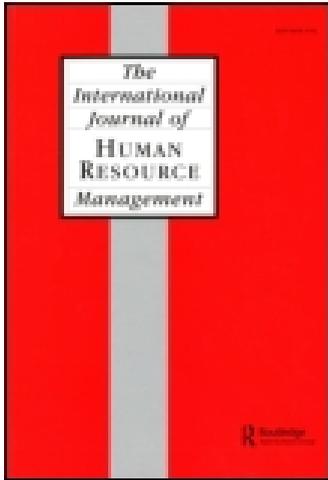


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Hayfaa A. Tlaiss^a

^a Faculty of Business, University of New Brunswick Saint John, Saint John, Canada

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Between the traditional and the contemporary: careers of women managers from a developing Middle Eastern country perspective

Hayfaa A. Tlaiss*

Faculty of Business, University of New Brunswick Saint John, Saint John, Canada

Informed by Institutional Theory, this study adopts an exploratory, qualitative, in-depth interviews-based approach as it explores the self-reported career paths of 32 women managers in Lebanon. The results indicate that in contrast with the majority of Western-based literature, the traditional-organizational career path in comparison to contemporary career patterns is still relevant, and continues to exist for Lebanese women managers as they progress in their managerial careers. At the same time, the findings suggest that women selectively adopt some aspects of contemporary, flexible careers to navigate their career paths amidst the macro-national economic and sociocultural factors and institutional challenges. The overall results and the implications for various stakeholders are further discussed in light of the related literature. This study suggests that scholars interested in women's careers in under-researched developing nations need to further integrate the agentic process – and the role played by women's individual agency in constructing their careers as they respond to institutional mandates – into their career models in more details. Similarly, multinational companies currently operating or interested in expanding their operations to the developing Arab Middle East region should incorporate these factors into their management and human resource practices.

Keywords: Arab Middle East; careers; developing countries; Institutional Theory; Lebanon; women managers

Introduction

Over the past two decades, scholarly interest in career dynamics has grown. Although such work has improved our understanding of career paths, minimal attention has been paid to careers in non-Anglo-Saxon countries. The majority of career studies have primarily focused on Western countries, with a few notable exceptions (for example Counsell [2002] in Ethiopia; Ituma and Simpson [2009] in Nigeria; Omair [2010] in the United Arab Emirates [UAE]). In particular, there is little research exploring women's career paths in the developing countries of the Arab Middle East (AME) region.¹ Notwithstanding the growing number of studies in this region that looked at women issues (Metcalf 2007; Hutchings, Lirio, and Metcalfe 2012), many research efforts have primarily focused on exploring the challenges that women face in their career advancement (Jamali, Sidani, and Safieddine 2005; Tlaiss and Kauser 2011a), the glass ceiling (Jamali, Safieddine, and Daouk 2006; Tlaiss and Kauser 2010) or women's lack of satisfaction with their careers (Tlaiss and Mendelson 2014). Therefore, research explaining the actual career paths of Arab women managers and how their careers unfold amidst the frequently referred to gender discrimination and institutional inequalities and challenges is virtually non-existent. Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence pertaining to managerial career patterns in particular (Vinkenburg and Weber 2012). Consequently, several career scholars have called for empirical studies that explore the career enactment in non-

*Email: hayfaatlaiss@hotmail.com

Western, understudied national contexts (Counsell 2002; Dany 2003; Pringle and Mallon 2003; Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram, and Henderickx 2008; Sullivan and Baruch 2009; Dries and Verbruggen 2012).

The calls for additional empirical career research are further strengthened by the growing number of studies that have critically questioned the portability of career concepts from Western to non-Western contexts (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, and Meyer 2003; Inkson 2006; Ituma, Simpson, Ovadje, Cornelius, and Mordi 2011). To further explain, although career theory marks the 1990s as the beginning of the transformation of career paths away from the organizational-traditional towards the new contemporary (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Hall 1996; Briscoe and Hall 2006; Sullivan and Arthur 2006), a small but growing number of scholars have questioned the assumptions of the demise of the traditional career path based on empirical findings that suggest the opposite (Dries, Van Acker, and Verbruggen 2012; Dries and Verbruggen 2012; Clarke 2013). The emergence of new empirical evidence that questions the claims of career theory have resulted in an interesting and stimulating debate between supporters and opponents of the new career paradigm (see Dries and Verbruggen 2012; Vinkenburg and Weber 2012). The growing body of evidence and debate have also strengthened the calls for more empirical studies studying managerial career patterns and the extent of the convergence and divergence of traditional and contemporary career paths.

With these factors in mind, the current study attends to this important knowledge gap using 32 in-depth interviews that explore the nature of the career paths (traditional or contemporary) of Lebanese women managers. It also investigates how the women managers advance their careers and navigate through existing patriarchal social and cultural values, and institutional and organizational inequalities. The study leverages Institutional Theory (IT) (Scott 1995, 2001, 2004) to portray how the unfolding of women's careers is affected by cognitive-culture, normative and regulative factors of the theory, along with the career actors' individual agency, and by the agentic process (Oliver 1991; Tlaiss 2013). Based on our findings, we argue that while the traditional-organizational career – with a primary focus on upward mobility – is still the norm, various aspects of the contemporary career emerge as a demonstration of women's agency. Some aspects of the contemporary careers also surface as strategies that women use to find meaning in their careers, challenge existing values and negotiate their careers amidst the macro-national factors and institutional challenges. Accordingly, we argue with Hall and Las Heras (2009) that while the organizational career is indeed 'alive and well' (p. 182), various aspects of the new careers are portrayed in the career accounts of Lebanese women managers. Overall, this study contributes to the career development and management literature by exploring Lebanese women managers' careers and demonstrating the interplay between the traditional and two of the 'new career' patterns as women search for meaning in their careers and for strategies to challenge institutional mandates and discrimination.

Organizational, protean and boundaryless careers

Career theory describes the traditional organizational career as an organizationally orchestrated career (Arthur 1994) founded on the premise of long-term employment security and membership (Hall 1976). In this form, the career paths of men and women are uni-dimensional (Rosenbaum 1979), focusing mostly on vertical progression in one single organization (Arthur 1994; Orser and Leck 2010), with goals and rewards defined by the organization (Hall and Mirvis 1995). Organizational careers are therefore seen as secure, predictable and linear (Baruch 2006), highlighting the stability of structure and clear

career ladders (Baruch 2003, 2004). Career advancement implies moving up the ladder to managerial positions (Orser and Leck 2010), through a predictable sequence of well-defined positions (Wilensky 1964). Psychological contracts are built on the grounds of loyalty and secure employment, where employees are expected to be loyal to a 'single' employer (Orser and Leck 2010), and employers are expected to provide their employees with secure, long-term employment (Baruch 2003, 2004).

During the mid-1990s, in response to globalization, increased workforce diversity (Sullivan and Baruch 2009), economic changes, increased competition in Western nations, organizational restructuring, the shattering of traditional bureaucracies and widespread redundancies (Baruch 2004), the traditional organization broke its promise of lifelong employment (Vinkenburg and Weber 2012). Instead, organizations began promoting individual employability rather than life-long job security (Baruch 2006). Consequently, the organizational career was pronounced dead (Hall 1996; Hall and Mirvis 1996), 'no longer in fashion and no longer relevant' (Clarke 2013), and was even referred to as 'traditional' to demonstrate the extent of its obsolescence (Baruch 2006). The death of the traditional organizational career heralded the emergence of so-called 'new or contemporary careers'. The new careers required a new way of defining and looking at careers (Clarke 2013) as they incorporated work-related and other experiences occurring both inside and outside organizations (Sullivan and Baruch 2009). Careers were no longer defined by progression in a formal hierarchy but as 'the unfolding sequence of a person's work experience over time' (Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom 2005, p. 178). As such, the new employment contract is a contract with oneself (Baruch 2006), and employers now offer their employees opportunities for development rather than secure employment.

Several metaphorical concepts to describe the flexible new contemporary careers evolved (Inkson 2004, 2006), such as the intelligent career (Arthur 1994), boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau 1996), protean career (Hall 1996) and kaleidoscope career

Table 1. Demographics of the sample used in the current study ($N = 32$).

<i>Demographics</i>	<i>Percentages (n)</i>
<i>Management level</i>	
Junior	53.125 (17)
Middle	28.125 (9)
Senior	18.75 (6)
<i>Educational attainment</i>	
High school diploma or equivalent	6.25 (2)
Bachelor	43.75 (14)
Masters	43.75 (14)
PhD	6.25 (2)
Professional qualifications	18.75 (6)
<i>Economic sectors</i>	
Services sector	81.25 (26)
Education	30.77 (8)
Banking/insurance	34.6 (9)
Marketing/advertising	11.53 (3)
Health services/hospitality	15.38 (4)
Others	7.69 (2)
Manufacturing	18.75 (6)
Food and beverage	33.33 (2)
Others	66.67 (4)

Note: Age, 25–59 years (mean, 41.9).

(Mainiero and Sullivan 2006). However, the concepts of a protean and a boundaryless career have not only 'dominated career literature' (Briscoe and Finkelstein 2009, p. 243) through the important impact on research and theory development over the past decade (Sullivan and Baruch 2009), they have also been and continue to be considered as the 'symbols of the new career' (Briscoe and Hall 2006, p. 5). Described by Arthur and Rousseau (1996) as 'a range of possible forms that defies traditional employment assumptions' (p. 3), the boundaryless career is characterized by breaking the traditional organizational career boundaries through movement across the boundaries of separate employers and organizations. It is sustained by external networks or information, draws validation from outside the present employer, rejects traditional career opportunities for personal or family reasons and perceives a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints (Arthur and Rousseau 1996). This form of career is independent of an employer's or organization's arrangements and has 'no limits to the territory into which it can extend or at least no clear line or barriers marking where those limits are' (Inkson 2006, p. 53). This was later redefined by Sullivan and Arthur (2006) to include physical and psychological mobility, although the majority of relevant literature continues to focus on physical mobility (Clarke 2013), primarily upward movement (Sullivan and Baruch 2009).

The protean career adopts a self-directed approach to career management (Briscoe and Hall 2006) by putting the individual, rather than the organization, in charge of managing his/her career (Hall 1996; Mirvis and Hall 1996; Hall and Moss 1998). It is driven by individually defined goals that spread across the entire life space, one's own values and psychological rather than objective success based on power, pay or rank (Briscoe and Hall 2006). As such, the protean career takes a more holistic approach to careers, by looking at work and employment in the context of one's life as a whole rather than in isolation (Hall 1996), and entails learning and reshaping through the crossing of organizational boundaries (Clarke 2013). The protean career is effectively a mindset and attitude towards a career that 'reflects freedom, self-direction, and making choices based on one's personal values' (Briscoe and Hall 2006). Its significance stems from its emphasis on adaptability in terms of performance and learning demands (Briscoe and Hall 2006) and the ability it gives to the careerist to rapidly change in response to changing circumstances (Baruch 2004; Inkson 2006). Named after whom the Greek believed to be a god called Proteus, who can change shape at will, a protean careerist can repack his/her abilities and knowledge to fit into the unstable and uncertain work environment, focusing on maintaining employability, continuous learning and intrinsic rewards (Sullivan and Baruch 2009). Career development under the protean career path is characterized by the individual's personal desire to grow, have autonomy and continuously learn (Hall 1996).

While the review of literature conveys the debate among career scholars regarding the changing nature of careers, it is focused on Western careers in Anglo-Saxon contexts; very little is known about the careers of managers in non-Western contexts, particularly in the Arab world. Hence, the current study is an attempt to explore how the careers of Lebanese women managers unfold; do their careers follow the traditional-organizational, boundaryless or protean paths?

Reflections on the traditional and new careers

Despite the attention that the transition from the organizational to the contemporary received, the three forms of career continue to be criticized for several reasons. First, drawing the distinction between 'where boundarylessness ends and protean begins'

(Greenhaus, Callanan, and DiRenzo 2008, p. 285) has been rather problematic. Scholars argue that although the two concepts are distinct, they overlap (Briscoe and Hall 2006; Briscoe and Finkelstein 2009) and are complementary (Inkson 2006). For example, Granrose and Baccili (2006) did not distinguish between boundaryless and protean careers as they recognized the two career patterns reflect the new, more ambiguous relationship between employers and employees. This debate has resulted in a number of 'integrative frameworks' (Sullivan and Baruch 2009) that attempt to combine various aspects and ideas from the protean and the boundaryless careers such as the boundaryless perspective (Greenhaus et al. 2008). However, this debate has always been within the context of Western countries and has never been extended to the understudied national contexts of the developing countries such as Lebanon; something that this study will attempt to address.

Second, while the shift from traditional to contemporary career paths has been explored by a number of studies (Pringle and Mallon 2003; McDonald, Brown, and Bradley 2005; Greenhaus et al. 2008), recent studies (Vinkenbug and Weber 2012; Clarke 2013) highlight the paucity of empirical studies that support the argument that the traditional-organizational strategy has disappeared or is no longer useful. Although the new or contemporary career patterns dominate the majority of current research (Clarke 2013), the empirical evidence is limited. Hence, a growing number of empirical studies have examined the careers of managers and professionals and revealed that the careers of these individuals have developed and advanced in single organizations over many years (McDonald et al. 2005; Ituma and Simpson 2009; Vinkenbug and Weber 2012; Clarke 2013), thus providing further evidence that the organizational career is alive. For example, in a large-scale survey that looked at the careers of more than 900 employees across 12 international active for-profit organizations in Belgium, Dries et al. (2012) found that people with high potentials and key experts are more often found in traditional-organizational careers. Similarly, in a recent study in Australia, Clarke (2013) revealed that the careers of Australian employees are organizational-traditional in nature, with some aspects of contemporary careers. Therefore, while these studies do not deny the significance of the contemporary models, they also question the validity of writing off the traditional career given the evidence suggesting its survival and the lack of empirical studies that confirm contemporary career patterns. These findings were also supported by other studies in several countries including Australia (McDonald et al. 2005), the USA (Reitman and Schneer 2003), Ethiopia (Counsell 2002), and France (Dany 2003), but have not been validated or explored in the context of the AME. The current study will thus explore whether the traditional career path is capable of explaining the unfolding of the managerial careers of women in Lebanon or whether it is indeed dead.

Third, while traditional career theory has been criticized for underplaying or ignoring women's career patterns (O'Neil, Hopkins, and Bilimoria 2008), research that examined whether there are gender differences in protean orientation or boundaryless careers is rather inconclusive (Sullivan and Baruch 2009). Hence, the feminist literature has repeatedly questioned the applicability of the traditional and the boundaryless careers to the lives of women (Pringle and Mallon 2003). To further explain, on the one hand, the traditional career model perceives the male norm of career progress based on upward progression through the hierarchy as being a normative standard for judging career progress (Powell and Mainiero 1992). As such, scholars argue that the traditional model fails to take into account the complex and multi-dimensional nature of women's careers (O'Neil et al. 2008) – how they move freely across domestic, work and relationship

boundaries (Pringle and Mallon 2003) – despite the increased presence of women in the workforce and their worldwide economic participation (Omair 2010). On the other hand, Pringle and Mallon (2003) contend that empirical studies into boundaryless careers have focused on limited samples within a narrow range of occupations, with women and minorities being deviations from dominant patterns. Similarly, Sullivan and Arthur (2006) considered gender discrimination, cultural differences and individual competencies as possible obstacles to a boundaryless career. In other words, men face less job discrimination and are therefore more likely to have higher physical mobility than women. Although this study will not look into gender differences as it is mainly interested in the careers of women managers, it will explore the extent to which Lebanese women managers identify with the traditional versus the contemporary career paths in order to explain the unfolding of their own career.

Fourth, relatively little career research has been conducted in non-Western (Sullivan and Baruch 2009), collective cultures (Pringle and Mallon 2003; Inkson 2006; Ituma et al. 2011) such as those of the Middle East, with the exception of Omair (2010) in the context of the UAE. National context and gender are not given sufficient credence in contemporary career literature (Pringle and Mallon 2003) given that the protean and the boundaryless careers may indeed unfold differently in non-Western contexts as they are significantly influenced by cultural values, individualism and agency (Briscoe and Hall 2006). For example, in her study of Arab women, Omair (2010) found that the unfolding of women's careers in this region is significantly impacted by macro-societal expectations, collective nature, gender stereotypes, as well as by institutional barriers such as gender-based human resource (HR) practices and the strong influence of networks, connections or *wasta* (in the Arabic language).² Similarly, Counsell (2002) revealed that national and cultural factors in an Ethiopian context need to be factored into our understanding of careers as national politics and ethnic affiliations have a significant impact on individuals' careers and on human resource management (HRM) practices. It is, therefore, very interesting to attend to this research gap by empirically exploring, through a country-specific study that focuses on Lebanon, the impact of the local masculine, collective culture on the unfolding of Lebanese women managers' careers.

Institutional Theory in a Lebanese context

To explore the status of Lebanese women managers, the current study leverages IT (Scott 1995, 2001, 2005) as its main theoretical framework, given its widely accepted usage in career-related studies of women in the AME (see for example Jamali 2009). According to IT, institutions are social structures that have a high degree of resilience and contain three pillars that provide meaning to social life, support and stability (Scott 1995, 2005). The cultural-cognitive pillar refers to the social construction and interpretations of the national culture and traditions within an institution. The regulatory pillar is concerned with rules and laws that act as control mechanisms, while the normative pillar refers to the standards of behavior, norms and beliefs. Not only do these pillars provide a basis for social order, they also dictate social obligations that constrain the behavior of individuals (Scott 1995, 2001). Taking the cultural-cognitive pillar into consideration, AME societies have long been described as (a) highly collectivist (Hofstede 1980, 1984, 2001)³ where group conformity is emphasized and the obligations of individuals to their families shape their aspirations and achievements (Pringle and Mallon 2003) and (b) masculine where gender roles are firmly distinguished, strictly defined and specific (Hofstede 2001). For example, while females in Arab families are socialized to attend to their domestic responsibilities

and to meet socially ascribed gender roles that are limited to being good mothers and wives (Tlaiss and Kauser 2011a,b), males are socialized to pursue education and careers and to be financially successful (Metcalf 2007; Omair 2010). These cultural values create specific social expectations for both genders and stereotypes about what a man and woman can or cannot do. Although previous studies suggest that Lebanon is more liberal than neighboring Arab countries regarding gender roles (Sidani 2005; Dirani 2006), studies that look at women's careers confirm the salience of gender discrimination and its negative consequences for women's advancement in Lebanon (Tlaiss and Mendelson 2014).

In turn, these macro-national traditions have strongly penetrated through local organizational cultures as suggested by the cultural-cognitive pillar. Indeed, it has been frequently suggested that Lebanese women suffer from being perceived as unsuitable for managerial positions given the reinterpretation of national gender stereotypes arguing that a woman's place is primarily in the home. Therefore, by virtue of the normative pillar of IT, the under-representation of women in senior management positions (women occupy less than 5% of senior management positions in Lebanon; Jamali et al. 2005) and their clustering at the lower levels of management, is not surprising but rather the norm or the acceptable standard of behavior given the salient discriminatory organizational culture. This gender discrimination is further aggravated by the rules and laws that act as control mechanisms as explained by the regulatory pillar. In other words, in the absence of any legal support such as the affirmative action in the USA and employment equity in Canada, the salient organizational practices further support this discrimination; an aspect which distinguishes the experience of Lebanese women from their Western counterparts. Indeed, several studies suggest that Lebanese women experience gender discrimination in recruitment, performance appraisals and promotions, while men dominate decision-making positions (Jamali et al. 2005, 2006; Tlaiss and Mendelson 2014). The notion of discriminatory organizational cultures and practices in Lebanon has been identified by Tlaiss and Kauser (2010). After surveying more than 400 women managers across a wide range of organizations throughout Lebanon, the authors found compelling evidence of the gender-based discrimination that Lebanese women experience in recruitment, promotion, performance appraisal and training and development opportunities. They also reported that the prevailing culture within Lebanese organizations accepts and promotes the ideal of 'think male, think manager', which significantly limits a woman's chances of establishing strong networks or *wasta* and career progression. This *status quo* provides insights into why women managers feel that their work is often undervalued, they are unsatisfied with their promotions and salaries and feel discriminated against (Tlaiss and Mendelson 2014). Hence, while one can argue that women in Western countries also experience institutional discrimination, scholars suggest the experiences of women in AME contexts are further aggravated by economic instability, the absence of legal support in terms of government imposed rules and regulations, and a patriarchal, masculine culture that strengthens gender stereotypes and discrimination (Tlaiss and Kauser 2010; Tlaiss and Mendelson 2014).

Given the discriminatory national culture that is further reflected in organizational culture and practices in Lebanon, some studies suggest that the participation of women in the workforce is the result of a labour shortage. To further explain, after 17 years of civil war between 1975 and 1992, Lebanon suffered a severe shortage of educated people as young educated males immigrated to neighbouring countries looking for better work opportunities (Jamali et al. 2005, 2006). This labour shortage at the macro-national level, in addition to the difficult economic situation in the late 1990s, which meant that the survival of many homes was dependent on dual incomes (Sidani 2005),

facilitated the increased participation of women in the workforce. Today, women are strongly represented in a number of sectors, such as education and healthcare where they constitute more than 50% and 79% of the workforce, respectively (Ministry of Public Health of Lebanon 2000; Tlaiss and Kauser 2011a). Other studies suggest that the increased involvement of women in the workforce is also motivated by the relaxed social codes at the macro-level that differentiate Lebanon from its neighbouring Arab countries (Dirani 2006) and the greater level of investment of women in their human capital at the micro-level. In other words, Lebanese society, despite its collectivist and masculine nature, is generally known for its relaxed codes regarding women and their participation in economic and political activities at the macro-national level (Sidani 2005; Dirani 2006). For example, Lebanese Muslim women are free to interact with men and can choose whether to wear a head scarf (Sidani 2005). Other studies attribute women's increased presence in the workforce to their increased educational attainment levels as they constitute more than 50% of the university student population (World Bank 2005).

However, while there is sufficient evidence in existing literature to support the unfair organizational practices that women in Lebanon experience, the same cannot be claimed regarding studies that look at career paths of these Arab women. Moreover, in studies where women's work is examined, gender tends to be ignored (Metcalf 2006, 2007), although gender hierarchies are firmly embedded in everyday cultural and organizational practices (Hutchings et al. 2012). Moreover, in a recent study that looked at women in the UAE, Tlaiss (2013) argues that while examining the careers of Arab women, the agentic process of women has often been ignored. Defined by Oliver (1991) as a strategic response to an institutional process, the agentic process is the process through which career actors (women in this case) devise a set of strategic behaviours to respond to the institutional pressures and constraints that are imposed on them. Tlaiss (2013) argues that Arab women do not rebel against institutional constraints *per se*, but rather use their individual agency to navigate through various constraints, rules and expected roles using career advancement-oriented behaviour in order to progress in their careers. In this latter study, the author argues for giving women's agency more attention in studies that look at women's careers in the Middle East. Therefore, considering IT and its three pillars, along with the potential influence of women's agency, this study explores the unfolding of the careers of women managers along traditional and contemporary career paths. While doing so, the current study realizes the multi-dimensionality of women's careers (O'Neil et al. 2008) and approaches careers as socially constructed experiences that cut through individual, organizational and societal levels of their lives (Iellatchitch et al. 2003).

Research questions

As this study is the first of its kind to reflect on the career paths of women managers in Lebanon, its results and findings will be of an exploratory rather than a confirmatory nature. The participants were invited to tell their career stories through open-ended interviews that focused on exploring the nature of their career paths (traditional or contemporary) and the ways they advance their careers, given the social, cultural and organizational realities. The research questions following from that are as follows: How do Lebanese women managers describe their career paths? To what extent do these paths reflect aspects of the traditional, rigid versus the contemporary, flexible career paths? Given that the macro-sociocultural inequalities, meso-organizational unfair organizational practices and gender-based discrimination that women in Lebanon face, the current study

also tries to explore what organizational and sociocultural factors are influencing and in what ways the women managers' organizational experience, and career paths into and within management? Thus, in this study, we will empirically explore the unfolding of Lebanese women managers' career paths amidst the macro-national and meso-organizational contexts.

Methodology

The methodological approach underling this study draws from the constructivist ontological and interpretive epistemological traditions. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the constructivist approach does not conceptualize the 'career as a form or structure that an individual temporarily inhabits' (Cohen 2006, p. 190), but as one that has been constructed by the career actors themselves. The interpretive epistemological perspective allows the researcher to get closer to the social actors, (women managers), in order to understand the phenomenon through the eyes and words of these actors and to develop an in-depth understanding of an under-researched phenomenon (Creswell 2007). This approach allows us to consider the rarely examined complex inter-relationship between work, family and career while exploring women's career accounts (Cohen, Duberley, and Mallon 2004; Cohen 2006). It also responds to calls for more qualitative input to women's career studies (Cohen and Mallon 2001; Arthur et al. 2005). This interpretive outlook has been frequently used in empirical investigation exploring the unfolding of women's career in various national contexts (Cohen et al. 2004; Cohen 2006; Clarke 2013) including those in developing countries and in the AME region (Omair 2010; Ituma et al. 2011).

To explore the unfolding of the careers of Lebanese women managers, a career narrative approach was adopted, using in-depth semi-structured interviews and template analysis, as recommended by previous career studies (Cohen 2006; Clarke 2013). While attention to the retrospective sense-making of careers is becoming more popular in empirical studies on careers (Cohen and Mallon 2001; Vinkenbunrg and Weber 2012), the call for its increased adoption as an approach to understand the unfolding of managerial career patterns in specific has been growing. A narrative approach to understanding careers, with its focus on retrospective sense making and identifying patterns, is more concerned with the women's understanding and interpretation of their careers. It also provides us with a better understanding of how women frame and account for their career development in particular sociocultural contexts (Omair 2010). In keeping with this approach, women managers were encouraged to talk about their career paths during in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured, open-ended interviews.

Study sample and profile of the interviewees

This investigation examined the career paths of 32 salaried women managers based in Lebanon, the majority of whom worked in large (≤ 100 employees) private organizations. In the current study the term 'manager' is used to refer to an individual who has supervisory responsibility and authority over the work and performance of at least two subordinates. Therefore, the interviewees in this study were categorized as managers based on their occupational category and their role as managerial staff, i.e. senior, middle and junior managers. The managers interviewed were educated as 24/32 (75%) had at least a bachelor's degree. The majority were junior managers (17/32; 53%), and married (18/32; almost 56%), with children. The career actors worked in production-oriented (6; almost 19%) and service-oriented (26; almost 81%) sectors, including banks and insurance

companies (9; almost 36%) and educational institutions (8; almost 31%). The mean age of the entire sample was 42 years, with the majority of the interviewees (11/32; 34.4%) between 41 and 50 years of age; 8 (25%) were over 50 years of age and the rest were less than 40 years of age (i.e. 7 managers [almost 21.9 %] were less than 30 years of age and 6 managers [18.8%] were between 31 and 40 years).

Procedures and instruments

Data collection in the AME has frequently been considered problematic given the absence of reliable governmental data sets that outline the percentage of women in the workforce or their allocation within the managerial hierarchy or between production-oriented and service-oriented sectors; the absence of dependable postal systems; as well as the reluctance of females to take part in any forms of research (Tlaiss and Kauser 2011b). To overcome these difficulties, the use of a convenience (rather than a conventional) sample was deemed necessary as it allowed for the selection of information-rich interviewees to study in-depth (Patton 2002). A mixed sampling strategy incorporating snowballing, purposive approach (Patton 2002; Cohen 2006; Omair 2010; Ituma et al. 2011) and chain referral was used. This approach aimed to generate a non-probability sample of participants that is neither claimed to be fully representative nor random, but rather one that provides a diverse population which has information about the topic under study (Cohen 2006, p. 194).

In addition, the researcher contacted the HR departments of a large number of organizations to request their participation in this study. In deciding which organizations to contact, multi-stage sampling was utilized. First, the Chamber of Commerce in Lebanon was contacted, from which the researcher obtained a list of local organizations with more than 100 employees. Second, this list of organizations was categorized as either service or production. Third, management of the HR departments of these organizations was contacted. If and when possible, a meeting was scheduled between the researcher and the managers of these departments to inform them about the research, its objectives and goals, and to gain their permission to solicit women managers working within the organizations.

To understand the nature of the interviewees' careers, the participants were asked the following questions: *Tell me about your career to date? Describe to me how you got to your current managerial position?* To understand the institutional barriers they faced, the process of finding meaning and how the women navigated their careers through the institutional challenges and existing values, the interviewees were asked: *What are the factors that influenced or shaped your career path? How did you react to these factors?* The interviews took place in locations based on the respondents' preferences, including in their offices or in cafes, and lasted on average for 90 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher discussed the objectives of the research and its focus, confirmed the confidentiality of the subject matter discussed and explained the potential dissemination routes for the data collected. This step was necessary to create rapport between the researcher and the interviewees. The interviews were recorded, and were transcribed by the researcher and by an independent researcher familiar with the phenomena under study. The interviews were mostly conducted in English, with some translated and back translated into Arabic and French by the researcher and another independent researcher fluent in Arabic, English and French.

Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing process throughout the empirical data collection phase. First, following King's (1994) instructions for template or thematic analysis, an initial

code book based on *a priori* themes identified in the literature, and guided by the research questions was prepared. Second, during the data collection phase, the transcripts were read by both researchers to gain an understanding of each woman's career account. During this process, the researchers undertook a systematic comparison between the themes highlighted by the interviewees and the initially coded themes. The researchers also compared the narratives of the managers to identify commonalities and differences in the unfolding of their careers. This resulted in the emergence of new themes and the continuous amendment and adjustment of the code book to account for new themes (King 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994; Cohen 2006). For example, the analysis looked for evidence of career mobility and self-management in keeping with boundaryless and protean career characteristics (Hall 2004; Arthur et al. 2005) and for evidence of a focus on upward mobility and the stability of career patterns within one single organization, in keeping with the traditional career dynamics (Clarke 2013). It also looked for evidence of ways in which women managers navigated gender discrimination and institutional mandates throughout their careers.

Results

The interview results were organized around the major research questions, distinguishing between the traditional versus the protean and the boundaryless career paths and exploring the manner through which national and organizational contextual factors shaped or influenced the unfolding of career patterns. The results section thus reflects on how the women experience their careers, how institutional factors constrain their careers and how their individual agency enabled their advancement.

Traditional, organizational career path

The dominant career path of the women managers in this study was traditional, institutionally offered, with upward mobility on the corporate ladder as the main objective. It was also dependant on length of service and loyalty to the employer. The careers of the interviewees evolved and progressed linearly through the different levels of a structured hierarchy within one single organization. The interviewees recounted their career progression in terms of gradual promotion and salary increases as rewards for meeting or surpassing work objectives or goals that were determined by their organizations. The Lebanese women managers, regardless of age, marital status or position within the managerial hierarchy, demonstrated an acceptance of this form of career path. They often referred to it in terms of progression, promotions, additional responsibilities and climbing the ladder. Typical responses were as follows:

Like everyone else, I had to start at the lower positions and gradually climb the ladder to management positions. (Middle manager, Educational sector)

My career path was the regular path. I started on the front desk and then I was gradually promoted to my current position ... I imagine that if I continue to meet my organizational goals, I will be further promoted. (Junior manager, Health and Hospitality sector)

When I joined the company several years ago, my manager told me that if I do my work well, I will progress through the grades and the levels, and that is what happened. Every year, I was getting a performance assessment and based on it, my raises and bonuses were determined. Then when positions became vacant, I would get promoted to higher positions. (Middle manager, Financial sector)

With the exception of three managers, none of the women pursued careers that involved regular or frequent movements across organizations or industries. The majority of the interviewees also emphasized the important role that length of service and loyalty to the employer (two important aspects of the traditional psychological contract) played in fostering their upward mobility. In other words, the in-depth narrative analysis revealed how some of the interviewees have indeed followed a traditional career path characterized by lengthy periods (some for more than 20 years) in the same organization.

I have been working with this bank all my life. I started as a customer service officer when I was pursuing my first degree, then I was promoted to assistant section head, then section head, then assistant branch manager and so on . . . that is the process that everybody has to go through and I knew that I had to go through the whole process. (Middle manager, Financial sector)

People usually consider changing employers if they are not satisfied, and I was satisfied. Plus, I have seen how seniority helped other people get promoted so I figured that if I stay and put in the years needed, I would get promoted and I did. (Junior manager, Production sector)

The analysis also revealed that the Lebanese women managers perceived their career advancement as the result of preserving a good relationship with their employer and demonstrating loyalty. The desire to maintain long-term employment security exhibited by this group of interviewees can be attributed to normative and economic reasons.

To further explain, one group of interviewees stated that by remaining with their employers, they were demonstrating loyalty and commitment, which were often acknowledged and positively rewarded by their employers.

To me, having a good relationship with my managers and employers and demonstrating to them my loyalty is very important and from the experiences of others, I learned that my employer appreciates loyalty and it helped me get promoted. (Junior manager, Health and Hospitality sector)

When I got my promotion to senior management, the CEO told me that I was promoted not only because of my good work, but also because they appreciated my loyalty and the fact that I could have moved to another employer but I did not (Senior manager, Financial sector)

This finding highlights how institutional factors influence the careers of women. In other words, by virtue of IT's normative pillar – highlighting the role of norms and beliefs within organizations for outlining standards of behavior – the women in this study experienced a traditional career path in one organizational setting given that dedication to one's employer is among the salient beliefs and norms in the region (Ali 1996). It also demonstrated how the cultural-cognitive pillar, through the national work-related values that stress the importance of loyalty to one's employer, is further reflected within the institutions and how it impacts the careers of individuals.

Another group of interviewees stated that by remaining with their employers, they were looking out for their families and ensuring their survival. This group of interviewees were not willing to risk losing their jobs given Lebanon's post-civil war, macro-national economic situation, high levels of unemployment and the shortage of career opportunities. The married women in this group were more likely to emphasize this point reflecting thus on the collective nature of Lebanese society, where group conformity is emphasized, and individual decisions are always considered in terms of their potential impact on the family and the group. This highlights not only the role of the macroeconomic situation as previously suggested, but also the role of cultural values in shaping individuals' career decisions and paths.

I did not want to take the risk and start working for a new employer. What if I did not like them? Plus, in our situation, who can afford losing their jobs? I definitely cannot. I am a

mother of two and my husband and I need my salary to support our family. Plus, I help my mother as well, so risking all this would be selfish so I decided that it is for the best of all of us if I keep working here. (Junior manager, Education sector)

I was so happy I found a job in Lebanon that I liked and I did not have to travel or live away from my family to get a job. Only someone with a rich family would risk changing jobs in Lebanon. (Junior manager, Production sector)

Interplay of institutional factors, the protean career and the agentic process

In addition to the wide spread of the traditional career path, the majority of the Lebanese women managers in this study complained about discriminatory organizational attitudinal and structural realities. In regard to the attitudes and the overall corporate environment, the women interviewees described organizational culture as contaminated by stereotypical attitudes that question women's abilities to be effective managers and decision-makers. The managers also considered that judgements about whether they should be promoted to managerial positions were based on adherence to masculine stereotypes and the 'think male, think manager' mentality. The women managers considered that these judgements stem from dominant national cultural values, where patriarchal attitudes that emphasize the role of women in domestic arenas are strongly entrenched. These findings strongly support the culture-cognitive and how the interpretation of the national culture within organizations impacts women's careers. They also demonstrate the normative pillar of IT; how the norms and beliefs that are spread in organizations create a social order and dictate certain constraints on individuals, i.e. the career advancement of women.

I and other working women in Lebanon suffer from negative perceptions about our abilities to take on management positions. It was very difficult for me, when I was promoted to my first supervisory position, to handle the questioning of my colleagues and subordinates on whether as a woman I can do the job or not. (Junior manager, Marketing and Advertising sector)

One of the biggest problems that Lebanese women face is our culture. Because in Lebanese culture, women are not perceived as decision makers, organizational cultures are the same. This stereotypical thinking is well spread in this company and in all the other companies as well. Although women are now more educated and qualified than men, they are always considered as a second choice and their capabilities are always dissected. (Senior manager, Financial sector)

Women's work in Lebanese society is always perceived as secondary to that of men and their desires to become managers or decision-makers are always taken lightly . . . being a manager for me is a proof that I am suitable to be a manger and a mother at the same time. (Middle manager, Health and Hospitality sector)

In addition to attitudinal barriers, the interviewees recognized numerous structural barriers to their career advancement, such as exclusion from informal networks, training and development opportunities. Several women reported being excluded from developmental assignments that would advance their careers because of a strong masculine culture that frequently grooms males for senior managerial roles. This exclusion was often translated into low visibility for women and less opportunities to advance. Some women managers also highlighted the lack of organizational support, fairness and transparency in performance evaluations, which in turn impacted their promotions and progression through the ranks. In other words, despite achieving their managerial position through gradual promotions and upward mobility in the organizational hierarchy, the interviewees felt that, unlike their male counterparts, they had to work harder and to constantly prove themselves and their capabilities. These findings highlight the impact of the regulatory

pillar of institutions and how the rules and laws within act as control mechanisms, controlling the number of women in management positions and keeping it to a minimum in such scenarios. Typical responses from the women managers were as follows:

I don't think women are treated fairly and I don't think I was treated fairly. I was excluded from several international assignments. When I asked about the reason, my managers said that they thought I would refuse because as a woman I was not to leave my husband and children behind. (Senior manager, Financial sector)

This is a patriarchal culture and men are always preferred for managerial position. The women are promoted only if they work twice, or more, as hard as men. (Junior manager, Education sector)

... My performance appraisals were not fair ... in comparison, men less accomplished than I was and who did not have my performance, were promoted faster ... the masculine figure for managers is still the salient prototype here. (Junior manager, Financial sector)

Despite these attitudinal and structural barriers, a large number of interviewees did not acquiesce. Equipped with strong educational backgrounds, years of experience, strong aspirations for management and progress, the interviewees navigated their managerial careers past the institutional barriers through hard work, persistence and determination. In other words, to overcome these attitudinal and structural barriers, the women managers felt the need to prove themselves and their suitability for management positions through excellent performance and long hours of work. They also felt the need to outperform their male colleagues to crack the glass ceiling and realize their potential. This autonomous approach to careers is a notable result as it explains how the career paths of the women managers demonstrate the interplay between the traditional and the protean and how they assumed responsibility for their advancement through the organizational framework. Several women reported strong individual agency. The women also gave meaning to their careers and built strategies for advancement by being forward thinking, self-motivated, hardworking and dedicated. In being driven by their personal goals to land managerial positions they reflected some aspects of the protean career.

I knew what the rules were ... I knew that I needed to meet my targets, to get good performance evaluations from my managers, and to do something great ... and I was working day and night, even on the weekends. I knew that I wanted the promotions and I was not willing to stop before getting them. (Senior manager, Financial sector)

I simply could not wait until my turn for a promotion came. I knew that if I wanted to get promoted I had to be excellent, not good but excellent. I wanted to prove to everyone that women can be senior managers, so I started working day and night, went to several workshops, went out to the community and met people, visited families in their homes and encouraged them to send their children as students to our institution ... I put a plan in place for myself and I achieved it. (Senior manager, Education sector)

In essence, the Lebanese women managers, in adopting some traits of the protean career, demonstrated strong individual agency as they created meaning for their careers, and navigated their institution's rules and norms to meet their goals. So, by virtue of the agentic process and the interaction between women's agency and institutional realities, the women realized career advancement by steering their development strategies across institutionally mandated challenges and peculiarities. The interviewees simply had strong aspirations to access and progress through the managerial hierarchy. Interviewees, across different age groups, marital status and positions in management, attribute their career progress to excellent performance, hard work and continuous attempts to overcome gender-based judgements that question women's commitment to their jobs versus their families. The women created goals and worked hard to prove themselves and realize their

goals. Therefore, guided by the organizational frameworks for job promotion, the interviewees demonstrated individual agency and had a personal desire to grow, which motivated them to agentially construct careers around institutional idiosyncrasies and demonstrate some levels of self-direction and career management, all in keeping with the protean career path.

Interplay of boundaryless and protean careers, and individual agency

The majority of the Lebanese women managers interviewed built their careers in one or two organizations and did not experience inter-organizational mobility. Only three interviewees defied the traditional employment immobility and moved across employers and industries. These interviewees were in their mid-30s, holding junior and middle management positions. Overwhelmed by the discriminatory institutional regulatory, normative and cultural-cognitive factors, these interviewees demonstrated their individual agency and boundaryless orientations by taking full control over their careers and changing employers. To further explain, this group of women managers put themselves in charge of their careers and chose to work in organizations that helped support their individual desire to grow their careers. These interviewees rejected working in institutions with discriminatory normative and regulatory pillars which did not support their personal growth. They were motivated by their personal values and their desires for freedom and autonomy. These findings serve to highlight how women managers used their individual agency to overcome institutional challenges; changing employers in search of one where they do not feel they had to prove themselves all the time or were continually challenged by gender discrimination.

I have worked in three companies so far and changed industries as well ... I want to work with an employer where I feel appreciated and valued. (Middle manager, Marketing and advertising sector).

I don't mind changing employers or industries ... whenever I start feeling uncomfortable or that my work is not being fairly evaluated, I start looking for a new job with a new employer. (Junior manager, Financial sector)

There was no point staying within a place where I was not getting promoted because I am a woman. I cannot function in places like that, so I changed employers. (Junior manager, Educational sector)

One of these three interviewees also said that she moved across employers in an attempt to find a job that helped her achieve one of her personal goals: the desire for work / life balance. This interviewee was the only married woman among this group and her movement across employers was in pursuit of a managerial career in an organization that would help her meet her family obligations and support her career growth. Overall, these findings highlight the difficulty in drawing the distinction between the self-directedness and personal values protean career-related aspects and those of physical mobility related to a boundaryless career.

Moreover, given the women's frustration with exclusion from organizational networks, these three interviewees resorted to building external networks (*wasta*), to help them move between organizations. The use of external networks to enhance physical mobility between employers is another aspect of the boundaryless career portrayed by the women in this group.

Discussion

This study is an exploratory investigation of the recounting of the career paths of women managers in Lebanon. Given that the unfolding of women managers' careers in the AME

is poorly researched, the objective of this study is to contribute to narrowing the knowledge gap rather than to develop a new typology of women's career development. Therefore, this study should be perceived as a step towards establishing a better understanding of the ways in which women's careers occur and their career management experience. It also contributes to our understanding of how women give meaning to their careers and navigate through the challenges imposed by macro-social and cultural values, and by institutional mandates. As such, the findings suggest that the careers of women managers in Lebanon go beyond the scope of either the traditional, protean or the boundaryless careers on an individual basis; rather, they unfold and co-exist within aspects of the traditional and the protean, with some limited evidence of the boundaryless career. The findings also suggest that, when subject to institutional pressures, women's agency plays a very important role in orchestrating their careers. In other words, by virtue of the agentic process, women devise strategies through their day-to-day activities to challenge institutional mandates and discrimination.

To further explain, the career path described by the majority of the interviewees in this study suggests a traditional career path, based on vertical progression in a predicted manner, and commitment and loyalty to one, or at most two, employers (Wilensky 1964; Rosenbaum 1979; Arthur 1994; Hall 1996; Baruch 2006). Therefore, the empirical evidence presented resonates with a small but growing number of studies (McDonald et al. 2005; Ituma and Simpson 2009; Vinkenburg and Weber 2012; Clarke 2013) that argue that the traditional-organizational career has not disappeared. To the contrary, the findings – in line with those of Dries et al. (2012) in France, McDonald et al. (2005) and Clarke (2013) in Australia and in Ethiopia (Counsell 2002) – suggest that the traditional organizational career pattern is indeed still capable of explaining the career paths of managers. Therefore, the career paths and experiences of Lebanese women (who follow traditional career paths) differ from their Western counterparts (who embrace contemporary career paths).

Although the traditional career has often been criticized as underplaying women's career patterns (O'Neil et al. 2008) and resembling a male form of career (Powell and Mainiero 1992), a common theme in the women managers' stories in this study is that the organizational career does indeed account for the unfolding of their careers. The narratives also confirm, contrary to widespread claims (see Baruch 2003, 2004), the resilience of the traditional psychological contract and the salience of the career-based, long-term, loyalty-focused relationship between employees and employers. It is, however, important at this point to re-emphasize the interplay between national economic and sociocultural factors and the careers of women managers in this study. Notwithstanding the complex and multi-dimensional nature of women's careers (O'Neil et al. 2008), one can argue that the difficult economic situation played a major role in directing Lebanese women to focus on job security and maintaining a steady income, which was effectively translated into loyalty to one employer.

The analysis also indicates that while the careers of the Lebanese women managers unfolded along the traditional-organizational career path and were influenced by various national economic and sociocultural variables, they also demonstrated some aspects of contemporary careers, namely the protean, and to a lesser extent, the boundaryless. These aspects were, however, strongly related to the institutional challenges the women faced within their organizations. Challenged by the restrictive cultural-cognitive, normative and regulative institutional factors emphasizing and fostering gender discrimination, Lebanese women adopted the agentic process, which allowed them to use their individual agency through their day-to-day activities to navigate these discriminatory challenges and achieve career advancement. Women's agency in this study was demonstrated through the adoption of some aspects of the protean career – demonstrating a strong determination to

fulfil their objectives to be managers and planning for their managerial advancement through hard work and proving themselves. This agency is therefore best explained as the process of work-related engagements that the Lebanese women managers invested in, based on their previous experiences or future possibilities, to advance their careers (Tams and Arthur 2010). In other words, to realize their individually driven objectives of career advancement and growth, the women assumed self-directedness and management of their careers through hard work, determination, personal responsibility and commitment, which allowed them to land management positions; all of which are suggestive of some aspects of the protean career.

Only some of the women overtly challenged the institutional obstacles by changing employers. This minority refused to accept institutional discrimination and moved across different industries, employers and positions looking for the most supportive institutional environment to advance their careers. This finding provides some evidence of the boundaryless career reflected through physical mobility across various employers (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Inkson 2006; Sullivan and Baruch 2009). It also strongly concurs with Sullivan and Arthur (2006) who argue that gender discrimination and cultural differences can be possible obstacles to a boundaryless career. In the context of Lebanon, the minimal reference to a boundaryless career in comparison to a traditional organizational career can be attributed to three major factors. First, the difficult economic backdrop that drove women to focus on job security emphasizes the impact of national factors on careers. Second, the collective nature of a society in which women are expected to make their obligations towards their families a priority, increases the focus on job security – portraying how some cultural barriers can indeed be obstacles to a boundaryless career. Third, entrenched cultural-cognitive and normative institutional factors perceive loyalty to one's employer as a highly esteemed moral value and obligation. However, the women who adapted the physical career mobility aspect of the boundaryless career were also demonstrating some aspects of the protean career, highlighting thus the relatively problematic aspect of the complementarity and the overlapping of boundaryless and protean careers (Briscoe and Hall 2006; Granlose and Baccili 2006; Inkson 2006; Greenhaus et al. 2008; Briscoe and Finkelstein 2009; Sullivan and Baruch 2009).

In a broader sense, this study concurs with previous studies in Lebanon and the AME region (Jamali et al. 2005, 2006; Al-Lamky 2007; Metcalfe, 2007; Tlaiss and Kauser 2010; Hutchings et al. 2012) regarding the ample attitudinal and structural organizational challenges that working women face in their careers. It also portrays how women experience and manage their careers given the organizational challenges. Although the findings do not necessarily suggest a shift to a more protean career, as some researchers might argue (e.g. Hall and Mirvis 1995, 1996; Mirvis and Hall 1996), what is noteworthy is the way in which Lebanese women use their agency and some aspects of the protean career to navigate a challenging institutional career path. This interesting finding echoes the multi-faceted labyrinth of challenges that women face (Eagly and Carli 2007) and their need to constantly establish and confirm their suitability for management positions by working hard and over-performing. The empirical evidence presented in this study, therefore, clearly demonstrates how Lebanese women devise advancement strategies to overcome the institutional barriers through their individual agency.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research

The findings of this study are informative and stimulate interest in conducting further research on the careers of women in the AME. Nonetheless, certain limitations need to be

acknowledged. The review of literature focused on only two types of contemporary career path. Notwithstanding the importance and the originality of the findings reported in this study, it would be interesting to see future empirical studies take into consideration other forms of career path, such as the intelligent career and the kaleidoscope career. Despite its Arab patriarchal, masculine and collectivist culture, Lebanon is often described as liberal, an attribute that might question the generalizability across the AME. Hence, it would be informative to examine the career paths of women managers in other countries in the AME region to determine the impact of local cultures and to identify differences in career paths. Another limitation is certainly the small sample size and the qualitative nature of this study. Future studies might consider using a larger sample size and a triangulation of methods between qualitative and quantitative techniques that will allow for some confirmatory research through the use of propositions and hypotheses. Furthermore, since the interviewees were women and managers, their career paths may differ from those of males and those in non-managerial positions. It would thus be worthwhile to examine how male managers describe their career paths, and to determine whether differences exist across countries in the AME region. Finally, comparative studies looking at the careers of both men and women across different countries in the AME would be very informative.

Implications

This study offers a rare examination of career women located outside the core of the world system, i.e. the West. The fact that these women are specifically Arab women makes it more valuable still, considering the high level of gender discrimination and the salience of gender stereotypes in the AME, as well as the low participation of women in the labour force, and their under-representation in management positions (Tlaiss and Kauser 2010, 2011a,b). Although Lebanon is frequently referred to as a liberal country, it remains an Arab country with a patriarchal, masculine culture that influences the institutions and the development of individuals within these institutions. Therefore, the current study represents a wonderful opportunity to underscore the uniqueness of the career-related experiences of women in Lebanon. The findings attempt to bridge the gap in our knowledge regarding careers in collective cultures and provide credence to the national context, something that is poorly executed in contemporary career studies. Hence, this study has important theoretical and practical implications.

From the theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to the debate regarding the convergence and divergence of career patterns in differing contexts (see Ituma et al. 2011; Clarke 2013). In this respect, although, to a smaller extent, some of the career patterns that emerged reflect the most common contemporary career paths currently reported in the Anglo-Saxon Western contexts, there is also an obvious divergence from the widely reported career patterns in these contexts and a convergence with the growing recent trend. In other words, the findings of the study concur with the growing, small current wave of studies that reconsider the organizational career path, particularly in countries with difficult economic situations that de-motivate career mobility and institutional factors impacted by patriarchal, masculine national cultures and values. The findings are, therefore, somewhat consistent with the divergence proposition as they demonstrate how the Lebanese women, unlike the majority of their Western counterparts, experience their careers in the traditional manner. The career experiences of the Lebanese women managers is similar to that of a small group of Western women managers and is impacted by several national and institutional factors. The findings, nonetheless, lend some support to contemporary forms of careers being mechanisms adopted by virtue of the individual

agency of the Lebanese women to overcome institutional mandates and barriers. Therefore, this study also provides further support to the suitability of using IT and its ability to embrace the various institutional challenges that women in Lebanon face within their working environments. Nonetheless, this study calls for career theories that are better able to align the career experiences of individuals with the local environments in which they operate. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of avoiding the extrapolation of North American and European research to Middle Eastern contexts, without accounting for cultural relativity and the different social factors, labour market and economic aspects of these contexts. They also imply the need for more empirical studies to understand the career-related experiences of women in this region in an attempt to develop frameworks that are better able to comprehend the different facets of their experiences.

There are also several practical implications from a policy perspective for governmental agencies and HRM departments. For government agencies and policy makers, the findings further confirm the salience of gender discrimination within organizational boundaries. The fact that the majority of the Lebanese women managers highlighted attitudinal and structural gender discrimination in their careers as institutional barriers (necessitating harder and longer work hours than for male colleagues) is problematic. The references made by the interviewees to *wasta* reflects and confirms the claims of corruption in Lebanon made by previous studies (see Tlaiss and Kauser 2011a,c). Governmental agencies and policy makers need to devise a national strategic plan that aims to eliminate discrimination and grant women fair representation in management through a quota that is well aligned with their participation in the labour force, educational levels and years of work experience. Governmental agencies can encourage organizations to embrace gender equality by holding seminars and workshops that explain the benefits of hiring the best talent, regardless of gender. They can also provide some statistics supporting how the elimination of gender discrimination and the introduction of a gender-neutral promotion policy that is based on merit have improved the overall performance and profits of other corporations locally and internationally.

For multinational companies already operating or considering expanding to the Middle East, the findings have implications for the debate of the standardization versus the localization of HRM practices and policies in the AME. Although the current study does not look at the organizational career development practices *per se*, the rather complex manner through which women's agency champions their navigation of the institutional challenges might question the suitability of importing HRM strategies and practices from developed Western economies. As our knowledge of HRM practices and policies in the AME is gradually improving, Western practices and policies are likely to continue to be influential. However, the findings of this study call for the consideration of several factors – post-war economic crisis, constant security alerts and political turmoil, national labour market, and sociocultural, institutional and legal factors – when creating developmental career plans. HR departments also need to pay considerable attention to the gender discrimination that seems to be widespread across organizations, which results in women working harder and for longer hours than men. The implications suggest the need to restructure HRM practices in the AME, towards a gender-free work environment where women do not feel the pressure to outperform their male colleagues in order to earn promotions.

To conclude, there remains a need to enhance our understanding of the under-documented career experiences of managers of both genders in the Arab world. This understanding will not only attend to the knowledge gap that currently exists, it will also allow for the creation of better and more culturally adequate HRM practices that will

enable organizations and governments to develop their human talent. These implications are very timely as most countries in the Arab world are now focusing on developing their HR to better embrace the changes taking place on various political, economic and social frontiers.

Notes

1. The AME is a group of Arab countries with emerging economies, including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine (Gaza Strip and West Bank), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, UAE and Yemen (World Bank 2009).
2. Historically, *wasta* was used as a means for managing relations and conflicts between families in the Arab world through the use of an intermediary frequently referred to as the *wasta*; hence, *wasta* refers to both the act of mediation and the person who intercedes. In recent times, *wasta* is used to refer to connections or social networks. Individuals today in Lebanon and other Arab countries seek the assistance of a *wasta* to help them land a job or get a promotion. The *wasta* is usually someone who is well respected in society, occupies an important position and has a big network of important connections. Through the use of family connections, individuals in the Arab world try to access a *wasta* to put in a good word for their application to a private or public job or promotion (Tlaiss and Kauser 2011c).
3. Hofstede's taxonomy for the Arab world will be used as a proxy for cultural values in Lebanon given that Lebanon was one of the countries examined while developing this taxonomy of cultural values. Due to the small sample sizes obtained from the Arab countries, Hofstede (1980, 1984) grouped seven Arab countries (UAE, Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Libya) and propounded them to be representative of 'Arab countries' and described them using one set of cultural values.

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