REPUBLIC OF TURKEY
ISTANBUL GELISIM UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Department of Business Administration

THE CONSEQUENCES OF WOMEN WORKPLACE CULTURE IN ARABIC-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

Master Thesis

Ashjan Ali Hamood SHAMSAN

Supervisor

Asst. Prof. Dr. Aslıhan ÜNAL

Istanbul – 2025

THESIS INTRODUCTION FORM

Name and Surname	**:**	Ashjan Ali Hamood SHAMSAN
Language of the Thesis	**:**	English
Name of the Thesis	**:**	The Consequences Of Women Workplace Culture in Arabic-Speaking Countries
Institute	**:**	Istanbul Gelisim University Institute of Graduate Studies
Department	**:**	Business Administration
Thesis Type	**:**	Master
Date of the Thesis	**:**	19.06.2025
Page Number	**:**	66
Thesis Supervisor	**:**	Asst. Prof. Dr. Aslıhan ÜNAL
Index Terms	**:**	Women in the workplace, workplace culture, gender equity, Arabic-speaking countries, qualitative research, cultural norms, professional advancement
Turkish Abstract	**:**	Bu tez, Arapça konuşulan ülkelerde kadınların karşılaştığı karmaşık ve çok boyutlu işyeri kültürünü incelemekte; özellikle köklü kültürel, dini ve toplumsal normların kadınların mesleki fırsatlarını, karşılaştıkları zorlukları ve kariyer sonuçlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğine odaklanmaktadır. Toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği bağlamında konumlandırılan bu çalışma, bireysel irade, örgütsel dinamikler ve toplumsal beklentilerin kesişiminde kadınların liderliğe erişimlerini, duygusal iyi oluşlarını ve uzun vadeli kariyer gelişimlerini nasıl etkilediğini eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla analiz etmektedir.

Niteliksel fenomenolojik bir yöntemle yürütülen bu araştırma, Suudi Arabistan, Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri, Mısır ve Ürdün gibi ülkelerde teknoloji, finans, sağlık ve eğitim gibi çeşitli sektörlerde çalışan on profesyonel kadının yaşanmış deneyimlerine dayanmaktadır. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler aracılığıyla toplanan zengin anlatılar, tematik analiz yöntemiyle değerlendirilmiştir. Bu analiz süreci sonucunda sekiz temel tema ortaya çıkmıştır: cinsiyete dayalı ayrımcılık, liderliğe erişimde engeller, duygusal emek, algılanan işyeri yükleri, örgütsel destek mekanizmaları, cinsel taciz, iş-yaşam dengesi mücadelesi ve ailevi ile evlilikle ilgili beklentilerin etkisi.

Araştırma sonuçları, kadınların iş yaşamında sürekli olarak cinsiyet temelli önyargılar, sınırlı liderlik fırsatları, adaletsiz işyeri politikaları ve geleneksel cinsiyet rollerini profesyonel ortamlarda dengelemeye çalışmanın getirdiği psikolojik yükle karşılaştıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu engeller, yalnızca kariyer duraklamasına ve tükenmişliğe değil, aynı zamanda yüksek işten ayrılma oranlarına ve kadın yeteneklerinin iş gücünde yetersiz kullanılmasına yol açmaktadır. Ayrıca, araştırma kadınların kişisel hedeflerini kültürel olarak öncelik verilen ailevi rollerle dengelemeye çalışırken yaşadıkları çifte baskının, kariyer hedeflerinden vazgeçmelerine veya bu hedefleri ertelemelerine neden olduğunu göstermektedir.

Tüm bu zorluklara rağmen, çalışma aynı zamanda ilerleme ve umut vadeden alanları da ortaya koymaktadır. Suudi Arabistan Vizyon 2030 gibi reform girişimleri ve tabandan yükselen kapsayıcılık talepleri, toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri etrafındaki söylemi yeniden şekillendirmekte ve politika değişikliklerini teşvik etmektedir. Bu çabalar, genç kuşaklar arasında artan farkındalıkla birleştiğinde,

örgütsel kültür ve toplumsal söylemde potansiyel bir dönüşümün habercisi olarak değerlendirilmektedir.

Tez, kadınlar için daha kapsayıcı ve adil bir iş ortamı yaratmaya yönelik somut önerilerle son bulmaktadır. Bu öneriler arasında şeffaf işyeri politikalarının uygulanması, esnek çalışma düzenlemeleri için kurumsal destek, yapılandırılmış mentorluk programlarının geliştirilmesi ve kültürel hassasiyet içeren örgütsel reformlar yer almaktadır. Kültürel, psikolojik ve ekonomik perspektifleri bir araya getiren bu çalışma, Arapça konuşulan iş ortamlarında kadınların karşılaştığı benzersiz engelleri anlamak için kapsamlı bir çerçeve sunmakta ve küresel iş gücü piyasalarında toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği literatürüne katkı sağlamaktadır.

Distribution List **:**

1. To the Institute of Graduate Studies of Istanbul Gelisim University
2. To the National Thesis Center of YÖK (Higher Education Council)

Ashjan Ali Hamood SHAMSAN

REPUBLIC OF TURKEY
ISTANBUL GELISIM UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Department of Business Administration

THE CONSEQUENCES OF WOMEN WORKPLACE CULTURE IN ARABIC-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

Master Thesis

Ashjan Ali Hamood SHAMSAN

Supervisor

Asst. Prof. Dr. Aslıhan ÜNAL

Istanbul – 2025

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that in the preparation of this thesis, scientific ethical rules have been followed, the works of other persons have been referenced in accordance with the scientific norms if used, there is no falsification in the used data, any part of the thesis has not been submitted to this university or any other university as another thesis.

Ashjan Ali Hamood SHAMSAN

19/06/2025

TO ISTANBUL GELISIM UNIVERSITY

THE DIRECTORATE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES INSTITUTE

The thesis study of Ashjan Ali Hamood SHAMSAN titled as The Consequences of Women Workplace Culture in Arabic-Speaking Countries has been accepted as MASTER THESIS in the department of Business Administration by our jury.

Signature

Director

Asst. Prof. Dr. Oğuz DEMİREL

Signature

Member

Asst. Prof. Dr. Aslıhan ÜNAL

(Supervisor)

Signature

Member

Asst. Prof. Dr. Ali ÖZBEK

APPROVAL

I approve that the signatures above signatures belong to the aforementioned faculty members.

... / ... / 20..

Signature

Prof. Dr. İzzet GÜMÜŞ

Director of the Institute

SUMMARY

This thesis explores the complex and multifaceted workplace culture encountered by women in Arabic-speaking countries, with a particular focus on how deeply embedded cultural, religious, and societal norms shape their professional opportunities, challenges, and career outcomes. Situated within the broader discourse of gender equity, the research critically examines the intersection of individual agency, organizational dynamics, and societal expectations that collectively influence women's access to leadership, emotional well-being, and long-term career development.

Using a qualitative phenomenological methodology, the study is grounded in the lived experiences of ten professional women working across diverse sectors such as technology, finance, healthcare, and education in countries including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Jordan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture rich narratives, which were then analyzed using thematic analysis. This process led to the identification of eight central themes: gender-based discrimination, leadership barriers, emotional labor, perceived workplace burdens, organizational support mechanisms, sexual harassment, work-life balance struggles, and the influence of familial and marital expectations.

Findings reveal that women consistently face persistent gender biases, limited leadership opportunities, inequitable workplace policies, and the psychological strain of navigating traditional gender expectations in professional settings. These constraints contribute not only to career stagnation and increased burnout but also to higher rates of attrition and a significant underutilization of female talent in the labor market. Moreover, the study highlights the dual pressures experienced by women as they attempt to balance personal ambition with cultural norms that often prioritize domestic roles, leading many to compromise or abandon career aspirations.

Despite these challenges, the study also identifies areas of progress and hope. Initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030 and growing grassroots advocacy efforts are gradually reshaping conversations around gender roles, encouraging inclusivity, and pushing for policy reforms. These efforts, combined with increasing awareness among younger generations, signal potential shifts in organizational culture and public discourse.

The thesis concludes with a set of actionable recommendations aimed at creating more inclusive and equitable professional environments for women. These include the implementation of transparent workplace policies, institutional support for flexible work arrangements, the development of structured mentorship programs, and culturally sensitive organizational reforms. By integrating cultural, psychological, and economic perspectives, this research offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the unique barriers faced by women in Arabic-speaking work contexts and contributes to the growing literature on gender equity in global labor markets.

Keywords: Women in the workplace, workplace culture, gender equity, Arabic-speaking countries, qualitative research, cultural norms, professional advancement

ÖZET

Bu tez, Arapça konuşulan ülkelerde kadınların karşılaştığı karmaşık ve çok boyutlu işyeri kültürünü incelemekte; özellikle köklü kültürel, dini ve toplumsal normların kadınların mesleki fırsatlarını, karşılaştıkları zorlukları ve kariyer sonuçlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğine odaklanmaktadır. Toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği bağlamında konumlandırılan bu çalışma, bireysel irade, örgütsel dinamikler ve toplumsal beklentilerin kesişiminde kadınların liderliğe erişimlerini, duygusal iyi oluşlarını ve uzun vadeli kariyer gelişimlerini nasıl etkilediğini eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla analiz etmektedir.

Niteliksel fenomenolojik bir yöntemle yürütülen bu araştırma, Suudi Arabistan, Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri, Mısır ve Ürdün gibi ülkelerde teknoloji, finans, sağlık ve eğitim gibi çeşitli sektörlerde çalışan on profesyonel kadının yaşanmış deneyimlerine dayanmaktadır. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler aracılığıyla toplanan zengin anlatılar, tematik analiz yöntemiyle değerlendirilmiştir. Bu analiz süreci sonucunda sekiz temel tema ortaya çıkmıştır: cinsiyete dayalı ayrımcılık, liderliğe erişimde engeller, duygusal emek, algılanan işyeri yükleri, örgütsel destek mekanizmaları, cinsel taciz, iş-yaşam dengesi mücadelesi ve ailevi ile evlilikle ilgili beklentilerin etkisi.

Araştırma sonuçları, kadınların iş yaşamında sürekli olarak cinsiyet temelli önyargılar, sınırlı liderlik fırsatları, adaletsiz işyeri politikaları ve geleneksel cinsiyet rollerini profesyonel ortamlarda dengelemeye çalışmanın getirdiği psikolojik yükle karşılaştıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu engeller, yalnızca kariyer duraklamasına ve tükenmişliğe değil, aynı zamanda yüksek işten ayrılma oranlarına ve kadın yeteneklerinin iş gücünde yetersiz kullanılmasına yol açmaktadır. Ayrıca, araştırma kadınların kişisel hedeflerini kültürel olarak öncelik verilen ailevi rollerle dengelemeye çalışırken yaşadıkları çifte baskının, kariyer hedeflerinden vazgeçmelerine veya bu hedefleri ertelemelerine neden olduğunu göstermektedir.

Tüm bu zorluklara rağmen, çalışma aynı zamanda ilerleme ve umut vadeden alanları da ortaya koymaktadır. Suudi Arabistan Vizyon 2030 gibi reform girişimleri ve tabandan yükselen kapsayıcılık talepleri, toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri etrafındaki söylemi yeniden şekillendirmekte ve politika değişikliklerini teşvik etmektedir. Bu çabalar, genç kuşaklar arasında artan farkındalıkla birleştiğinde, örgütsel kültür ve toplumsal söylemde potansiyel bir dönüşümün habercisi olarak değerlendirilmektedir.

Tez, kadınlar için daha kapsayıcı ve adil bir iş ortamı yaratmaya yönelik somut önerilerle son bulmaktadır. Bu öneriler arasında şeffaf işyeri politikalarının uygulanması, esnek çalışma düzenlemeleri için kurumsal destek, yapılandırılmış mentorluk programlarının geliştirilmesi ve kültürel hassasiyet içeren örgütsel reformlar yer almaktadır. Kültürel, psikolojik ve ekonomik perspektifleri bir araya getiren bu çalışma, Arapça konuşulan iş ortamlarında kadınların karşılaştığı benzersiz engelleri anlamak için kapsamlı bir çerçeve sunmakta ve küresel iş gücü piyasalarında toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği literatürüne katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadınların iş hayatı, işyeri kültürü, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği, Arapça konuşulan ülkeler, nitel araştırma, kültürel normlar, kariyer gelişimi

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY ..... **i**

ÖZET ..... **iii**

TABLE OF CONTENTS ..... **v**

ABBREVIATIONS ..... **viii**

LIST OF TABLES ..... **ix**

PREFACE ..... **x**

INTRODUCTION **1**

CHAPTER ONE
LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Workplace Culture and Gender Dynamics 5

1.1.1. Understanding workplace culture and its constituents 5

1.1.2. Theories on workplace and gender interaction 6

1.2. Women in the Labor Force: Global and Regional Trends 6

1.2.1. Global trends in women's employment 6

1.2.2. Gender Disparities in Employment: Key Patterns 8

1.3 Gender and Workplace Culture in Arabic-Speaking Countries 9

1.3.1. Historical Overview of Women's Workforce Participation in the Region 9

1.3.2. Cultural and religious norms ınfluencing women's employment 11

1.3.3. Structural barriers to workplace inclusion 11

1.4 Economic Consequences of Women's Underrepresentation 13

1.4.1. Gender and economic productivity: a global perspective 13

1.4.2. The impact of gender disparity on GDP in arabic-speaking countries 14

1.4.3. Policy recommendations and the way forward 16

1.5 Systemic Challenges in Women's Career Advancement 17

1.5.1. Workplace discrimination and patriarchal norms 17

1.5.1.1. Lack of anti-harassment laws and legal protections 17

1.5.1.2. Limited childcare and family support policies 18

1.6. Strategies for Women's Inclusion in the Workplace 19

1.6.1. Organizational policies for gender equity 19

1.6.2. Government initiatives and policy interventions 20

1.7 Research Gaps and Future Directions 21

1.7.1. The need for qualitative research on women's experiences 21

1.7.2. Unexplored intersections of culture, policy, and economic outcomes 22

1.7.3. Potential areas for further research 23

CHAPTER TWO
METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design 24
2.1.1. Phenomenology as a research design 24
2.2 Research Context and Participants 25
2.3 Data Collection Method 26
2.4 Mode of Interviews 27
2.5. Ethical Considerations in Data Collection 27
2.6. Data Analysis Method 28
2.7. Trustworthiness and Rigor 30
2.7.1. Credibility 30
2.7.2. Transferability 30
2.7.3. Dependability 30
2.7.4. Confirmability 31

CHAPTER THREE
FINDINGS

3.1. Summary of Findings from the Thematic Analysis 32
3.1.1. Theme 1: Gender bias and stereotypes in the workplace 35
3.1.1.1 Underrepresentation of women in leadership 35
3.1.1.2. The "prove yourself again and again" phenomenon 36
3.1.1.3 Gendered task assignments and stereotypical roles 36
3.1.1.4 The double standard: assertiveness vs. likability 36
3.1.1.5 Exclusion from informal power networks 37
3.1.1.6 Traditional gender roles influencing workplace expectations 37
3.1.1.7. Conclusion: the persistence of workplace bias 37
3.1.2. Theme 2: Work-life balance and spillover 38
3.1.2.1 Home-to-job and job-to-home spillover 38
3.1.2.2 Guilt and emotional burden 38
3.1.2.3 Time constraints and exhaustion 39
3.1.2.4 Disproportionate domestic responsibilities 39
3.1.2.5 Impact on career decisions 39
3.1.2.6. Conclusion: the invisible balancing act 40
3.1.3. Theme 3: Lack of support and structural challenges for women 40
3.1.3.1 Inadequate support for working mothers 40
3.1.3.2 Lack of genuine flexibility 41
3.1.3.3 Absence of female mentors and role models 41
3.1.3.4 Limited organizational investment in gender equity 41
3.1.3.5 Social and cultural reluctance to use available resources 42
3.1.3.6. Conclusion: structural barriers beyond policy 42
3.1.4. Theme 4: Personal struggles and emotional toll 42
3.1.4.1 Guilt and self-imposed pressure 43
3.1.4.2 Societal expectations and the “perfect woman” ideal 43

3.1.4.3 Fear of judgment and scrutiny 43
3.1.4.4 Burnout and emotional exhaustion 44
3.1.4.5 Ambition framed as a flaw 44
3.1.4.6. Conclusion: the weight of ınvisible labor 44
3.1.5. Theme 5: Career aspirations and gendered career progression 45
3.1.5.1 Aspiration met with resistance 45
3.1.5.2 Frustration with unequal promotion practices 45
3.1.5.3 Lack of opportunities for leadership development 46
3.1.5.4 Pressure to conform to male norms of leadership 46
3.1.5.5 Desire for equal recognition and advancement 46
3.1.5.6. Conclusion: unequal roads to leadership 47
3.1.6. Theme 6: Need for organizational and policy changes 47
3.1.6.1. Demand for equal pay and transparency 47
3.1.6.2. Parental leave for all genders 48
3.1.6.3. Policy support for unique needs (childcare, menstrual health, etc.) 48
3.1.6.4 Mentorship and leadership programs for women 48
3.1.6.5 Challenging everyday biases in workplace culture 48
3.1.6.6. Conclusion: from policy on paper to practice in culture 49
3.1.7. Theme 7: Advice and empowerment for women 49
3.1.7.1 Setting boundaries and prioritizing self-care 50
3.1.7.2 Advocating for one's own value 50
3.1.7.3 Finding allies and building support networks 50
3.1.7.4 Rejecting guilt for wanting both career and family 51
3.1.7.5 Encouraging resilience and persistence 51
3.1.7.6. Conclusion: strength through solidarity and self-belief 51
3.1.8. Theme 8: Cultural norms and external expectations 52
3.1.8.1. Pressure to "settle down" and prioritize family 52
3.1.8.2 Doubts about long-term career commitment 52
3.1.8.3 External judgments around career choices 52
3.1.8.4 Expectations to perform nurturing or emotional labor 53
3.1.8.5 Navigating cultural ıdentity alongside professional identity 53
3.1.8.6. Conclusion: culture as a silent career ınfluencer 53

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS 55

REFERENCES 58

APPENDIXES 63

RESUME 66

ABBREVIATIONS

GDP	**:**	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	**:**	International Labour Organization
MENA:	**:**	Middle East and North Africa
STEM	**:**	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
UN	**:**	United Nations
UNESCO	**:**	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Codes Identifying Gender Bias and Stereotypes in the Workplace 32
Table 2. Codes Identifying work-life balance and spillover 32
Table 3. Codes Identifying Lack of Support and Structural Challenges for Women 33
Table 4. Codes Identifying Personal Struggles and Emotional Toll 33
Table 5. Codes Identifying Career Aspirations and Gendered Career Progression .. 34
Table 6. Codes Identifying Need for Organizational and Policy Changes 34
Table 7. Codes Identifying Advice and Empowerment for Women 35
Table 8. Codes Identifying Cultural Norms and External Expectations 35

PREFACE

The participation of women in the workforce has long been a topic of global discussion, but in Arabic-speaking countries, this issue carries unique cultural, religious, and societal dimensions. Over the years, women in the region have achieved significant progress, yet they continue to face numerous challenges shaped by deeply ingrained traditions and systemic inequalities. As someone deeply intrigued by the interplay between culture and professional development, I have undertaken this thesis to explore the consequences of workplace culture on women in Arabic-speaking countries.

This study is not only an academic pursuit but also a personal journey to understand how gender roles and organizational practices influence the lives of millions of women. The research sheds light on how cultural norms, policies, and economic systems intersect, creating barriers that limit women's potential in the professional sphere. It also identifies emerging opportunities, as reforms and grassroots movements gradually challenge traditional norms and foster inclusivity.

Throughout this research, I have been motivated by the belief that gender equality is not just a moral imperative but also a critical factor for economic growth and societal development. This work highlights the necessity of organizational reforms, mentorship initiatives, and policies that empower women, enabling them to thrive in the workplace. It also underscores the role of governments, organizations, and communities in driving systemic change.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisors and mentors for their guidance and support during the research process. Their invaluable insights have helped shape this thesis into a meaningful contribution to the discourse on women's empowerment. I also extend my gratitude to the many individuals and organizations whose perspectives and data enriched this study.

It is my hope that this thesis serves as a resource for academics, policymakers, and practitioners who are committed to advancing gender equality in the workplace. By understanding the barriers and opportunities women face in

Arabic-speaking countries, I aim to inspire meaningful discussions and actionable solutions that create a more inclusive and equitable future.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, workplace culture has become a focal point in understanding gender dynamics in professional settings. In Arabic-speaking countries, localized dynamics are instantiated by peculiar cultural, social, and economic factors that make research in this area imperative: the social constraints that have historically trapped women into domestic roles are now slightly dissipating after a century, and women in these regions have begun to enter formal employment. Although there have been some advances, the reality is that barriers to entry remain high, with cultural stereotypes, religious interpretations, and systemic inequalities acting as impediments to women's participation and aspiration in the work field.

According to the World Bank (2025), only 20% of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were in the formal labor force in 2020, compared to a global average of 47%—far below the international standard. The consequences of this underrepresentation affect women beyond the individual—the closure of the gender gap is projected by McKinsey&Company (2020) to contribute $2.7 trillion to the region's (GDP) by 2025.

While significant research has explored workplace culture and gender inequality globally (Saeed & Ahmed, 2021), but such studies focusing particularly on the Arabic-speaking world are limited. A severe lack, especially, pertains to that of women's lived experiences in negotiating workplace contexts inflected by cultural and religious mores. Much of the subsequent scholarly work considers gender inequality in a wider sense and fails to unpack the unique barriers for women in professional spaces in such regions. For instance, while the World Bank (2024) cites the lack of adequate childcare provision and labor policies, what we find deficit in is any sort of study that would brown the operational definition of systemic barriers women encounter by adding historical-cultural and economic dimensions. This is relevant because, without unpacking such unique challenges fully, say patriarchal workplace hierarchies or the economic costs of underutilized female talent (McKinsey & Company, 2015; ILO, 2021) developing successful policies and strategies to advance gender equity and inclusivity within workplaces stands nowhere.

The lack of an in-depth understanding of women’s workplace experiences in Arabic-speaking countries hinders the development of inclusive workplace policies

tailored to these unique contexts. There are systematic barriers to the advancement of women in these regions such as limited access to leadership roles, inequality in pay, and workplace harassment, where cultural stigmas tend to discourage women's participation in certain industries. This list of challenges is made worse by the lack of anti-harassment laws, limited childcare possibilities (World Bank, 2024), and limited mentorship programs. To be able to proceed with gender equality at these levels and open for economic realization of women in the workforce, which might otherwise lead to a major contribution to the region's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), would require tackling these issues concerning systemic underemployment (Saeed & Ahmed, 2021).

Guided by this objective, the research is structured around one central question and four sub-questions that collectively frame the scope of the investigation:

Main Research Question:

"How do workplace cultures in Arabic-speaking countries influence the professional experiences, career trajectories, and decision-making of women?"

Sub-Research Questions:

1. What challenges do women face in workplace environments in Arabic-speaking countries?

2. How do cultural and religious norms shape women's professional experiences?

3. What are the economic implications of women's underrepresentation in the workforce, particularly for GDP?

4. What actionable strategies can organizations and governments implement to foster gender equity in Arabic-speaking workplaces?

To address these questions, the study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach, focusing on the lived experiences of women in Arabic-speaking workplaces. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 women employees across diverse industries in Arabic-speaking countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. The interviews will explore participants' professional challenges, cultural influences, and career intentions, with particular attention to home-to-job spillover and workplace dynamics.

Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) will be employed to identify patterns in how cultural norms and organizational practices shape women's experiences. This method aligns with recent studies on gendered workplace barriers in the region (World Bank, 2024) and ensures a nuanced understanding of systemic inequities.

The research informs the larger agenda for gendered workplace cultures in Arab countries and provides applied recommendations toward the active formulation of policies, organizational reforms, and academic investigation. The research foregrounds the women's experiences and identifies systemic hindrances such as patriarchal norms, unequal remunerative arrangements, and inadequate childcare provisions (World Bank, 2024), which retain little traction in gender equality discourses at large. The outcome of these findings is an encouragement to establish contextually embedded policy applications along the lines of Saudi Vision 2030 in mitigating structural inequities.

The study also underscores the economic rationale for gender equity. Approximately $2.7 trillion can potentially be added to the region's (GDP) by closing the gender gap by 2025 (McKinsey&Company, 2020), while Gulf nations are losing an estimated 1.2% annual (GDP) growth currently as a result of systemic underemployment of women (Saeed & Ahmed, 2021). By linking critiques of culture to economic consequences, this study offers an integrated scheme from which the stakeholders—policymakers, businesses, and civil society—can advance women's empowerment as a moral and economic imperative.

The thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter One: Literature Review synthesizes existing scholarship on women's workplace culture in Arabic-speaking countries, integrating historical, cultural, and economic contexts to frame the research problem. This chapter also identifies gaps in understanding the lived experiences of women navigating systemic barriers such as patriarchal norms and childcare infrastructure deficits (World Bank, 2024).

Chapter Two: Methodology details the qualitative phenomenological design, including the recruitment of 10 women employees across Arabic-speaking countries, semi-structured interview protocols, and thematic analysis. Ethical

considerations, such as participant anonymity and informed consent, are also outlined.

Chapter Three: Findings presents a thematic analysis of interview data, highlighting key challenges like workplace discrimination, cultural stigmas, and economic consequences of underrepresentation, (GDP) losses (Saeed & Ahmed, 2021).

Conclusions and Recommendations consolidates the study's implications, linking findings to regional initiatives like Saudi Vision 2030. It proposes actionable strategies for policymakers and organizations, such as mentorship programs and equitable labor reforms, while suggesting future research directions to address unresolved gaps.

CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the theoretical and empirical foundations that inform the study of workplace culture and its impact on women in Arabic-speaking countries. It begins by outlining key theoretical frameworks related to workplace culture and gender dynamics, followed by an examination of global and regional labor force trends that contextualize women's participation in the workforce. The discussion then narrows to the specific cultural and institutional factors shaping gendered workplace experiences in Arabic-speaking contexts. The chapter also addresses the broader economic consequences of women's underrepresentation in the labor market and highlights emerging strategies aimed at fostering greater inclusion and equity. Finally, it identifies existing research gaps and proposes directions for future inquiry, establishing a foundation for the study's methodological and analytical approach.

1.1. Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Workplace Culture and Gender Dynamics

1.1.1. Understanding workplace culture and its constituents

Workplace culture plays a significant role in shaping an organization's environment, influencing employee behavior, communication, and overall efficiency. It consists of shared values, customs, and norms that guide how employees collaborate and work towards common objectives. Key elements of workplace culture include adaptability, alignment with the organization's mission, consistency, and employee engagement. Research has shown that a strong, positive workplace culture enhances productivity, reduces employee turnover, and increases job satisfaction.

According to Schein (2010), workplace culture can be understood through three primary levels:

1. **Artifacts:** These are the visible aspects of workplace culture, such as office design, dress codes, and formal policies.

2. **Espoused Values:** These refer to the explicitly stated principles and beliefs that guide decision-making and behavior in an organization.

3. **Underlying Assumptions:** These are deeply ingrained and often unconscious beliefs that influence workplace interactions and expectations.

Given the complexity of workplace culture, organizations must take an active role in shaping it to foster inclusivity, innovation, and high performance.

1.1.2. Theories on workplace and gender interaction

Gender dynamics in the workplace have been extensively studied through different theoretical perspectives. These frameworks help explain how gender roles impact workplace interactions, leadership opportunities, and career advancement. Some of the most significant theories include:

Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987): This theory suggests that society assigns distinct roles to men and women, leading to occupational segregation and gendered expectations in professional settings.

Gendered Organizations Theory (Acker, 1990): It highlights how organizational structures perpetuate gender inequalities through recruitment biases, wage gaps, and barriers to promotion.

Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989): This framework examines how overlapping social identities, such as gender, race, and class, shape workplace experiences and contribute to discrimination.

Tokenism Theory (Kanter, 1977): This theory explains that when women or minorities are underrepresented in leadership, they often face increased scrutiny, stereotyping, and limited career advancement opportunities.

Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964): This model explores how an individual's expectations regarding workplace rewards and career growth influence motivation and job performance.

Understanding these perspectives is essential for developing workplace policies that promote gender equality and reduce bias in organizational decision-making.

1.2. Women in the Labor Force: Global and Regional Trends

1.2.1. Global trends in women's employment

Over the years, women's participation in the labor market has evolved significantly, shaped by social, political, and economic factors. In developed countries,

policies promoting gender equality, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements have contributed to an increase in female labor force participation. However, in many developing regions, financial constraints, legal barriers, and traditional gender norms continue to hinder women's workforce inclusion.

Key global statistics highlight the existing gender gap are as follows.

- Labor force participation

As of 2023, around 47% of women globally are part of the workforce, compared to 72% of men (World Bank, 2023). These figures stem from extensive labor market surveys conducted by the World Bank across various regions. The data highlights significant regional disparities; for instance, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), female labor force participation remains as low as 20%, while Scandinavian countries boast figures exceeding 70%. The study attributes these disparities to multiple factors, including socioeconomic barriers, lack of childcare support, and cultural norms that discourage women from working outside the home.

- Wage gaps

The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021) reported that, on average, women earn 20% less than men for the same job roles. The wage gap is a global issue, with particularly stark differences in developing nations and in high-level corporate positions. The ILO's data comes from household income surveys and employer wage reports across different industries and countries. The gap persists due to occupational segregation, discrimination in promotions and salary negotiations, and fewer opportunities for women in high-paying fields such as technology and finance. Some nations, such as Iceland and Norway, have implemented equal pay transparency laws, which have proven effective in reducing disparities.

- Leadership representation

Despite progress, only 28% of managerial roles worldwide are held by women, and just 8.8% of Fortune 500 CEOs are female (McKinsey&Company, 2022). McKinsey's "Women in the Workplace" report is based on surveys of hundreds of companies across different continents and focuses on gender diversity in corporate leadership. The study found that women face a "broken rung" phenomenon—meaning they are promoted at lower rates than men at the first level of management, limiting

their trajectory toward senior leadership. Additional factors include workplace bias, fewer sponsorship opportunities, and societal expectations that place a disproportionate burden of caregiving on women.

- Employment restrictions

According to the World Bank's 2023 Women, Business, and the Law report, over 104 countries still have laws restricting women from working in certain industries . These restrictions exist primarily in manufacturing, mining, energy, and construction sectors, often justified on the grounds of protecting women's safety. However, many of these laws reinforce outdated gender norms, limiting women's economic independence. For instance, in Russia, women were historically banned from over 400 jobs, including certain roles in transportation and heavy industry—although some of these restrictions have been lifted in recent years. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms have significantly reduced legal employment restrictions, leading to a sharp increase in female labor participation from 19% in 2016 to 33% in 2023.

1.2.2. Gender Disparities in Employment: Key Patterns

Gender inequalities in the workforce manifest in different ways across industries and regions. Some prominent trends include:

- Occupational segregation: Women are overrepresented in lower-paying fields such as healthcare, education, and administrative roles, whereas men dominate high-paying Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields (England, 2010; Charles & Grusky, 2005).

- Part-time employment: Women are more likely to take on part-time roles due to caregiving responsibilities, which can limit career growth and long-term financial stability (Goldin, 2014; Blau & Kahn, 2017).

- Workplace discrimination: Workplace discrimination remains a widespread issue. OECD research highlights that women frequently face gender-based biases in promotions, salary negotiations, and performance evaluations, contributing to long-term disparities in career advancement (OECD, 2017).

- Lack of workplace flexibility: Rigid work schedules that do not accommodate caregiving responsibilities contribute to higher dropout rates among women in the workforce (Gornick & Meyers, 2003).

Despite these challenges, efforts to close the gender gap in employment have been gaining momentum. Many governments and organizations are implementing policies to promote women's participation in the workforce and support gender inclusion (World Economic Forum, 2023; UN Women, 2020).

1.3 Gender and Workplace Culture in Arabic-Speaking Countries

1.3.1. Historical Overview of Women's Workforce Participation in the Region

The role of women in the workforce across Arabic-speaking countries has undergone significant changes over time, influenced by historical events, political transformations, and evolving cultural perspectives. Traditionally, women were primarily responsible for domestic duties, but modernization efforts in the mid-20th century created new opportunities for female employment.

Key historical milestones include:

• Pre-20th century: women in informal sectors

Before the 20th century, women's participation in the workforce was largely restricted to informal sectors, such as agriculture, domestic labor, and family-owned businesses (Boserup et. al., 2013). In many societies, women played a crucial role in subsistence farming, textile production, and small-scale trade, but their labor was often unrecognized in economic records (Folbre, 1991). Traditional gender roles, reinforced by patriarchal customs and religious interpretations, confined women to household duties, limiting their financial independence (Kandiyoti, 1988). In regions like the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), social norms dictated that women primarily engaged in unpaid labor within extended family structures (Moghadam, 2003). Similar trends were observed in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where women's economic activities were largely informal and excluded from decision-making processes (ILO, 2018).

• Colonial era: western education and limited employment

The early 1900s saw the introduction of Western education systems in many colonized regions, bringing new but limited employment opportunities for women (Kelly, 1984). European colonial powers established missionary schools and secular educational institutions, allowing some women to gain literacy and access professional

fields such as teaching and nursing (Jayawardena, 1986). However, colonial policies often reinforced gendered divisions of labor, restricting women to care-oriented professions while men dominated administrative and technical fields (Stoler, 1995). In countries such as India, Algeria, and Egypt, women's participation in formal employment remained minimal, as traditional norms and colonial economic structures prioritized men's workforce integration (Ahmed, 1992).

• Post-ındependence reforms (1950s–1980s): expanding women's access to work

Following independence movements in the mid-20th century, governments in nations like Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria implemented state-led initiatives to expand women's access to education and formal employment (Charrad, 2001). Many newly independent states saw women's participation in the workforce as a symbol of modernization and national progress, leading to policies that promoted female education and workforce integration (Moghadam, 1998). In North African countries, women gained rights to work in government, healthcare, and education, while socialist-oriented regimes, such as in Algeria, encouraged women's employment in industries previously dominated by men (Lazreg, 1994). However, these advancements were often constrained by deep-rooted cultural and religious barriers, and many women continued to face discrimination and limited career growth (Kandiyoti, 1991).

• Modernization (1990s–present): globalization and ıncreased participation

Since the 1990s, economic liberalization, globalization, and digital transformation have contributed to a notable rise in female workforce participation, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, such as the UAE and Qatar (Sidani, 2005). Government-driven reforms, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, have actively promoted women's employment in sectors like finance, technology, and entrepreneurship (Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014). The expansion of higher education has also played a crucial role in this transformation, with women now outnumbering men in university enrollments in many Arab states (UNESCO, 2020). Despite these advances, gender pay gaps, workplace discrimination, and legal restrictions continue to hinder full economic equality, demonstrating that cultural and institutional barriers persist (World Economic Forum, 2023).

1.3.2. Cultural and religious norms ınfluencing women's employment

Cultural and religious beliefs continue to shape women's experiences in the workforce. Some of the key challenges include:

- Male guardianship laws

For many years, Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system restricted women's autonomy, requiring them to obtain a male guardian's approval—from a father, husband, or brother—to enter the workforce, travel, or make legal and financial decisions (World Bank, 2024). This system significantly limited women's ability to participate in economic and professional activities, reinforcing gender-based dependency. However, under Vision 2030 reforms, many of these restrictions have been lifted, granting women greater control over their employment and mobility. Despite these legal advancements, deep-rooted cultural norms still influence hiring practices, and women often face informal societal pressures that discourage them from pursuing certain careers (World Bank, 2024).

- Workplace segregation

Many conservative societies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region continue to enforce gender-segregated office environments, limiting interactions between male and female employees (World Bank, 2024). This practice is particularly prevalent in government institutions, education sectors, and some corporate workplaces, where separate office spaces, meeting rooms, and even entrances for men and women exist. While proponents argue that such segregation aligns with cultural and religious values, critics contend that it restricts women's career growth, limits networking opportunities, and reinforces gender disparities in leadership roles. Countries like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have gradually moved toward more integrated workplaces, but resistance to gender mixing remains strong in more traditional societies (World Bank, 2024).

- Dress codes

Strict dress codes for women remain a significant factor affecting workplace culture in countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, where women must adhere to government-mandated attire, including headscarves, abayas, or loose-fitting clothing. In Iran, the enforcement of Islamic dress codes is stringent, with recent laws imposing

severe penalties for non-compliance, including imprisonment and fines (Human Rights Watch, 2024; VOA News, 2023). These dress codes are often enforced under the guise of modesty laws but disproportionately impact women's professional experiences by placing additional burdens on them, while their male counterparts face fewer restrictions. Although recent legal relaxations in Saudi Arabia have given women more freedom in their dress choices, workplace expectations and societal norms continue to pressure women to conform to conservative attire, even in private sector jobs (Capetocasa, 2023; The Week, 2023).

1.3.3. Structural barriers to workplace inclusion

Women across Arabic-speaking countries continue to face a range of structural obstacles that hinder their full inclusion in the workplace, despite notable advances in education and employment access. These barriers are deeply embedded in organizational practices, societal expectations, and policy gaps, making progress toward gender equity both complex and uneven. This title examines three critical dimensions of structural exclusion—leadership representation, wage disparities, and workplace harassment—that collectively constrain women's professional growth and contribute to broader patterns of gender-based inequality in the region.

- Leadership representation: Despite progress in women's education and workforce participation, leadership opportunities remain severely limited in the MENA region. Women hold less than 5% of corporate board positions, restricting their influence in business decision-making and organizational policies (World Bank, 2024). This underrepresentation in leadership is often attributed to deep-rooted gender biases, lack of mentorship programs for women, and traditional expectations that prioritize men for high-ranking positions. Some governments and corporations have introduced quotas and gender diversity policies to address this imbalance, but meaningful change has been slow (World Bank, 2024).

- Wage gaps: Women in Arabic-speaking countries face a persistent wage gap, earning 30–40% less than their male counterparts for performing the same work (ILO, 2021). This disparity is influenced by several factors, including occupational segregation, limited access to promotions, and biases in salary negotiations. In many cases, women are steered toward lower-paying industries, such as education and healthcare, while men dominate high-paying fields like finance, engineering, and

technology. Additionally, the lack of pay transparency laws and salary discrimination policies allows the wage gap to persist, reinforcing economic inequalities between men and women (ILO, 2021).

- Workplace harassment: Workplace harassment remains a serious issue for women in the workforce, particularly in regions with weak legal protections and cultural stigmas surrounding harassment claims. In Egypt, studies indicate that a significant portion of women—up to 70% in Cairo—have experienced some form of workplace harassment, often without access to proper reporting mechanisms or legal recourse (Al Bawaba, 2015). Despite the criminalization of sexual harassment in Egypt's Penal Code, enforcement remains inconsistent, and many cases go unreported due to fear of retaliation, social stigma, and the potential for job loss (Lotfi, 2019). Cultural norms that often blame victims further discourage women from speaking out, leading many to choose silence over reporting (Samir, 2018). While some organizations have started to implement anti-harassment policies and corporate accountability measures, these efforts are frequently undermined by a lack of clear procedures and institutional commitment (Mousa & Abdelgaffar, 2022).

1.4 Economic Consequences of Women's Underrepresentation

1.4.1. Gender and economic productivity: a global perspective

Gender inequality in the workforce has significant economic repercussions, leading to substantial losses in national and global productivity. Studies indicate that increasing women's labor force participation can boost economic growth by maximizing human capital potential, fostering innovation, and increasing household income levels. When women remain underrepresented in the workforce, economies fail to harness their full productive capacity, resulting in billions of dollars in unrealized GDP (McKinsey&Company, 2020).

Key insights on the economic impact of gender gaps include:

- Global gender productivity gap: Research by McKinsey & Company estimates that closing the gender gap in employment could contribute an additional $28 trillion to global GDP by 2025. This projection is based on a scenario where all countries match the progress of the most gender-equal economies, such as those in Scandinavia (McKinsey&Company, 2020).

- Regional variations in economic growth**:** Countries with high female labor force participation, such as Sweden and Norway, experience stronger per capita income growth than those with restrictive gender policies. For instance, in Norway, women's labor participation is over 65%, significantly contributing to the country's high Human Development Index (HDI) and robust welfare economy (World Bank, 2024). In contrast, in Pakistan, where female participation remains below 25%, the economy struggles with high dependency ratios and lower GDP per capita (ILO, 2021).

- Impact on innovation and business performance: Research from the Rock and Grant (2016) shows that diverse teams—including those with higher gender representation—are 20–30% more likely to develop innovative solutions and achieve long-term business success. Countries like Canada and Germany, which have policies promoting women in leadership roles, have seen greater advancements in STEM fields, corporate governance, and entrepreneurial ventures, leading to stronger business outcomes (Rock and Grant, 2016).

- Effects on household income and socioeconomic well-being: Women's participation in the workforce not only boosts family income but also improves children's educational and health outcomes. Studies by the World Bank (2023) highlight that when women earn an income, a higher percentage is reinvested in children's education and healthcare, leading to long-term economic stability and poverty reduction. In Bangladesh, for example, the rise in female employment in the garment sector has been linked to increased school enrollment rates for girls and improved child nutrition (World Bank, 2023).

1.4.2. The impact of gender disparity on GDP in arabic-speaking countries

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, gender inequality in the workforce has led to significant economic losses. A study by McKinsey & Company (2020) estimated that closing the gender gap in employment could add approximately $2.7 trillion to the region's GDP. Despite some progress, systemic barriers such as cultural norms, limited legal protections, and lack of childcare support continue to hinder women's workforce participation.

The experiences of women in the workforce vary significantly across Arabic-speaking countries, shaped by differing national policies, cultural dynamics, and

economic conditions. The following country-specific snapshots highlight both progress and persistent challenges in advancing women's labor force participation and workplace inclusion.

- Saudi Arabia: As a result of reforms under Vision 2030, female labor force participation has increased from 19% in 2016 to 33% in 2023. This growth has been driven by legal changes allowing women to work without male guardianship, expansions in female entrepreneurship, and greater representation in corporate and governmental roles (World Bank, 2023). However, challenges remain in leadership opportunities and wage equality, limiting the full economic potential of these reforms.

- Egypt: According to the World Bank (2023), a 10% increase in female employment could boost Egypt's GDP by an estimated $33 billion annually. The Egyptian government has introduced financial incentives for women entrepreneurs, expanded childcare services, and strengthened anti-harassment workplace policies, but rigid gender norms and labor market biases continue to limit women's access to formal employment.

- United Arab Emirates (UAE): The United Arab Emirates (UAE) leads the Gulf region in promoting gender equality, with strong representation of women in sectors such as healthcare, education, and government. While the UAE Gender Balance Council has launched numerous initiatives to enhance women's participation in leadership, disparities remain in STEM fields and senior executive roles. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), the UAE has made notable progress in closing the gender gap, particularly in educational attainment and political empowerment, but economic participation still lags behind global averages.

- Jordan and Tunisia: While both countries have high literacy and education rates among women, workforce participation remains low due to legal restrictions, cultural expectations, and lack of maternity protections. In Jordan, women's participation is only 14%, one of the lowest in the world, despite women outperforming men in higher education (ILO, 2021). Tunisia, on the other hand, has been a regional leader in gender-equal labor laws, but economic downturns and political instability have slowed female employment growth (World Bank, 2023).

1.4.3. Policy recommendations and the way forward

The economic benefits of closing the gender gap in employment are undeniable, and governments across the MENA region have started taking steps toward gender-inclusive policies. However, addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach:

1. Strengthening Legal Protections: Implementing stronger anti-discrimination laws, equal pay regulations, and anti-harassment policies is crucial to ensuring safer workplaces for women. The World Bank's "Women, Business and the Law" report highlights that several MENA countries have enacted reforms to advance women's economic opportunities, including laws protecting against domestic violence and sexual harassment, as well as measures promoting equal pay and increased representation in governance structures (World Bank, 2015).

2. Expanding Childcare and Maternity Benefits: Providing affordable childcare, paid maternity leave, and flexible work arrangements to support working mothers (World Bank, 2023).

3. Promoting Women in Leadership: Encouraging female representation on corporate boards and government positions, including mandatory quotas where necessary (McKinsey&Company, 2020).

4. Investing in STEM Education for Women: Increasing access to STEM programs, mentorship initiatives, and scholarships to prepare women for high-growth industries (Rock and Grant, 2016).

5. Public Awareness and Cultural Shifts: Conducting awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and normalize women’s participation in male-dominated sectors (ILO, 2021).

By addressing these challenges, MENA countries can unlock significant economic potential, reduce poverty, and enhance global competitiveness. The evidence from high-income and gender-equal economies shows that greater workforce inclusivity leads to higher economic growth, improved innovation, and stronger societal well-being (McKinsey&Company, 2020).

1.5 Systemic Challenges in Women's Career Advancement

1.5.1. Workplace discrimination and patriarchal norms

Women in the workforce continue to face systemic barriers that hinder their career progression, particularly in regions where traditional gender norms and institutional biases persist. One of the most significant challenges is bias in promotions, where studies indicate that 72% of women in Saudi Arabia have experienced discrimination in opportunities for advancement. Many organizations operate within male-dominated structures, where leadership positions are predominantly held by men, making it difficult for women to break into senior roles. Additionally, women hold fewer than 5% of executive positions across the Middle East, reflecting the deeply ingrained cultural and corporate biases that prioritize men for leadership positions (World Bank, 2024).

The perception of female competency remains another major barrier. In many workplaces, cultural stereotypes continue to portray women as less suited for leadership, often associating them with emotional decision-making rather than strategic or analytical skills. This leads to fewer mentorship opportunities, lower salary growth, and stagnated career progression for women. In sectors such as finance, technology, and engineering, women often face higher scrutiny in performance evaluations, which further discourages them from pursuing leadership roles (World Bank, 2024). Changing these perceptions requires proactive corporate policies, leadership training, and stronger advocacy for gender-inclusive hiring practices to ensure that women are given equal opportunities for career progression.

Beyond individual workplace dynamics, structural and policy-level deficiencies continue to hinder women's full participation in the labor market across Arabic-speaking countries. The points below highlight two critical barriers: the lack of legal protections against workplace harassment and the insufficient support for working mothers through childcare and family policies.

1.5.1.1. Lack of anti-harassment laws and legal protections

Workplace harassment remains a widespread issue that undermines women's participation in the labor market. A major contributing factor to this issue is the lack of comprehensive anti-harassment laws in the MENA region. According to the

International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022), only 40% of MENA countries have workplace anti-harassment laws, compared to 78% in Europe. This legal gap leaves women vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination, particularly in sectors where men significantly outnumber women, such as construction, manufacturing, and government institutions. Countries such as Tunisia and Morocco have introduced stricter workplace harassment laws, but implementation remains inconsistent, with many companies failing to enforce clear anti-harassment policies (ILO, 2022).

1.5.1.2. Limited childcare and family support policies

Another significant obstacle to women's career advancement is the lack of adequate childcare and family support policies, which disproportionately impact working mothers. In many MENA countries, caregiving responsibilities are traditionally assigned to women, making it difficult for them to balance family life and career aspirations. The absence of comprehensive parental leave policies reinforces this issue. Currently, only three MENA countries mandate paternity leave, which places the entire caregiving burden on women, limiting their ability to return to work after childbirth (World Bank, 2024).

Additionally, high childcare costs act as a financial barrier for many women seeking to re-enter the workforce. In countries such as Egypt and Jordan, affordable childcare services are scarce, making it economically unfeasible for many women to continue working while managing family responsibilities. The result is a significant dropout rate among women who leave their jobs after having children and struggle to regain employment due to career interruptions and skill gaps (ILO, 2021).

Workplace flexibility has been identified as a key factor in retaining female employees. According to McKinsey & Company (2024) report, women leaders are significantly more likely to switch jobs if flexibility is not offered. However, many companies in the region still operate under rigid work schedules, failing to accommodate working mothers who need flexible arrangements to manage both their professional and family responsibilities. Countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia have begun introducing flexible work policies and tax incentives for companies offering childcare benefits, but widespread adoption remains slow

Addressing these systemic challenges requires policy reforms, corporate initiatives, and cultural shifts that promote inclusive work environments. Governments

must expand parental leave policies, improve workplace protections, and support women's reintegration into the workforce. At the same time, companies must adopt gender-sensitive policies to ensure that women receive equal career opportunities and are not penalized for taking maternity leave or requesting flexible work arrangements (World Bank, 2024).

1.6. Strategies for Women's Inclusion in the Workplace

Efforts to promote women's inclusion in the workforce require a comprehensive approach that includes both organizational policies and government interventions. While corporations must adopt gender-equitable policies, governments also play a crucial role in creating legal frameworks that ensure equal opportunities, workplace protections, and leadership representation for women.

1.6.1. Organizational policies for gender equity

Companies and organizations have a significant role in bridging the gender gap by implementing inclusive workplace policies that empower women and foster professional growth. One of the most critical steps is enforcing equal pay initiatives to address gender-based wage disparities. Studies show that transparent salary structures and regular pay audits help to reduce wage inequalities, ensuring that men and women receive fair compensation for equal work (ILO, 2022). Countries such as Iceland and Germany have successfully implemented pay transparency laws, leading to measurable reductions in gender pay gaps (World Bank, 2023).

Another effective measure is the introduction of flexible work arrangements, such as remote work options, part-time employment, and adjustable work hours. Research indicates that working mothers are more likely to remain in the workforce when they have access to flexible schedules, reducing the number of women who drop out due to caregiving responsibilities (McKinsey&Company, 2024). Companies in Canada and Sweden, for instance, have adopted work-life balance policies that have resulted in higher female workforce retention rates (ILO, 2022).

Additionally, mentorship and sponsorship programs are crucial for women's career advancement. Providing leadership training, executive coaching, and networking opportunities helps women navigate corporate environments and overcome gender-based barriers. Studies show that women who receive mentorship

and sponsorship from senior executives are significantly more likely to advance into managerial and leadership positions (Rock and Grant, 2016). Many organizations in the UAE and Saudi Arabia have begun investing in leadership development programs to increase female representation in executive roles (UAE Gender Balance Council, 2023).

1.6.2. Government initiatives and policy interventions

Recognizing the economic and social benefits of gender inclusivity, several governments in the MENA region have introduced policy interventions aimed at increasing female labor force participation, leadership opportunities, and legal protections.

One of the most significant initiatives is Saudi Vision 2030, a government-led strategy that aims to increase women's workforce participation from 19% in 2016 to 30% by 2030 (World Bank, 2023). As part of this plan, Saudi Arabia has lifted restrictions on women working without male guardianship, introduced new labor laws to prevent workplace discrimination, and expanded female entrepreneurship programs (McKinsey&Company, 2023). The reforms have already led to a rise in women's employment in finance, technology, and government sectors, with female labor force participation reaching 33% in 2023 (World Bank, 2023).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has also been proactive in promoting gender inclusion through the establishment of the UAE Gender Balance Council, which seeks to achieve 50% female representation on federal boards by 2025 (UAE Gender Balance Council, 2023). The council has introduced policies such as mandatory female representation on corporate boards, gender-sensitive workplace regulations, and incentives for companies that implement diversity programs. These efforts have resulted in the UAE ranking first in the Arab world for gender equality, according to the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report (2022).

In Tunisia, gender inclusivity has been integrated into national legislation through the Gender Parity Law, which requires equal representation of men and women in electoral lists, government positions, and corporate leadership roles (ILO, 2022). This policy has significantly increased women's political and economic participation, making Tunisia one of the leading countries in North Africa in terms of

gender-balanced governance. However, challenges such as cultural resistance and implementation gaps remain (World Bank, 2023).

1.7 Research Gaps and Future Directions

1.7.1. The need for qualitative research on women's experiences

While extensive research exists on statistical gender disparities in the workplace, fewer studies explore the lived experiences of women navigating professional challenges. Much of the existing literature focuses on quantitative labor force statistics, such as workforce participation rates, wage gaps, and leadership representation. For instance, reports by McKinsey & Company (2023), the World Economic Forum (2022), and the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022) provide detailed numerical analyses of gender inequality but lack insights into the psychosocial and cultural barriers that women face daily.

Recent qualitative studies, such as those by Al-Asfour et al. (2017) and Metcalfe (2011), have begun to address this gap by documenting the career experiences of women in the Middle East. Al-Asfour et al. (2017) conducted interviews with professional women in Saudi Arabia, revealing how workplace discrimination affects their motivation, career aspirations, and mental health. Similarly, Metcalfe (2011) examined how cultural expectations and patriarchal norms limit women's career choices in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. However, more research is needed to explore:

- The psychological impact of workplace discrimination on career aspirations: Studies such as Al-Asfour et al. (2017) highlight how bias in promotions and exclusion from leadership roles lead to diminished confidence and job dissatisfaction among women. Further research should investigate how discrimination influences mental health, stress levels, and long-term career decisions.

- The effectiveness of mentorship programs in supporting women's professional growth: While reports by McKinsey & Company (2023) emphasize the importance of mentorship, limited research evaluates how mentorship programs in Arabic-speaking countries impact career advancement. Metcalfe (2011) suggests that the lack of female mentors and sponsors contributes to the underrepresentation of women in leadership

roles, but further qualitative studies could examine how different mentorship models impact professional development.

- How cultural expectations influence women's career choices: Research such as Syed and Van Buren (2014) explores how religion, family obligations, and societal norms shape women's job preferences and career trajectories in South Asian and Middle Eastern contexts. However, there is limited empirical research on how these cultural influences evolve over time and how younger generations of women navigate professional aspirations while managing traditional expectations.

1.7.2. Unexplored intersections of culture, policy, and economic outcomes

Despite progress in gender research, intersections between cultural norms, government policies, and economic development remain underexplored. Studies such as World Bank (2023) and ILO (2022) focus on how legal reforms impact workforce participation, but they often fail to examine the cultural resistance that prevents these policies from being fully effective. Future research should explore:

- The role of family dynamics in shaping female workforce participation has garnered significant scholarly attention. Research indicates that family support and spousal encouragement can profoundly influence women's career decisions in the Middle East. For instance, Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) found that Lebanese women managers often perceive family responsibilities not as barriers but as factors that can coexist with career advancement. Similarly, Sidani and Al Hakim (2012) highlighted that single women in a developing country context face unique work–family conflicts that affect their job attitudes. Moreover, Alarifi and Basahal (2023) emphasized the crucial role of spousal support in helping Saudi working mothers achieve work-life balance, directly impacting their career sustainability. Nonetheless, further research is needed to delve deeper into how marital status, parental expectations, and multigenerational household structures influence women's long-term professional trajectories across the region.

- The impact of digital transformation on female entrepreneurship: Research shows that women entrepreneurs in developing countries face persistent barriers such as limited access to capital, business networks, and formal training (OECD, 2021). However, the rise of remote work, digital banking, and e-commerce may present new opportunities for women-led businesses, particularly in regions where traditional

employment structures are restrictive. Studies should analyze whether technology-driven businesses help bypass cultural restrictions and whether governments are supporting female digital entrepreneurship through policies and incentives.

- How legal reforms influence corporate hiring practices: While countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Tunisia have introduced gender inclusion policies, there is limited research on whether private sector companies are effectively implementing these reforms. Research by McKinsey&Company (2023) highlights corporate diversity programs, but further studies should investigate whether these initiatives result in tangible hiring and promotion improvements.

1.7.3. Potential areas for further research

Given the rapidly evolving workplace landscape, several emerging topics warrant further exploration:

- Remote Work Trends and Gender Dynamics: The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased remote work adoption, but its impact on gender dynamics remains unclear. While some research, such as Bloom et al. (2021), suggests that remote work benefits working mothers by offering flexibility, other reports, including OECD (2024), caution that women in remote settings may face reduced visibility and fewer promotion opportunities.

- Women-Led Businesses and Economic Development: Women-led businesses remain underrepresented in traditional economic sectors, but entrepreneurship is increasingly becoming a pathway for women's financial independence. Studies such as Minniti and Naudé (2010) suggest that female entrepreneurs contribute significantly to job creation, yet women face more barriers in securing business funding. Future research should explore how government policies, microfinance programs, and international trade agreements influence the success of women-led startups in the MENA region.

- The Impact of AI and Automation on Workplace Inclusion: The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation is reshaping job markets, yet its impact on gender equality remains largely unstudied. Research by World Economic Forum (2023) suggests that women are at a higher risk of job displacement due to AI-driven automation in administrative and service sectors, where they are overrepresented.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in the study, detailing the phenomenological research design, the contextual background and participant profile, data collection through semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis procedures, and the ethical considerations guiding the research process.

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the workplace culture and professional experiences of women in Arabic-speaking countries. Given the nature of the study, a phenomenological research design is employed to understand and interpret the lived experiences of women facing systemic barriers, workplace discrimination, and cultural constraints in their professional lives.

2.1.1. Phenomenology as a research design

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that focuses on exploring how individuals experience and make sense of their lived realities (Creswell, 2013). This design is particularly suitable for this study as it provides rich, in-depth insights into women's experiences in their workplace environments. Unlike other qualitative approaches, phenomenology allows participants to share their subjective viewpoints, emotions, and interpretations, contributing to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural challenges they face (Moustakas, 1994).

This approach is founded on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, who emphasized the importance of understanding human consciousness and subjective experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). By using phenomenology, the study does not just document workplace conditions but delves into how these women perceive, interpret, and navigate their professional environments.

The decision to adopt a phenomenological approach is grounded in the study's aim to explore the lived experiences of women within Arabic-speaking workplace cultures. Phenomenology enables a deep, nuanced understanding of individual perspectives, revealing how structural inequalities, leadership barriers, and cultural

norms shape women's professional journeys. By moving beyond numerical data, this approach provides rich, contextualized insights and aligns with established gender studies that emphasize the value of lived experience and intersectionality in workplace research.

2.2 Research Context and Participants

The study focuses on Arabic-speaking countries where traditional gender norms, religious interpretations, and socio-cultural expectations shape workplace experiences. These include but are not limited to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. These nations were selected based on varying degrees of gender workplace inclusion, allowing a comparative perspective.

Participants are selected based on the following criteria:

- Women employees working in Arabic-speaking countries.
- Women working in diverse industries, including corporate sectors, education, healthcare, and government institutions.
- Participants with at least three years of work experience to ensure informed insights.
- Women who have faced workplace challenges such as discrimination, wage gaps, or leadership barriers.
- Participants representing different age groups, marital statuses, and career levels to explore intersectional experiences.

The study involves 10 participants, selected through purposive sampling. In qualitative research, a smaller sample size ensures rich, detailed data rather than broad generalizations (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling involves selecting individuals who have firsthand knowledge of the research topic. This approach ensures that:

- Participants align with the study objectives.
- A variety of industries and workplace experiences are represented.
- The research gathers meaningful, experience-based insights (Etikan, 2016).
- Ensures maximum variation sampling, capturing different perspectives on workplace discrimination.

- Facilitates snowball sampling if needed, where initial participants recommend others with relevant experiences.

2.3 Data Collection Method

The study employs semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data. This method allows participants to share detailed personal accounts while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into their experiences (Kvale, 2007). Semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining consistency across participant responses, ensuring a comprehensive and comparative analysis of workplace experiences.

The interview form consists of 11 questions, specifically designed to gain an in-depth understanding of women's experiences with workplace culture in Arabic-speaking countries. The questions aim to comprehensively explore participants' professional backgrounds, perceptions of workplace culture, the influence of societal norms, and the balance between work and family life.

The interview questions focus on:

- How cultural expectations shape women's roles in the workplace.
- The spillover effects between home and job responsibilities.
- Factors contributing to or hindering job satisfaction.
- Support mechanisms available for women in the workplace.
- Workplace challenges, including discrimination, leadership barriers, and gender biases.
- The impact of workplace culture on career aspirations.
- Participants' perspectives on organizational policies and necessary changes to enhance gender inclusivity.

This comprehensive set of questions is designed to capture women's personal experiences, challenges, and recommendations, shedding light on the broader societal dynamics affecting their professional lives.

To ensure the validity and relevance of the interview form, it was sent to two academics specializing in workplace culture and gender studies. Their feedback was

incorporated into the final version of the interview form, ensuring clarity, relevance, and effectiveness in capturing participant experiences.

Additionally, the interview questions were submitted to the Istanbul Gelisim University Ethics Committee for review. The committee approved the final version, ensuring compliance with ethical research guidelines.

By incorporating expert feedback and obtaining ethical approval, the study ensures that the interview questions are methodologically sound, ethically responsible, and aligned with research best practices.

2.4 Mode of Interviews

Interviews are conducted online via video calls due to geographical limitations. Each interview lasts approximately 45–60 minutes, ensuring depth while respecting participants' time constraints.

The decision to conduct online interviews was based on several factors:

- Accessibility: Participants from different countries could join without logistical constraints.
- Convenience: Women working in restrictive environments could speak freely from private settings.
- Cost-effectiveness: Eliminated the need for travel expenses and scheduling conflicts.
- Ethical Sensitivity: Allowed greater anonymity, encouraging honest discussions.

2.5. Ethical Considerations in Data Collection

The following ethical principles were rigorously applied to ensure participant safety and data integrity.

- Informed Consent – Participants signed a consent form before the interview, ensuring voluntary participation.
- Confidentiality – Identities were anonymized to protect privacy.
- Right to Withdraw – Participants retained the right to exit the study at any stage without consequence.

- Data Storage – Interviews were securely recorded and transcribed, with files deleted post-research to maintain confidentiality.

- Recording Permission – Permission from the participants was obtained to use a voice recorder during the interviews.

2.6. Data Analysis Method

The study follows thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). This method identifies patterns, themes, and recurring issues in the data.

The following six steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was followed in conducting thematic analysis.

1. Familiarization with Data – Transcribing and repeatedly reading interview transcripts.

2. Generating Initial Codes – Identifying recurring ideas and phrases.

3. Searching for Themes – Organizing codes into broader themes.

4. Reviewing Themes – Refining and ensuring coherence in theme categorization.

5. Defining and Naming Themes – Finalizing key findings based on participant responses.

6. Writing the Final Report – Structuring themes into a narrative analysis.

The choice of thematic analysis as the most appropriate method for the data analysis of this study stems from its deliberate and systematic identification of patterns and themes emerging from qualitative data. It operates in a structured but flexible manner that facilitates the interpretation of participant experiences, thus allowing for some nuanced understanding about the complexities of workplace culture for women in Arabic-speaking countries.

One of the strengths of thematic analysis, indeed, lies mainly in its flexibility when applied to qualitative data. Contrary to other, more cumbersome methods, thematic analyses should allow themes to emerge rather freely from the data, reflecting the true lived experience of the participants with the subject matter under investigation. Given that this is a deeply ethereal study looking into both personal and professional realms of struggle, thematic analysis seems an all-prevalent means of upholding and

making sense of the voices of participants (Nowell et al., 2017). It is also applicable across different disciplines and is accordingly unburdened by ontological and epistemological assumptions, making it rather fitting for on-the-ground interdisciplinary investigations into workplace cultures and gender (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

The thematic analysis offers themes that are recurrently appearing in data collected from participants, which helps in deeper understanding of workplace challenge. Gender dynamics in such professional environments commonly become channeled through implicit biases, cultural norms, and systemic barriers (Terry et al., 2017). The thematic analysis has the potential to explore such issues, even contrary to direct observance, providing women a much clearer image of how they traverse their way out of this professional terrain (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Iterative coding and refining of themes allow these findings to reflect on both individual experience and larger systemic issues (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Thematic analysis is truly an excellent approach for qualitative research that places much emphasis in understanding lived experiences, according to Braun and Clarke (2013). For this study, which mainly focuses on how women in Arabic-speaking countries experience their workplaces from their own perspectives, thematic analysis presents the explorative yet structured framework within which to forge an inquiry into the participants' subjective realities. The methodology also permits rich, narrative-type interpretations that venture well beyond numerical data to provide insight into the emotional and sociocultural dimensions of workplace culture (Nowell et al., 2017).

Constructivist epistemology, on which this study is based, holds that reality is socially constructed in the course of experiences and interactions. Thus, thematic analysis is a fitting approach, one that does not alter the categorization in pre-existing terms but allows for codes to be generated through narratives of the participants. This means that the findings refer back to the lived experiences of the women and are not thereby distorted by preconceived notions or theoretical biases of the researcher applying the method. Because the thematic analysis is inherently iterative, it enhances this approach's close association with constructivism, since data are continually reinterpreted and refinined in answer to emergent themes (Terry et al., 2017).

2.7. Trustworthiness and Rigor

In terms of establishing the credibility and reliability of this study, it adhered to criteria set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985). While their criteria seek to maintain rigor in qualitative research, the remaining parts remain the same: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.**Credibility** – Participant validation (allowing participants to review transcripts for accuracy).

2.7.1. Credibility

Credibility allows an assurance that the study truly represents participants' experiences. Credibility is achieved through participant or member-checking; participants review the transcripts to ascertain that their responses were captured accurately (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process adds to the reliability of the findings and protects against misinterpretation (Shenton, 2004). Moreover, prolonged engagement with the data, such as repeated readings and iterative coding, assures that the themes arise from genuine participant experiences, not bias from the researchers (Nowell et al., 2017).

2.7.2. Transferability

Transferability concerns the applicability of the research findings to other some similar contexts. In qualitative research, this is assured by the provision of thick, rich descriptions of the research setting, participant demographics, and contextual factors that act as contingents to workplace culture for women in Arab-speaking countries (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the present study specifies the barriers women experience in such environments, it enables researchers in the future to determine whether the results can be truly applied in other cultural and organizational settings (Shenton, 2004). This eventually corresponds with the idea of naturalistic generalization, whereby permutations of insights are linked through contextual relevance as opposed to statistical representation (Stake, 1995).

2.7.3. Dependability

Dependability seeks to ensure that the research process is consistent and replicable. This is guaranteed by writing down all the steps of the research, including data collection procedures, thematic analysis techniques, and reasoning along the way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To further strengthen dependability, an audit trail is kept,

documenting all methodological choices, coding processes, and emerging themes. The final layer of rigor and reliability is added through peer debriefing—the process in which an external researcher examines the methodology (Nowell et al., 2017).

2.7.4. Confirmability

Confirmability corroborates that findings are forged by substantive narratives of participants, free from biases of researchers. This is undertaken through reflexivity, within which the researcher reflects on his or her own perspectives and preconceptions during the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thematic coding more generally occurs according to a systematic basis and that the topics arise naturally from the data rather than being imposed by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Additionally, the coding consistency check ensures that an independent researcher has verified the thematic categories, thereby upholding the objectivity and data-driven nature of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

CHAPTER THREE

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the thematic analysis. Each theme, along with the codes that constitute it, will be explained in detail. The researcher's thesis will be supported by illustrative quotes from the participants

3.1. Summary of Findings from the Thematic Analysis

As a result of the thematic analysis, 8 themes were identified:

THEME 1. Gender Bias and Stereotypes in the Workplace: This theme highlights the persistent gender biases and stereotypes that shape workplace dynamics, often placing women at a disadvantage. It reflects how systemic barriers and cultural expectations hinder women's access to leadership roles and equal opportunities The theme consists of 6 codes. The codes that form the theme are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Codes identifying gender bias and stereotypes in the workplace

Theme	Codes
Gender Bias and Stereotypes in the Workplace	• Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership • The "Prove Yourself Again and Again" Phenomenon • Gendered Task Assignments and Stereotypical Roles • The Double Standard: Assertiveness vs. Likability • Exclusion from Informal Power Networks • Traditional Gender Roles Influencing Workplace Expectations

THEME 2. Work-Life Balance and Spillover: This theme explores the challenges women face in managing the demands of both work and home life. It reflects how responsibilities in one domain often spill over into the other, creating stress, guilt, and difficulties in achieving a healthy work-life balance. The theme consists of 5 codes. The codes that form the theme are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Codes identifying work-life balance and spillover

Theme	Codes
Work-Life Balance and Spillover	• Home-to-Job and Job-to-Home Spillover • Guilt and Emotional Burden • Time Constraints and Exhaustion • Disproportionate Domestic Responsibilities • Impact on Career Decisions

THEME 3. Lack of Support and Structural Challenges for Women: This theme highlights the structural and institutional barriers that limit support for women in the workplace. It underscores the lack of flexible policies, mentorship opportunities, and accessible resources—particularly for working mothers—hindering their career progression and well-being. The theme consists of 5 codes. The codes that form the theme are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Codes identifying lack of support and structural challenges for women

Theme	Codes
Lack of Support and Structural Challenges for Women	• Inadequate Support for Working Mothers • Lack of Genuine Flexibility • Absence of Female Mentors and Role Models • Limited Organizational Investment in Gender Equity • Social and Cultural Reluctance to Use Available Resources

THEME 4. Personal Struggles and Emotional Toll: This theme captures the emotional and psychological toll experienced by women as they navigate career demands alongside societal and familial expectations. It reflects feelings of guilt, burnout, and internal conflict arising from the pressure to meet often unrealistic standards. The theme consists of 5 codes. The codes that form the theme are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Codes ıdentifying personal struggles and emotional toll

Theme	Codes
Personal Struggles and Emotional Toll	• Guilt and Self-Imposed Pressure • Societal Expectations and the “Perfect Woman” Ideal • Fear of Judgment and Scrutiny • Burnout and Emotional Exhaustion • Ambition Framed as a Flaw

THEME 5. Career Aspirations and Gendered Career Progression: This theme reflects women's aspirations for career advancement and the challenges they face due to gender-based barriers. It highlights frustrations over unequal opportunities, biased promotion practices, and the pressure to adapt to male-dominated professional norms. The theme consists of 5 codes. The codes that form the theme are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Codes ıdentifying career aspirations and gendered career progression

Theme	Codes
Career Aspirations and Gendered Career Progression	• Aspiration Met with Resistance • Frustration with Unequal Promotion Practices • Lack of Opportunities for Leadership Development • Pressure to Conform to Male Norms of Leadership • Desire for Equal Recognition and Advancement

THEME 6. Need for Organizational and Policy Changes: This theme emphasizes participants' calls for meaningful organizational and policy reforms to promote gender equity. It includes demands for structural changes such as equal pay audits, inclusive parental leave, mentorship opportunities, and measures to address everyday workplace biases. The theme consists of 5 codes. The codes that form the theme are presented in Table 6.

Table 6 : Codes identifying need for organizational and policy changes

Theme	Codes
Need for Organizational and Policy Changes	• Demand for Equal Pay and Transparency • Parental Leave for All Genders • Policy Support for Unique Needs • Mentorship and Leadership Programs for Women • Challenging Everyday Biases in Workplace Culture

THEME 7. Advice and Empowerment for Women: This theme focuses on empowering women to take control of their careers and well-being. It emphasizes the importance of setting boundaries, self-advocacy, seeking support, and prioritizing self-care without guilt, in order to balance career and personal life effectively. The theme consists of 5 codes. The codes that form the theme are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Codes identifying advice and empowerment for women

Theme	Codes
Advice and Empowerment for Women	• Setting Boundaries and Prioritizing Self-Care • Advocating for One's Own Value • Finding Allies and Building Support Networks • Rejecting Guilt for Wanting Both Career and Family • Encouraging Resilience and Persistence

THEME 8. Cultural Norms and External Expectations: This theme explores the external pressures and cultural expectations placed on women, particularly around traditional gender roles. It highlights societal and familial expectations regarding women's career choices, work-life balance, and their perceived commitment to their careers, especially after major life events. The theme consists of 5 codes. The codes that form the theme are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Codes identifying cultural norms and external expectations

Theme	Codes
Cultural Norms and External Expectations:	• Pressure to "Settle Down" and Prioritize Family • Doubts About Long-Term Career Commitment • External Judgments Around Career Choices • Expectations to Perform Nurturing or Emotional Labor • Navigating Cultural Identity Alongside Professional Identity

3.1.1. Theme 1: Gender bias and stereotypes in the workplace

One of the most dominant themes across the interviews is the presence of gender bias and stereotypes in the workplace. Women, regardless of their industry or level of experience, report facing persistent inequalities, including underrepresentation in leadership roles, male-dominated decision-making networks, and gendered expectations that shape their professional experiences.

3.1.1.1 Underrepresentation of women in leadership

Many interviewees express frustration over the lack of women in leadership roles, despite company policies that claim to support gender diversity. While organizations often emphasize diversity and inclusion in theory, in practice, leadership positions remain dominated by men.

"The culture at my workplace is progressive, at least in theory. The company values diversity and inclusion, but in practice, there are still underlying biases. Women

in leadership are still underrepresented, and decision-making often happens in informal male-dominated networks." (Interview 9)

This statement highlights the disconnect between company rhetoric and reality—while organizations may promote diversity on paper, real decision-making power is still concentrated among men.

3.1.1.2. The "prove yourself again and again" phenomenon

Women frequently mention that they are expected to prove their competence repeatedly, whereas their male counterparts are given the benefit of the doubt.

"While there is an effort to support women, there is an unspoken expectation that we should prove our competence repeatedly." (Interview 9)

This pattern forces women to constantly justify their skills and qualifications, making career progression more challenging compared to men, who are often assumed to be capable without needing to provide continual proof.

3.1.1.3 Gendered task assignments and stereotypical roles

Several interviewees describe how women are often assigned tasks that align with traditional gender roles, such as administrative work, social coordination, or emotional labor, even when those tasks fall outside their official job descriptions.

"At work, I notice that women are often given administrative or social coordination tasks, such as planning office events, even if that is not part of our job description." (Interview 9)

These assignments reinforce outdated stereotypes that women should handle organizational and people-oriented roles, rather than strategic or leadership responsibilities.

3.1.1.4 The double standard: assertiveness vs. likability

A major challenge faced by women in leadership or aspiring leadership roles is the double standard in how assertiveness is perceived. While men are praised for being decisive and authoritative, women with the same qualities are often labeled as "difficult" or "too aggressive."

"Assertive women are sometimes perceived as difficult, whereas the same traits in men are seen as leadership qualities." (Interview 9)

This highlights how workplace culture punishes women for displaying traits that are rewarded in men, making it harder for them to be taken seriously in leadership roles.

3.1.1.5 Exclusion from informal power networks

Several interviewees mention that key decisions are often made in informal male-dominated networks, where women are either excluded or feel unwelcome.

"Promotions and leadership roles still favor men, as there is an assumption that women's priorities lie with their families. Additionally, networking opportunities often happen in spaces that are not always inclusive for women." (Interview 9)

This exclusion is particularly problematic because informal relationships often dictate promotions and opportunities. When women are not included in these networks, they miss out on mentorship, sponsorship, and career advancement.

3.1.1.6 Traditional gender roles influencing workplace expectations

Cultural expectations about gender roles continue to influence workplace dynamics, reinforcing the idea that women should prioritize family over their careers.

"Traditional gender roles still influence workplace expectations. Women are expected to be accommodating and nurturing, which can sometimes make it difficult to assert authority." (Interview 9)

This expectation places an extra burden on women, as they must navigate both professional ambitions and societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles.

3.1.1.7. Conclusion: the persistence of workplace bias

Despite progress in corporate policies, deeply ingrained biases and gendered expectations still shape women's professional experiences. The interviews reveal that women are often:

- Expected to prove themselves more than men.
- Assigned administrative or people-oriented tasks regardless of their role.
- Penalized for assertiveness while men are rewarded for the same behavior.

- Excluded from key decision-making spaces.
- Subject to societal expectations that frame career ambition as secondary to family responsibilities.

These barriers make career advancement more challenging for women, reinforcing the need for structural and cultural changes within organizations.

3.1.2. Theme 2: Work-life balance and spillover

One of the most emotionally resonant themes that emerged from the interviews is the struggle women face in balancing professional responsibilities with personal and family life. This challenge is often compounded by societal expectations, rigid workplace structures, and internalized pressure to succeed in both domains. The theme of work-life spillover reflects how the stress and responsibilities from one area of life frequently interfere with the other, creating a cycle of emotional strain and physical exhaustion.

3.1.2.1 Home-to-job and job-to-home spillover

Women frequently report that stress from work affects their family life and vice versa. The boundaries between professional and personal spaces are often blurred, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed and stretched too thin.

"When I have a bad day at work, it definitely impacts how I interact with my kids and partner. I try not to let it, but sometimes the stress just follows me home." (Interview 6)

This two-way spillover creates a situation where neither domain receives full attention or energy, often resulting in emotional fatigue and a sense of underperformance in both spheres.

3.1.2.2 Guilt and emotional burden

Many participants express deep feelings of guilt—either for spending too much time at work and not being present for their family, or for prioritizing family and fearing judgment at work. This guilt is amplified by societal norms that expect women to be primary caregivers.

"There's always this guilt. If I stay late at work, I feel like a bad mom. If I leave early, I feel like I'm not serious about my job." (Interview 5)

This emotional burden is a constant companion, adding an invisible weight to everyday decisions and actions.

3.1.2.3 Time constraints and exhaustion

Interviewees commonly mention that long working hours eat into family and personal time, leaving little room for rest, leisure, or self-care. The cumulative effect is often burnout.

"After a full day of work, I go home and immediately start my 'second shift'—cooking, cleaning, helping kids with homework. There's barely time to breathe." (Interview 2)

The metaphor of a "second shift" powerfully conveys the dual workload many women shoulders.

3.1.2.4 Disproportionate domestic responsibilities

Despite holding demanding jobs, many women report that they are still expected to manage the majority of household tasks. The assumption that women are naturally more suited to domestic roles persists, even in dual-income households.

"Even though we both work full-time, I'm the one expected to handle the groceries, school meetings, doctor's appointments—you name it." (Interview 3)

This imbalance reflects deep-rooted gender norms that continue to shape domestic life.

3.1.2.5 Impact on career decisions

Several women mention making career compromises—like turning down promotions, refusing travel, or shifting to part-time work—to better manage home responsibilities. While these decisions are often made for family well-being, they come at the cost of career progression.

"I turned down a leadership role because it required travel, and I just couldn't leave my kids that often. It was disappointing, but I had no choice." (Interview 7)

This illustrates how structural inflexibility at work disproportionately affects women, limiting their professional growth.

3.1.2.6. Conclusion: the invisible balancing act

The theme of work-life balance and spillover reveals a complex interplay between societal expectations, organizational structures, and individual aspirations. Women in the workforce:

- Often bear the brunt of emotional and domestic Labor at home.
- Feel persistent guilt about not meeting expectations in either domain.
- Experience significant mental and physical exhaustion.
- Make career sacrifices to meet familial obligations.
- Encounter systemic barriers that fail to accommodate their dual roles.

These findings underscore the urgent need for more supportive workplace policies and cultural shifts that acknowledge and address the unique pressures faced by working women.

3.1.3. Theme 3: Lack of support and structural challenges for women

A significant barrier identified in the interviews is the lack of systemic and institutional support structures for women in the workplace. This includes not just policy-level issues like inadequate parental leave and lack of flexibility, but also cultural resistance to utilizing the support systems that do exist. Many women describe workplaces where support for their unique needs is either unavailable, inconsistently applied, or socially discouraged, creating an environment where they must navigate professional life with minimal institutional backing.

3.1.3.1 Inadequate support for working mothers

Many participants express frustration over the limited structural support for working mothers. Even when parental leave policies exist, they are often insufficient, gender-biased, or applied unevenly. Some women noted that using such policies may be viewed negatively by colleagues or supervisors.

"Technically, we have maternity leave and some flexible work options, but when someone actually tries to use them, it's like they're not serious about their career anymore." (Interview 11)

This indicates that while some organizations may offer family-friendly policies on paper, there is a cultural stigma attached to using them, which can deter women from taking advantage of them.

3.1.3.2 Lack of genuine flexibility

Though flexibility is touted in many workplaces, the actual implementation of flexible work policies—such as remote work, flexible hours, or reduced schedules—is often limited or selectively granted. Several interviewees pointed out that remote work options during or after the pandemic were revoked without consideration of how they helped women manage home responsibilities.

"During COVID, I was finally able to work from home and balance things better. But now they're pushing everyone back to the office with no exceptions, even though I've shown I can be just as productive." (Interview 8)

This lack of lasting flexibility undermines the progress made in accommodating diverse work styles and needs.

3.1.3.3 Absence of female mentors and role models

Women also discuss the scarcity of female leaders or senior colleagues who could serve as mentors. This absence contributes to a sense of isolation and reduces opportunities for guidance, networking, and career planning specific to women's experiences.

"There are barely any women in senior roles here. It's hard to find someone who understands the unique challenges and can guide you through them." (Interview 4)

Mentorship plays a crucial role in career development, and without it, women often navigate challenges alone, slowing their growth and potentially leading to disengagement.

3.1.3.4 Limited organizational investment in gender equity

Several women perceive that their organizations lack a genuine commitment to supporting gender equity. While diversity training or awareness campaigns might be conducted, they often feel performative and are not matched by actionable change in policy or culture.

"We had a gender inclusivity workshop last year, but nothing really changed. There's still no real support system in place." (Interview 6)

This gap between discourse and action reflects a superficial engagement with gender equity that fails to create meaningful support mechanisms.

3.1.3.5 Social and cultural reluctance to use available resources

Even when formal support systems are in place, cultural norms within the organization can discourage women from using them. There is a fear that taking leave or requesting accommodations may be seen as a sign of weakness or a lack of ambition.

"I feel guilty even thinking about asking for flexible hours. People will assume I'm not committed to my job anymore." (Interview 10)

This social pressure creates a paradox: support exists, but using it can harm one's professional image.

3.1.3.6. Conclusion: structural barriers beyond policy

This theme highlights that the barriers women face go beyond the absence of formal policies—they also include cultural resistance, inadequate implementation, and lack of mentorship. The findings reveal that woman:

- Are often discouraged from using work-life balance policies.
- Experience limited or inconsistently applied flexibility in their roles.
- Lack access to senior female mentors and career advocates.
- Face a disconnect between company rhetoric and actual structural support.
- Operate in environments where policy use is stigmatized rather than normalized.

For meaningful progress, organizations must go beyond token measures and invest in real cultural change, accountability, and infrastructure to support women's professional and personal wellbeing.

3.1.4. Theme 4: Personal struggles and emotional toll

Beyond structural challenges and organizational shortcomings, many women reported experiencing intense emotional and psychological strain as they navigate the

dual demands of career and family life. These personal struggles often stem from internalized societal expectations, fear of judgment, and the pressure to excel in every area of life. The emotional toll is cumulative and, over time, can lead to burnout, self-doubt, and a diminished sense of personal well-being.

3.1.4.1 Guilt and self-imposed pressure

A recurring emotion expressed across interviews is guilt—guilt for spending time away from children, guilt for taking time off work, and guilt for not living up to idealized versions of motherhood or professional success. This guilt often results in women setting impossibly high standards for themselves.

"There's always a voice in my head saying I'm not doing enough—at work or at home. It's exhausting trying to be everything to everyone." (Interview 12)

This self-imposed pressure to excel in both spheres without letting either slip creates a constant sense of inadequacy, even when external performance is high.

3.1.4.2 Societal expectations and the "perfect woman" ideal

Participants often describe the emotional burden of trying to conform to idealized societal roles: being nurturing, agreeable, selfless at home, while simultaneously ambitious, competent, and resilient at work.

"You're expected to be soft and nurturing but also strong and assertive. It's like walking a tightrope every single day." (Interview 4)

These conflicting expectations leave women feeling as if they can never fully meet anyone's standards—least of all their own.

3.1.4.3 Fear of judgment and scrutiny

Women shared that they often fear being judged—whether it's for taking maternity leave, asking for flexibility, or even showing ambition. This fear can inhibit them from advocating for their needs or pursuing opportunities.

"I sometimes hesitate to take a sick day because I worry it will be seen as me not coping well or not being strong enough." (Interview 6)

Such internalized fears stem from a workplace culture where vulnerability or deviation from "ideal" behavior may be penalized, overtly or subtly.

3.1.4.4 Burnout and emotional exhaustion

Many interviewees describe symptoms of burnout, including chronic fatigue, anxiety, and emotional numbness. The pressure to constantly perform, meet expectations, and manage responsibilities without sufficient support leads to long-term emotional wear and tear.

"By Friday, I'm completely drained—mentally and physically. There's nothing left for me." (Interview 2)

This chronic exhaustion is not simply the result of a busy schedule, but of a deeper, ongoing emotional labor that often goes unrecognized.

3.1.4.5 Ambition framed as a flaw

Women also expressed that being ambitious is sometimes viewed negatively—especially if it challenges traditional gender roles or makes others uncomfortable. Ambition, when displayed openly by women, can be misinterpreted as aggression or selfishness.

"When I push for a promotion or speak up about my ideas, I get labeled as aggressive or too much." (Interview 7)

This creates an internal conflict: the desire to grow professionally is strong, but the fear of social penalties for doing so can be paralyzing.

3.1.4.6. Conclusion: the weight of ınvisible labor

The emotional struggles described by participants highlight how deeply personal and psychological the impact of workplace and societal pressures can be. Women:

- Experience pervasive guilt for not meeting idealized standards.
- Face emotional strain from conflicting societal roles.
- Often fear being judged or misunderstood for asserting themselves.
- Suffer from chronic burnout due to unrelenting expectations.
- Are penalized—both socially and professionally—for expressing ambition.

These insights emphasize that any effort to create a more equitable workplace must address not just structural change but also the emotional and cultural weight that women carry daily. Recognizing and validating these internal battles is essential in

crafting supportive environments that prioritize mental well-being alongside productivity.

3.1.5. Theme 5: Career aspirations and gendered career progression

While many women express a strong desire to advance in their careers, their paths are often hindered by gender-based biases and systemic limitations. This theme captures the frustration of women who strive for leadership and growth but find themselves repeatedly sidelined in favor of male colleagues. The structural and cultural barriers embedded in career progression pathways reflect broader patterns of inequality in workplace advancement and recognition.

3.1.5.1 Aspiration met with resistance

Several women spoke passionately about their career ambitions, only to find that those aspirations are not equally supported or nurtured by their organizations. Despite putting in equivalent or greater effort than their male peers, many report facing obstacles that seem unrelated to performance.

"I've always aimed high, but it's disheartening when your ambition is seen as unrealistic or even threatening, especially when male colleagues with the same goals are encouraged." (Interview 10)

This differential treatment can dampen motivation and cause women to question their value and future in their organizations.

3.1.5.2 Frustration with unequal promotion practices

Interviewees frequently express frustration about being overlooked for promotions, often watching less experienced or equally qualified men rise faster through the ranks. This fuels a perception that advancement is not merit-based, but influenced by gender and informal networks.

"I've trained male colleagues who were later promoted above me. No one could explain why—I just had to accept it." (Interview 5)

The repeated experience of being passed over contributes to a sense of disillusionment and inequity in career advancement.

3.1.5.3 Lack of opportunities for leadership development

Many women noted that leadership development programs and strategic roles are often offered to men, reinforcing the gender gap in upper management. Even when women express interest or show capability, they are sometimes deemed "not ready" or "too stretched" due to assumed family responsibilities.

"There's this belief that women won't be able to handle senior roles because of family obligations—even when we haven't said anything about that ourselves." (Interview 3)

Such assumptions create a self-fulfilling cycle where women are denied opportunities based on stereotypes rather than actual capabilities.

3.1.5.4 Pressure to conform to male norms of leadership

Participants also highlighted how workplace culture often defines leadership in traditionally masculine terms—assertiveness, competitiveness, decisiveness—while undervaluing traits more commonly associated with women, such as empathy, collaboration, and patience.

"I had to adapt to a more aggressive style just to be taken seriously. But then I'm criticized for not being 'warm' enough." (Interview 12)

This puts women in a no-win situation, where they are either not seen as leadership material or penalized for adapting to the dominant culture.

3.1.5.5 Desire for equal recognition and advancement

At the heart of this theme is a desire for fairness—women want equal access to career development, mentorship, recognition, and advancement. Many women are not asking for special treatment, but for an even playing field where performance and ambition are judged without gendered bias.

"I'm not asking for favors. I just want the same chance to grow that my male colleagues get." (Interview 7)

This statement encapsulates the widespread call for merit-based progression and the dismantling of unspoken gendered barriers.

3.1.5.6. Conclusion: unequal roads to leadership

The findings under this theme make it clear that while many women are ambitious and driven, their pathways to success are often obstructed by biases that favor male colleagues. Women:

- Feel their ambition is undervalued or viewed with suspicion.
- Are frequently passed over for promotions despite strong performance.
- Struggle to access leadership development opportunities.
- Are pressured to conform to male models of leadership.
- Seek equal recognition and access to growth, not special privileges.

Addressing these inequities requires organizations to critically examine their promotion criteria, mentorship structures, and leadership pipelines to ensure that advancement truly reflects merit and inclusivity.

3.1.6. Theme 6: Need for organizational and policy changes

A recurring and strongly voiced theme throughout the interviews is the urgent need for organizational reform and policy transformation to promote gender equity. Women express that without systemic change, individual efforts are insufficient to dismantle the entrenched barriers they face. From pay disparities to limited parental support, the current structures in many workplaces fail to accommodate or empower women effectively. The interviewees advocate for meaningful, actionable change rather than performative gestures or surface-level inclusivity initiatives.

3.1.6.1. Demand for equal pay and transparency

Many women raise concerns about unequal pay and a lack of transparency in compensation practices. They call for regular audits and open communication around salary structures to ensure fairness.

"We all talk among ourselves and know that men in the same role are earning more. But there's no system in place to review or correct it." (Interview 4)

This disparity not only demoralizes employees but also perpetuates systemic inequality, especially when pay differences go unchallenged for years.

3.1.6.2. Parental leave for all genders

Interviewees stress the importance of equitable parental leave policies for both women and men. Many believe that current structures reinforce gender norms by expecting women to take extended leave while discouraging men from doing the same.

"If only women take parental leave, it just reinforces the idea that caregiving is their job. We need equal leave policies that normalize both parents taking time off." (Interview 11)

This change could help distribute caregiving responsibilities more evenly and reduce the career penalties often experienced by mothers.

3.1.6.3. Policy support for unique needs (childcare, menstrual health, etc.)

Women advocate for policies that acknowledge and accommodate their specific life needs—such as on-site childcare, period leave, or family care days. These are often overlooked in standard corporate benefit packages but are crucial for supporting women's well-being and productivity.

"There's no childcare support or understanding for the days I have to stay home when my kid is sick. I'm expected to make up for that time as if nothing happened." (Interview 2)

Such lack of accommodation contributes to stress and reduces retention among women employees.

3.1.6.4 Mentorship and leadership programs for women

The absence of formal mentorship programs is identified as a key barrier to leadership development. Women call for structured initiatives that pair them with senior leaders, especially other women, who can guide and sponsor their growth.

"I would love to have a mentor, but those kinds of opportunities just don't exist in my workplace. Everything is informal and based on who you know." (Interview 5)

This lack of structured support makes it harder for women to navigate promotions, office politics, and long-term career planning.

3.1.6.5 Challenging everyday biases in workplace culture

Women point out that even with policies in place, everyday interactions—like being talked over in meetings or having their ideas ignored—reveal persistent cultural biases. They emphasize the need for not only policy changes but also deep cultural education and accountability.

"We need more than just policies. We need people to actually call out and challenge sexist behavior when it happens—big or small." (Interview 6)

This suggests that true equity must be embedded in daily interactions, not just in HR handbooks.

3.1.6.6. Conclusion: from policy on paper to practice in culture

This theme underscores that women are not simply asking for surface-level reforms; they are demanding structural overhauls that address root causes of inequality. Interviewees collectively advocate for workplaces that:

- Conduct regular and transparent pay equity audits.
- Offer equal parental leave to break caregiving stereotypes.
- Implement supportive policies that address women's lived realities.
- Provide formal mentorship and leadership programs.
- Hold employees accountable for day-to-day bias and exclusion.

For meaningful and sustainable progress, organizations must go beyond declarations of support and invest in transformative change at both the policy and cultural level.

3.1.7. Theme 7: Advice and empowerment for women

Amid the systemic challenges and emotional struggles described in previous themes, many women also shared empowering strategies, advice, and affirmations intended to uplift and support others navigating similar experiences. This theme focuses on the voices of resilience—women who, despite facing bias and pressure, have found ways to assert themselves, reclaim their narratives, and encourage others to do the same. Their advice centers around self-advocacy, boundary-setting, community-building, and redefining success on one's own terms.

3.1.7.1 Setting boundaries and prioritizing self-care

Several women emphasize the importance of saying “no,” protecting personal time, and prioritizing mental and emotional well-being. They advocate for boundaries as an essential tool—not just for health, but also for sustaining long-term career growth.

"It took me years to realize that burnout isn’t a badge of honor. Now I block off time for myself and say no when I’m at capacity." (Interview 9)

This advice challenges the “always-on” culture and affirms that protecting one’s energy is not a weakness but a strength.

3.1.7.2 Advocating for one’s own value

Many interviewees share how critical it is for women to speak up for themselves—whether it’s asking for a raise, voicing ideas in meetings, or pushing back against unfair treatment. Self-advocacy is portrayed as a necessary skill in environments where women are often overlooked or undervalued.

"If I didn’t speak up for myself, no one else was going to. Document your wins and bring them to the table—don’t wait to be noticed." (Interview 7)

This empowerment comes from reclaiming agency and refusing to shrink in the face of bias.

3.1.7.3 Finding allies and building support networks

Women stress the importance of building relationships with mentors, peers, and allies—especially those who are willing to amplify their voices and offer guidance. They view community not just as emotional support but also as a strategic tool.

"Find your tribe at work. It makes all the difference when you know someone has your back or will echo your point in a meeting." (Interview 3)

This reinforces the idea that empowerment is both individual and collective, and that solidarity among colleagues can lead to cultural shifts.

3.1.7.4 Rejecting guilt for wanting both career and family

Several women challenge the notion that one must choose between a fulfilling career and a meaningful family life. They encourage others to reject guilt and societal judgment in favor of defining success for themselves.

"I refuse to feel bad for wanting a career and a family. Men aren't asked to choose, so why should we?" (Interview 12)

This message reclaims the narrative around ambition and motherhood, emphasizing that women are entitled to pursue both without apology.

3.1.7.5 Encouraging resilience and persistence

Interviewees often conclude their advice with affirmations of persistence. Even in the face of repeated setbacks, they encourage others to keep going, learn from each challenge, and continue believing in their worth and capabilities.

"You're going to hear a lot of no's—but don't let that break you. Keep showing up. You have every right to be here." (Interview 5)

This perspective celebrates the resilience of women who continue to carve space for themselves in workplaces not always built with them in mind.

3.1.7.6. Conclusion: strength through solidarity and self-belief

This theme offers a counterbalance to the challenges described in earlier sections by highlighting the tools women use to empower themselves and others. These insights reveal that:

- Setting boundaries and protecting one's well-being is crucial.
- Women must learn to assert their value and track their contributions.
- Community and allyship can serve as powerful support systems.
- It is valid to pursue both professional and personal fulfillment.
- Resilience is built by continuing forward, even in the face of resistance.

This theme serves as both a guide and a call to action, reminding women that empowerment is not just an outcome—it is a daily practice rooted in self-respect, courage, and collective support.

3.1.8. Theme 8: Cultural norms and external expectations

Cultural norms and external societal pressures play a powerful role in shaping women's professional experiences. This theme explores how traditional beliefs about gender roles, family expectations, and societal assumptions influence women's career choices, behaviors, and opportunities. These expectations often come from outside the workplace—family, community, or cultural tradition—but they deeply impact how women are perceived and how they navigate their professional identities.

3.1.8.1. Pressure to "settle down" and prioritize family

Many women report feeling a strong cultural and familial expectation to prioritize marriage and family over career ambitions. This pressure often manifests early in their professional lives and intensifies with age or relationship status.

"People keep asking when I'm going to settle down—as if career success means nothing if I'm not married by a certain age." (Interview 6)

Such questions reflect the societal assumption that a woman's ultimate fulfillment lies in domestic life, not in professional achievement.

3.1.8.2 Doubts about long-term career commitment

Some interviewees shared that after getting married or having children, they felt others began to question their long-term commitment to work. This assumption can subtly or overtly impact promotions, assignments, and leadership opportunities.

"After my maternity leave, it felt like people stopped taking me seriously. As if motherhood meant I was less invested in my job." (Interview 11)

These perceptions create barriers to growth, even for women who remain fully dedicated to their careers.

3.1.8.3 External judgments around career choices

Women also describe feeling judged—sometimes by their families, sometimes by peers—for their decisions to remain in demanding jobs or to pursue non-traditional career paths. In some cultural contexts, career ambition in women is seen as selfish or unorthodox.

"When I chose to stay in a high-pressure startup, even though it meant long hours, people acted like I was choosing work over family and relationships." (Interview 4)

These judgments contribute to internal conflict and societal isolation, making it difficult for women to pursue paths that don't align with conventional expectations.

3.1.8.4 Expectations to perform nurturing or emotional labor

Women often find themselves expected to take on emotional and interpersonal responsibilities at work—such as mentoring others, managing team morale, or smoothing over conflicts—even when these tasks aren't formally assigned.

"I'm always the one expected to 'check in' on people or organize team events—no one asks the men to do it." (Interview 2)

This unspoken expectation reflects the cultural association of women with caregiving roles, which adds extra labor without recognition or reward.

3.1.8.5 Navigating cultural ıdentity alongside professional identity

In some cases, women from culturally conservative backgrounds shared that pursuing ambitious careers created tension within their families or communities. These dual pressures—cultural and professional—can create a unique kind of identity conflict.

"I'm constantly balancing the expectations of my family with who I am at work. Sometimes it feels like I'm leading a double life." (Interview 7)

This sense of fragmentation makes the workplace an emotionally complicated space, requiring constant code-switching and compromise.

3.1.8.6. Conclusion: culture as a silent career ınfluencer

Cultural norms and external expectations, while not always explicitly stated, exert profound influence on women's professional lives. The interviews reveal that women:

- Are expected to prioritize family over ambition, regardless of personal desire.
- Face skepticism about their career dedication after major life events.
- Are judged for pursuing high-pressure or unconventional paths.

- Are burdened with emotional Labor due to gendered expectations.
- Often struggle to reconcile personal, professional, and cultural identities.

These insights show that achieving gender equity in the workplace requires more than just internal policy changes—it also demands a broader cultural shift that challenges outdated assumptions about women's roles in society and work.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

This study set out to investigate the consequences of workplace culture on women in Arabic-speaking countries, focusing on how cultural, societal, and institutional factors shape women's professional experiences, career development, and economic participation. Through a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study sought to capture the lived experiences of women navigating deeply gendered workplace environments across diverse industries in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. In these contexts, the relevance of the topic is profound—where evolving gender roles meet enduring cultural and religious norms, shaping not only individual trajectories but also national development outcomes.

Findings revealed that women face a multitude of systemic challenges in the workplace. Participants consistently cited limited access to leadership roles, prevalent wage gaps, and a lack of supportive workplace structures, such as maternity leave or childcare services. Harassment, both explicit and covert, was frequently mentioned, with women expressing concerns over the absence of formal reporting mechanisms. These insights confirm previous literature and resonate with broader trends reported by the World Bank (2024), which emphasize the scarcity of gender-sensitive policies and protections.

Cultural and religious expectations significantly shaped participants' professional experiences, often reinforcing rigid gender roles that devalue women's ambitions outside the home. While some women reported internalizing these norms as limitations, others actively resisted them by seeking careers in progressive industries or organizations. This dual dynamic—where norms serve both as constraints and catalysts—suggests a need for deeper engagement with the nuances of cultural influence, as also observed by World Bank (2024).

Economically, the consequences of women's underrepresentation are substantial. According to projections by McKinsey& Company (2020), closing the gender gap could contribute $2.7 trillion to regional GDP by 2025. This study echoes those findings, with participants repeatedly noting the untapped potential of educated women who are excluded from the labor force. Examples from Egypt and Saudi Arabia show how targeted reforms—like Vision 2030—can improve labor participation, although gaps in leadership access and wage equality persist.

In response to these systemic issues, several strategies emerged from this research. For organizations, the implementation of gender-sensitive HR policies, formal anti-harassment procedures, and structured mentorship programs were highlighted as vital. Participants emphasized the importance of leadership pathways that include women and flexible working arrangements to accommodate caregiving roles. On a governmental level, policy interventions such as legal reforms, gender quotas, and public investment in childcare infrastructure are necessary to create enabling environments. Programs like Saudi Vision 2030 serve as examples of successful governmental commitment, but they must be matched with enforcement mechanisms and cultural awareness campaigns to address deep-seated biases.

This thesis contributes to the literature by integrating economic, cultural, and psychological dimensions of gender inequality in the workplace, offering a localized yet comparative perspective across Arabic-speaking countries. It also brings forth voices that are often absent in macroeconomic assessments, revealing emotional labor, informal discrimination, and negotiation strategies women use daily. In doing so, it challenges the oversimplified narrative of women's economic inactivity by demonstrating that exclusion is often a product of systemic and cultural design rather than personal choice.

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed. For organizations, it is imperative to adopt transparent pay structures, offer professional development programs specifically for women, and institutionalize harassment reporting systems with legal backing. Equally, introducing flexible work schedules and remote opportunities could drastically reduce dropout rates post-childbirth. For governments and policymakers, actions should include enforcing equal pay legislation, subsidizing childcare, and mandating female representation in leadership roles across sectors. These interventions must be contextualized to each country's socio-cultural framework to ensure both efficacy and acceptability.

Limitations of the study include its relatively small sample size and the focus on a select group of countries, which may not represent the full spectrum of experiences across the Arab world. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of policy reforms on women's career advancement and assess the role of digital entrepreneurship in circumventing cultural barriers. Moreover, comparative studies

across different Arab states could uncover regional best practices in promoting workplace equity.

In closing, fostering gender equity in Arabic-speaking countries is not only a moral imperative but also an economic and social necessity. Achieving inclusive and sustainable development hinges on leveraging the full potential of the workforce—women included. Bridging the gender gap through context-specific reforms and inclusive policies can unlock innovation, prosperity, and progress for the entire region.

REFERENCES

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: a theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002

Ahmed, L. (1992). Women and gender in İslam: historical roots of a modern debate. Yale University Press.

Alarifi, A., & Basahal, A. S. (2023). The role of spousal support in working mothers' work-life balance. *International Business Research*, 16(4), 39–49. https://doi.org/10.5539/ibr.v16n4p39

Al-Asfour, A., and Khan, S. A. (2014). Workforce localization in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Issues and challenges. *Human Resource Development International*, 17(2), 243–253. https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2013.836783

Al-Asfour, A., Tlaiss, H., Khan, S., and Rajasekar, J. (2017). Saudi women's work challenges and barriers to career advancement. *Career Development International*, 22(2), 184–199. https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-11-2016-0200

Al Bawaba. (2015, September 29). Egypt: Sexual harassment, a silent stalker at the workplace. Retrieval address: https://www.albawaba.com/business/egypt-sexual-harassment-silent-stalker-workplace-748642

Blau, F. D., & Kahn, L. M. (2017). The gender wage gap: Extent, trends, and explanations. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 55(3), 789–865. https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20160995

Bloom, N., Liang, J., Roberts, J., and Ying, Z. J. (2021). Does working from home work? Evidence from a Chinese experiment. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics,* 130(1), 165–218. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qju032

Boserup, E., Tan, S.F., and Toulmin, C. (2013). Woman's role in economic development. Routledge.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Capetocasa. (2023). Female dress code in Saudi Arabia: What to & not to wear!. Retrieval address: https://capetocasa.com/female-dress-code-in-saudi-arabia-what-to-not-to-wear-capetocasa/

Castleberry, A., and Nolen, A. (2018). Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 10(6), 807–815. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2018.03.019

Charles, M., and Grusky, D. B. (2005). Occupational ghettos: The worldwide segregation of women and men. Stanford University Press.

Charrad, M. M. (2001). States and women's rights: The making of postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. University of California Press.

Clarke, V., and Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The Psychologist*, 26(2), 120–123. Retrieval address: https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/937596

Creswell, J. W. (2013). Qualitative inquiry & research design: choosing among five approaches (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), Article 8. Retrieval address: http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8?utm_source=chicagounbound.uchicago.edu%2Fuclf%2Fvol1989%2Fiss1%2F8&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages

Eagly, A. H. (1987). Sex differences in social behavior: A social role interpretation. Lawrence Erlbaum.

England, P. (2010). The gender revolution: Uneven and stalled. *Gender & Society*, 24(2), 149–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243210361475

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., and Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11

Folbre, N. (1991). The unproductive housewife: Her evolution in nineteenth-century economic thought. *Signs*, 16(3), 463–484. https://doi.org/10.1086/494679

Goldin, C. (2014). A grand gender convergence: Its last chapter. *American Economic Review*, 104(4), 1091–1119. Retrieved from: https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.104.4.1091

Gornick, J. C., and Meyers, M. K. (2003). Families that work: policies for reconciling parenthood and employment. Russell Sage Foundation.

Human Rights Watch. (2024, October 14). Iran: New hijab law adds restrictions and punishments. Retrieval address: https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/14/iran-new-hijab-law-adds-restrictions-and-punishments

ILO (International Labour Organization). (2021). World employment and social outlook - trends 2021. Geneva: ILO. Retrieval address: https://www.ilo.org/publications/world-employment-and-social-outlook-trends-2021

ILO (International Labour Organization). (2022). Global report on gender equality in the workplace. Geneva: ILO. Retrieval address: https://www.ilo.org/publications/world-employment-and-social-outlook-trends-2021

Jayawardena, K. (1986). *Feminism and nationalism in the third world*. Zed Books.

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3), 274–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004

Kandiyoti, D. (1991). Identity and its discontents: Women and the nation. *Millennium*, 20(3), 429–443. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298910200031501

Kanter, R. M. (1977). Men and women of the corporation. Basic Books.

Kelly, G. P. (1984). Women, history, and theory: the essays of Joan Kelly. University of Chicago Press.

Kvale, S. (2007). Doing interviews. SAGE.

Lazreg, M. (1994). The eloquence of silence: Algerian women in question. Routledge.

Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. SAGE.

Lotfi, F. (2019, July 15). Sexual harassment at workplace: Unprotected women. Retrieval address: https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2019/07/15/sexual-harassment-at-workplace-unprotected-women/

McKinsey & Company. (2015). The power of parity: how advancing women's equality can add $12 trillion to global growth. Retrieval address: https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth

McKinsey & Company. (2020). Women at work: Job opportunities in the Middle East set to double with the right policies. McKinsey Global Institute.

McKinsey & Company. (2022). Women in the workplace 2022. McKinsey & Company. Retrieval address: https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace-archive#section-header-2022

McKinsey & Company. (2024). Women in the workplace. McKinsey&Company. Retrieval address: https://www.flipsnack.com/78C9ACFF8D6/women-in-the-workplace-2024/full-view.html

Metcalfe, B. D. (2011). Women, empowerment and development in Arab Gulf States: A critical appraisal of governance, culture and national identity. *Human Resource Development International*, 14(2), 131–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2011.558310

Minniti, M., and Naudé, W. (2010). What do we know about the patterns and determinants of female entrepreneurship across countries? *European Journal of Development Research*, 22(3), 277–293. https://doi.org/10.1057/ejdr.2010.17

Moghadam, V. M. (1998). Women, work, and economic reform in the Middle East and North Africa. Lynne Rienner.

Moghadam, V. M. (2003). Modernizing women: gender and social change in the Middle East. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Mousa, M., & Abdelgaffar, H. A. A. (2022). Coping with sexual harassment in the Egyptian context: A study on female academics. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 41(6), 907–926. https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-10-2021-0281

Moustakas, C. (1994). Phenomenological research methods. SAGE.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., and Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

OECD. (2017). *The pursuit of gender equality: An uphill battle.* OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264281318-en

OECD (2021). The missing entrepreneurs 2021: policies for inclusive entrepreneurship and self-employment. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/71b7a9bb-en

OECD (2024). The impact of the covıd-19 pandemic on women's economic vulnerabılıtıes ın the MENA. OECD Development Center.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). Qualitative research and evaluation methods (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Rock, D. and Grant, H. (2016). *Why diverse teams are smarter*. Retrieval address: https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter

Samir, N. (2018, September 20). Majority of women prefer silence when sexually harassed. Retrieval address : https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2018/09/20/majority-of-women-prefer-silence-when-sexually-harassed/

Schein, E. H. (2010). Organizational culture and leadership (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information,* 22(2), 63–75. https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201

Sidani, Y. (2005). Women, work, and Islam in Arab societies. *Women in Management Review*, 20(7), 498–512. https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420510624738

Sidani, Y. M., & Al Hakim, Z. T. (2012). Work–family conflicts and job attitudes of single women: A developing country perspective. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management,* 23(7), 1376–1393. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2011.579919

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., and Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research*. SAGE.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *Case study research*. SAGE.

Stoler, A. L. (1995). Race and the education of desire: Foucault's history of sexuality and the colonial order of things. Duke University Press.

Syed, J. and Van Buren, H. J. (2014). Global business norms and Islamic views of women's employment. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 24(2), 251–276. https://doi.or/10.5840/beq201452910

Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., and Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE* Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology (2nd ed., pp. 17–37). SAGE.

The Week. (2023). Saudi Arabia: The laws on what women can—and can't—do. Retrieval address: https://theweek.com/60339/things-women-cant-do-in-saudi-arabia

Tlaiss, H. and Kauser, S. (2011). The impact of gender, family, and work on the career advancement of Lebanese women managers. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 26(1), 8–36. https://doi.org/10.1108/17542411111109291

UN Women. (2020). *Gender Equity: Women's Rights in Review 25 Years after Beijing*. Retrieval address: https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/03/womens-rights-in-review

UNESCO. (2020). *Global education monitoring report*. Retrieval address: https://gem-report-2020.unesco.org/

VOA News. (2023, September 22). UN: New Iranian dress code law further represses women. Retrieval address: https://www.voanews.com/a/un-new-iranian-dress-code-law-further-represses-women-/7279840.html

Vroom, V. H. (1964). Work and motivation. Wiley.

World Bank. (2015). Middle East and North Africa makes progress on gender equality, but severe barriers persist, says WBG report. Retrieval address: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/09/09/middle-east-and-north-africa-makes-progress-on-gender-equality-but-severe-barriers-persist-says-wbg-report

World Bank. (2023). Women, business, and the law 2023. World Bank. http://hdl.handle.net/10986/39462 License: CC BY 3.0 IGO

World Bank. (2024). Women, Business and the Law. Retrieval address: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/reports

World Bank. (2025). Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) – Middle East & North Africa. World Bank Gender Data Portal. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=ZQ

World Economic Forum. (2023). Global gender gap report 2023. Retrieval address: https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/

APPENDIXES

Interview Form

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research study. This study explores how workplace culture in Arabic-speaking countries influences the experiences, behaviors, and career intentions of women. Specifically, it aims to examine how cultural norms shape home-to-job and job-to-home spillover, affect job satisfaction, and contribute to career abandonment intentions.

Your insights and experiences are invaluable to this research. The interview will consist of several open-ended questions designed to understand your perspective on these topics. It is expected to take approximately 40 minutes to complete. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. If you have any questions about the study or require further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me at.

We greatly appreciate your time and contribution to this research. Your participation will help provide a deeper understanding of workplace culture and its impact on women in Arabic-speaking countries.

Sincerely,

Ashjan Ali Hamood Shamsan
Master's student at Business Administration Program
Institute of Graduate Studies
İstanbul Gelisim University

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me about your job and role in your organization? How long have you been working in this field?

2. Can you describe the workplace culture in your organization? How do you feel it aligns with or challenges cultural norms in your country?

3. In what ways do cultural expectations for women influence your role and responsibilities at work?

4. How do your responsibilities and expectations at home affect your work life? Can you provide examples of positive or negative spillover?

5. In what ways does your work life impact your responsibilities and relationships at home?

6. What aspects of your workplace contribute to your job satisfaction? Conversely, what factors negatively affect your satisfaction?

7. How do your workplace policies and colleagues support or hinder your ability to balance home and work responsibilities?

8. What challenges have you faced in navigating workplace expectations as a woman in an Arabic-speaking country?

9. How has workplace culture influenced your career intentions or aspirations? Have you ever considered leaving your career, and if so, why?

10. What changes or policies do you believe would better support women in the workplace in your country?

11. Based on your experiences, what advice would you give to other women trying to balance cultural norms, workplace demands, and personal aspirations?

Ethics Commitee Aproval Form

T.C.
İSTANBUL GELİŞİM ÜNİVERSİTESİ REKTÖRLÜĞÜ
Etik Kurul Başkanlığı

ETİK KURUL KARAR ÖRNEĞİ

Toplantı No	Toplantı Tarihi	Toplantı Saati	Toplantı Yeri
2025 – 05	14.03.2025	14.00	Rektör Yardımcısı Odası

KARAR NO: 2025-05-36: Lisansüstü Eğitim Enstitüsü, İşletme (İngilizce) Tezli Yüksek Lisans Programı 241432201 numaralı Ashjan Ali Hamood SHAMSAN' ın, Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Aslıhan ÜNAL' ın danışmanlığında yürütülen "The Consequences of Women Workplace Culture in Arabic-speaking Countries" konulu çalışması görüşüldü yapacağı anket sorularının, etik kurallara uygun olup olmadığını tespit etmek üzere, İGÜ Etik Kurulumuzun 30.12.2024 tarih ve 2024-22 sayılı toplantısında, İGÜ Etik Kurul Yönergesinin 12(1) maddesine göre değerlendirme yapmak üzere görevlendirilen öğretim elemanlarının raporları incelenmiş olup, ilgili çalışmada yer alan bilimsel araştırmanın etik kurallara uygun olduğuna oy birliği ile karar verildi

ASLI GİBİDİR

Cihangir Mah. Şehit Jandarma Komando Er Hakan Öner Sokak No:1 34310 Avcılar / İSTANBUL
Tel: (+90212) 422 70 00 Faks: (+90212) 422 74 01
www.gelisim.edu.tr https://(birim).gelisim.edu.tr (birim)@gelisim.edu.tr

RESUME

Personal Information

Surname, name : Ashjan Ali Hamood SHAMSAN

Nationality : YEMEN

Education

Degree	Education Unit	Graduation Date
Master	Istanbul Gelisim University Institute of Graduate Studies Business Administration	2025
Bachelor	IEC Univerity Bachelor of Arts	2020
High School	7 July School	2016

Work Experience

Year	Place	Title

Foreing Language: English

Publications

Hobbies: Interest in the business field