

## Women Leaders and Motherhood

Marianne El Khoury

To cite this article: El Khoury, M. (2022). Women Leaders and Motherhood. *Al Raida*, 45(2) and 46(1), 161-171. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v45i2.1916

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v45i2.1916>

© 2022 The Author(s)

Corresponding author: Marianne El Khoury

Author contact:

Article type: Article

Published online: 31<sup>st</sup> January 2022

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

Copyright: This is an Open Access article, free of all copyright, and may be freely reproduced, distributed, transmitted, modified, built upon, or otherwise used by anyone for any lawful purpose. The work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

## Women Leaders and Motherhood

Marianne El Khoury

### Abstract

While motherhood is celebrated in various cultures around the world, including in Lebanon, it remains a significant barrier to women's equal participation in the labor force. This consequently prevents them from becoming "leaders" in their work, either as managers or directors. Using Finland as a case study, this article examines the relationship between motherhood and women's leadership roles in the workplace in Lebanon. The paper concludes with several recommendations for gender equitable policies that can support mothers in the workplace.

**Keywords:** motherhood, leadership, workplace, parental leave, childcare

### Introduction

Women have struggled for years to secure their basic rights to safety, education, freedom of choice, and even life, in some extreme cases (for example, honor killings). It is no surprise, then, that they have also found it difficult to become leaders, whether as managers in an organization or business or as leaders of a country. The lack of women leaders can be attributed to many phenomena, such as the subconscious biases that employers hold, the inability of women to work overtime due to fear of harassment, and subsequent loss of promotion opportunities. This paper will focus on analyzing motherhood and its effect on women's leadership. This focus was inspired by Finland's exceptional welfare state, hailed as women friendly due to its right to childcare and paid parental leave. This paper also addresses the results of a collaborative survey conducted by

the author and other classmates on patriarchal beliefs and the acceptance of women as managers and leaders in Lebanon.

## Literature Review

### *Women in the work force and childcare: A critical barrier*

To attain a leadership role, one must first be in the workforce, and many studies have documented the role of motherhood as an obstacle for women who want to join and stay in the workforce. A study done in the U.S. examining the effects of the availability of childcare on families found that women who were unable to find a childcare program were less likely to work than those who did, while this phenomenon was nonexistent for fathers (Schochet, 2019). Furthermore, women reported they would apply for higher paying jobs and promotions, as well as seek more work hours, or even find a job in the first place, if they had access to childcare. For example, Hodge writes about her experience as a mother in academia. She describes the reluctance of faculty members to accept her in the doctoral program, worrying she may “just get married, have kids, and not stay in the program, let alone stay in the academy” (Hodge, 2017, p. 208). She describes getting denied financial support, getting criticized more than her male peers for not being scholarly enough, and being discouraged to have kids during teaching season. Most notably, she explains how, when she did have children, most of her money went into daycare costs. Additionally, Hodge notes feeling burnt out as a result of trying to raise a family while working in an environment that did not encourage or support her in any way (Hodge, 2017).

However, this is not only an issue in the U.S. One study by the International Development Research Center (IDRC) found the same problem in Kenya, where childcare is almost nonexistent (Clark & Muthuri, 2016). Mothers who want to work are forced to leave their children home alone, or in the care of slightly older siblings, when older relatives like grandparents, are not available. When a woman is forced to bring her child with her as she searches for work, she will most likely be rejected. Additionally, a significant difference was found between women who had day care

available to them and those who did not; the percentage of working women who had available childcare was a lot higher than that of women who did not. Women who were disadvantaged, such as single parents and migrant workers, also seemed to benefit the most from day care (Clark & Muthuri, 2016).

Childcare has also been a problem in Lebanon. Jamali, Sidani, and Safieddine (2005) reported that women managers tended to feel unsupported by their work environments, as there was an absence of flextime and childcare support. It is important to also note that it is difficult to find a Lebanese individual who does not have an anecdote about a female relative who was refused a job due to her being pregnant or married, which for employers often translates to “pregnant in the near future.” Anecdotal evidence is, naturally, insufficient, but still interesting to mention, as it only strengthens scientific evidence.

### ***Motherhood and women leaders***

In Finland, Lämsä and Piilola (2015) examined the concept of motherhood in relation to being a leader. The participants reported that motherhood had slowed down their career advancement (Lämsä & Piilola, 2015). This is explained by the fact that women rarely go back to work after childbirth, as one study in the U.K. showed. In fact, Harkness et al. (2019) found that fewer than one-fifth of new mothers and only 29% percent of first-time mothers returned to full-time work after maternity leave, a number that falls to 15% after five years. Furthermore, 17% of women leave employment altogether after giving birth, which is in contrast with men’s 4% (Smith, 2019).

In Lebanon, as mentioned earlier, only 22.6% of women are in the labor force, and even fewer women are leaders. Here, it is important to recount the findings of the survey mentioned above, in order to explain this phenomenon. Women are not only expected to be the primary caregiver for their children, but are also deemed less competent mothers if they do not spend all their time with their children. In Lebanon, motherhood is an important part of a woman’s identity. To be a

bad mother is to be a bad person. Thus, women might shy away from any work that will take them away from their responsibilities as a mother.

On the other hand, motherhood does not always have to be an obstacle to women's leadership. In their study on Finnish women leaders, Lämsä and Piilola (2015) reported overall positive outcomes from motherhood. The women reported that motherhood caused significant personal development. They explained how motherhood helped them to organize their work as leaders, as well as to become more understanding of their employees. Motherhood also helped these women to reassess their values and priorities, as they now had less time to waste on unfulfilling jobs and unnecessary activities. They explained that motherhood allowed them to form and polish their identities as leaders. As Gurchiek notes, studies in the U.S. have found that 91% of working Americans claim that working mothers have unique skills that they bring to leadership roles, and 85% believe that being a mother prepares one to become a business leader who is able to face challenging obstacles (Gurchiek, 2019). In Lebanon, motherhood is also valued, though not in relationship to leadership roles. Women build nations, but only because they raise the nation's leaders. Further, mothers are respected and honored because they support men and help them achieve their goals (Zaatari, 2006).

### ***A case study of Finland***

The World Happiness Report for 2021, which studied how people fared in response to COVID-19, named Finland's people the happiest people in the world, for the sixth year in a row (Helliwell, 2021). This is the result of many years' worth of government work. However, the efficiency of the current government in dealing with the pandemic has been an important factor in the reported levels of happiness. Furthermore, Finland's economic freedom score is above regional and world averages, and it has increased since last year, due to the government improving its spending score (The Heritage Foundation, 2021). The Finnish government also has many policies that aim to achieve equality for all. Notably, it has reinstated the right to childcare for those under seven, and the government promises to remove the law requiring transgender individuals to be sterilized, for

example (Chadwick, 2020). Thus far, the original aims that the government wanted to achieve have been put on hold due to the pandemic. Moreover, it is worth noting that the success achieved by Finland in reducing the effects of COVID-19 was also shared by many other female-led countries. One study found a significant difference in the number of cases and deaths caused by the pandemic in female led countries (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2020).

These few facts do not necessarily imply that a woman-led government is better than a government led by men. However, these facts do prove that women are, at the very least, just as competent as men, and that they deserve equal opportunities to be leaders. Yet, women only hold 24% of senior leadership positions globally. A study done on almost 22,000 publicly traded organizations worldwide found that 60% have no women board members (Institute for Women's Leadership, n.d.). In Lebanon, which is the focus of this paper, women constitute only 4.6% of the parliament, and only 22.6% of the labor force.

### ***Past Policies***

Many policies have been adopted to support women with the burdens of motherhood and childcare, with the aim of making it easier for women to be mothers and achieve their work goals. Finland is one of the best countries in this regard, as they reduced the price of early childhood education, allowing even less fortunate families to be able to educate their children and to afford quality childcare while the parents work (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Furthermore, parents are entitled to maternity leave, paternity leave, and parental leave, which would allow the parents to stay with their child, at least one at a time, for three years in total (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Parents in Finland do not have to worry about their children's schooling, which has increased women's participation in the labor force.. Finally, Sanna Marin, the prime minister of Finland, is a mother herself, and is balancing those roles brilliantly. She serves as a successful example to Finnish women.

In Lebanon, however, women are given 10 weeks of paid maternity leave, while men only get three consecutive days (WEEPortal, 2018). Achieving this three-day paternity leave was difficult, and even unexpected. Further, cultural differences and a patriarchal social order make it difficult to adapt policies that support working mothers.

## **Our Study**

### ***Methodology***

In collaboration with fellow students, an online survey was sent via social media to examine attitudes towards women leaders. The survey aimed to study the patriarchal beliefs and the attitudes toward women managers. The survey used the Women as Managers Scale (WAMS) and the Patriarchal Beliefs Scale. The WAMS scale includes questions that address the attitude of the survey respondent to women holding leadership or managerial positions (Krishnan, 1991), while the Patriarchal Beliefs Scale includes questions that address the attitude of the respondent to statements about gender equality (Yoon et al., 2015). The survey received 153 responses, of which 101 were women, 50 were men, and two identified as other. Survey participants identified with many sexualities, but the majority were heterosexual (74.8%), while bisexual individuals constituted 14.8% of participants, homosexuals 6.5%, and the rest identified as “other.” Furthermore, the majority of respondents were people completing or who had already completed a Bachelor’s degree (74.2%), while 18.1% were completing or had completed high school, and the rest were currently working toward or had completed their graduate studies.

### ***Results***

Survey results showed a relative rejection of patriarchal beliefs as well as an acceptance of women as managers. However, a statistically significant gender difference was found: women were more accepting of women as managers, and more rejecting of patriarchal beliefs than men. Additionally, most responses yielded homogeneous results, for example, only 1.3% of survey respondents

agreed to any extent with the statement “Women should be paid less than a man for doing the same job,” and only 3.8% disagreed with the statement “Society should regard work by female managers as valuable as work by male managers.”

In contrast, a few statements, usually centered around pregnancy, childcare, and the emotionality of women, were more controversial. Only 82.7% of participants agreed to any degree with the statement “The possibility of pregnancy does not make women less desirable employees than men,” and only 81.8% agreed with the statement “Women would not allow their emotions to influence their work more than men would.” Moreover, 20.2% agreed with the statement “A woman should be the primary caretaker for children,” and 10.4% agreed with the statement “On average, a woman who stays at home all the time with her children is a better mother than a woman who works outside the home at least half time.”

These results imply that “obvious” forms of sexism are condemned, while more subtle ones remain rampant in society. This is yet another testament to the glass ceiling standing in the way of women trying to reach leadership positions. Motherhood and pregnancy seem to be the most commonly used arguments against women leaders, which is why they are important to study.

## **Recommended Policies**

### ***Child Care***

It is important that childcare is available to parents of all social, financial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Children who are too young to go to school should have an institution to go to while their parents are working, and it should not be very expensive. Government funding for these childcare institutions would be ideal. However, alternative funding models should be investigated. Furthermore, childcare should not simply entertain, but it should also educate, raise, and stimulate children in ways to optimize their physical and mental growth. This allows women to seek work opportunities without having to worry about which relative will watch their child every week.

### ***Parental Leave***

Simply, maternity and paternity leave need to be much longer. They need to adhere to global recommendations, and be, if not equal, at least close in length. This will perhaps highlight the importance of fathers in raising children. Additionally, these policies might challenge society to reassess who is responsible for childcare. Parental leave can also challenge gender discriminatory policies in the workplace, specifically for working mothers and pregnant women. Additionally, it would be ideal to adopt a policy similar to Finland's in regard to parental leave. However, this would be counterproductive in Lebanon, as women would probably still be taking much of the load. Therefore, this change is advised to be implemented after cultural change has happened.

### ***Schedules and Travel***

Alongside parental leave, workplace flexibility can help support working mothers. Flexible working hours can give mothers the ability to leave work, for example, when their child is sick or when their childcare provider is unavailable, without repercussions. Relatedly, workplace policies should give working parents the option to virtually attend work events rather than attending them in person. This is because travel is difficult for working parents, who might be unable to find appropriate childcare in their absence.

### ***Education***

These solutions will not be very effective if the understanding of motherhood does not change in Lebanon. Education is key to this change. Gender equitable curricula can challenge discriminatory understandings of motherhood. They can also challenge gender norms that do not value women as future leaders. Furthermore, gender equitable education can challenge men to become active parents. Additionally, seminars and workshops, as well as commercials on television may play a role in the education of adults on these issues.

## Conclusion

It is important that women are able to thrive in the areas that they are experts in. The solutions presented in this paper will lead to a better life for everyone, and not just women, as was seen in the example of Finland. Finally, we must stop praising mothers for being good supporters, and for raising good leaders. We should instead give them the chance to become leaders themselves.

## Acknowledgement

This survey was completed in collaboration with Aquilina Barhouche, Dennis El Mouzawak, and Meiya Saad as part of a final course project.

## Note

For more information on the WAMS scale, see Chullen, C., Adeyemi-Bello, T. & Vermeulen, E. (2017) A comparative analysis of attitudes towards women as managers in the U.S. and the Netherlands. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics*, 14(2), 24–42.

## References

- Chadwick, L. (2020, December 10). *How has Finland's female-led government fared in its first year?* Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/12/10/how-has-finland-s-female-led-government-fared-in-its-first-year>
- Clark, S., & Muthuri, S. (2016). *Creating better economic opportunities for women in Nairobi slums through improved child care options* [PowerPoint slides]. International Development Research Center. [https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/sp/Documents%20EN/idrc-women-empowerment-evidence-from-india-kenya-and-canada\\_0.pdf](https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/sp/Documents%20EN/idrc-women-empowerment-evidence-from-india-kenya-and-canada_0.pdf)
- European Commission. (n.d.). *Finland—maternity and paternity*. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1109&langId=en&intPageId=4514>
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2019). *Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2019 Edition* [Eurydice Report]. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5816a817-b72a-11e9-9d01-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-102611557>

- Garikipati, S., & Kambhampati, U. (2020). Leading the fight against the pandemic: Does gender “really” matter? Preprints. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3617953
- Gurchiek, K. (2019, August 16). *Employers can benefit from working mothers’ leadership skills*. SHRM. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/employers-can-benefit-from-working-mothers-leadership-skills.aspx#:~:text=In%20fact%2C%2091%20percent%20of,a%20so%2Dcalled%20workplace%20penalty>
- Harkness, S., Borkowska, M., & Pelikh, A. (2019, October). *Employment pathways and occupational change after childbirth*. Government Equalities Office. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/840062/Bristol\\_Final\\_Report\\_1610.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840062/Bristol_Final_Report_1610.pdf)
- Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J., & De Neve, J. (2021). *World happiness report 2021*. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network. <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2021/>
- Hodge, D. M. (2017). Motherhood and leadership in academia. In K. Cole, & H. Hassel (Eds.), *Surviving sexism in academia: Strategies for feminist leadership* (pp. 208–214). New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Institute for Women's Leadership. (n.d.). *Facts & states*. <https://iwl.nichols.edu/facts-stats/#:~:text=Globally%2C%20women%20hold%20just%2024,51%25%20of%20senior%20leadership%20slots.&text=Women%20represent%2045%25%20of%20the,only%204%25%20of%20the%20CEOs>
- Jamali, D., Sidani, Y. & Safieddine, A. (2005). Constraints facing working women in Lebanon: An insider view. *Women in Management Review*, 20(8), 581–594. DOI: 10.1108/09649420510635213
- Krishnan, R. (1991). *Attitudes towards women as managers: a review of literature and research findings* (Working Paper No. 16). Institute of Rural Management Anand. <http://www.nzdl.org/cgi-bin/library?e=d-00000-00---off-0hdl--00-0---0-10-0---0---0direct-10---4-----0-1--11-en-50---20-help---00-0-1-00-0-0-11---0-0-&a=d&c=hdl&cl=CL1.1&d=HASHa94b263094051851056658>
- Lämsä, AM. & Piilola, A. (2015). Women’s leadership in Finland: The meaning of motherhood as related to leadership for women managers. In S. Madsen, F. Ngunjiri, K. Longman, & C. Cherrey (Eds.), *Women and leadership around the world* (pp. 87–105). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Schochet, L. (2019). *The child care crisis is keeping women out of the workforce*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2019/03/28/467488/child-care-crisis-keeping-women-workforce/>

- Smith, J. (2019, October 22). *Women less likely to progress at work than male colleagues after childbirth*. Workplace Insight. <https://workplaceinsight.net/women-less-likely-to-progress-at-work-than-their-male-counterparts-following-childbirth/#:~:text=Fewer%20than%20one%2Din%2Dfive,to%20four%20percent%20of%20men>
- The Heritage Foundation. (2021). *Finland*. <https://www.heritage.org/index/country/finland>
- Women Economic Empowerment Portal (WEEPortal). (2018, January 25). *Paternity leave in Lebanon 3 days only, compared to 2 years in other countries*. <https://www.weeportal-lb.org/news/paternity-leave-lebanon-3-days-only-compared-2-years-other-countries>
- Yoon, E., Adams, K., Hogge, I., Bruner, J. P., Surya, S., & Bryant, F. B. (2015). Development and validation of the Patriarchal Beliefs Scale. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 62*(2), 264–279. DOI: 10.1037/cou0000056
- Zaatari, Z. (2006). The culture of motherhood: An avenue for women's civil participation in South Lebanon. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, 2*(1), 33–64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40326887>