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Work–Life Balance and the Needs of Female Employees in the Telecommunications Industry in a Developing Country: A Critical Realist Approach to Issues in Industrial and Organizational Social Psychology

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Abstract
Finding a balance between the demands of the role requirements of work, family, and social life is a challenging problem for modern society and is particularly relevant for the growth of women's participation in the workforce. These role conflicts may result in significant psychological stress for individuals. For corporations, stressed employees are also a problem. Work–life balance (WLB) programs to address these issues have emerged in Western countries in the past three decades and have been evaluated in various ways in multidisciplinary studies which have employed sociological and psychological methodologies. WLB programs in developed countries often reflect the ethos of particular cultures, and Western models may not be wholly relevant for cross-cultural comparison. The present study explores these issues using the methodology of critical realism in companies in the telecommunications sector of Palestine. This qualitative study develops a complex model of a newly identified set of factors, which may be relevant for other Arabic cultural settings. Further exploration of this model using psychometric techniques is proposed.

Keywords
work-life-balance, human relations management, Palestine, telecommunications, women's employment, critical realism

Introduction

The study of complex organization in business, health care, and government requires an interdisciplinary approach. For this purpose, techniques developed in industrial and organizational psychology (Anderson, 2012; Jones, Burke, & Westman, 2013) must be complemented by sociological and ethnographic methodologies (Poelman, Greenhaus, & Maestro, 2013), and both quantitative and qualitative research approaches are necessary to achieve the fullest picture of the nature and delivery of developing policies such as work–life balance (WLB)—policies which are aimed to reduce strain on workers and improve their well-being and efficiency, in balancing the often stressful, competing demands of work roles, leisure time, and family commitment. In the language of business, WLB is defined as: "A comfortable state of equilibrium achieved between an employee's primary priorities of their employment position and their private lifestyle" (Business Dictionary, 2015).

In the past three decades, employers, employees, and government have recognized the need to address these issues, especially as higher proportions of women enter the workforce (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2007). In American research, Munn (2013) applies statistical modeling to the 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce and shows that finding a balance between three forces (individuals, organizations, and

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government) which influence the work–life dimension is an important challenge for future research.

Methodological Issues: Critical Realism

Social science methodologies for studying industrial organizations face the dilemma of using quantitative methodologies (often with positivist assumptions) that tend to ignore social context; or qualitative methodologies (often construing the research universe as a singular phenomenon) that provide detailed information of an apparently unique situation from which generalizations may be difficult. One solution to this problem of the paradox of competing methodologies is to engage in follow-up research, constructing psychological instruments that build on the insights generated by qualitative work (Rogelberg, 2002). It is surprising how rarely this is done, as researchers are only atypically trained in more than one type of research methodology (Poelman et al., 2013). A potential solution to these dilemmas of methodology has emerged in recent years, that of critical realism, which is based on a philosophical critique of how *knowledge* is produced, perceived, analyzed, and interpreted (Archer, 1995, 2003) and offers a new way of addressing methodological dilemmas in the study of organizations (Edwards, O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014; Fleetwood & Ackroyd, 2004).

Critical realism reflects both sides of the *quantitative versus qualitative* debate: it accepts that *reality* is in part *subjective* and in part *objective* (Bhaskar, 2010). The critical realist paradigm utilizes a stratified or deep, ontology (Sayer, 2002). This *deep ontology* comprises three distinct layers: the *empirical*, which is what is observable by human beings; the *actuality* of what exists, such as social institutions and collective organizations, including the state; and a conception of the *real* that goes beyond facts, perceptions, and experiences, which seeks to explicate underlying social mechanisms that are independent of the observer but which serve to condition the social life, and therefore the subjective perceptions of social actors (Bhaskar, 2010; Sayer, 2002). According to this approach, a researcher should be able to grasp the *subjective* as well as the *objective* truth of the WLB practices within the cultural and organizational context under study. In other words, the researcher will consider the social mechanisms of the culture, the norms of the society, prevailing economic ideas, and other existing aspects of *reality* behind the events observed (Bhaskar, 2010). These should then be combined with accounts of the experience of the social actors, in order to generate a comprehensive set of recommendations for WLB practices in the organizations studied.

To this end, the epistemology of critical realism is both subjective and objective and provides a means by which the researcher is able to take account of an existing and given external reality, a reality which may of itself be neither perfect nor complete, as well as accommodating the dimension of a personal and interpersonal *subjective* reality (Sobh & Perry, 2006). In its most basic form, this may be taken to mean that knowledge of the social world is to be produced by a study of factors such as governmental rules and regulations, as well as prevailing social and cultural norms, the labor union, the organizational structure *and* by an assessment of the effect these *objective* factors have on individuals' subjective perceptions, decisions, actions, and social roles, as they themselves interpret them (Reed, 2001, 2005).

Social mechanisms are never entirely fixed and determined but are constantly open to stress and flux and therefore to change over time (Bhaskar, 2010). This is a process of change dependent on the human social actors themselves and also in part on factors outside of the control either of individuals or of collective organizations (Archer, 2003). In effect, we are seeking a *still point* in a world of change, which over time, will itself be subject to modification as the social reality it reflects undergoes change (Archer, 1995; Willmott, 2005). For example, in order to understand the barrier of taking up the WLB practices by employees, critical realism will likely oblige the researcher to move progressively from surface appearances—from a *flat* ontic reality—to a deeper *stratified* ontic level in order to determine the social mechanisms involved in any social practices and the objective mechanisms which in turn are embedded in either social or cultural conditions, or most likely, in both (Archer, 2003; Bhaskar, 2010). Under each *layer*, there is usually to be found one or more sublevels, so that under the general category of *society*, the individual participates in family life, ethnic group friendships and exchanges, religious organizations, and so on. All of these interconnections, taken together, reflect the *whole reality* of the barriers to using the take-up of WLB practices by employees (Archer, 2003; Fleetwood, 2005).

The critical realist does not take their findings to be necessarily fixed and objective over time. Change is accommodated within the methodology by means of a feedback loop between ideas and real social practice and outcomes (Fleetwood, 2005; Fleetwood & Hesketh, 2008). Critical realism holds that the reality of the social world is always relative and that any *scientific theorizing,* while presenting the best means of deriving knowledge of both subjective and objective factors, is fallible and open to change. While most methodologies seek to determine the outcomes of the policies they advocate, critical realism goes further by recognizing that any change to the social practices dominant within a society will inevitably feed through into other aspects of the life of a society, aspects which are not usually considered to be direct consequences stemming from those practices (Boyd, 2010; Fleetwood & Ackroyd, 2004).

Critical realism argues that, despite any epistemological relativism, it is always possible to combine its findings with a judgmental rationality which asserts that a science is not an arbitrary practice but rather the product of rationally determinable criteria by means of which it is possible to judge whether certain theories are better than others (Boyd, 2010). This *feedback loop*, and its potential to facilitate an internal modification of the study, will be represented in a triangulation of the finding from the perspective of different groups, as well as by reference to existing theory and the objective factors supporting any particular viewpoint. In effect, critical realism is a self-booting approach to the study of social and economic conditions, providing the researcher with a tool that permits first the formulation of a theory and then the opportunity to test this theory against objectively determinable practical outcomes. In other words, it attempts the unity of both theory and practice (Boyd, 2010). The critical realist research model stresses the importance of developing new theoretical models for further research (Ollier-Malaterre, Valcour, Den Dulk, & Kassek, 2013).

Research Setting and Design

This research examines whether certain WLB policies identified in European and North American research (Heinen & Mulvaney, 2008) are available to employees in key organizations in a developing country (Palestine). Little previous research in this field in any Arabic country can be identified (Al-Hamadi,Budwar, & Shipton,2007; Aycan & Eskin, 2005) and there is no previous research on WLB policies in Palestine. This exploratory research examines, within a critical realist research model, how the benefits identified may differ from those found in Western and other international research; how particular cultural, religious, social, and political factors in Palestine may influence the application of a particular set of WLB policies; how these policies are applied in practice; and how line managers and employees perceive the application and uptake of these policies. The research setting and subjects are a sample of the headquarters staff in the two largest, privately owned telecommunication organizations in Palestine, which offer mobile and landline services. The companies have received significant international investment and technological innovation in the past two decades, particularly from European corporations. Although investment and technology come from European organizations, the two companies operate independently, with local board members and CEOs. The implicit message from the international corporations seems to be that profits are maximized when local customs regarding employee benefits are supported.

Palestine, previously a single state, was split into two halves following the founding of Israel in 1948, and since that time there has been an uneasy relationship between the two countries, sometimes resulting in violent conflict between Israel and Palestine, most recently in 2014, after the research described in this article was completed. Movement of Palestinians between the two halves of the Palestinian state is often difficult or impossible, which has split some extended families (Taraki, 2006). This has meant that a higher proportion of women than would be expected in an Arab country do not have the support of an extended family for child care when they take up paid employment outside of their home (Kultab, 2006). Although the unemployment rate in Palestine is around onethird of all males, 20% of the workforce is female (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 1997–2014). The women employed in the telecommunication industries in the present research (22% of the total number of employees) were frequently graduates, bilingual in Arabic and English, with highly marketable skills and experience.

Palestine is dominated by the collectivist mode of culture (Heinen & Mulvaney, 2008) in which individuals share allegiance and mutual obligations across extended kindred and social groups, of whom the majority follow Islamic principles concerning family obligations and care and the norms concerning the primacy of family institutions embedded in the collective identity of a group of people. It was expected at the outset that explanatory models for WLB policies derived from Western research (Hegewisch & Gornich, 2011) might well be inadequate in explaining the development of, and the need for WLB policies in the largely Arabic culture of Palestine. Palestine has many features of social organization which are similar to those described in other Arab societies (Nydell, 2012), but in many sectors of society has well-developed economic and educational institutions, although the effects of continuing conflict between Palestine and Israel have increased unemployment levels in Palestine.

As no clear research hypotheses could be adduced to account for the emergence and application for WLB policies in Palestine (which only began to emerge in transnational companies in the late 1990s), the present study is exploratory and qualitative in nature, within the critical realist research paradigm. Therefore, a qualitative research program, collecting contextual and observational data for the two organizations studied, was undertaken, with purposive samples two senior managers, and all of the 15 middle-ranking managers (two of them are female) in the two telecommunication companies; and 32 employees (half of them are female) with varying degrees of experience and technical skill. Employees sampled were equally divided between the two companies. Female employees were oversampled (at a ratio of two women for each man interviewed, in the available, sampled population) in each of the two

organizations, as we were particularly interested in how women perceived and had access to WLB policies in the light of traditional role expectations for women. Sampling of employees (similar proportions in each of the two organizations) ended at the *satiation* point, when additional interviews appeared to yield little or no new findings or insights (Gomes, 2013).

Data Analysis in the Critical Realist Mode

After obtaining the formal consent of the research participants and satisfying ethical requirements of confidentiality, the Arabic language interviews were recorded, the tapes being transcribed into a format suitable for N-Vivo processing (Silverman, 2011, 2013). The interview transcripts, which are in Word format, have been subjected to an exhaustive process of qualitative analysis, one which is not limited to a single systematic method as would likely be the case with the quantitative approach (Sandiford & Seymour, 2007). There are different approaches that can be utilized, such as *grounded theory*, *thematic analysis*, and other methods which rely on an *abductive* principle of critical realism rather that the traditional inductive principle for applying the coding process (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Dey, 2003).

A systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data into coded segments and themes was employed: this reduced the data from interviews, observations, and documentary analysis into a format for subsequent analysis of its most salient elements (King, 2004). Codes refer to a label that is attached to a section of text as a guide to its relation to a theme within the data set; the theme itself is a statement of meaning that runs through most of the pertinent data and frequently arises from the way in which various subthemes relate to each other. This method assisted the researcher in seeing possible new themes or ideas emerging, which required consideration in the interviews to follow (King, 2004). This proved to be the case with several WLB practices, particularly those related to social and financial WLB services. It also identified the factors of Internationalization and Networking, which were considered as a *code* for further interviews; they had not been part of the original theoretical framework of the study.

According to the paradigm of critical realism, the codes for data analysis derive mainly from a top-down coding taken from suggestions found in the existing literature rather than from a bottom-up system of coding from data itself; in this respect, the researcher considered the existing theoretical framework of the study in terms of, for example, the role of government and Labor unions (Codes), and examined them in subsequent interviewees (Urquhart, 2001). The researcher has, however, derived certain significant themes from the interviews themselves and has added to the theoretical framework

of the study (abductive approach): these derived concepts related to social WLB practices, the political and Islamic belief of individuals and the social origins of the individual. These concepts (codes) had not been identified before and did not exist in the initial theoretical framework of the current study; they were developed as the interview process unfolded. Finally, the themes concerned with reasons for adopting WLB practices were represented by the following codes: government rules and regulations, labor unions, women in the workforce, workers with dependants, religion and cultural values, the position of women in society, and the existence of competitors in the market.

After an intensive reading and rereading of data transcripts, the researcher applied the above codes to the transcription of the interviews. This assisted in the arrangement and segmenting of the data according to similarities in kind. King (2004) argues that this process is important for structuring data, beginning with the highest level of coding which then steps progressively downwards from the most generic codes to subcodes, finally arriving at a hierarchical structuring of the data set by the means of both primary and derivative encodings. The highest code levels were the nature of the WLB, the reasons for adopting such a WLB policy, the role and behavior of line managers, and use and benefit of WLB practice by employees. Coding protocol followed Bryman and Bell (2007).

King (2004) further argues that this template analysis, in which the researcher utilizes a list of codes applicable to the whole data, can then be loaded into a software package such as N-Vivo. Once this is done, it is possible to use the tabular display facilities of this software to manage the data to indicate patterns and particular relationships of codes. The data transcripts were translated from Arabic to English, a language suitable for the software employed.

Case Study Findings in Light of the Cultural and Religious Setting, Compared With Previous Findings in Contrasted Cultures

The qualitative data analysis has identified four salient types of WLB policies in the case studies of the two telecommunications organizations. These are: (a) flexible WLB policies, (b) leave arrangement WLB policies, (c) childcare and financial policies, and (d) social and religious policies. The policies available to workers were largely similar across the two organizations.

The first type, flexible and leave policies generally resembled those available to employees in Western organizations: these reflected the desire (because of market forces) to retain the loyalty and work commitment of valuable employees, pressure from unions, and the requirements of governmental regulations (described

in other contexts: Den Dulk, Peters, & Poutsma, 2012; Pasamar & Alegre, 2014). These consist of part-time work, flextime, term-time, compressed working, and some other benefits which are offered to enhance the balance between working time and private life. But the Palestinian organizations applied only a few flexible policies involving part-time working and flextime systems. For example, flextime working was offered only with one-hour variability of working hours for male and female employees; and teleworking was available only on a very limited scale. This finding is in line with studies in Spain, India, and China which pointed to the limited adoption of flexible polices, because of *plentiful* labor supply; and a variety of cultural, political, economic, and social factors (Baral & Bhargava, 2011; Ollier-Malaterre, 2009; Thévenon, 2011; Wang, Lawler, Shi, Walumbwa, & Piao, 2008). Findings from the present study of the two Palestinian corporations indicate that the right for men to have parental leave policy does not exist in either; men have only a very short paternity leave of 3 days, available only in one organization.

The present study indicated overall, rather low concern among male employees concerning the balance between working and family lives in the two telecommunication organizations: men in general believed that work did not conflict with family life. Rather, and in line with studies in India and China, Palestinian men seem to be satisfied with longer working hours (provided there was adequate remuneration), because working and personal lives, in cultural terms, complemented each other. Higher remuneration of the male *bread winner* usually supports family welfare in the absence of well-developed state support. If any conflict occurs between the two, work is given priority over family life, reflecting cultural values concerning how roles are prioritized, with women's roles being more home-focused (Spector et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2008).

Researchers in developing countries have found a limited relationship between flexible policies and reducing the conflict between work and personal life in comparison with many Western countries: in the latter, WLB benefits are more likely to benefit both genders (Idiagbon-Oke & Oke, 2011; Spector et al., 2004). Reflecting this, the adoption of flexible policies by organizations (including the two in the present study) is limited to part-time and flextime policies which generally fulfill the needs of the women workforce, in contrast to studies in Western settings (Chandra, 2012; Spector et al., 2004). These different cultural styles are derived from what has been termed as *squeeze time pressure* (Lewis, Gambles, & Rapoport, 2007; Stalker, 2014; Zuzanek & Manhell, 1998). This literature suggests that, in comparison with developing countries, many individuals in Western or *developed* countries frequently experience the strains of separating work activity from personal life within a crowded day. In Palestine and also in many Arab and developing countries, business and individual life is not so often *squeezed* into separate compartments: for men at least, work, family, and leisure roles are integrated, rather than being separated and potentially conflicting (Heinen & Mulvaney, 2008; Lewis et al., 2007).

The second type, special leave WLB policies, was more strongly developed in the Palestine case studies than those recorded in Western organizations and was aimed particularly at helping women to balance the demands of family and childcare with the time demanded by work. These included paid maternity leave for 3 months, but with an hour's leave each day for breast-feeding a newborn for up to 24 months; and emergency paid leave of up to 10 hours a month for a child's illness.

In certain developed countries, current flexible policies for WLB to some extent accommodate women's interests, although feminist critics argue that there are still, in Europe, many reforms yet to be enacted or applied (Crompton, Lewis, & Lyonette, 2007; Hantrais, 2000; Pasamar & Alegre, 2014). In Palestine, the movement toward meeting women's interests can be observed in the emergence of part-time working, including a one-hour reduction every day for women's working hours in the winter season. This policy derives from the Islamic belief that women need to be protected, in both family and work roles: for example, they are not expected to go outside alone during darkness, except when accompanied by *Mahram*, referring to those males whom a woman cannot marry (e.g., a brother). Palestinian society, like other Arabic cultures, has strong values concerning the protection of women, principles derived from Islam. But in addition, there is a strong masculine gender culture in which men are seen as the main *bread-winner*, while women's roles are more focused on the home (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010).

Female employees in Europe have rights to statutory maternity leave, the right to maternity paid benefits, and protection against unfair treatment or dismissal because of pregnancy, and also the right for leave for child illness. These policies have been developed over time in various ways within Western countries and with varying outcomes: for example, maternity leave is quite long in Germany and in Scandinavian countries compared with the United Kingdom and Spain (Ollier-Malaterre, 2009; Poelman et al., 2013; Thévenon, 2011). Differences in the period of maternity leave are related mainly to birth rates and publically funded welfare systems which reflect varying political value systems (Den Dulk et al., 2012). Women in the two Palestinian organizations studied had only 70 days of paid maternity leave, and in addition unpaid parental leave of 1year, with guaranteed job return. There is no interest or commitment by policy makers in Palestine in amending labor laws that support

further WLB policies in this area. This conclusion is consistent with studies in developing countries which have found that the practice of maternity leave and other benefits is largely absent, in contrast to those documented in the United States and European WLB literature (Gregory & Milner, 2009).

However, some WLB leave policies in the two Palestinian organizations were more developed than those in Western countries, with regard to four areas: emergency leave (e.g., urgent illness or injury involving a family member), bereavement leave, breast-feeding, and honeymoon leave. These policies are found in many Western countries, but they are quite short, merely to fulfill *atypical* personal needs. For example, bereavement leave could be unpaid and offered for an individual in the case of one close, co-dwelling family member (Ollier-Malaterre, 2009; Thévenon, 2011). In the current case studies, there is evidence that emergency, bereavement, and honeymoon leaves are applied on a larger scale than in Western settings, for example, 10 days for honeymoon, and 10 hours for emergency leave every month, which could be extended. Such emergency and bereavement leaves are also part of the Labor Law of Palestine; this also provides for women to have breast-feeding leave for 1 hour every day, for 2 years. Legal protection for workers is a recent development in Palestine, as in other Arabic countries, and dates from around 1990.

Based upon the findings of the current research, individuals in Palestine need a long bereavement, honeymoon, and emergency leave to satisfy the needs of not only of their close family but also of relatives and friends, in ways which are strongly influenced by the traditions of culture and religion. This reflects both Palestinian values and Islamic ethics (Metcalfe, 2007; Nydell, 2012), which require assistance to the seventh degree of relationship. These religious rules apply in the case of long breast-feeding leave. When governments and organizations in Palestine develop policies, they are often implemented according to principles of Islam.

Concerning *childcare and financial policies*, in both organizations described in the present research, there is a childcare centre for children of employees, with 50% discount of normal fees, for all individuals. The childcare centre concept is also found in Western contexts, mostly provided by the private sector (Dex & Smith, 2002; Glass & Finley, 2002). The existence of such centers was not expected in the *extended family* culture of Palestine. Setting up a childcare center requires staff trained in child development, as well as management costs and skills. Such organization would not be undertaken unless it appeared to be vital for the workforce or for the image of the employer or for conformity with religious norms. Some married couples are now beginning their lives independent of extended family, for a variety

of reasons (Taraki, 2006). This situation does not seem to have decreased individual obligations toward father, mother, and close family members. Thus individuals accessing WLB benefits still need many leave policies to fulfill obligations toward their parents and extended family. For religious and other cultural reasons, ties of kinship and the extended family remain powerful (Kamali, 2003; Sidani, 2005).

In the Palestinian context, there are many emerging WLB policies that enhance the welfare of individuals. Financial policies were offered by the organizations studied in order to assist individuals with respect to education, healthcare, hardship and crises, and family vacation expenses. These financial policies are a crucial part of WLB policies of both the organizations and had the overt intention of fulfilling and harmonizing individual lives within workplace, family, and society. This finding emerged from both of the organizations studied, notwithstanding the fact that they are working within the stressful economic and political situation of Palestine. As in many developing countries (Baral & Bhargava, 2011; Idiagbon-Oke & Oke, 2011; Wang et al., 2008), in Palestine, there is a lack of developed educational and health systems or any kind of *welfare state*. Parents are expected to cover costs of education, buying or building a house for sons, and much more. Most Palestinian parents work to save money for the future educational and medical care of their children (Devi, 2004; Lundblad, 2008). In Palestine, there is the constant threat of conflict, both internal to Palestine and with Israel: three major conflicts (not including that of 2014) had occurred in the previous 6 years. The consequences are extensive damage to housing of many employees and the risk of death or serious injury to employees and their extended families. Numbers of employees have died or were injured not only in conflict with Israel but also from local political infighting. The two telecommunication organizations studied remarkably have paid the cost of house refurbishment and have also secured the lives of individual families after a breadwinner has been killed. Such financial policies greatly enhance the welfare of employees in the current context of Palestine. WLB policies of the Western type rarely encompass financial WLB policies of this type, perhaps because they are rarely needed. Only a few studies have identified specific financial benefits in other developing countries, such as healthcare premiums and subsidies for study (Bach & Sisson, 2000: Idiagbon-Oke & Oke, 2011). These have usually been categorized as *fringe benefits*, or *financial incentives* as opposed to being true WLB practices available to all members of a workforce.

Concerning social and religious policies, the present research has identified WLB policies which do not exist in the WLB policy models of most Western corporations or labor laws: benefits in both of the organizations

studied included 30 minutes for daily prayer, 1 month's paid leave for the Hajj pilgrimage (an obligation at least once in a Muslim's lifetime), reduction of working hours during Ramadan (the fasting month), as well as other concessions and benefits related to family obligations and the perceived roles of men and women. These are offered to allow individuals to comply with the five *pillars of Islam* (Kamali, 2003; Kamal-ud-Din, 2010). Suspension of conferences or meetings during the prayer time is customary in Palestine as in many Arab countries, as individuals pray together (Abuznaid, 2006; Budhwar & Mellahi, 2006).

Reducing working hours in Ramadan (when individuals take no food or liquid during daylight hours, for 1 month) is due to the fact that the individual has less energy during the long fasting hours. Individual work efficiency may fall and absences from work increase. Such religious policies are also incorporated in regulations of the government of many Arab countries. In many Western countries, *religious benefits* are usually confined to the granting of particular religious holidays for Christians, Jews, and Muslims. That aspects of religious culture frame individual work values and identity, and in turn influence WLB policies, has not been discussed in the research literature in industrial and organizational social psychology.

In the Palestinian culture, boundaries between work, society, and family are porous rather than fixed, and this has clearly had an influence on WLB policies. In the two case studies, individuals had a right to have personal visitors during office time, regardless of work-related task demands, as well as the right to make and receive personal phone calls from friends and family members during office hours, not only when some family crisis was involved. A parent of any employee could stay for 20 to 30 minutes with their son or daughter to have a cup of coffee within the organization. Even if one is busy, it is unacceptable not to meet with the visitor. Arabic society is still less concerned about time than is customary in the West, whether in business or family life; in both of these aspects, the individual in Palestinian culture has no rush or pressure to *be on time*. The social WLB policies for these aspects of cultural behavior and obligations are largely absent in the Western context (Chandra, 2012; Heinen & Mulvaney, 2008).

Compared with limited availability of flexible and leave policies which are conventional in Western organizations, those in the present study have concentrated more upon policies that meet the requirements of an employee welfare system within a specific cultural, political, and religious context. This finding supports the ideas of earlier researchers, who suggest that human relations management (HRM) policies cannot be predicted or understood without reference to the values and social structure of the countries in which they are developed (Aycan, Al-Hamadi, Davis, & Budhwar, 2007; Aycan & Eskin, 2005; Chandra, 2012; Gomes, 2013; Thévenon, 2011).

Flexibility in WLB policies was offered by the organizations in the present study, due to particular social, culture, and market characteristics. Some leave policies in the Palestinian context are essential but are quite unlike those typically encountered in Western WLB policies. The non-leave, financial policies were of more importance in the present context to make up for deficiencies in the welfare system of the Palestinian government. These financial incentives have also been found by researchers to be motivating factors for WLB policies in Arabic countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman, and Libya (Mellahi, Demirbag, & Riddle, 2011; Mellahi & Wood, 2004; Metcalfe, 2007.

Two other salient findings emerged from the critical realist analysis of the case study material: first, the role of *wasta*, a cultural practice of favoring those whose status or values apparently deserves deference; and second, the role of line managers in administering (and sometimes blocking) access to WLB benefits. *Wasta* is common in Arab cultural life and can be an advantage or disadvantage (Jamal, 2009). It involves treating favorably those to whom the individual feels a social or ethical obligation. This can be toward members of a religious group, a political affiliation, a gender group, or those ranked by age. Thus, women in the case studies had better access to WLB benefits, and indeed many such benefits were designed with women's dual-career status in mind. The value of deferring to the elderly also meant that older males were more likely to be given more access to WLB practices. Both of these two types of favoritism reflected cultural and religious values. However, despite formally written HR policies, middle-rank line managers were often ignorant of the full range of WLB practice in their organization and refused requests either through ignorance or through the practice of favoritism. Employees interviewed also reported uneven practice by some line managers. There are lessons here for more efficient administration of WLB benefits in this cultural context, which can be crucial in accommodating the needs of all employees.

A Theoretical Model

The present research indicates that derived from the case study interview and observational data, there are six main reasons for applying WLB policies: this model is proposed within a critical realist understanding of the framework of organizational goals, and the network of roles which individuals play in delivering a viable telecommunications service. Six emerging themes form the basis of a theoretical model whose viability can be tested both in Palestine in further quantitative and qualitative

studies and in other developing countries both within the Arab world and beyond. The six potentially synergistic and interacting elements of the model which appear to inform and underpin WLB policies and their application are: social and religious factors; international investment and technology adoption, in which norms of international organizations are to some extent absorbed—both of the organizations in the present study have strong links with European communications technology, and investment; rules and regulations of government enacted in Palestinian labor laws; the existence of a significant number of women workers whose expertise is essential for the organizations, and whose presence in the organizations may have resulted in a unique set of WLB policies which assist women in balancing the culturally prescribed role obligations of family and child care, and the demands of the workplace, relative influence of labor unions, competition for skilled labor, both male and female. This theoretical model (Abubaker, 2015) is novel and quite different from studies based on research in Western organizations (Figure 1).

The WLB policies in the two Palestinian organizations studied were focused upon financial, social, and religious WLB contexts, rather than upon the flexible policies typically found in Western settings. In Palestine, there exist the following WLB polices: crisis financial support, healthcare insurance, war hardship support, time for prayer, time for Hajj (pilgrimage to Makkah), and receiving personal visitors. Additionally, a number of leave arrangements and flexible policies, which exist in Western WLB policies, were also found in the current study—in particular, parental leave for men and elder leave policies, but on a limited scale. This is because of the masculine gender culture in Palestine which limits male engagement in what are perceived to be *women's responsibilities*. Islamic values also require individuals to care for their parents (Kamali, 2003; Sidani, 2005). This study also offers insight into the nature of a number of leave policies which are relevant for Muslim and Arabic countries, such as emergency (e.g., accident or illness) and bereavement leave, which are more developed than in the West. Figure 2
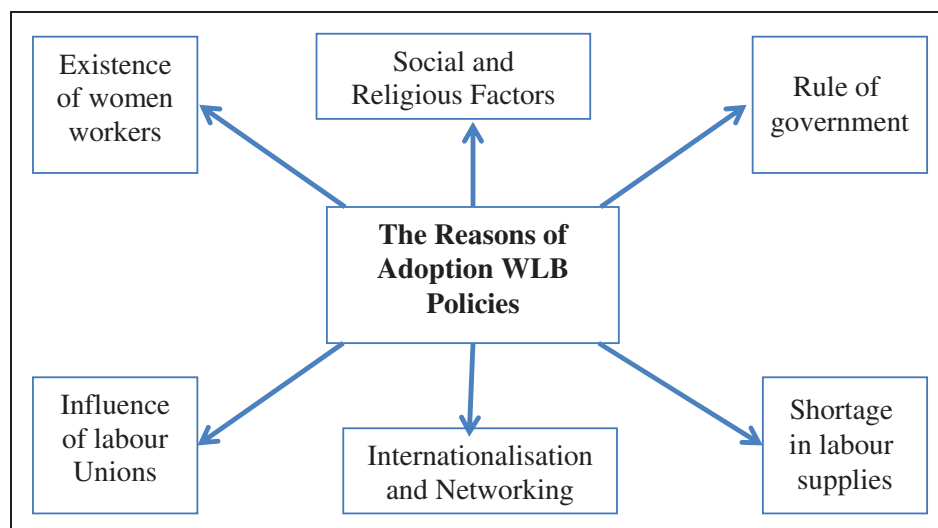
Figure 1. The reasons for adopting WLB policies in the two case studies. WLB = work–life balance.
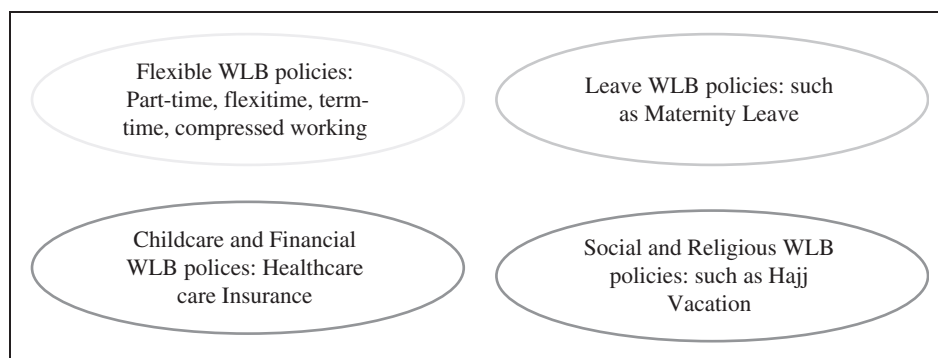
Figure 2. The WLB policies in the two telecommunication organizations. WLB = work–life balance.

summarizes the content of WLB policies of the current study.

Figure 2 is a new model of the structure of WLB polices emerging from the current case studies. Financial, social, and cultural policies are noted. The flexible and leave policies of the most Western countries are less important in the current WLB policies of the studied telecommunication organizations in Palestine. The organizations in the present study have concentrated upon policies that meet the requirements of an employee welfare system within the relatively homogenous Islamic context of Palestine. This finding supports the idea that HRM policies cannot be predicted or understood without reference to the values and social structure of the countries in which they are developed (De Henau, Meulders, & O'Dorchai, 2007; Den Dulk et al., 2012) and explains the uniqueness of the Palestinian WLB profile identified here.

The evolving structure of WLB policy includes new elements likely applicable as theoretical bases or elements for further studies in Palestine and other Arabic nations. In developing countries, organizations are likely to offer limited financial incentives in order to support government welfare systems. The homogeneous Islamic culture is common across many of the Arabic nations, governed by religious rules which include 1month's fasting during the day in Ramadan each year, prayers five times every day, Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, and Zakat (obligatory donation to Muslim charities). All of these rules could be accommodated within WLB policies. Flexibility is generally practiced in Western countries, given the much more heterogeneous cultural and religious background, and could accommodate Muslim workers' needs. For example, according to an Australian study (Sev, Harris, & Sebar, 2012), which examined how a sample of Muslim men adapted their work roles in relation to religious obligations and practices, it was found that Muslim men may prefer to reduce their working hours through the use of flexible policies in Ramadan and also seek to have a holiday each Friday since (as in Muslim countries) this is the day of attendance at the Mosque for *jummah*, the obligatory prayers at mosque—rather than the conventional weekly holiday of Saturday or Sunday. Likewise, the effects of Muslim business ownership are notable; in Bradford, United Kingdom, many Muslim-owned shops are closed and work is suspended on Friday afternoon, which may affect any employees' work hours.

Previous theoretical models derived from Western research have not encompassed such socioreligious factors as salient reasons underlying the adoption of WLB policies (Chandra, 2012). The critical realist findings of the present Palestinian study are thus a novel contribution to the theoretical framework of the literature on why organizations adopt WLB policy and practice. Social and religious influences of Islam are essential elements in formulating research for understanding organizational business environments in developing Islamic-majority countries and should be part of any initial theoretical framework for understanding these contexts.

Conclusions

The critical realist methodology has combined attempts by external observers to construct what they perceive to be the realities of a research setting, then conducting a qualitative case study and an interview study of two telecommunication companies in a developing country. Based on the data generated, a complex model of potentially interactive elements has been constructed, which influence the policy and practice of delivering WLB programs. As the initial observation was that WLB policies were meeting the needs of women rather than of men, and since a particular focus of research was on female employees, they were purposely oversampled (two women compared to each man studied) as the research proceeded. Standard techniques for analyzing qualitative data found a number of different themes within the data generated. While some WLB policies identified in Western literature also emerged in the Arabic culture of Palestine, new forms of benefits to help workers balance the demands of work, and cultural, social, religious, and family life have been identified. While various factors have influenced the development of such WLB policies in Palestine, cultural and religious factors have meant that women have been a major focus of such policies.

We offer these as important findings since they imply that further research and policy development should be initiated using more quantitative research methodologies that build upon the information and insights of the qualitative study. A psychometrically validated scale relevant for cross-cultural use would be ideal, for example, the scales developed by Hayman (2005) and Hayman and Rasmussen (2013) which combine psychometric and qualitative methodologies to understand the nature and impact of WLB policies. Future research should also measure stress experienced by individuals in relation to the success or otherwise of WLB programs in particular cultural settings.

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