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Lebanese perceptions of the glass ceiling

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present insights regarding the barriers that prevent women in Lebanon reaching parity with men in senior leadership positions. The paper also portrays men and women's varying perceptions regarding these barriers.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 129 participants at a Lebanese university took part in the study. The data collected were analyzed using SPSS. Frequencies and χ^2-tests were conducted.

Findings – The findings suggest that women are more likely to be discriminated against and are thus more likely to be underrepresented in top leadership positions. Organizational and cultural barriers were considered to cause this discrimination. Women were more likely than men to believe that women face more barriers while climbing the career ladder. Men were more likely than women to believe that organizations are the parties responsible for this underrepresentation, more so than the surrounding culture. Surprisingly, a sound proportion of women believed that men are more competent at occupying top management positions in Lebanon.

Originality/value – This is one of the few studies to explore Lebanese perceptions on the workplace's glass ceiling. Further, it examines the differences in opinions between males and females on women in the workplace, which has not been previously studied. This research contributes further to the existing body of knowledge on women in management in Lebanon and the Middle Eastern region, which is generally small in quantity.

Keywords Lebanon, Women in management, Gender discrimination, Glass ceiling

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Women have made enormous progress in entering the job market, as they currently account for 35 percent of the workforce, globally; yet their representation in top-level managerial positions in business remains nominal at 24 percent (Grant Thornton, 2013). There are several women in the corporate business field who are well equipped to advance into senior managerial roles (Hoobler *et al.*, 2011). However, few women attain such positions in comparison to the representation of men at this level. In the world of work as we know it today, the higher you ascend in the managerial hierarchy, the less visible women become (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013). This raises the question, why are there still so few women in top leadership positions?

Several studies have investigated the barriers women face that hinder their career advancement, and the metaphor of the "glass ceiling" is used to refer to these invisible obstacles (Oakley, 2000). The gender discrimination that women face, regardless of their leadership skills, educational level, experience and qualifications, is a topic of interest in this study. Challenging situations demand unwavering decisions and actions

taken by any individual possessing qualities such as determination, fairness, confidence, honesty, assertiveness and discipline – qualities that are not gendered.

The literature on women's roles in management and the glass ceiling has been growing in Arab countries to support the emergent trend of workingwomen. However, research tends to focus on specific countries such as Egypt, Lebanon and the wealthier Gulf countries, neglecting poorer countries in North Africa (Omair, 2008). Even though Lebanon is commonly considered a more liberal Arab country with relaxed social norms, it is still characterized by a persistently masculine collective culture. Lebanese organizations follow the ideal of "think male, think manager" and neglect alternative working arrangements such as flextime and childcare support (Tlaiss, 2014). Unlike Western women, Lebanese women usually follow a traditional career path of vertical progression to managerial positions, and create advancement strategies to shatter the organizational barriers through their own individual agency (Tlaiss, 2014).

However, in comparison to the study of developed countries, research in the MENA region in general (Metcalfe, 2007) and in Lebanon specifically seems to be lacking in quantity (Hejase *et al.*, 2013). A recent search performed online using popular business search engines such as "ABI/INFORM Complete" yielded only five hits on the query "Glass Ceiling in Lebanon." Two studies conducted by Tlaiss and Kauser (2010, 2011) explored organizational barriers and the impacts that gender, family and work have on women's career advancement. Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) suggest that women identify "Wasta" – career advancement's dependence on social connections rather than education and achievement – as a significant factor limiting their progress, and consider gender to be less of a criterion. Two other studies conducted by Jamali *et al.* (2005, 2006) discussed the constraints working women face in the banking sector. The most recent study performed by Hejase *et al.* (2013) focussed on explaining the marginal presence of female leaders. Further research is needed on the topic to define and address it properly. This study is one of the few conducted in Lebanon aiming to investigate the perceptions of barriers preventing women's upward career mobility. Moreover, current research on the variation in perceptions of the glass ceiling across genders remains relatively narrow, especially among students (Schein, 2001; McWhirter, 1997). It is important to understand the views of today's students as they are tomorrow's workforce who will shape the future of the glass ceiling. In Lebanon, this area is unmapped. Thus, the novelty of this study lies in examining gender-related differences of the perceived career barriers. It is also the first study to address students on the subject with hopes to understand their views for proper institution of gender equality.

Literature review

The underrepresentation of women in senior management has been investigated extensively in the literature. The metaphor of the "glass ceiling," first appearing in an article in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1986, refers to the problem of gender inequality hindering women's progression in the workplace (Oakley, 2000). Many studies confirmed the "glass ceiling" hypothesis and recognized it as an invisible artificial barrier preventing qualified individuals, mainly women and people of color, from advancing within their organization and reaching their full potential (Lyness and Thompson, 2000).

Two major approaches to explain this gender disparity in top management have been established in the literature. The first set of theories emphasizes the barriers created by corporate practices, policies and management hierarchies. Some policies

favor the recruitment, retention and promotion of men over women, specifically in jobs that comprise the typical career paths of a future senior manager (Oakley, 2000). Corporate policies and practices in training and career development, promotion and compensation are key components of the glass ceiling (Liu, 2013). Substantial evidence exists supporting the theory that men prefer to employ individuals fitting traditional leadership standards, and thus they hire candidates similar to themselves (Liu, 2013). Moreover, corporations are still neglecting to create diversity policies to promote women's progression (Ellemers *et al.*, 2012). Most women managers also earn considerably lower wages, making them less likely to be next in line for a promotion (Oakley, 2000; Dah *et al.*, 2009b).

The second approach focusses on social theories that rely on cultural and behavioral gender biases. The stereotypical image of a leader was found to be that of a man. This stereotype favors males as managers and results in perceptions of women as being less competent (Hoobler *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, women's leadership style allows them to experience a behavioral double bind. When women adopt a feminine leadership style, they are perceived as less favorable managers; however, when they use a masculine leadership style they are negatively sanctioned for violating their gender role. Thus, women often adopt a strategy that does not classify them as either feminine or masculine, indicating to others that they will not outperform coworkers, with the result that they are less likely to be promoted (Oakley, 2000). In addition, a significant number of women in top management roles would pose a menace to the "old boy network." This upscale network is an informal, male social system that extends within and across organizations, and excludes less powerful males and all women from its membership (Liu, 2013). This dominant sub-culture preserves and boosts rewards for male managers at the top. Since women are paid lower wages for the same managerial job, admitting too many women to senior management poses a hazard to the continuously growing salaries and perks of the selected males present at the top (Oakley, 2000). Besides, male co-workers can have obstructive attitudes; they tend to feel more uncomfortable or threatened by women taking powerful managerial roles (Oakley, 2000).

Rosabeth Kanter (1978), in her book *Men and Women of the Corporation*, introduced the concept of tokenism, meaning that groups with tilted sex ratio show clearly distinct behaviors between "dominants" and "tokens." Since they are greatly underrepresented in upper management, women fulfill the token position, which subjects them to increased scrutiny and skepticism (Haslam *et al.*, 2010). Women constantly state the need to work harder, prove themselves and their credibility as managers, especially when they are the "token woman" (Jackson, 2001). However, research on tokenism showed varying results, with "tokens" experiencing both positive and negative experiences (King *et al.*, 2010). Thus, it is essential to establish a comprehensive framework of the gendered nature of the context in which tokens work in order to understand the phenomenon clearly (King *et al.*, 2010).

Hoobler *et al.* (2011) provide a new understanding for the glass ceiling: the family-work conflict bias. The mere fact of being a woman indicates to a worker's manager that her family will interfere with her work, regardless of whether or not she experiences family-work conflict, is married or has children. This preconceived assumption that women are unable to fully dedicate themselves to work because of care-giving responsibilities affected managers' decisions.

Liu's (2013) research discussed barriers at the personal level that indicate women have career aspirations different to those of men. Hakim (2006) proposed that the glass ceiling exists due to differences in life goals, values, abilities and competitive behavior

between men and women. Women may value overall life satisfaction more than the power associated with high-level managerial positions (Liu, 2013).

With only a few women making it to top positions, one might think that they would express solidarity with other women. However, several studies identified the "Queen Bee" effect as an alarming barrier, and found that women tend to be less supportive of the advancement of other women. Women who achieved success may deny the existence of sexism, as their personal experiences make it more difficult to understand the difficulties faced by other women (Ellemers *et al.*, 2012).

The glass ceiling, without a doubt, is a global phenomenon. Yet to understand it properly, it is critical to recognize the different contextual factors that shape the day-to-day barriers that women face. Macro-level contextual factors are the factors that comprise the general environment within which women live and work (Karam and Afiouni, 2014). For instance, even though women in Western countries also face organizational discrimination, women in Arab countries additionally encounter economic instability, the absence of supportive government regulations and a patriarchal, male-dominated society (Tlaiss, 2014; Omair, 2008). Socioeconomic factors, demographic factors, family networks, interpersonal connections, government, legislation and the patriarchy are among the interrelated factors influencing women's managerial roles in the Arab MENA region (Karam and Afiouni, 2014). Arab societies, being highly patriarchal, demonstrate clear gender-role differences. Starting from a young age, girls are socialized to obtain a domestic role and boys are directed toward education and careers promoting financial success (Tlaiss, 2014; Omair, 2008).

Lebanese women are perceived as emotional and submissive individuals, while men are perceived to be balanced and autonomous. The global perceptions that women possess fewer leadership traits concur in Lebanon, as its workplaces capitalize on masculine leadership (Jamali *et al.*, 2005). Recent findings suggest that there is substantial convergence in the manner men and women lead, and that the leader's gender is not a dependable indicator of their leadership behavior. Both genders, however, still consider sex to be a reliable predictor of leadership effectiveness (Prime *et al.*, 2009). For instance, both male and female managers perceived that the characteristics associated with managerial success were more likely to be held by men than by women. Similarly, perceptions of managerial sex typing were ensued among both male and female students across four different countries (Schein, 2001). Thus, such perceptions are at least partly based on existing gender stereotypes (Prime *et al.*, 2009). Perceptions of gender differences play a powerful role in preserving the glass ceiling (Agars, 2004).

The differences between men and women are reflected in their opinions. Even though, globally, managerial sex typing exists among men and women, yet women vary cross-culturally in their attitudes. Men provided low, near zero resemblance between women and manager's characteristics across four countries, while women showed varying degrees of resemblance between these characteristics across the countries (Schein, 2001). Even with both genders agreement that men are better fit in executive positions; women were more likely than men to believe in women. Also, as women's managerial participation heightened in the USA, these views diminished among women but not among men (Schein, 2001).

Furthermore, men executives tend to attribute women's top management underrepresentation to corporate practices such as denying women the required line experience, while women executives most often cite behavioral reasons such as male

stereotyping to be the main responsible barrier (Schein, 2001; Oakley, 2000). Actually, only a few men compared to women perceived gender stereotypes as a barrier to women's progression (Prime *et al.*, 2009). Besides, female students perceived discrimination and child rearing to be greater barriers than males in their future workplace (McWhirter, 1997). Vocational researchers studying women's career development recognized the potentially significant impact that perceived barriers have on the formulation and pursuit of career goals (McWhirter, 1997). Embedded in all cultures are discriminatory practices and views that impose a glass ceiling on women and keep them from attaining highest executives positions (Schein, 2001). Lebanese women share these constraints with other women worldwide and the main difference lies in cultural values, traditionally assigned roles and elevated sense of patriarchy (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010; Jamali *et al.*, 2005).

Based on the above review, the following hypotheses were developed to study the variation between women and men's opinions.

Hypotheses

H1. Women are more likely than men to believe that women are faced with more barriers when climbing the career ladder.

H2. Women are not as likely as men to believe that men are more competent as senior managers in the Lebanese job market.

H3. Men are more likely than women to believe that organizations are the party responsible for women's underrepresentation in senior management than the culture surrounding them.

Methodology

The research tackled gender disparity in Lebanon by addressing students of a reputable university. The study conducted was exploratory and its purpose was to provide an honest representation of the students' opinions. It is considered exploratory since this is a novel topic and we do not have comprehensive research findings on the subject in Lebanon. It is the first to tackle students' opinions regarding barriers that workingwomen face in Lebanon. We aimed to determine the students' thoughts and awareness level regarding the glass ceiling, since changes in gender role perceptions can be made during formal education (Kizilaslan and Diktas, 2011). Students will eventually enter the workforce, bringing with them those views and attitudes, and they will thus play a part in diminishing or reinforcing the glass ceiling. Previous studies have analyzed the perceptions of career-related barriers by addressing high school and college students. For instance, 168 females and 118 males enrolled in a university completed a questionnaire to measure the barriers in career development. Even if students have not encountered these barriers, perceived barriers may still play a critical role in the career decision-making process, and in women's career development, especially (Luzzo and McWhirter, 2001).

Self-administered e-surveys were chosen for data collection since they are a fast and inexpensive method. An e-survey via Google forms was constructed, as it is easily filled-in and accessible to the students. Respondents may also be more honest about sensitive issues as anonymity is maintained, and interviewer bias is absent (Zikmund *et al.*, 2010, pp. 188-195). All respondents participated in the study voluntarily.

The first part of the survey gathered demographic data such as respondent's gender, age and nationality. The second part investigated opinions on the incidence of gender disparity in Lebanon. We probed the respondents for their thoughts regarding work equality, competency in senior roles, barriers hindering career progression and senior management representation in Lebanon in order to determine whether their perceptions were gender-related. The third part aimed to identify the barriers responsible for hindering women from reaching top management positions. We studied their thoughts on the effects that women in leadership roles have on other women in lower management positions. In addition, the respondents were requested to identify the most critical reasons for this underrepresentation at both local and global levels. The full survey is available upon request from the authors.

An e-mail was sent to students at the university. According to the university's facts and figures published in 2013, the number of male students enrolled is equal to that of female students. Of the 7,000 students informed about the study, only a total of 129 students responded. Therefore, the response rate was low at 1.84 percent. The primary data obtained were analyzed using SPSS through frequencies, cross-tabulation and χ^2-tests.

The demographic data showed that 58.1 percent of the respondents were females, and 41.9 percent were males (Table I). The sample gender distribution was not matched with the university distribution, since the higher participation of women can be an indicator of interest. Females might have been more interested in this research as the topic tackles women (Groves *et al.*, 2004). The supreme majority of respondents were Lebanese (Table I). This is expected as the university is a Lebanese one and 80.19 percent of its students are natives, according to the university's published facts and figures. Most of the respondents belonged to the 18-21 year-old age group (65.9 percent) (Table I): the common age group for university students.

Results and discussion
In the first step of the analysis, we obtained frequencies for the main questions of the survey. Of the respondents, 82.2 percent believed that women are not treated as equal to men. Most respondents (63.6 percent) stated that gender is not related to the competency of senior managers, with 29.5 percent believing that men are more competent and only 5.4 percent believing that women are more competent. Since the sample consisted of educated people, most of them might perceive competency to be

	Frequency	%
Gender		
Female	75	58.1
Male	54	41.9
Age		
No answer	1	0.8
< 18 years	6	4.7
18-21 years	85	65.9
22-25 years	24	18.6
> 25 years	13	10.1
Origin		
Non-Lebanese	11	8.5
Lebanese	118	91.5

Table I.
Summary of
demographic data

related to qualifications and skills rather than to gender. However, women were still given the lowest percentage in the category of competency, and this can be linked to the stereotypical image that men are more competent and fit the traditional role of leader (Hejase *et al.*, 2013). Of the respondents, 78.3 percent perceived women as facing more barriers and 81.4 percent believed that women are underrepresented in top management. Women were perceived to face more barriers, to be treated unequally and to be underrepresented in the highest managerial roles in Lebanon. This further portrays the conviction that women face gender discrimination and have to overcome more obstacles in order to ascend the career ladder (Liu, 2013). Lebanese women managers share the numerous barriers that women face in other areas of the world (Jamali *et al.*, 2005). This belief is substantiated by the marginality of women in senior management, denying women's participation in strategic decision-making and planning (Hejase *et al.*, 2013; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010; Jamali *et al.*, 2005). The glass ceiling is not an unverified assumption; rather, it is a reality of which Lebanese people are aware.

In this survey, 42.6 percent of the respondents believed that female top managers treated women in lower positions similarly to their male counterparts. They did not identify women in higher positions as a barrier for other women; on the contrary, 29.5 percent considered them supportive. Of respondents, 26.4 percent believed that female top managers are obstructive toward their female subordinates. Only a quarter of the respondents were aware of the "Queen Bee Effect" (Ellemers *et al.*, 2012). Lebanese women managers have trouble establishing friendly interpersonal relationships with their female colleagues. Most Lebanese women were discriminated against by other women and thus preferred not to work with them, whether they were top managers or subordinates (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). Scarcity in advancement cannot be due solely to the lack of support from men within the organization but women managers must also have an effect (Jamali *et al.*, 2005). In Lebanon, most of the respondents (43.4 percent) believed that companies' policies and structures are the major barriers to women's progress. Structural arrangements at work can alienate women from acquiring the experience necessary for job development (Jamali *et al.*, 2005). In total, 31 percent of the respondents believed family-work conflict to be the second most important barrier. As for the global underrepresentation of women, half of the respondents believed culture to be the main obstacle and 20.9 percent believed that organizations provide a work environment that encourages men more. Both final questions provided an altered priority for the barriers responsible, and this could be attributed to the difference in contextual factors at the local and global levels.

Next, a cross-tabulation was performed between the gender of the respondents and each question in the second and third parts of the survey. About 91 percent of women and 70 percent of men believed that women are not treated equally to men. Similarly, 85.3 percent of women and 68.5 percent of men agreed that women face more barriers. In total, 85.3 percent of women and 75.9 percent of men agreed that women are underrepresented in leadership positions. In total, 45.3 percent of women and 40.7 percent of men considered companies' policies to be responsible and 33.3 percent of women and 27.8 percent of men believed that women face more family-work conflict. The discrepancy between women and men's perceptions can be attributed to the fact that women are more familiar with the problems that women face or have been discriminated against previously in their life (Klonoff and Landrine, 1995). Moreover, 60 percent of women and 68.5 percent of men stated that both genders are equally

competent to handle senior management positions in the Lebanese job market, and 33.3 percent of women and 24 percent of men believed that men are more competent to fit this position. These results are very remarkable, with the percentage of women believing that men are more competent being higher than that of men. Both genders share common ground in believing that competency is not related to the manager's gender. Irrespective of their gender, managers with prominent leadership competencies produce improved job outcomes (Trivellas and Reklitis, 2014). Furthermore, most women (52 percent) considered that female top managers treat women and men in lower positions similarly, while most men (38.9 percent) believed that women will work together to move forward in their careers. Finally, a large proportion of women (45.3 percent) and men (57.4 percent) stated that culture is the most responsible party for women's marginal representation across the globe. Responsibility appeared to originate in cultures and traditions fostering the mentality that creates companies' policies and structures favoring the promotion of men (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). This causes the underutilization of women at work, which reflects negatively on the economy (Hejase et al., 2013).

The study's results echo those of previous studies performed in the region. Recent findings confirm the existence of a discriminatory male culture and organizational practices within Jordanian organizations (Al-Manasra, 2013). Similarly, Dah et al. (2009a) showed that in Lebanon, men have greater opportunities for promotion when compared to women as they climb the career ladder. The glass ceiling endures in a number of Middle Eastern countries (Pillai et al., 2011; Al-Manasra, 2013); nevertheless, some differences arise in the results of the studies due to different contextual factors. For instance, our respondents perceive both genders as equally competent in holding leadership positions, yet a study conducted in Egypt shows that a woman holding the "general manager position" is still considered a complex situation to accept (Kattara, 2005). Lebanon has conventionally been more open compared to some other Arab countries where more traditional cultural norms may discourage the employment of women in senior positions (Jamali et al., 2006; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011).

Moreover, χ^2-tests were performed to examine the hypotheses. According to Table II, H0 is rejected using the χ^2-test since Exact Sig. (one-sided) = 0.02 < 0.05.

Barriers

| | | Gender | | |
		Female	Male	Total
Women face more barriers than men	No	11	17	28
	Yes	64	37	101
Total		75	54	129

χ^2-tests

	Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson χ^2	5.223[a]	0.022		
Continuity correction[b]	4.281	0.039		
Likelihood ratio	5.168	0.023		
Fisher's exact test			0.03	0.02
No. of valid cases	129			

Notes: [a]0 cells (0.0 percent) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.72; [b]computed only for a 2 × 2 table

Table II.
Barriers
cross-tabulation

This suggests that women are more likely than men to believe that women face more barriers while climbing the career ladder, an opinion that might be due to personal experiences of discrimination. While women students might not have been discriminated against in a workplace, several studies have confirmed sexism as an experience that women face commonly and throughout their lives (Klonoff and Landrine, 1995). Previous experiences may make women more likely to think that they will be discriminated against in the future. Generally, women perceive more gender discrimination and bias against women than men do (Foley *et al.*, 2006).

According to Table III, we failed to reject *H0* using the χ^2-test since Exact Sig. (one-sided) $= 0.484 > 0.05$. This means that women are as likely as men to believe that men are more competent as senior managers in the Lebanese job market. Surprisingly, a sound proportion of women believed that men are more competent as top managers. This finding can reflect the personal barrier that women impose on themselves by having a low level of self-esteem in their own credentials. Women usually have lower self-esteem scores than men, and this negative self-concept forms a rigid barrier limiting their achievement (O'Leary, 1974). If women do not believe in themselves, it will be difficult to expect others to believe in them and endorse their upward career mobility. Additionally, a woman's upbringing focussed on a domestic role could affect her belief in herself and other women to play the "masculine" role of leader (Metcalfe, 2007). In Arab countries, including Lebanon, women have just started ascending to lower and mid-level management positions, with a limited few attaining top positions (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). The fact that men dominate senior management may yield the perception that they are more competent. The larger number and greater visibility of successful male leaders provide a socialized assumption that leadership role models are men (Sikdar and Mitra, 2012).

According to Table IV, *H0* is rejected using the χ^2-test since Exact Sig. (one-sided) $= 0.007 < 0.05$. This implies that men are more likely than women to believe that organizations are the party responsible for women's underrepresentation than the culture surrounding them. Oakley (2000) finds that women managers usually consider subjective behavior as the major barrier to top positions, whereas their male counterparts consider the corporate promotional and career development practices to be the primary barriers.

Competency

		Gender		
		Male	Female	Total
Who is more competent?	Female	4	3	7
	Male	25	13	38
Total		29	16	45

χ^2-tests

	Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson χ^2	0.193[a]	0.661		
Continuity correction[b]	0	0.992		
Likelihood ratio	0.189	0.664		
Fisher's exact test			0.686	0.484
No. of valid cases	45			

Table III.
Competency
cross-tabulation

Notes: [a]2 cells (50.0 percent) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.49; [b]computed only for a 2×2 table

Responsibility

Responsibility		Gender		
		Male	Female	Total
Responsibility	Culture	22	5	27
	Organizations	34	31	65
Total		56	36	92

χ^2-tests

	Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson χ^2	6.816[a]	0.009		
Continuity correction[b]	5.647	0.017		
Likelihood ratio	7.311	0.007		
Fisher's exact test			0.01	0.007
No. of valid cases	92			

Notes: [a]0 cells (0.0 percent) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 10.57; [b]computed only for a 2 × 2 table

Table IV.
Responsibility
cross-tabulation

Conclusion

The research offered novel insights into the perceptions of the glass ceiling in Lebanon. It shows that most participants believed strongly that women are not treated equally, face more barriers (mainly organizational and cultural) and are underrepresented in top management. The research also differentiated between women and men's opinions, finding that women believe that they face more barriers than men in their ascent to top management. Men are more likely to believe that organizations are the party responsible for this underrepresentation. One remarkable finding was that women were as likely as men to believe that men are more competent as senior managers. Possible explanations for this finding could be that female respondents believe that women lack career aspirations, are less qualified or that women are more skilled at familial duties.

Practical implications and future research

The findings identify a high level of awareness regarding the existence of the glass ceiling in Lebanon. The glass ceiling evidently plays a role in limiting the number of top women executives (Jamali *et al.*, 2005; Hejase *et al.*, 2013, 2014). However, the effect of the glass ceiling is progressively decreasing. In addition, the concomitant wage gap continues to decrease, even though the pace of that decline has lessened with time (Hejase *et al.*, 2014). The banking sector provides a positive corporate culture for women managers' progression, as reported by women managers themselves (Jamali *et al.*, 2006). However, the above finding cannot be considered a given for other sectors, since this sector is distinct because women infiltrated it early on (Jamali *et al.*, 2006). Women have been able to prove themselves by participating in diverse sectors; they are no longer limited to the education and health sectors (Metcalfe, 2007). Women currently account for about 55 percent of the workforce in the Lebanese service sector. This will provide women with greater opportunities to partake in leadership roles in the future (Hejase *et al.*, 2013). However, higher workforce participation, increased educational level and years of work experience were still not able to eliminate the glass ceiling effect (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010).

Initiatives such as organizational policies and procedures, legal regulations and proper education are needed (Hejase *et al.*, 2013). For instance, we chose higher education students as the respondents in order to determine their potential career perceptions, so we can identify the corrective measures needed at the educational stage. An important

implication of this study would be the need to focus on women's self-confidence and empowering them early on to believe they can be competent leaders. Changing women's mindsets provides a cultural shift in gender role perceptions, equipping them with the confidence needed to attain leadership positions (Hejase *et al.*, 2013). Starting from early school years, students should be taught about gender equality to frame the perceptions that will stay with them a lifetime. In addition, a national strategic governmental plan is imperative to eliminate this discrimination and fight the traditionally assigned gender roles – especially because it will benefit the economy and society in general. The Ministry of Education can initiate awareness programs about gender equality across schools and universities, or even include the subject in the curriculum. Such programs can be accompanied by educational campaigns for adults. At the public policy level, legislation regarding gender quotas can ensure women's fair representation in the corporate world relative to their labor force participation, educational level and work experience (Tlaiss, 2014). Governmental agencies can take a proactive stance to encourage organizations' support for gender equality. For instance, regular seminars and workshops can highlight the benefits of hiring and promoting based on merit alone. On their behalf, organizations can ensure the employment of HR policies and practices that encourage a work environment free of gender bias to provide equal opportunities for all. Adopting work-family policies such as flexible working hours or child-care initiatives will offer gains to women's careers. Changing perceptions about women is an ongoing process that is improved through awareness, education, women's empowerment and the real experiences of women undertaking leadership positions and proving themselves. It will provide a culture that embraces women's progression to decision-making roles and will help the movement toward gender equality in society.

Future research is needed to define the glass ceiling in Lebanon properly, especially when it comes to cultural norms. Existing studies, including this one, have provided useful insights from a limited sample size, yet we are in need of a tangible assessment at a broader level in order to define the current situation of women at work. Afterwards, studies should focus on developing ways to break through this glass ceiling in Lebanon, as such research is currently absent from the field. Women should continue to strive to achieve higher positions and realize their full potential, as such challenges should move them forward toward a better tomorrow rather than hold them back. Indeed, the marginal presence of Lebanese women in management is a motivational factor to attain career success (Jamali *et al.*, 2006).

Limitations

This study was conducted in a short period of time, which limited the research to a small sample size in one university. Its demographics do not reflect the Lebanese population; the sample reflects an educated, younger age group belonging to a somewhat higher socioeconomic group, as the university providing respondents is considered an expensive one. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader community. Another limitation could be that we did not assess the respondents' working statuses; varying perceptions might exist between working and non-working respondents. Working students can provide more valid opinions in relation to their experience. Future research is advised to determine their working status and identify any possible variations. Furthermore, the survey was only addressed to students in higher education and an extension of this research would include gathering the perceptions of employees. Still, the focus on those

students is valuable in defining the initial roots of the problem and mapping suggestions for its correction. The survey was also self-administered and students chose to participate in the study, which may impose a self-respondent bias (Zikmund *et al.*, 2010, pp. 188-195).

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