

Is a “Father Friendly Workplace” Possible in the Middle East?

A Personal Report from the Front

Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous

Work-life balance has been on the agenda for almost half a century throughout the Western, industrialized world. More recently, assisting working fathers to reconcile their career and family needs has also gained the support of governments, the social partners (labor and business associations), NGOs, and the media in North America, the European Union, Australia, Japan, and more recently in the new democracies of Europe and Latin America. The international business community has become aware that family-friendly hiring, scheduling, and promotion schemes are good for business. Expanding the logic of family-friendliness from a uniquely women's issue to a genuinely gender mainstreamed approach has boosted productivity, sales, and retention rates and thus benefited employers, employees, customers, and the public sector servicing all three. The bottom line doesn't lie. In the case of the family-friendly workplace, the interests of profits and people go hand-in-hand.

The internationalization of the corporate world in the second half of the 20th century forced companies to deal with the cultural diversity of the workplace throughout the West. With the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, the multicultural workplace became even more complex. Today, Indian, Chinese, Mexican, Brazilian, South African, and Russian manufacturers and trading companies are becoming global players, complicating this diverse mosaic of entrepreneurial traditions even more. Flextime, working online from home, extended parental leave for fathers and mothers, creative promotion schemes allowing working parents to keep up with the

changes in technology and workplace organization while on leave, and part-time employment for mid-level and senior staff all belong to the spectrum of gender mainstreaming options of any modern Western organization. Extending this model to the rest of the world has proven challenging, even daunting, in many cases.

As a developer and designer of gender mainstreaming and family-friendly assessment and training tools in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, I personally experienced how employers in the public, private, and NGO sectors struggled to keep up with the rapid changes in the workplace in this phase of rapid globalization. The work-life balance approach was developed simultaneously in many EU member states and in North America, based on their individual socio-economic traditions. In the US, the women's movement, and more recently the nascent men's movement, worked hand-in-hand with state-of-the-art multinational corporations to convince employers that balancing career and family needs was profitable. In Europe, both the labor movement and the church played a larger role in promoting family-friendly business practices. As the former communist countries prepared to join the EU, they swapped their centralized, Marxist-Leninist gender equality regimes for the Western model, which highlighted flexibility and personal motivation. I was on the ground as a trainer in Hungary in the mid 1990s as this former East bloc country struggled to prepare its workforce for EU accession. The most common argument given for not introducing gender mainstreaming and work-life balance at the time was that “this is a luxury that only the West can afford”. Today Hungary is a

member of the European Union in good standing, having proven capable of integrating the logic of the market and the needs of its nation's workers and families.

While transitioning from Austria to Lebanon over a decade ago, I attempted to adapt the human resources development tools we had designed in Europe for use in the MENA region. At the time, this approach was rejected by both employers and scholars in the region alike as "a luxury that only the West can afford". Ten years later, globalization has forced MENA organizations, be they non-profit, commercial, or governmental, to become more in tune with international realities. The trend towards American and European certification and accreditation has brought Western monitoring bodies to the region that are also paying closer attention to gender equality and family-friendliness issues. I am now working as an academic with administrative responsibilities and have come to realize how difficult the uphill battle of reconciling career and family needs in Lebanon can be. For example, suggesting that a conference, training program, or career advancement seminar should provide childcare services still meets with resistance from both female and male colleagues.

It remains to be seen who will take the lead within the MENA region in promoting global gender mainstreaming standards in the workplace. Both subsidiaries of multinational corporations and American system Arab universities, with their international format and global perspective, would be a good place to start. For this to work, however, gender policies in general, and work-life balance schemes in particular, must deal with the specific socio-economic traditions prevalent in the region. Reform must be organic if it is to take root and thrive in the Middle East.

Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous - Chair,
Department of Political Science, Notre
Dame University. (former researcher and
trainer with the GenderLink Diversity
Center, Salzburg/Austria)
Email: sdabbous@ndu.edu.lb

Call for Submissions

Al-Raida is always looking for contributors to write articles about women in the Arab world.

If you are a researcher or a professional or freelance journalist please consider submitting reports on legislation, events, conferences, debates, exhibits, and performances related to women in the Arab world or Arab women in the diaspora.



For more information about our forthcoming issues, thematic call for papers, and stylistic guidelines, kindly visit our website at <http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb>

al-raida