

The Role of Spousal Support in Working Mothers' Work-Life Balance

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Abstract

This paper studied how Saudi working mothers experience spousal support, and what types of support are most relevant for them. Drawing on a qualitative research design with 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Saudi working mothers, and a thematic analysis approach, this study explored and discussed in-depth six types of spousal support and how working mothers experience each. We find that the most relevant and welcomed type of support is professional support, especially as it relates to current and future career aspirations, followed by more practical support in the household and with childcare/parenting responsibilities. Intellectual and emotional support are appreciated, but not a must, as most women feel they should be able to deal with their own emotions without their husband's involvement. Financial support is becoming less relevant and the least-needed type of spousal support. Overall, we find that most working mothers struggle to find a balance between their work and non-work-related life, and male partners have an essential role in helping their wives find that balance.

Keywords: female employment, Saudi Arabia, spousal support, working mothers, work-life balance

1. Introduction

The transition into parenthood is a great step in the lives of all adults. With parenthood come many new responsibilities, such as childcare, but also increased household tasks. As such, many parents – especially those of young children – experience high-stress levels (Smallen et al., 2022). Historically, parenthood responsibilities have been ascribed to women. Males, on the other hand, have been largely exempted from such responsibilities in the past (Ilyushina, 2019). While today, significant societal changes have led to the development of dual-earning families, gender norms still largely ascribe parenthood responsibilities to women – especially in the Middle East (Dickson, 2020; Moazam & Shekhani, 2018; Sakallı & Kuzlak, 2018; Uddin, 2021; Basahal et al., 2021). As a result, many working mothers struggle with finding a healthy balance between work and life as they have to continuously juggle between work and family responsibilities, more than men do (Greaves et al., 2017; Uddin, 2021; Wani, 2022).

To alleviate working mothers' stress, many recent studies have demonstrated a trend in which more fathers are taking up bigger responsibilities in the household, and are providing their wives with practical and emotional support (Uddin, 2021). However, these studies are usually conducted in a western context (Gram & Grønhaug, 2018; Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020), and an understanding of how Saudi working women experience spousal support is largely unexplored. With the previous in mind, this research focused on the role of spousal support in Saudi working mothers' work-life balance. More specifically, the current study sought to explore at the different types of spousal support and how they affect working mothers. That will lead us to the following research questions:

RQ1: How does spousal support affect work-life balance for Saudi working mothers?

RQ2: What types of spousal support are available for Saudi working mothers?

RQ3: In what ways can Saudi working mothers benefit from each type of spousal support?

Moreover, based on these questions, three propositions can be formulated:

Proposition 1: Spousal support is an essential factor influencing Saudi working mothers' work-life balance.

Proposition 2: Various types of spousal support are available to working mothers in Saudi Arabia.

Proposition 3: Spousal support can vary based on the perception of both partners.

The paper is organized as follows: first, an overview of the literature on this topic is provided. This is followed

by a description of the methodology adopted in the study. The findings from the study are then presented in the form of six themes. The ramifications of the results are highlighted in the final considerations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Spousal Support

Amin et al. (2017) have examined the relationship between spousal support and success in the subjective profession through work-life balance and dedication to a career. The theoretical base for that study was based on the conservation of resource (COR) theory which described the positive relationship between spousal support and work-life balance. Through support from spouses, the working mother would be able to remain much more relaxed and calm while rendering the required activities, both at work and at home (Williams et al., 2016).

A spouse can provide both direct and indirect assistance to help their partner achieve their goals and realize their potential (Grossbard-Schetman & Izraeli, 1994). Direct assistance can take the form of the exchange of skills or information used in the person's profession, while indirect assistance can take the form of moral support that can be utilized when confronting challenges on the job. The individual can feel more motivated and more satisfied with their achievement, happy, able to perform work and family activities effectively, and eventually may improve individual-level work outcomes such as career satisfaction when a spouse provides them with physical and moral support, empathy, caring, and love (Lu et al., 2009). After job experience, education, and personality, a study that investigated twelve primary predictors of professional success by Yu (2012) showed that the support of one's family is the essential factor in determining one's level of success in their chosen field. In Table 1, many researchers concentrate on indirect forms of assistance, such as financial, physical, and emotional support (Uddin, 2021; Dickson, 2020; Usdansky et al., 2016; Edlund & Öun, 2016; Matsui et al., 1995).

Table 1. Comparison of Spousal Support Across Various Context

Study	Country / or Countries Compared	Main Findings
Uddin (2021)	▪ Bangladesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The masculine social system restricts women's movement and encourages strict separation of work, resulting in their being primarily responsible for household tasks. Spouse's non-cooperation in household duties. ▪ Working mothers lack professional support from their husbands, which may hinder their ability to work smoothly if they fail to serve their husbands' families.
Dickson (2020)	▪ United Arab Emirates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ As far as housework is concerned, it is the woman's responsibility, and the husband rarely assists, but working women hire a domestic worker. ▪ Although some husbands help with the children, most are still handled by working mothers who are often considered experts at parenting. ▪ Husbands motivate their wives and then take pride in them when they reach their practical goals
Edlund and Öun (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sweden ▪ Germany ▪ Denmark ▪ Finland ▪ Poland 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nordic countries: Men and women share income equally, a model often referred to as a dual-earner family or a dual-earner/double-carer family, where the father participates more actively in raising children.
Matsui et al. (1995)	▪ Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A husband may provide his wife with instrumental support by helping her with domestic duties. ▪ A husband may provide his wife with emotional support by accepting her work outside

2.2 Spousal Support in a Saudi Context

The literature review on this topic in Saudi Arabia is relatively scarce - especially with the introduction of initiatives and regulations in the last decade aiming to strengthen women's rights and empowerment in education and work (Syed et al., 2018).

While the number of Saudi females entering the employment market has increased significantly, the percentage of women who are working is still relatively low, and a strong majority of women are still not participating in the labor market (TheWorldBank, 2019). Perceived cultural norms seem to function as a particular barrier for women to take this step (Alfarran et al., 2018; Almathami et al., 2022). Fearing that others, including their husband and direct family, may disapprove, many women feel discouraged from entering the job market. Interestingly, Bursztyn et al. (2020) found that such perceived and expected reactions are in fact distorted, as there seems to be more support for the trend towards Saudi women working than these women realize

themselves. Indeed, Bursztyn et al. (2020) found that, especially in young married couples, the male partner is - often unknowingly - supportive of the idea of their wife working outside the house. For women, having such a realization is important because perceived acceptability could influence their motivation to enter the labor market (Bursztyn et al., 2020).

Support for employment – both from a spouse and the community in general – is indeed proven to significantly impact women’s perceived self-efficacy and psychological well-being (Park, 2018; Rasool et al., 2019; Basahal, 2020), and career commitment and success (Azim & Islam, 2018). With the husband usually being the closest person to his wife, especially spousal support seems important (Wani, 2022). In this regard, some studies have focused on the logistical need and support from male spouses. Many women count on their husbands to commute to and from work. With women only being allowed to drive since 2018 (Krane & Majid, 2018), many indeed do not have a driver’s license or access to a car yet and still count on their male partner or family members to get to and from work (Al-Garawi & Kamargianni, 2021). Especially with taxi drivers, public transport, and other alternatives being expensive, driving themselves or having a partner to count on are the most realistic and sustainable options for working women (Williams et al., 2019). When it comes to other types of support, scientific research in the Saudi context is lacking, hence the need for the current study.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative design and constructivist approach. The purpose of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon based on the perceptions and daily lives of individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Additionally, qualitative designs are deemed especially useful when the emphasis is on dealing with social systems undergoing rapid change – as was the case in this study (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000)

According to Symon and Cassell (2012), qualitative researchers usually adopt a constructivist approach when doing research. This means that they believe that reality is constructed based on experiences and perceptions, and there are as many realities as there are people (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Considering that the objective of this study was to comprehend how Saudi working mothers experience spousal support, and what types of support are most relevant for them, it was considered that a qualitative methodology with a constructivist approach would be the most appropriate.

3.2 Study Participants

17 Saudi working mothers from various professions in the education industry participated in this research. Table 2. visualizes several essential participant demographics. Throughout the results section, participant numbers will be used to link quotations to participants.

3.3 Data Collection Measures

This study used 17 audio-recorded, semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews to collect data. Due to the fact that semi-structured interview protocols contain open-ended questions and adhere to a general style, they were deemed the most suitable method of data collecting for this study. However, they offer sufficient space for the participant to add his or her own information (Wethington & McDarby, 2015). The researcher planned in advance the main structure of the interview protocol, which contained a series of pre-written questions and broad interview topics (Kallio et al., 2016). As required, follow-up and further probing questions were added on a case-by-case basis. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, transcribed, and then translated into English; the initial translation made an effort to preserve the colloquial quality of Arabic and was used to code the responses (Santos Jr et al., 2015).

Table 2. Participants' Demographics

Participant Code	Age	# Children	# Working Years	Profession
M1	32	2	8	Lecturer
M2	51	5	28	Lecturer
M3	35	1	20	Manager
M4	45	3	22	Laboratory Technician
M5	38	2	12	Manager
M6	42	5	14	Lecturer
M7	38	3	13	Manager
M8	43	3	20	Specialist
M9	42	3	21	Manager
M10	42	4	14	Manager Assistant

M11	28	2	1	Administrative Officer
M12	48	3	18	Administrative Officer
M13	41	2	14	Administrative Officer
M14	39	4	14	Director
M15	42	2	10	Teacher
M16	42	3	18	Manager
M17	36	5	12	Assistant Professor

3.4 Data Analyses

The exact analysis technique used was the six-step thematic analysis procedure outlined in Newson (2022). The six processes include data familiarization, generation of coding, construction of themes, review of prospective themes, identifying and defining themes, and report output. The researcher read and reread the transcripts in order to become familiar with the data. Following this, codes were assigned to text pieces that represented a certain concept. This process was repeated until no additional codes or concepts were discovered. The links between codes were recognized as categories following coding. Subsequently, similar categories were grouped together into subthemes and themes. The researcher reexamined the emergent categories in light of the data to ensure an accurate depiction of the data in the fourth phase. After identifying themes and subthemes, a report was prepared.

4. Results

Thematic analysis resulted in the development of six themes: (a) household support, (b) professional support, (c) childcare and parenting support, (d) intellectual support, (e) financial support, and (f) emotional support. Each theme represents a source of support for working women, and is explored in depth and supported by direct participant quotes. It is important to take into account that these quotes were translated from Arabic to English, and small adaptations to make sense to an English-speaking audience were made.

4.1 Household Support

Society and gender norms still ascribe common household tasks such as preparing dinner or washing and ironing clothes predominantly to women. Females – regardless of their work status – are indeed still considered the sole/predominant responsible person for household chores. However, due to long and/or irregular working hours, working mothers are often unable to complete these household tasks by themselves. To resolve this issue and as a token of their support, many husbands have agreed to employ a maid who would help out with the mother's household-related workload.

However, our results suggest that most working mothers are still left with many household responsibilities – cooking being a common example. This is because the maid may not be employed full-time, or because the mother does not trust her with certain responsibilities. In many households, a husband may only offer to help out when these responsibilities become too much and the maid cannot help. Interestingly, this help would mostly relate to making or getting dinner ready.

There are things that he does himself; he does not expect me to do everything for him.

For example, if he wants a certain kind of food, he will cook it himself. I don't necessarily have to cook it for him. ... Actually, he helps me a lot in the kitchen. ... I don't have to worry about food because he usually helps me with it. (M4)

However, such household support is rather limited as in many families, the male provider may assume that having a maid cancels out the need for him to help out with the housekeeping.

My responsibility is to cook. He doesn't have anything to do with household responsibilities like tidying and cleaning, perhaps because, as he said to me, "If we were abroad and we did not have a maid, I would help you, but we are here and there are servants and I go to work, so you don't need me; there is an alternative. (M1)

4.2 Professional Support

Our results suggest that successful working mothers heavily rely on what we call professional support from their husbands. Specifically, this translates into supporting their wives' current work status and future career aspirations, whether directly or indirectly. Active professional support can translate into a husband's flexibility and understanding of late working hours, active participation in work-related events, and encouragement in terms of further education and professional development.

My biggest supporter is my husband; he supports me a lot in terms of work. For example, if I have to put in overtime, he does not get angry with me. He says, "This is your job, and as long as you love it, do whatever you want." (M14)

He is currently encouraging me to complete my PhD, even if I need to go abroad. He has no problem. He tells me to "go." (M6)

Indirectly, professional support can translate into logistical support, lowered traditional female expectations, and passive acceptance of their wives' decision to work. Logistical support predominantly refers to assistance with transportation. With driving being a relatively new activity for many Saudi women, working mothers indeed appreciate their husbands encouraging them to get their driver's license, or helping them with commuting to and from work by hiring a driver for them, or by driving them to and from their place of work themselves.

With regard to transportation, he tells me to give him a weekly transportation plan and tell him where and when I need to go somewhere. Of course, I learned to drive recently, but before that, he used to tell me give me your schedule and I will try to arrange my time with yours. (M5)

Working mothers also experience indirect professional support through lowered household expectations from their husbands. As mentioned previously, it seems that in most dual-earning families, the mother is still considered the main responsible person for common household tasks such as cleaning and cooking. While most working mothers do not seem to mind being in this position, they do expect their husbands to appreciate the fact that they too have been working during the day, and, therefore should not be expected to cook and clean to the same extent a stay-at-home mother would be able to.

He does not scrutinize on many things; he lets things slide ... Like eating, it is not a strict matter for him. I mean he can have any meal, or for example, I have not washed the clothes, if he is missing something, he doesn't scrutinize. He knows that I am busy or that I have forgotten or been busy with the children. (M4)

While most male spouses seem to understand and respect that their wives cannot attend to household tasks to the same extent a stay-at-home mother would be able to, some working mothers feel this type of support is lacking. Indeed, some women feel that their husbands still expect them to attend to all the cooking and cleaning regardless of their work life. Although this situation is not ideal, women in this position are accepting of these high expectations – as long as their husbands are passively accepting of them working. Our results indeed indicate that working mothers at least expect their husband to passively accept their career aspirations. This is important because mutual understanding and acceptance of each other's values and life goals is considered to be the basic requirement of a successful marriage. In light of this finding, many mothers claim that they would have never considered working in the first place without their husband's approval. This indicates that working mothers attach great value to the approval of their spouses.

I thank him for his approval, because we live in a society where women are under the command of men, we are still at the beginning of the change, and therefore, his opinion was particularly important as a husband. (M9)

To experience such much-needed support, clear communication is perceived as a must. This means that a woman who wants to pursue a professional career and has no intention of becoming a stay-at-home mother, should communicate this clearly and well in advance to her husband. It is important that during this discussion both partners listen to each other and get to express potential expectations and concerns. Having such an open discussion is indeed more likely to lead to a positive agreement between both partners.

There should not be a problem with you working, but your husband should be aware from the beginning of your aspirations. You must clarify what your expectations from him are. If you were given children, agree on who will take care of them, only then you can ensure to have a balance. (M2)

4.3 Childcare and Parenting Support

Many working mothers struggle with finding a healthy balance between work and parenting responsibilities. Childcare indeed requires a lot of time and energy and encompasses a variety of tasks. As mentioned previously, traditional gender norms seem to remain largely present in Saudi society, with childcare responsibilities being predominantly prescribed to women. This does not mean that men are not present in their children's life, but rather that the majority of parenting is prescribed to mothers. Because of this predominant societal associating of parenting with motherhood, some fathers seem to feel that parenting is not part of their duties, and as such have a minimum involvement in childcare.

Sometimes he would say, "No, I won't take responsibility for the boys. You take care of them." When he really has to, for example, when I am on a trip, he will take care of the children, but he will only do the minimum. He will simply say, "I don't care, you should do it." (M13)

In addition, many working women fortify this association as they too believe that mothers should carry more responsibility for raising children as compared to fathers. Indeed, according to some women, being a mother should always remain their first priority and unless they can successfully combine the job of being a caring and present mother with their work, they should not become a working mother. As such, they do not oppose to these expectations. However, for many working mothers this reality comes with added stress.

Working or studying is something you choose, and it does not give you the right to fall short of your husband and children. If you choose to work, you must have values, and you must balance your goals with your priorities and arrange the responsibilities that you must perform. (M17)

To make the combination of work and family responsibilities more manageable for working mothers, many rely on the help of their own mothers or sisters. Family members indeed often help out by taking care of their nieces and nephews while their mother and father are at work. Another solution may be, as mentioned before, the assistance of a maid.

My mother was and still is my first and last support, especially when they were young. Because of my work, I was not able to leave work early and pick up the children from school, nor was my husband able to, so my mother would pick them up instead and keep them at her house until I would finish work. (M2)

Regardless of getting support from family and/or a maid, many working mothers still put pressure on themselves to take as many of the parenting responsibilities as possible upon themselves. Many of our participants indeed implied to feel guilty for working and not being able to spend as much time with their children as household mothers would be able to. Most do not like the idea of others – especially the maid – filling in the role of mother, and as such they try to combine their work with their parenting responsibilities as much as possible.

The maidservant is an assistant to me and is not an alternative for me. I will prepare breakfast, but I will ask her to feed them, and dress them up. This is how I manage my household; the maidservant is an assistant, not an alternative. I mean that she cannot take my place. (M1)

I am certainly not the ideal mother, because during our work it is difficult for a mother to be perfect. Considering that you are not with them constantly, and you do not share with them every big and every little thing, you cannot be a perfect mother. ... I wish I could be more responsible for my home. ... During the workweek, I can't be like that, but I try on the weekend to be as perfect as I can be. (M5)

Many working women keep themselves to a strict schedule that allows them to combine both roles, and often succeed in doing so. Their success can, however, sometimes cause a backlash as seeing their wives successfully combining their work with their childcare responsibilities fortifies some father's assumption that their role in parenting and childcare can be kept to a minimum.

He sees me as an ideal mother and I must bear all the responsibilities, so he puts the full responsibility on me, even in the simplest things. He always tells me that "if something happens to me, the children will not be lost, but if something happens to you, you are everything to your children." (M9)

It is important to nuance the above results as in a few dual-earning families. Therefore, fathers are starting to take an equal or even leading role in some parenting aspects – especially the more practical aspects.

My children are 18 and 16, and he sits with them and accompanies them to the point that I sometimes feel that my presence is not required; their father is supposed to be with them in certain situations because he will understand them better in certain aspects. For example, now the children want to learn to drive, so they go out with him. ... There is no one in the world that I would rather leave my children with except their father. (M12)

If one of the children gets sick, he is the one who takes them to the doctor. He also takes care of them when I am not home yet from work or I have a late meeting; he would come back early, bring them back from school and keep them company. (M4)

Although the above seems to suggest that there is an upcoming trend in which more men are starting to take a more prominent role in parenting, at the moment, it seems that childcare responsibilities predominantly remain a woman's responsibility. Our results suggest that combining both roles is starting to negatively impact working mothers' social, emotional, psychological, and physical health, and as such is unsustainable. These findings demonstrate that to date, working mothers have not been able to find the right balance between work and family yet. This is especially true in the context of raising young children. Once children are older and less dependent on their parents, finding that balance becomes a little easier.

4.4 Intellectual Support

A third type of support is of intellectual nature, and refers to work-related advice. Many working women expressed to experience stress at work from time to time. Being able to talk about their problems at work and ask their husband for advice is important for many women. Hearing their husband's advice indeed makes them feel supported, understood, and respected.

If I am angry or upset with work or hurt by someone, he tells me to do such and such, say such and such, and speak to so and so. He is always interested in helping me. (M10)

However, such intellectual support is often lacking – especially in couples where the female partners does not feel that their husband support their decision to be working mother. In this case, women may indeed feel uncomfortable complaining or expressing negative emotions about their work as they would expect their husbands to abuse the situation and tell their wives to quit their job and just focus on their household and childcare responsibilities. To avoid such comments, these working mothers will be more inclined to not talk about their work with their husbands.

You must anticipate the things that he will consider as mistakes and use as reasons to prevent you from working. Working mothers are not appreciated by most husbands and any shortcoming on your part will be attributed to your work. (M9)

Another reason to not talk about work with their husband, and thus not receive intellectual support, is because some women assume their husband will not be able to relate. This is especially the case when the male partner works in a completely different industry or setting. In this situation the female partner may assume that their husband will not be interested in their wife's problems, or will not be able to give the advice they need. As such, they feel it is unnecessary to talk about work-related issues with them.

Even if I tell my husband that someone said such-and-such to me, he is not the type to ask why, and will turn the conversation to another direction ... and no matter how much I explain to him, he is still ignorant of what my work is. (M8)

4.5 Financial Support

Our results suggest a great shift in terms of the financial role of men in the household. With many women now working too, they are indeed becoming less financially dependent on their husbands. At the same time, working mothers like being more financially independent from their husband, a certain level of financial support is still expected and appreciated. A husband's financial support in the form of household and childcare supplies, money for groceries, and work-related financial support are indeed all well-perceived and appreciated by working women.

If I need to copy paper or buy things for work, he helps me and goes with me and buys for me. (M14)

On the other hand, our findings reveal that in couples where the husband is not supportive of their wife's working situation, financial support may be lacking. One explanation may be that female financial independence offends or unsettles some male spouses, and as a reaction they may decide that if she chooses to work, she should be completely independent. This translates into males who assume that additional financial contributions from the husband are unnecessary. Indeed, a husband may feel that since their wife is working, they should be able to take care of herself, the children, and the household.

These results have to be nuanced as most working mothers do feel financially supported by their husband. An interesting finding, though, is that some working mothers feel that their husband may misperceive financial support as exempting them from providing any other type of support. Although appreciated, our results suggest that financial support is the least 'needed' type of support and working women would prefer other types of support such as in the household or with parenting. This does not mean that financial contribution from the male partner is not needed – rather, it should be a given and not a substitute for other types of support.

4.6 Emotional Support

A final type of support is emotional support, and relates to confirming a working mother's self-image and capabilities. Specifically, this type of support can translate into non-work-related and work-related emotional support.

In terms of family-related emotional support, some working mothers appreciate a husband who confirms, once in a while, that they are good mothers, and who enforces respect from their children towards their mother. Working mothers generally raise two reasons for attaching importance to their husband's opinion and confirmation. First, some women feel that in a partnership, both partners should want and value each other's opinion on parenting. However, this does not automatically mean that everything the male partner says is automatically considered to

be true.

Of course, his opinion will have an impact because we live a life together, so his opinion matters. Sometimes he says things that I feel are true, and I realize that I really should devote more time to the children and pay more attention. At other times, I realize what he's saying is not 100% true and I'm sure of myself. I am a rational person; if the words are true, I can admit this and I will try to improve myself. (M17)

My husband is my partner and I care about his opinion, and he also cares about my opinion. (M7)

A second reason for wanting non-work-related emotional support relates to personal insecurities. With the difficulties of juggling between work and family responsibilities, some women may appreciate positive feedback from their husbands once in a while – especially at times when they are insecure about their parenting capabilities. In such cases, having a husband who tells them that they are a good mother, can increase their self-image and motivation.

His opinion is the most important thing. If I cannot prove to all the members of the household that I am a mother, I feel that I am a failure in my entire life because motherhood is more important than work. (M8)

Although for some women, family-related emotional support is important, others disagree and do not feel that they need this specific support from their husbands. Their rationale is that strong and independent working mothers should not rely on their husbands' opinions or compliments. Rather, a working mother should trust her own instincts and should be able to know herself whether she is being a good mother to her children and wife to her husband. The need for appraisal from their husband is, as such, viewed as a weakness.

If he told me that I am not a good mother, I would not care about his opinion, because I am sure I am a good mother. There is enough evidence around me that could confirm this. (M16)

In relation to work-related emotional support, we find that working mothers appreciate a husband who takes the role of personal motivator, or who actively celebrates with them when a milestone at work has been achieved. For example, most working mothers would appreciate their husbands congratulating them, telling them that they are proud of them, or even taking them out for dinner to celebrate together. Fortunately, most women say that they have experienced such support in the past.

He is a strong supporter, even when I feel that my productivity has decreased, and I get a feeling like escaping, that I do not want to work; frankly, he never accepts that, but he supports and motivates me. He says continue, and your productivity is more than that, so he always tries to motivate me to keep going. Such an attitude – even before marriage - was one of my most important conditions. (M3)

When something good at work has happened for me, he will celebrate with me, blesses me, rejoices over me, and goes to tell his family that he is proud of me; he will invite me to have dinner together at a restaurant. ... When I feel a sense of failure and remorse, I talk to him and he reinforces my image of myself, and he tells me, "You are doing everything you can!" (M11)

5. Discussion

This paper studied the role of spousal support for Saudi working mothers. While significant changes in Saudi society have led to easier access to career development opportunities for Saudi working mothers, a strong emphasis on the traditional motherhood discourse remains largely present. As a result, these women are continuously and consciously looking for ways to combine both roles to their best ability.

Generally, our findings suggest that working women are struggling with finding a healthy balance between work and family. The combination of societal expectations of motherhood and traditional gender norms make Saudi working mothers feel that they have to excel in both aspects. Our findings suggest a particularly relevant role reserved for spousal support. Such spousal support can translate into: (a) household support, (b) professional support, (c) childcare and parenting support, (d) intellectual support, (e) financial support, and (f) emotional support.

Society and gender norms still ascribe common household task such as preparing dinner or washing and ironing clothes predominantly to women. Recognizing that the female partner may not be able to complete all these tasks themselves, most dual-earning families employ a (female) maid to help out in the household. In many households, a husband may only offer to help out when these responsibilities become too much and the maid cannot help. Interestingly, this help would mostly relate to making or getting dinner ready. However, such household support is rather limited as in many families the male provider may assume that having a maid cancels

out the need for him to help out with the housekeeping. This is consistent with eastern cultures (Uddin, 2021; Dickson, 2020;) and does not agree with western cultures and Japan (Usdansky et al., 2016; Edlund & Öun, 2016; Matsui et al., 1995), where the husband helps more in the housework.

Our results suggest that successful working mothers heavily rely on what we call professional support from their husbands. Specifically, this translates into supporting their wives' current work status and future career aspirations, whether directly or indirectly. Active professional support can translate into a husband's flexibility and understanding of late working hours, active participation in work-related events, and encouragement in terms of further education and professional development.

Indirectly, professional support can translate into support in transportation, lowered traditional female expectations, and passive acceptance of their wives' decision to work. Logistical support predominantly refers to assistance with transportation. With driving being a relatively new activity for many Saudi women, working mothers indeed appreciate their husbands encouraging them to get their driver's license, or helping them with commuting to and from work by hiring a driver for them, or by driving them to and from their place of work themselves. In relation to passive acceptance, our findings suggest that a husband's acceptance of their wife working is crucial, because mutual understanding and acceptance of each other's values and life goals is considered to be the basic requirement of a successful marriage. In light of this finding, many mothers claim that they would have never considered working in the first place without their husband's approval. This indicates that working mothers attach great value to the approval of their spouses. To ensure such approval, we find that transparency is crucial. Indeed, our respondents feel that a woman who wants to pursue a professional career and has no intention of becoming a stay-at-home mother, should communicate this clearly and well in advance to her husband.

With reference to parenting and childcare, our findings suggest that these responsibilities are still predominantly ascribed to women. Because of this predominant societal association of parenting with motherhood, some fathers seem to feel that parenting is not part of their duties, and as such have a minimum involvement in childcare. In addition, seeing that their wife is doing a good job, can further fortify some father's assumption that their role in parenting and childcare can be kept to a minimum. Many eastern cultures tend to hold the belief that husbands should not heavily involved in childcare responsibilities (Uddin, 2021; Dickson, 2020). However, in western culture, spouses often share childcare responsibilities (Usdansky et al., 2016; Edlund & Öun, 2016).

In addition, many working women fortify this association as they too believe that mothers should carry more responsibility for raising children as compared to fathers. This mentality undeniably leads to self-inflicted stress on working women. While mothers and sisters often help out, many working mothers still put pressure on themselves to take as many of the parenting responsibilities as possible upon themselves. This suggests that working mothers feel a certain level of guilt and seem to indirectly stimulate traditional gender norms themselves.

Our results suggest that, at the moment, most working mothers are successful in combining the roles of employee and mother with minimum help from others. However, they admit that their current routine is unsustainable and is starting to negatively impact working mothers' social, emotional, psychological, and physical health. A stronger involvement of fathers may help working mothers to find a more sustainable work-life balance.

A third type of support is of intellectual nature, and refers to work-related advice. Hearing their husband's advice indeed makes them feel supported, understood, and respected. However, such intellectual support is often lacking – especially in couples where the female partners does not feel that their husband support their decision in being a working mother. In this case, women may indeed feel uncomfortable complaining or expressing negative emotions about their work as they would expect their husband to abuse the situation and tell their wife to quit their job and just focus on their household and childcare responsibilities. To avoid such comments, these working mothers will be more inclined to not talk about their work with their husband. Another reason to not talk about work with their husband, and thus not receive intellectual support, is because some women assume their husband will not be able to relate. As such, they feel it is unnecessary to talk about work-related issues with them.

Financial support is a less important type of support, as working mothers no longer have to rely on their husband's income. However, some level of financial support is still expected, particularly for household and childcare supplies, money for groceries, and work-related needs. We find that this support is missing in couples where the husband is not supportive of his wife's work situation. In this situation, the male spouse may feel offended or unsettled by the idea that his wife is creating a level of financial independence for themselves, and

they may act assuming that the husband's additional financial contributions are unnecessary. These results must be different, since most working mothers feel financially supported by their husbands.

Similarly, in the UAE (Dickson, 2020), Saudi working mothers feel that financial support is often misunderstood by their husbands as exempting them from providing any other type of support, which they find discouraging because other types of support, such as family or parenting, are more needed and appreciated in the Saudi context. However, this contrasts with studies conducted in the West, men and women share income equally, a model often referred to as a dual-earner family or a dual-earner/double-carer family, where the father participates more actively in raising children (Edlund & Öun, 2016).

A final type of support is emotional support, both family- and work-related. We find that in terms of family-related emotional support, some working mothers like to be reminded by their husband on a regular basis that they are good mothers. They find this valuable because in a partnership, both partners should want and value each other's opinion on parenting, and because such compliments may help with coping with personal insecurities. Interestingly, not all participants find emotional support important. Indeed, some feel that working mothers should trust her own instincts and that the need for an appraisal from their husbands is a weakness.

In relation to work-related emotional support, we find that working mothers appreciate a husband who takes the role of personal motivator, or who actively celebrates with them when a milestone at work has been achieved. For example, most working mothers would appreciate their husbands congratulating them, telling them that they are proud of them, or even taking them out for dinner to celebrate together. Fortunately, most women say that they have experienced such support in the past.

6. Conclusion

In sum, our results are novel and add to the scientific body of literature that studies work-life balance and social and cultural perceptions of female employment. The topic of spousal support for working mothers has not been studied yet in a Saudi context. These results offer a first overview of the types of support and their respective relevance to Saudi working mothers. However, more research is required to understand better the dynamics between husbands and working wives in a Middle Eastern context.

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