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Neither-nor: career success of women in an Arab Middle Eastern context

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Abstract

Purpose – Few studies examine the career success of women in the Arab Middle East. With that in mind, the purpose of this paper is to explore the conceptualizations of the career success of women managers in Lebanon. Drawing on the individual, behavioral, and structural approaches, this study also investigates the women's approaches to career success. Capitalizing on the institutional theory (IT), the current investigation accounts for the complexity of the local context by illustrating how a diverse set of socio-cultural values and norms, institutional constraints, and individual agency impact the overall experience of career success among Arab women.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is exploratory in nature and draws on a qualitative approach. In-depth, face-to-face, open-ended interviews were conducted with women managers across the managerial hierarchy in a wide range of industries, sectors, and organizations.

Findings – The findings suggest that the Lebanese women managers' career success was not conceptualized exclusively using the objective or the subjective measures. Rather, it was conceptualized on a continuum between these measures, thus challenging the rigid objective/subjective dichotomy in the context of Lebanon. The results also suggest that the career success of these women managers is better predicted and explained by the individual and behavioral approaches than by the traditional, structural approach. This empirical work sheds light on the gendered working conditions that women experience and how they capitalize on their individual agency to survive the hegemonic masculinity embedded in their workplaces, along with the inequalities that it promotes.

Originality/value – This study is the first to explore the conceptualizations and the determinants of the career success of women managers in Lebanon. However, the originality of this paper is not only limited to its contribution to the limited research on the careers of Arab women; it also extends to its usage of various approaches to predict career success as well as to adapt IT as a theoretical framework for capturing the myriad of factors that impact women's careers and success. The originality of this study also lies in advancing the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity into studies looking at Arab women's career experiences by shedding some light on how the reproduction of gender, gendered working practices, and agency impact their career success.

Keywords Women, Lebanon, Career success, Gender inequality, Arab Middle East, Hegemonic masculinity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Despite the widespread scholarly interest in and extensive research on managerial careers and career success in Anglo-Saxon countries, little attention has been paid to the conceptualizations of the career success of managers in developing, Arab Middle Eastern (AME) countries. This unevenness of attention (Ituma *et al.*, 2011) has created a serious gap in our knowledge of career success, particularly as more studies suggest that careers are not free of the social context in which they unfold (Melamed, 1996; Ituma *et al.*, 2011) and that the meaning of career success is socially constructed (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2004; Gunz and Heslin, 2005; Chudzikowski *et al.*, 2009; Dries, 2011). Hence, career scholars have increasingly called for more country-specific career studies

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(Ituma *et al.*, 2011) that discover how career success unfolds in different social settings (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2004; Gunz and Heslin, 2005) and how its construction is a culturally specific process.

To attend to this knowledge gap and in response to these scholarly calls, the current study explores the nature of women managers' career success in a non-western, AME locale, namely, Lebanon. To achieve its objectives, the current study draws on the institutional theory (IT) as its main theoretical framework as it demonstrates how the conceptualization of career success is affected by the symbiosis and interdependency of the cognitive-culture, normative, and regulative factors within Lebanese contexts. The interest in women managers is rooted in: first, this study's interest in gender inequality, particularly as women managers are perceived as actors in the reproduction of inequality in western (Cohen *et al.*, 2009) and Arab (Tlaiss, 2014) contexts; and second, the strong links made between masculinity and managerial careers in the Arab world, given the masculine nature of its culture, norms, beliefs, and values (Hutchings *et al.*, 2010, 2012; Tlaiss, 2014). Ultimately, leaning on the lens of hegemonic masculinity, the current study argues that the career success of Lebanese women managers is on a continuum between the objective and the subjective measures as it is impacted by the gendered working conditions and inherent inequalities, including gender, at the larger societal level. The findings also reflect on the Arab women's agency – through their resistance to and complicity with the gendered working practices – in their conceptualizations of career success.

Research context: Lebanon in light of the IT and hegemonic masculinity

Hughes (1937) argued that a proper understanding of career success involves an understanding of the structures and institutions of societies and how they impact the manner in which individuals experience or define this construct. In the following section, we will set the stage for this exploratory study by reviewing the societal and organizational factors that impact the careers of women in Lebanon by leveraging the IT (Scott, 1995, 2001, 2005) as a theoretical framework. Scott (2005) defines institutions as social structures with high levels of flexibility. They comprise three pillars that provide meaning and support to social life. While the cultural-cognitive pillar refers to the social production and interpretation of national cultures and traditions within institutions, the regulatory pillar refers to rules and laws that control the functioning of these institutions. The normative pillar highlights the norms and beliefs in these institutions, along with the standards of behavior of individuals operating within them (Scott, 1995, 2001, 2005).

Recent studies argue that Lebanese women have made significant strides in educational attainment levels and workforce participation. For example, women in Lebanon constitute more than 50 percent of the university student population (World Bank, 2005). They are also strongly represented in a number of sectors, including education and health and social services, where they constitute more than 50 percent of the workforce in both sectors. Despite their impressive educational attainments and increased involvement in the local workforce, Lebanese women remain under-represented in the labor market as their participation is at one of the lowest rates of female labor participation in the world (Freedom House, 2010). Moreover, when and if employed, Lebanese women face gender discrimination, particularly at the management level. Leaning on the cultural-cognitive pillar of the IT and Hofstede's (2001) cultural taxonomy, the Arab culture is patriarchal, highly collective, and masculine with gender roles that are firmly distinguished and defined. The private and public domains are shaped by a traditional gender ideology that expects men to

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pursue careers outside the house and to be competitive and achievement-oriented, while women are expected to be caring and focussed on building relationships and family (Hutchings *et al.*, 2010, 2012; Tlaiss, 2013). In addition, by virtue of the high-power distance nature of their culture and using Hosftede's typology, Arab women are expected to accept inequality in authority, power, and society.

The cultural norms, values, and stereotypes deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions that promote male privilege constitute the most fundamental barrier to women's career advancement. The uneven distribution of power in turn (re)produces inequality, is seen as natural, and can be characterized as hegemonic as suggested by Sang *et al.* (2014). From a social constructionism perspective, there is an important distinction between sex (referring to the biological categories of males and females) and gender (Barrett, 1996). Gender is an "actively constructed social accomplishment" that serves to organize life in culturally patterned manners (Barrett, 1996, p. 129). It is an institution that structures social relationships and reproduces social patterns of expectation and human beings actively "do and perform" gender in their daily activities within the context of the social patterns (Barrett, 1996). To further explain, as men are seen as a social category (Collinson and Hearn, 1994), masculinity is thought of as being embedded within an ensemble of social practices, discourses, and ideologies associated with the category of man (Barrett, 1996, p. 130). While hegemony has been used to understand gender relationships (Sang *et al.*, 2014), hegemonic masculinity is often perceived as the best way to be a man (Barrett, 1996; Collinson and Hearn, 1994). For example, during early socialization stages in western (Barrett, 1996) and Arab cultures (Hutchings *et al.*, 2010), boys are taught that being masculine means not being a woman. Based on the suggestions of Barrett (1996) and the salience of gender inequalities in the Arab world (Tlaiss, 2014), hegemonic masculinity has indeed become a successful strategy to subordinate women in this region. As such, the Lebanese, Arab culture continues to be imbued with polarized gender stereotypes and attributed cultural expectations, based on gender ideologies, as to the place of men and women in society.

Given Lebanon's socio-cultural values promoting male privilege and patriarchy, it is not surprising to see organizations becoming the prime social unit of men's domination. Gender is integrated into organizational logic, which in itself is a gendered substructure that is reproduced daily in work activities (Acker, 1990), including the rules and laws that control the functioning of organizations (i.e. IT's regulatory pillar). For example, in a large scale study that looked at the organizational experiences of more than 400 women in Lebanon, Tlaiss and Kauser (2010) found that women managers experienced gender-based discrimination in recruitment, promotion, performance appraisal, and training and development opportunities. As suggested by the regulatory pillar, the discrimination that women face seems to be further promoted and intensified by these practices and rules that act as control mechanism to limit the status of women. Therefore, within Lebanese organizations, as gender is performed and reproduced in ways that propagate gender inequality, women managers are rarely visible "when only the masculine is present" (Acker, 1990, p. 142). Recent studies confirm these arguments as they portray Arab institutions as gendered, with cultures and values (IT's normative pillar) that reflect the socially accepted notions of masculinity and femininity and promote management in terms of hegemony (Tlaiss, 2013, 2014). Organizations in Lebanon and several Arab countries can be seen as mini-patriarchies that reproduce discriminatory social relationships and corporate hierarchies in gendered ways.

Despite its wide usage, hegemonic masculinity has its critics. For example, Sang *et al.*, (2014) argue that studies of hegemonic masculinities run the risk of fusing masculinities

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with men and femininities with women. Whitehead (2002) argues that discussions of hegemonic masculinities make limited examinations of the individual agency portrayed through their complicity and resistance. Further work is therefore needed to understand the agency of marginalized groups, especially as feminist and pro-feminist critics argue that the concept of patriarchy (the main characteristic of Arab culture) is dismissive of women's agency and resistance (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). This resonates with recent studies in the AME (Tlaiss, 2013, 2014) in the context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have argued for the further integration of agency in studies looking at women's careers in the region. This study addresses this very issue.

Review of the literature

Between the traditional and contemporary careers: changing conceptualizations of career success

The construct of career success has received considerable interest given its complexity as a multifaceted construct (Hughes, 1937; Seibert *et al.*, 2001; Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2004; Heslin, 2005; Hall and Chandler, 2005; Gunz and Heslin, 2005; Orser and Leck, 2010; Rasdi *et al.*, 2011; Ituma *et al.*, 2011; Dries, 2011). The complexity of this construct led to what Gunz and Heslin (2005, p. 106) termed "the great divide," in career scholarship, between the objective and subjective definitions or conceptualizations of career success.

Career theory marks the 1990s as the beginning of the transformation of careers from the traditional to the contemporary, and of career success from the objective to the subjective. Traditional careers were often defined as the organizationally orchestrated (Arthur, 1994) movement of people between jobs in a predictable sequence (Wilensky, 1964). Consequently, career success was defined as externally oriented (Hall and Mirvis, 1996) and conceptualized and measured using external, visible factors, such as upward mobility (Wilensky, 1964; Baruch, 2004) and ascending the managerial hierarchy (Heslin, 2005; Dries *et al.*, 2008; Orser and Leck, 2010; Dries, 2011). This perspective used the objective path of a person's career, as defined by society or a reference group, as the reference point for career success (Gattiker and Larwood, 1988, 1989). It reflected a shared social understanding of what external tangible indicators reveal about an individual's career situation (Arthur *et al.*, 2005), with career success measured using indicators that are observable and typically regarded as successful by others (Ng *et al.*, 2005). These indicators included the number or rate of promotions (Gattiker and Larwood, 1988; Kim, 2004), as well as title or job status (Gattiker and Larwood, 1989) and increases in salaries and financial rewards (Hall, 1996). The objective approach to career success was supported by the social comparison theory (Ng *et al.*, 2005), which argues that people assess their career success or advancement by comparing themselves to others based on visible criteria such as career progression on the managerial hierarchy or frequency of promotion. It is, therefore, evaluated relative to the attainments and expectations of others or other-referent criteria, which involve comparing one's individual achievements to outcomes achieved by other people (Heslin, 2005).

In the mid-1990s, as organizational and economic changes shattered traditional bureaucracies, new, contemporary forms of careers (Arthur, 1994; Hall, 1996) with broader goals extending beyond upward advancement were introduced (Hall and Mirvis, 1996). For example, the protean career is a contemporary form of career that adopts a self-directed approach to career management. It is driven by individually defined goals that spread across the entire life space and an individual's values and thus takes a more holistic approach to careers (Hall, 1996, 2004). As contemporary careers shifted the responsibility of career management from the organization to the individual (Orser and Leck, 2010), the perception of career success also shifted.

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Definitions of career success shifted focus away from vertical progression and the experience of objective success (Heslin, 2005) toward a more subjective and psychological experience; one that is based on individuals' personal and internal evaluations of their careers (Arthur *et al.*, 2005) and work experiences (Hall, 1996). Career success was therefore seen as intrinsic, based on the dimensions that are important to the careerists themselves (Arthur *et al.*, 2005) in light of specific organizational contexts, societal norms, and the opinions of significant others (Gattiker and Larwood, 1988, 1989; Nabi, 2001). As such, the intrinsic, subjective perception of career success is built on the premise that people have different career aspirations and put different values on factors such as income, career progression, access to learning, and work-life balance (Arthur *et al.*, 2005). Evaluations are made relative to personal standards or self-referential criteria that reflect an individual's personal career-related standards and aspirations (Heslin, 2005). This approach to career success gained prominence given its multi-dimensionality (Nabi, 2001, 2003) and ability to: relate to the individual's central values (Hall, 1996); and take different forms, including feelings of satisfaction with one's career, self-fulfillment (Baruch, 2006), pride, personal accomplishment (Hall, 1996), and happiness with the family (Hall, 2004).

Role of gender and culture in the conceptualizations of career success

The objective and subjective approaches to career success have their critics. Recent studies contend that the objective/subjective career success dichotomy has been developed in accordance with economic and organizational developments in the western, developed world. A key argument therefore is the ability of these conceptualizations to contain the conceptualizations of individuals from different cultures and across genders (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2004; Dries *et al.*, 2008; O'Neil *et al.*, 2008; Chudzikowski *et al.*, 2009; Dries, 2011).

Although organizational structures are theorized as gender neutral (Acker, 1990), the common concepts of organizational thinking, including career theory, assume that the worker or employee is actually a man (Orser and Leck, 2010; Collinson and Hearn, 1994). Men in organizations take their behavior to be representative of human behavior or input (Acker, 1990). Moreover, although feminist discourse demonstrates how labor market structures and workplace relations have been affected by symbols of gender (Acker, 1990; Sang *et al.*, 2014), recent studies have failed to integrate gender. Studies suggest that while gender is reproduced in ways that extend gender inequality in organizations (Acker, 1990), critical perspectives on organizations and careers (Melamed, 1996) have ignored the experiences of women and have been insensitive to the implications of gender on their goals. As organizational research continues to be dominated by male-defined constructions of women's career success (Melamed, 1996; O'Neil *et al.*, 2008; Bowles, 2012), it fails to realize how gender is a constitutive element of organizational logic, which in turn is a gendered substructure reproduced daily in work activities (Acker, 1990). As organizations continue to be perceived as gender neutral, men's behavior continues to be perceived as representative of human behavior (Kanter, 1977, p. 46) and men's dominance over women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) continues to be ignored in discussions about Arab women's conceptualizations of careers success. With careers in the Arab world perceived as socially constructed in ways that further promote the dominance of men in management roles and the notions of masculinity (Tlaiss, 2014), our knowledge of Arab women's career success is minimal given that the image of success is often associated with a specific form of masculinity characterized by rationality and independence (Tlaiss, 2013).

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Failure to account for gender effects when examining women's career success predictors and outcomes is also problematic as it supports stereotypes about women's ambition and commitment to their careers (Orser and Leck, 2010). It also neglects the complex constraints in women's career development (Powell and Maineiro, 1992; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005), such as gender discrimination (Orser and Leck, 2010). Failure to account for gender also overlooks the relational approach women take to holistically evaluate their careers in the context of their relationships, opportunities, and constraints (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). For example, compared to men, women have been found to be more likely to value achievements and good relations with colleagues (Powell and Maineiro, 1992), balancing work and family, and commitments to their families (Melamed, 1996) more than upward mobility.

With regards to culture, career scholars are increasingly aware of the fact that career literature has underestimated the weight of cross-cultural differences in explaining career success (Hall and Chandler, 2005; Chudzikowski *et al.*, 2009). This underestimation has created an overemphasis on western career concepts and measures in the literature. It has also led to the projection of western values onto career actors in non-western parts of the world, without accounting for cultural differences (Stead, 2004; Dries *et al.*, 2008; Dries, 2011). For example, in Arab contexts, where socio-cultural norms and value systems that promote gender stereotypes and materialism are widespread, Tlaiss (2013, 2014) argues that meeting social expectations and maintaining good social standards is a critical measure of success. As studies argue that career success should be examined as a socially constructed concept that evolves within the historical and cultural contexts surrounding it (Stead, 2004) and as hegemony is achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), it is important to understand the role of Arab culture in promoting such hegemonies.

While such career studies have led several scholars to suggest that the subjective perspective may be a more important determinant of career success for women since its wide boundaries extend beyond the objective measures (Powell and Maineiro, 1992), the generalizability of these findings cannot be extended to non-western contexts without due research. For example, in a recent study in Nigeria, Ituma *et al.* (2011) revealed that, in contrast to the findings in western-based studies, managers in Nigeria prioritize objective vs subjective career outcomes when conceptualizing career success. Moreover, the implications of viewing careers as social roles rather than a sequence of jobs suggest that the macro-social system and the different social roles and expectations between genders will indeed impact the conceptualizations of career success, which may differ between men and women (Melamed, 1996). Studies that assessed the impact of gender-based assumptions and stereotypes on women in the AME suggest that the emphasis local culture puts on women as mothers and wives shapes their conceptualizations of career success, underlies the sex discrimination that women face organizationally, and underestimates the abilities of women (Hutchings *et al.*, 2010; Tlaiss, 2013). Therefore, further research into Lebanese women's self-reported conceptualizations of career success – and the extent to which the currently available literature is capable of explaining their experiences, given the particularity of AME societies and cultures – is required.

Approaches to career success

In seeking to further understand career success as an important part of the organizational experience and self-worth (Nabi, 2001, 2003), the literature highlights three conceptual approaches to the realization of success; individual, behavioral, and structural (Aryee *et al.*, 1994; Ballout, 2007; Rasdi *et al.* 2011).

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The individual approach is largely derived from human capital models and motivation theories. It emphasizes the role of individual attributes (Orser and Leck, 2010; Rasdi *et al.*, 2011) such as maximizing education, skills, and experience to achieve career success (Melamed, 1996; Ballout, 2007). This approach draws heavily on the human capital theory and is very important in explaining objective career success (Rasdi *et al.*, 2011). It is built on the premise that individuals who invest in improving the various features of their human capital – through education, training, and work experience – are expected to show higher productivity and better performance at work (Becker, 1975, 1993) and will be highly rewarded by their employers (Orser and Leck, 2010). Although human capital is important for the career progress of men and women, job-relevant human capital, such as education and experience, was found to be more relevant to the career success of women than men in several western (Melamed, 1996) and developing contexts (e.g. Riordan, 2007 in South Africa). However, this approach is not without its critics. For example, human capital theory has been critiqued by economic sociologists on the grounds that economists are aware that culture and politics influence economy and they assume that these factors can be safely bracketed and will not impact advancement as individuals develop a framework that focusses on the expected results of investing in human capital and hence on purely economic factors. Another criticism of human capital theory lies in its assumption that individuals act rationally to maximize utilities (please refer to Block, 1990 for a detailed critique of the human capital theory).

The behavioral approach to career success suggests that by engaging in career building and enhancing strategies and tactics, managers can impact their career advancement (Nabi, 2003; Greenhaus and Foley, 2007; Orser and Leck, 2010). This approach to career success calls for active or proactive behavioral interventions that encourage individuals to take responsibility for their development and career success through individual career management and networking behaviors (Aryee *et al.*, 1994; Ballout, 2007; Rasdi *et al.*, 2011). The behavioral approach capitalizes on social capital theory, which argues that social networks impact career success by providing access to information, resources, and mentoring opportunities (Seibert *et al.*, 2001). Social capital is roughly understood "as the goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and that can be mobilized to facilitate action". Studies in western contexts (e.g. O'Neil *et al.*, 2008) and AME contexts (Hutchings *et al.*, 2010; Tlaiss, 2014) have often cited the inability of women to establish networks as a major factor impeding their career success. This does not come as a surprise given that men prefer the company of other men and exclude women from informal networks by virtue of the phenomenon of homosocial behavior (Kanter, 1977; Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Sang *et al.*, 2014). While homosocial behavior is common practice and perceived as appropriate in western contexts (Sang *et al.*, 2014), the use of networks (wasta) in the Arab world has often been contested and perceived as a form of corruption that surpasses merit and qualifications and renders career advancement to be the result of who you know, what you do, and how you do it (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010).

The third approach to explaining the predictors of career success is the structural approach, which highlights the impact of organizational structures on the career success of individuals. It considers organizational factors, such as the size of the organization or promotion policies, as influential factors and predictors of the career success of employees (Melamed, 1996; Ballout, 2007). This approach is based on the management theory of the firm (Tosi *et al.*, 2000 in Ballout, 2007), which argues that the size of the organization plays a major role in the career success of individuals. Large organizations typically have more managerial positions and hierarchical levels that

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allow employees to establish a career and realize management positions and career success. Moreover, organizational support, which refers to the extent to which career actors perceive their work organizations to be supportive of their well-being and appreciative of their contribution is another structural variable that impacts career success (Orser and Leck, 2010; Rasdi *et al.*, 2011). Nabi (2001), for example, found that personal support was strongly related to women's career success in western contexts.

Although the previously discussed approaches have been used to explore the career success of managers in western contexts, the same cannot be claimed in the AME contexts. These arguments, along with others previously outlined, clearly demonstrate the need to explore the conceptualizations of Lebanese women toward career success and the extent to which the individual, structural, and behavioral approaches are used.

Methodology

With minimal research attending to the career-related perceptions of individuals in developing countries (Counsell and Papova, 2000) and with calls for more qualitative research into the conceptualization of career success in different national contexts (Hall and Chandler, 2005; Heslin, 2005; Gunz and Heslin, 2005; O'Neil *et al.*, 2008; Ituma *et al.*, 2011; Dries, 2011; Bowles, 2012), this study adopts a qualitative, face-to-face, semi-structured interview-based approach. The interview-based approach facilitated the process of understanding career success as defined by the Arab women themselves, using their own words (Heslin, 2005; Dries *et al.*, 2008) and how career success unfolds given that it is "at the heart of lives as they are lived" (Gunz and Heslin, 2005, p. 109).

The qualitative approach used is based on a constructivist ontological position, presuming that the meanings of social phenomena are constructed by the social actors and that these meanings are constantly changing and subject to constant revision (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). The current study also presumes an interpretive epistemological perspective, which allows the researcher to get closer to the social actors to better understand the phenomena through their eyes and words (Creswell, 2007). These methodological and philosophical approaches allowed not only for more qualitative input into women's career studies (Arthur *et al.*, 2005), but also for the exploration of the poorly examined relational approach (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; O'Neil *et al.*, 2008) that women often adopt between their career and family, while examining women's recollection of their career dynamism.

Study sample and profile of the interviewees

This study explored the career success of 37 salaried women managers working in large (100+ employees) private organizations. Managers in this study had supervisory responsibilities and authority over the work and performance of at least two subordinates and occupied junior, middle, or senior managerial roles in their respective organizations.

More than half of the interviewees were clustered at the lower levels of management; despite their high educational attainments (17/37 had a master's degree). The majority held a managerial position in the services sector and were married with children (please refer to Table I).

Procedures

Data collection in the AME, including Lebanon, has often been problematic in the absence of reliable governmental data sets and a dependable postal system, and the aversion of females to take part in any form of research (Tlaiss, 2013). Hence, a

	Percentages (*n*)
Demographics	
Management level	
Junior	51.35 (19)
Middle	27.03 (10)
Senior	21.62 (8)
Educational attainment	
Diploma	5.41 (2)
Bachelor	40.54 (15)
Masters	45.95 (17)
PhD	8.10 (3)
Age	
Range	25-60
Economic sectors	
Services sector	83.78 (31)
Education	25.81 (8)
Banking and insurance	32.26 (10)
Arts and media/travel and transport	6.45 (2)
Marketing and advertising	12.90 (4)
Health services	16.13 (5)
Hospitality and tourism	6.45 (2)
Manufacturing	16.22 (6)
Fashion	16.67 (1)
Food and beverage	33.33 (2)
Printing	16.67 (1)
Other	33.33 (2)

Table I. Some personal and occupational demographics

purposeful approach focussing on a convenience sample based on snowballing and chain referral sampling was deemed necessary (Patton, 2002). In addition, the researcher contacted the human resource departments of a large number of organizations to request their participation in this study. The interviews took place in several locations, based on the respondents' preferences. They were tape-recorded and transcribed by the researcher and an independent researcher familiar with career studies. The majority of the interviews were in English. For those conducted in the Arabic language, back translation techniques were used by the researcher and the independent researcher familiar with the English and the Arabic languages. Before embarking on data collection, ethics approval was granted based on the interview protocol used.

The interviews were guided by the overall research objectives, which include exploring: first, the Lebanese women managers' conceptualization of their own career success; second, the relevance of using the objective/subjective career success dichotomy in this research context; and finally, the extent to which the individual, structural, and behavioral approaches can be used to better understand the Lebanese women managers' approaches to career success. Specifically, the interviewees were asked the following questions: tell me about your career success? Do you feel that you have been successful in your career or you have a successful career? Describe to me how you measure, conceptualize, or assess your career success? Why do you conceptualize your career success in this way? What are the factors that impacted your career success?

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Analysis

Data analysis was performed manually without the use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software. As per the suggestions of Sang *et al.* (2014), the data were analyzed thematically using template analysis. The thematic analysis of the text was executed using the interview schedule as an initial code book (King's, 1994) along with the themes pertinent to the research subject identified in the literature, and guided by the research questions. Later in the process, as the researchers went through the transcribed interviews, they compared the narratives of the interviewees to the preliminary code book of themes in an attempt to identify any convergence/divergence in the women's experiences. If and when the interviewees' narratives departed from the literature, the code book was adjusted to account for the emerging themes. The original and new themes were incorporated, resulting in a final coding template (Sang *et al.*, 2014). For example, conceptualizations of career success in either objective or subjective terms were outlined in the initial code book. However, one of the emerging themes was the complex manner by which the respondents in this study conceptualized their career success on a continuum between two extremes. After conducting the first 32 interviews and analyzing the data, recurring themes were identified and additional data collection was less likely to unveil some new themes. Nonetheless, to increase the reliability of the findings and ensure that important themes were not ignored, five additional confirmatory interviews were conducted. As no new themes emerged from these additional interviews, the researchers judged that "theoretical saturation" had been reached (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 61; Ituma *et al.*, 2011, p. 3643).

As suggested by Sang *et al.* (2014), several aspects of the interviewer/relationship should be outlined when considering the data presented. First, the interviewer was not a manager or an employee working for a local organization. This allowed the respondents to provide details regarding their overall career experiences, which would have been familiar to a manager working in Lebanon. Given the power imbalance inherent in the interview relationship, this helped prevent the interviewer from making assumptions or advancing specific views. Second, the interviewer was a female, which may have encouraged the interviewees to feel comfortable about sharing their experiences. Third, the interviewer did not personally know any of the respondents, which might have encouraged a higher level of openness from the respondents in comparison to a situation where the interviewer and the respondents had a prior relationship (Sang *et al.*, 2014).

Results

The results of the interviews were organized around three major research questions: whether women managers perceived themselves as successful or not; their conceptualizations of career success; and the ability of the individual, behavioral, and structural approaches to explain or predict the career success of the Lebanese women managers.

Career success

The majority of the interviewees, when asked whether they thought of themselves as successful in their careers or as having successful careers, answered with a definitive yes. Despite the societal, cultural, and institutional barriers women face, the respondents perceived their careers as successful. Although previous studies suggest that women (Xian and Woodhams, 2008), and especially mothers with maternal responsibilities (see Kmec and Gorman, 2009), are likely to modestly evaluate their achievements and

careers, the divergent results here can be partly explained by the local context. In other words, while western women were less likely to perceive themselves as successful because maternal and domestic responsibilities may have affected their effort at work and career success experiences (Kmec and Gorman, 2009), the respondents in this study had live-in paid help, which reduced their domestic responsibilities. The results here resonate with Tlaiss's (2013, 2014) finding regarding the role of paid live-in help, which is very common across AME countries, and its role in fostering the advancement of women's careers in the region. Women's perceptions of their careers as successful can also be explained as a reaction to the "hegemonic masculinity" which has associated the image of success to that of masculinity as suggested in previous studies (Barrett, 1996; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Conceptualizations of career success

Objective conceptualizations: advancement and financial rewards. The majority of the participants conceptualized their career success with career progress on the corporate ladder. The respondents' conceptualizations of success were often associated with the fact that "they got to management at a young age," or they were "the only female manager" or "among very few women managers" or a combination of all these factors:

> Yes I am successful in my career because of being the only senior female manager in the bank so far […] my position is maybe the maximum a woman can reach in the banking industry in Lebanon (Senior manager, Banking sector).

> The progress that I have achieved in my career has been great. I came forward a long way […] plus I am the only female General Manager of a hotel in Lebanon (Senior manager, Hospitality and Tourism sector).

The conceptualizations of career success were external and measured by indicators that are observable by others in their reference group. As the participants compared themselves to other women who continue to struggle to land managerial positions, their position as managers, by virtue of social comparison theory (Ng *et al.*, 2005), dominated their conceptualization of career success. This aspect of success can also be related to and explained by the reactions to societal and organizational barriers that hinder women's careers and question their competencies for management. Moreover, as Tlaiss (2013) argues, the interviewees' presence in management was prioritized as it portrays their victory over the societal and organizational gender-based stereotypes that question women's ability and suitability for managerial roles. It is important to state that upward mobility has often been synonymously associated with conventional masculinity (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). With that in mind, another possible explanation for the conceptualization of career success with upward mobility may be the women's complicity with conventional masculinities reflected in their organizations.

Some of the participants viewed their career success in terms of monetary rewards in comparison to other women or men, using this as their referent criterion. The interviewees were proud of the high income that they were making as it helped them to financially support their families and granted them a certain societal status:

> […] I am successful because I make good money […] Life in Lebanon is not cheap and a lot of families are struggling. Therefore, the fact that I am making a good income speaks to the success of my career and to my ability to give myself and my family good living standards (Middle manager, Health sector).

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The focus on material wealth can be partly explained by the high levels of unemployment and the difficult economic situation in Lebanon, which reflects the importance of the cultural-cognitive pillar of IT theory and its ability to help understand the findings. The women here assessed their career success based on social comparison theory (Ng *et al.*, 2005) and conceptualized it through the salary they made in comparison to the low-Lebanese average. Unlike their counterparts in the UAE, who enjoy high levels of financial prosperity (Tlaiss, 2013), the interviewees in this study were very cognizant that the survival of their families was largely dependent on their ability to provide financial support. Conceptualizing their career success through their ability to provide material support to their families was also part of their fulfillment of larger societal obligations that highlight the role of women as supportive of the well-being of their families. These findings resonate with those of Ituma *et al.* (2011), where income, wealth, and the ability to meet the family's financial obligations and provide them with a good standard of living standard are strong indicators of a privileged social status.

Subjective conceptualizations: personal attributes and work/family balance. Drawing a clear distinction between the objective and the subjective aspects of the career success of women managers in Lebanon in this study was not possible as the interviewees drew on subjective career success criteria. One group associated their conceptualizations with happiness with their career and overall performance, satisfaction with their career progress, good relations with and good feedback from colleagues and clients, as well as knowledge and experience, moral success, inner happiness, and self-satisfaction:

> I conceptualize my career success based on my level of knowledge and experience […] I am happy with where I am right now, with what I am doing […] it is career satisfaction (Junior manager, Sales and Marketing sector).

> Career success is not only based on promotions, because not getting to middle or senior management does not imply lack of career success or failure. My current work and career are things that I like and I feel that I am satisfied with myself, I love my work, and I work from my heart […] I still feel successful (Junior manager, Banking sector).

Respondents in this category conceptualized their career success using personal attributes derived from their sense of accomplishment and the satisfaction derived from their work. They also defined their career success in terms of their knowledge and experience, which allowed them to take additional responsibilities and helped their careers advance. Their internal evaluations of career success along dimensions important to them align with the subjective aspects of career success highlighted by several career studies (Hall, 1996; Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Baruch, 2006). Careers were evaluated based on the careerists' personal criteria regarding what career success entails and their individual aspirations, as suggested by Heslin (2005). These conceptualizations can also be perceived in terms of the individual agency of careerists portrayed in the form of resistance. In other words, as organizations in Lebanon continue to extend gender inequality and as careers are socially constructed, the women in this study looked for alternative conceptualizations of success, aside from those associated with masculinity.

Another group defined career success in terms of successfully fulfilling their responsibilities to their families, in addition to having a successful career. The single women in this study emphasized attending to the needs of their parents and siblings as an integral part of their career success. The married interviewees with children prioritized attending to the needs of their husbands and children as an integral part of their career success. They felt that their career success would be incomplete if they did

not succeed at creating a stable home and a good family and raising well-educated and well-mannered children:

> […] So my position is important, but there are other important things such as my happiness with the education my children are getting, how well my staff gets along with each other, and how satisfied I am with my career (Junior manager, Education sector).

> […] in addition to being a manager, I am also a wife and a mother […] succeeding at work is not the only important thing […] attending to my husband's needs is also important. Making sure that my children are well-behaved and have a good education and upbringing is also important (Middle manager, Health Sector).

These interviewees defined their career success in terms of meeting their family obligations, doing a good job at work and at home with their families, family happiness, and striking a balance between their work and family life. Their conceptualization of career success was therefore based on their families' happiness and well-being, which is aligned with the suggestions of Hall (2004) regarding subjective measures of career success. However, their criteria for assessing their career success were a combination of self- and other-referent criteria. To further explain, this group of respondents conceptualized their career success based on self-referent criteria as suggested by Heslin (2005) and on what they perceived as important for them as women and their aspirations for their children. They also used other-referent criteria – in particular that of their patriarchal, masculine society, and attending to their roles as mothers and wives, roles that are prioritized in AME contexts (Hofstede, 2001). Aligned with the suggestions of Tlaiss and Kauser (2010, 2011) in the context of Lebanon, the interviewees focussed on meeting society's expectations, as suggested by the cultural-cognitive pillar of IT, through being the primary caregivers in their families. Nonetheless, by conceptualizing their career success within traditional gender roles, one cannot but wonder about the role of women in further (re)producing inequality and hegemony, following Barrett's (1996) argument, to further subordinate women and confine them to traditional roles. So another explanation for this finding can be related to the agency of women, which is portrayed through their complicity with the patriarchy of their cultures and the masculinities that are then enforced and reproduced.

Approaches to career success

A mixed picture emerged regarding the approaches used to predict and explain the participants' career success. Resonating with the individual approach to career success, more than half of the interviewees explained their career success in terms of their human capital investment, including their education, training, and work experience. Interestingly, this group of interviewees highlighted the fact that to be promoted, they had to be more educated and have more years of experience than their male colleagues. They also emphasized the role of their career aspirations and belief in their abilities as a means for advancing their careers. One middle manager said:

> As a woman I knew that I would not get promoted without better qualifications, so I finished my master's degree and went to international workshops on my days off work. I knew that I had to have an excellent education record, along with good training and work experience to get promoted (Middle manager, Food Production sector).

> I had to be pushy and to constantly improve my competencies to get promoted […] companies in Lebanon prefer to have male managers, but I wanted to be the manager of my section and I believed that I had what it takes, so I worked twice as hard as the men in my department and fought tooth and nail to get to my current position (Junior manager, Health sector).

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The approach of this group of interviewees to career success was highly dependent on their individual attributes (Orser and Leck, 2010; Rasdi *et al.*, 2011) and human capital (Melamed, 1996; Ballout, 2007), lending credence to the human capital theory and its potential to partially explain the antecedents of the career success of women managers in Lebanon. The interviewees often spoke about pursuing higher education, attending training and development workshops and seminars, along with putting in long hours and working hard. They also perceived their investments in their human capital as instrumental to making them more valuable to the organization. These findings support a large body of knowledge (Melamed, 1996; Ng *et al.*, 2005) suggesting that women managers understand the causal connection between education, training, and work experience and increased advancement and upward mobility (Orser and Leck, 2010), as suggested by human capital theory (Becker, 1975, 1993). These findings also confirm the salience of organizational gender inequalities, since women had to work harder and longer than their male colleagues to secure promotion. By putting in more effort than their male colleagues, the interviewees were reproducing inequality and granting further privilege to men in response to the gender inequality that they were enduring. At the same time, they were demonstrating high career aspirations to work hard and invest in themselves to achieve higher salaries and upward mobility on the corporate ladder. The agency of the interviewees plays an important role in explaining these findings. By focussing on upward mobility as a measure of success, one can argue that the interviewees were exhibiting agency through identifying with the masculine definition of career success. By focussing on capitalizing their career aspirations for advancement, the interviewees demonstrated agency that was resistant to the gendered norms that attribute inferior status to women. Such results resonate with Riordan (2007) in South Africa and Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) in Lebanon and various countries in the AME (Hutchings *et al.*, 2010, 2012; Tlaiss, 2013, 2014) regarding the role that women's aspirations and agency play in constructing career success through organizational and societal barriers that serve to hinder their progress.

Another group of interviewees highlighted their behavioral approach to explaining their career success in terms of creating strategies with long- and short-term objectives, as well as creating strong networks and connections. This group of women believed in themselves and planned their way to management, while emphasizing their ambition and the importance of networks and connections. In reference to connections, the interviewees also spoke about how they actively tried to strengthen their connections with important people inside and outside their organizations. Some women in this category also spoke of how they developed plans for their careers, with goals and milestones to be achieved by a certain age, and focussed on building connections and networks. For example:

> As a woman, being promoted to a managerial position would have been very difficult, if not impossible, without having the right network or strong connections (wasta). So I started strengthening my connections within the company and building affiliations with important people outside work to make sure that I had the wasta I needed to get to management (Middle manager, Arts and Media).

This group of respondents showed serious commitment to their careers and persistence to meet their career goals through hard work and the deployment of career enhancement strategies and tactics, including the use of wasta. This finding is supported by a large body of knowledge that highlights the role of the behavioral approach in career success (Aryee *et al.*, 1994; Greenhaus and Foley, 2007). The importance of wasta or connections

is also consistent with the premises of social capital theory (Seibert *et al.*, 2001) and the importance of social capital for the advancement of women's careers and career success in western (O'Neil *et al.*, 2008) and Arab contexts (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). Given the salience of gender inequalities and masculinities within organizations, the exclusion of women via homosocial behavior (Kanter, 1977; Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Sang *et al.*, 2014) was not a surprise. It was impressive, however, to see the women realize the importance of this and to actively seek to improve the social capital aspect of their careers.

Generally speaking, the interviewees did not make any references to taking or adopting the structural approach to their career success, as suggested by previous studies (Ballout, 2007; Orser and Leck, 2010). They did not explain their career success as related to the size of their organizations or to facilitation by their employers' practices. On the contrary, the majority of respondents complained about the lack of organizational support in terms of additional training opportunities or help for them to manage their family-work roles. They also complained about the salience of workplace gender discrimination and inequality. By raising such complaints, the women were further confirming the dominance of masculinities that perceive the behavior of men as normal, and the institutional normative and regulative pillars as further promoting the gender inequalities.

Discussion

This study is an exploratory investigation of Lebanese women managers' conceptualization of their career success and the predictors of this success in Lebanon, a research context that is frequently ignored in the career management literature. It is also the first study to explore the predictors of the career success of women managers in an Arab context using the individual, behavioral, and structural approaches. As expected, some of the career success factors that appeared and the approaches used by women managers in this study share commonalities with career studies in Anglo-Saxon contexts. However, the emerging themes and contextual findings make the current study a wonderful opportunity to underscore the uniqueness of the career-related experiences of women in Lebanon. They also demonstrate the inter-relatedness of various institutional factors, along with gender inequality and masculinities, and their impact on the career success of Arab women.

Despite claims made by mainstream career studies regarding the death of traditional careers (along with the extrinsic conceptualization of career success), its perseverance in the context of Lebanon is an interesting theme since it deviates from these studies. As previously illustrated, the findings demonstrate how the traditional belief system and the national economic situation establish the overarching contexts of women's careers and shape the conceptualizations of career success. Upward advancement to and across the managerial hierarchy was emphasized given the institutional structural and attitudinal barriers that Lebanese career women face, along with the larger societal stereotypes that limit women's competencies, skills, and suitability for the role of mothers and wives. In other words, as organizations become the prime social unit of men's domination – and even mini-patriarchies that reproduce corporate hierarchies in gendered ways (Collinson and Hearn, 1994) – it does not come as a surprise that Lebanese women conceptualize their career success in terms that align with the masculine hegemony that focusses on upward mobility. Given the relatively low rates of female labor force participation in the Middle East and North African region and the notorious under-representation of women in management in this region (Freedom House, 2010; Hutchings *et al.*, 2010), when the women in this study

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compared their status to that of other women struggling to attain managerial positions, they perceived their careers to be successful, as supported by the social comparison theory. The findings also portray the significance of monetary rewards as a measure of career success given the dire economic situation in Lebanon, a country characterized by high unemployment and economic instability. As such, these findings underscore the significant role that economic and socio-cultural factors play in shaping women's career success in AME contexts.

In addition to objective conceptualizations, the women in this study conceptualized their success "individually" (Arthur *et al.*, 2005), in broader terms (Powell and Maineiro, 1992), with multiple dimensions, including career satisfaction (Baruch, 2004, 2006), and happiness with self and family (Arthur, 1994; Hall, 2004). These findings concur with previous research (Powell and Maineiro, 1992; Melamed, 1996; O'Neil *et al.*, 2008) concerning the suitability of intrinsic or subjective measures of success to capture some of the women's definitions and measurements of career success. Though resonating with studies in western contexts, this finding underscores the cognitive-cultural component of IT and that of the research locale. To further explain, the inclination of the women interviewees to measure their career success in intrinsic terms such as balancing work and home and inner happiness can be best understood as a reflection of the cultural values of a patriarchal, masculine society that emphasizes gender-role stereotypes and emphasizes the nurturing and care-giving role of women. In addition, as traditional gender ideology continues to confine men to gender-role stereotypes, the interviewees in this study may well have internalized the socialization process, and thus sought measures of success outside their employment. In other words, hindered by institutional masculinities, the women in this study, by virtue of their individual agency, used intrinsic factors to measure success. In doing so, they were unconsciously reproducing gender and gender stereotypes that argue for women being more committed to their families than to their careers.

The in-depth reading of the findings clearly portrays the interdependence of the objective and the subjective measures (Seibert *et al.*, 2001) rather than the superiority of one over the other (Aryee *et al.*, 1994) given the cultural, economic, and institutional factors in Lebanon. This interlocking also casts doubt over the transferability of western career dynamism that perceives the subjective model as more capable of encompassing women's conceptualizations of career success. Since the conceptualizations of career success by the women in this study were on a continuum between objective and subjective measures, the study questions the validity of the rigid objective/subjective dichotomy definition of career success. The findings of the current study support recent arguments regarding the suitability of categorizing the conceptualizations of career success as either/or on the conventional indices, or the dichotomy of objective/subjective career success (Gunz and Heslin, 2005; Ituma *et al.*, 2011). They also support the notions that women experience their careers in a relational manner (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005) that departs from the departmentalization that men usually express in terms of their work and personal lives. The conceptualizations of career success in this study should be perceived as the product of the multiple hats that career women wear on a daily basis to attend to their domestic responsibilities, socially ascribed gender-role stereotypes, gender inequality, work demands, and also the discriminations experienced within institutional boundaries.

In terms of the approaches used, the findings provide strong support for the impact of human capital variables on the perception of career success of women managers in Lebanon. The results suggest that women perceived their human capital through education and rewarding work experiences, which together with career aspirations,

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belief in their abilities, and self-efficacy were predictors of their career success: a finding that is aligned with suggestions of previous studies (Ng *et al.*, 2005). They also support women's agency and the behavioral approach to career success as women build career enhancement strategies and a network of connections and wasta to foster their career progression. While homosocial behavior has been proven as important for the success of men in western contexts (Kanter, 1977; Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Barrett, 1996; Sang *et al.*, 2014), it is interesting to see how social networks are among the important vehicles that help Arab women realize and define career success. Given the discrimination embedded in organizational structures and cultures in Lebanon, adapting a behavioral approach that focusses on developing career enhancement tactics and plans and building networks, in addition to investing in human capital, might have been the only viable option for the women's career advancement. As such, it does not come as a surprise that the women did not receive any organizational support for their career advancement, hence the limited attention attributed to the structural approach as a predictor of their conceptualizations and perceptions of career success.

Implications

This study is the first of its kind to reflect on the career success of women managers in Lebanon and while it is an exploratory rather than a confirmatory study, its findings have important implications. The implications of this study are necessary, urgent, and timely as they will allow organizations to better prepare to embrace the changes taking place at various political, economic, and social frontiers in the Arab world.

On the theoretical front, by shedding some light on the gendered realities of Lebanese organizations – given that organizations are never gender neutral (Acker, 1990) – the current research has broadly added to the debate on masculinities and hegemonic masculinity. This seems important given that these issues have not been considered when looking at how Arab women perform their gender roles and careers. Despite the changes that the Arab world is going through and efforts to improve gender equality, more needs to be done. The positive role that individual agency played in this study is clear, but more research is needed, as suggested by Sang *et al.*, (2014), to further understand how the role of agency can challenge and reproduce the societal inequalities that are further entrenched within institutional dynamics. With this in mind, the findings presented here also have some academic implications for advancing career theory and particularly the construct of career success. As demonstrated by this study, contexts, along with the gender ideologies that inhabit them, need to have primacy over other factors in the construction of the careers or the concepts of career success of women. Gender cultures and structures, along with their definitions and perceptions of masculinity and its various forms, should be examined as constructed through social and economic experiences as portrayed in this study and should therefore be more thoroughly integrated.

In addition, the findings of this study further advance and strongly reflect on the convergence/divergence debate in international HRM. Indeed, some of the career success criteria that emerged in this study (e.g. the focus of women on the subjective conceptualization of career success) support the convergence theme as they indicate some common themes with the widespread conceptualizations of women's career success in western contexts. However, the divergence revealed in this study – through the women's objective conceptualizations of career success – calls into question the claims of advocates for the convergence theme, who argue that due to globalization and technological innovation, the cultural gap between countries is narrowing and international HRM practices can be transferable (Ituma *et al.*, 2011). The findings of this study suggest that

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the career success conceptualizations and the approaches used to predict them are also rooted in societal values, organizational realities, and economic situations. This is aligned with the divergence theme identified in this study that recognizes cross-national differences and calls for management practices that are reflective of the specific context of Lebanon and the lives and careers of people in this context.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest the need for international HR managers to account for the local economic, cultural, and organizational realities in the developing countries of the AME when they transfer HRM models from western contexts. The suitability of western HR practices and their ability to deliver desired results is highly questionable without adjusting these practices to suit local realities. For example, the current HR practices and policies used in western nations are built on flat organizational structures, which may be an inappropriate assumption in the context of Lebanon and the AME. HR practices in Canada and the USA, for example, are built on the equal employment opportunity and equity models, which do not apply in the context of Lebanon. The absence of these models was evident in this study as the women took personal charge of their careers by adopting an individual and a behavioral approach to their careers rather than depending on the structural approach and support from their organizations.

The findings also suggest that while career actors in industrialized western societies have shifted their attention toward post-material values – such as happiness and satisfaction – after having their material needs satisfied (Dries, 2011), career actors in developing countries such as Lebanon are still struggling to meet their material needs. Hence, the motivational strategies that may be effective in industrialized contexts might result in higher employee turnover in the context of Lebanon as career actors are primarily focussed on meeting their basic needs. Moreover, the fact that the majority of Lebanese women conceptualized their success based on their position as the only "woman manager" or "among the minority of women managers" signals the urgent need for HR departments to address the current gender discrimination in management positions within organizational contexts in Lebanon.

Therefore, the findings of the current study call for HRM practices that account for the interaction between the notions of localization and standardization, without trying to prove the superiority of one approach over the other. As the career development of managers in the Middle East is not fully understood and HRM practices and policies in the AME are gradually improving, western practices and policies are likely to continue to be influential. However, "imported HRM practices" need to be handled with caution given the suggestions of recent studies (see Sang *et al.*, 2014) that gender inequality remains evident in western contexts, a reality that further questions models assumed to be built on gender inequality. As the western HRM models continue to be built on the notion of a man as the ideal worker and on organizational structures that reproduce a range of inequalities, including gender, the ability of the imported HRM to introduce or motivate gender equality is questioned. The imported models should also be questioned given their ability to accommodate local labor markets, and macro conditions, including socio-cultural, institutional, legal, and economic influences. In other words, the results also imply the need to avoid the blind extrapolation of North American and European research to Middle Eastern contexts without accounting for the inherent gender inequalities as well as cultural relativity and the different legal, social, labor market, and economic aspects of these contexts. While doing so, we highlight the need for more empirical studies to understand the career-related experiences of women in this region in an attempt to develop frameworks that are capable of comprehending the different facets of their

experiences. Regardless of whether the goal is to create a Middle Eastern HRM model or not, the need remains to enhance our understanding of the under-documented career experiences of managers in the Arab world. This understanding will not only attend to the knowledge gap that currently exists, but will also allow for the development of more culturally adequate HRM practices that will enable organizations and governments to develop their human resources.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research

The findings of this study are exploratory and informative and serve to stimulate interest in further research on the careers of women in the AME region. Nonetheless, certain limitations need to be acknowledged. The current study focussed on the conceptualizations of the career success of women managers, which may differ from those of women in non-managerial positions. If the interviewees had been non-managers, different results might have been reported. Another limitation is the small sample size and the qualitative nature of this study, which limited the ability to establish causalities or correlations between factors such as demographic characteristics and career success. Future studies might consider using a larger sample size and the triangulation of methods between qualitative and quantitative techniques. Also, comparative studies between males and females and across different countries in the AME would be very important and informative. It would be a worthwhile venture to examine how male managers conceptualize their career success and their approaches to making successful careers, and to determine how these conceptualizations compare to those of women managers. Despite the reference made to several theories, the current study did not examine post-colonial theories or critical race theory; these can provide further insight into research on the careers and career success of women in the region.

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