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Article

Arab Culture and Organisational Context in Work-Life Balance Practice for Men and Women: A Case Study from Gaza, Palestine

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Abstract: This paper examines types of WLB (Work-Life Balance Policies) that have emerged in research in Western countries, and compares their applicability for male and female employees in Arab countries in general, and in Gaza, Palestine in particular. A qualitative study has been undertaken with employees of telecommunication companies, with thematic analysis to identify new kinds of WLB in an Arab culture. The WLB policies identified in the two companies were often quite different from those identified by Western researchers, and were guided by the religious principles of Islam, cultural factors, and the needs and aspirations of female employees. The international investors identified had adapted their policies to meet the cultural requirements of an Arabic society. This paper contributes to debates on the effectiveness of, and the need for culturally adapted WLB policies which try to meet the aspirations of women in developing countries. Additionally, this case study adds a new theoretical base, advocating the importance of WLB policies which are adapted to local cultural conditions in ways which also meet the aspirations of international business models. The WLB practices identified have not been described previously in any detailed study. The WLB policies and practices identified advocate for further research studies focusing on gender differences in the provision and take-up of WLB, using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Keywords: gender; Arab culture; Islamic religion; work-life balance; family-friendly practices; flexible working; telecommunication sector; Gaza; Palestine



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1. Introduction: Work-Life Balance Policies, Definition, and Development

Firstly, this paper briefly reviews the literature on the development of Work-Life Balance (WLB) benefits provided by employers in organizations and businesses in different cultures [1]. This review focuses on how investors and employers, particularly those importing models from Western countries into a developing country (such as Gaza, in the State of Palestine) accommodated and adapted WLB policies to accommodate local culture and values. The research considers in particular how these organizations, agencies, and businesses might offer benefits that accommodate both traditional cultural and religious values. We also have a particular interest in the entry of educated women into the workforce. Our qualitative, longitudinal research on which conclusions are based began in 2014 and completed in August 2023, prior to the devastation imposed on Gaza and its infrastructure by warfare in October 2023.

Many businesses and organizations are now operating on a global scale, and markets are evolving with heightened international awareness, introducing new and dynamic challenges for human resources management in general, and for the provision of Work-Life Benefits (WLB) in particular [2–7].

The demand for a more specialized workforce, inclusive of women, has led to an intensified study of international businesses and organizations driven by the imperative of providing highly skilled workers who understand the goals and purpose of international business, in ways which are also sympathetic to local cultural factors [8]. An important example is that of newly emerging workforce needs, such as a growing preference for flexible working hours, and an increased emphasis on employee health and well-being [9]. Thus, the development of WLB policies has garnered attention within the realm of human resources management, both in terms of policy development, and research [2,3].

This heightened awareness underscores the necessity for the development of culturally sensitive policies addressing inherent tensions between workplace demands, and the individual's desire for sufficient time and energy to enjoy personal and family life [10]. Some organizations have responded by developing a variety of 'family-friendly policies' (FFP) specifically crafted to enhance the work-family balance of employees, although there has remained a bias towards Western models, as identified in [11] comparison of Work-Life Benefits offered in Western companies, with those in other parts of the world.

Organizations worldwide have implemented a range of Work-Life Balance policies, typically categorized into three fundamental types: flexible policies, leave policies, and childcare support [6,10,11]. The adoption of these WLB policies has been spurred, in part, by the rise in dual-income families, as more women have entered the workforce. Additionally, increasing demands from employees for an improved quality of life, coupled with heightened competition in a tightening labor market have emerged as drivers for the wider acceptance of WLB policies [12,13].

Despite the implementation of WLB policies, there is evidence suggesting that employees in certain countries or industries *underutilize* these provisions. Researchers emphasize the need for further investigation, including the exploration of cultural factors that may influence individual behaviors [13]. The variations in the types of WLB benefits offered underscore cross-cultural differences, shaped by historical factors, as well as the intricate interplay between state and labor market roles in specific countries [14]. Examining the 'business case' approach prevalent in neo-liberal Western countries, the social democratic systems of Scandinavian countries stand out [15]. In Nordic nations, family-friendly policies are extended by many companies to employees with dependent family members, regardless of age. Notably in these Nordic examples, there is a considerable degree of policy equality across genders, and the utilization of paternity leave is a common practice in these societies [12,14].

Pfau-Effinger [16] explored the complex determinants embedded in the values, history, and economic challenges faced by various European countries in their development of welfare policies benefiting women. Her work emphasizes how women can influence social systems to alter the status and significance of their work, highlighting the intricate nature of formulating such policies [17]. Using this model, understanding WLB policies within Arab culture presents an equally formidable intellectual challenge due to the cultural complexities involved.

Studies in Western societies where there is a growing trend for both partners to work outside of the home, indicate that there is increased adoption of WLB practices, especially in childcare support, and employment practices for reducing working hours [12,13]. These findings align with the perspectives of [18], who contended that in collectivistic cultures prevalent in many developing countries, assistance from extended family members often serves to supplement or even diminish the demand for WLB childcare provisions offered by employers.

The cultural backdrop significantly shapes employees' adoption of WLB practices, influencing practices like leave arrangements and financial provisions, including, in some

settings, childcare or flexible working options [18]. According to Wang’s review, a research gap lay in the insufficiency of studies on WLB practices in developing countries, particularly in the Arabic context. It remains a fact that while WLBs in Europe have been intensively investigated, parallel research in the Arabic context is limited [19]. A few studies attempting to replicate positivist research methods are available for Palestine’s West Bank region, using, for example, translated Western questionnaires which are, unfortunately, insensitive to local cultural practices and values [20–22]. No qualitative or in-depth studies of human resource management are available for the region of Gaza or Palestine. This gap highlights the need for exploring factors impacting WLB policies in this and other Arab contexts. The present study aims to address this gap by examining the use of WLB policies in Gaza between 2014 and 2023, exploring whether a Western ‘standard WLB package’ has been relevant within this specific culture.

1.1. Defining Work–Life Balance for the Purpose of the Present Research

The term “Work–Life Balance” lacks a universally agreed definition due to the complexity of interpreting the nature and connections of ‘working life,’ ‘personal life,’ and ‘balance’ [3]. Defining these proves challenging, given, for example, the diverse activities encompassed by personal life, including child-care, holidays, and socializing [5,23,24]. The present paper adopts the generic definition from these authors of Work–Life Balance (WLB) as “a satisfactory level of involvement or ‘fit’ between the multiple roles in a person’s life, as measured by personal statements or measures of satisfaction”.

Organizations may respond to WLB complexity by implementing various policies within the categories: Flexible WLB Practices, Leave Arrangement Practices, and Childcare Practices. These various policies (summarized in Table 1) aim to offer flexibility and support for employees navigating the intricacies of work and personal lives, with specific practices which are influenced by economic development and culture [25]. The present research explores by means of a qualitative inquiry (in which the researcher is embedded within the research milieu) the extent to which Western-developed WLB policy and practices have been offered, the potential influence on WLB of European investment, and the degree to which these companies have developed new or specific policies which reflect Arabic and Islamic cultural norms and practice.

Table 1. Kinds of WLB benefits explored in open-ended interviews.

| WLB Practices | Definition of WLB Practice | Types of Practice |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Flexible WLB policies | Giving workers greater flexibility in scheduling hours of work in terms of attending and leaving organization. | Part-time working, flexible working hours, compressed work weeks, home working, job sharing. |
| Leave WLB Policies | A pattern of work designed to reduce working hours in order to provide time for family care or personal needs. | Leave for vacations, illness, maternity, paternity, parental leave, emergency leave, short-term leave. |
| Child-care and Other Policies | Practices that assist workforces to manage their responsibilities for dependents. | On-site and off-site care centers, an employee assistance program, and information and referral. |
| Source of guide for interview | [3,10] | [2] |

1.2. Work Life Benefits in Gaza, a Region of Palestine

This study of WLB development in the culture of Gaza (which has also shaped the values and perceptions of the principal researcher) draws on a longitudinal research project which is both qualitative and autoethnographic in nature, following the guidelines of established methodologies [26–29]. In Palestine (and, in particular, in Gaza) societal values may translate into WLB is largely undocumented. We anticipated that WLBs might strongly focus on the female workforce, aligning with traditional ideas about gender status and roles, in ways which might enable Muslim women to thrive in a country under chronic siege. These ideas are based both on the knowledge of Gaza's traditional Islamic culture, and on work in other 'developing' countries such as India, China, and Nigeria, which has indicated that Work–Life Balance policy development often revolves around 'women and family needs' (e.g., [18,30]).

Initiating research in the Gaza region of Palestine has prompted questions about the manifestation of WLB policies within an Arabic culture marked, traditionally at least, by strong gender segregation and limited gender role sharing or exchange [31–34]. The present study aims to illuminate the dynamics of Work–Life Balance in Palestine (and in Gaza in particular), providing insights into how cultural norms, and the values covering gender role performance and workplace policies may intersect to shape the workplace experiences of women and men in the Palestinian workforce, and the emerging WLB policy and practice.

Gradual changes in Palestine (as in other Arab countries) are evident, with an increasing number of educated women entering the workforce, and, in general, the adoption of more individualist lifestyles [35–38]. In Palestine, while labor laws recommend a limited number of WLB policies, local values and organizational choice may often outweigh formal laws, similar, for example, to earlier findings on female managers in America and Germany [39]. Thus, under Palestine's Labor Law entitlements to organizational leave policies exist, but the extent of line managers' application of these and other legally defined WLBs has remained unclear. Certainly, researchers have argued that decision-making on the allocation of WLB benefits in Western countries often falls under untrained line managers' direct control, with a lack of awareness and understanding of available benefits, and how to allocate them. This may be the case in developing countries as well [40].

In summary, previous studies have underscored the challenges of organizational culture, social, cultural, and religious factors in the development and administration of Work–Life Balance benefits in both developed and developing countries. However, research evidence on the nature and application of WLBs in developing countries remains limited, despite some valuable studies [1,11,18,30,32]. Social and business research in Gaza faces particular challenges, with few studies of how imported WLB models might be applied

2. What Is the Essence of Arabic Culture Such as Gaza, in Terms of Business and Work Roles, and Potential WLBs?

Gaza, Palestine, the focus of this study, which is an Arabic nation, where 90 percent of the population are Muslim. In sociocultural terms, Gaza and Palestine resemble the neighboring countries of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, where the values and daily rituals of Islam serve as a comprehensive framework governing all aspects of life, including interpersonal relations, work, and employment [41].

Adhering to Islam involves commitment to the Five Pillars: *Shahada*—Belief in Allah, and Allah's message revealed through Gibreel to the final prophet Muhammad; *Salat*, the five daily prayers beginning at dawn and ending at dusk; *Zakat*, the giving of a proportion of income to Islam's welfare system; *Sawm*, fasting during the daylight hours each year for one month; and *Hajj*, pilgrimage to Makkah in one's lifetime if means and health allow. The faithful are also guided by the *Sunnah* (legal guidelines based on how The

Prophet interpreted, lived, and reflected on the message from Allah) [42]. These rituals and obligations unite Muslims worldwide and are a significant aspect of Islamic consciousness and behavior [43,44]. Being a Muslim joins the believer in joyous unity with all other believers in the *Ummah*, the group bonding in brotherhood, and separately in sisterhood, which unites Muslims worldwide. Genders enjoy a ritual separation, and the gendered ummah is a source of mutual support which goes beyond family boundaries. The father is responsible for the religious education of his children, and at the child's birth, in a ritual of exquisite beauty he will gently sing the daily call to prayer into the infant's ear. But after this, it is mothers (in our experience of Gaza) who are the main leaders of religious education in the family.

The principle of *modesty* following The Prophet's Hadith (an interpretation of The Qur'anic message) means that both men and women must dress and conduct their affairs with modesty and restraint. An adult for example, will not have any physical contact with anyone who is not of the same gender, except their spouse, child, or an older member of their close family. But same-gender relationships may be extended to all fellow Muslims of the ummah, relationships that are emotionally warm, tactile, close and mutually supportive. These are homosocial relationships, with no sexual implications.

Within the Islamic value framework individuals are urged to care for family, neighbors, and those in need, as articulated in Qur'an and Sunnah. Practicing Muslims are obligated to engage in charitable deeds within their community, serving and seeking respect from God, family, and society [41]. Following Islamic principles, the prescribed Straight Path instills a belief in God's support for achieving reward in the afterlife, contributing to a sense of peace and enhanced *baraka* in the present life, underpinning the notion of success through mutual assistance in the community [45]. The principle of *zakat* (required contribution to central or charitable funds) provides, at least in theory, welfare and educational support for all of those in need.

Islam significantly shapes the separate roles of men and women, and has sometimes discouraged women's participation in 'mixed' workplaces [36,37]. This we argue, arises from an incomplete understanding of women's role and status in Islam. In the 'traditional' view their only roles were those of being family caregivers, while men in contrast worked outside of the home, and were viewed as breadwinners with little involvement in family care [46]. This cultural tradition (in many developing countries) has prioritized men in education and career progression, negatively impacting women's workforce engagement [18].

Nevertheless, a review of the emerging research on 'Islamic feminism' has shown that Islam, from the very first creation of Adam and Hawwa, has favored the equality of women in a variety of roles, including those of business and trading [47–50]. This spirit of Islamic feminism has made considerable advances in Arab nations (including Palestine) in the past two decades, with the most support for both Islamic and secular feminism coming from educated women, and in women working outside of the home [51].

2.1. Palestine and Gaza

Palestine comprises more than one distinct region, including Jerusalem (with Al Aqsa Mosque), the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. Since 2006, Israel has blockaded Gaza (population prior to October, 2023, some 2.1 million), and this has resulted in lower economic development and higher unemployment in Gaza than in the West Bank [52–54]. Residents of Gaza have been prevented by Israel from journeying to Jerusalem and the West Bank, so effectively Palestine is split into non-contiguous regions, creating problems of government and the monitoring and enforcement of, for example, labor regulations. Intermittent bombardment and continuous blockade of Gaza has also severely hampered economic development [55].

2.2. Women's Employment in Gaza

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [54], women seeking employment constituted approximately 23% of the workforce, compared with adult males, with around 65% actively seeking work. By 2020, the blockade and subsequent lack of economic development resulted in unemployment rates in all potentially employable age and gender groups in Gaza of about 60 percent. The cultural backdrop in Gaza has both challenged and reinforced traditional gender roles, where mothers have remained as 'strong family managers', only atypically seeking to enter the external work force. But in the past decade women in Muslim families in Gaza have increasingly deployed the role of 'strong family-manager' in moving into professional roles in the external workforce [56].

Although in more traditional Muslim cultures WLB policies supporting child-care may not be offered for either gender by employers [57], recent studies indicate changes in Gazan and Palestinian society with increased engagement of women in the external workplace [54,58–60]. In our experience, gender segregation in Gaza has been diminishing, leading to the coexistence of both genders in universities and workplaces, along with a rising percentage of women both as university graduates (including STEM degree-holders), and as entrants to the professional workforce. This shift may be attributed to changes both in secondary education achievements [61], and a better understanding of Islamic principles concerning women in Palestine, and in contiguous Arabic countries [62–64].

Palestine's collectivist culture has traditionally emphasized the priority of communal, as opposed to individual aspirations. In conflicts, individuals in Arabic cultures have been expected to make personal sacrifices for collective well-being [65], families following these norms serving as a primary 'social safety net' with the assistance of community-funded *zakat* resources [44]. The extended family's involvement in childcare might diminish the demand for certain WLB policies, by providing care for children within co-dwelling, multi-generational households (e.g., [32]). Although NGOs and international organizations including UN agencies, banks, and major telecommunications companies in Gaza may acknowledge paternity leave as part of flexible employment policies (reflecting the norms of international organizations and investors—PALTEL, 2012–2021), WLB benefit adoption may be limited. This possible underutilization in Gaza would reflect various social, cultural, and religious factors (as suggested by [57]), ideas explored in this current research.

3. Methodology of a Qualitative, Longitudinal Study of Aspects of Women's Work Roles, in Gaza, Palestine

Research Methodology

This study is nested within the methodology of *autoethnography* in which the researcher has an intimate knowledge of the culture and the settings being researched, and uses personal information and insights in qualitative interviews, intuitively exploring institutions, values, and opinions which seem to be most relevant [27,28]. The case study approach adopted within this ethnographic approach follows [66] methodology, which may prove valuable in providing an in-depth understanding of employees' perceptions regarding the utilization of WLB policies and their culturally embedded nature. In our study, focusing on Gaza, this understanding guides the selection and analysis of case studies in reflecting and describing organizational size, established human resource systems, significant female employment, and stable market presence of employers.

For this reason, we initially focused on Gaza's growing telecommunications industry, which has been strongly linked to the investment of European manufacturers such as Eriksson [67]. For purposes of this research, one large organization was selected, and one smaller enterprise, relatively new to the market in 2014, when this research commenced.

Access to these organizations was facilitated through the Human Resource managers, providing them with a comprehensive overview of the research topic and the anticipated number of interviewees. The primary focus of the investigation revolved around two key aspects: (a) soliciting participants' perspectives on the existing WLB practices implemented within the workplace, and (b) gauging their opinions on the actual utilization of these WLB practices.

Using purposive sampling, this paper derives findings from analyzing interviews with 45 employees, 22 of whom were female. Interviews took place between January 2014 and August 2023. Interviewees were not randomly selected, but chosen on the basis of the information they might offer on WLB policy and practice. The individuals chosen ranged from senior management, middle and line managers, and frontline workers. Women were oversampled, anticipating that they might have more specific work/family conflict experiences. Workers with dependents, regardless of gender, were also prioritized for interviews.

Recommendations for interviewees were sought across different departments to ensure diversity. All of those approached agreed to be interviewed, and it was clear that the lead researcher (at that time, a lecturer at Al-Aqsa University in Gaza—an institution whose fabric was totally destroyed in October, 2023, and its faculty scattered or killed) had the confidence of the organizations' higher management. The sample did not mirror exactly the gender distribution in the telecommunication sector gender distribution (22% women and 78% men): there was an oversampling of women. Employing a semi-structured approach, interviews focused on WLB policies allowing participants to freely discuss relevant issues (following the methodology of [68]).

A standard interview protocol was used for the initial interviews, with follow-up questions for about half of respondents, tailored to individual responses in the initial interviews. Respondents spanned various departments, with participants prompted to reflect on personal and cultural influences on their organization, human relations factors, and their agency within their department and organization. Of the 22 women informants 10 were interviewed a second time, as participants in a parallel study of 'glass ceiling' effects facing women in their professional roles in business.

We aimed to comprehend the potential influence of sub-layers in the social system, such as religious and cultural values, and their structural impact. Participants were afforded the freedom to articulate, in their own terms, the meaning and significance they attributed to WLB policies and benefits, for up to an hour. Interviews, with formal consent, were audio-recorded, transcribed from Arabic into English, coded, and analyzed using template analysis [69,70]. The researcher then used standard programs for thematic analysis [71] and identified recurring themes relevant to exploring WLB issues, which emerged as gender, religious values, family politics, role and status in the organization, and personal and professional aspirations.

Codes were applied in order to organize, segment, and categorize themes in the interview data, with thematic similarities leading to sub-groupings. This hierarchical structuring, starting from the most generic codes, progressed downwards to sub-codes, and followed the methodical approach outlined by [69]. This coding process (following the guidelines of [72]) is valuable for structuring and analyzing data systematically, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the themes and their interconnections.

4. Results of Data Analysis

Table 2 displays various WLB policies adopted by the two organizations, a number of which are similar to those observed in other cultures ([23]; and Table 1). The WLB practices available to interview participants included part-time work, flexitime, maternity,

and paternity leave. Additionally, unique policies in this Muslim culture were revealed, including breaks in the working day for prayers, reduced work hours in the fasting month of Ramadan, and paid leave for religious reasons, particularly for the pilgrimage to Makkah, for Hajj (full pilgrimage) or Umra (short pilgrimage). These policies, not highlighted in previous research, signify the impact of religious factors on organizations in adopting new WLB policies, which are used by most employees.

Table 2. WLB practices utilized by the interview sample.

| Existing WLB Practices Offered by Employer | N of Users of Practices | |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| | 23 Males | 22 Females |
| Teleworking | 2 (8.7%) | 3 (13.6%) |
| Flexitime working | 3 (13.0%) | 6 (27.3%) |
| Part-time working | 2 (8.7%) | 9 (40.9%) |
| One hour reduction for women | N/A | 8 (36.3%) |
| Paid Annual Vacation | 16 (69.6%) | 20 (90.9%) |
| Paid Breast Feeding Leave | N/A | 19 (86.4%) |
| Paid Maternity Leave | N/A | 19 (86.4%) |
| Paid Sick Leave | 16 (69.6%) | 18 (81.8%) |
| Unpaid Parental Leave for Women | N/A | 8 (36.4%) |
| Leave for Bereavement | 8 (34.8%) | 10 (45.4%) |
| Leave for Honeymoon | 9 (39.1%) | 5 (22.7%) |
| Paid Emergency Leave | 15 (65.2%) | 18 (81.2%) |
| Paternity Leave for Men | 5 (21.7%) | N/A |
| Break for Praying | 17 (73.9%) | 19 (86.4%) |
| Hajj or Umra Pilgrimage Leave | 15 (65.2%) | 8 (36.4%) |
| 2 h work reduction in Ramadan fasting month | 16 (69.6%) | 16 (72.7%) |
| Number using 3 or more of these WLBs | 11 (47.8%) | 20 (90.9%) |

4.1. Islamic Issues

Table 2 indicates WLB policy and practice which is important for this particular Arabic culture, which has not been described before, or conceptualized as WLB policy. These WLB practices clearly reflect the culture of Gaza, and also favor women in terms of both their child-care roles, and their status as women in an Islamic culture. The benefits seem generous, both for men and women, compared to those identified in Western cultures, reviewed earlier.

“We are a Muslim society. . .Prayer and Hajj, for example, are compulsory policies for all Muslims, and they are obliged to follow these policies to fulfil their religious duties. . . They are very common in most organizations, and it would be a shame to prevent someone from observing them; if you do so, you become a Kafir [denier of Islam].” (Male Employee 9, and Male Employee 30)

International organizations investing in Palestinian enterprises have clearly been trying to introduce or accommodate Islamic WLB policies. The impact of Islam is also evident in priorities for both older workers and workers with family responsibilities, following the family-oriented values of Islam. Indeed, many employees expressed personal difficulties in taking advantage of WLB benefits, feeling that priorities must be given to older people and women with family care obligations.

“It is difficult to let those people [older employees and women] down. They are like our fathers. . . We are used to helping them and sometimes give them priority in the work schedule. . . Islam and the rules of the society teach us this.” (Male Employee 18)

Giving preference to older employees over younger ones reflects the fact that in Palestinian society, older people are valued and respected, as in other cultures in the Arab world [31,32,41]. Most women also identified the importance of flexible policies which helped them accommodate an Islamic emphasis on women as the most important family carers.

“Flexible work is good for me because my husband and his family are not happy with my work in a place where other men are present, like ‘mixed-gender.’ Also, I am not earning the main income in the family; anything I add is fine and is acceptable according to my husband’s belief.” (Female Employee 25)

Another emerging theme for women was that WLB availability justified working from home, and helped them avoid reservations voiced by society, or husbands about working in a mixed-gender workplace. Some men, based on Islamic beliefs concerning ‘modesty’, still prefer to see their wives working in a non-mixed-gender workplace, similar to the findings of [73].

4.2. Communication Challenges

The thematic data underscores the significant impact of culturally derived organizational value systems influencing recognition or usage of certain WLB policies. But there was limited awareness of flexible working and leave practices. Thus, one employee expressed uncertainty, stating the following:

“...to work part-time, take paternity leave, study leave, or telework, I think they are not available” (Male Employee 1)

However, another employee observed the following:

“There are good WLB practices in the organization, but it seems that our managers often do not know about them. . . there are variations in the interpretation among the managers over the use of WLB policies” (Female Employee 19)

Limited awareness and ineffective communication systems have quite often hindered the utilization of available WLB practices, as earlier studies from the UK and the US have observed (e.g., [74,75]). For example, in the present study, some line managers viewed paternity leave as annual leave, while others were unaware of any such policies.

4.3. Political and Cultural Issues

Socio-cultural values emerged as a significant theme from the qualitative analysis of interviews. Their impact on organizational culture was evident in the granting of the right to utilize WLB policies based on both Islamic and political beliefs.

“If you are a religious person, belong to or support political parties that are not in line with your line manager’s beliefs, you will encounter a problem when taking up leave policies . . . it could reflect negatively on your career development.” (Male Employees 16 and 10)

Having a strong Islamic belief, or unpopular political affiliations quite often influenced the line manager’s behavior regarding the granting of WLB benefits. The prevalent culture of favoring individuals in one’s acquaintance, kinship, and value networks clearly played a role in employees’ access to WLB.

“Everything in this department depends on your relation with the [line] manager. If you drink coffee with him outside, help him get information about work, or have a family

relationship, then the line manager will be helpful.” (Male Employee 20, Female Employee 23)

These kinds of practices are sometimes referred to as *Wasta*, a form of personal favoritism common in most Arab countries [44,76]. *Wasta* reflects Islamic principles, and can sometimes be seen as a form of *Zakat* (Islamic charity), incorporating values of care and deference towards elders, women, and one’s personal kin network. This may influence employees’ access to WLB benefits. The nature of the relationship between the line manager and the employee may determine the level of allocation or utilization of WLB policies, even in cases where an employee officially has no right to use a specific policy. *Wasta* is often challenging for managers of international organizations who are used to Western models of reward allocation [76,77]. Some Western opinion views this as a form of corruption, and the continued practice of *Wasta* remains controversial.

4.4. Gender Issues

A value prevailing in Western culture emphasizes the importance of respecting and supporting women’s roles in child-care and family management [1]. In the interviews for the present study, this is apparent too in a Muslim culture, through the provision of shorter working hours for women, and various WLB supports. However, this cultural practice has led to some male employees in the present study being less inclined to utilize flexible policies, perceiving them as more relevant for females. One employee voiced this perspective, stating the following:

“It is not common to have part-time work because it is more for women” (Male Employee 9)

This perspective aligns with the results of some earlier Western studies that examined WLB policies and their take-up by both genders [78]. For example, the gender segregation and masculine cultural ethos of Gaza is manifested in the limited use of paternity leave.

“It is a nice policy, but three days are not really needed. It is just at the time of birth, when we need to complete the child registration forms at the hospital and during this time my mother/mother-in-law stays with my wife. . . My mother and father will not allow me to undertake paternity leave to stay with my wife” (Male Employee 1, Male Employee 26)

The impact of this masculine cultural ethos on individual behaviors is clear, consistent with other findings from scholars in non-Western cultures (e.g., [79]). In Arab Palestine a few days of paternal leave seems sufficient, in contrast to the longer leaves now observed in Western countries. In Gaza, extended family support system was still available (until October 2023) to assist women following the birth of a child. However, a few male users of the (short) paternity leave policy expressed enthusiasm.

“I am excited to have access to paternity leave. Before adopting this policy, I used to take two days off to help my wife and family on this special occasion. I have a lot to do during the first days after birth, such as cleaning the house, caregiving for my children, and so on” (Male Employee 2)

But although birth is considered a special event, only a few males felt able to assist their family and wives during the first few days after the child’s birth, leaving those duties to women in their extended family. At all levels of work, men were less likely to use policies that could ‘weaken their identity’.

“My life is in the workplace and meeting people outside; it is not to stay at home or have long holidays or reduce my working hours. . . This is rather the case for women who need a lot of time to take care of their family” (Male Employee 13 and Male Employee 27)

Working time was not seen by male respondents as conflicting with family life; instead, family and working life were viewed as complementary for men working to support their families. This contrasts with many Western contexts where there appears to be a less clear separation between family and work–life roles, reflected in requests for more flexible policies [31,80]. Most women in the present study did not find this issue stressful, as they overtly at least in responses to a male interviewer, considered themselves primarily as homemakers within traditional cultural norms, and only secondarily as women whose work outside the home was important. Nevertheless, the majority of females interviewed were grateful for the family and child-care support which their employers offered.

4.5. Career Development

WLB policies outlined in company documents were intended to enhance organizational culture and values, but often with a Western bias. In practice these policies sometimes did not align well with the organizational system implied by the culture of Palestine.

“Sometimes I cannot use my annual leave because many individuals have holidays, and I was told to postpone my needs for the future. This could rarely occur for women, even when there is high pressure at work. When they apply for leave, women usually get it” (Male Employee 9)

Most employees assumed that many WLB policies were designed for women. In cultural terms men were assumed to have fewer family obligations. The Arab stereotype of women requiring more protection than men persisted, with male line managers often expressing the opinion that the organization was less “dependent” on female employees. The use of teleworking, part-time, long-leave practices, and other forms of leave was limited among men due to the perception that the use of these policies would reduce working hours, income, and ultimately their status.

“I would like to do extra work rather than work part-time or take long leave policies. There are huge financial responsibilities I have to sort out. . . If I stay at home, the people around me will ask why I do so. They will ask if I have been fired or if I am a woman. . .” (Male Employees 8 and 19)

Most men emphasized the necessity of working long hours to secure necessary financial resources, similar to earlier findings in Western cultures [81,82]. This reflects a male-oriented gender culture where men perceive their primary role as ‘the breadwinner.’ In Palestine, men are normatively expected to work outside the home, contrasting with women’s roles. The interviews suggested that most organizations still valued traditional ways of working, especially regarding the time and commitment of male employees. In this context, men were less interested in part-time roles.

“If you check my attendance days for the last year, you will find a limited use of my right for any leave or flexible policies. It has a negative impact on my promotion. . . Instead, I work long hours to develop further in the organization and have a nice position in the future. . . The more you use the leave policies, the more negative impact you receive in your career development. . . If one employee leaves his desk before the regular time, he will be considered less committed and serious about his career” (Male Employee 8 and Male Employee 26)

This opinion reflects the fact that in the overtly male-oriented culture of Palestine, most men aspire to be successful as at least skilled workers, or professionals [31]. Our findings reflect these attitudes, and also highlight how an organization defines an employee’s loyalty/attachment to the organization. Employees clearly understood that failing to meet those behavioral standards and productivity goals might result in a lack of rewards or promotions. In contrast, women often felt pressure in the male-oriented culture to be

primarily a “family manager” rather than aspiring to higher managerial roles in business or marketing.

“I was promoted to a higher scale, but I failed to accept it because it is not possible to neglect my family/home duties; my children and husband have priority in my life. . . My family also did not allow me to do so. (Female Employee 6). After marriage, working full-time or studying is difficult because I have to work harder to meet the needs of my husband. . . Men do not prefer that their wife is highly educated or earning more money than him because he will feel that he is not a man” (Female Employee 17)

Women were less concerned about promotion and career orientations. Apart from a few women who were determined to achieve leadership roles, most females accepted the culturally preferred role of being both a ‘good wife’ and a strong family manager, as well as achieving a rewarding career for some part of their lives.

5. Discussion and Exposition of the Findings

In the two companies studied in Gaza, the adoption of WLB practices, particularly flexible and leave arrangements, was not widespread amongst men, evidenced by substantial percentages of individuals refraining from utilizing part-time work, study subsidies, and paternity and parental leave practices. In contrast, time allowed for social and religious practices (including generous leave for religious pilgrimage) had a higher uptake. The variance in WLB policy usage is multifaceted, reflecting factors, such as limited awareness among some individuals due to differential effectiveness in training and communication systems of line managers.

The religious leave and the family support WLB practices identified in the two case studies are novel findings. These practices allowed organizations to pragmatically extend benefits to highly skilled individuals (including women) who contributed significantly to the organization. The costs of these benefits were managed to some extent by restricting awareness of expensive practices to specific individuals. Women enjoyed reduced hours when they were breast-feeding, subsidies for paid child-care, maternity leaves, and often a shortened working day in winter time allowing journey to home in daylight hours. Occasional benefits included interest-free loans or grants for replenishment and rebuilding when homes were damaged or destroyed by Israeli attacks.

Possible anomalies in WLB adoption are noted in the TeleCom sector, where individuals encounter challenges related to Wasta. Wasta in the present context involved relationships with management that facilitate benefits, bypassing line managers—a phenomenon prevalent in many Arab countries, involving deference to individuals because of their gender, rank, or age. Some Western critics see this as a form of corruption, expecting that reward should be given on the basis of ability or rank alone. But from an Islamic point of view this is part of a religious ethic which rewards and protects certain individuals, for example, providing special rewards (e.g., WLB benefits) for women workers. In Palestinian culture, differing gender roles influence the perception and utilization of WLB practices, with several practices predominantly benefiting women (c.f. [41]).

The persistence of this protection of women’s traditional roles in Palestinian society suggests that the management of organizations may perceive certain WLB leave practices as primarily for women, despite evolving social roles. A growing demand for educated women in the Palestinian workforce has led to enhanced (and culturally relevant) WLBs for well-qualified women professionals, as our studies have shown.

However, this case study findings also show that many individuals refrained from considering (or taking up) WLB practices, influenced by both individual and cultural factors. Many flexible and leave-related WLB practices did not serve the prevailing notion of men as primary breadwinners, leading to their reluctance to access policies that might

jeopardize current earnings and future career advancement—as found in earlier studies of Western organizations (e.g., [83]). This phenomenon was potentially more pronounced in the current study due to the challenging economic situation in Palestine, and the cultural expectation for males to play prominent roles in both organizations and in society.

Western cultural norms, reducing male working hours were not prioritized in the findings of the present study. Men perceived work and its extensions as integral to social activity, with a prevailing sentiment that “Being in work is better than with family at home.” Men frequently volunteered for extra working hours, differing from findings in Western countries where men may express guilt or frustration over time spent away from family. Our study revealed a cultural distinction where in Arabic society an ideal (male) employee is one whose work is central to life, whereas in Western cultures, an ideal employee is someone who maintains harmony between work, family, and leisure [80].

Contrary to men, women in the study perceived long working hours and limited availability of flexible and leave policies as significant sources of conflict with their caregiving roles. Part-time and long leave practices were identified as crucial by women, facilitating their entry into paid work roles with the support of extended family; an observation aligned with a study in Sudan, where WLB practices empowered women to participate actively in both the workplace and family life, fulfilling their ambitions as productive individuals in both spheres [84].

The findings additionally highlight the significance of the extended family culture and the traditional role of women as homemakers, impacting the utilization of workplace childcare. There was often negotiation with the extended family about who (amongst a group of female siblings) would stay home, and who would enter the world of work as an additional source of financial support for the extended family (or, as was often the case, being the only breadwinner at a time of chronic male unemployment). This reflected the traditional lifestyle in Palestine, which minimized the demand for formal daycare, a contrast to Western countries where governments often provide such services early in a child’s development, emphasizing an individualistic culture as well as gender equality [61,79].

Despite a movement towards individualism, evidenced by the adoption of paternity and emergency leave practices by a few men, changes in male roles remain at an early stage in the Arabic culture studied, with clear distinctions between male and female roles remaining—in contrast to the situation in many Western countries where both genders may take days off to care for children [11,12].

In Gaza and Palestine, the social, psychological, and physical separation of genders persists, influenced by cultural interpretations of Qur’an and Sunnah related to women’s roles, qualifying women’s participation in public life, and sometimes perpetuating a subordinate position for a masculine-dominated gender. Islamic feminists offer cogent arguments that gender equality is in fact required in Islamic scriptures [49]. However, The Prophet’s injunction requiring “modesty” in all relationships outside of the family continues to have a strong cultural influence. While changes have occurred (e.g., [85]), significant transformation in women entering more powerful roles has yet to be realized. Islamic women’s greatest economic power outside of the family seems to lie in independent entrepreneurship [7,21,86].

In the two organizational case studies in the present study, individuals were usually aware of various work–life balance benefit policies, such as emergency leave, annual leave, honeymoon or bereavement leave, and time off or leave for religious practices. These were often used in order to meet social and familial expectations prevailing in this Islamic culture. These practices are important for supporting caregiving responsibilities, as well as social and cultural activities such as bereavement and marriage, especially in the culture of Gaza which has been continually stressed by blockade and intermittent warfare [87–91].

Work–life balance practice plays a vital role in fulfilling social and religious duties which are essential in an Islamic society and are likely to persist into the future.

6. Final Conclusions

One of the primary objectives of this study has been to investigate the demand for and utilization of WLB practices by employees in two telecommunication companies, initially focusing on policies identified in various Western contexts that influence the adoption of such practices. Examining the organizations in Gaza we found that these Western WLB policies were only atypically relevant for an Arab culture, in which WLB benefits were influenced by the traditional ‘male breadwinner’ role, and a gender-segregated culture, with cultural norms giving reward and respect to elders, kin, and women. Given the unique cultural, political, and economic elements of Palestine, exploring the nature and uptake of culturally specific WLB practices becomes particularly relevant.

The study, based on the researcher’s embeddedness in the organizations and culture studied, offers a unique account which deserves replication, since it offers a fresh perspective and theoretical contribution to understanding the level of demand and use of culturally relevant WLB practices in an Islamic culture, albeit one under siege from a hostile country. We offer what we believe are the underlying reasons for employee take-up of certain WLB options. Flexible policies in Palestine were found to be more aligned with the specific gender needs of the women workforce, suggesting that these policies were particularly relevant to women’s interests, a noteworthy observation not extensively explored in previous research.

Certain WLB practices identified in the case study did not align with the needs of many individuals, particularly males in the workforce, who prioritized income levels and career development over flexible policies. But our study also underscored the significance of additional leaves, financial support, and allowances for religious practices in meeting the personal and family obligations of both men and women. The identified issues and factors surrounding the use of WLB policies offer important examples which may be researched and possibly replicated in other Arabic contexts, given their somewhat similar religious, political, and gender issues. This theoretical contribution suggests a model underlying the development of WLB practices applicable in various contexts beyond Palestine, adding significance to the current case studies.

7. Practical Recommendation

Guidelines and Procedures: The study demonstrates the need to develop clear and comprehensive guidelines for WLB policy implementation in new cultural settings, emphasizing the expected behavior of line managers. There is a need to align these guidelines with cultural values, respecting religious systems.

Monitoring Systems: There is a need to implement a robust monitoring system within HR departments to track WLB practice uptake, with regular assessment of their effectiveness, to ensure fair and consistent implementation.

Feedback Mechanisms: There is a need to establish a transparent and confidential feedback system for employees to report experiences with WLB practices and line managers’ behavior, fostering open communication channels for employees to express concerns or provide positive feedback.

Cultural Sensitivity: There is a need to recognize and respect cultural nuances, including practices like Wasta, which remain controversial. WLB policies should be culturally appropriate, considering special considerations for women and the elderly. The promotion of fairness must emphasize the positive impact of WLB practices on both employees’ well-being, and organizational performance.

8. Limitations, and Future Research

Firstly, while providing in-depth insights into WLB policies in the Palestinian Telecommunication sector, the study's generalizability beyond Arab contexts remains uncertain, emphasizing the need for further comparative research.

Secondly, the qualitative methodology employed, while having insights in identifying policies and practices not previously described, should be considered within the special context of the study. The researcher's unique position as an auto-ethnographer has both advantages and limitations: the results may be overly biased since they are viewed through a single intellectual (and emotional) lens. Future research potentially utilizing quantitative methods, should be broader in scope, using a variety of methodologies, across different industries to deepen the understanding of WLB issues.

Exploration of WLB policies across diverse sectors, including financial institutions, educational sectors, and health public service institutions, is crucial to comprehensively understand the landscape of public and private benefits for workers and dependents in Palestine and similar MENA countries.

Finally, the destruction of Gaza's infrastructure since October 2023, the disruption of business enterprise and practice, the forced unemployment of all the participants in this study, and the death of a number of those interviewed have occurred. In consequence, further research in Gaza is not possible at the present time, and new modes of research must be found for business development in Gaza in a rebuilt political economy [92,93]. Our findings may have relevance for understanding and applying WLB policy and practice in other Arab nations, and in the rebuilding of Gaza and its institutions.

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