Work-Life Balance, Family-Friendly Policies and Quality of Work Life Issues: Studying Employers' Perspectives of Working Women in Oman

By Shweta Belwal[1] and Rakesh Belwal[2]

Abstract

Family-Friendly Policies (FFPs) aim to help employees manage their family responsibilities, create flexible-work conditions and enable women to perform better on both domestic and work fronts. In comparison to other countries in the Gulf, women in Oman are joining the workforce in large numbers. This trend continues as educational and vocational institutions within the country consistently enroll a higher proportion of women. Currently, women comprise 55% of the total workforce in Oman and contribute significantly in education, health, media, banking and other business sectors. Challenges such as work-life balance (WLB) constrain their Quality of Work Life (QWL). Omani Labor Law (OLL) grants some privileges to working women; however, there is an overgrowing need to address specific issues that women encounter while managing their work and family life. By resorting to in-depth interviews of selected top-level managers from government, public, and private sector organizations, this study aims to secure managers' perception of WLB and QWL-related issues and also their opinion about offering certain FFP-related benefits to the working women in Oman. The research informs that despite some provisions in the OLL, Oman lacks a clear-cut policy on FFPs. Most of the concessions to women exist with a tacit understanding of 'give and take' or sympathy. Notwithstanding, all the employers confirm their adherence to the OLL and are enthusiastic over granting additional benefits, albeit with individual differences in perception. The research recommends some collective efforts on three major fronts. Governmental interventions are needed to direct organizations to classify some jobs as 'Family Friendly'. Organizations need to observe healthy workplace practices. Families and societies need to exhibit a supportive outlook towards working women in Oman.

Key Words: Family-Friendly Policies, Work-Life Balance, Quality of Life, Women, Oman

Introduction

Family-Friendly Policies (FFPs) aim to help employees manage their family responsibilities (Albrecht, 2003). These policies create flexible work conditions and enable

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women to perform better on both domestic and work fronts (Subramaniam and Selvaratnam, 2010; Beham and Drobnic, 2010), thereby increasing the quality of work life (QWL). Hence, FFPs are beneficial to both employees and their companies (Porter and Ayman, 2010: 28-32).

Women in Oman have started serving the workforce in large numbers and managing their work and family simultaneously. This trend is expected to continue in the future as more and more women register in the higher educational or vocational institutions within the country. Currently, women comprise 55% of the total work force in Oman (MONE, 2010) and contribute significantly in education, health, media, banking and other business sectors (Khanduri, 2007). Oman is now at the forefront of integrating women into all facets of society (Buzella, 2010) and is witnessing a sea change in its workforce composition.

According to Al-Shaibany (2011a), "Twenty-five years earlier, there were only about 8,000 working mothers in the private and government sectors taken together in Oman, compared to 32,000 now." Out of 1.25 million people working in various industries in Oman, over 35 per cent are women, and the gap indicating the composition of males and females, according to both the civil service and manpower ministries' statistics, is narrowing down each year (Omaninfo.com, 2010). Furthermore, graduate statistics of universities indicate an increasing trend for the number of women pass-outs (approximately 70% on an average) in comparison to males.

These facts are indicative of the future workforce of Oman where women will have a larger role to play. However, this increase in the participation of women in the workforce will impose additional challenges on the QWL front and will demand some special considerations such as FFPs (Belwal et al, 2012). FFPs and QWL issues are, therefore, expected to dominate the future governmental and organizational agenda. Following a review of relevant literature and discussions held with the top-level managers of select business organizations, this paper studies the FFPs and QWL-related issues that demand a timely attention in Oman. The major aim of this study is: (i) to investigate the nature of FFPs that employers in the public, private and government sectors practice in Oman, and (ii) to assess managers' perception of QWL-related issues prevailing in Oman.

The Situation of Women in Oman

The discrepancy between genders is inherent in the Omani codifications of male and female identities, where the girls are "carefully confined to the home and the neighborhood", unlike boys, who are "allowed to explore even more distant reaches" (Wikan, 1982: 83). Like patriarchal societies from the Arab/Islamic world, women in Oman have traditionally played exclusively domestic roles, but the recent acculturation and the spread of education have brought new roles and opportunities for women (Al-Sarbati et al., 2003). Although women's autonomy in Oman is still limited, there have been some improvements since the 1980s. Al Riyami et al. (2004), in their study of 1968 households, found women scoring a mean autonomy level of 1.2 on a 5-point scale that probed their decisions regarding the self-choice of spouse, participation in the workforce, employment as personal fulfillment, looking after self-health and insisting on one's own opinion in case of disagreement. However, the educated women (those with a secondary school or higher education) scored higher (2.3) than the uneducated ones (0.9).

The educational scenario of Oman is fast changing. The public elementary schools that were limited only to a few prominent towns such as Sohar in 1972 (Wikan, 1982), have emerged almost in every locality. Ten years ago, according to Al Riyami, Affifi, and Mabry (2004),

women aged 60 plus barely had 12 or more years of education compared to men (4.4%) but almost half of the women in the age group of 20–29 had completed secondary school, parallel to men. Unlike the past when the boys and girls were taught separately by men and women, respectively, several co-educational institutions and universities have emerged, which have attracted women equally. According to Al-Shaibany (2013), women now account for more than 65% of the students enrolled in different colleges and universities in Oman.

According to Al Lamky (2006), the recent policies of the Government of Oman provide equal rights and opportunities to women without any discrimination in social rights, obligations and occupation of public office. Following these policies, women surpass their male counterparts in education, and a number of them have been appointed as ministers, as ambassadors, to other government offices and to private sector organizations. Although those days are over when "women observed strict seclusion and did not appear in the market or public places" (Wikan, 1982: 9), some socio-cultural constraints are still prevailing, particularly at the behest of the society (Al-Sadi et al., 2011). Unfortunately, women form a large potential of human resources but are subject to a number of coded and unwritten social mores in a patriarchal male-dominated society (McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003). Oman, like other countries in the Arab world, can be characterized by "kin-based patrilineal extended families, male domination, early marriage, son preference, restrictive codes of behavior for women, and the association of family honor with female virtue" where "another general trend is a change in family structure and increased likelihood of living in a nuclear, as opposed to a multi-generational household" (Offenhauer, 2005; p.10). Al-Shaibany (2013) also reports some evidence of gender discrimination that prevents women from occupying managerial positions in both the private sector and government ministries. Notwithstanding, women have started gaining respect, freedom and acceptance for their contribution in social, economic and political spheres.

Consequently, the educational and work responsibilities of the women have offered them a platform where they can bargain for less household chores and greater white collar work. Although Oman lacks specific studies akin to the one attempted by Gordon and Whelan-Berry (2005), there is little evidence that partners combine occupational and family roles (Al-Alyani, 2013; Al Zedjali, 2011). Increased access to education among women has brought the fertility rate down with an improvement in health conditions (Dorvlo et al., 2006) and access to work in different spheres and levels (Goveas, and Aslam, 2011). There are signs of delayed marriage due to the time spent in schooling, looking for an appropriate match, or an increased interest in the career (Islam et al., 2013). Working women have obtained the autonomy to live on their own; some of them have even rebelled against the polygamy by moving out of marriages as they could afford to do that (Al-Shaibany, 2011b).

FFPs and QWL: A Review

Contemporary business dynamics and workers' involvement have not only increased economic pressure on organizations but have also led to a greater work-life imbalance for workers (Brough et al., 2008). For organizations and individuals, the negative impact of this work-life imbalance is increasing, and both employers and employees are being affected by the work-life conflict, reductions in productivity and increased absenteeism or turnover.

There is no dearth of literature in the area of FFPs. Several definitions of FFPs exist, and the concept is widely known and defined. FFPs as business strategies accommodate employees' needs for work-life balance and enable them to manage their work and family (Albrecht, 2003; Beham et al., 2010; Robbins et al., 2011). FFPs enrich the QWL, provide employees greater

control over their time and reduce the interference and stress between work and family life (Porter and Ayman, 2010; Houle et al., 2009) Work-related demands, for women, more often collide with their family expectations (Knudsen, 2009) and create negative effects, such as job burnout, declining feelings of achievement and higher levels of depressive symptoms (Wood et al., 2010).

Beham and Drobnic (2010) observe that family policies that reconcile work and family life are important. Ability to decide when, what, where and how work is done allows employees to personalize their roles and QWL and limits their intention to quit the job (Porter and Ayman, 2010). WLB acts as a positive reinforcement to satisfy an employee emotionally (Beham and Drobnic, 2010). Flexible work policies can help organizations, particularly, in dealing with the problems associated with long working days and excessive overtime and generally, in QWL, WLB, and participation of women-related issues (Price, 2010); Subramaniam et al., 2010). Waldfogel (2011) finds that Britain, in the past decade, has witnessed a sea change in the support, for provisions such as paid maternity and paternities leaves, pre-schooling, support for child care and part-time or flexible hours have expanded to a considerable extent.

"The issue of QWL has gained a new dimension with the increased number of women entering the workforce" (Akdere, 2006, pp: 175). QWL implies a nice and safe work environment where people feel respected for their work irrespective of who they are and are committed to dealing positively with their superiors, fellow workers and customers (Bodek, 2003).

However, Joshi (2007) explains that QWL has different connotations to different persons and the factors contributing to QWL are also varied. She states that to a worker down the assembly line, it may simply mean a fair day's work, safe working conditions and a supervisor who treats him/her with dignity, whilst to a young professional, it may mean opportunity for advancement, career growth and being able to utilize one's talent. Furthermore, QWL means different things to different people, for some take it from the perspective of happiness while others as an incentive (Mahapatra, 2011).

Saraji and Dargahi (2006) explain QWL as a comprehensive program to improve employee satisfaction. According to them, a high QWL is essential for organizations to attract and retain employees. Akdere (2006) posits that family and work cannot be separated from each other as work is an essential part of people's life and a source of livelihood. Cheung and Tang (2009) explain that QWL acts as a mediator between emotional labor and work-to-family interference. QWL efforts are intended to increase employee participation and effectiveness, and QWL activities are designed to free workers to apply their energies to their work.

According to Brian and Norman (2007), it is not easy for organizations to improve QWL simply by giving higher salaries; instead, organizations need to resort to a mixed basket of benefits that might include child and elderly care, resources, flexible time, career counseling, on-site dental care and mentoring programs. According to him, QWL can be improved by HR interventions in these eight areas: adequate and fair compensation, safe and healthy working conditions, immediate opportunity to use and develop human capacities, future opportunity for continued growth and security, social integration in the work organization, constitutionalism in the work organization, work and the total life space, and social relevance of work life.

Problems caused by stress and a disturbed WLB are a major concern to both employers and employees (Goveas, 2011). Millions of people all over the world juggle to balance their lives by minimizing potential conflicts that arise because of this balancing and to improve quality of life (Md-Sidin et al., 2010). Havlovic (1991) outlines how, with the installation and

institutionalization of a QWL process, employers can expect to see reductions in minor accident, grievance, absenteeism, and turnover rates. According to Elizur (1990), actions taken to improve the quality of life of individuals may result in a sense of higher QWL. Anderson, Crous and Schepers (1996) posit that if the jobs are designed carefully, and workers find enjoyment and challenges in doing jobs, a high QWL is expected to result at the end. Therefore, design and implementation of appropriate FFPs could help in achieving a better WLB and QWL. In this paper, we perceive FFPs as one of the policy interventions that are needed to improve WLB and QWL.

It becomes imperative for the organizations to be concerned about their employees and their needs to balance work and family life (Milliken et al., 1998). Furthermore, Brough et al. (2008:261) conclude that *"It would appear that work–life conflict is not only a moral issue—it is a productivity and economic issue, a workplace issue and a social issue, and needs to be addressed as such."* We, therefore, explore this issue in context of FFPs, WLB, QWL and working women in Oman.

The study is innovative from both conceptual and research perspectives in Oman. Our search of literature did not encounter a single study that focuses on FFPs in the context of Oman. Indeed, most of the studies in Oman are in the area of women entrepreneurship and identify barriers that women face. Moving beyond entrepreneurs and the barriers they face, this study broadens the scope of existing research by including women who are employed in private, public and government organizations. At the same time, this study focuses on a specific dimension, i.e., WLB and QWL-related issues. This will help Oman carve out a long-term strategy to assist working women and their productive employment. Lewis (1997) also emphasizes cross-national research to elucidate the impact of supportive policies. The study outcomes will also contribute to the global content on FFPs, WLB and QWL. Furthermore, they will provide certain directions and insights to the rest of the Arab world, in shedding their image of nurturing male-dominated Islamic societies and discouraging women to work outside their homes.

Research Methodology

An active perusal of secondary data was made before embarking on the study. Research papers, documents such as Omani Labor Law (OLL), and individual company policies were reviewed. A few officials from the private, public and government organizations were consulted on a voluntary and anonymous basis to arrive at a detailed, bilingual (Arabic and English) interview schedule. The schedule was revised following the discussion with experienced academics for ensuring the reliability and the validity of the responses.

Organizations from the private, public and government sectors in the two industrial cities of Muscat and Sohar were screened to identify the key informants. Campbell's (1955) criterion was adopted for qualifying the respondents. We resorted to two waves of emails, follow-up calls, and reminder emails; the organizations in Muscat and Sohar were contacted by personal visits.

In order to select representative organizations, which have relatively well-established HR functions, policies and procedures, a purposive sampling technique was used, targeting 30 organizations from all the sectors. Service as well as manufacturing organizations operating for more than three years and/or having more than 100 employees were given preference. After a lot of hard work, key respondents from 28 organizations were finally interviewed.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted on the premises of the organizations by a minimum of two members of the research team and lasted between one and one and a half hours.

Respondents were informed, in advance, about the confidentiality of information, and whenever permitted interviews were recorded to generate detailed transcripts. Atlas.ti 6.5 software was also used to support the qualitative analysis.

Findings

Profile of Sample Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of respondents who took part in this research project.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

GENDER		MANAGERIAL LEVEL	
Male	22	Top	07
Female	06	Middle	21
SECTOR		TYPE OF INDUSTRY	
Public	05	Service	19
Private	17	Manufacturing	07
Government	05	Extraction	02
Joint Venture (50-50)	01	LOCATION	
		Muscat	11
		Sohar	17

Employers' Perceptions of Work-Life Balance and Quality of Work Life

Employers felt that WLB is an important issue. Some private sector employers believed that it is the responsibility of the employee, given the flexibility granted by the organization. There were others who claim that organizations are equally responsible for maintaining this balance. The major cited benefits of WLB were 'happiness at job', 'positive contribution', 'reduced stress', 'increased focus at work', 'induced savings', 'employee retention' and 'a motivation for women to join a comfortable workplace'. Views of public sector employers were not very diverse. Most of them looked at maintaining WLB and QWL as a collective responsibility. Among benefits cited were 'reduced early retirement', 'maintaining social obligations and networks' and 'securing women's contribution to the GDP'. Whilst a private sector employer expressed that *"Whatever we have done is this area is not enough, and we constantly debate what we should do,"* a public sector employer advised that *"We need to learn to crawl before we start walking."*

Women's Complaints on WLB and QWL-related Issues

Most of the time, employers expressed that although work-life balance issues affect women the most, it is not common to find complaints from women. Most of the employers felt that women rarely lodge a formal complain about their WLB-related problems. An employer from a public sector company said, *"No, they do not approach directly, but we have heard that they complain. If some ask why are you taking a leave which is not allowed, they say we have family, we are studying, we have to go for training; there are lots of things to do for women."*

The manager of one leading private sector sales organization expressed that informally women complain a lot of the time, and the managers try to sort their complaints out. According to him, "*Formally, I remember that women came up once during the protest[3] with few demands…like we will work until 4, and we want particular things like one room for women where we can rest, etc...*" One manager from a leading public sector company said: "*Well women do complain but rather than taking it up to the management (which normally will not allow any concession), we follow it in a friendly way. If women have complaints, we flexibly help them.*" The views of a few other managers are presented below:

> *No, since there is flexibility within the organization, no such issues arise; if they have to go to hospitals they can go by telling the manager; they get pay for a full day. (Private Service Sector Company).*
> *We heard; they come and complain… husband is away, child alone at night… whether she can be excused night duties for a month… we give them shifts as per their desire. They have got what they want so they should be motivated (Government Hospital).*
> *Honestly, no complaints; I think our company is a bit supportive and tries to adjust with their demands (Private Sector Company).*
> *I never had an instance where a woman had to resign because of their feelings that their family commitment was being pressured from other commitments at work (Educational institution).*
> *I haven't met any women complaining about their job timings. There is flexibility in every department not only with women but also with men. It depends on the manager. Similar to men, we are compassionate with women (Ministry employer).*
> *We did not receive any complaints with regard to work pressure. Cooperation between all staff is good and there is flexibility (Public Sector Company).*
> *Informally sometimes when there is a work pressure (Private Bank).*

The companies employing young and unmarried girls observed no complaints from women. However, an employer from a ministry said that "*Such complains are normal, and we try to solve them as quickly as possible. Sometimes these complaints have nothing to do with the work.*"

Some private companies take proactive measures when employing women and explain the work-related challenges to them well before they commit to the job. This helps them in picking the right person. Some companies provide work in shifts, so there are no complaints from women. Some employers claimed that individual elements in practice such as remuneration, medical insurance for everyone in the family, training and development policies and counseling committees help in minimizing such threats proactively. While a few private sector employers said that they had fewer women to deal with, public sector employers felt that their policies help women in securing a WLB.

It is important to note that both the public and the private sector employers realized that there is a lack of an explicit policy on WLB or FFP, apart from the specific provisions made in the OLL by the government.

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[3] In February 2011, Oman faced some protests during the awakening of the Arab Spring. The situation restored to normalcy soon after His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, the ruler of Oman, granted benefits to meet some of the key demands.

FFP Components Existing in Different Organizations

According to employers, the WLB and QWL-related issues of women are mostly addressed by extending certain benefits to employees, which are usually granted either officially or unofficially. Most of these benefits contribute to FFPs. It is important to note that the term 'FFPs' as such is not used in Oman, and it is a western concept. In this research and during the interviews as well, the term 'FFPs' was used meaning 'benefits extended to female employees'. We encountered the presence of the following practices in the sampled organizations, but not all organizations gave all these benefits unless authorized by their company policies or boards: annual leave, sick leave, marriage leave, maternity leave, paternity leave, *Hajj* leave[4], compassionate leave, *Iddah* leave[5], examination leave, emergency leave, unpaid leave, annual travel allowance for expatriates, educational allowance for expatriates and free meals. In the following section, we assess the perceptions of employers from the private, public and government organizations on some of the specific components.

Employers' Perceptions of Specific Components of FFPs and their Availability
Flexibility in the Workplace

In most of the organizations, flexibility exists in the form of a tacit understanding. The nature of work constrains some organizations from being flexible. Although flexible-working as such was not inherent in hiring plans or policies, most employers were interested in assessing its applicability in specific jobs. The employers were empathetic to women and provided them with greater flexibility, either assuming some common understanding or permissions, without affecting their salaries. Some comments from different employers about the availability of flexibility in the workplace are grouped below:

Private sector employers:
"Omanis are happy with the working hours as we have accommodated prayer hours according to them, and I don't think we will go for that.", "In office area it could be ok; but it cannot be applied in a factory running on shifts." "It's good to have in the future.", "It depends on work sometimes we finish our task and just sit for 2-3 hours so it's better to finish and go.", "In the short time it would be a challenge but let us understand what its implications are.", "The numbers of working-hours are 8 - 9 hours daily. Flexibility in work is available sometime but if repeated, we reduce the amount of money paid.", and "We do practice flexible timings."

Government employers:
Our organization applied it once during the Ramadan time, but it stopped. It was very nice. I think it needs an approval and a decision. We hope to implement it in the future,", "We don't have part-time work or flexible working hours, the work start at 0730 and finished at 1430. After the office is closed it is not allowed to

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[4] Hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca during Dhu'l Hijja, made as an objective of the religious life of a Muslim. See http://www.thefreedictionary.com/hajj

[5] Iddah is a waiting period obligatory for a wife after being widowed or divorced during which she shall not remarry as defined by Article 119 (a) of the Personal Status Law (issued by Royal Decree No. 32/97, Sultanate of Oman).

stay in without a special permission.", and "We don't have flexible time. However, we provide flexibility in the work, especially to women. If any of our staff faces any emergencies, we allow him/her to leave and come back to continue work."

Compressed Workweek

A compressed workweek is an alternative where employees have a choice to work longer hours but for fewer days in a week. When asked about this provision, employers had mixed reactions. While some questioned its applicability in their organizations, there were a few who expressed an interest in exploring this further, especially for women. However, the recent amendment in the OLL recommends a five-day working week (Trowers and Hemlins, 2012), so this component might not appeal to most of the organizations and employers. Further comments of some employers on this issue are categorized below:

> *Private: "In a factory it is difficult to apply it, especially in production, perhaps in other areas too!", "We don't do it now, but it is possible.", "I don't think we can apply it especially in my department.", "It won't work. I cannot open a showroom for four days. It depends upon industry to industry.", and "We haven't thought about that. For some jobs, you can do that but for others you cannot. It is good for future. The ladies will work with more energy.", and "We will be happy but from the company's side, it will be difficult. Some of them can have Thursdays and Fridays off and some Fridays and Saturdays. I don't see any problem in working two hours more. It will be really good."*

> *Public: "As a whole it can be beneficial in the future; usually in government organizations it is difficult to do that; we already have 5 days working week now.", "We don't have that but I like that.", "I am not very fond of that.", "I don't think we can apply it in our organization and I'll tell you why. Because our operations run 24 hours.", and "It is difficult to be applied for women: may be for men."*

> *Government: "I disagree with that. Women will mess everything.", "I think with time the society will accept this change. The working women will be near her children and at the same time in her work.", and "It's a good idea but not with us, as our work is meeting with people, and we can't miss schedules."*

On-Site Child Care

On-site child care or other related provisions were considered a good idea by most of the employers. A few production-oriented organizations expressed their worries that they could not provide it on-site, while some believed that culturally it will not suit Omani conditions. The following statements provide a better view of their concerns:

> *Private: "Good idea, if there are reasonable numbers of women with kids. Conceptually good but our company is far away.", "It's good. Even the employees are ready to pay for the baby sitter.", "Not applicable.", "There is no plan or idea to make a nursery because it needs a special person to organize such a place, and*

it is also a huge responsibility.", "Not relevant for us, so no opinion. Probably. Let's see. It is difficult to decide right now. If need be we will.", "Yes why not, we thought of that but I don't know.", "If a request comes, we have no issues.", "As no women are there- you need somebody to be with the child and you may find even mothers fighting outside.", and "It will be good. The children staying at home do not enjoy when parents go to attend the work."

Public: "Cannot actually, you can't have it here because the factory environment is not safe for children. We don't have it. I think in big companies it might be there.", "It won't work.", "No, it is not available. However, we will think of it in the new company building.", "They can keep their items and other stuff but they can't keep their children there. I think they have proposed it but not yet applied because it will have running cost and they have to study it.", and "We don't have it. Maybe if we see real demand for that we would like to do that."

Government: "This can be done in other countries not in GCC countries as in each house, you will find one or two house maids.", "Here we don't have. It is very good idea.", "Oh! It is very nice idea it will be very helpful for all working women. I saw such things in different Arabian countries but not in Oman.", "Many of them are asking for nursery and if any private organization opens, it will run. I am sure.", "Many married persons are facing problem to keep them with housemaids and sometimes no house maid. We understand the problem but cannot do anything as we are under Ministry. I am sure privates can do that.", and "We have extended families, so we cannot compare ourselves with Europeans. It's a blessing for our country that we have social contacts."

Paid Family Leave

There were affirmative as well as negative responses about the provision of paid family leave as one of the FFP components. The perceptions of all the employers were mixed, some of which are categorized below:

Private: Can be given to people as a reward.", "Why not!", "No.", "Something that does not exist in Labour law... I don't think so.", and "We follow the law. If need comes, we might."

Public: "Yes if an employee is working very hard and is approved by management.", "We don't have that actually. It is difficult as you need employees all the time. We would like to have it.", "For a week it is difficult but for the rest of the day we can allow.", and "I think it is great but I think also you have to be careful. Why should I give leave to someone who has a family? I have unmarried men and women."

Government: "We wish that.", and "No it is not necessary. They can use their annual leave."

Duration of Maternity Leave

The employers did not express any desire to extend the duration of the maternity leave. While most of them said that maternity leave was long enough, the private sector expressed a view that they will follow the government rules and regulations in this regard. A few employers from government and public sector organizations even expressed a desire to reduce the duration of maternity leave. Some of their concerns are presented below:

> *Private: "Let the government[6] decide.", "Yes, we may as the need arises.", "We will do whatever law says.", "It is so difficult. She will bring sick leave, annual leave, and you will see women working only for one month. Some girls having children are working well with the private organizations.", "I would say no in the short term, as we are still growing, and we need support from all our employees. When we become more mature, and we have good processes may we consider it in a distant future.", and "We will not go for increasing the duration of maternity leaves but if government says, then we will."*

> *Public: "We want to reduce it because two months of maternity and one month of annual leave will keep the staff away for three months, and we will have to arrange for some option.", and "We have already increased. I think it is enough."*

> *Government: "I think 50 days plus annual leave for 48 or 54 days. So if they want to take them together than it is enough.", "No it's enough.", "In fact, fact it was 45; three years ago, it was made 50. It is the Ministry regulation. No we don't want to increase but bring it to 30.", "Not enough. In certain cases, it should be increased- unhealthy babies, premature babies…"*

Paternity Leave

There were few but mixed reactions about this component as it was not known to some of the employers. Some employers were willing to offer paternity leave for a short duration. While organizations having working couples expressed a concern about job loss, there were a few who expressed that this would not suit culturally. Further concerns are exhibited below:

> *Private: "Our company is multinational and practises it elsewhere, so we might have it here.", "Let's see if requests come. We are flexible on that.", "No; we don't need it. It won't work in Oman as it is the responsibility of women.", "Maybe we should ask for that.", and "I don't mind having that. It is again the decision of the Board. We can recommend a shorter leave."*

> *Public: "Yes we can consider 2- 3 days at least or one week to enjoy the baby.", and "At least for three days, we want."*

> *Government: "We don't need it, and it's not good. In UAE, they are planning to give 45 days' leave.", and "We have got lots of couples so it will affect our staffing level and service."*

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[6] By government, the respondents mean either the concerned ministries or H.M. Sultan Qaboos, the ruler of the Sultanate of Oman.

Paternity leave is not known to companies and employees much in the Middle East, unlike the West where they have proven their worth. For example, in Qatar, UAE, and Oman, these leaves are available for three days in some companies and in some cases impose restrictions up to three children. The leave, however, has its own benefits such as recognizing the role of a husband to support his wife, acknowledging that men and women are complementary beings, empowering women economically and ensuring their active participation in family life, helping working couples achieve and enjoy a work-life balance, and protecting the wellbeing of mother and child (D'Souza, 2012). Paternity leaves are particularly important for working couples having a nuclear family or those working in places away from their extended families. The working husbands of working women in such families reflect a higher willingness in sharing the household duties, and they could be the prime beneficiaries of paternity leave. Organizations should target them by formulating a clear-cut strategy for granting the paternity leave. However, as the culture in the Middle East is changing, and more and more families are supporting women in their higher education and work, securing work-life balance is becoming crucial to cope with the economic pressures and the need for leading a good life.

Job Share Opportunities

Job share opportunities allow employees to share their work and salaries. We explored with the employers the presence of this component. While most of them liked the idea, they were not clear about how it could be implemented in their organizations. The statements of some employers are presented below:

> *Private: "We don't allow that as they have to work for eight hours, but we may look at it.", "Ya! It can be a good idea. It can be good in production.", "That's a good idea. However, we haven't thought of that in a teaching institution as someone starts a job then he/she needs to complete it until it's done.", "I don't think because the women, here are secretaries or directors, so I don't know how?" "It will be helpful for married ladies" and "It's a good idea. Some girls are not working just for money but for utilizing their knowledge, keeping them busy. So, if they work for four hours, it will be good, but it may be a problem also. For receptionist jobs, it can be done, but I am not sure about other jobs.", and "This is a good idea actually. More women want this kind of job. Even males will also prefer to work like this. It can be done in some specific roles like in a bank for a cashier or a receptionist. It can be tried out. It's a good idea."*

> *Public: "We haven't thought about it so far. But it is a good idea actually as they are sharing the salary.", "It's a good idea. It will work.", "We don't have. I don't think it's practical", "It is not available now, but we can think about it and apply if possible.", "It is part time working in a way. I am not against and if the demand comes up.", and "We are not a mature organization; we are not going to say ok."*

> *Government: "We don't have job sharing, but staff can exchange their duties. I am not sure how will it work?" "We work for seven hours. I think for our business it's not helpful. So, no need for job sharing.", "Job sharing exists in a different*

way. For the future it's a good suggestion.", and "Very good idea it will help women to take care of her children. We hope this idea can be applied soon."

Health Insurance

It was observed that almost all the private sector employers and a few public sector employers provide health insurance benefits to their employees and their family members. The coverage of such insurance differs from organization to organization in terms of the number of family members, type of treatment, etc. Almost all the government and few public sector organizations expect Omani employees to take free health treatments at the government hospitals. Some government employers argued that *"Health Insurance is a must. Government hospitals cannot solve problems. Our employees are going to private hospitals or to other countries."* A private sector employer mentioned that *"There is no health insurance for anyone. However, we reimburse the medical expenses for the expatriate workers. For Omanis we don't pay for any treatment in private hospitals as they are entitled for free treatment in the government hospitals."*

After School and Summer/Winter Programs for Children

In a majority of the organizations, there were no opportunities for after school and summer/winter programs. A few organizations sponsor children for such programs conducted elsewhere. Almost half a dozen organizations expressed a desire to develop such programs because of their benefits, such as increasing employee motivation and loyalty, and reducing employees' worries about children during vacations.

Working from Home

A few employers liked the idea of their employees working from home but expressed concerns about its applicability. As most of the work in an organization needs to be done at the office, they expressed a need to find the areas where work can be attended from home. Some replies were: *"Yes, if you are talking about Part-time. However, working from home, I don't think this will be suitable for our society"; "I don't think it will work in Oman for the next 100 years"; and "If you are talking about telecommuting, I think it's too far away from us".*

On-site Wellness Programs

Upon asking whether their organizations provide some onsite wellness programs such as a clinic, gym or swimming pool to the employees, employers had mixed reactions. Most of the organizations did not have on-site wellness programs. While some questioned their applicability, others replied that they are working along these lines. A few organizations had some facilities such as a training department, food court and gym. One employer responded that **"We are working on it, but Omanis are not enthusiastic over those things."** While another exclaimed *"It is a good idea! Like someone who is obese wants to reduce weight, so some initiatives like wellness programs can be taken."*

Other suggestions in the areas of FFPs included organization of women's meetings, a mother's day, annual interactions with the families, extending the coverage of insurance to include mothers and fathers, financial support for children's education and corporate packages providing regular access to gyms, spas and other recreational facilities.

Employers' Perspectives on Existing FFPs

Employers thought the existing provisions are mutually helpful, making everyone happy. Some felt that such provisions motivate people to be more productive, induce them to have a better work-life balance and help in creating a positive environment. A few proudly highlighted some areas where they had an upper edge over other employers. *"We provide 60 days of maternity leaves…something better our employees feel while comparing with 45 days elsewhere,"* said one public sector employer. Some replied that FFPs increased attractiveness of their company outside the labor market and motivated internal staff in doing a better work. One manager commented that *"In fact, this improved our retention as with our flexible timings, one can work with us, can continue higher studies and even manage one's family. It is helping us"*. A private sector employer attributed gains in flexibility and employee productivity as major benefits.

Whilst a majority of employers indicated positive effects of FFP-related provisions, a few recommended caution to be exercised in offering them. A public sector manager felt that it was a zero-sum game. He said that *"losing a staff member for some days and finding her more productive at other times was not beneficial."* Another employer claimed that the effects of FFPs were dependent on the workload of the employee. One private sector employer expressed that *"Misuses of such provisions have happened, and we applied checks and balances. Most of the times we saw that flexibility helped employees in gaining efficiency, and they became more trustworthy."* Overall, the number of replies citing benefits of FFP-related provisions outperformed the number of apprehensions.

While asking about the perceived advantages of FFPs, employers came up with different perceptions. The benefits predicted were: good outcomes, increase in productivity, increased cooperation, some relaxation and a good environment. Employers felt that the informal concessions granted in this regard have affected the companies in positive ways. They also felt that a selective attention to FFPs will broaden such benefits. Some positive reactions to our questions are posted below:

> *We need to give too. It is always give and take.*
> *I think it will help both to see the challenges, difficulties, how to motivate women in work and to identify weaknesses and strengths while implementing these policies.*
> *Yes, I can see benefits of FFPs as people feel ownership, they feel comfortable, and they feel attached to the place where they go for work.*
> *For providing facilities like crèches, I think; we need to plan that in longer time because as we are building as we are expanding we have lots of limitations of place and space something like that, but ultimately, I think it will be a good policy.*
> *Things such as providing flexible hours will apply when the employee is helpful and feels the responsibility for his or her work. Mechanism can be devised to permit an employee to leave the work in lieu of his or her coming back in the evening to finish the work.*
> *On receiving empathetic treatment, employees will feel positive. They will like the work, will work very sincerely, and their performance will increase.*

On the other hand, there were concerns that these provisions might affect their bottom line and could be misused. Given below are some statements from the employers:

> *No I think at the end of the day we as a private company look at everything as business case and the most important is that it becomes cost neutral so whatever we bring as a benefit we need to be sure that with that benefit, there is a return and that return hopefully will counter or balance it out.*
> *It depends if they recognize them; e.g., example you have a lady, who is not married and when she gets married, she gets 60 days then only she feels about such benefits.*
> *I feel it is important, but also I feel that the community should understand they should not be taking advantage of this right because if you want to apply them and give them such flexibility, they should understand that they should not be compromising with their responsibilities.*

Employers confirmed their adherence to FFP-related benefits in line with the OLL. Some companies provided more than what is required in the OLL. A few additional benefits being extended by organizations to women include: the option to choose their location for work, permissions to leave the job early, activities for employees and their families, days out, provision of a place for breastfeeding and medical insurance for Omani employees and their family members.

Discussion

Work-life balance initiatives support the needs of staff in achieving a balance between their work and family lives. Better management of work and family life can help in reducing stress and increasing a motivated, loyal and productive work force (Harr 2008). Beham and Drobnic (2009: 669) state that *"The affective component of satisfaction with work-family balance leads to a positive feeling or emotional state."* Identifying the presence of FFPs to develop a long-term strategy for employing working women and their QWL is the need of the hour.

Robbins et al. (2011: 238) state that *"Arab women are now putting more hours into their work weeks. So what can managers do?"* This is a major concern for Oman, too, as the proportion of women in the workforce is expected to increase here, and women are likely to surpass men in the future workforce of skilled and highly educated personnel. Although the situation is somehow different than that of the industrialized countries where the decline in fertility and the increase in divorce rates and lone-parenthood were the primary reasons for the decrease in the entry of women into the labor force (Gauthier, 1996); the concerns are similar. Attracting and retaining women in the workforce might be a major challenge for future employers in Oman. Although there may not be many problems for single women, once they are married and have responsibilities for children and elderly ones at home, many women will start juggling between home and work and will not be able to cope with the work pressure. Serious planning about FFPs could help in taking some proactive measures to overcome these problems and enriching their QWL.

Al-Shaibany (2011a) states that the number of working women in Oman has quadrupled compared to 1985. He further states that today women choose to come back to work after childbirth. He quotes two reasons for this: first, Omani women are more educated and do not

want to waste their education just by sitting at home after marriage; second, their husbands' attitudes have also changed, as, unlike their parents, they do not object to their wives resuming work after maternity leave. Even the traditional rural conception where it was believed that 'women are meant for marriage and for raising children' is also changing. Despite these positive trends, women face many problems at work, and FFPs have an important role to play, not only to keep women in the workforce but to improve their QWL.

Oman is witnessing a major transformation concerning the composition of its workforce, where women are emerging as a significant part of the whole pie. However, two major concerns are, firstly, how prepared organizations are to accommodate these women workers; and secondly, how effective companies will be in retaining women's contribution to their economic activities.

To our understanding, retaining unmarried women in the national workforce is not a problem. Difficulties occur once women are married, have children and start juggling their time between home and work. Attracting and retaining women then becomes a major challenge for employers. In the era of male-dominated workforce, competition and skill shortages, "family-friendly friendly measures could be construed as a new form of a company 'perk', advantaging one employer against other in areas of recruitment and retention" (McKee et al., 2000, p. 563). However, there is a need to divert from the "traditional work structures"[7] (Lewis, 1997, p. 15), keeping in view the cultural sensitivity—where "The first right (and pride) of a woman is to be a family caretaker. She has a decisive responsibility for bringing up children and taking care of her family..." (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2012; p.8) and where "The influence of the family on an individual's life supersedes all other social institutions, including the state" (Faour, 1989; p. 254).

Similarly, playing a lead role in the workforce will be a daunting challenge for women in Oman as balancing the work-life conflicts is not easy. As women everywhere juggle their time between work and family life, there is a growing body of research concerning work–family conflict, work–life issues and the necessity for FFPs. Oman lacks a comprehensive review identifying where it stands in terms of work–life research and FFPs. This research, therefore, is innovative as it explores employers' perceptions about Family-Friendly Policies for women working in Oman—policies necessary, we believe, to keep women committed to Oman's economic needs. We hereby present our conclusions and recommendations under distinct headings to outline some prominent issues:

Women Face Difficulties of Juggling between Work and Family Life
The study noticed that WLB is an important issue for working women. The views of employers from all the sectors were more or less similar on WLB. However, some private sector employers considered that employees are responsible for maintaining their WLB, while most of the public and government employers believe that it should be a collective responsibility. Though women do not formally complain about WLB issues, employers hear their complaints informally, especially about the problems they face arising out of WLB. Whilst some private-sector companies take proactive measures to assist their women, employees manage WLB; they along with the public sector employers admit a policy lack in this aspect. However, some inherent support comes from the OLL, which protects the interest of employees by legal provisions. Notwithstanding, stereotyping the government sector as 'family-friendly' and the private sector as 'non family friendly' (Nielsen et al. 2004) will not hold much in Oman, as this

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[7] By traditional work structures, Lewis (1997) means traditional pattern of work and career path.

study encountered certain private sector organizations that offer more benefits to their employees than the government organizations.

Formal and Informal FFP-related Workplace Practices

A variety of practices apply in Oman in the context of leave and other benefits. Some of the FFP-related provisions, which are mostly formal in the developed world, apply informally in tacit forms in Oman. Flexibility at work, one of the major components of FFPs, is provided to employees in Oman based on understanding or sympathy. Compressed workweek, another FFP component, is not of much importance as recent amendments in the OLL have already recommended a five-day working week. On-site child care attracts some employers but is considered too risky or unhygienic to be employed by certain organizations because of their specific work environments. Paid family leave, paternity leave, job share opportunities, health insurance, and telecommuting are regarded positively by employers but raise concerns because of difficulty in their applicability, their cost and their socio-cultural feasibility.

Employer Commitment to FFPs

Despite individual differences in perception, all the sampled employers confirm their adherence to the FFP-related benefits directed by the OLL and are enthusiastic over granting additional benefits to their employees if the need arises. Employers attribute existing provisions, formal or informal, that are made above and beyond the recommendation of the OLL as mutually beneficial and helpful in increasing productivity, maintaining a healthy environment and securing the WLB. Whilst a majority of employers indicated positive effects of FFP-related provisions, a few recommended exercising caution while offering them, especially because of their possible misuse and their cost.

Challenges in Implementing FFPs

Most employers from all three sectors acknowledge the need for FFPs. The private sector employers acknowledge that although it may impose a cost in the short run, FFPs will bring benefits in the long term. For public and government organizations, cost was not an issue, however. We observed that recruitment policies in Oman lack FFP-related considerations as nothing is explicitly laid down in such policies. While the private-sector companies emphasize costs and benefits and social responsibility in their recruitment policies, public and government-sector employers do not exhibit any specifically focused area.

Recommendations

The following group of recommendations can be offered in line with the findings and analysis:

Firstly, there is a need to identify problems facing women in the workforce and to address them. Keeping in view the projections that women are going to outnumber males in the future workforce of Oman, there is a need to give some specific and urgent attention to FFPs and their incorporation in the OLL.

Secondly, government interventions are required to help women in leading a QWL. There is a need to classify some jobs as 'Family Friendly'. The Government should ask employers to identify suitable jobs and earmark them as 'family friendly'. Lewis (1997; p.18), too, advises that "State support is, therefore, a necessary context for broad organizational change, providing

a platform of rights from which workers can negotiate the conditions needed to balance work and family."

Thirdly, observing healthy workplace practices would help organizations in engaging employees. Organizations need to establish formal complaint or request mechanisms for employees having WLB-related issues. Employers should offer open door policies to women and devise specific mechanisms to identify the WLB-related problems they encounter. Employers should display a copy of rules concerning women as well as FFPs for them at workplaces. This would also increase the "sense of entitlement" [8] (Lewis, 1997; p. 15) among the workforce. Organizations employing women need to develop culturally-sensitive infrastructure providing basic amenities like washrooms, prayer rooms and a common area for women to use. Companies need to do some cost-benefit analysis to accommodate their need for FFPs.

Fourthly, increased cooperation of families and societies to women would ensure sustainability and QWL. Women should get help from their husbands, especially in the nuclear families, and from their siblings and in-laws in the extended families. Some kind of education or awareness programs should be developed for family members and society generally to support working women in ways, which are needed above and beyond the legal support system.

Finally, there is a need for further research on WLB, QWL and FFPs in the local context, especially for studies, which examine the perceptions of working women in different private, public, and government organizations.

Importance of Study, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study outcomes will help senior management and policy makers in understanding the importance of FFPs in employing women and improving their QWL. Adherence to FFPs in employment policies can help women reduce their juggling between home and work life and increase their motivation and productivity. This research suggests ways of dealing with work-life balance-related issues, especially from the employers' perspectives. Since this study covers only a small sample, any generalizations need caution and further probing to assess the wider economic impact. However, this research would have a wide potential or socio-economic impact if conducted from employees' perspectives nationwide. Notwithstanding, these insights would definitely help policy makers in shaping the employment policies of the Sultanate, especially for working women.

The study witnesses a major transformation among the working couples who now form a distinct niche in the society, away from the conventional male dominance, where both men and women take care of household responsibilities. Under such circumstances, the domain of FFPs can be extended to the males, who can help their spouses in managing the work-family conflict. The need for male-oriented FFPs in the Arab world can be studied by future researchers.

Although a majority of the employers favor FFPs, to address their concerns, in reality, these offerings need to be supplemented by a change in organizational norms and values about work-family life situations. Lobel and Kossek (1996), too, argue that a mere outlook towards FFPs without changing the norms and values would not help. Future research can be undertaken to assess the role of organizational norms and values on FFPs and work-life balance.

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[8] Sense of entitlement, according to Lewis (1997) is a sense that employees are entitled to voice their needs to modify reasons and to have these needs met.

Acknowledgement:

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