Work structure factors***

Unstructured work schedules, as noted by two respondents, may have added to the challenges. Two respondents claimed that their work schedules were not structured with one of the two adding that 'sometimes I have to work more than the working hours free of charge'. Lack of leisure time was also indicated by one respondent whose work was unstructured. Unsurprisingly, time spent at work meant that the women have limited time to have meals with the family. Meal times ranged from four times a week and one meal a day to sometimes. As such, the family time for sharing meals was limited.

#### **Self-Related Factors**

This theme concerns issues that women employees relate to themselves including, hobbies, health, and 'me-time' among others. Subthemes were identified based on similar issues raised by the participants. The following are the subthemes;

### ***Health and Happiness***

Two respondents indicated that they had a good quality of life in that they felt happy and healthy. One of the two indicated that she was 'a healthy mother' and that she used her me time to interact with friends, go to movies and make spa visits. Only one respondent claimed that she was low on health and happiness as she did not 'have enough time to hang out with friends or family' and often ate outside and at work.

### ***Engaging in Hobbies***

In the current study, two of the respondents indicated that they had to give up on their hobbies so that they could effectively maintain a balance between work and family life. Notably, only one indicated that she did not have to give up on her hobby which is reading. The same woman also indicated that she used her 'me-time' to interact with friends, go for movies and spa visits.

### **Coping Strategies**

The coping strategies sought to identify methods and techniques employed by working women in Saudi Arabia with the goal of maintaining a work/motherhood balance. The identified techniques included prioritizing, time management, exercise, meditation and releasing stress by spending time with the family.

## **6.0 DISCUSSION**

This study was carried out to identify factors that influence the ability of working Saudi women to maintain a work/motherhood balance. Just as the respondents illustrate, working can result in role strain for Saudi women who have children given their culturally important and prescribed roles as mothers and wives. The factors that influence their ability to maintain a work/motherhood or family balance can be divided into family-related factors, work-related factors, and self-related factors.

Regarding family-related factors, it is evident that women recognize and appreciate the important role they play as spouses and mothers. However, ensuring that they can effectively parent their children and maintain a healthy marriage is critical. Salee and Pascale (2012) indicated that multiple roles with competing obligations can result in conflicts between work and home responsibilities. Such an argument can explain why some respondents felt that they were not good mothers and that their marriages had been affected. However, the current study showed that support by the spouse and children results in better work/motherhood balance. Nevertheless, just as indicated by Naithani (2016), health is an important factor that determines the ability of women to maintain a work/life balance. Therefore, the happier and healthier the women feel, the more they are likely to experience a work/motherhood balance.

Concerning work-related factors, it appears that challenges at the workplace include how the work is structured can influence the ability of Saudi women to maintain a work/family balance. In line with Moghadam (2015) who noted that there lacks social provisioning that would allow Saudi women to be employed and enjoy family life, the respondents identified various challenges. These include unstructured work schedules, lack of leisure time, and having



to take work home. Therefore, as long as employers do not make space for social provisions to accommodate women, career women are likely to continue experiencing work/family role conflicts. It is for such reasons that AlGhamdi (2014) called for solutions to assist women in maintaining the balance between work and family. Therefore, the presence or absence of work-related challenges will influence the extent to which Saudi women can maintain a work/motherhood balance.

When it comes to self-related factors, an individual's health, happiness, and hobbies are important considerations. According to Margo et al. (2008), assuming dual roles as a mother and an employee leads to limited opportunities for leisure and this can explain why two of the respondents indicated that they had to give up on their hobbies. It is possible that the goal was to try and create more time with the family and therefore the ability to create time for the family is a significant factor in maintaining a work/motherhood balance.

Notably, considering the factors that influence the ability of Saudi women to maintain a work/family balance and the associated challenges, Saudi women have coping strategies which include prioritizing, time management, exercise, meditation and releasing stress by spending time with the family. In fact, one respondent claimed that meditation helped her deal with work/life related stresses. This is an important aspect of maintaining work/motherhood balance given that Alsubhi, Hoque, and Razak (2018) indicated that lack of ability to adapt is one of the personal challenges that influence the ability of Saudi women to maintain work/life balance. Therefore, having a coping strategy may be a potential strategy to recover from work/life balance-related stress.

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