

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND WORK-FAMILY CONFLICTS IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Nick Forster, Aisha Al Ali Ebrahim, Nadia Alma Ibrahim

Abstract:

This article describes how Emirate women cope with the competing demands of work and family life and how these, in turn, affect their job performance, well-being and home lives. We found that many Emirate women face the same challenges in dealing with work-life balance and work-family conflicts as working-women in western countries do, although these are much more significant issues for Emirate women who work for private sector companies in the UAE. The article then describes policies that could be implemented by the Federal Government, and organizations in the UAE, to help Emirate women balance their work and family responsibilities more effectively; policies that would enable them to achieve their career goals and help them to achieve leadership positions in their organizations in the future. The broader implications of these findings for the future economic diversification of the country are also discussed.

Keywords: *Emirate women; work-family balance; work-family conflict.*

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the UAE has witnessed what can be described as a 'quiet revolution' in the legal rights and economic power of Emirate women. Today, they have opportunities that their mothers and grandmothers could have only dreamed about; and the freedoms they now have are very different to those of young women in more conservative Middle-Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia (see, for example, Lacey, 2009 and 2001; Alsanea, 2008; Salloum, 2003). The number of Emirate women in the national workforce grew from 18,144 in 1995, to 38,657 in 2000, to more than 100,000 in 2009. By 2009, Emirate women comprised 66 percent of the workforce in the government sector, of which nearly one-third were in middle and senior management positions. There has also been a growing level of participation in the private sector, although the proportion of Emirate women working in this sector remains small (Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs, 2009, 12; Al Abed, 2007, 246; Allen et al, 2007).

However, the UAE remains in many ways a very traditional Muslim society, with all the implicit assumptions that are made about the 'correct' public and private roles of Emirate women, and their responsibilities to their community, their extended families, their husbands and their children. Although much has changed in Emirate society over the last two decades, it is still characterized by a patriarchal culture, and fathers still exert considerable control over their daughters' lives and continue to make many of the important decisions that affect their education, careers, and choice of marriage partners. Some Emirate fathers do not allow their daughters to pursue certain careers, and others still do not permit them to work in mixed-gender workplaces (Marmenout, 2009; Metcalfe, 2006; Mostafa, 2005). According to the UAE Federal Government, women now enjoy equality of opportunity in the workplace, including pay equity with men, although there is a lack of independent research that might validate this claim (Al Abed, 2007: 244-249). We do know that the UAE is currently ranked first for gender equality in the MENA region, was ranked 29th in the UN's Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) in 2009 and ranked 43rd among 177 countries in the United Nations' Gender-Related Development Index (cited by the Ministry of State for Federal

National Council Affairs, 2009, 3). Globally, however, it was ranked 103/134 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2012 (World Economic Forum, 2012: 9).

The issues of work-life balance (WLB) and work-family conflict (WFC) have been the subject of hundreds of research articles and dozens of books over the last three decades. However, very little attention has been paid to these emergent issues in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region by either western or local management scholars, reflecting the general lack of research on organizations, business and management in this part of the world. And, it is only in very recent times that the phenomenon of dual-career couples has emerged in the UAE and, concurrently, public debates about the impact of work on family life, changes to the traditional (domestic) roles of Emirate women and, of course, Islamic beliefs and values (Trade Arabia, 2010). This article is the first to describe the emergence of WLB and WFC issues in one country in this region, the UAE, and the growing challenges that Emirate women face in balancing their work and family lives. It is divided into four parts. Part one describes a theoretical framework for understanding WLB and WFC issues in the UAE, derived from the recent academic literature. Part two addresses the survey research methodology, and part three describes the data derived from a questionnaire survey of 118 Emirate women. Part four begins by summarising the broader implications of the data results, and then recommends strategies for improving WLB, while reducing WFC, in the UAE. It also describes the limitations of this exploratory study and suggests some avenues for further research on this topic.

A Theoretical Framework for Understanding WLB and WFC Issues in the UAE

WLB is defined here as, 'the ability to harmonise and cope effectively with the competing demands of work and family life'; and WFC is defined as, 'situations where people find it difficult to balance the demands encountered in one domain (family) due to their involvement in the other domain (work)' (adapted from Aycan, 2008). Four broad causes of WFC

have been identified in the international research literature and these form the basic theoretical framework for this study (adapted from, Lewis, 2010; Halpern and Cheung, 2008; Lewis et al, 2007; Gambles et al, 2006; Aycan, 2008; Drago, 2007; Yang, 2005; Aycan et al, 2004; Gelfand and Knight, 2003; Friedman, Christensen and Degroot, 2000):

Role or Strain Overload: arising from multiple demands (e.g. long hours) and activities at work (e.g. routine multi-tasking) that may affect employees' ability to cope with family responsibilities. Several studies have found that work overload is strongly correlated with work life imbalance in many different cultures, reducing the amount of time that employees can spend with families and affecting other non-work personal relationships.

Work-to-family interference: when work responsibilities interfere with family life and make it difficult to perform household tasks or spend adequate time with children.

Family-to-work interference: when family responsibilities interfere with work demands, which may make it difficult - or impossible - to perform efficiently and effectively at work

Cultural (gendered) assumptions and expectations: the belief that women, even if they work outside the home, are still primarily responsible for management of the domestic unit, housework and childcare, even in dual-income relationships.

In addition to these, three deeply-rooted gender, organizational and cultural norms have been identified in this literature which influence the way that WLB and WFC issues are conceptualised by women, men, public and private sector organizations and by individual societies/cultures. These are the Motherhood Norm, the Ideal Worker Norm and the Individualism Norm (Aycan, 2008; Drago, 2007).

The Motherhood Norm: refers to the ancient and deeply held belief that women should be, primarily, mothers and managers of their households. In turn, this may discourage them from being fully committed to demanding professional, full-time jobs which, in turn, will prevent them from reaching higher positions in their careers because they are not regarded by their employers as, 'ideal workers'.

The Ideal Worker Norm: refers to the belief that employees must be totally committed to their employers and available 24/7/365 in order to gain promotions, earn higher salaries and, if they have the ambition, to serve in leadership positions. They are, consequently, expected to be both 'visible' and 'present'. This widely prevalent norm will affect the amount of time that employees have to spend with their families - unless they have other support-systems in place such as stay-at-home spouses, extended families or servants/nannies (see, for example, Forster, 2000, for an analysis of how Ideal Worker and Motherhood assumptions contributed to holding back British women academics in their careers during the 1990s).

The Individualism Norm: refers to the assumption that companies (and governments) should not, as a general rule,

interfere in the private lives of their citizens - unless their behaviour poses a threat to their employer, themselves, their families or others. While there are considerable variations in the amount of help and support given by national governments, and private sector companies, to help women employees balance their work and family responsibilities, the literature is very consistent about one major issue: most organizations, public or private, still view work and personal life as competing priorities in a zero-sum game, in which a gain in one area means a loss in the other. In their view, every time an employee's personal interests win, the organization pays the price at the bottom line, and so they may often regard work-life programs as little more than corporate 'welfare' (see, inter alia, Lewis, 2010; Lewis et al, 2007; Donaghy, 2002; Thomas, 2004; Friedman et al, 2000; Thomas, 1996).

Utilising the four part theoretical framework described above, we created thirty research questions to address in this exploratory survey, of which eight are addressed in this article: How do working Emirate women conceptualise the issue of 'work-life balance' in general terms? How many hours a week, on average, do professional Emirate women work? How many hours a week are they able to spend with their children and immediate and extended families? What is the impact of work on the home lives of working Emirate women? Do their family responsibilities affect their work performance? What strategies do working Emirate women use to balance their work and family lives? Do employers in the UAE help working mothers to balance their work and family lives? What specific HR policies and services do they have in place to help with this?

Research Methodology

The questionnaire designed for this exploratory study comprised several descriptive items plus 40 Likert-scale items, some of which have been used in previous studies of WLB and WFC (e.g. Ayree et al, 2002; Gambles et al; 2006). It was divided into four sections:

Demographic profiles: information about the participants' ages, number of children and their spouses' employment status.

Occupational and employment profiles: information about the participants' employment sector, average hours worked each week, and work designations.

Work-family balance and work-family conflict: time spent at home, interactions with their immediate and extended families, the effects of work responsibilities on their home lives, and how they balance the competing demands of work and home life.

WLB support provided by respondents' employers: evaluations of the work-life balance policies in their organizations and information on how these could be improved by their employers.

Having made contact with the HR Directors of 20 public (N = 12) and private sector organizations (N = 8) in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, two on-line questionnaire surveys were

distributed during March and October 2011 to 400 female Emirate employees in full-time jobs. After sending two rounds of reminders, we had received 210 questionnaires by early December 2011. However, 37 of these were incomplete and excluded from the data analysis. We then identified those respondents who were not married, or who were married but did not have children, and also excluded these (N = 55), leaving a valid sample of 118 questionnaires for data analysis (public sector employees N = 71; private sector N = 47). In addition to the questionnaire surveys, we also conducted 20 interviews with a sub-sample of respondents to elicit richer and more nuanced insights into how Emirate women cope with work-life balance issues. However, only the data from our questionnaire surveys are described in the remainder of this article. The data analysis, primarily using SPSSx, followed well-established practices in quantitative business and management research studies (e.g. Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2001).

Data Analysis

Demographic profile

21.10 percent of our sample were aged 20-25 years, 25.60 percent 25-30, 40 percent 30-35, and just 13.30 percent were aged 35 and above. (Note: all figures in text and in the data tables are rounded to the nearest decimal point). This demographic profile is representative of the relatively youthful female Emirate working population of the UAE, following the baby boom of the 1980s and 1990s and the increasing employment opportunities that became available to Emirate women during the 2000s. As noted above, all of these women were married; and 58 have one child, 35 have two, 18 have three and seven have four or more children. 93.5 percent of our respondents have husbands who were also working full-time or managing their own businesses.

Occupational and employment profiles

Our respondents worked in a variety of public (41.1 percent), semi-government (24.4 percent) and private sector organizations (34.5 percent), and included accountants, financial officers, human resource managers, research analysts, customs' officers, medical professionals, university employees, import-export managers, airline employees, media employees, two women diplomats, police officers, a few women working in IT, school teachers, marketing managers, bank officers and branch managers. Most of these worked in supervisory or middle management roles. 38.5 percent had work experience of less than five years; 26.4 percent of our respondents had 6-10 years' work experience and 23.1 percent had 11-15 years. Only 12 percent of these women had worked for more than 15 years. Again, these data reflect the relatively youthful age profile of this sample of Emirate women. On average, women in the private sector report working longer weeks than their sisters in the public sector (5.4 versus 5.0 days per week), and there are noticeable differences in the average hours they report working each day (Table I).

Table I: Daily hours worked by Emirate women in public, semi-government and private sector organizations in the UAE

Daily average working hours (%) *				
	7-8	9-10	11-12	12 or more
Sector				
Public	65.30	39.70	5.00	0.00
Semi-government	41.70	45.20	13.10	0.00
Private	33.10	42.50	21.80	2.60

* These include 'time spent on work-related duties while at home' and 'commuting hours' in order to assess the 'total number of hours engaged in non-family activities' by these women each week. 66.6 percent of our respondents reported that they took '30 minutes or less' to travel to work, 28.6 reported '30-60 minutes' and the remainder reported '60 minutes or longer'.

In the public sector sub-sample, a majority of respondents report being 'neutral' about the amount of time they spend at work, with 30.6 percent of respondents reporting that they were 'happy' and 11.9 percent 'very happy' with their working hours. However, more respondents in the private sector sub-sample felt 'unhappy' or 'very unhappy' about the amount of time they spend at work (37.4 percent compared to 11.4 percent among public sector employees). Furthermore, 61.2 percent of private-sector employees reported that work pressures 'sometimes make me feel very tired' and only 10.5 percent reported that their work 'never leaves me feeling tired'. And, while 31.8 percent of public sector employees reported that they had 'sometimes' dealt with work during weekends and holidays, this figure rose to 71.2 percent among those working in the private sector.

Work-life balance and work-life conflict

To develop a clearer picture of how our respondents cope with the competing demands of work and family life we asked them a general question, 'Do you feel that you are able to balance your work responsibilities and family life?' The results are presented in Table II.

Table II: Do you feel that you are able to balance your work responsibilities and family life?

	Rating (%)				
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Sector					
Public	2.10	8.80	30.60	37.10	22.30
Semi-government	2.70	6.20	37.10	37.20	16.80
Private	9.40	24.90	33.70	17.00	12.00

The responses to this question show that most of the women who work in the public and semi-government sectors feel that they are able to balance their work responsibilities and family life, although three out of four public, and nearly 40 percent of semi-government employees, reported that it was sometimes difficult to balance the competing responsibilities of work and family. The situation for those working in the private sector is rather different, with nearly one-third reporting that they were 'never' or 'rarely' able to balance the demands of their jobs and families. There is also clear evidence of spillover between work and our respondents' leisure time, with noticeable differences in the responses of

the private sector employees when compared to public and semi-government employees (Tables III and IV).

Table III: How often do you think about work when you are not actually at work or when traveling to work?

Rating (%)					
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Sector					
Public	0.00	30.80	61.90	7.30	0.00
Semi-government	0.00	27.70	57.90	10.80	3.60
Private	0.00	8.40	47.70	35.60	8.30

Table IV: Do you ever miss-out on quality time with your families and friends because of work pressures?

Rating (%)					
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Sector					
Public	1.80	17.50	56.10	17.60	7.00
Semi-government	0.00	27.30	59.50	10.80	2.40
Private	0.00	8.40	48.70	36.60	8.30

The data also suggested that work responsibilities had few negative effects on the amount of time that our public-sector respondents had to spend with their children. However, once again, the longer working hours required of those working in private sector companies in the UAE had a demonstrable effect on the time they could spend with their children (Tables V and VI).

Table V: On an average working day, how much time do you have to spend with your children?

Hours per day (%)				
	< 2 hours	2-3 hours	3-4 hours	> 4 hours
Sector				
Public	12.60	29.40	38.20	19.80
Semi-government	12.60	33.10	46.50	7.80
Private	49.50	27.30	22.20	1.00

Table VI : During an average weekend, how much time do you spend with your children?

Hours per weekend (%)				
	< 4 hours	4-5 hours	5-6 hours	> 6 hours
Sector				
Public	3.60	12.40	26.20	57.80
Semi-government	5.60	16.40	28.00	50.00
Private	19.60	35.30	27.20	20.90

In order to evaluate how Emirate women coped with the competing demands of work and family, we asked several questions about childcare and the management of their households. The data show, unequivocally, that most working Emirate women - regardless of the employment sector that they work in - are still heavily dependent on extended families and older relatives for child care and support, or some combination of family support, nannies or

servants (who, by western standards, are extremely cheap to employ) (Table VII). Combined together, these make childcare a less onerous and expensive proposition for working Emirate women. However, as we will see later, extended kin networks are beginning to fragment in the UAE and some of our respondents can no longer rely on these for routine childcare. In addition, just over one-fifth of our respondents reported that they also had ongoing responsibilities for elderly or dependent relatives (22.5 percent), and seven reported that they had children with disabilities, requiring some specialised professional home-care.

Table VII: Who - primarily - takes care of your children while you are at work?

Care-person (%)			
	Spouse	Parents, in-laws or close relatives	Servant or Nanny
Sector			
Public	9.60	42.40	48.00
Semi-government	9.60	41.90	50.50
Private	9.60	37.30	53.10

To conclude this section, we asked our respondents five questions concerning the impact of their home lives on their work performance. Only a minority of our respondents felt overwhelmed by the competing demands of their home and work lives, but there was evidence of some strains and stresses being created by this, across the entire sample (Table VIII). These findings confirm the results of other studies on WLB, indicating the existence of a 'high-pressure' subgroup of one in seven Emirate women working in the private sector who, at times, really struggle to balance the competing demands of high-pressure jobs and busy family lives.

Table VIII: What is the impact of home life on your work performance?

	Sector		
	Public	Semi-government	Private
Impact (% of respondents who indicated this item*)			
My home life has no impact on my work performance	33.40	28.60	27.70
Family responsibilities can reduce the time I have to work on job-related tasks	9.30	11.20	14.70
Family responsibilities can distract me from work-tasks	8.40	8.20	21.70
Problems at home can make me feel irritable at work	12.10	11.90	17.80
At times, work pressures and family responsibilities can overwhelm me	4.10	4.10	15.40

(* For items 2-5, respondents were asked to indicate 'Yes' or 'Sometimes'. Only 'Yes' responses are reported here)

WLB support provided by respondents' employers

In the final section of the survey, we examined the WLB support provided by our respondents' employers. The data portray a very mixed picture of both the general availability of WLB support in UAE organizations (Table IX), and the

provision of specific services or HR policies that are known to help with the management of WLB (Table X).

Table IX: Does your company have any specific services or HR policies to help with work-life balance?

Sector	Response (%)		
	Yes	No	Not sure/don't know
Public	32.10	51.60	16.30
Semi-government	32.10	51.60	16.30
Private	22.60	57.30	1.10

Table X: WLB support provided by respondents' employers (excludes 'Not sure/don't know' respondents)

Policy (%)	Sector		
	Public	Semi- government	Private
Flexible starting and finishing times	19.40	17.40	27.20
Option to work part-time or job share	19.20	16.50	4.80
Crèche, day-care or nursery at your workplace	0.00	0.00	0.00
Career breaks or sabbaticals	17.40	17.40	0.00
Parental or family advice	15.60	15.60	0.00
Advice on stress management	4.80	5.20	13.60
Paid maternity leave*	100.00	100.00	100.00

(* At 30 September 2012, 45 days is mandatory for all employers in the UAE)

In an open-ended question, we asked those respondents who had reported conflicts between their jobs and family lives, in Table VIII, to indicate which five factors they believed to be the greatest hindrance to achieving better WLB. In order of importance, these were 'Negative/patriarchal/old-school attitudes of (male) senior managers, bosses or supervisors' (N = 35); 'Inadequate maternity leave provisions' (N = 33); 'Lack of childcare facilities at work' (N =27); 'Negative attitudes of family members', 'culture and religion' (i.e. pressures to put family before work, or their husband's career) (N= 25) and, 'Technology' (i.e. being accessible 24/7 for work-related matters) (N= 24). The final question we asked our respondents in the survey was, 'Do you think that if employees enjoy a good balance between their work and family lives, then their work-performance will improve?' 77.1 percent replied 'Yes', 21.1 percent replied 'not sure' and 1.8 percent replied 'No'.

Summary

The data collected in this survey demonstrate that WLB and WFC are issues that concern many working Emirate women. However, there were noticeable and consistent differences in the responses of those in the private sector, when compared to those working in the public sector. Women in the former group reported longer working hours, had less time to spend with their children and families and experienced greater difficulties in balancing work and family commitments. In addition, both groups of women can still rely on the support

of extended families and kin, who routinely help out with childcare, or they can afford nannies and, in some cases, servants. This means that, at this moment in time, WLB is a less stressful issue than is typically the case for many working-women in western industrialised societies. However, some Emiratis will not be able to rely on their extended families for support in the future to the extent that they did in the past; an issue we return to in the discussion section. Last, both groups of women felt that the organizations they worked for could be more sympathetic to WLB and WFC issues, and they suggested a range of HR initiatives that could be implemented to help with these (flexi-hours and longer maternity leave, for example). These, they believe, would also enhance their prospects of becoming business and public sector leaders in the future. Their recommendations, and the implications of these findings for the career development of Emirate women, and the development and diversification of the UAE economy in the future, are discussed in the next section

Discussion

At the time of writing, WLB and WFC are not issues that are part of public discourse in the UAE to the extent that they are many western countries. However, WFC has already become an important professional and personal issue for those Emirate women who work in the private sector. And, as we will see in this section, WLB and WFC will become more significant issues in the UAE in the near future - particularly for private sector organisations - and these will require positive and creative solutions from business, public sector organizations and the UAE Federal Government if they are not to become impediments to the economic development of the UAE during the 2020s and 2030s. There are two main reasons for this.

The first, and most important, is the compelling need for the UAE economy to diversify away from oil. Only one Emirate (Abu Dhabi) has significant reserves of oil and gas, but even these passed their 'peak-production' levels during the late 2000s. Even before the economies of Dubai and the UAE began to recover from the downturn of the late 2000s and early 2010s, the country had already been facing a variety of economic, business, social and environmental challenges. The UAE Government Strategy Document 2008 and the Dubai Strategic Plan 2015 had made it clear in the late 2000s that the country had to focus on industrial and business diversification in order to safeguard the country's economic growth and prosperity in the future. The strategic development priorities identified in these reports include transport, infrastructure, new technologies, health, education, tourism, the arts and environmental sustainability. These documents also clearly demonstrated that continuing economic development and diversification, at both macro and micro-levels, would remain key strategic priorities for the country, and each of the Emirates, during the 2010s and beyond.

In addition, several commentators had noted during the late 2000s that the makeup of the UAE's economy was not well suited to the changing needs of university-educated and ambitious young Emirates, male or female. In 2009,

for example, Davidson had suggested that, 'only a limited number of jobs is likely to be available in government departments, national oil companies or investment vehicles; and those nationals with alternative aspirations, abilities and qualifications will remain frustrated' (2009, 65). After a period of rapid growth during the 2000s, the public sector had reached saturation point by the early 2010s, when about two-thirds of those employed there were women. Increasing higher-education enrolments by women during the mid-2000s and early 2010s now means that the number of female Emirate graduates applying for public-sector positions exceeds demand, and there is now fierce competition for jobs in the one sector where most Emirate women still prefer to work. This preference will be difficult to change because it is a very attractive option for them. It combines perhaps the best public-sector pay rates and benefits in the world, short working hours and generous holiday entitlements (compared to the private sector), and working environments that respect local women and their religious/cultural values. Collectively, as our research has demonstrated, these factors allow them to enjoy a better job/family balance when compared to those who work in the private sector. The only thing that might change this situation is to make the public sector less attractive to Emirate women, and that is unlikely to happen in the near future.

The only remaining option is for private sector companies to implement employment policies that will make them more appealing to Emirate women (and our research clearly indicates that improved WLB policies is one factor that would help). With a persistent long-term unemployment rate of 15-20 percent among younger Emirates, it is becoming even more important that UAE nationals embrace careers in the private sector and as entrepreneurs (Holdsworth, 2010; Kahn, 2009, 267-270). The response of the UAE Federal Government to the low levels of participation by Emirate women (and men) in the private sector during the 2000s was to introduce a compulsory process of 'Emiritisation', whereby all companies operating in the UAE are required by law to recruit a percentage of national employees. To date, this initiative has had limited success because many Emiratis (female or male) still - for the reasons documented above - prefer to work in the public sector (Holdsworth, 2010; Dyes, 2009; Farrell, 2008; Al-Ali, 2008; Dubai Women's Establishment, 2008 a & b;).

The second reason concerns the breakdown of extended kin networks in the UAE. In many cultures, such as in those in Southern Europe, Asia, Latin America, the Pacific Islands, the MENA region and sub-Saharan Africa, extended families are still commonplace. This, until very recently, was also true of the UAE where it was normal for three generations of a family to share a single household. It is true that this part of the world extended families are still much more common than they are in the west, but this has changed with the emergence of increasing numbers of nuclear families in recent times - ones that consist of a father, mother and their children - who can no longer rely on parents or other close relatives to look after their children while they are at work. The data from our research shows that a growing number of younger Emiratis, who may be both socially and geographically mobile, can

no longer rely on extended kin networks to the extent that their parents did. With the decline of extended kin networks in many western countries, employees are more reliant on government-mandated laws (e.g. for extended maternity leave or flexible working options), the discretionary WLB support provided by their employers, or (expensive) professional childcare.

The problem for Emirate women is that our research shows that the support provided by Emirate federal/state governments and private sector companies are negligible, which means that most Emirate women will continue 'to vote with their feet' and will not, if they can avoid it, pursue careers in the private sector. That situation, as we've already noted, is not sustainable in the context of the long term economic diversification of the UAE. Our research shows that some private sector companies offer some WLB support to their employees, but these are limited in scope. Others provide no support, other than that mandated by law (e.g. 45 days paid maternity leave). But, as we've seen, many of our respondents suggested simple policies that they believed will help them to achieve better WLB, would improve their performance at work, will increase their commitment to their organizations and also improve their chances of achieving leadership positions in the future. These would also encourage more women to work in private sector companies in the UAE.

To help with this, the UAE Federal Government could perhaps emulate countries like the UK, New Zealand and Australia who have promoted better work-life balance by launching a variety of targeted campaigns during the 2000s. The national governments of these countries have all developed websites to provide information to policy analysts, employees, employers and trade unions on the importance of improving work-life balance. In Australia, for example, The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency regards paid maternity leave as both an essential element in helping women and their families to have a balanced life, and something that also has a positive impact on gender equity in the workplace. In addition to this, Australia already recognizes the benefits of parental leave by allowing male employees the option of 12 months unpaid parental leave. A Work and Family Unit (WFU) has been established in the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations that provides information and advice to employers and employees on how to improve WLB. There are also a variety of resources on its website to assist with work-life harmonization and the WFU also oversees the annual Family Friendly Employer awards (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, 2012). There is nothing - apart from tradition and myopic thinking - that is preventing the UAE Federal Government from adopting similar policies and creating support agencies that can help Emirate women balance their work and family lives more effectively.

Limitations of this exploratory study and directions for future research on WLB and WFC issues in the UAE

While this study generated some useful data, it has three major limitations. The first of these is the sample size. It took several months to acquire a valid sample that would allow us

to draw reasonable preliminary inferences about how Emirate women perceive and deal with WLB and WFC issues. Hence, while we now have a good platform to generate testable research hypotheses during Stage 2 of this research, we need to locate larger and more representative samples, covering a broader range of public and private sector companies in the UAE. Second, we only surveyed Emirate women working in large public and private sector organisations. An increasing number of Emirate women are opting for self-employment and we need to know if this helps them to cope with WLB and WFC more effectively, or whether they face the same challenges as other working women. Hence, in Stage 2, this research will be extended to cover a sample of 20 married women SME owners in Dubai and Abu-Dhabi. Third, no men participated in this survey. The second stage of this research will include a sample of Emirati males from public and private sector organisations in order to elicit their views about WLB and WFC issues, and to assess if their traditional roles as family patriarchs are also changing and evolving in dual-career households.

Conclusion

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this exploratory study of WLB and WFC issues in the UAE. First, many working married Emirate women now have to deal with these and some of them experience regular conflicts between the demands of their jobs and their families. Second, they think about and deal with these in ways that are very similar to those of working women in western countries. Third, while many working Emirate women can still rely on a combination of extended families, nannies and servants to help with childcare, this will change in the future as Emiratis become more professionally and geographically mobile, as extended kin networks weaken and, as is beginning to happen, they marry non-Emiratis and move away from their home areas. Fourth, Emirate women working in the private sector experience considerably more difficulties in dealing with WLB and WFC, caused primarily by longer working hours, shorter holidays and greater work pressures. Fifth, the provision of WLB support at the governmental/legislative level is two to three decades behind leading western countries. The same appears to apply to the WLB support provided by private sector companies in the UAE, which lag well behind the employment practices of 'Employer of Choice' companies in the west such as IBM, Google, W. L. Gore, Coca Cola, the SAS institute and many others. Sixth, we argued that there is considerable room for improvement in this domain and several simple HR policy changes were identified which could improve WLB, while reducing the potential for WFC. Sixth, the additional pressures of work (combined with limited WLB support) in the private sector continue to act as major deterrents to younger Emirate women when they are making decisions about their future careers. Their strong preference for public-sector employment, and the implications of this for the future economic development and diversification of the UAE, economy have documented in the article.

While businesses in the UAE can learn from best-practice in companies that have well-established work-life balance

policies, these will have to be modified to suit the specific needs of Emirate women, and their cultural and religious beliefs. Having said this, the benefits for companies and employees of introducing supportive WLB policies have been well documented elsewhere, and there is no reason to suppose that companies in the UAE would not also enjoy these benefits. These include, higher levels of employee motivation, enhanced employee performance and productivity, greater engagement and emotional commitment, reduced absenteeism and labour turnover, increased retention of female talent and the considerable competitive advantage of being able to attract and select the best women employees (e.g. Lewis 2010; Halpern and Cheung, 2008; Yang, 2006; Catalyst, 2004). Private-sector companies in the UAE that take the lead in maternity leave, flexi-working, sensitivity to family responsibilities and childcare provision today will have a considerable advantage in recruiting the best and most talented Emirate women tomorrow. However, local companies also need to be aware that creating work-life policies, like all other aspects of organizational management, will require top-level leadership support and will take time, energy and commitment to ensure that they are implemented successfully.

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Prof. Nick Forster
 College of Business
 PO Box 50927
 Al Faisal University
 Riyadh 11533
 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
 Email:nforster@alfaisal.edu

Aisha Al Ali Ebrahim
 Accounts Manager
 Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company
 Du PLC
 PO Box 502666
 Dubai
 United Arab Emirates

Nadia Alma Ibrahim
 Research Analyst
 Emirates Airlines,
 PO Box 500686
 Dubai
 United Arab Emirates