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Dr. Mousa Lubbad & Prof. Christopher Adam-Bagley

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Work-Life Balance Policies and Traditional Culture in a Competitive Market: Three Case Studies of Jordanian Telecommunication Companies

Dr. Mousa Lubbad

Faculty of Administration and Finance, Al-Aqsa University, Gaza, Palestine.

Prof. Christopher Adam-Bagley*

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Southampton, UK.

***Corresponding author: christopher.adam@outlook.com**

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Abstract

Available studies on culturally-contextualized work-life balance (WLB) programs in Jordan are scarce. The present qualitative study of the understanding of WLB) benefits offered in three Jordanian telecommunication companies, adds to this literature, based on interviews with 15 senior managers. The research is grounded within the theoretical perspective of Critical Realism, a useful approach to the study of organisations. The study identified three distinct types of WLB: social and cultural practices; financial practices; and leave arrangements. In comparison with developed countries, social practices such as time for prayers, Hajj (pilgrimage) leave, and concessions in hours worked during the fasting month of Ramadan reflected the culture and religion of Jordan as an Arabic, Islamic country. WLB benefits were also to current levels of economic development in Jordan. Senior managers' reasons for accepting or initiating WLB practices included level of competition in the labour market, existing government regulations, social and culture norms of society, and pressures (including market pressures) relating to women in the workforce. Financial practices were linked to a competitive market, reflecting the need to retain well-qualified staff. These financial benefits including subsidized childcare, paid study leave, and family health insurance, and were reported to have the strongest positive impact on organisational morale and staff retention. We argue that successful international investors should recognize, co-operate with local norms, values and practices underlying WLB provision.

Keywords: *Work-Life-Balance, Jordan, Qualitative Research, Critical Realism, Arab Culture, Telecommunications*

1. Introduction: Work-Life Balance Benefits

Work-Life Benefits (WLB) aim to help employees balance demands of home, family, leisure and try to maximise employee satisfaction, and are relatively well-developed in Western countries [47]. Sometimes these benefits (e.g. paid maternity leave) are required by legislation, but often employers themselves initiate such benefits, or grant them in response to employee requests [19], since WLBs can enhance employee satisfaction, increase productivity, and reduce turnover. This is especially important when highly skilled labour is in short supply [42].

This has led to organisations developing more flexible working arrangements [59]. There is another implication for globalisation, in the need to increase the skill level of workers, including those with competing family commitments [47] [48]. In the past three decades employers, employees and governments in developed and developing countries have recognized (sometimes unwillingly) the need to address these issues, especially as higher proportions of women enter the workforce [6] [27] [37] [38].

WLB practices identified in previous Western studies include: working time arrangement designed to give workers greater flexibility in scheduling hours of work by using part-time working; flexible working hours; compressed work weeks; home-working; term-time working; limited number of annual hours; job sharing; flexible leave arrangements such as practices reducing working hours to provide time for family care or personal needs, including vacations; illness, maternity, paternity, and parental leave; emergency leave; short-term leave to care for a sick child; financial allowances that assist workers to manage care for dependents, including on-site and off-site child care; elder care; employee assistance programmes; fee-sponsored referral services; and various subsidised well-being programmes [47] [48].

Such benefits have the aim (in their Western development) of enhancing employee well-being, in order to provide for the needs of personnel, and to improve organisational outcomes [29]. The motivations of employers in offering such benefits are varied, and generally reflect self-interest, rather than benevolence [27]. These various issues are explored in the context of a developing industry, in a developing country.

2. Previous Studies of WLB in Developing Countries

Among the important 'culturally aware' research studies of such practices in developing countries are those of Wang and colleagues [55] [56], who investigated the WLB practices in India, Kenya, and China, indicating that WLB practices frequently differed from those in developed countries. For instance, both Wang [56] and Heinen and Mulvaney [33] found that WLB practice frequently responded to concerns about family health insurance, retirement plans, and subsidised education for children where state welfare systems were not well-developed. Little previous research on WLB in any Arabic country can be identified [11] [14]. The work of Abubaker [2] on the nature, development and impact of WLB in three telecommunication companies in Palestine is therefore relevant, and offers a critique of more recent studies of WLB in Arab cultures. Jordan is an Arabic country like Palestine (and contains many people with Palestinian ancestry), in which Islamic cultural norms prevail. Nevertheless, the history and political setting of Jordan introduces some novel features in describing and analysing WLBs, which we explore in the present research. We did expect, however, to replicate the findings of Aladwan *et al.* [8] [on both development, and the unsystematic application of human resource management practices in Jordan, in a field of rapid economic development, high staff turnover, and marked competition for skilled and professional workers.

The research we report below is based on extended interviews with 15 senior managers in three Jordanian telecommunications companies.[1] For "diplomatic" reasons we accessed a sample of 13 men and two women who occupied key managerial posts in the Jordanian telecommunications sector, but were unable to extend the work to employees of junior managers. The senior managers who in this research describe and implement forms of WLB practice in Jordan offer us a starting point within the critical realist paradigm, of gaining both an objective and a subjective understanding of the significance of implementing WLB policy and practice. The research interviews (conducted in Arabic by the first author) did not attempt to test any hypotheses, since we felt that the field is not yet developed enough for quantitative research which this research model might require. Rather, we used a qualitative approach with our sample in an attempt to generate hypotheses for future work. The broad research question posed was: *What is the nature, role and function of WLB practices in selected Jordanian organisations?* We wanted to know why the key informants had adopted or were considering, certain WLB practices, and what their overall perceptions and values were in relation to these practices.

We should add however, that several researchers have, with varying degrees of success, undertaken quantitative studies of WLB and other aspects of employee satisfaction and motivation, in medical, educational, transport, manufacturing and communication sectors in Jordan [1] [4] [9] [10] [16] [23]. All of these studies have, in our reading, been somewhat naive in importing Western instruments and quantitative research models, which were often not particularly relevant for an Arabic cultural setting.

3. Jordan: The Research Setting

Jordan, population about ten millions (of whom about a tenth are refugees, mainly from Syria), is a Middle Eastern country bordered by Palestine, Israel, Syria and Saudi Arabia. Its historical importance stems from being at the "crossroads" where trade routes from Asia, Europe and Africa converge. The port of Al-Aqaba provides access to the Red Sea and Egypt. This key location leads to the Kingdom of Jordan being regarded as a gateway to the Middle East [43]. Certainly Jordan is well placed to trade both with North Africa and the rest of the world and this fact has increased attractiveness to international companies and investors. By 2013 Jordan had a literacy rate in both sexes surpassing 95 percent [21] [54]. Both genders attend schools and state universities free of charge. There are also internationally-renowned private schools and universities that charge fees.

A quarter of Jordanian women are employed full-time: the trend for women to enter the external work force is rapidly changing, and many of the employed women in paid employment are graduates [21] [43]. Economic and technological expansion has greatly expanded the demand for an educated work force, and women are increasingly filling these roles, social changes which have implications for WLB offered by employers. The International Labor Organization survey of 2013 reported that Jordan was one of the more advanced of the MENA countries in terms of education achievements, and employment opportunities for educated personnel: a highly educated population means that the country's human resources are its greatest asset: "Indeed, the combination of Jordan's lack of natural resources and its increasingly highly educated population mean that the country's human resources are its greatest asset". [34]

Foreign investment has steadily increased with firms such as Orange, Coca Cola, and Nestlé investing in the kingdom. Foreign direct investment in Jordanian enterprises had increased to about US$8 billion by 2019 [28] [43]. By 2015 Jordan had become an economic leader in the

[1] Some initial findings from the study of the first two companies have been discussed in a previous paper [3].

Middle East, as a member of the European-Mediterranean Free Trade Area. In the UN Human Development Survey [54] Jordan was reported as having "high human development" in terms of education, health and life expectancy, income levels and income distribution, and environmental protection. Tourism accounted for about 15 percent of national income. "Health tourism" has been another growth industry, given the high quality of Jordan's medical facilities. Following reforms introduced after 1999, economic and technological progress in Jordan has rapidly advanced [18] [43]. Jordan is a regional leader in the telecommunication and information technology marketing, a sector which was expected to recruit an additional 18,000 highly skilled workers by 2020. This sector benefits from investment from European companies, including the introduction of mobile and other electronic devices. These international investment links mean that, as in Palestine, foreign investors have to exercise caution in introducing management models and WLB packages which are not compatible with local cultural values [2].

Jordan's modernization implies that organisations have to consider implementing WLB policy and practice familiar in developed countries, in ways which both adapt to local values and expectations, and which can retain highly skilled workers, such as women professionals who are in increasing demand [3] [15].

Most of the settled citizens of the Jordanian nation are of Arabic ethnicity (98%), the majority of the population being Sunni Muslim (92%) and Arabic speakers [21]. As in other Arab cultures, a collectivist culture rather than an individualistic one prevails: for example, obligations to care for extended kin are strong. The individualistic society of the west with its nuclear family is uncommon in the Arab world [33]. Family members often live in shared households or adjacent dwellings with adult siblings, parents and grandparents living close by, with the extended family being able to assist each other in various ways. Arabic norms are usually reflected in gender roles, with men traditionally being "bread-winners", women's main role being family management [57]. However, the role of woman as a "strong family manager" can often be extended into successful managerial roles in trade and industry [2] [52].

An increasing emphasis on the education of women, as favoured by employers seeking intelligent, skilled and flexible personnel, has led to gradual changes in the pattern of family life in the Arab world [2] [52]. There are now many new indications of individualism such as lower birth rates, and more young people living apart from families [57]. Despite this, the movement of women into work roles traditionally held by men is not fully accepted in Arab cultures, and positive progress is slow [6] [18].

Among Arabic practices which remains strong in Jordan is that of *wasta*, or favouritism [20]. This gives preferential access in employment and benefits, to for example older applicants (given the general deference to elders), to women (given cultural and religious norms on the protection and care of women), and to those who hold similar values. These practices, reflecting both Arabic values and Islamic tradition, influence employment programmes in recruitment and compensation, as well as in other aspects of organisational reward systems [2] [5].

Jordanian labour laws have developed only since the new phase of economic expansion began in 1999, and generally focus upon minimum wages, annual paid leave, child allowances, and special conditions for women workers. An employer with at least 20 married female workers is "required" to provide a suitable place for employee's children up to the age of four years. One study investigating this practice in small organisations found that many, for obvious purposes, employed a maximum of 19 women [52].

In the present study, the research focuses, *inter alia*, on the nominal adherence of three large telecommunication companies (each employing at least 100 women) to the guiding laws and

regulations which aim to manage labour relations in the Jordan [49]. These include a maximum working week of 48 hours spread over six days, with breaks for meals and prayer (the free day is normally Friday, the day of obligatory Mosque attendance for males). Each worker in a large organisation is formally (although not always in practice) entitled to 28 days of paid leave per year, and 14 days paid sick leave per annum. Paid maternity leave under government regulations, is for 10 weeks. Women on return to work after maternity leave are entitled to an hour's paid leave per day over one year, for breast-feeding. Unpaid leave of a year with the right of return to work must be provided if a new mother requests this. Leave must also be given for travel to The Hajj pilgrimage. These rather generous rights, when given to workers in larger organisations reflect the Islamic nature of the culture, which holds that women in general, and mothers in particular are deserving of special support. However, as the research interviews in the present study show, there is some laxity in the observance and enforcement of these Labour Laws.

4. Chosen methodology: Critical Realism

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). The present study applies a qualitative approach to research with a small (but crucially important within the organisation) sample of fifteen senior managers, in three large telecommunication companies.

The chosen research model is grounded within the Critical Realist approach to understanding phenomena, an increasingly popular and effective research model in investigating business organisations [25]. In this model there are complementary and interlocking ontological assumptions that may be utilised in order to understand the reality of the phenomenon [26] [17]. *Critical Reality* is 'constructed' from the researcher's perception and analysis of the subjectivity of the research participants, and is analysed as a consequence of the interplay of the interviewees' individual perspectives, their life histories, and the researcher's understanding of the *ontology*, the prevailing reality, or perceived social structure - in these case studies, market competition moderated by adherence to Islamic business practices, and the principle of *zakat*, or charitable service to both employees and customers [6].

The realist researcher uncovers knowledge by naming and describing broad, generative mechanisms. In other words, the validity is a "contingent validity" whereby the researcher has developed a 'family of answers' that cover several contingent contexts and reflects different participants' world-view "albeit imperfectly" [45].

Neither positivism nor social constructivism provides an ontology that is capable of reflecting the 'actual reality' of WLB practices, and their genesis within organisations. Social constructivism may regard 'reality' to be synonymous with the values and beliefs of social actors, but in doing so fails to recognise existing realities, nor is it capable of determining the 'reality' of how for example organisations are experienced objectively in the labour market; nor is naive empiricism be able to give an account of reasons for adopting particular WLB practices [26] [53]. These are problems which Critical Realism seeks to avoid. "Mixed methods" in this model, is a preferred approach to HRM issues [35]. Furthermore, Critical Realism can be a particularly appropriate methodology when the research setting is intertwined with a strong religious culture, such as Islam [58].

5. The Interview Process: Ethical Issues and Methodology

In order to gain access to senior managers, with the possibility of frank reflections on company policies the three firms (and all of those interviewed) were given, for ethical reasons, a guarantee of anonymity. The declared aim of the research for interviewees was to educate the researchers on the nature and administration of the company's WLB policy and practice. The interviews were face-to-face with each of the 15 managers, lasting for approximately an hour. We began by raising topics as well as presenting new ideas in order to elicit the responses on how and why they constructed their social world in terms of Work Life Benefits for employees. The lead researchers encountered a certain reluctance to co-operate by some managers, particularly in the second company. Nevertheless, the researcher was able to elicit a wealth of data from the 15 interviews - the' saturation point' was reached in each Case Study after five interviews – the point when it seemed clear that there was a feeling that fresh data seemed to be unlikely, or irrelevant [41].

All of the managers interviewed had been in their current post for at least two years. All senior managers were potentially available to the researchers. All were male, apart from one female manager in Case Study One, and one in Case Study Three. The male research interviewers were experienced HRM professionals, and had held a faculty positions in a Middle Eastern Management Faculty. All recorded interviews were conducted in Arabic, and later translated into English, for purposes of computerized analysis of the qualitative data.

6. Results from the Three Case Studies: WLB Profiles

Using codes derived from textual analysis of Arabic-language interviews translated into English, the researchers identified three kinds of WLB practices (and sometimes their absence) in the three Case Studies. These are shown in Table 1, appended. For definitions and scope of these WLB policies and practices, the reader is directed to the references in the right hand column of the Table.

As shown in Table 1, the companies in Case Studies One and Three were somewhat more generous in WLB provision, providing subsidized child-care, subsidy for family's sports centre membership, and paid *Hajj* (once-in-a-lifetime Makkah pilgrimage) leave. Case Study Two company allowed employees to go on this once-a-lifetime pilgrimage for up to a month, but as unpaid leave; the other two companies paid employee's salary during this leave. Case Study Three (the largest company studied) offered the most generous range of WLB benefits. This finding suggests that the WLB benefits offered are not merely a reaction to standard Labour Law provisions [49], but are dynamic and changing, as employers compete for highly skilled employees in a competitive market.

In the following section we highlight both similarities and differences in the approach of the three companies, and how key managers viewed or interpreted WLB practices. It should be emphasized that each company was keen to recruit, and retain, skilled personnel in a competitive jobs market in Jordan at the time of the research.

7. Findings from the Interview Data

Since its launch in 2005, the first company had been able to expand rapidly into the Jordanian mobile market, achieving a high market penetration. The company proved to be a key player in one of the highly competitive telecommunications markets in the Arabic region. By the end of the first quarter of 2006, the company customer base had reached an unprecedented number of over 500,000 subscribers, all within six months. By 2010, in comparison with the competitors in the mobile Jordanian market, the company held a market share of 22 percent. The company in 2017 had over 400 employees, 95 percent of whom were Jordanian. The percentage of women in the workforce was around 30 percent.

By 2017 significant competitors had entered the market, including Companies 2 and 3 in the present study, both of who had a significant market share, and employed more than 200 personnel.

Workers in all of the companies had a formal right to 28 days annual holiday, 15 days sick leave, and 70 days maternity leave. On Leave Arrangement practices, the HR Manager of the first company pointed to the firm's pioneering practice of offering employees' the right to take 28 days of annual paid vacation, which at the time it was initiated, was comparable with the practice of many international organisations working in Jordan. We were impressed by the fact that senior managers in all three companies held rather similar views on the nature, function and quality of the WLB benefits that their companies offered.

Firstly, none of the managers interviewed indicated the existence of paternity leave, which was seen as inappropriate in an Arabic culture. A Financial Manager observed: *What is the point of paternity practice? Who looks after his wife on such occasion?* But a Sales Manager, a woman, said: *I wish that could happen, but this would entail a change in the mentality of men before being able to ask the employer to implement such special provisions.* In Arabic culture men are not expected to provide 'domestic assistance' for women, who are expected to be supported either by extended family or by other women, particularly during pregnancy, childbirth, and afterwards. It is rare to see men staying at home, helping a wife with family matters.

All those interviewed pointed to practices within their company that could be classified as Social WLB practices. These cultural and religious factors may oblige employers to offer these to enable individuals to manage working and personal lives in culturally appropriate ways. An HR Manager stated: *Yes, the policy of HR considers the culture and religion factors in setting practices. We have a praying room for workers within the organisation.* A Procurement Manager also stated that: *We offer additional practices that are essential in most of the Arabic region, such as break for praying time. There is a room available for this purpose.*

Under Social WLB policies, several practices were supported in all three companies, including a half hour prayer-time break; reduced work-hours during Ramadan (the month of fasting, ending the day at 1 pm rather than 4 pm); bereavement leave for up to three days, personal phone calls and personal visitors at work; and one month's paid leave for each employee going on the Hajj pilgrimage during his or her lifetime.

The coding analysis (using NVIVO of the English translation of the Arab-language interviews) identified a group of WLB practices under the heading of *Financial Matters*. In terms of WLB interviewees indicated that there were many financial WLB practices available to workers, as recorded in Table 1. These were seen, for example, by the managers in Company One to be the most important type of WLB practice they offered. The Financial Manager remarked that: *In*

one meeting the employees expressed a desire to increase their salary, and for the employer to provide private health insurance for the whole family… We have pressure to increase our contribution to 100% of the cost of childcare centre rather than the present 50%. We now offer free private health care insurance to all employees.

The Administrative Manager in Company Three stated that there were many additional benefits for employees in achieving a balance between working life and family responsibilities, including a free mobile telephone line with 1500 free minutes for each employee and their spouse; subsidized overseas family trips for one month; and family membership of a sport centre for upper and middle-rank employees. Most of the Financial and HR Managers offered the opinion that rather than merely following regulations, or cultural values within Jordan, these benefits also achieved the purpose of maintaining morale and retaining good employees. A manager commented: *We look to the HR policies of our major competitors.* He then mentioned that his company had joined an association of telecom organisations in Jordan on maintaining "excellent" employee conditions.

One of the aims of this association was indeed to seek a common code of practice with respect to WLB practices, a "benchmark" for all existing and prospective telecommunication companies. The Procurement and Sales Managers in Companies Two and Three both indicated that a private limited company must be concerned about the reputation of the organisation, including its reputation as an employer, otherwise investors and customers might go to their competitors.

The researchers' impression was that competition (and fear of competition) was an important reason behind the implementation of some WLB practices, and for the setting up of a form of oligopoly which limited competition for scare labour resources. This association 'obliged' members to apply particular practices and after its formation, competition for skilled labour between members of the association had declined, but had increased with regard to competition with other technology sectors who employed professional and skilled workers. It is our inference from the case study and interview material that the creation of the association of telecommunication companies in Jordan has established a tacit understanding with regard to which WLB practices to promote, and which to leave unimplemented.

However, the companies One and Three did offer somewhat higher levels of benefits, suggesting that they were straining the limits of the telecommunications companies' clique. When the researchers enquired why more benefits were offered, the response was that these created the ability to attract skilled workers, and to retain them once employed. That this is the case is supported by the practice within one organisation of giving one month's unpaid leave for any key worker who was "exhausted", and contemplating resignation.

Labour Unions played some role in the implementation of WLB practices, but they were more likely to be concerned with increasing financial incentives and rates of remuneration, rather than improving other rewards. Company One had a full-time union representative on site. But the HR and Procurement Manager in Company Two remarked: *What is the point of them [the unions] exerting pressure because more practices are offered than in other organisations, and ours are more than those which have been demanded by the employees.*

Women constituted more than 20 percent of the labour force in each of three companies at all levels, from sales to senior management, and there were a number of women in mid and high positions in all three companies. Even so the interviewees did not indicate any particular or notable pressure from women in respect of WLB practices. A female Sales Manager observed: *The HR policies of the company had been established at the inception of the organisation, irrespective of whether there were or were not women in the workplace at that time.*

A financial manager also indicated that the policy of providing childcare facilities had existed from the beginning. He suggested that this practice resulted from a decision of the company's foundation board of directors who believed that: *The implementation of childcare facilities feeds back into an increase in profitability and was deemed beneficial for improving the personal achievement of employees.*

The implementation of "child friendly" practice by senior management was based on the recognition of an increase over the years in the number of employees, particularly of women employees, with young dependents. The intention, as implied in the above quotation, was one of improving both the personal achievement of employees, including women with dependents, as well as increasing the favourable public image of the company (which also translated into a marketing strategy).

One of the principal reasons why this company chose to implement a system of WLB, and particularly Financial WLB and Social WLB practices, was indicated by the Sales manager: *We are a service organisation rather than manufacturing organisation, the value of our company lies its reputation and customer service.* This general view was also supported by the Administrative and Procurement managers, of the other two companies, both of whom indicated that the principal asset of the organisation was its workforce. It was the employee who produces the 'product' of the organisation (the sale of the device, rather than the device itself) and who persuades the customer to use, and keep using, the organisation's services mobile telecommunication services. The WLB policies adopted were, in effect, an important way through which all of that the organisations could maintain and strengthen their position in the marketplace. Manufacturing companies could overcome this problem by producing new handsets and connectivity, but this, in a rapidly advancing field of technology, would be a temporary advantage. The manifest "happiness" of sales and service staff was clearly a good long-term marketing strategy.

There was clear evidence from interviews in all three companies on the use of a part-time working strategy to fill the immediate needs of the employee, rather than of the employer. In addition, such a strategy was used to enable the companies to select its most highly skilled future employees through initial hiring of workers (particularly females) only the most efficient of the part-time workers. This was confirmed by all of the interviewees.

A predominant idea among the participants was that all of the companies had a generally good reputation in the marketplace for their "generous" WLB practices. These derived in the main from financial WLB practices, and from established social practices. As one manager noted: *Go and ask 'the public', would they like working for our company or not?* The reputation of the company was, according to this and other managers, more related to benefits and practices which they implemented, rather than to their actual telecommunication products.

A female sales manager added, in reflecting on the introduction of subsidized childcare: *I am happy with this practice, it is the time to find more partners, I mean more women.* The support for childcare also indicated a desire to reduce the turnover of employees with dependents, as an Administrative Manager observed: *One women employee said, 'the time is over for my husband to force me to leave work'.* An HR Manager observed: *I am expecting a reduction in the turnover of women with dependents, but I cannot be sure of this now because the practice of providing childcare is new.*

There were several indications of the esteem that childcare benefits were thought to bring the company in terms of a reduction in turnover of staff. This idea was supported by several participants who generally observed that the happiness of employees, in reduced emergency leave, and increased informal discussion about such benefits between employees. Most

interviewees were also confident that other financial WLB practices also explained the reduction in staff turnover. For example, a Procurement Manager observed: *One of my employees who gained study leave, speaking with me informally about a competitive offer he had received from one of our competitor companies remarked that he could not let his company down. 'They have paid for my studies and have appreciated me and so I have respect for them.' He rejected the rival's offer.*

Financial WLB practices were perceived as having greater impact than other benefits. This was noted by all of the managers interviewed and was apparently supported by a reduction in special leaves requested, and in the general level of commitment of employees. A Manager observed: O*ne employee said: 'this is my home' and said this at 6 o'clock after a normal working day which usually ended at 4 o'clock.* On the creation of childcare facilities, an HR Manager noted a decrease in emergency leave, and a reduction in absenteeism among women. He offered the example of three women who used to leave work several times in a week: their behaviour changed dramatically after the implementation of childcare.

The salient nature of WLB in Case Study One are leave arrangements, financial WLB benefits, and religious and cultural practices - but the practice of flexible work was quite rarely used. Overall, WLB provision reflected managerial policy for maintaining employee morale, satisfaction, and lower absenteeism and turnover – but the bottom line was clearly the efficient (and profitable) operation of the company. Overall, the reasons for the implementation of WLB derived primarily from government imposed labour law, the reputation sought by the organisation, the need for a stable and profitable enterprise, the influence of international standards (even though this was a locally-owned enterprise), and the practices of competing organisations. The impact of these practices was reportedly positive with respect to employee attitudes and behaviour, and the companies' 'good reputation' in the marketplace. The predominant impact perceived involved the provision of financial benefits, childcare facilities, and part-time working.

WLB policies emerging in all of the Case Studies fell into three main categories: Flexible Working and Leave Arrangements; Social and Cultural WLB practices; and Financial WLB practices. Comments on the social and cultural WLB practices were predominant in the interviews, and according to the interviewers' impression these benefits were strongly and sometimes enthusiastically stressed. When the researcher asked about such practices the answer was almost always a straightforward response: *"Of course, yes"*. A HR manager stated that: *Even during praying time and Ramadan, a reduction in working hours is not available as part of the formal policy of organisation. Such practices are by virtue of common sense, offered both in our organisation and in others.*

These practices are a consequence of Arabic culture society [2] [33]. Interviewees indicated that workers had the right to prayer time breaks of half an hour; reduced work-hours during Ramadan; bereavement leave for three days; special, paid wedding leave of up to ten days; and one month's paid or unpaid holiday for employees going on Hajj during their lifetime. The provisions for prayer-time and Ramadan in particular all derive from the companies' appreciation of cultural values and expectations. While they are formal, in the sense of being instituted across the organisation, they are regarded as 'informal' because they derive neither from Jordanian law nor from any prior established system of WLB practices, but rather from 'what is evident to all' given the context of an Islamic society.

On leave arrangements, employees have the right to several benefits as shown in Table 1. All women were entitled to an hour's reduction in the working day to breast feed, for one year. Paid vacation is 28 days a year, and could be increased without pay. Administrative and Marketing Managers observed that: *Employees have the right and access to leave practices*

that are both traditional, and those laid down in Jordanian Labour Law. Paternity leave was not available, but all of the Marketing and Public Relations managers indicated that men could take a maximum of two days for the birth of their child; after that time the extended family could provide the care. A Financial Manager observed that paternity leave in European countries might be essential for the people there given prevailing norms, but not in Jordan. He had studied in Europe, where in general individualism is a characteristic of society, but in an Arabic culture, family roles are prescribed according to gender. *I cannot expect one employee to ask for a long holiday to assist or look after his wife or children. We live with families that can assist us in this regard.*

In terms of flexible working practices, the only one available was, in all three Case Studies was part-time working, utilised to meet the organisation's strategic needs, and often for short periods of time, rather than being a choice of employees. An HR manager affirmed that: *There is no formal policy or rule within the organisation concerning part-time working. But I use it to employ a number of part-time employees at the end of each year as consequence of a heavy workload.*

Regarding Financial Assistance, HR and Public Relation Managers indicated that the company only gave employees free mobile line use on the company's network. All of the organisations provided family private health insurance for full-time workers above the basic grade; and in some cases, subsidised study leave and scholarships for particular workers for studying abroad. These latter were seen by employers as one of the most important WLB practices. An Administrative Manager observed that: *The more you added financial practices the greater the ability of workers to manage their personal affairs; I mean financial practices are an essential part of WLB for employees.*

An HR manager reported that the most requested financial practices were family health insurance, followed by paid studying leave, Hajj vacation, and various financial incentives. These were said to be the principal concerns for employees, rather than other WLB practices, such as flexible working practice. Managers observed that men in particular sought longer hours (and higher pay) rather than other forms of benefit (seen as mainly for women), which would reduce working hours.

Jordanian Labour Law encourages employers to accommodate the social and religious needs of workers, but without stipulating many specific requirements. Even so, many Managers indicated that they would apply these to avoid negative consequences for the organisation. Thus a Financial Manager stated: *We could ignore the rules and regulation of government as many organisations do [he indicated that labour law application is weak in Jordan], but I think that that would cost the organisation too much.* Continuing this theme, a Public Relations manager also observed that: *We are a big organisation which has many networks both internally and externally. It becomes difficult for me to promote and advertise the organisation in the market place if we do not have a good image.*

A PR Manager indicated that the implementation of leave arrangement and social WLB practices are a result of pressure from the government and from social norms, and he linked this with the reputation of the organisation in the market place. The main reason, however, for the implementation of these practices was neither government rules, nor social requirements, but rather the reputation of the organisation and its competitors in the market place. This could explain the non-existence of childcare allowances, even though under Jordanian law, they are "expected" if there are more than 20 women with dependents. The Managers avoided this area of non-compliance, and appeared to assume that such provision would only be necessary if the "public image" of the company was negatively affected.

Rather defensively, an Administrative Manager in Case Two stated that "we have a contract with two kindergartens off-site, for employees' children", and the Finance Manager noted that we "we have off-site facilities" - but employees were responsible for accessing these subsidized facilities. What was understood by these comments was that the organisation was concerned about governmental regulations and understood those policies very well, but they also knew that Jordanian law did not oblige organisations to be responsible for implementing these practices unilaterally.

The Financial Manager in Case Two indicated that: *We can ignore the rules and regulation of the government, as many organisations do.* Furthermore, on how to organise and implement childcare practices is not exemplified in the statute: the law made no specific stipulations as to how childcare is to be provided. There is thus no standard model which organisations must follow to comply with what is effectively a weak legal obligation. Labour unions in Jordan also remain weak, and focus on direct financial rewards for workers, rather than on indirect rewards offered by WLB.

Competition was highlighted by most Managers in Cases Two and Three as an important reason for implementing WLB, and this is particularly the case with respect to financial WLB practices. For instance, the Administrative Manager indicated that: *The introduction of free mobile minutes and family health insurance derives from the availabilities of these practices in other organisations.* An HR Manager commented: *We are working in a market place that could be categorised as highly competitive ...We have recently offered private health care cover as a consequence of employee demand. We also offered three scholarships last year for highly skilled people in the areas of finance, information technology, and procurement.* These scholarships covered the cost of fees and maintenance during study at universities in Jordan, and as Managers conceded, this also had the effect of enhancing skill levels in the company's workforce.

Since about 25 percent of the permanent workforce in the three companies are women, the researcher asked the interviewees about WLB policies for women and other employees with young dependants, and the implementation of WLB practices. A Marketing Manager noted that: *These practices are normally to be found in most well known organisations, whether there are many women there, or not.*

The researcher was not be able to understand the meaning of 'normally' in this reply, as one practice - that of subsidising the cost of children - was desired but certainly not universal in many organisations in Jordan. Three interviewees indicated that workers with dependents had the right of additional financial benefits, such as family health insurance, and increments in salary. From this the researcher understood that increments in salary were given according to number of dependent children, a practice approved by custom rather than law.

There are patterns which the researchers (with the aid of NVIVO) inferred from the interview data concerning the flexibilities in meeting the needs of women. This pattern was evident in many interviews: for instance, the HR Manager stated that: *We normally accept a request from a woman to have holiday or emergency leave, but other employees are more restricted. You can ask [a named employee] who took four emergency leaves last week.* The named employee was a mother of three children, one of whom was ill. Such women-friendly policies were more evident in Company Cases Two and Three, which manifested (according to senior managers) a clear appreciation of the role of women as workers, and an aspiration to offer WLB policies which assisted them. But this altruistic motivation was associated also with the desire to retain valuable professional women, who also had traditional family responsibilities.

Most managers regarded Financial WLB practices as having the greatest impact on employee performance. These involved private family health insurance, free mobile lines, and child benefit payments, and other types of financial support. The Marketing and the Administrative Managers in Case Two noted that: *Employees are happy with these provisions and there has been a corresponding increase in customer satisfaction.* An Administrative Manager added that: *Employee contributions to the running of the company have increased in the form of a greater number of positive suggestions as to improvements to the services provided …*

Two managers (Public Relations and Administration) in Case Three agreed that:

Employees have the right to leave arrangement, but also we have the right to accept or reject these if it creates a conflict with the demands of work in the company. The HR Manager in Case Two expressed concern about generous leave policies: *At the end of each month, accounting departments used to prepare the salaries for all employees. On one occasion three employees from the department were unavailable: one woman on maternity leave, one on sick leave, and one on holiday for three days.*

In all three case studies financial WLB practices were perceived as having a strong relationship to the satisfaction apparently expressed by employees. For instance, a Marketing Manager remarked: *I was happy to gain an opportunity for study, but I did not expect the company to grant me paid study leave, which they did …Other employees [told me] that family health insurance had saved them a lot of money. I really appreciated this offer from the company.*

Several of the managerial respondents said that their organization does not discriminate between employees: it merely conducted itself in accordance with the requirements for open competition in order to choose who should be granted an opportunity to study. This view was not fully supported by all respondents, and one who requested anonymity remarked that he did not believe that there was any clear system for determining which candidates should be offered paid study leave.

8. Conclusions from the three case studies

The WLB practices identified in the content analysis of the 15 interviews with senior managers revealed three main themes: Social and cultural WLB; Financial WLB; and Leave Arrangements. One of the interesting findings across all of the Cases was the existence of practices that have rarely highlighted in studies of HRM in Arabic cultures [2]. These are Social and Cultural WLB practices which deal with the right of employees to have *inter alia* access to personal phone calls, to have personal visitors at work, to be granted praying-time breaks, to have reduced hours of work during Ramadan, bereavement leave and wedding leave, and to have a vacation for Hajj, whether paid or unpaid. These practices reflect cultural and religious factors in Jordan and support the claims of Heinen & Mulvaney [33] and Abubaker & Adam-Bagley [2], that cultural factors in Arabic society underpin WLB practices that do not exist in western contexts.

Wang *et al.* [55] [56] concluded that the impact of cultural factors can also impose the lack of particular practices, such as paternity leave. Indeed, across all three Cases Studies, Paternity Leave arrangements were non-existent. This is because the emergence of this practice in western culture derives from the acceptance of cross gender role models [13]: but this is rare in Jordan, as the social convention is that men are the primary breadwinners with little cross gender transference of roles [6]. These findings support previous studies of Paternity Leave in Arabic nations, which are little in demand because men and women still largely restrict themselves to traditional functions [5].

The main financial benefits in all three companies were subsided health insurance, financial allowances for parents, and paid study leave. Other Financial WLB practices identified were the provision of a childcare centre (in two companies), free mobile phone calls, subsidized family trips for one month abroad, and membership of sports bodies for the family. All of the managers indicated the non-existence of Flexible WLB practices, except for part-time working. Here this provision was used to increase the number of workers in times of high demand for labor. In one case this practice was used for enabling the company to choose which of several newly trialled employees they would offer full-time work. This practice was therefore used to fulfill company requirements rather than being an integral strategy of WLB.

The findings indicate responsiveness by employers to the adoption of WLB practices as consequences of perceived cultural and social factors, and also in response to market factors - rather than as a result of governmental directives. This is particularly so regarding religious matters such as prayer-time breaks, and Hajj leave. The pressure of social and cultural factors is such that it is not possible for these organisations to ignore them. These practices represent the beliefs and norms of most of Muslim people in the Middle East [18].

But there is some flexibility concerning the ability of employers to adopt, or to ignore, a reduction in working hours during Ramadan. Such a reduction is not part of Islamic requirements. Nevertheless reduced working hours enable employees to take part in the traditions of Ramadan: individuals fast during daylight, and prepare food after dusk; and there are additional prayers and Qur'anic readings in the night hours. In addition, individuals who fast from dawn lack energy and concentration by the early afternoon, and in the companies studied, leave work by 1 pm. In terms of other Social WLB practices deriving from cultural norms, there is little separation between working life and social life. It is common for workers to be visited by their friends in the company office, or call them during the working day. There is little general conception in Arabic society of a part of the day being for work and a part for social or religious life [18] [57].

On the other hand, the study's findings indicate a rather weak pressure to implement governmentally defined Leave Arrangements. Rather, the compliance of these organisations was seen to enhance their reputation, their positive public image, as an implicit marketing strategy. As in Metcalfe's review [42], we found that there was a degree of 'idiosyncrasy' on the part of the employers in dealing with their workforces, particularly in allocating working hours required, and how individual workers were rewarded. This might be accounted for by the system of *wasta*, an Arabic cultural practice of differentially rewarding workers according to their needs as perceived in the Islamic system of values; and preferring certain religious or ethnic groups within the general employment system [20]. In a study of employees at a variety of levels in telecommunication companies in Palestine we did find that *wasta* played a role in how WLB policies were applied [2]. Since the current study did not interview an employee sample, this cannot be verified in the Jordanian case.

On the impact of women in the workforce in all three organisations, findings revealed both self-serving and ambiguous responses. The organisations insisted that the implementation of WLB practices was an initial policy of each organisation at its inception, as opposed to being the result of demands made by the workforce. In two Cases, childcare facilities were provided, associated with both high costs and managerial time. The only reason for this adoption appeared to be that the organisation was aware that by offering to assist women employees, there would be an increase in personal satisfaction, performance, and less leave-taking for family reasons. This was apparently verified by a significant impact on the female workforce following the adoption of childcare practices. It is clear that women graduates with professional and technical skills are in demand in the telecommunications and other sectors in an

economically expanding country, and employers are prepared to provide support which will help such women balance the demands of 'traditional' family responsibilities, and entering the professional work force. This entry of women into the external labour force represents an important social change in the Arab world, and deserves further study [6].

Human Resources Management in Jordan is, according to our case study perspective, more systematic than the overview of Aladwan *et al*. [8] found in an earlier survey: but WLB in these three organisations in our study also offer a certain cultural uniqueness. Nevertheless, in addressing the specific cultural needs of workers [39], international corporations in developing countries can according to our case studies, accommodate the aspirations of female workers who wish to balance work and family life [44].

The limitations of the present study should be stressed. The researchers aimed for the highest levels of manager to interview, choosing to begin with a "top down" sample of fifteen senior managers. Gaining such access to firms engaged in a seemingly oligopolistic industry was by no means easy, and was gained diplomatically, with the express understanding that we would listen to the managers' "success stories", and not interview more junior line managers responsible for administering HR policies, nor the workers themselves. Future research must interview managers and workers at all levels if WLB policies and practices are to fully assessed. Future research must also combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, as Hayman [31] and Hayman and Rasmussen [32] have ably demonstrated in their Australian work. Finally, the subjectivity of the researchers in this qualitative study, framed through the research lens of critical realism must be emphasized. Subsequent researchers may uncover different aspects of this reality.

Table 1. The nature of identified WLB practices in the three companies

	WLB Practice	**Code of Type of WLB Practice**	**Available in Case1/ Case2/Case 3**	**Reference for description of WLB practices**
1.	Annual hours	Flexible practices	No/No/No	Perry-Smith & Blum [46]
2.	Job Sharing	Flexible practices	No/No/Yes	Burchielli *et al.* [19]
3.	Term time working	Flexible practices	No/No/Yes	Lewis [37]
4.	Working at home	Flexible practices	No/No/Yes	Konrad & Mangel [36]
5.	Part time working	Flexible practices	Yes/Yes/Yes	Guest et al [30]
6.	Flexitime work	Flexible practices	No/No/Yes	Wise & Bond [59]
7.	Compressed work	Flexible practices	No/No/Yes	Wise & Bond [59]
8.	Unpaid study leave	Leave arrangement	Yes/Yes/Yes	Doherty [24]
9.	Paid and unpaid vacation	Leave arrangement	Yes/Yes/Yes	Doherty [24]
10.	Paid breast feeding leave	Leave arrangement	Yes/Yes/Yes	Roberts *et al.* [51]
11.	Emergency leave	Leave arrangement	Yes/Yes/Yes	Wang, *et al.* [56]
12.	Emergency vacation	Leave arrangement	Yes/Yes/Yes	Giardini & Kabst [29]
13.	Paid/unpaid paternity leave	Leave arrangement	No/No/No	Giardini & Kabst [29]
14.	Paid maternity leave	Leave arrangement	Yes/Yes/Yes	Doherty [24]
15.	Paid/unpaid sick leave	Leave arrangement	Yes/Yes/Yes	Giardini & Kabst [29]
16.	Childcare centre	Financial practices	Yes/No/Yes	Dex & Smith [22]
17.	Subsidised study leave	Financial practices	Yes/Yes/Yes	Wang & Walumbwa [56]
18.	Subsidised- child education	Financial practices	No/No/No	Wang & Walumbwa [57]
19.	Subsidised-Health insurance	Financial practices	Yes/Yes/Yes	Wang & Walumbwa. [56]
20.	Subsidised or free mobile line	Financial practices	Yes/Yes/Yes	Maxwell *et al.* [40]
21.	Cost of membership sport-centre	Financial practices	Yes/No/Yes	Maxwell *et al.* [40]
22.	Subsidy for family holiday	Financial practices	Yes/No/Yes	Maxwell *et al.* [40]
23.	Personal phone call at work	Social and cultural	Yes/Yes/Yes	Maxwell *et al.* [40]
24.	Personal visitors at work	Social and cultural	Yes/Yes/Yes	Heinen & Mulvaney [33]
25.	Prayer time break	Social and cultural	Yes/Yes/Yes	Heinen & Mulvaney [33]

26.	Ramadan-work-hours reduction	Social and cultural	Yes/Yes/Yes	Heinen & Mulvaney [33]
27.	Bereavement/wedding leave	Social and cultural	Yes/Yes/Yes	Heinen & Mulvaney [33]
28.	Paid Hajj vacation	Social and cultural	Yes/No/Yes	Heinen & Mulvaney [33]

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