

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE UNDERLYING ANTECEDENTS AND  
CONSEQUENCES OF LEBANESE WOMEN'S CAREER  
INTERRUPTIONS

by  
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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

Marilyn Antoine Khoueir for Master of Human Resources Management  
Major: Human Resources Management

Title: The underlying causes and consequences of Lebanese women's career interruptions.

The purpose of this study is to explore the different factors that shape and dictate women's career interruption decisions. This was done to come up with practical implementations that can help companies and HR managers better retain and cater to their female workforce. Our study consists of semi-structured interviews of 15 women who had one career interruption of 3 months or more. Our results show that women in our sample were mostly pushed out of the workplace whose culture and practices were incompatible with their other roles due to a lack of satisfying options. Most of our participants also emphasized the prevalence of balance in their lives as they aimed to balance their traditional gender roles with their ambitions and careers.

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*To*  
*My Beloved Family*

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Women constitute half of the Lebanese population, have the same rate of “secondary education and above” than men (38.8%) yet only constitute 22.8% of the labor force (HDR, 2014). In other words, women in Lebanon are an underutilized labor pool and still haven't reached their full potential. By increasing the level of employment, organizations can serve their own purposes while having access to a larger number of qualified applicants. For that reason, companies need to capitalize on employing and retaining women. In order to do so, organizations must have a better understanding of the reasons that push or pull women to opt out of the workforce in the Lebanese market as well as what contributes to attracting and retaining them. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to get a holistic view of women's careers by exploring the reasons leading to the emergence of career interruptions as well as the repercussions these interruptions have on women's careers. This would ultimately reveal further avenues for research that will, in the long run, lead to drafting applicable solutions to facilitate retention and increase women's presence in the local workforce.

Research on women's careers in non-western countries is still in its early stages (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009) and the heterogeneity of the Middle East calls for career studies to each country's distinctive context (Afiouni and Karam, 2014; Weir and Crowley-Henry, 2013). Thus this study contributes to the burgeoning body of research on women's careers in the Middle East (Afiouni, 2014; Afiouni and Karam, 2014; Metcalfe, 2008; Omair, 2008, 2010; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010) by investigating both the different forces that partake in Lebanese women's decision to off-ramp and the

consequences such off-ramps have on their careers using both a cross-cultural approach and the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM). The KCM is based on the assumption that women and men consider the impact of their decisions in both their work and non-work lives on their environment and families before making them.

“In particular, the kaleidoscope model fits women's careers well as a means of understanding how women operate relationally to others in both work and non-work realms. Like a kaleidoscope that produces changing patterns when the tube is rotated and its glass chips fall into new arrangements, women shift the pattern of their careers by rotating different aspects in their lives to arrange their roles and relationships in new ways” (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, p. 106).

Since the KCM acknowledges the interplay of different factors, including women's agency and its environment in shaping women's career, it could help us get a better understanding of women's career in our specific context. While this model has been proven effective in western countries, could its pillars be used in a specific context as the Middle East and help companies understand women's priorities and increase their presence in their workforce?

Until recently, most of the research on women's careers and career interruption focused on individual agency with little or no consideration for social factors (Grote and Hall, 2013), when some scholars maintain that social factors and context highly influence women career decision (Afiouni, 2014; Afiouni and Karam, 2014; Ituma and Simpson, 2009; Chudzikowski *et al.*, 2009). In addition recent studies found evidence toward the fact that the aggregate of a woman's culture, social group, family and reference group wields both direct and indirect influence on her career (Grote and Hall, 2013; Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2008). While some studies have been done in Non-western societies (Ituma and Simpson, 2009), much is left to be done in the Middle-East whose heterogeneity calls for country specific research (Karam and Afiouni, 2014).

Therefore this project seeks to paint a holistic understanding of women's career

interruptions in Lebanon that accounts for structural and social constraints as well as women's agency by answering the following questions:

What are the multi-level factors that lead to women's career interruptions and are they a combination of context and agency? Does one or more of the Kaleidoscope Career Model anchors transcend culture and could they be used to analyze the reasons why Lebanese women opt out of the workforce? And finally are companies partly to blame for the profusion of women's career interruptions? And if so what practical steps can they take to counter this phenomenon? This would contribute to existing data on women's careers specially in the Middle East where many scholars took an interest in the topic and the factors that shape it (Afiouni, 2014; Afiouni and Karam, 2014; Metcalfe, 2008; Omair, 2008, 2010; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010) as well as test existing western theories in the context of the Middle East as some researchers suggested the need to test existing theories in different indigenous contexts (Korpi, Ferrarini and Englund, 2013; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Solera and Bettio, 2013). But most importantly this study will come up with practical solution to increase women's representation in the workforce.

All of these inquiries are tackled through an in depth thematic analysis of fifteen interviews of women with diverse career paths to identify the different factors and patterns that contribute to career interruptions. It would also help distinguish the consequences these interruptions have on women's careers and on their perception of work using both a cross-cultural approach and the Kaleidoscope Career Model principles. This is ultimately done in an attempt to deduce practical recommendations that would help companies retain their trained workforce and avoid loss of productivity and profits high turnovers generate.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Women's Careers

##### Gendered Career Models

While women's participation in the workforce increased drastically these last two decades their career progression and representation in different sectors and across organizational hierarchy diverges greatly from that of men (Betz, 2005; Burke and Vinnicombe, 2005; Miles, 2013). This brings us to reconsider a long-standing theory that proclaims that women "traditionally followed different career patterns from men" (O'Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2004). Preceding scholars also acknowledge that women take time away from work more often than their male counterparts (Baker, 2002; Hewlett and Luce, 2005) which might partly explain their lower representation rates in senior managerial positions (Patton, 2013). Another plausible explanation for such discrepancies between men and women is the fact that women somehow maintained their traditional roles of caregivers, which they are expected to conciliate with their jobs (Fitzgerald and Harmon, 2001).

Another major difference between men and women concerns what motivates them. A study done by Miles (2013) recently discovered that while men are extremely responsive to extrinsic motivators women on the other hand work due to intrinsic motivators. In order to get a better understanding of what motivates women let's take a closer look at intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is the act of "doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence" (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In other words an intrinsically motivated person is driven by the challenge

of an act itself and the satisfaction that arises from it rather than responding to external pressure and incentives or the promise of rewards. Oppositely, extrinsic motivated people act based on certain desired outcomes and are highly affected by surrounding factors and incentives (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Traditionally workplaces are often a source of extrinsic motivators that are not really attractive to women who would rather have a shift in culture and job organization that nurtures their inherent motivators and do not diverge from them (Miles, 2013).

Although there has been considerable research highlighting the differences between career paths according to gender, (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007) most career models were developed based on men's experiences with no particular attention to women (e.g. Osipow and Fitzgerald, 1996 in O'neil, Bilimoria and Saatcioglu, 2004; Sullivan, 1999). More prominently, previous findings recognized that existing career models based on men's experiences and work stages cannot grasp the diversity of women's experiences, since those are highly influenced by a combination of personal, organizational and social factors (Powell and Mainiero, 1992). For those reasons, even if both women and men's careers are going to become less linear throughout the years (Patton, 2008) there is a real need to consider and study women's career paths in order to fully grasp all of the factors that shape them.

Recently researchers developed career models that grasp the heterogeneity of factors that could help explain women's career decisions. The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) is one of the most predominant models that acknowledge the influence of multiple factors while taking career decisions. KCM is based on the assumption that women and men make decisions through the lens of rationalism. Consequently, they understand and take in consideration the effect their choices have on their environment and everyone in it (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). In other words they do not solely base



career decisions on their own wants and needs but look at the bigger picture and favor solutions that not only benefit them personally but that also positively affect their environment and people in it. In fact, according to the model, people have three main concerns during their career: balance, authenticity and challenge. And depending on whether they are in the beginning, middle or end of their career, their priorities shift to one main parameter while the other two take more secondary roles without disappearing, since all are essential. These three anchors of the Kaleidoscope career model that are also called the ABCs of Kaleidoscope are defined by Sullivan and Mainiero (2008) as follows:

*Balance*: Defined as making decisions so that the different aspects of one's life, both work and none work, form a coherent whole;

*Authenticity*: Defined as the being true to oneself in the midst of the constant interplay between personal development and work and none work issues;

*Challenge*: Defined as engaging in activities that permit the individual to demonstrate responsibility, control, and autonomy while learning and growing (p. 35).

Another interesting aspect of the ABC of Kaleidoscope is its use as a milestone in mapping career priority shifts. For instance it is the root of the Alpha-Beta career paths. In the Alpha career path, an employee emphasizes challenge in his/her early career, values authenticity in his/her mid-career and requires balance through the last stage of his/her professional life. Likewise, an employee who follows the Beta career path focuses on challenge in his/her early career, concentrates on balance in his/her mid-careers and seeks authenticity in his/her late career.

While the Alpha career path has been shown to be representative of men's priority shifts through time, research established that the Beta career path better represents women motivators in Western countries (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007)

although its' cross cultural validity remains to be proven.

### **Women's Career Interruptions**

A decade ago, the media drew attention to career interruptions, an important phenomenon of women's' working lives that has been increasing these last years, according to Western media (Hewlett and Luce, 2005). Career interruptions have been hastily attributed at the time to merely one reason: child rearing, without a systematic study of the factors that lead to it (Belkin, 2003; Story, 2005; Wallis, 2004). Research has gone a long way since to determine the actual causes for women's career interruptions and found that they can be attributed to a myriad of push and pull factors (Cabrera, 2007, 2009; Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). In fact, in a study of 2000 randomly chosen women graduates in the USA Cabrera, it was identified that only 35% of women who had career interruptions cited child rearing as a reason (Cabrera, 2007). Most of factors identified by the literature can be divided in two distinct categories: pull factors that are generally due to women's traditional gender roles on one side, and push factors that usually stem from organizations, their culture or the job itself on the other.

#### **Pull Factors**

Some of the main pull factors found in literature on career interruptions often revolve around women's need to balance their multiple roles, more specifically their traditional roles as care giver and responsible for child rearing (Cabrera, 2007). As expected, the need to care for a child (Cabrera, 2007; Ehrlich, 1989) was found to be one of the most predominant reasons to leave work, along with the necessity to assist an elderly family member (Gross, 2005). Other reasons range from the need to spend more time with the family (Cabrera, 2007) and moving away to accommodate a spouse's career (Eby, 2001). For instance in a study done by Cabrera (2007) a woman clearly

stated that she left her job to relocate to England with her family since her spouse was offered an opportunity. Not only do women relocate to follow a spouse more often than men (Eby, 2001) but they also tend to take career interruptions because their current job requires relocating. A sacrifice they are rarely willing to take since it is incompatible with their husband's job and their need to be there for their families (Cabrera, 2007). Another reason related to gender roles and expectations was that women found they proved themselves at work and could leave the workplace without regrets to focus on their family (Cabrera, 2007) which suggests they view childrearing and care taking as their main responsibilities.

### **Push Factors**

Another category of factors predominant in the literature on career interruptions are pull factors mostly pertaining to the organizations women worked for. For instance some of the most common factors cited by women as leading to career interruptions include, but are not limited to, an unchallenging job, discrimination, low pay, sexual harassment, lack of opportunities for vertical advancement, a male dominated corporate culture and feeling left out of informal male networks necessary to reach top level positions (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Terjensen, 2005). Others found difficulties integrating their company's culture or had trouble finding a sense of purpose and meaning in their jobs (Cabreara, 2007). Women also perceived that most organizations have masculine cultures that do not value work/life balance, meaningful work and autonomy often needed to be satisfied with ones' job (Wilhoit, 2013). Another pertinent issue to the subject is the lack of mentoring and training given to women to better manage their different tasks. When questioned about what triggered their work interruption some women incriminated the lack of support and training that could have helped them better manage their different roles (Cabrera, 2007), while others

complained that the jobs they were successful at were too demanding and conflicted with their other roles and responsibilities, which forced them to leave (Cabrera, 2007). Finally some women stated taking career interruptions to resume education or to get additional training (Hewlett and Luce, 2005) which pushes us to question if they would have resumed working if given the possibility to do both.

### **Work Re-Entry**

Another interesting aspect of women's career interruptions is the aftermath of such breaks and the barriers women face when trying to reintegrate the workforce. When Harris Interactive conducted a survey on a sample of 2,443 highly qualified women who took career interruptions most of them declared having faced considerable salary losses on reentry (Hewlett and Buck Luce, 2005). Another study done by Reitman and Schneer (2005) found that women with an MBA who off-ramped had had their salaries decrease by around 45% compared to their counterparts who did not take off-ramps (Reitman and Schneer, 2005). In addition to affecting ones' salary rates, career interruptions adversely influence the "knowing-how", "knowing-whom" and "knowing-why" necessary for a successful boundary-less career, making women less eligible for promotions, training and mentoring and therefore lacking important competencies and connections restricting their chances of success. All these factors provide women with more reasons to change their career paths or start entrepreneurial work (Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Terjesen, 2005). As a result, facilitating women's reentry after career interruptions should be a major concern for companies who could lose valuable talent if they do not lower the price of taking career interruptions on reentry which might cost them valuable talented employees. This could be done by having a better understanding of the meaning and meaningfulness of work to women (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003).

### **Meaning of Work**

The meaning of work refers to the importance work takes in ones' life and could have different interpretations to different people. For instance, work could mean financial independence to someone but be more of a calling to someone else. In the literature, when one talks about the meaning of work, one also refers to the meaningfulness of work; with the meaningfulness of work being how important work is to a certain individual or community (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). A decade ago, in an attempt to describe how men and women define success and what factors they perceive as important, women were determined to define success differently than men. Instead of basing their definitions solely on career success and personal growth they also take into consideration their family lives and meaningful relationships. In other words, work is important to their perception of success and being satisfied with their lives as long as it is well integrated in their social life and does not conflict with their other roles (Dyke and Murphy, 2006).

While these results tend to generalize the meaningfulness of work to women, the preference theory gives us another perspective: According to (Hakim, 1998, 2000, 2003), when women have the opportunity to shapes their lives and their careers, they choose between 3 different lifestyles, depending on their priorities. This means that all women do not hold the same importance to different aspects of their lives but could fall into one of three patterns. These three patterns being: home centered or family centered, adaptive and work centered. It is important to note that these three different lifestyles are independent of education level and social class, with each class behaving as follows:

A work-centered woman's main priority in life is her career; she usually works in the public sector in competitive spheres (Hakim, 2003). Work-centered women

manage their family lives to accommodate for their work and are often childless even when married. They highly partake in developing their skills through trainings and qualifications as an investment in their careers. They are often a minority in any given environment and represent around 20% of the female population even in Western contexts (Hakim, 2003). They are not responsive to family or social policies but appreciate economic incentives as well as advancement opportunities.

Home centered or family centered women are a minority in western countries; they tend to focus on family and private life after they marry. These women usually prefer not to work after marriage and only do so out of financial necessity. Home centered women tend to have large families if their financial situation permits it. They pursue education as cultural capital in industries that rarely yield economic gain. They are usually not responsive to employment policies.

Adaptive women usually constitute the highest portions in most occupations. They prefer to give equal emphasis to work and family life without prioritizing either. "They want to enjoy the best of both worlds" (Hakim, 2003). They are attracted to industries that accounts for good work life balance like academia. Contrarily to home centered women, they pursue their studies with the intention to work. Adaptive women often seek to assign as much time to their families as to their work therefore they often switch to more flexible jobs after their pregnancy. They prefer part time jobs, temporary work, work from home or school term-time jobs. However if these more flexible options that promote work life balance and reduce commuting time are not available, they will resume working a full time job. They are very responsive to legislation promoting female employment, flextime, institutional factors as well as changes in perceptions toward working women.

One of the main advantages of this theory is that it can follow changes in

women's priorities as well as help identify which social and employment policies they were have the greatest impact as well as which populations will be responsive to such initiatives (Hakim, 2003).

## **Women's Careers in the MENA**

### **Overview of the Socio-Cultural Outlook in the MENA**

Recently, scholars found six macro-level drivers which shape women's lives and careers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA, 2007). These macro level factors categories include: Socioeconomic factors, demographic factors, family network and interpersonal connections, government legal frameworks and legislation, Islam and patriarchy. Due to the diversity of the region, these factors do not affect all the countries equally and call for further national based research (Karam and Afiouni, 2014).

Moreover, an exploratory study identified several sociocultural factors that impact women's careers in the Arab Middle East, these factors being: Islam, patriarchy and family centrality (Afiouni, 2014). These findings consolidate the fact that Arab women's careers are shaped by a number of societal scripts (Jamali, Sidani and Safieddine, 2005; Omair, 2008).

### **The Impact of The Socio-Cultural Factors on Women's Careers**

As mentioned previously women's careers in the Middle East are highly affected by different social factors and scripts. When examining the existing literature on the subject, three main factors stand out and have been proven to highly influence women's careers in the Middle East. Those three factors that seem to have a considerable impact on women's career choices in the region are Islam, patriarchy and family centrality (Afiouni, 2014; Karam and Afiouni, 2014; Jamali, Sidani and Safieddine, 2005; Metcalf, 2007; Miles, 2002; Mostafa, 2005; Omair, 2008; Sidani,

2005). Therefore we are going to focus on these three macro factors to give a holistic view of the forces in interplay to better appreciate the context in which Middle Eastern women's careers evolve.

### *Islam*

One of the most predominant macro level factors that affects women's career in the region is Islam. In fact, the Islamic religion dictates courses of conduct on all fronts of a believer's life (social, economic, cultural). Thus it shapes the environment in which his career evolves and therefore affects his career itself (Weir and Crowley-Henry, 2013) More specifically Islam dictates specific gender roles and social scripts women need to abide by during their career to gain and maintain respect and legitimacy in their environment (Afiouni, 2014), the most important of which is the perception that women's main role is that of caregiver and housekeeper (Metcalf, 2007) and do not have the same rights as their male counterparts (Sidani, 2005; Omair, 2008). Not only does Islam's conservative stance towards women affect the way their environment perceives them but it also affects their own perception of self, of their roles and their place in society (Omair, 2008). Islamic expectations also shape HR policies in the region. For instance, Afiouni and Karam (2014) identified the presence of indigenous HR policies in universities in the regions that acclimatize for Islamic practices like long bereavement leaves (Idda), medical escort leaves for wives as well as daily prayer breaks. It is important to note that although Islamic countries maintain a traditional vision of women's roles, it is not Islam itself that constricts women's career prospects but the strongly patriarchal interpretation some countries have of it (Sidani, 2005).

### *Patriarchy*

Arab societies in the Middle East are still considered strongly patriarchal and lacking gender equality with a prevalence of traditional gender roles (Metcalf, 2008,



Omair, 2008). In fact, men are still expected to be the primary financial providers for their families (Omair, 2008) while women's perceived main role is that of a caregiver who raises children and is in charge of household chores (Metcalf, 2007). Furthermore, when investigating barriers faced by Lebanese female managers in Lebanon, Jamali (2005) identified that cultural norms, mainly patriarchal attitudes, are one of the most preeminent factors dictating career. In addition, specific differentiations of gender roles are also found in organizational cultures and networks with women still being considered less stable than their male counterparts and less reliable. For instance, women in Lebanon reported being excluded from masculine informal networks and mentoring, which in turn gives them less visibility and therefore fewer opportunities for development (Jamali, 2005). Furthermore, when asked about the obstacles that hinder their career progression, 450 women identified organizational practices, male oriented organizational culture and networks as the main barriers they have to overcome, followed by mentoring and tokenism, which have shown to be less pertinent to the issue (Tlaiss, 2010). While women's contribution to the workforce in the region has highly increased, women commonly still choose to work into conservative traditional sectors like education, caretaking and clerical work (Metle, 2002) with female entrepreneurs mostly concentrated in the service sector (Omair, 2008) and women holding lower level jobs (Metcalf, 2008). Furthermore throughout their careers women are expected to enact specific gender roles (Afiouni, 2014) and many of them are still expected in certain countries to stop or stall their careers due to marriage or to avoid earning more than their husbands (Marmenout, 2009, Metcalf, 2006). While patriarchy is still predominant in the Middle East there is some evidence of evolving gender roles in the region (Afiouni and Karam, 2014; Sidani, 2005) with women becoming less submissive and a change of perception of working women due to the "westernization and

modernization” of the region (Omair, 2008). Similarly the relocation of men throughout the region to find better opportunities can in some cases create more diverse opportunities for women (Omair, 2008). This is the case in Jordan where postponing marriage to focus on one's career is becoming more common between women (Miles, 2002).

### *Family Centrality*

Recently, many researchers have sustained that a woman's perception of family in the Middle East impacts her career decisions (Afiouni and Karam, 2013, Metcalfe, 2008, Omair 2008) with family preceding paid work in terms of women's priorities in the region (Neal *et al.* 2005). Contrarily to Western countries, the extended family has an important role in the Middle East and family is deemed the core of the social, economic, political and religious spheres (Omair, 2008). In addition, in some Middle Eastern collectivistic countries people rely on their families and close networks to seek advice, jobs and advancement (Metcalfe, 2006, Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). Furthermore, caring for ones' family as well as for a spouses' family are concept deeply rooted in women's' mind from their childhood (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011) which reinforces the role as caregivers. Not only did society perceive childrearing and housework as the major role of women but also women themselves identified family is their first priority and declared that having a career is important as long as it is concealable with family duties (Jamali, 2005). For instance, a qualitative study in Jordan on unemployment found amongst its themes “the strength of family ties” as well as women weighing the impact of career decisions on their families as well as their point of view in consideration (Miles, 2002). In Lebanon, when searching for determinant factors for women's careers paths, *wasta* (nepotism) was found to hold an important role to the extent that it can outweigh gender prejudice when it comes to

finding a job and getting promoted (Tlaiss, 2009; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). This prevalence of nepotism shows the importance collectivistic countries like Lebanon give to family ties and networks that even intervene in the professional sphere. One of the most important factors that weight in women's success in the region is the support of their families and spouses, with women's success in the country not being defined by financial gain but with satisfaction, serenity and personal fulfillment (Omair, 2008). It is therefore safe to say that women's families are an extremely important factor in shaping their careers as well as her perception of success.

### **Males' Attitudes toward Women's Career**

A study of men's attitudes toward women's employment in Saudi Arabia revealed that most men have a traditional vision of gender roles and are not supportive of women's employment (Elamine and Omair, 2010). While these results might contradict most of the existing literature about changing gender-roles (Metcalf, 2007, 2008; Omair, 2008), age was the greater predictor of males' attitude towards women's contribution to the workforce, this might be an indicator that a change in perception might gradually occur with new generations (Elamine and Omair, 2010). In the same manner, Metle's (2002) study of public sector employees in Kuwait showed that although women's participation in the workforce is increasing, there is still an implicit agreement that men are more entitled to jobs than women. In Jordan on the other hand, males seemed quite receptive to woman's employment if the job fit the societal view of what was considered appropriate working conditions for young women (Miles, 2002). A review of the existing literature on the subject showed that although there is a traditional vision of women and some reservation about working women, these gender-based perceptions are becoming more moderate (Omair, 2008). Consequently, it is safe to say that although men's perception of female employment is changing, these changes are

occurring at different paces in different Middle Eastern countries. This disparity of perceptions can be due to the large heterogeneity of the region and the prevalence of Islam in some countries (Elamine and Omair, 2010).

### **Women's Careers in Lebanon**

Lebanon is often considered the most Westernized country in the region because it incorporates both Western and Eastern ideals and is a melting pot for Christian and Muslim non-fundamentalist values (Neal *et al.*, 2005). It is also the first country in its surroundings where women were introduced in the political and economic spheres, traditionally reserved to males in the region, and were given roles outside traditional gender roles (Sidani, 2005). Contrarily to other women in the region, Lebanese women are perceived as liberated and having the freedom to interact with males and to evolve into more masculine circles (Neal *et al.*, 2005). However this positive vision of Lebanese women does not portray the whole picture: recent studies have shown that women in Lebanon still face the same barriers to career progression as their Arab counterparts, mainly due to the prevalence of cultural values as well as hostile organizational cultures (Jamali, 2005; Jamaly, Sidani and Safieddine, 2005; Tlaiss, 2009, 2010).

Almost two thirds of working women in Lebanon are concentrated in health, education and the social service sectors (MENA, 2007). The prevalence of women in these particular sectors can be partially explained by the absence of other interesting options that permit them to balance their different roles (Afiouni and Karam, 2014). Since most Lebanese women still perceive their families as their main priority and are not willing to sacrifice their role of custodian of family values and caretakers to advance in their careers (Jamali, 2005). Not only do women tend to cluster in certain sectors, but

they are also underrepresented in managerial levels, even in sectors where they constitute a large portion of the labor force (Association of Lebanese Banks, 2000; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). Lebanese women also face more difficulties than men when it comes to enacting their careers. For instance, a study of female managers in Lebanon showed that women still need higher educational achievements and more experience than men to get promoted since most organizational environments still perceive women as less proficient than their male counterparts (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). In addition, women with high educational accomplishments still find themselves clustered at lower levels of management (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). Interestingly, Lebanese women require actively balancing their family roles and their careers to feel successful and measure their success in comparison to other women who are unable to do so rather than to men's financial achievement and status (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). When asked about difficulties faced that hindered their career progression, women blamed the corporate environment itself, where they are considered a riskier investment than men. However, Lebanese women have begun to contest the unwritten rules of suitable female employment and sectors by increasing the range of available career opportunities for women and adventuring into more masculine sectors and jobs. In fact, they are fully aware of their role in changing the current mentality and demonstrating they can match men's accomplishments and capabilities with hard work and perseverance (Jamali, Sidani and Saffieddine, 2005; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). These and other studies on the Middle East and more specifically Lebanon represent promising milestones for future generalizable studies on the socio-cultural influence the region exerts on women and their career choices. Although research on women's careers in the MENA region has been prolific, there has been no particular consideration to career interruptions, specifically in Lebanon which leads us to our research objectives:

*RO1:* Identify the perceptions of women of the different factors that affect their career interruptions in Lebanon and determine whether these are related to personal agency, organizational factors, social factors, or a combination of multiple reasons.

*RO2:* Investigate women's perceptions of the Kaleidoscope Career Model to determine if it transcends culture and can be used to analyze the reasons women opt out of the workplace in Lebanon.

*RO3:* Explain whether structural, social factors or agentic factors triggered women's desire to join the workplace then reflect on the reentry process.

*RO4:* Reflect on this studies' results to suggest recommendations if needed.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since the study of Women career interruption in the Middle East is still in its infancy, and therefore unknown territory, a qualitative approach will facilitate the emergence of new themes (Patton, 2005).

#### **Sampling Approach**

The sample consists of 15 Lebanese women from different sectors who hold at least a bachelor's degree and are between 20 and 65 years old. All participants experienced at least one career interruption of 3 months or more and resumed work afterwards. Given the difficulty to locate women from diverse industries with career interruptions, along with the low response rate in the country, this research relied on the snowball method to identify women that both meet the criteria and are willing to participate in this study. Therefore, we started establishing a convenient sample from personal contacts such as family members, friends, and relatives who themselves helped obtain other potential participants for the research. An initial message introducing the research was sent by email to the primary sample to identify those who are interested and inform them about the procedure. Along with the message, a paragraph invited them to forward the email to women who might be interested along with my contact information. In order to not pressure the participants, they were encouraged to approach me themselves to initiate an interview. Only then were they emailed a consent form and would an interview meeting discussed. Table 1 illustrates the sample characteristics of each participant who is given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

Table 1

*Sample Demographics*

| Name  | Age | Grew up in      | Lives in | Status   | children | Worked in   | Mother's job      | Father's job         |
|-------|-----|-----------------|----------|----------|----------|---|-------------------|----------------------|
| Amina | 58  | Urban           | Suburban | Married  | 2        | Teaching then own company                             | Housewife         | CEO                  |
| Aya   | 30  | Urban           | Urban    | Single   | 0        | Advertising then own company                          | Art gallery owner | Businessman          |
| Ghada | 34  | Rural           | Suburban | Married  | 2        | Advertising   | Housewife         | Teacher              |
| Jana  | 34  | Urban           | Urban    | Married  | 3        | Advertising then Embassy                              | Housewife         | Restaurant owner     |
| Lama  | 64  | Rural           | Rural    | Divorced | 2        | Art, Banking then own business                        | Housewife         | Business owner       |
| Lara  | 51  | Rural           | Urban    | Married  | 3        | Accounting  | Housewife         | Small business owner |
| Leila | 65  | Urban and Rural | Suburban | Married  | 2        | Teaching  | Housewife         | Pharmacist           |
| Maya  | 30  | Urban           | Suburban | Single   | 0        | Travel agency   | Housewife         | Sales manager        |
| Nadia | 60  | Urban           | Urban    | Married  | 2        | Teaching  | Housewife         | Civil engineer       |
| Rana  | 57  | Rural           | Suburban | Divorced | 3        | Own business then management                          | Housewife         | Landlord             |
| Rima  | 30  | Urban           | Suburban | Single   | 0        | Teaching  | Housewife         | Sales manager        |
| Roula | 26  | Rural           | Urban    | Married  | 0        | Pharmaceutical companies and pharmacies. Own pharmacy | Housewife         | Business owner       |
| Saja  | 28  | Suburban        | Suburban | Married  | 0        | Interior design                                       | Teacher           | Carpenter            |
| Sara  | 40  | Urban           | Urban    | Married  | 2        | Teaching then own business                            | Housewife         | Small Business owner |
| Zeina | 45  | Urban           | Urban    | Married  | 1        | Teaching  | Store manager     | Army                 |

**Data Collection**

Data was collected through face to face semi structured interviews that lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. These semi-structured interviews permitted us to explore the views, experiences and motivations of individual participants through several key questions while allowing respondents to diverge in order to pursue specific issues (Gill *et al.*, 2008). The interview protocol was adapted from pre-existing questionnaires used



to assess the Kaleidoscope Career Model, including both broad open ended questions and probes to allow for patterns to come up from the participants' personal experience. The interview protocol also tests for the importance of social factors in shaping women's career choices. To include non-English educated candidates, all interview questions were translated to Arabic and back translated to English in order to insure both set of questions convey the same meaning. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each participant received the transcribed version of her interview to review it and to rule out any potential errors. Interviews conducted in Arabic were translated by the bilingual researcher who compared the translated versions to the tape recordings to make sure the meaning was not altered during the translation process.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data was kept anonymous; with each participant assigned a pseudonym. Access to the raw data was limited to one coder for verbatim transcription and was destroyed once the interviews transcribed to erase any possible link to our participants. After that, two different coders read all transcripts and identified key statements they found recurrent in different response transcripts (15 for each question). They then combined them into meaningful categories on Nvivo 10. Our study relied on thematic analysis with no preconceived categories since it permits an extensive range of analytical choices and enables multiple themes to immerge from the data itself (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which makes it an appropriate method for an exploratory research where a broad set of themes might be discussed by the participants. It is important to note that each coder identified statements and combined them into themes and patterns on his own to avoid personal biases or missing out on pertinent information. As a last step the two coders met and discussed their statement lists' similarities and

discrepancies and worked on merging similar categories to come up with a smaller set of themes. The outcome of this exercise was themes perceived as relevant by the two coders that would serve as the base of our analysis.

### **Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol present in the appendix consists of 18 semi-structured questions adapted from pre-existing questionnaires used to assess the Kaleidoscope Career Model. It includes both broad open ended questions and probes to allow for patterns to come up from the participants' personal experience. The interview protocol tackles the following major themes: demographics, employment history and social and organizational factors. While demographics are here to help better understand both the context and background of our sample, the part on employment history helps us examine all aspects of career interruptions, from the reasons that led to them, to their perceived impact on our sample's careers. The final section on organizational and social factors helps us examine whether women's social context and organizations' cultures and procedures affects women's career decisions when it comes to on-ramping and off-ramping.

## CHAPTER IV

## RESULTS

Table 2 exemplifies the thematic analysis that recapitulates the most predominant themes and categories distinguished through the content analysis of the 15 interviews. We added the respondents' pseudonym to help the reader get a holistic view of women's profiles whose answers pertain to a specific category through the demographic information presented in Table 1. The number in the "source" column refers to the number of participants who mentioned a certain category. As for the number in the "references" column it reflects the number of times a certain category was mentioned as the same respondent might have mentioned a certain category more than once.

Table 2

*Thematic Analysis Results*

| Category                              | Sources | References | Pseudonym  |
|---------------------------------------|---------|------------|--|
| <b>Career interruption</b>            |         |            |  |
| <i>Causes of career interruptions</i> |         |            |  |
| Family                                | 10      | 15         | Amina, Ghada, Jana, Lama, Lara, Nadia, Lama, Rima, sara, zeina |
| Organizational factors                | 7       | 9          | Aya, Ghada, lama, Lara, Maya, Roula, Saja                      |
| Personal choice                       | 3       | 4          | Amina, Roula, Saja   |
| <i>Length of career interruption</i>  |         |            |  |
| less than 7 months                    | 7       | 9          | Amina, Aya, Lama, Maya, Rima, Roula, Sara                      |
| a year                                | 3       | 3          | Ghada, Lara, Zeina   |
| between 1 and 5 years                 | 3       | 3          | Jana, Nadia Rana   |
| Between 5 and 10 years                | 2       | 2          | Amina, Sara  |
| more than 10 years                    | 2       | 2          | Laila, Nadia   |
| <i>Number of career Interruption</i>  |         |            |  |
| 1                                     | 8       | 8          | Aya, Ghada, Jana, Lara, Leila, Rana, Saja, Zeina               |
| 2                                     | 4       | 4          | Amina, Lama, Maya, Nadia                                       |
| 3                                     | 1       | 1          | Rima   |
| 4                                     | 1       | 1          | Roula  |

Table 2

*Continued*

| <b>Category</b>  | <b>Sources</b> | <b>References</b> | <b>Pseudonym</b>  |
|--|----------------|-------------------|---|
| <b>Perceptions</b>                                       |                |                   |   |
| <i>Environmental support to women's employment</i>       |                |                   |   |
| Extremely supportive close circle                        | 13             | 13                | Amina, Aya, Ghada, Jana, Lama, Maya, Nadia, Rana Rima, Roula, Saja, Sara, Zeina       |
| Undermining and unsupportive family members              | 4              | 4                 | Lara, Leila, Rana, Lama   |
| <i>Organizational support to women's employment</i>      |                |                   |   |
| Supportive   | 8              | 12                | Ghada, Jana, Leila, Rana, Rima, Roula, Saja, Sara Aya, Lara, Maya, Nadia, Roula, Saja |
| Extremely unsupportive organization and employer         | 6              | 8                 |   |
| reluctantly provides support                             | 7              | 8                 | Aya, Ghada, Lama, Lara, Rana, Rima, Zeina   |
| Supportive because self employed                         | 3              | 4                 | Amina, Ghada, Lama  |
| <i>Ease of reentry process</i>                           |                |                   |   |
| Easy and fast  | 13             | 13                | Amina, Aya, Ghada, Jana, Lama, Lara, Maya, Nadia, Rana Rima, Roula, Saja, Sara, Zeina |
| No difficulty on reentry                                 | 7              | 7                 | Lara, Maya, Nadia, Rana Rima, Roula, Sara,  |
| Faced some difficulties on reentry                       | 5              | 5                 | Lama, Saja, Zeina, Leila, Jana  |
| Opportunity available through close environment          | 4              | 4                 | Amina, Aya, Ghada, Lama   |
| Difficult and lengthy                                    | 1              | 1                 | Leila   |
| <i>Perceived legitimacy of women's employment</i>        |                |                   |   |
| Legitimate   | 7              | 7                 | Amina, Aya, Jana, Lama, Lara, Maya, Sara  |
| Legitimate only out of necessity                         | 5              | 5                 | Ghada, Nadia, Rana, Roula, Zeina  |
| Changing perception towards working women                | 4              | 4                 | Lama, Lara, Rima, Saja  |
| <i>Role Model</i>  |                |                   |   |
| Male relative  | 0              | 0                 |   |
| working woman from close environment                     | 7              | 7                 | Lara, Leila, Maya, Nadia, Rana, Rima, Zeina   |
| None   | 5              | 5                 | Amina, Aya, Ghada, Lama, Saja   |
|  | 3              | 4                 | Jana, Roula, Sara   |
| <i>Career interruption advice</i>                        |                |                   |   |
| Recommends career interruptions                          | 11             | 11                | Amina, Aya, Ghada, Jana, Leila, Maya, Nadia, Rana Rima, Roula, Sara                   |
| Does not recommend career interruptions                  | 4              | 4                 | Lama, Lara, Saja, Zeina   |
| <b>Career</b>  |                |                   |   |
| <i>Does not perceive having a career</i>                 | 5              | 5                 |   |
| <i>Impact of career interruption on career prospects</i> |                |                   |   |
| <i>Negative</i>  |                |                   |   |
| loss of self confidence                                  | 5              | 6                 | Ghada, Leila, Nadia, Roula, Saja  |
| Loss of respect and of credibility                       | 4              | 4                 | Ghada, Nadia, Roula   |
|  | 2              | 2                 | Leila, Saja   |
| <i>Positive</i>  |                |                   |   |
| time to balance priorities                               | 5              | 6                 | Amina, Aya, Jana, Rima, Sara  |
| New perspective  | 3              | 3                 | Jana, Rima, Sara  |
| Time to reflect of future projects                       | 2              | 2                 | Amina, Sara   |
|  | 1              | 1                 | Aya   |
| <i>No impact</i>   | 4              | 4                 | Lama, Maya, Rana, Zeina   |

Table 2

*Continued*

| Category                           | Sources | References | Pseudonym   |
|------------------------------------|---------|------------|---|
| <b>Work</b>                        |         |            |   |
| <i>Meaning of work</i>             |         |            |   |
| Self-fulfillment                   | 6       | 6          | Amina, Jana, Lama, Lara, Rima, Saja   |
| Become an active member of society | 4       | 4          | Amina, Aya, Nadia, Zeina  |
| Less important than family         | 4       | 4          | Ghada, Maya, Roula, Saja  |
| Independence                       | 2       | 3          | leila, Rana   |
| <i>Reasons for resuming work</i>   |         |            |   |
| Self-fulfillment                   | 6       | 7          | Amina, Lara, Leila, Rana, Rima, Sara  |
| Financial reasons                  | 4       | 4          | Aya, Ghada, Lara, Leila   |
| Creating own business              | 3       | 3          | Amina, Aya, Sara  |
| Decreased family responsibilities  | 2       | 2          | Rana, Sara  |
| <i>Preference</i>                  |         |            |   |
| Adaptive                           | 12      | 12         | Amina, Jana, Lama, Lara, Leila, Maya, Nadia, Rana, Rima, Roula, Sara, Zeina |
| Work centered                      | 2       | 2          | Aya, Saja   |
| Family centered                    | 1       | 1          | Ghada   |

### Career Interruptions

The analysis of the questions, "Did you have career interruptions? How many? For how long each time? For each career interruption, what prompted you to quit? What prompted you to return?" led to the identification of four themes under which fall multiple categories as follows:

#### Causes of Career Interruptions

When asked about what prompted their career interruptions our samples responses led to the detection of three distinctive categories:

##### *Family Reasons Led to Career Interruption*

In total 10 women in the sample cited family reasons as the principle cause of their career interruptions. Most of them emphasized the need to be with their children while they were growing up or the need to prepare their arrival. They also mentioned being scared of missing out on important milestones in their children's lives if they

continued working. Here are some of the most poignant statements on the subject:

*I left because I was not able to conceal the work hours with my new duties as a mother. (Ghada)*

*I had to stop working to take care of my children while they were still young. (Jana)*

*I wanted to start work two years after my first child but then Marc was born and I did not feel like leaving him that early. (Jana)*

*I stayed there until I was 8 month pregnant and stopped to prepare for the baby's arrival; I wanted to take care of him myself. (Lara)*

*First when we moved to Dubai, by the time we settled there I was pregnant and preferred not to look for work. (Nadia)*

*I did it because I wanted to raise my kids myself and was scared to miss out on important milestones. (Sara)*

*[I stopped] after my sons' birth to raise him, we have been trying to have a child for years and he finally was there I did not want to miss a second of him growing up. (Zeina)*

Others left work to follow their husbands abroad, mainly to the UAE, since they were offered a better opportunity. This was the case of Sara, lama and Nadia. Only Rima claimed leaving work to take care of her parents:

*All I can say about my interruptions is that my parents needed me and it was my duty to put them ahead of any other priority at the time including my job. (Rima)*

It is also important to note that some of the women in our sample perceived a combination of the family factors above to be the cause of their interruption.

### *Organizational Factors*

The second most salient category identified as a cause of career interruptions in our sample is organizational factors. In fact, seven women responded with statements that pertain to this category. While there were different organizational factors identified by women ranging from poor compensation to having disagreements with one's boss or even a hostile organizational culture, two specific subcategories were predominantly

cited. One of which is an extremely constraining job that makes juggling different priorities almost impossible:

*I left because my work was too constraining I was at the same time in charge of marketing designing and holding the store for a low salary. (Aya)*

*I had trouble managing both my job and my studies I stopped for the last 2 years of university. Before working as an interior design, my former boss was not really conciliating with the fact I was studying. (Saja)*

*I left because I was not able to conceal the work hours with my new duties as a mother. (Ghada)*

*My boss hated me and spent her time making my job impossible, the pay was really low, the hours too long, I ended up standing up to her and quitting. (Lara)*

The other predominant subcategory was a lack of opportunities for advancement and development, with women perceiving their jobs as being boring and repetitive:

*I left because I was bored in my jobs that were repetitive and tedious on the long run. (Lama)*

*I left because I had no opportunity for development or progress. (Maya)*

*The second time I left because I wanted a higher position. (Maya)*

#### *Agency*

The last category of reasons discussed by our sample was women's agency, with only 3 respondents claiming they paused their career out of personal choice. In this case respondents wanted to redirect to another job, open their own business or take time away for the workplace in order to travel and focus on themselves.

#### **Length and Number of Career Interruption**

The second aspect of career interruption tackled through our interview was the length of our sample's career breaks. Half of our respondents had career interruptions

that ranged from 3 to 7 months. Only three claimed to have stopped for less than a year, but more than seven months or between a year and five years. And finally two respondents had careers that lasted between 5 to 10 years and only two had career interruptions that lasted more than a decade.

Half of our sample only had one career interruption, 4 had 2 and only one respondent had 3 or 4 career interruptions.

#### *Ease of Reentry Process*

When asked about how and how long it took them to resume work after their interruption, 13 of the 15 women that constitute our sample perceived their reentry to be fast and relatively easy and only one respondent found the reentry process to be difficult and lengthy. Taking a closer look we identified the following themes.

#### *No Difficulty on Reentry*

Seven of the women in our sample stated that they did not face any particular difficulty on reentry due to their career interruption. For instance, two respondents perceived that the repetitive nature of their job made it easier for them to accommodate to their job. Two others of these seven women perceived that the career interruption was too short to affect their abilities which could explain their ease of reentry. Only one participant stated having evolved which made her reentry easier.

*No because I learned from each new experience and job and felt more confident about my skills. (Lara)*

And finally only one woman stated not facing difficulties on reentry due to proper training:

*Not really no, my friend trained me for a month before she left I am a fast learner so It all went smoothly, everyone was very supportive and patient there. (Rana)*



*Faced Some Difficulties on Reentry*

Five women reported having faced some difficulties on reentry. Three of them perceived that these difficulties were due to a change in industry and getting accustomed to a foreign environment. However, the remaining two respondents reported a loss in self-esteem and feeling guilty for resuming work. One respondent even felt that she was perceived differently by her coworkers:

*Not really but I was intimidated at first to be in a bigger more "professional" firm I was afraid not to get used to it but I did. I probably lacked confidence which pushed me to do twice the effort than my other colleagues to avoid being labeled as "the mother" who could not care less about work.*

**Opportunity Available Through Close Environment**

When asked about the ease of reentry, 4 women from our sample pointed out they found their job through their family and close networks. In most cases, they were approached and informed about the opening without going through the hassle of looking for a job themselves:

*I did not go about to search for a job again an opportunity was available through my sister who was a retired ballerina due to an injury. (Amina)*

*Around three months a university teacher with whom I kept in touch contacted me when he knew there was an opening. (Aya)*

*In marketing and communication having a large network helps and I kept in touch with most of my university friends' teachers and previous colleagues from internships it made it easier for me. (Aya)*

*I found the job through public relations it took me around a month, had to go through a lot of uninteresting offers and interviews before I found exactly what I was looking for. (Ghada)*

**Perceptions****Career Interruption Advice**

*Does Not Recommend Taking Career Interruptions*

When asked whether they would recommend taking career interruptions to other women, 4 of our respondents said they would not do so. They claimed that working helps self-fulfillment, feeling useful:

*Frankly no, working allows woman to feel useful and independent it provides them with income and help them keep a healthy social life and feel fulfilled, If a woman has the opportunity to work she should hang on to it. (Lama)*

*No staying home kills your imagination and your sense of self-worth. (Saja)*

One respondent pointed out that she would not recommend taking career interruptions unless it was really necessary which her case was:

*It depends when I left my job it was to take care of my child if there wasn't an important reason to do so I wouldn't have done it and wouldn't recommend it to others. If I had family who could have helped or that my absence was compensated by someone trustworthy I would not have stopped. (Zeina)*

#### *Recommends Career Interruptions*

While 4 women affirmed they would not recommend career interruptions, more than two thirds of our sample affirms they would. While the responses somehow differ, the same subcategories appear in most of our respondents answers. For instance, taking some time to balance ones other priorities and focusing on one's family:

*I would recommend taking career interruptions for women, to allow for better family care because I do not believe that raising children is thoroughly possible while having a full career. One should balance his/her priorities. (Amina)*

*Yes if it offers them the opportunity to be happier and at peace with their other roles. I am a person and a daughter before being a teacher. (Rima)*

*In my opinion any woman who has a career and wants to build a family must stop educate her children then go back to working, and if she does not she will regret it later on, because at some point she is going to grow old and stop working and nothing can replace a strong loving family. (Sara)*

Taking some time for herself to discover what she really wants. Achieve other goals to plan for the future:

*Yes if it helps them balance their priorities and use the time constructively to achieve their dreams and ambitions but I am against staying idle for too long. (Aya)*

*If it is financially possible of course but not more than for a couple of years. There are the best years in a woman's life and make up for great memories. (Leila)*

And finally pursuing ones' education or pursuing other opportunities after reaching a dead end:

*Yes, when someone reaches a place where he feels he cannot grow, he owes it to himself to leave and seek better opportunities. (Maya)*

### **Environmental Support to Women's Employment**

#### *Extremely Supportive Close Circle*

When asked how supportive of their career their environment was, 13 out of the 15 women who went through the interview said they had an extremely supportive and close circle of people. In fact most women cited that their husbands, parents, siblings, friend and children supported their career choices and helped them find work and manage their different roles. For instance one respondent reported that her mother was helping her with childrearing while her husband was actively helping her find a job:

*Very [supportive]. My mother is helping me with the kids and my husband actively helped me look for work. (Ghada)*

Another reported that her family and friends helped her gather the funds to start her own company:

*Very [helpful], they helped me find a job, helped me raise the money to open my own pharmacy and gave me advice. (Roula)*

#### *Undermining and Unsupportive Family Members*

While most our sample stated perceiving their close circle as extremely

supportive, three women have reported that their husband were not supportive at all of them working. In their opinion, their husbands feared that their careers would affect their family dynamic, would distract them from their traditional duties as wives, housekeepers and mothers. According to these men, a woman's place is at home with her family and the money that she would earn by working is not worth the void she would leave in the household. They were also inconvenienced with the idea of contributing to the household work or having to rely more on themselves when they returned from their own jobs. One of our respondents' spouses was uneasy with his wife working and related it with failing at his role as a husband.

*A lot my kids mostly but the war delayed it I guess. It annoyed my husband at first he was used to getting a lot more attention after work, once I started to work myself he had to do some chores heat the food alone.... But he was happy to see me happy. (Leila)*

*Depending on whom, I discussed trying to go back to work with my husband and he felt the money was not worth the time and energy I would need to devote to get it. (Lara)*

*He [My husband] used to say that he was doing his best to make sure I do not have to work. (Lara)*

Moreover, one woman perceived her siblings to be hostile towards her desire to work because they felt they would have to compensate her absence caring for their mother

*My sibling's count a lot on me take care of my mother and would probably resent me working again because they would have to compensate my absence. (Lara)*

### **Organizational Support To Women's' Employment**

#### *Supportive*

When asked how supportive organizations were of their careers, half our sample identified their organization as supportive and claimed they helped them balance their other roles:

*A lot they are really supportive and concerned with the well-being of their employees and they allowed me to merge my priorities. (Jana)*

*My new workplace was very helpful when my daughter was born I took some time off then resumed work. (Ghada)*

However only two respondents declared that their workplace had established procedures to make sure all employees felt they have their support, flexibility or opportunities for advancement:

*The pharmaceutical company had clear rules to help their employees manage both their career progression. (Roula)*

*A lot, there is a rule and procedure for everything that takes into consideration that employees are people with lives and families. (Jana)*

#### *Reluctantly Provides Support*

However, seven women from our sample claimed that when the company was supportive it did it reluctantly to advance her own agenda without specific consideration to the employee herself:

*They helped a lot with my insecurities but would convince me to stay if I planned on stopping work for a while to help my son with his children when he would have some. They help as long as it would not conflict with their own interests which are what I would do if I were in their shoes. (Rana)*

*[They were] Supportive as long as it affects it positively. They would stall my development or encourage it depending on their own agenda. (Rima)*

Furthermore, some respondents did not feel they were considered as an important asset to the company which made them question how valuable they were to their companies:

*They were not involved, they did not want me to leave, at least the travel agency did not but they never contacted me again. (Lara)*

#### *Extremely Unsupportive Organization or Employer*

In addition half our sample described their organization or their direct manager as extremely unsupportive. They reported that their employer did not respond to their needs even when they had valuable reasons to seek support or more flexibility:

*Not at all, at least my previous employer was not [supportive]. I was just a pawn for them. (Aya)*

*No, even when I was pregnant, I was never allowed to be late or to take an extra day off, I used to drive to work still feeling morning sickness to avoid negative comments. (Lara)*

#### *Supportive Because Self-Employed.*

However 3 respondents claimed being in a supportive organization because they are their own boss. They consider being their own boss one of the few possible options that helps them balance their priorities.

*Being an entrepreneur is amazing it helps you appreciate other aspects of your life and manage your own time, when I left the country I was tired of working for others and having to abide by their rules. (Lama)*

### **Role Model**

#### *Male Relative*

When asked if they had a role model growing up, 7 women identified either their brother or father as their role model. They mainly admired how driven and loving they were and how they believed in their capabilities:

*My father and brother, we were really close and I always dreamt of being like them, strong assertive and driven. (Zeina)*

*My older brother he always been an example I wanted to follow I still consult with him with important personal or work matters. (Rana)*

*My father, he was extremely effectuate and a great parent. He used to tell me there is nothing I couldn't do if I worked hard enough. (Lara)*

*My older brother he always been an example I wanted to follow I still consult with him with important personal or work matters. (Rana)*

#### *Working Woman from Close Environment*

Five respondents identified working women from their environment as their role model. They mainly admired how driven and successful they were on different fronts:

*My grandmother who was a very strong educated Italian woman who was in charge of her father's company after his death which was not that common at the time. I think that I owe her my entrepreneurial spirit. (Lama)*

*My aunt a clinical psychologist in the USA who took her PHD and pursued a successful career after her marriage, having the support of husband and family. (Amina)*

*My mother she is a strong eccentric and creative woman, she is currently my partner in my new business and always been extremely supportive. (Aya)*

#### *No Role Model*

Finally 3 women stated not having role models growing up and always wanting to shape their own path:

*None of course I admired different people growing up but never to the point to try and mimic them. (Roula)*

*No I had my own vision of what I wanted to be and did not aspire to mimic anyone's path and wanted to create my own. (Jana)*

### **Perceived Legitimacy of Women's Employment**

#### *Legitimate*

When asked how their environment felt about or perceived women's employment, half our sample perceived that women like men, had the right to work and should be a productive part of society:

*Yes everyone does we believe that work is a way to achieve self-fulfillment and a happy life, at least that is how we were raised. (Aya)*

*Yes in my environment men and women are equal. (Maya)*

*It was definitely common for women to work in my environment since my grandmother was already school rector (in the 1940) and my aunts were either professors or researchers and many women friends of my*

*parents were working (Amina)*

#### *Legitimate Only Out of Necessity*

When it comes to career legitimacy, 5 women stated that women should work only if necessary to help provide for the family:

*No Not really, we focus on family, if a woman does not need to work to pay necessities her place is at home with the kids, it is a way we were raised I guess. (Rana)*

*Yes all of my married friends, cousins and even my sister is working. It is harder now to pay the bills with one income per household than it was before. (Roula)*

*Yes, it is hard to make a decent living and raise a family with one income; most of the women in my environment do work. (Zeina)*

#### *Changing Perception Towards Working Women*

Finally, 4 respondents perceived a change in Lebanese society's view of women employment, slowly becoming more and more accepted by the community:

*20 years ago no. But once I came back to Lebanon I realized that that changed and most of my friends are women in their late career, mostly working part time or consulting for their previous employer. (Lama)*

*Yes, nowadays men and women are equal. At least that is how I was raised, my mother was a housewife because she was afraid to leave me and my brothers alone but times have changed now. (Rima)*

### **Career**

#### *Does Not Perceive Having A Career*

When asked questions concerning their career, a third of our sample claimed they do not perceive having a career, or that the concept did not apply to their succession of jobs:

*My career decisions? I do not have any just worked stopped and worked somewhere else afterwards. (Zeina)*

*No simply because I never thought of my jobs as a career it was a stable way to get money and both experiences weren't related. (Lara)*



*Not much, but frankly I did not have much of a career in Lebanon just a succession of jobs. (Lama)*

#### *Impact of Career Interruptions of Career Prospects*

- *Negative impact*

When asked about the impact of career interruptions on their careers five of our respondents claimed that career interruptions affected their careers negatively. In fact 4 of them reported experiencing a lack of confidence in their skills and a decrease in self-esteem after their interruption:

*It made starting again stressful and made me question my abilities. (Ghada)*

Two respondents also mentioned that their career interruptions prompted others to look at them differently. Hence they lost credibility and coworkers' respect. Here is what one respondent had to say on the subject:

*I had to start from scratch lost my credibility and had to prove myself to others that did not stop working. I had to learn a lot by myself from books, the internet younger colleagues. Felt like I should have started earlier. (Leila)*

- *Positive impact.*

In addition 5 women from our sample felt that their career interruptions had a positive impact on their career prospects. More precisely, 3 women stated that their career interruptions helped them merge their careers with their other roles and priorities:

*No on the contrary, once I resolved family matters and helped my parents I felt more invested in my work. I would have felt extremely guilty if I had not done so. I had amazing parents who sacrificed a lot for me the least I could do is be there when they needed me. (Jana)*

Two others affirmed that their career interruptions gave them a new perspective on life and their career and helped them mature as a person:

*The time I spent out of the workplace did not affect my reintegration; on the contrary it gave new perspectives a sort of hindsight on behavioral issues which helped. (Amina)*

*On the contrary I had another point of view and came back more mature, I felt the time I spent as mother and as woman rather than as an employee helped me grow as a person. (Sara)*

And finally one respondent perceived that her interruptions helped her plan for future projects and further her career options in the direction she chose:

*No I spent the time working on my own business drafting plans and designing some products, on the contrary It motivated me to continue. (Aya)*

- *No impact.*

Furthermore four participants did not perceive their interruptions to have significantly impacted their prospects since most of them did not have long career interruptions or resumed work in the same industry:

*No it was like getting back on a bike it came naturally and since it was a really small company people were nice and we got to know each other really fast they used to joke about the fact that I was a "natural". (Rana)*

## **Work**

### **Meaning of Work**

#### *Self-fulfillment*

When asked about the importance of work in their lives, 6 participants from our sample claimed it helped them reach a better sense of self-fulfillment and be more at ease with their different roles and responsibilities:

*It is something I do for myself and it helps me define myself differently than just a wife or a mother, it builds up character too. (Jana)*

#### *Become an Active Part of Society*

Four women reported that because of work they felt they became an active part of society, being productive and avoiding feeling useless and isolated.

*I feel like a productive person with an active role in society. (Zeina)  
Less important than family.*

Four women also emphasized that although work was an important part of their lives, it was not as important as their families and relationships. They also maintained that it was a priority for them as long as they did not have kids or did not start a family:

*It is important but is not enough by itself; it is not the most important aspect of my life. (Ghada)*

*Work is my first priority in life I think there is a time for everything and as long as I do not have kids I want to focus solely on my career. (Roula)*

*[Work is] very important but not as much as family. (Sara)*

*[Work is] one of my priorities, then again I did not start my own family. (Maya)*

### *Financial Independence*

Only two women from our sample considered work as a means towards financial independence and to be considered as their husbands' equal when it comes to providing for their families:

*It changed my character. I used to be more dependent of my husband. When I was working I paid my daughters' studies and I had money for myself. Money I could use as I pleased without having to justify its use to my husband. (Leila)*

### **Reasons for Resuming Work**

#### *Self-fulfillment*

When questioned about the reasons that led them to resume work after their interruptions, six women from our sample claimed they did so for self-fulfillment. In fact they reported getting bored and missing the social interactions and intellectual stimulation they had through work:

*I am not into socializing like most housewives I know so I felt isolated and depressed really fast. (Rana)*

*I resumed work because I love my job, which I consider a blessing.  
(Rima)*

#### *Financial Reasons*

Four women reported having resumed work for financial reasons, mostly because their husbands' income was not enough for the family or because they felt uneasy asking for money from their parents and their spouses.

*I went back to work because we had some financial difficulties, we really needed additional income. (Ghada)*

*I used the year to take some time for myself until I started to get bored and felt uneasy about asking my parents for money. (Lara)*

#### *Creating Own Business*

Three women from our sample declared resuming work to start their own business and be self-employed.

*After that I returned to work to elaborate a structure for a family business and trade again solicited by family. I helped my sister establish her own dance school and started importing sports supplies in a shop I opened in down town. (Amina)*

#### *Decreased Family Responsibilities*

The two last respondents reported resuming work after their children grew up because they were not needed at home anymore and felt useless:

*When my kids grew older we came back from the states, they did not need me anymore. (Sara)*

### **Preferences**

#### *Adaptive*

When discussing the importance of work and where it falls on the spectrum of their priorities, 12 respondents stated that both work and family are necessary to their happiness and wellbeing and that they would shift their efforts to one that requires immediate attention:

*Only one for four years to take care of my children while they were still young. I wanted to start work after two years but then Marc was born and I did not feel like leaving him that early. (Jana)*

*[My grandmother] proved to me that a woman could do anything a man can while raising a family. (Lama)*

*I always hoped I could follow her example and succeed in both aspects of my life. (Lama)*

Similarly, they also tended to stress on the importance of work interruptions to conceal their family and their careers.

*I would recommend taking career interruptions for women, to allow for better family care because I do not believe that raising children is thoroughly possible while having a full career. One should balance his/her priorities. Given that the person intends to resume work and find a healthy equilibrium. (Amina)*

*Of course, I would [recommend taking career interruptions to other women]. At least for a while to focus on family especially when kids are young as long as they intend to start work again. (Rana)*

#### *Work Centered*

Only two participants clearly stated that work is the first priority without comparing it to the importance of family or mentioning whether their state of mind could evolve and whether they intend to conceal it with their other roles:

*It helped me elaborate and improve myself it is a big part of who I am I cannot imagine a life without work. (Saja)*

#### *Family Centered*

Finally only one woman from our sample declared resuming work only for financial reasons which she would not have done spontaneously since she had built a family:

*Yes one for a year, I left because I was not able to conceal the work hours with my new duties as a mother. I went back to work because we had some financial difficulties, we really needed additional income. (Ghada)*

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### **Meaning of Work**

When looking at answers regarding the meaning and importance of work, our results suggest that women in our sample have an adaptive approach to their priorities. In fact, most of our respondents consider work as one of their priorities but also view their family duties and relationships as extremely important. Some even mentioned that they needed to balance both to achieve self-fulfillment and self-satisfaction. Furthermore, most of the young women in our sample claim that work is currently their priority but that their state of mind will change once they have a family to accommodate, the new role they will have is perceived as equally or even more important than work itself. They also tend to shift their time and efforts from their career to their family and inversely depending on which aspects of their life currently requires immediate attention. For instance, most of our sample stated focusing solely on their career as long as they do not have children. The rest of our sample reported focusing on their working lives then taking some time away from work to take care of their children. Once they perceived that their children were autonomous and needed less time and attention they shifted back their efforts to joining the workplace. In addition, many women reported being frustrated, lacking purpose and feeling guilty when they felt they could not devote enough time and attention to both their families and their careers. These observations suggest that a significant portion of our sample is adaptive. This statement supports previous findings on the preference theory that states that most of any given society, independently of social class and ethnicity presents high

percentage of adaptive women (Hakim, 2008, 2012). Other studies already identified that women in Lebanon are required to balance both the family and professional spheres to consider themselves successful (Karam, Afiouni, and Nasr 2013; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010a, 2010b). Similarly, they came to the conclusion that Lebanese women were not willing to sacrifice their family relations and dynamics to advance their careers (Jamali, 2005) since their roles as caretakers are deeply embedded in their notion of self from their upbringing (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). These findings, as well as our findings, suggest that women try to conceal both spheres instead of nurturing one at the expense of another. It also portrays women as being determined to succeed following their own terms and without negating their upbringing and the values it gave them. What our research specifically adds to existing literature in fact is the link between women's priorities and the preference theory. For instance, adaptive women are highly receptive to policies and regulations that promote flexibility and a favorable environment to women's employment (Hakim, 2003). Thus, if our results are supported by future research, companies could work on better attracting and retaining women by improving their work life balance regulations and making sure women have equal opportunities for pay and advancement within their organizations which ultimately paves the way for better retention and utilization of the Lebanese workforce.

### **Environments' Role**

When it comes to the environmental support, women in our sample reported having extremely supportive close environments whereby their families to encourage them to grow, accept the need to move away from home or travel to pursue higher education and support their ambitions from their early childhood. All respondents who started their own business had fathers who were entrepreneurs themselves, which

portrays' the influence our sample's families had on their career decisions. Our respondents also heavily relied on their families to find jobs opportunities, consulted them for advice and often had their financial support when they started their own business. These narratives account for the importance of *wasta* and family connections and networks in the region, which are powerful enough to compensate for gender prejudice by propelling women on paths that would not have been available without the help of their family. These results confirm previous findings that found nepotism as one of the main factors that affect women's career in the region and that even outweighs and compensates for gender prejudice (Tlaiss, 2009; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). For instance in the region people give precedence to family allegiance over societal adherence with business decisions being based on family and close circles' interests which in turn gives rise to nepotism (Sidani and Thornberry, 2010). In addition research has shown that young women tend to be more sensitive to ethnic and family socialization than their male counterparts (Sidani *et al*, 2008), which might explain why women tend to rely on their families and close circles for business matters.

Another interesting observation in our samples narrative is their perception of change in society towards women's employment. In fact, the most seasoned respondents clearly stated observing a transformation in attitude towards working women who are nowadays closer to a norm than an exception. This phenomenon is also apparent in our demographic table where most of the participants' mothers were housewives while they worked. Our younger respondents portrayed having an internal locus of control while the most seasoned respondents tend to attribute their career decisions to external factors. Previous studies already identified a progressive change in perceptions towards women employment. For instance, in Saudi Arabia which is considered one of the most traditionalistic countries in the region, a study found that young men are starting to have



a more favorable view of women's employment in the country (Elamine and Omair, 2010). Similarly other studies pointed towards a progressive change in gender roles (Metcalf, 2007, 2008; Omair, 2008). However some studies still identify resistance towards women's evolving roles (Metle, 2002) which reminds us that perceptions change slowly and incrementally, especially for matters deeply rooted in one's values and upbringing. While the most seasoned women in our sample emphasize that it was unusual for a women to work unless her family was going through difficult financial times, younger women often claim that times have changed and that they were raised to believe both men and women where equals. In their opinion, and that of their families, women should be free to work if they aspire to do so. However, some respondents feel the need to justify women's employment by pointing out that it is extremely difficult to support a family with one income. This suggests that although society's perception of women employment is slowly changing and becoming more favorable, women themselves still feel the need to rationalize its occurrence. In our study, participants did not specifically describe a hostile environment to women's work; it is therefore safe to say that our sample was not drawn out of the workplace by social expectations about their roles or any traditional gender view of women's role in the society.

### **Career Interruptions**

Even though they reported having an extremely supportive close environment, most women in our sample stated taking career interruptions for family reasons. While some of these family reasons echoes the typical pull factors identified in the literature similar to child rearing or relocating to accommodate a spouse's career (Cabrera, 2007; Eby, 2001), others reveal a scarcity of options available given certain contexts (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2003). For instance, some of our respondents who took off-

ramps to raise their children stated that they did so because they were afraid of missing out on important milestones, as though according to them, their working conditions were not concealable with being there for their kids. That same fear of missing out on important family milestones and not being there for their children is often stated by women when discussing their career interruptions in the West (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2003). Furthermore our sample emphasized the lack of support systems that could have helped them conceal their working lives with their family roles. For instance, the Lebanese Labor Law only give women half the maternity leave's minimum duration recommended by the ILO (Tailfer, 2010). In addition, the local labor law does not have any provisions pertaining to breastfeeding or that recommends on-site daycare or daycare allowances from organizations (Tailfer, 2010). Therefore it is safe to say that there is room for improvement regarding local work legislation. Half our sample also reported taking career interruptions because of organizational factors. This is consistent with the literature that provides us with a myriad of pull factors that lead to career interruptions ((Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Terjensen, 2005). In fact, they all mentioned the lack of flexibility which made juggling their roles as mothers, wives or needed daughters too difficult. Some of them even perceived being considered second class citizens and having repetitive and poorly compensated jobs. Only three women actually stated leaving their jobs out of personal choice but whether it was pure agency or a combination of push factors is debatable. For instance, these women specified taking interruptions to find a better job, more responsibilities or start their own business, but all of them also stated being unsatisfied with their working conditions, level of responsibilities or their perception of the organizational culture at the time they left. Our sample responses also hint that family centrality and patriarchy highly taint the organizational cultures and expect women to enact specific gender and

social scripts. Interestingly enough the literature on women's career often cites masculine and hostile organizational culture as a barrier to women's careers (Jamali, 2005; Jamaly, Sidani and Safieddine, 2005; Tlaiss, 2009, 2010). Combined with the supportive environment our sample described, these results lead us to consider that women could be mainly pushed out of the workplace rather than pulled or having no interest in pursuing their careers. This takes a more interesting dimension since the literature already found Lebanese women to be driven and ready to fight to further their careers and match men's accomplishments (Jamali, Sidani and Saffieddine, 2005; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). This leads us to question how many of these women would have still taken career interruptions if they were presented with other options that would allow them to juggle their different responsibilities.

### **Reentry**

The most salient reasons that prompted women to reenter the workforce in our sample are self- fulfillment and the need to feel they are an active part of society. Nothing constrained them to do so, in fact most our sample appears to be intrinsically motivated: they missed the satisfaction they got out of feeling useful and having a purpose and did not covet financial rewards. This assumption has already been made in previous studies who examined gender differences in motivation (Miles, 2013). In addition, most of our sample perceived their reentry to be fast and easy because they actively looked for a job and were ready to work on themselves, learn new skills and master new areas of expertise. Contrarily to other studies on women's career interruptions, our sample did not focus and barely mentioned their monetary loss on reentry, but how their career interruptions affected their know-whom, why and how. Although these factors are predominant in most of the literature (Hewlet and Luce,

2005; Terjesen, 2005), it does not necessarily mean that women did not experience such losses and these discrepancies could be due to the difference in culture and perception of work. While their environments were rather passively supportive, 3 of our respondents faced resistance from their husbands who did not hesitate to undermine their efforts and who would have rather they kept their traditional roles of caregivers and housewives. This is in line with the literature that suggests a slow change in perception of women's employment with the prevalence of traditional gender roles throughout the transition (Omar, 2008). Oddly enough, all the women who reported resuming work for self-fulfillment had mothers who were housewives, as if they perceived their mothers' lives as dissatisfying or lacking purpose.

### **The Importance of Family Centrality**

Another predominant aspect that concurs with things written in the literature is the predominance of family centrality in the region (Metcalf, 2006, Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). Our sample did not hesitate to halt their career when their kids, siblings or parents needed them. When their family responsibilities diminished, for instance, when their kids grew older and more independent or when their parents did not need their complete attention and support, women resumed their careers. Most of the women who had kids also felt guilty for leaving them to resume their career. As if the traditional gender roles of women were still embedded in them from their upbringing and were tainted by the importance their mothers gave their families and their homes. This is congruent with the literature that suggests that women in the region value work as long as it is concealable with their family responsibilities (Jamali, 2010). Some women in our sample relocated due to war or their husband being offered a better opportunity abroad. In both cases they stressed on how important it was to them to keep their family

united and took it on themselves to make sure it happens. As though they feel it is their job as women, mothers and wives to put their family needs above their own. It echoes with previous studies that point out those Lebanese women embedded traditional gender roles from their upbringing and actively work on fulfilling them before meeting their other aspirations (Jamali, 2005).

Moreover there was a predominance of family members named as role models. Whether it was their mother, father, aunt or brother they aspired to be like, the affection our participants held for their families was palpable through their answers. Oddly enough, our sample only cited male family members as role models when they were supportive of them pursuing their dreams and having a career. Similarly, when our respondents chose a female role model, they almost only chose women who worked and were successful at their jobs but also at their family lives. It is therefore safe to say that our sample chose role models that embody their own values and aspirations and portrays a will to break free from expected gender roles while maintaining balance.

Furthermore, although women in our sample mostly stated that women should have the right to work if they want to, they also perceived work to be legitimate when needed financially. This traditional approach to work also mirrors the prevalence of family as their main priority even when work seems important to them.

### **Organization's Role**

Women in our sample perceive not getting enough support from their organizations: they cited the inability to balance their different priorities, a hostile organizational culture and unchallenging jobs with low recognition as one of the main factors they off-ramp. Women also complained about the predominance of male organizational cultures that leaves little room for women to get promotions because they

rarely fit into the typical male career path due to their other responsibilities and their career interruptions. In addition, our sample perceives that family centrality and patriarchal concepts are still deeply embedded in local organizational cultures that penalize women whose behaviors stray from traditional notions as well as expect them to hold traditional priorities and therefore little emphasis on their jobs and their careers. These complaints are similar to those identified through previous studies on women's careers in Lebanon where women perceive organizational practices, organizational culture and networks as the main barriers they have to overcome followed by mentoring and tokenism which have shown to be less pertinent to the issue (Tlaiss, 2010). Moreover, women also perceived that companies found their characters as less suitable for leadership roles when they themselves did not feel masculine leadership styles as more effective. Also when asked about barrier hindering their career progression women blamed the corporate environment itself where they considered a riskier investment than men. Another issue stated in the literature is they were being considered less stable than their male counterparts and less reliable due to the idea that work is not a priority to them (Jamali, 2005). Women also reported facing difficulties on reentry as for instance having to work twice as much as anyone else to prove they are worthy of the job or being perceived as a mother for whom work is not a priority. This point was also tackled previously with women reporting being excluded from masculine informal networks and mentoring which in turn gives them less visibility and therefore fewer opportunities for development (Jamali, 2005). Furthermore, most of the women who had experienced difficulties on reentry had lengthy career interruptions that could explain why it was difficult for them to reintegrate the workforce.

A third of our sample did not perceive having a career but a succession of jobs. This leads us to question whether organizations in the country provide proper career

guidance and opportunities to their employees who still perceive a job as isolated occurrence rather than a milestone in their career path.

## CHAPTER VI

### THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

In this study we have conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with women who had one or more career interruptions for at least three months. The purpose of this paper is to get a better understanding of the forces that shape women's career in the event of career interruptions to help HR managers come up with feasible solutions to retain and attract women who constitute half of the Lebanese workforce. This was supposed to be done by answering four specific research questions that relate to different aspects of career interruptions. After conducting a thematic analysis of our interviews and coming up with several themes and examining them thoroughly we can now attempt to answer our research questions and deduce both theoretical and practical contributions.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

This exploratory paper gives us a glance of the different factors that partake in Lebanese Women career interruptions and paves the way for future studies of different avenues and theories that could be interesting to follow. Our first research objective was:

**RO1:** Identify the perceptions of women of the different factors that affect their career interruptions in Lebanon and determine whether these are related to personal agency, organizational factors, social factors, or a combination of multiple reasons.

Based on our results, most of our sample perceived taking career interruption because of a myriad of factors, the most predominant being social and organizational factors. Half our sample reported being pushed out of the workplace by hostile



organizations. In fact they perceived that their employers failed to provide them with the proper organizational culture, did not take into consideration their priorities and provided them with unchallenging jobs with no clear room for improvement. Furthermore, our sample described organizational cultures as patriarchal and enacting society's traditional gender roles with most of our respondents almost unanimously stating that work was important as long as they could conceal it with their family duties and roles. Therefore we can deduce our sample took career interruptions because of the interaction between organizational factors and social scripts that conflict with their values as well as their need for self-fulfillment and feeling useful. While most studies in the Middle East on women's careers focus on social factors that shape those careers, there is a real need to also examine the organizational practices in use and make sure they do not contradict these social factors as well as take into consideration different cultures around the world to come up with local HR policies that specifically cater for the intended population. For instance, a study already documented indigenous HR practices in the Middle East that document indigenous HR practices in university that specifically caters for Middle Eastern women Islamic and family duties that largely differ from that of their Western counterparts (Karam and Afiouni, 2014). Therefore we can conclude that in our sample women's decision to take career interruptions were mainly shaped by the inadaptability of organizational factors to the Lebanese society and its culture.

When it comes to our second research objective:

RO2: Investigate women's perceptions of the Kaleidoscope Career Model to determine if it transcends culture and can be used to analyze the reasons women opt out of the workplace in Lebanon.

Our results clearly show that balance is an important aspect of our respondents' lives regardless of their age and background. Our sample mostly took career decisions

that privilege balances both on the organizational and personal front. On a smaller scale, part of our sample emphasized challenges but only in periods of their lives where they had minor or almost no family responsibilities. This could be a transitional state where women try to establish balance by focusing solely on their careers since they predict that their families will take most of their time in the future. However there was no significant emergence of authenticity in our sample's responses. This might imply that although some of the Kaleidoscope anchors can transcend culture, the model in its totality caters for a specific culture and could not be used to better understand women's careers in diverse cultural contexts simply because all of its anchors are not relevant in all cultures. Another plausible option is the predominance of one specific anchor in a woman's life in some cultures regardless of career stages.

Our third research objective was:

RO3: Explain whether structural, social factors or agentic factors triggered women's desire to join the workplace then reflect on the reentry process.

According to our analysis, personal agency triggered most of our sample's desire to resume their careers with social and structural factors having a smaller role. Our results also show that women in our sample are intrinsically motivated and face little difficulties on reentry because they are willing to work on themselves and adapt. However most of our sample does not perceive having significant difficulties on reentry. This could be due to the fact that Lebanese women consider work as a privilege (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010) which renders them more resilient and expecting difficulties along the way. This could also be due to the fact that they are already accustomed to gender discrimination on a daily basis to the extent that they do not attribute difficulties to their career interruptions. However, a minority reported facing self-esteem issues on reentry as well as being considered less capable and less involved than their

counterparts. This is of little advancements to the literature on career interruptions that clearly identifies a cost on reentry in western countries (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett and Luce, 2005).

As for our last research objective:

RO4: Reflect on this studies' results to suggest recommendations if needed.

We identified through our research that our sample lacked flexibility and work arrangements that would help them manage their different priorities. Our sample also suggested having no avenues for advancement or challenging tasks at their former jobs. They seldom focused on compensation and status, issues women in Western countries readily reported as being problematic after career interruptions (Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Reitman and Schneer, 2005). This implies that there are some disparities between women's priorities in the Middle East and women in Western countries. The literature should therefore work on identifying these specificities to better formulate retention procedures that are targeted to women in specific cultural contexts.

### **Practical Implications**

Our results suggest Lebanese women are driven, willing to work on themselves and are extremely interested in pursuing careers. However they are also adaptive in nature and need to balance their different roles to achieve satisfaction. Unfortunately half the women in our sample reported being pushed out of the workplace that had little or no consideration for their need to balance their priorities or being pulled out of the workplace due to social expectations and a lack of options. They described a constant conflict between their ambitions and dreams on one side and the social scripts embedded in them and in organizations in another. They also felt left aside in

organizations with masculine cultures that do not give them equal opportunities as men for advancement, rarely values their contributions and considers them as second class citizens. Our respondents also reported facing difficulties on reentry and implicitly paying a price for taking career interruptions. Most of the women in our sample did not rejoin their former workplace after their interruption or even decided to create their own companies since the labor market did not properly respond to their needs. This is a huge loss for companies that are losing valuable trained talent. Changing social scripts and traditional cultural gender roles takes time and is incremental (Elamine and Omair, 2010). Fortunately enough, the other major cause of career interruptions stems from organizations themselves as well as legal legislation, therefore HR managers and organizations can reverse the trend by implementing different work life balance procedures that are less hostile to women which in turn on the long run could traditionally lead to a change in perceptions. The literature states that the implementation of work-life programs profits both companies and employees since they tend to increase productivity, employee commitment, lower absenteeism and stress (Buddhapriya, 2005; Dunne, 2007).

However for work life balance procedures to be effective HR departments should make sure that they are not perceived negatively and do not hinder women career advancement. For instance, work life balance practices in Eastern countries are often perceived to be solely for women who have children and are rarely used by women without children, or men. Similarly, the existence of work life balance policies does not guarantee their proper implementation (Chandra, 2012; Fleetwood, 2007). Furthermore studies identified work life balance practices to hinder women's career progression in most cases where a masculine organizational culture that values masculine career paths prevails (Straub, 2015). Therefore the proper implementation of such practices would

mostly require a change of organizational culture that still stigmatizes women and praises “male-based work assumptions” (Lewis, 2001; Straub, 2015). Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) tried to improve work life balance practices already in use in Western countries to effectively promote women's employment and that could be considered by HR managers in Lebanon. The first one consists of reviewing flexible work arrangements to give employees the opportunity to partially work from home when needed. Another option would be to provide technology for flexibility which means allowing employees to work in the office any hour of the day. An additional flexible work arrangement that could be easily implemented is the promotion of video conferencing instead of unnecessary travel. But most importantly when resorting to flexible work policies companies should encourage both men and women to use them and reward those who effectively do so. Another practice that would promote female employment is replacing companies' linear conception of careers with a more adaptable model that acknowledges off-ramps and on ramps as a normal and available option for all employees to benefit from. This gives employees the opportunity to resume their roles after an interruption. Another practice that could highly improve women's advancement is making top managers accountable for advancement and turnover rates of women. Similarly, providing career succession plans and “profit and loss” experience for women who resume work after an interruption could encourage them to rejoin their previous workplace with the prospects of advancements. Sullivan and Mainiero (2005) also state that replacing traditional face time, long hours' compensation schemes and reward systems with performance based systems that promote equal pay and training opportunities regardless of gender helps abolish gender inequalities. Another effective procedure is to involve managers by rewarding those who come up with effective compensation schemes and include family feedback when it comes to established

practice which helps in the implementation of these procedures. Finally, instead of just creating family-friendly programs companies should strive to create cultures that encourage both males and females to use work life balance practices (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). This could be done by asking top managers and male employees in high position to make use of flexible work arrangements, personal and paternity leaves. This would in turn help normalize career interruptions and make them less frowned upon or considered career graveyards. And finally in order to create sustainable and generalizable change companies should strive to improve government legislation in order to create laws and initiatives that support working parents as well as work life (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Such legislation could include clauses that promote on-site day care, personal leaves with the option of resuming one's job. In addition, companies should strive to adapt these practices to the local context since each country's values and beliefs changes their priorities and their definition of effective work life balance practices (Guest, 2002).

## CHAPTER VII

### FURTHER RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

This societal change of the perceptions of women's employment and its normalization in a traditionally patriarchal context would be an interesting source of input on women's careers if further studied. Women also portrayed wanting to be an active part of society. However, even if society's perception of working women is changing, and women themselves are interested in working, our results suggest that women still hold on to their traditional gender roles embedded in them from their upbringing. This contradiction between their personal aspirations and the values they have been taught growing up could create internal conflicts and feelings of guilt. It would therefore be interesting to examine how prevalent this contradiction is among Lebanese women and how much it really affects their career decisions. Similarly, some of our spouses' respondents seemed uncomfortable with the idea of their wives working as if it questioned their own aptitude to provide for their families. Therefore, it would be interesting to study Lebanese men's perception of self and gender roles and how occurring societal changes affect them.

Another interesting avenue for research would be to examine the generational gap when it comes to career perceptions of women themselves. For instance, most of our seasoned respondents who witnessed war clearly emphasized its importance in shaping their careers and reported feeling no or little control over how their working lives evolved. In fact they claimed that their main concern at the time was survival and sustainability. Conversely, our younger participants portrayed having an internal locus of control and believe that they are responsible for shaping their careers. Therefore it

would be interesting to compare generational personal career perceptions of women in the country. While the younger participants in our sample pretend to shape their careers themselves, our results suggest otherwise. Under the superficial claim of personal agency lies an intricate web of factors that influence if not dictates these women's career choices. It would therefore be interesting to further examine such occurrences and what causes dissonance between women's perceptions of their careers and the actual state of things. Furthermore, as stated earlier it is primordial to better understand specific cultures to come up with hybrid practices that will answer a specific population's needs and priorities. Another possible avenue for research that is still under documented is the implicit cost of career interruptions to women in the Middle East. And finally further research should be done on the Kaleidoscope career model in different countries mainly in Lebanon to try and validate the importance of balance, and examine whether the other anchors are prevalent or come up with a specific model that helps explain women's career decisions in the Middle East.



## CHAPTER VIII

### LIMITATIONS

One of the major limitations of this study did not test the credibility of results by subjecting them to a group of our respondents. Furthermore, this study's results might be tainted by the researcher's own biases on the subject and is therefore not entirely neutral. Another shortcoming of our study is that all the data was collected from one source instead of relying on triangulation of data which could have revealed themes and categories still dormant in our sample's responses. Similarly, this study relied on one researcher's circle who themselves recruited other participants who most probably resulted into a homogenous sample with similar backgrounds, social classes and religious affiliations. In addition, our research did not account for generational differences, and did not account for the impact of war that highly tainted our most seasoned respondents' career path and could be the source of career interruptions. For instance, some of our respondents had to relocate and resign to protect their families. In addition, our interviewing protocol did not account for religious or ethnic demographics that could have helped us better understand the influence of Islam on women's careers in Lebanon. But most importantly our study would have benefited from exploring men and organizations' points of view to better discern societal change and assess the gap between women's needs and organizational procedures currently in use.

## APPENDIX I

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Demographics**

- Can you tell me a little about yourself

Probes:

- How old are you?
- Are you married? Divorced? Widowed? Single? Cohabiting?
- Did you grow up in a rural region? Urban? Suburban?
- Do you live in a rural region? Urban? Suburban?
- Highest degree earned? What year?

- Do you have children?

Probes:

- How many?
- How old are they?
- What is your mother's occupation and educational background (current or previous)?
- What is your father's occupation and educational background (current or previous)?

#### **Employment history: off ramping and on ramping**

- Tell me about your employment history.
- Did you have career interruptions? How many? For how long each time?

Probe:

- for each career interruption, what prompted you to quit? What prompted you to return?
- Did you still want to work in the same industry? If not why did you choose your current job?
- Describe how you went about to find a job and how long it took you?
- Did you face any difficulties when you reentered the workforce?
- Once you resumed work did you feel your time out of the workplace affected your career negatively?
- Would you recommend taking career interruptions to other women? Why?
- If you could lead your career differently what would you change?

**Social and organizational factors**

- Did you have any particular role model growing up?
- Is it common for women/mothers in your environment to work? (Friends, family...)
  - Please elaborate
- How supportive is your environment of you seeking employment/working?
  - Can you please elaborate?
- What is the importance of work for you?
- To what extent did your workplace(s) support your career decisions?
- To what extent did your workplace allow you to actively balance all your priorities?

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