

Parental influence on female vocational intentions in the Arabian Gulf

Female
vocational
intentions

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine parental career-related behavior (PCB) in relation to the vocational intentions of female nationals enrolled at higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual framework was constructed to examine the interplay between the PCB factors of support, interference and lack of engagement, against context-relevant dimensions of gendered sociocultural barriers, public sector preferences and the likelihood itself of labor market entry. Survey data from face-to-face encounters ($n = 335$) was collected.

Findings – Parental support was found to significantly reduce the perceived sociocultural barriers to workforce participation. Parental interference amplified these barriers and also increased public sector preferences. Those with educated fathers were more likely to seek labor market entry and consider atypical career paths, while those with a parent working in the private sector were more willing to consider this sector.

Research limitations/implications – One limitation was a sample comprising only female students, nonetheless it implies PCB has an impact on “national” female labor force participation (FLFP). Therefore, seeking to engage parents as more active stakeholders in vocationally related HEI interventions would benefit from greater policy attention.

Originality/value – This paper is the first to consider parental influence on FLFP using the PCB construct. Its value is in the framework model presented and its contribution to the discourse on the Arabian Gulf’s labor market dynamics.

Keywords Employment, Human resource management, National cultures, Women, Labour market, Arabian Gulf labour markets, Career choice intentions, Female labour force participation, Parental career-related behaviour, Vocational behaviour

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The Arabian Gulf is marked by its low levels of female labor force participation (FLFP) which are more pronounced still among the national cohort (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010). However, due to the region’s over-dependence on non-national labor, pyramid-style national demographic profile and now “saturated” public sectors, policymakers are seeking to encourage more female nationals to take up productive employment as opposed to the longstanding default: a government job of a bureaucratic nature (e.g. Rutledge and Al-Shamsi, 2015). Yet, despite the political rhetoric encouraging this cohort to utilize their tertiary-level qualifications and “marketable skills”, it is said that only a minority “intend” to use their acquired knowledge by pursuing “an active career” (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2007, p. 577). The usage of “intend” may not be an entirely accurate portrayal as various sectors of society still question the need for this cohort to participate in any but the narrowest range of occupational roles (e.g. Marmenout and Lirio, 2013). Indeed male support for a female family member’s higher education, does not necessarily translate to subsequent support for their labor market entry (e.g. Farrell, 2008; Williams *et al.*, 2013).

In light of such “structural” and “sociocultural” considerations, this study examines the impact of parental influence, including parental career-related behavior (PCB), on the



vocational intentions of female nationals in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The PCB dimensions of “support”, “interference” and “lack of engagement” – set out and operationalized by Dietrich and Kracke (2009) – are measured against likelihood of labor market entry, work-related sociocultural barriers and public sector preferences. The paper studies how labor market intentions are influenced by PCB, and the extent to which these intentions are likely to be actualized post-graduation. Although it is assumed PCB will have an impact, it may well be less significant than either prevailing societal attitudes to women and work or the pronounced pull of the public sector (thus an individual’s intention (or “planned behavior”) to join the labor market is also used as a dependent item to gauge the impact of these, see Figure 1). For instance, within the Arabian Gulf it is noted that if no “appropriate” jobs are available, citizens of both genders may well elect to remain unemployed in the interim (e.g. Gallup/Silatech, 2009; Harry, 2007). “Appropriate”, to be clear, means a very well remunerated conventional public sector position which comes with short working hours and long holidays (see e.g. Al Ali, 2008, p. 375; Issa *et al.*, 2013; Salih, 2010, p. 172). Based on a survey of 335 Emirati adolescent females in fulltime education, this paper fills a gap by conceptualizing a framework model to gauge parental influence on vocational intentions tailored to a region typified by low FLFP rates.

2. Background context

While FLFP the world over is partially contingent on economic conditions, market perceived “employability” and seeking an amicable family/work life balance, within the Arabian Gulf an additional factor is that many occupational roles are not considered “appropriate” for national women to pursue, especially if they are in the private sector (e.g. Farrell, 2008; Harry, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2013). This then provides some context for why, at this juncture, the gender equality gap – particularly in terms of economic participation and opportunity – in the Middle East and North Africa remains pronounced (e.g. Marmenout and Lirio, 2013; Moghadam, 2006). Indeed, eight of the ten countries with the lowest FLFP rates globally are located within this region (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012, p. 25). As Abdulla (2006, p. 10) points out, it is still considered *haraam* (“sinful”) in some quarters for national females to interact with men other than their close relatives and, as Harry (2007, p. 138) observes, less *ajib* (“shame”) is attributed to those of this cohort working in the public sector as compared to those in the private sector.

Despite this, and although women only constitute a small fraction of the respective “national” workforces, there are proportionately more national women working in the private sector than there are men (Nelson, 2004; Rutledge and Al-Shamsi, 2015). One factor

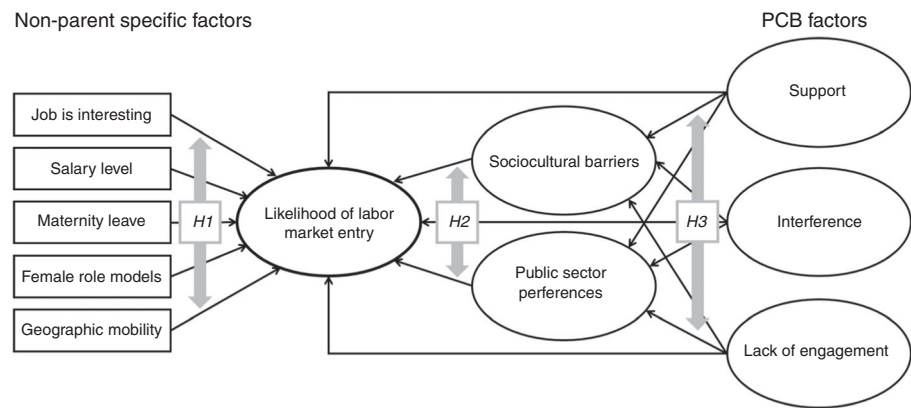


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

Note: H1, H2 and H3, correspond to the hypothesis groupings set out in the text

leading to this somewhat counterintuitive observation is that many male nationals are able to secure jobs in the armed and security services. Another is that female nationals outperform their male counterparts in terms of grades and also comprise the majority of nationals in higher education (e.g. Hausmann *et al.*, 2012; HCT, 2015; UAEU, 2014). At secondary level for instance, adolescent females statistically outperformed males in mathematics and science, in five of the six Arabian Gulf countries (Karoly, 2010, pp. 46-48). In every year since 1986 there have been substantially more female graduates from the UAE's national university – a ratio of over three to one – and since opening in 1991, 62 percent of all graduates from the UAE's national vocational colleges have been female (HCT, 2015; UAEU, 2014). Proportionally far more of this cohort elect to study the more “vocationally relevant” academic subjects and are considerably more likely to be awarded distinctions and honors upon graduation (HCT, 2015; UAEU, 2014).

The Arabian Gulf's labor markets can be characterized by their elasticity with respect to non-national labor and rigidity with regard to national labor, the former dominate the private sector, and the latter predominantly work in the public sector. However, national youth “unemployment”, even if it largely due to individuals choosing to remain out of work until securing a government job, is rising and is viewed as a serious concern because, along with underemployment resultant from sinecures, labor nationalization policies have largely replaced non-national labor in the public sector's bureaucratic strata (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2011). In consequence, “second generation” economic diversification strategies, whose primary purpose is to create productive employment opportunities for citizens, are now a policy priority (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010). Of particular relevance to this paper is that in seeking to address this “demographic imbalance” and move toward a more open and dynamic economic structure, policymakers and the HRD literature alike consider female nationals (i.e. citizens as opposed to residents) to be an “underutilized asset” (see e.g. Rutledge and Al-Shamsi, 2015). This is in no small part because for female nationals, a conventional public sector position is still seen to be by far the most “appropriate” occupational role (e.g. Farrell, 2008; Williams *et al.*, 2013) and, presently, commercially run, government-backed enterprises – that would be classified in the industrialized world as public sector – tend to be considered as private sector operators by Arabian Gulf citizens.

3. Literature review

While neither the form of female personality traits, nor the terms of reference for their labor are constant, gendered notions of appropriate occupational roles are considered to be formed at an early stage of childhood and be reinforced through into adolescence (e.g. Astin, 1984; Weisner and Wilson-Mitchell, 1990). Consciously or not, parental influence with respect to adolescent career decision-making is often said to be gendered (e.g. Gutek and Larwood, 1987) as is advice on subject choice prior to starting tertiary education (e.g. Creamer and Laughlin, 2005). Moreover, parental influence in this regard is said to be more pronounced in “conservative” (read “patriarchal”) societies where the role and status of women is subjugated (e.g. Cohen, 2006; Hijab, 1998) and also in contexts where gender segregation occurs (e.g. Chang, 2004; Khasawneh, 2010). More generally, parental influence on career decision-making is usually said to carry more weight than either that of career counselors or educators (e.g. Creamer and Laughlin, 2005; Mortimer *et al.*, 2002). It follows then that “agency,” in this context the actions that create or advance educational and vocational development and “self-efficiency,” the subjective confidence in being able to fulfill tasks or “intentions” (planned behaviors), are two constructs regularly applied when investigating the career decision-making process. In terms of parenting style, there are a range of taxonomies but that most frequently cited in the theory underpinning Dietrich and Kracke's (2009) PCB construct are the authoritarian (hostile and controlling) vs authoritative (warm and controlling) modes. Authoritarian parents expect strict obedience from their

children while authoritative parents exhibit clear, stable and flexible behavior; the latter of which is said to have a positive effect on adolescent self-esteem. With regard to the warmth-hostility and controlling-uncontrolling clines, PCB “support” can be seen as controlling and warm; “interference” as controlling and hostile; “lack of engagement” as uncontrolling and possibly either disinterested or unable to offer vocationally related advice.

The so called “school-to-work-transition”, the period in which individuals are not normally burdened with the responsibilities of adulthood (i.e. the “psychosocial moratorium”), is grounded upon assertions that “intention” is the single best predictor of actual behavior (Mortimer *et al.*, 2002, p. 441). Levels of (self-assessed) behavioral control – such as the “intention” to seek employment post-graduation – mediated by parental influence, can broadly be situated in the Theory of Planned Behavior, in which “intention” is a state of mind directing an individual toward a specific mode of behavior (see e.g. Ajzen, 1991). Yet the difficulties, exploration processes and vocational intentions that comprise career decision-making will to a degree also be influenced by access to education and contemporary economic conditions, which themselves will be shaped by the normative values of the given contextual relationship (i.e. the sociocultural setting). Thus, career decision-making cannot satisfactorily be considered as solely an individual psychosocial task as it occurs within a relational framework in which parental influence plays a role. Indeed, Ng and Feldman (2007) argue that the extent to which parents are supportive and the nature of the parent-adolescent relationship, will impact on the efficacy of the school-to-work-transition itself and will also have longer-term employability and job satisfaction implications.

Investigating the variables that influence vocational intentions during the school-to-work-transition timeframe is at the heart of the adolescent career decision-making literature. Vignoli *et al.* (2005), who consider parenting style and adolescent anxiety in relation to the career exploration process, theorize that “Exploratory Activity” might be strengthened by certain parenting styles and that parental influence is probably more salient for girls as boys are said to be more systematically socialized for certain occupational roles. Koumoundourou *et al.* (2011) explore the influence of parental authority styles on adolescents’ career decision-making in relation to self-esteem. And although they argue that the relationship is for the most part indirect, they observe that those with high self-esteem face less career indecision and exhibit more career-related maturity. In addition, they contend that “authoritarian” style parenting can lead to career indecision particularly for females because of its negative impact on this cohort’s self-image and self-identity.

Nevertheless, and in line with the view of Eccles (1994), who dismisses the notion that gendered differences in vocational choices result solely from individualistic interests and aptitudes, many authors contend that societal agents – including government policy related to human resource management, vocationally related higher education interventions and also, parental influences – have the capacity to broaden the range of conventionally accepted career-paths for women within the region (e.g. Marmenout and Lirio, 2013; Rutledge and Al-Shamsi, 2015). Seeking to better identify and interpret career decision-making intentions has the capacity to contribute to a better understanding of national FLFP dynamics within the region and, the PCB construct, as articulated by Dietrich and Kracke (2009), can help assess the impact of parental influence on post-graduation vocational intentions.

Hypotheses investigated

The purpose of the *H1* is to ascertain the extent to which non-parent specific variables impact on the likelihood of labor market entry (see Figure 1). As the literature sets out, there are quite a number of considerations that result in the career decision-making plans of female nationals within the region being more complex than they are in some other parts of

the world. These include: maintenance of family name and honor, the nature of work (e.g. degree of customer interaction and the use of vehicles), working hours, familiarity with organizational culture and an overall concern about being too far away from the family home (e.g. Rutledge and Al-Shamsi, 2015; Williams *et al.*, 2013). Farrell (2008) observes that non-gendered incentives such as remuneration, as well as more gendered ones such as geographic mobility (the proximity of the job to the family home) were important considerations. The importance role models are said to have in encouraging young women to explore unconventional career-paths was voiced by many of the female nationals that participated in the focus groups convened by Marmenout and Lirio (2013) as was the need for improving private-sector maternity leave provision:

H1. Other things being equal, the job “being interesting,” “salary level,” “provision of maternity leave,” “female role models” and “geographic mobility,” will each increase the intention to join the workforce.

Turning now to the second set of hypotheses (*H2a* and *H2b*) it is assumed that the more one is influenced by societal perceptions relating to women and work, the stronger will be the desire for public sector employment; the higher one’s preference for a public sector job is, the less likely employment will be irrespective of “intention”; as this sector is now considered to be overstaffed, unproductive and unlikely to continue expanding (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2011). Nonetheless, results of the Gallup/Silatech (2009, p. 22) survey revealed that 67 percent of young UAE nationals would only consider public sector employment (in spite of the caveat, “assuming pay and working conditions in the private sector were similar”). For the female cohort such strong sectoral preferences may be resultant from the restrictions that have traditionally been imposed on their interacting with men, other than their direct family members which makes securing employment far from straightforward (Williams *et al.*, 2013, p. 145). Along with this is the prevailing cultural norm that dictates men be responsible for the “maintenance of their wives and children” (Moghadam, 2006, p. 223). Furthermore, those that do take up private sector employment will be a distinct minority in almost any enterprise’s workforce (Ryan, 2016) and this helps explain why many who work in this sector report feeling uncomfortable with regard to the potential for sociocultural misunderstandings to arise, view themselves as having “failed” in some way and intended to move to the public sector if the opportunity arises (Nelson, 2004; Salih, 2010). Such sociocultural factors are compounded by more pragmatic ones: UAE public sector employees earn, on average, three times as much as their private sector counterparts and have an additional 57 days of annual leave (Issa *et al.*, 2013):

H2a. Those who exhibit a high preference for public sector employment will be less likely to join the workforce.

H2b. Those more sensitive to gendered sociocultural barriers will be less likely to join the workforce.

The third set of hypotheses (*H3a* and *H3b*) are designed to investigate the impact of parental influence on likelihood of labor market entry. Patriarchal societal constructs such as that in the Arabian Gulf are said to negatively impact on the adolescent female’s career decision-making process (e.g. Cohen, 2006; Hijab, 1998; Koumoundourou *et al.*, 2011; Moghadam, 2006). Williams *et al.* (2013, p. 137) contend that while fathers in the UAE support their daughters’ higher education they continue to impose many implicit career-related restrictions subsequently. Based on eight in-depth interviews with UAE national women working in the public sector they find that in most instances the public sector remains the only acceptable employment avenue. Having said this, Ng and Feldman (2007, p. 122) find that individuals whose parents have a higher socioeconomic status are more adaptable to the changing needs and requirements of the labor market. “Change” up to a

point in the UAE may be seen as the government's strategic aim to cut back the conventional public sector and generate more productive "private" sector employment opportunities. "Higher socioeconomic status" up to a point may be equated with educational attainment levels and occupational status. As Dietrich and Kracke (2009, p. 117), recommended that future PCB-related research investigate the effect of the parental labor market relationships and educational attainment levels it was considered worthwhile to collect such demographic data as part of this study's student survey. It is therefore assumed that:

H3a. Parental relationships with the labor market and/or, educational attainment levels, will impact on the likelihood of labor market entry.

H3b. The PCB dimensions of "support", "interference" and "lack of engagement" will impact on the likelihood of labor market entry.

4. Methods

Participants

Emirati adolescent females were asked to participate in the research study by completing a questionnaire. Sample members were selected from within a pre-defined target group: female nationals in fulltime education still living with their parents. The average age of the sample was 21 (SD = 3.6). A stratified sampling approach based on the size of the national population per each of the UAE's seven Emirates was then used; the geographic breakdown of the sample is thus broadly reflective of the constituent Emirates' population ratios for female nationals (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Of all female nationals 42.6 percent are from Abu Dhabi, of our sample those from Abu Dhabi comprise 27.2 percent; respectively, for Dubai the figures are 17.1 and 24.8 percent; Sharjah 16.3 and 20.9 percent; Ras Al Khaimah 10.6 and 8.7 percent; Fujairah 6.9 and 7.5 percent; Ajman 4.6 and 7.2 percent; Umm Al Quwain 1.9 and 3.9 percent.

Procedure

The survey of approximately 20-minute duration was carried out at several public sector higher education institutions. Participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the general purpose of the research study. This also stated that participation was voluntary and that their responses would be anonymized and in no way be attributable to them. First, a pilot study was conducted ($n = 46$) at one federal level institution to ensure that the questions (and their Arabic translations) were clearly worded and logical. At this stage some items were dropped and some reworded aided by face validity checks. As the questionnaire was conducted face-to-face, a high response rate of just over 90 percent was obtained. In total 335 completed and usable survey responses were collected.

Survey instrument

The survey instrument which consisted of 50 items was designed to provide data to fit this study's conceptual framework (see Figure 1). The survey included items relating to sectoral preferences, the appropriacy and attractiveness of various occupational roles and perceptions of societal attitudes to women and work. These items were based on the qualitative research of Farrell (2008) along with an extensive series of labor market-based surveys conducted in the early 2000s reported on by Nelson (2004). Most PCB dimension items were used except for a few relating to apprenticeships which were not considered relevant to the regional context (Dietrich and Kracke, 2009, p. 113). The items reported in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, are five-point Likert statements ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (see Table AI for the items used in this analysis).

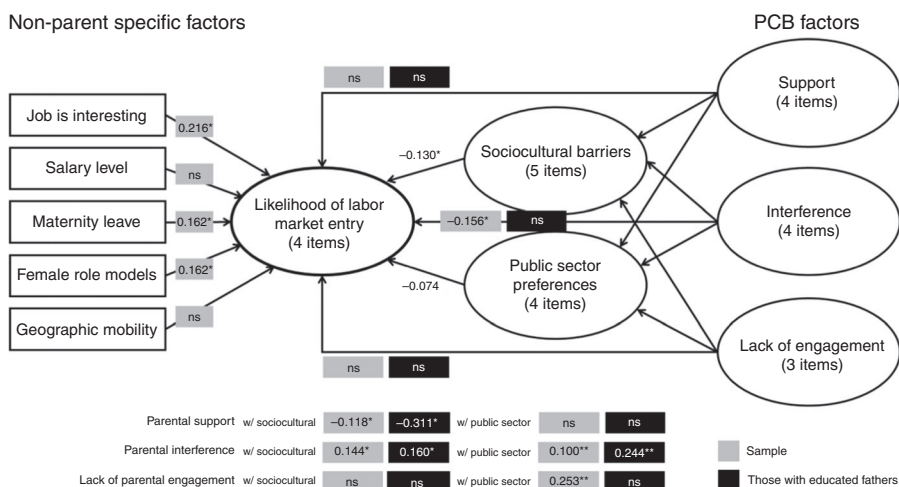
Analytical strategy

The data ($n = 335$) was subjected to exploratory component factor analysis and subsequently combined into a number of independent variable groupings to be tested against the dependent variable: “likelihood of labor market entry” (four items, $\alpha = 0.852$). The extraction process was Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation and Kaiser Normalization. Of the items that were thought to potentially fit with the forecast factor groupings two were dropped due to low communalities (see Table AI for factor loadings).

5. Results

In terms of *H1*, Figure 2 depicts that the job being interesting, the provision of maternity leave and the presence of female role models all had significant positive effects on the likelihood of labor market entry. Thus only these three non-parent specific factors acted to increase the likelihood of labor market entry in support of the hypothesis. In addition, the sample members were asked to rank a number of factors related to workforce participation (see Table I). Unlike would be the case with a series of Likert-style items where sample members could attribute high importance values to each, ranking necessitated selecting which variables were of most and least relative importance. It is noteworthy that from the sample’s perspective, whether or not the given workplace was gender segregated was of relatively low importance. The job being interesting was ranked as the most important and this was subsequently found to significantly increase the likelihood of labor market entry ($\beta = 0.216$). However, while salary level does not significantly correlate (see Table II), it is ranked as being of second highest importance.

While no direct significant relationship was found to support *H2a*, it should be pointed out that 78.5 percent of the sample stated “the public sector” when asked in which sector they intended to seek employment. Furthermore, 29.6 percent strongly agreed with the statement that they would “wait” for a government job as opposed to taking private sector job in the interim. It follows that although an individual may intend to secure employment



Notes: At the conceptual stage, the intention was to delineate parents into two sub-groupings: the sector in which they work and, by educational attainment level, following statistical analysis the only significant findings were in relation to the father’s educational attainment levels. Coefficients are shaded gray (the sample as a whole) and black (those with educated fathers). * $p < 0.05$;

** $p < 0.10$

Figure 2.
Relationship between
variables

Table I.Factors influencing
the likelihood of labor
market entry, ranked

| Factor | Mean | SD | |
|---------------------------------------|----------|---------|-------------|
| Job is interesting | 2.7470 | 1.89509 | |
| Salary level | 2.7801 | 1.72851 | |
| Working hours and holidays | 3.9428 | 1.50920 | |
| Geographic mobility | 3.9819 | 1.75535 | |
| Job security | 4.0241 | 1.69753 | |
| Gender-segregated environment | 4.6777 | 2.10632 | |
| Availability of child care facilities | 5.7380 | 1.67459 | |
| <i>Friedman test statistics</i> | | | |
| <i>n</i> | χ^2 | df | Asymp. Sig. |
| 332 | 463.863 | 6 | 0.000 |

Notes: Min = 1.0 (of most influence); max = 7.0 (of least influence); terms such as public sector and sociocultural barriers were consciously omitted; available child care is distinct from provision of maternity leave

Table II.Correlations with the
likelihood of labor
market entry

| | Correlation |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Factor/item</i> | |
| Sociocultural barriers | −0.130* |
| Public sector preferences | −0.074 |
| Job is interesting | 0.298* |
| Salary level | 0.064 |
| Maternity leave | 0.183* |
| Female role models | 0.257* |
| Geographic mobility | 0.018 |
| <i>PCB dimensions</i> | |
| Support | 0.039 |
| Interference | −0.208* |
| Lack of engagement | −0.049 |

Notes: $n = 335$; $*p < 0.05$

post-graduation, their actual likelihood of securing employment will be lower if they limit applications to conventional public sector openings (partially and albeit indirectly validating *H2a*). With regard to *H2b*, sociocultural barriers were observed to be significantly negatively correlated with likelihood of labor market entry; the more sensitive one is to such societal sentiment, the less likely will be their job market entry (see Table II). Furthermore, in regression analysis the proximity of the job to the family home was found to significantly amplify sociocultural barriers to work ($\beta = 0.406$ – see Table III); in other words, the further a given job was from the family home, the less likely it would be accepted (many male nationals from the Northern Emirates commute to the cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai). As stated, the presence of female role models acts to significantly reduces socioeconomic barriers ($\beta = -0.271$) as well as significantly increasing the likelihood of labor market entry ($\beta = 0.162$).

Support was also found with regard to *H3a*, it is observed that those who have a parent working in the private sector will be less averse to accepting a position in this sector. This indirectly makes workforce participation that much more likely as the majority of job openings are in this sector. Dependent item responses were cross-tabulated with a dummy variable “private sector” (where 1 means having one or more parent/close family member working in the private sector and 0 the reverse). No less than 70 percent of those intending to work in the private sector met this criterion (the χ test p -value was 0.001). It is also observed

Table III.
Linear regression
results

| <i>Dimensions</i> | Likelihood of labor market entry | Sociocultural barriers | Public sector preference |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Job is interesting | 0.216* | ns | ns |
| Maternity leave | 0.162* | 0.182* | ns |
| Female role models | 0.162* | -0.271* | ns |
| Geographical mobility | ns | 0.406* | 0.109 |
| <i>Sample</i> | | | |
| PCB support | ns | -0.118* | ns |
| PCB interference | -0.156* | 0.144* | 0.100** |
| PCB lack of engagement | ns | ns | 0.253* |
| R^2 | 0.160 | 0.094 | 0.349 |
| <i>Those with educated fathers</i> | | | |
| PCB support | ns | -0.311** | ns |
| PCB interference | ns | 0.160* | 0.244** |
| PCB lack of engagement | ns | ns | ns |
| R^2 | 0.029 | 0.173 | 0.095 |

Notes: Salary level, working hours and holidays and job security are omitted as no significant relationships were found. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

that the father's educational attainment has a significant bearing on the daughter's relationship with the labor market. A two-sample *t*-test revealed that those whose fathers had tertiary-level qualifications were significantly more likely to seek labor market entry post-graduation ("It is likely that I will enter the labor market after completing my education," $p = 0.001$; "I can decide myself whether I enter the labor market after graduating," $p = 0.047$). No such relationships were found with regard to the mother's educational level.

The PCB dimensions were found to have a number of significant albeit relatively weak relationships (see Table III). With regard to *H3b*, parental support ($\alpha = 0.79$) acted to significantly reduce the magnitude of sociocultural barriers ($\beta = -0.118$). Parental interference ($\alpha = 0.78$) both significantly amplified these barriers ($\beta = 0.144$) and directly made labor market entry itself, significantly less likely ($\beta = -0.156$). With respect to PCB and public sector preferences, support had no significant bearing but interference and lack of parental engagement ($\alpha = 0.61$) both acted to amplify the preference for a government job ($\beta = 0.100$ and $\beta = 0.253$, respectively). It is particularly noteworthy that those whose fathers were more highly educated did not report interference as having a significant bearing on the likelihood of labor market entry. Furthermore, for the sub-sample with more highly educated fathers, parental support acted to reduce sociocultural barriers more strongly ($\beta = -0.311$). In a further distinction from the sample as a whole, reported lack of engagement no longer had a significant bearing on public sector preferences.

6. Discussion

This study makes a number of clear contributions to the literature by providing an initial quantitative contribution to the discourse that focuses on "national" FLFP within the Arabian Gulf and second it adds a gendered perspective to the nascent Arab Middle East Human Resource Management model (see, Marmenout and Lirio, 2013, p. 166). This study's observations are also of policy relevance in light of the region's unambiguous attempts to convert hydrocarbon resources into value-added domestically manufactured products and foster hi-tech, knowledge-based industries (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010). For longer-term viability, quasi-private sector entities within such sectors will need to

attract and retain national employees. Nevertheless, it is evident that presently national females themselves have limited agency with respect to career decision-making; the gist of the “patriarchal bargain” thesis set out by Williams *et al.* (2013) is that, for many the only realistic option is the conventional public sector (see also: Rutledge and Al-Shamsi, 2015). Indeed, as this study finds, almost four fifths of those surveyed intended to seek public sector employment.

Many of the job classifications that the sample considered to be “attractive” were not at the same time considered to be “appropriate” in society’s eyes. So although Marmenout and Lirio (2013, p. 151) report that national women in the UAE are now “slowly making their mark in atypical professions,” it remains the case that a range of occupations hi-tech, knowledge-based industries while considered to be interesting and educationally related were simultaneously viewed as being inappropriate in society’s eyes. This ties in well with the importance and positive effect this study’s sample attributed to female role models: extant government policies of championing female role models who are pursuing, regionally speaking, atypical career paths (see e.g. Al Khoori, 2015; Malek, 2016) is more than just a gimmick and is likely to have longer-term transformative potential. Therefore, the study’s finding that female nationals are significantly more likely to consider the private sector if a parent or a close family member currently works there is also of policy relevance. This longer-term normalization process is likely to be more viable by way of government-backed enterprises as they currently offer “national” employees with relatively high salaries and more favorable working conditions than do “real” private sector entities (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010). That such enterprises operate across the spectrum of knowledge-based and hi-tech industries means they are also capable of providing the range of “more interesting jobs” that national females seek and are relatively more qualified to undertake.

Of the working Emirati women interviewed by Marmenout and Lirio (2013, p. 157) most considered classic public sector employment to be “less interesting,” but preferable as the “benefits are substantially higher and working hours considerably lower.” It is true that public sector salaries are notably higher than for like-for-like roles in the private sector (Issa *et al.*, 2013). Yet this study also provides a fresh perspective on the role salary plays. Although it was ranked as being the second most important of seven discrete factors, it did not turn out to have a significant relationship with the likelihood of labor market entry. One reason for this could be that traditionally at least, it is men within the region who provide financially for their wives and daughters (Moghadam, 2006). However, it may be the case that while higher public sector salaries remain an attraction, other benefits (e.g. holidays and working hours) are of more importance. For instance, UAE Labor Law actually stipulates that public sector workers be granted 60 days maternity leave while those in the private sector are only entitled to 45 days (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012, p. 66). Gendered sociocultural norms aside, it may be the working conditions in general that draw jobseekers to the conventional public sector and not simply the (uncompetitive and thus unsustainably high) salary offered.

Another clear contribution this study makes is with regard to the PCB construct and the role fathers play in particular. The fact that parental support significantly reduces the magnitude of sociocultural barriers is of policy relevance. If gendered sociocultural norms constitute one of the key barriers to greater levels of FLFP, then PCB-style parental support in the school-to-work-transition timeframe may represent one way in which to address this. Moreover, the negative relationship between parental interference and the intention of seeking labor market entry seems to indicate that if parents discourage certain occupational roles the individual’s intention of joining the labor market becomes less pronounced. Up to a point, this ties in with arguments set out by Marmenout and Lirio (2013, p. 158), “only male sponsors [can] enable Emirati women to actually achieve their

career ambitions.” Williams *et al.* (2013, p. 140) argue that the prospect of pursuing an interesting job (e.g. at a commercially run, government-backed enterprise) would not likely occur if it meant going against the father, “the prime decision maker,” and thus “breaching the patriarchal bargain.” This then underscores the importance of the observation that those whose fathers had a higher level of educational attainment (i.e. a tertiary-level qualification) were significantly more likely to seek labor market entry post-graduation and be less deterred by sociocultural barriers.

Policy implications

The observations made in this study point to a number of ways in which parents, particularly the father, impact on the post-graduation labor market entry prospects, for national females. Drawing on the arguments set out by Eccles (1994) regarding the role societal agents can play in broadening the range of career options for women, policy measures that seek to engage parents more directly in vocationally related higher education interventions are likely to have merit. Ideally, within the Arabian Gulf, government agencies tasked with human resource development and management and educators should view the school-to-work-transition as a joint “parent-adolescent project” Koumoundourou *et al.* (2011, p. 177). The smoother such a transition is, the greater will be levels of career goal fulfillment and indeed, longer run job satisfaction (Ng and Feldman, 2007) – both useful for the envisaged dynamic and open economic structure. One concrete policy measure would be to orientate the now obligatory internship programs that all undergraduates at UAE public sector higher education institutions have to undertake, toward commercially run, government-backed enterprises. Together with the continued championing of female role models, and this has the capacity to contribute to a smoother school-to-work-transition for adolescent females within the region. Other considerations, such as encouraging more national men to undertake higher education, are clearly interventions that will not have short-term effects. There is merit nonetheless in considering such options, at present far fewer male nationals elect to pursue tertiary-level education (HCT, 2015; UAEU, 2014) as lucrative positions in the army and police force do not require such qualifications as entry prerequisites (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2011).

As Marmenout and Lirio (2013) and Rutledge and Al-Shamsi (2015) have emphasized, regional labor nationalization strategies needs to be cognizant of the fact that society is still very much patriarchal in nature and that this continues to represent a significant challenge to national women and their (private sector) workforce participation. Indeed Williams *et al.* (2013) argue that this issue cannot be addressed by way of short-term market incentive-based policies, but only by way of behavioral changes on the part of family and society. This study’s findings with regard to the father’s level of educational attainment are of particular interest. As mentioned, a considerable fraction of male nationals choose to join the security services upon leaving secondary school. Thus, whilst it is received wisdom that female education plays a key role reducing the gender gap in terms of access to economic opportunity (e.g. United Nations Population Fund, 2005; World Bank, 2006), within the Arabian Gulf encouraging more male nationals to consider tertiary-level education, may well have a positive impact on FLFP and in the longer-run afford adolescent females with greater agency and career choice scope.

7. Conclusions

While extant gendered sociocultural norms tend to push adolescent females toward the public sector this study does finds that parental career-related behavior has a number of consequences in relation to the likelihood of labor market entry. High levels of PCB-style “support” act to significantly reduce the sociocultural barriers and, those who receive this,

are both more likely to seek employment and be relatively more willing to consider “atypical” occupations (i.e. occupations other than the longstanding default bureaucratic-style government job). The socioeconomic status of parents with regard to education and their relationship with the labor market was also found to be important. Having a more educated father or having a parent working in the private sector will make labor market entry more likely as employment opportunities in government-backed enterprises look set to increasingly become the default gateway to workforce participation: those who had a parent or close family member working in the private sector are far less averse to this sector – those with more highly educated fathers are less affected by sociocultural barriers which tend to place the private sector off limits. On the other hand, PCB-style “interference”, by significantly amplifying sociocultural barriers and public sector preferences, will make securing employment less likely: the conventional public sector is now “saturated” and largely nationalized.

Limitations

One evident limitation of this study is that the correlations and paths are rather modest. Another is that it only canvassed the opinions of one gender group; for comparative analytical purposes there is merit in seeking the views of both. It would also have been advantageous to collect the views of those studying in both public and private higher education institutions. For practical reasons also, this study was only able to provide a snapshot rather than a longitudinal perspective of parental impact on FLFP. Ideally therefore future research might canvas a sample while in fulltime education and again several years after graduation.

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| Factors ^a | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | α |
|--|----------|-----------|----------|
| 1. Likelihood of labor market entry (DV) | | | 0.852 |
| I would like to enter the labor market after completing my education | 4.18 | 1.03 | 0.878 |
| It is likely that I will enter the labor market after completing my education | 3.97 | 1.00 | 0.826 |
| I can decide myself whether I enter the labor market after graduating | 4.03 | 0.931 | 0.743 |
| It is important that I enter the labor market after completing my education | 4.07 | 1.02 | 0.851 |
| 2. Public sector preferences | | | 0.737 |
| I will only work if I can find a public sector job | 2.70 | 1.20 | 0.839 |
| I would wait for a government job rather than taking private sector job right away | 2.73 | 1.20 | 0.845 |
| I expect the government to provide a public sector job for me | 3.19 | 1.12 | 0.636 |
| Working for the government is easier than working in the private sector | 3.48 | 1.11 | 0.649 |
| 3. Sociocultural barriers | | | 0.683 |
| The opinions of my family will influence my decision to work or not | 3.65 | 1.20 | 0.638 |
| Emirati society's opinions on women in the workplace will influence my decision | 2.54 | 1.25 | 0.619 |
| My religious beliefs will influence my decision to work or not | 3.61 | 1.23 | 0.647 |
| Being able to work in a gender-segregated setup will influence my decision | 3.32 | 1.31 | 0.730 |
| The opinions of my friends will influence my decision to work or not | 2.42 | 1.16 | 0.661 |
| 4. Parental support ^b | | | 0.794 |
| My parents talk to me about my vocational interests and abilities | 3.88 | 0.891 | 0.664 |
| My parents help me to seek information about vocations I am interested in | 3.93 | 0.956 | 0.709 |
| My parents give advice on the choice of careers available to me | 3.65 | 1.05 | 0.709 |
| My parents talk to me about job opportunities in a variety of careers | 3.45 | 1.12 | 0.637 |
| 5. Parental interference | | | 0.784 |
| My parents have their own ideas about my future vocation and try to influence me | 2.71 | 1.11 | 0.804 |
| My parents interfere too much with my vocational preparation | 2.64 | 1.12 | 0.820 |
| My parents would talk me out of a vocation they do not consider acceptable | 2.56 | 1.15 | 0.707 |
| My parents try to push me in a certain direction regarding my future vocation | 2.66 | 1.22 | 0.736 |
| 6. Lack of parental engagement | | | 0.613 |
| My parents are not really interested in my future vocation | 1.95 | 0.905 | 0.622 |
| My parents cannot support my vocational preparation, because they are too busy | 2.15 | 1.02 | 0.795 |
| My parents cannot offer me guidance because they know too little about different vocations | 2.52 | 1.23 | 0.716 |

Notes: α = Cronbach's α (≥ 0.6 acceptable; ≥ 0.7 good) and factor loadings; 24 of the 50 original items are shown here as an abridged list (the full list of items can be provided by the authors upon request). ^aPCA was conducted: KMO/Bartlett = 0.748; Eigenvalues for the six factors were: 3.57, 3.26, 2.39, 2.27, 1.42 and 1.06; explaining 61 percent of the variance (Monte Carlo Parallel Analysis figures are: 1.50, 1.42, 1.35, 1.30, 1.25 and 1.21). ^bThe corresponding α 's reported by Dietrich and Kracke (2009) were: α = 0.93 for support, α = 0.72 for interference and, α = 0.68 for lack of engagement

Table AI.
Survey factors
and items

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