



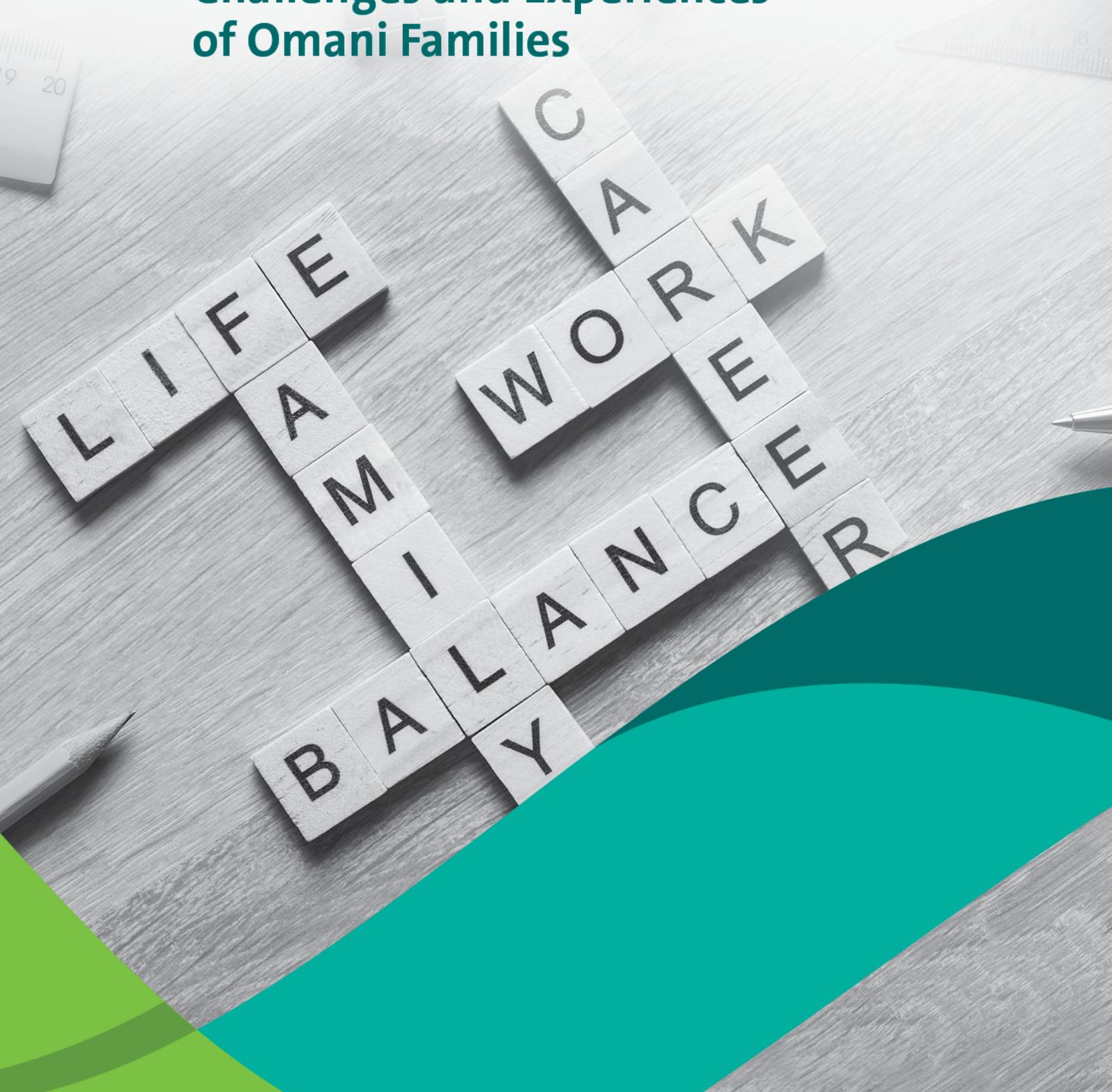
**DIFI**

معهد الدوحة الدولي للأسرة  
Doha International Family Institute  
البحوث لدعم السياسات الأسرية  
Research to advance family policies

عضو في مؤسسة قطر  
Member of Qatar Foundation

# Work-Family Balance:

## Challenges and Experiences of Omani Families



# WORK-FAMILY BALANCE: CHALLENGES AND EXPERIENCES OF OMANI FAMILIES



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## DOHA INTERNATIONAL FAMILY INSTITUTE

Doha International Family Institute (DIFI) is a global policy and advocacy Institute working to advance knowledge on Arab families and promote evidence-based policies at national, regional and international levels. DIFI is a member of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development (QF) and is an integral part of the Foundation's efforts to foster healthy, educated societies underpinned by strong cohesive families in Qatar and the region. DIFI has special consultative status with United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSCO).

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## FOREWORD

Since the 1980s, Oman has witnessed an unprecedented increase in economic growth and women's education, which has translated into some of the highest rates of Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) in the country. As this contribution of Omani women continues to expand, women are facing, besides men, a set of challenges to balance work and family life. The ability to strike a balance between work and family, and simultaneously maintain productivity at work and a healthy life is a dilemma in the region, with Oman as no exception.

This imbalance might also lead to family conflict, stress and strain due to many factors such as caregiving responsibilities, household commitments and taking care of the elderly. That is why it is important to conduct research in order to produce evidence-based work-family balance policies. Hence, we at DIFI started by producing this evidence in Qatar, and we published accordingly our research report on "Work Family Balance: Challenges, Experiences, and Implications for Families in Qatar." We worked with national stakeholders to advocate for policy development in this regard. Reaffirming our regional commitment, we are pleased to present to the readers our recent evidence in Oman, which has been conducted in collaboration with Sultan Qaboos University.

This qualitative study on work-family balance in Oman has enlightened the understanding of relevant implications for individual, family health and well-being, and besides acknowledging and addressing the challenges, we propose the solutions. The recommendations of the study will help to develop a sustainable national workforce who are exerting positive energies and commitments in work and family in Oman.

The findings of this research will help us and the Omani society to provide the needed evidence to the mentioned stakeholders, and work closely with them to improve the quality of family lives through exploring best practices, shaping evidence-based policies and intervention programs.

**Dr. Sharifa Noaman Al-Emadi**

**Executive Director**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oman has witnessed a comprehensive and rapid economic growth over the past decades. This has been accompanied by huge social developments. The educational achievement has contributed to significant rise in the participation of women in the labor force which made work-family balance a daunting task for Omani working adults, especially women. Similarly, it was reported that working women are the ones who are burdened and overloaded with household activities more than men. Women are devoted to more work in the house and non-paid responsibilities such as taking care of children and aging parents, and getting less assistance from their male supporters. All these factors affect work-family balance in particular for women who play a role in keeping the family happy and strong. That is why it is important to conduct evidence-based research on the topic of work-family balance and its effect in Omani society.

The objective of this study is to generate evidence-based knowledge to create policy related to work-family balance which will work towards the benefit of Omani families. To achieve this objective, a qualitative study was conducted that involved 52 married Omani working adults aged 24 to 48, all of whom were working full-time jobs. The participants, 25 males and 27 females, participated in either in-depth individual interviews or one of four focus groups that were conducted separately for females and males (two for each gender). The interviews were constructed to ask about the meaning of work-family balance among Omanis, to explain what the elements that build work-family balance or the lack thereof are, and gather information on what the benefit and value of policy-relevant work-family is that is supportive of working Omanis.

The data from these qualitative interviews tells a very clear story of work-family balance among Omanis. Their experience of work-family balance was uniformly described as **“a sense of peace and tranquility that enables an individual to focus on their responsibilities.”** Underlying this experience was the belief that work-family balance means that the individual is able to accommodate duties in both the work and family sphere without distraction. The **“ability to meet responsibilities”** was generally held to mean meeting requirements at work and within the family to the fullest extent, with a clear emphasis placed on **“trying to achieve”** as many responsibilities as possible and **“striving for”** qualitatively high standards in meeting those responsibilities.

The data also clearly conveys the preeminent importance of **“family”** in the term **“work-family balance,”** as meeting family responsibilities is undoubtedly the primary focus of working Omanis. The priority placed on family was most eloquently expressed when participants discussed the challenges for working parents. For most, it was exceedingly difficult to balance work and family, particularly for mothers. However, many participants also expressed the view that work-family balance could not truly be achieved unless you had children. Essentially, remaining childless was not a viable solution to achieving work-family balance because it was viewed as **“unnatural,”** thus childless individuals could never achieve work-family balance.

Work-family balance was commonly observed as something that is actively created. Both men and women expressed sentiments about the deliberate steps taken to achieve some semblance of work-family balance. These steps invariably required social interaction wherein a problem surfaced, and a potential solution was found and implemented by working with other family members (e.g., hiring a domestic servant) or a supervisor (e.g., being allowed to leave at a different time to accommodate one's commute). The data suggests that women need to work harder than men to achieve work-family balance. Working women's success in balancing work and family rests heavily on their supervisor's supportiveness, their ability to plan and coordinate with their spouse, or hire a domestic worker, and create new strategies for maintaining balance as they and their family transition into new life stages. There was a notable absence of any discussion of formal policies that help Omanis achieve work-family balance, either at the level of the workplace or as national initiatives.

Collectively, the findings of this study propose that the term **“work-family balance”** is translated differently in Omanis' lives, primarily because of the unequalled position of family in daily life. Be that as it may, most working Omanis view work-family balance as meaning that they meet their responsibilities to family members and individuals in the workplace such as supervisors and coworkers. When this is possible, it produces a sense of focus, tranquility, and peace. Omanis actively seek and construct frameworks for achieving work-family balance, particularly after major life transitions like marriage and having a child. These frameworks involve social interactions with the work and family spheres and others, primarily to modify expectations but also to create solutions that are acceptable and agreed upon by all parties. Women, in particular, shoulder the responsibility of constructing frameworks for achieving work-family balance. Finally, the lack of any discussion about policy supports provided by private employers or governmental agencies suggests that Omani families are attempting to achieve work-family balance without such support. Given Oman's rapidly changing economy that entails long-term physical separation from one's family due to job assignments, several policy-related recommendations are provided to support Omani families.

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an introduction to Work-Family Balance (WFB) and its relevance and implications for Oman. It elaborates on the social, economic, legal and institutional contexts related to work-family balance.

## 1.1. Work-Family Balance

Work-family balance is acknowledged by institutions across developed countries as a solution for captivating key talent in the workforce (Kossek et al., 2014; Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2006). Employee awareness about the unfavorable outcomes that resulted from work-family balance such as family issues and stress led to more research and discussion worldwide (Hill et al., 2004; Kossek et al., 2014).

On one hand there are countries such as Singapore and Germany, who were concerned about work-family balance as it seemed to be connected to decline in fertility and population issues, on the other hand, countries, like the United States and Australia, are worried about the implication on health due to poor work-family balance.

Arguments by institutions and government on work-family balance entail huge differences in how it is defined. However, discussion of the views on the meaning of work-family balance is still scientifically valuable. Institutions try to work for the benefit of human beings, but research sometimes reveals confusing results, which in return creates obstacles to implementing policies that help in supporting the diverse needs of working families.

There is a tremendous gap in cross-cultural attention to the concept of work-family balance to develop policy recommendations. For instance, research conducted on work-family balance in the Arab countries is not done (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018).

Few studies were conducted on work-family balance in the Gulf countries, for example, in the UAE and the Sultanate of Oman, where the focus was on the effect of poor work-family balance on family relations and dynamics, and work productivity. These paid special emphasis to its impact on women's lives in relation to the different sectors they were employed in, given the substantial increase in women's labor force participation that has given rise to new challenges for families and family life (Ghafar, 2013). This explains why the studies on work-family balance in the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman have highlighted mainly the subject from the point of view of employed women.

The first study by Agha et al. (2017) explored the different models and tools that can be used to measure and understand higher education teachers' level of work-life balance and job gratification, both in private and public institutions. The study stressed the relationship between work-life balance, teaching gratification and job gratification. The results showed that the interference of personal life with work and vice versa affected job satisfaction negatively, which can lead to increased

absenteeism and employee turnover. Therefore, organizations have an important role to play in helping employees reach work and personal life balance through initiating and establishing policies that allow for work-life balance. Although the study does not discuss in detail the results of the respondents' views, it sets the grounds for further research on the topic in Oman.

The second study by Belwal S. and Belwal R. (2014) explored those in higher management roles in government, public, and private sector institutions, and their views on the challenges of attaining Work-life Balance (WLB) that impact their Quality of Work life (QWL). There was collective agreement by respondents that all sectors lack **“clear-cut Family Friendly Policy (FFP),”** despite some provisions in the Omani labor law. The impact of having FFP and healthy workplace practices will contribute to WLB, as respondents suggested that it is divided accountability by the employee and the employer.

In comparing Oman to the United Arab Emirates, its closest neighboring Gulf country that shares lots of similar social characteristics yet different economies, one can find that working women mostly face the same struggles and challenges. Forster et al. (2014) conducted a study that assessed the work-life balance (WLB) of Emirati women working in different sectors. It highlighted their coping mechanisms with the demands of both work and family obligations, given the impact of the imbalance on job performance, family and wellbeing. Just like in Oman, the public sector seems to be more appealing to Emirati women as they make up 66% of the workforce. The public sector offers **“the best public-sector pay rates and benefits in the world, short working hours and generous holiday entitlements (compared to the private sector), and working environments that respect local women and their religious/cultural values”** (Forster et al., 2014).

The results showed that women working in the private sector struggle more to attain WLB due to higher workloads, extended working hours and shorter holidays (Forster et al., 2014). Women working in both sectors need to rely on extra help from extended family members, nannies or servants to care for their children and family. Implementing policies, such as extended maternity leaves and flexible working hours, are thought to contribute to better WLB by women working in the private sector (Forster et al., 2014). The researchers argue that the U.A.E. will have to diversify its economy through enhancing the private sector, which will require companies and organizations to implement some policies that support work-life balance to encourage more women to join (Forster et al., 2014).

The following study by DIFI adds to the existing body of literature by including the perspective of not only women but also men working in the public sector. The next section will describe the situational context of Oman in terms of social, economic, legal and institutional contexts.

## 1.2. Oman Context

### 1.2.1. Social context

The Sultanate of Oman is situated on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula with a population of 4.6 million people according to the 2018 census (National Centre for Statistics & Information, 2019), out of which 2.6 million (58.10%) are Omanis and 1.9 million (41.90%) are expatriates (National Centre for Statistics & Information, 2020). Oman is considered to have one of the highest birth rates among the countries in the Gulf with life expectancy averages of about 77 years (National Centre for Statistics & Information, 2019). The infant mortality rate is decreasing, and almost half of the population is under the age of 30 (Peterson et al., 2020).

Culturally, Oman is distinct from the rest of the Arab world in several ways including its social organization, which is situated historically within Arab tribalism along with approximately 250 years of nearly consistent rule by one family dynasty, and a prevalence of Ibadhi Islam (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007). However, it **shares some of the characteristics of many Arab countries: it is characterized by “kin-based patrilineal extended families, male domination, early marriage, preference for sons, restrictive codes of behavior for women, and the association of family honor with female virtue”** (Offenhauer, 2005). Also, there is a general wave and change in the family structure with the likelihood of living in nuclear families rather than as an extended family increasing (Offenhauer, 2005). Given such patriarchal nature of the society and male dominance, traditional gender roles are more likely to prevail, dictated by **“coded and unwritten social norms”** (Belwal S. & Belwal R., 2014), limiting women to the private sphere of family and other traditional jobs (Moghadam, 2013). However, the aspirations of the government to achieve its developmental goals through economic reforms required promoting education for both genders, which resulted in changes to traditional norms and gender roles.

Education was a key factor in achieving the goal of a qualified and skilled Omani labor force, the number of schools in Oman tripled between 1980 and 2003, and there was more than a fivefold expansion in the number of students in schools across all regions of the country during this time, such that the proportion of girls in school was brought nearly in line with that of boys (Rassekh, 2004).

Increased educational opportunities for women produced a substantial increase in women's employment. In 1993, only 6% of females aged 15 or older were employed or looking for a job, while by 2010, 15% of females in the same age group were employed and another 10% were on the job market (Al-lawatia, 2011). Al-lawatia estimates the number of women working in the civil service and public sector as 42.3% out of the total percentage of Omanis in these sectors, which was 89% in 2009 (Al-lawatia, 2011). While, in the private sector, which is the main employer of the Omani labor force, only 19% of the total number of Omanis were found to be women in 2009 (Al-lawatia, 2011). In 2014, the total number of Omani women in the workforce had reached 55% of the total workforce (Belwal & Belwal, 2014).

This can be explained by the impact of the oil economy on the patterns of women's

employment in the private sector. Moghadam (2013) argues that such an economy is both **“male-intensive and capital-intensive,”** and the number of employed workers is low. In addition, given the high revenues of the exported oil, states are not highly motivated to **“diversify the economy,”** which can create more **“labor-intensive”** opportunities, such as **“export-led manufacturing that favors female employment”** (Moghadam, 2013). Moreover, the high wages of male workers in the oil industry that are enough to finance an entire household, might diminish the need for women to provide the household with extra income through employment (Moghadam, 2013).

In a study conducted by Kardasheh et al. (2017), to understand the attitudes of the Omani society towards some employment patterns for women, the results revealed that the society still prefers jobs that do not allow women to be in a mixed environment (i.e., with men), and increased chances of interaction with men. This in turn led to increased numbers of women choosing jobs in the education or medical fields. Yet, as people became more educated, their opposition to women choosing other professions in the banking sector and media became less. These kinds of attitudes have paved the way for gender discrimination, as Al-Shaibany (2013) has indicated, which limits women from opportunities in assuming high managerial jobs in the private and public sectors. However, it is of importance to mention that new trends have started to emerge as women’s labor participation has increased. Thus, women’s contribution in the social, economic and political domains have become more welcomed and valued.

Each of these characteristics, along with the rapid economic expansion, create new challenges to work and family life. As in other Arab Gulf countries, the world of **“work”** exploded in Oman with the discovery of vast oil and gas reserves, as well as the subsequent and rapid expansion of national wealth. The tribal structure found within the Arab culture, which frequently revolves around shared ancestors and familial (oftentimes patrilineal, or fatherly) lines, traditionally places family at the center of society. This reality and the distinct gender roles for parents, coupled with tendencies towards male dominance, particularly in public spheres like work, come together to create a unique context for exploring the dynamics of work-family balance.

Thus, the similarities and differences of Oman makes it an interesting place for studying work-family balance in comparison to Western societies. Given its strong economy, that is increasing its reliance on women, Oman represents a suitable example for understanding work-family balance in comparison with Western cultures. However, stemming from the potential differences that it exhibits in the field of **“family”** and broader cultural values such as collectivism and gender egalitarianism, which follow the Arab culture and Islamic beliefs more broadly, Oman also has some similarity to Western societies for exploring this concept. Most importantly, the basic meaning of **“work”** and **“family”** — as separate spheres or means to an end — as well as **“acceptable”** divisions of labor by gender and expected behaviors for women and men, are used to be the basis for understanding work-family balance.

### 1.2.2. Economic context

Oman provides an interesting and compelling comparative context for understanding work-family balance. As outlined by Al-Barwani and Albeely (2007) and others (e.g., Al Khaduri, 2007; Al’Omairi & Amzat, 2012; Chatty, 2000; Ghafar, 2013), Oman is a country, which is going through rapid social and economic development. It shifted its economy, that was heavily dependent on traditional commerce activities such as agriculture, fishing prior to 1970, to an oil economy (Aycan et al., 2007). This was among the initiatives undertaken by the government to modernize the country, while still remaining loyal to their core cultural values, as harbingers of substantial change (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007). The requirements of the new economy in terms of **“advanced technical and professional expertise and manual labor”** demanded the reliance on expatriate workers (Aycan et al., 2007).

However, as oil prices faced significant fall by 1980, the Omani government took steps to limit the dependence on expats and increase the number of skilled Omani manpower through the adoption of **“Omanization Policy”** as part of Oman’s **“Vision 2020”** (Aycan et al., 2007). This is a long-term development program that **“seeks to advance privatization and free market policies, and to develop Oman’s human resources, upgrading skills and education as an engine for growth”** (Aycan et al., 2007). Thus, achieving sustainable development would depend on private initiatives, national workforce and renewable resources (Education Council-Oman, 2018).

In 2012, Oman reconsidered its priorities to keep up with its ambitions of economic diversification, through establishing the Supreme Council for Planning, that develops strategies and policies, which drive the sustainable development (National Strategy for Education, Education Council-Oman 2018). This in turn dictated changes in the composition of the population in Oman during all of these economic shifts.

As a result of the economic liberalization and Omanization, the national budget started to depend less on oil revenues and the Omani labor force became dominant in the public sector such as banking, finance and hospitality (Aycan et al., 2007). According to the latest statistics from 2018, the percentage of Omanis working in the government sector reached 84%, a total number of 195,810 (of which 113,592 are male and 82,218 are female) in comparison to 15.5% of expatriates with a total number of 35,783 expatriates (of which 22,539 are male and 13,244 are female) (National Center for Statistics & Information, 2019), while in the private and family sector, expatriates continued to be dominant (Aycan et al., 2007). Recent statistics show that the percentage of expatriates working in the family and private sector reached 87.3%, with a total number of 1,729,713 expatriates (1,531,790 male, 198,004 female) as opposed to only 12.7% of Omanis, with a total number of 252,132 Omanis (187,090 male, 65,042 female) (National Center for Statistics & Information, 2019).

It is of value to present the international conventions related to labor and Oman’s stances, to see whether they are reflected in the laws related to human capital in the government and private sectors in Oman.

### 1.2.3. International conventions

This section sheds light on four conventions declared by the International Labor Organization (ILO) related to regulating labor affairs, which have an impact on balance between work and family responsibilities. These are: Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (1981, No. 156), Maternity Protection Convention (2000, No 183), Holiday with Pays Convention (1970, No 132) and Part-Time Work Convention (1994, No 17). The section discusses Oman's stance on them and the status of ratification, in order to assess if the essence of the conventions is reflected in any of the Omani laws of the public and private sectors.

#### a) Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156)

This convention includes a number of provisions that aim at helping workers achieve work-family balance. For example, article (3) states: **“With a view to creating effective equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women workers, each member shall make it an aim of national policy to enable persons with family responsibilities who are engaged or wish to engage in employment to exercise their right to do so without being subject to discrimination and, to the extent possible, without conflict between their employment and family responsibilities.”** Through article (4), the convention stresses that all measures put in place are there to **“(a) enable workers with family responsibilities to exercise their right to free choice of employment; and (b) to take account of their needs in terms and conditions of employment and social security.”** It also calls for taking the necessary measures in article (5) to develop the community's public and private services such as: child care, and family services and facilities. Article (7) states that employees with family responsibilities are able to become and remain employed, and also able to resume their employment after absence because of such responsibilities. In addition, article (8) states that family responsibilities should not **“constitute valid reason for the termination of employment”** (ILO, 1981:2–4).

#### b) Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183). Convention concerning the revision of the Maternity Protection Convention (Revised), 1952.

This convention states a number of measures related to maternity, including leaves, cash benefits, and general provisions to ensure women's ability to continue being in the workforce and not being discriminated against due to such conditions. According to article (3) pregnant or breastfeeding women are not obliged to perform any task or job that might impose any risk on the mother's or the child's health. Article (4) ensures that women are entitled to no less than 14 weeks of maternity leave. The convention also grants women leave in case of illness or complications arising out of pregnancy and childbirth, which can be provided before or after the maternity leave period (article 5). Women who are granted any of the previously mentioned leaves should be provided with cash benefits, which are aimed at helping a woman to **“maintain herself and her child in proper conditions of health and with a suitable standard of living”** (article 6.2). The amount of the benefit should not be less than two-thirds of her previous earnings (article 6.3). In addition, women are entitled to receiving medical benefits, which include: prenatal, childbirth and postnatal care,

and hospitalization when necessary (article 6.7). Article (8) highlights the right of a woman to return to her position or an equivalent position at work after the end of maternity leave, and the inadmissibility of the termination of her employment during her pregnancy or absence on leave mentioned in articles (4) and (5). Article (10) stresses on the right of women to full paid daily breaks or daily reduced working hours for breastfeeding her child (ILO, 1952:2–4).

#### **c) Holidays with Pay Convention (Revised), 1970 (No. 132)**

This convention states all necessary arrangements and measures in regard to paid annual leave. For instance, article (3) states that every worker is entitled to an annual paid holiday that is not less than three working weeks for one year of service. A worker should receive his full or average remuneration for the full period of his holiday (ILO: 1970:3).

#### **d) Part-Time Work Convention, 1994 (No. 175)**

The articles of this convention numbers (5), (6) and (7) ensure that part-time workers are not subject to discrimination in comparison to full-time workers in terms of wage calculation, statutory social security schemes based on occupational activity, and all measures related to maternity protection, condition of termination of employment, and types of leaves. In addition, workers should be granted the right to transfer from full-time to part-time work and vice-versa (article 10) (ILO, 1994:2-3).

The Sultanate of Oman along with all other GCC countries have not ratified any of the conventions except for Kuwait that ratified only Holidays with Pay Convention, 1936 (No. 52) but not the revised version for the year of 1970 (No. 132) (Aref & Kahlout, 2015). However, some of the articles listed above are reflected in some provisions of the Civil Service Law and Labor Law of Oman.

#### **1.2.3.1. Revision of Omani laws in light of international conventions**

The Civil Service Law regulates the state administrative apparatus of the Sultanate. The articles address both male and female employees, and some special leaves are granted for certain circumstances. Female employees are granted leaves such as pre and postnatal leave with full pay for a period that does not exceed 50 days for up to five times during her employment period (article 80). She is entitled also for up to a year of special unpaid leave to care for her child (article 81). A male employee is entitled to a student escort leave, where he can escort his wife for a scholarship or training course outside of Oman (article 82). Both male and female employees are entitled to a fully paid patient escort leave of no more than 15 days, subject to extension for no more than 30 days based on a managerial decision (article 84) (Oman Civil Service Law, 2004).

The Omani Labor Law of 2003 regulates the private sector, just like the civil service law, and employees from both genders are granted different types of leaves. Examples of these leaves: A paid leave for a minimum of 30 days upon the completion of 6 months of their employment, a 6-day emergency leave once a year, employees are entitled to their annual leave allowance and they have to take at least a two-week annual leave every two years, national holidays and weekends are

excluded from the annual leave days, employees are entitled to 10-week sick leave per year; the first two weeks are fully-paid; week 3 and 4 with three-quarters of the comprehensive pay, week 5 and 6 with half of the comprehensive pay and weeks 7–10 with only a quarter of the comprehensive pay. Employees are entitled to special leave in the following six cases: first, 3 days for marriage only once per employment; 3 days bereavement (death of first degree relative); 2 days bereavement (for uncles/aunts' death); 15 days for pilgrimage granted once per employment after at least a complete year in the job; 15 days for exams for Omani employees; and 130 days for a Muslim female whose husband dies (Oman Labor Law, 2012).

Moreover, chapter 2 of section 5 in the Omani Labor Law is dedicated to regulating the employment of women, article 80 through 86 (Oman Labor Law, 2012). Of importance is to highlight some of these articles which set important regulations for women. Article (81) regulates the working hours as women are not required to work in late night shifts between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. Women are also not required to undertake jobs that might impose any physical risk or harm to them (article 82). Female employees are entitled to a special full-paid 50-day maternity leave, which covers the period before and after delivery, for no more than three times during her employment period per employer (article 83). The law also ensures that pregnant women will not lose their jobs in case of emergency absences due to illness attributed to pregnancy or delivery or that she cannot resume work, for a total period of absence that does not exceed six months (article 84). Employers are required to keep a handy copy of the regulations of employment of women so that all women are aware of their rights.

Upon the revision of the international conventions and the Omani laws for both private and public sector, it can be noted that:

- In terms of maternity leave, both sectors did not set the minimum of 14 weeks as per the maternity protection convention (2000), where a woman is only entitled to full-paid 50 days of maternity leave. It is worth noting that some restrictions are imposed on the right to maternity leave for working women (Aref & Kahlout, 2015), where women are entitled to such leave up to five times only during her service time in the public sector and only three times in the private sector. In both sectors, a woman's right to maternity leave does not affect her right to her other leaves. Women who are working are entitled to an unpaid leave due to illness during or after her pregnancy for up to 6 months in the private sector (Aref & Kahlout, 2015). The laws in both sectors ensure that employers do not terminate the employment of any working women due to her marriage, maternity leave or sick leave because of pregnancy or delivery (Aref & Kahlout, 2015). Moreover, both sectors do not grant male employees paternity leave (Aref & Kahlout, 2015).
- As for child care arrangements, both laws of private and public sector did not mention granting mothers breastfeeding hours, as in breaks or reduced working hours. The laws also did not include any articles to require employers to open nurseries in the workplace. Women employed in the public sector are granted an unpaid child care leave for up to one year. However, in order to be entitled to this leave, a woman should not be a contract employee and should apply for it

within a year of the end of her maternity leave. In addition, there is no special leave granted in both sectors for women to take care of children with disability (Aref & Kahlout, 2015).

- In terms of flexible work arrangements such as flexible working hours, unpaid leaves and patient escort leave, it is found that only the private sector grants an employee — who is not a contract employee — a paid patient escort leave for up to 30 days, and any further extension is taken from the employee's annual leave or it is counted as unpaid leave.

Taking into account the national context is an important determinant to work-family balance policies provided in any country. Given Oman's new model which focuses on privatization, WFB provisions and policies will have to consider the needs of not only the employee, but also the employer. The private sector requires certain regulations guaranteed by the state to help it sustain and support its production cycles. From the employers' perspective, it could be that implementing generous WFB policies might hinder the productivity of the sector. However, limitations in WFB policies can impact the well-being of the family and participation of Omanis in the labor market.

#### **1.2.4. Institutional setup**

In order to achieve and implement these laws and regulations, there have to be governmental bodies that undertake this role. In the Sultanate of Oman, the Ministry of Social Development (MOSD) is the main governmental body responsible for overseeing and regulating all matters related to individuals and families, through providing different services and playing different roles. MOSD develops plans and programs for the social welfare of individuals and families. It provides adequate financial assistance and work on improving the condition of families who receive social security benefits. It works towards building women's capacities and developing their potential in favor of the family and the society. It is responsible for child and motherhood care and improving the provided services for them. It provides training and rehabilitation for people with special needs and works towards their social inclusion. It also conducts studies and research on social matters. It supervises NGOs' work and activities. MOSD has a dedicated directorate for family which is the General Directorate of Family Development. It oversees six units, which are: Family Counseling Unit, Child Affairs Unit, Woman Affairs Unit, Family Development and Empowerment Unit, Family Protection Unit and Child Care Center (Omanportal, 2019).

In 2007, a Sultanate Decree was issued (number 12) to establish the National Committee for Family Affairs (NCFA). Its membership consists of eight official bodies which are: Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Information, Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Royal Oman Police, Oman Public Prosecution and Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The scope of work of the NCFA involves: 1) Proposing public policies and programs for family care in various social, health and cultural fields and following up their implementation in coordination with the competent authorities. 2) Coordination between the efforts of official and voluntary bodies that work in family affairs. 3) Encouraging studies and research related to family. 4) Following up and implementing decisions and

recommendations of international and regional meetings and conferences related to family issues. 5) Providing an opinion on the relevant conventions. 6) Cooperation with other Arab and international committees, councils and organizations concerned with the family. 7) Proposing and managing financial resources to finance programs for the family. 7) Adoption of internal decisions and regulations related to the work system (Sultanate Decree, 2007). As there is no official website for the NCFA other than a verified twitter account where media coverage of NCFA's, campaigns, meetings and activities are published, the actual impact of the NCFA on work-family balance or family friendly policies is not documented or measured through any formal literature.

## CHAPTER TWO: OBJECTIVES AND FRAMEWORK

This chapter will explain the main objectives, theoretical framework, methodology followed and limitations of the study.

### 2.1. Objectives

The objective of this study is to build a foundation to understand what is work and family life among Omani families. To establish this objective, we undertook a qualitative, exploratory study of Omani adults by conducting in-depth interviews with Omani working men and women at various stages of life. The main focus of getting qualitative data was to formulate an understanding of what the experience of work-family among Omanis is. We aimed to understand the meaning of work-family balance and their experiences of it in their own words. The study was intended to address four fundamental research questions:

1. What is the meaning of work-family balance in the eyes of Omani working adults?
2. What is the process that they undertake in their pursuit of work-family balance?
3. Are some challenges more salient for Omani women who are working to pursue work-family balance?
4. What role does public policy play in supporting work-family balance among Omani working adults?

### 2.2. Theoretical Foundation of Work-Family Balance

Work-family balance is defined by different scholars from different perspectives; Frone (2003) explained, **“Work-family balance is defined as the combination of low work-family conflict and high work-family enhancement”** (Frone, 2003, p. 143–144).

Greenhaus et al. (2003) looked at work family balance from the perspective of **“those individuals who devote a substantial amount of time to their combined work and family roles and distribute this substantial time equally between the two roles exhibit positive time balance”** (Greenhaus et al., 2003, p. 515).

Voydanoff suggested **“work-family balance as a status wherein both work and family demands are met by resources available through the work and family domains”** (Voydanoff, 2005, p. 825). Valcour (2007) suggested work-family balance can be looked at as **“an overall level of contentment resulting from an assessment of one’s degree of success at meeting work and family role demands”** (Valcour, 2007, p. 1512).

In addition, the conceptualization of work-family balance can be looked at from the daily course of the family life. The concept of work-family balance is a changing

concept depending on different factors, for example it can range from regular factors such as work, to the irregular such as family matters, to the unpredictable such as unexpected situations of sickness or illness. In addition to the above, individuals either by themselves or jointly with their partners are usually involved in developing work-family balance. This is done either through life management activities, for example, cooking for a whole week, discussion of work schedule between the individual and supervisor or between the spouse and worker in order to secure a more flexible schedule (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007).

There is one definition that explains work family balance is achieved by the individual and defined as the **“accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his or her role-related partners in the work and family domains”** (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007, p. 458). This definition explains balance as a procedure to share and negotiate expectations with the individuals concerned and related to everyday activities, and it is more applicable to Western societies. The use of this definition in the context of Oman would give more insights of this theory of work-family balance.

## 2.3. Methodology

The research team contacted the participants after securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from Sultan Qaboos University, the participants were all working adults in Oman. The research team conducted 15 semi-structured interviews ranging from 35 to 90 minutes each in duration. The majority of interviews were tape-recorded after taking permission from the participant and transcribed verbatim. Some participants refused for the interview to be tape-recorded so notes were taken by the interviewer. The average length of each interview was one hour.

In addition, four focus group discussions were conducted, involving two groups of males consisting of nine participants in each group, and two groups of females, one group consisting of 10 participants and the second group of nine participants. The age range was from 26 to 48 years, and there was a diversity in educational backgrounds, ranging from secondary school to higher degrees.

The participants, after they signed the consent form, were asked demographic questions. Other questions were related to the meaning of work-family balance and their experiences; the causes that led to the imbalance; what they thought of work-family balance in relation to policies such as maternity leave, paternity leave, on-site facilities, flexible time at work. Probing was used to get additional information while conducting the interviews.

### 2.3.1. Sample

The sample included 52 married Omani working adults, 25 males and 27 females, employed full-time. The age of the participants was from 24 to 48 years. Most participants (n=31, or 59%) held a bachelor's degree, while 5.7% and 9.6% held a graduate degree (e.g., PhD or master's) or a high school diploma, respectively. The

age of the children ranged from one month to 32 years, with an average of three children per family. All participants were employed in the public sector, in different occupations such as administrators, prosecutors, aviators, clerks, treasurers, mechanics, and faculty in academia.

### **2.3.2. Procedures**

The procedure that was followed in this study was using MAXQDA 2018 for analyzing the interviews. Grounded theory approach was the approach that was used in analyzing the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Grounded theory was used because there was lack of information in certain areas and its relationships with others which was important to be identified in order to understand the meaning of work-family balance.

The term **“work-family balance”** was developed as an open code. This code included what the meaning of work, family, work-family balance, participant experience on work-family balance and imbalance was. Each transcript was alone coded by a primary and a secondary coder, and any discrepancies that emerged were discussed with a third party who was involved in the study. The themes were developed using theoretical coding approach. This was done by joining the codes taking into consideration the comparison and cross comparison among the codes. After the final stage of the coding was selected, themes were developed to form a theoretical framework. This framework detailed how participants described what they mean by work-family balance, how it is fulfilled, what makes it an ideal goal and to strike a balance.

## **2.4. Limitations**

This study has some limitations because of the scarcity of literature on work-family balance in Oman and our inability to collect quantitative data on this topic. In addition, our team had difficulty in recruiting participants for the interviews. Another limitation was that the scope of this study was limited to the public sector in Oman. Finally, yet importantly, was the limited timeframe of the study.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS AND MAIN THEMES

In this section, we discuss the analysis of the data that revealed the main themes that emerged from the responses, which explained how work-family balance among the Omani population is experienced and performed according to their understanding of the term work-family balance.

### 3.1. Unimpeded Focus: Work-Family Balance Manifested

Different themes such as work focus, work dispersion and child rearing disruptions appeared to be issues that affect the achievement of work-family balance, as will be discussed in the sections below.

#### 3.1.1. Work focus

The manifestation of work-family balance was uniformly described as **“a sense of peace and tranquility that enables an individual to focus on their responsibilities.”** Regarding the workplace, participants explicitly mentioned their ability to focus, and what they saw as the natural by-products of that focus. For example, when asked to describe a recent experience of achieving work-family balance, one woman reported, **“I was able to perform my work without thinking about my issues at home,”** while another woman in the same focus group commented, **“There was creativity at work and patience with challenges.”** Another woman reported, **“There was no stress or issues, and I focused on improving my performance and consequences.”**

By contrast, in the home and with the family, emphasis on the individual’s ability to focus was less pronounced but nonetheless evident. For example, when asked to describe a recent experience of achieving work-family balance, one man reported, **“As for my family, there is an established time for me to come back from work and after that, I am with my family taking care of their needs.”** Two women also reported parallel sentiments, with one reporting, **“There were few problems and there was a noticeable interest in [performing] home duties,”** while another woman reported, **“I would go home with love, work hard to fulfill my family’s needs and feel happy and satisfied.”**

#### 3.1.2. Work dispersions

Conversely, when asked to describe a recent experience when work and family were out of balance, the majority expressed a sense of distraction or the inability to focus on the responsibilities at hand. For example, one man commented, **“There wasn’t enough time for work and it kept piling up and I was under stress at home because I was thinking about how my work was piling up,”** while similarly one woman reported, **“My performance and deliverance of work tasks was poor; this entailed being questioned and having to answer to my manager.”**

Across these descriptions of the experience of work-family balance was the idea of undistracted focus on the responsibilities at hand, regardless of whether it was

work- or family-related. Essentially, family is the focus while at home, but work is the focus while on the job. This focus was characterized both as a sense of peace and as an awareness of what needed to be accomplished or completed in the immediate context. Notably, that awareness was not accompanied by a sense of obligation or feeling overwhelmed; rather, there was an interest, perhaps even a desire, to pursue this need. By contrast, experiences of poor work-family balance or being out of balance were typically described in terms of feeling judged, overwhelmed, starved for time, and perhaps inadequacy at meeting the expectations of others.

### 3.1.3. Child rearing disruptions

Interestingly, the **“sense of peace and tranquility”** that accompanies work-family balance is not equivalent to the absence of demand and possibly even hardship. This issue became particularly striking when participants considered the role of childbearing and child-rearing in the individual capacity to accomplish work-family balance. There was near-uniform agreement that having children makes achieving and maintaining work-family balance more difficult. This difficulty was characterized in a variety of ways, including the requisite demands of children, particularly young ones, and how this impedes effectiveness at work. For example, one man said, **“Without a doubt, a person cannot perform his duties in the best manner if he is overshadowed by the family stress related to having children.”** One woman fully elaborated the demands of parenting, particularly a newborn, when she said:

**Yes, because we know that a newborn child needs a great deal of care, a very great deal, and I might request permission a lot from work in order to take care of him and to take him to follow-up visits at the hospital and things.**

Others expressed the demands of child-rearing in terms of the disruptions that eventually made their way into everyday life via children. Some disruptions took the form of unplanned contingencies like a child becoming ill, as when one man identified **“... repeated requests from home and the illness of my children”** as the cause of a recent experience of poor work-family balance. Other disruptions resulted from children’s developmental changes that could be anticipated but not avoided, as well as the consequences — albeit presumably unintended consequences — of personal decisions. The role of developmental changes and personal decisions was expressed directly by one woman who identified **“letting go of a domestic servant and the children entering school along with an increase in workload”** as the cause of a recent bout of poor work-family balance.

Despite the obvious belief that parenting is demanding, there was a wide heterogeneity in the way that participants conceptualized whether or not these demands impeded work-family balance. The origins of this heterogeneity ultimately lie in clearly expressed sentiments about the preeminence of family, particularly parenting, in the lives of Omani people, and the role of work — or perhaps, more precisely, the ability to earn a living — in supporting the preeminent position of family. First, illustrating the preeminence of family, particularly parenting, and its importance for a good life, one Omani man stated:

**Life is not only work, but it has many facets, and a person who decides not to have children is an imbalanced person and doesn't have the ability to balance different things. This [referring to having children] is a natural part of life and must be.**

Other participants expressed similar sentiments. A male participant said, **“The decision [to remain childless] prevents [people] from achieving balance because it disrupts the natural way of life and God’s creation”**; and a female participant said, **“This [remaining childless] is proof that the person is not able to balance between family and work in the future, and it is the wrong decision.”**

Although the role of work in supporting the preeminence of family was expressed throughout the interviews, as will be elaborated more fully below when the data is utilized to arrive at a basic definition of work-family balance according to Omanis, it was most succinctly stated by a woman who noted:

**It is a matter of trying to achieve work-family balance as much as possible so that you endeavor to reach the highest level of balance in both [work and family]; balancing work is about the individual’s dedication to perform their work and their ability to complete it in the best manner so [emphasis added] in return s/he can meet the expectations of their family.**

The key idea illustrated by this quote is expressed by a small, almost imperceptible, word — **“so.”** This simple word conveys the motivation for the **“dedication to perform their work”**: **“so that”** the worker is able to meet the expectations and presumably the needs of her family. This core idea indicates that, at least for this woman, paid employment is not an impediment to work-family balance, but rather an essential means to achieving work-family balance.

## **3.2. The Concept of Work-Family Balance: Understanding and Meaning**

### **3.2.1. Meaning of work-family balance**

Study participants had a very clear understanding of work-family balance, with it meaning taking care of both work and family, and thus giving both work and family their appropriate due, so that neither is neglected nor compromised. As one male focus group participant commented, **“There has to be balance and you must give each one its due,”** and another male participant thoughtfully elaborated, **“Balance means adjusting and taking care of both sides, work and family, in regards to one’s life and daily practices so that one does not take precedence over the other.”**

Opinions differed regarding the degree to which work and family responsibilities need to be met. Most participants noted that work-family balance means meeting

the requirements at work and family to the fullest extent. Seemingly aware of the theoretical possibility that an individual can always “do better” in either work or family life, a clear emphasis was placed on the individual trying to fulfill as many responsibilities as possible and striving for comparatively high standards in meeting those responsibilities. As one woman commented, **“Balance means that you try, as much as you can, to meet work requirements and family requirements at a high rate so that one doesn’t overwhelm the other.”** Similarly, others commented that **“what is important is to perform your duties for each to the fullest,”** and **“it is a matter of trying to achieve work-family balance as much as possible so that you endeavor to reach the highest level of balance in both ....”**

In contrast to most participants, who believed that work and family responsibilities needed to be well-achieved or to high standards, there was a noteworthy minority who held more tempered thoughts on the matter. Sometimes those tempered views questioned the realities surrounding an individual’s ability to achieve expectations in both work and family life, like those reported by one male focus group participant who said, **“No individual can fulfill all the expectations of their directors and colleagues, and that goes for fulfilling the requests of their family as well.”** Likewise, there was a similar sentiment shared by a female focus group participant who said, **“You can’t have completely equal balance between the requirements of work and the needs of family.”**

In other cases, the tempered views reflected that it was not merely attending to the responsibilities of both work and family, but it was simply **“... fulfilling the basic requirements of each”** rather than holding high expectations of meeting all responsibilities and doing them well, as noted by a woman in the second focus group.

### 3.2.2. Work-family balance is created

It was notable from the data that work-family balance is defined by the Omani population as taking certain actions and using some skills. Skills such as planning, time management and encouraging cooperation between role partners can serve as tools for achieving work-family balance.

#### 3.2.2.1. Planning and organizing steps toward work-family balance

Omani adults attribute work-family balance to multiple sources. The dominant attribution, either implicitly or explicitly, is to personal action intended to create work-family balance. As one male focus group participant stated, **“It [work-family balance] doesn’t happen on its own, instead it is the result of work and effort preceded by planning.”** Similarly, a female focus group participant commented that **“[work-family balance] happens as a result of organizing my time at work and with my family, and organizing other matters and completing work at a set time.”** An implicit element of statements like these is a sense of the cooperation that is involved, either among family members or among coworkers or supervisors. Indeed, the virtues of **“planning”** and **“organizing time”** are not inherent in those activities, but rather in mobilizing others to accept or abide by such **“planning”** or **“organization.”** For example, in describing how a recent experience of work-family

balance occurred, one female focus group participant commented, **“Thank God, by coordinating with my family members and finding a domestic worker to help ... [I was able to] reduce the workload at home.”** Similar coordination also seems to take place within the workplace, as expressed by a female focus group participant: **“It happened as a result of my managers at work taking into consideration the distance to the place, and that was why I was permitted to leave.”** A male focus group participant concurred: **“It happened after I reviewed my actions and discussed things with the other party.”**

Each of the previous examples highlights how **“planning”** and **“organizing”** was not a solo activity; rather, it resulted from a social interaction wherein a problem surfaced and a potential solution was created and implemented in partnership with other family members (e.g., hiring a domestic servant) or a supervisor (e.g., being allowed to leave at a different time to accommodate commute time).

Also, a notable minority of women and men discussed employing the strategy of **“segmentation,”** which essentially involves keeping the worlds of work and family in physically and temporally separate spaces. As one male focus group participant commented, **“It [work-family balance] doesn’t happen automatically. I completely separated my work from my family, and I made myself used to having a set time for my work and a set time for my family.”**

A female focus group participant expressed a similar sentiment in describing how her experience of work-family balance emerged, noting, **“It [work-family balance] happened as the result of commitment and dedication where there was total commitment to each party — by not taking anything work-related home.”**

Although segmentation appears to stem from a solely individual decision or personal commitment, it is in fact supported through some type of social coordination. The man who describes **“having a set time for work and a set time for family”** can only implement this strategy in conjunction with others. His supervisor or coworkers have to implicitly or explicitly honor his **“set”** work time. Likewise, the woman who reported **“not taking anything work-related home”** can only maintain this practice if approved by her supervisor, or if she creates new work systems to enable herself to complete her job-related tasks while being at work.

In addition, transition periods provided interesting contexts for looking at one’s difficulty at achieving or maintaining work-family balance. Transitions inherent in parenting, such as the arrival of an infant or the specific hallmarks of a child’s developmental stages, including entering school, have already been discussed as challenges to work-family balance, although they may also contribute to work-family balance in some cases. Other transitions, like getting married, were also mentioned. For example, one woman stated, **“It [an experience of poor work-family balance] happened in the beginning of my married life because there was no planning done in order to avoid interference between work and family.”**

Similarly, a male participant discussed how **“the surprise of the changes after marriage and the lack of preparation for these changes”** also posed challenges to achieving and maintaining work-family balance.

Each of these comments references, either directly or indirectly, the need for individuals to create a new plan to highlight the points involved in balancing work and family in the face of a new event or relationship. Unfortunately, these participants did not elaborate upon the origins or specifics of the issues that emerged following marriage. Perhaps the transition into marriage and the increased complexity of attending to two work schedules within the family unit rather than one was more difficult than expected. Or perhaps combining the expectations of the new spouse and marriage with the continued expectations of coworkers and supervisors was more difficult than anticipated. In either case, marital transition posed challenges to work-family balance. Finally, work-related transitions, such as starting a new job or having an increase in job-related responsibilities associated with a promotion or advancement, were mentioned. For example, one male participant described why he believed a period of poor work-family balance occurred in his life when he said, **“It could be that [with] entering a new life, and my desire to prove my abilities at work, I dedicated all my attention to work and focused less on my family.”**

Three primary forces contributing to work-family balance were mentioned primarily by women. First, several women indirectly referenced governmental initiatives to lengthen spacing between births. For example, in response to a question about the cause of work-family balance, one woman said:

**It was the result of prior planning in regards to the care of the children ... I worked to provide a new domestic worker and to plan the spacing of the births of my children, in addition to smooth financial planning.**

A second force affecting primarily women’s experiences of work-family balance was the commuting time or geographic distance between home or family and work. Apparently, some public sector jobs require employees to spend extended periods away from family, including children. This experience was best articulated by one woman as part of a broader discussion about how work-family balance may have different meanings for working adults with children relative to those without children. She said:

**Yes, it differs because my current job as a teacher requires me to be far from my family for weeks, and that affects my children and my husband, and a person who is not in a relationship doesn’t have to bear any responsibility for others.**

Several other women commented on how their ability to achieve work-family balance improved after switching to a different job requiring less time away from family, or a job whose workplace was closer to their home, thereby reducing their daily commute time.

### **3.2.2.2. Workplace flexibility**

Comments about workplace flexibility were an inherent part of the discussion of commute times. Several women commented on how they valued their managers’

willingness to allow flexibility with regard to when work began and ended, or attentiveness to the physical distance between the workplace and the home. For example, one woman reported the reason for her ability to maintain work-family balance as **“the proximity of the work to my home and the flexibility of my work and the great management, which created a positive feeling.”** Although only one male participant mentioned the necessity to commute or be physically separated from family due to his work, there was substantial agreement by men and women alike about the value of mandatory workplace flexibility policies. Participants commented that mandatory workplace flexibility policies would **“provide the employee with the appropriate time in order to balance work and family,” “decrease overcrowding,” “create positive energy for the employee and also a love of one’s work,” “stop the crisis of unexcused absences,”** and increase productivity.

A third force that primarily affected how women experienced work-family balance was previous episodes of poor work-family balance, work-family imbalance, or the belief that work-family balance is a dynamic state. One woman poignantly described the emergence of work-family balance in her life, commenting, **“... after thinking deeply about the miserable situation of imbalance, and after I participated in the time management workshop, all my views on time and balance between family and work have changed.”**

Other women suggested that work-family balance is a relatively transient state. For example, one focus group participant commented that **“there is no set balance, meaning there is a period of balance sometimes and then none during another period of time,”** while other women commented that the transience of work-family balance was shaped by a variety of factors. Whereas things like finding a job closer to home or hiring a domestic servant were factors that enabled work-family balance, other factors like increased job responsibilities, sick children, or unexpected financial challenges impeded work-family balance.

### **3.3. A Notable Absence: Public Policy on Work-Family Balance**

There was a notable absence of discussion about public or organizational policies in the participants’ descriptions of work-family balance. The sole exception, mentioned primarily by women, was their discussion of seemingly informal practices of workplace flexibility on the part of individual supervisors. Indeed, not a single public policy was referenced by participants when they were asked to describe a recent experience of work-family balance (or imbalance), or the perceived causes of work-family balance (or lack thereof). Study participants made no mention of maternity or paternity leaves or paid time off following the birth of a child. Nothing was mentioned by participants without their first being prompted by the interviewer in regard to policies that provide time to new working mothers to breastfeed their child or express breast milk. Similarly, no mention was made of child care facilities on or near the worksite, or official policies pertaining to workplace flexibility.

Despite the lack of unprompted mentions of public policies that support work-family balance, study participants were universally supportive of a number of

specific public policy initiatives, particularly paid maternity leave, on-site workplace child care facilities, and nursing hours.

### 3.3.1. Maternity leave policy

Only a few of our study participants reported having taken advantage of the existing maternity leave policy, but all thought it was important for both the new baby and the family. As one woman who reported taking leave noted:

**I spent it taking care of my daughter and following up with the hospital. The benefit was that I was emotionally at peace because I was taking care of my daughter and it supported my family emotionally because I was close to my family and taking care of their needs.**

Likewise, there was almost unanimous agreement about the need for public policies that would create high-quality child care facilities either at or near worksites. Often, these comments were directly followed by mention of the potential benefits of such policies for employers, including increased productivity due to reduced absenteeism and better well-being among working mothers. As one woman noted, **“This [provision of worksite child care facilities] is a must because it will be to the benefit of the organization and it will increase the productivity of the parent whose child is in a safe place near him.”**

### 3.3.2. Workplace child care policy

Sentiments were mixed regarding who should be financially responsible for the operation of the workplace child care facilities created by public policies. A number of participants believed employers should be responsible for the child care facilities’ operating costs. A comparable number, although fewer, believed employees using the child care facilities were responsible for the operating costs because **“the entity is providing the place for the daycare, the employee is responsible for the fees.”** Still another comparable, although smaller, portion of participants believed costs should be split, such that employees pay a **“symbolic fee, the rest being covered by the employer.”**

Both men and women agreed that a public policy ensuring that mothers are allowed to nurse their infants was essential. Two specific features of such a policy were articulated. First, most participants believed that any costs incurred due to nursing hours should be covered by the employer, so that working mothers would not encounter lost wages when nursing their child. Indeed, several participants noted that whatever costs an employer might incur from mothers taking time to nurse would be more than compensated by the productivity gains resulting from providing mothers with the unrestricted opportunity to nurse and spend limited yet vital amount of time with their children. A second feature of this policy was the permitted periods of time when nursing leave would be scheduled. Nearly all participants suggested setting nursing breaks at the beginning and end of the

workday (essentially arriving late and leaving early) to minimize disruptions to work duties. There was also near-universal agreement that employees should be able to choose when nursing breaks were taken, but that employees should be cognizant of their coworkers and their work to avoid **“conflict with the interests of one’s work”** or **“negative effects on job performance.”**

Beliefs about the potential benefits of public policies on paternity leave and workplace flexibility were mixed. The majority of participants, both male and female, believed that paternity leave should be optional for men yet not mandatory. A full one-third of the participants viewed paid paternity leave as not necessary, with the prototypical response sounding similar to that offered by one male focus group participant who said, **“Actually, a newborn needs to be cared for by its mother. It is in dire need of her at this time and a father can’t handle these duties as it is a mother’s nature.”**

If public policy on paid paternity leave was to be developed, the majority of participants believed it should be paid by either the employer or the government and be separate from the annual leave of the employee. There were widely divergent views on the suitable duration of paternity leave, ranging from several days to up to one year. The most frequently reported durations were: 1) less than two weeks; 2) one month; and 3) the same as maternity leave.

### 3.3.3. Flexible working arrangement

Finally, there was widespread support for the concept of workplace flexibility policies, but there was substantial variation in how such a policy might look. Participants generally agreed that workplace flexibility policies would produce a variety of valuable outcomes both for the employer and for families. However, about one-third suggested that such policies are problematic, because solutions should be allowed to accommodate differences among individual workers and their families, as well as differences across varying work contexts. For example, one woman who supported this view commented by saying, **“Yes, because the circumstances of the employees differ and the person who has extenuating circumstances differs from his colleagues and needs flexibility,”** whereas both men and women commented that:

**It is a good idea but it should not be compulsory, because this could be appropriate for one type of work but not another and each employee knows the nature of their work.** (man)

**This should not be compulsory for them, because some jobs cannot be performed remotely just as they can’t have flexible work hours.** (woman)

Many participants noted that flexible work arrangements have the potential to be taken for granted and possibly abused. Therefore, many participants believed that any workplace flexibility policy should be subject to stipulations, such as satisfactory work performance and cooperation among both employees and employers, in

addition to appropriate documentation to ensure the flexibility is in accordance with policies. For example, one female focus group participant noted that:

**The conditions are that the employee adheres to what he is owed and what is required of him in terms of rights so he doesn't neglect his job or the duties assigned to him and still completes all his work.**

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

The results presented in the previous chapter offer clear explanation into the meaning and experiences of work-family balance found among Omanis as expressed in their own words. In this chapter, we incorporate the results observed in the data within the research questions explored within this project. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter is organized by the findings related to each objective of the study.

### 4.1. The Meaning of Work-Family Balance in the Eyes of Omani Working Adults

The metaphor implied by **“balance”** does not fit the Omani experience. In its most universal application, **“balance”** connotes a sense of **“equalness”** across or between the realms of work and family. In contrast to the notion of equalness implied by the expression **“work-family balance,”** the interview data clearly demonstrates that family holds the preeminent position in the lives of working Omanis, a description that has been articulated by others (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007). The preeminent position of family was clearly expressed in the discussion of the role of children in the individual capability to accomplish or maintain work-family balance; that is, many held the view that children are not an impediment to work-family balance, but rather only individuals with children can achieve work-family balance because this is the way willed by **“God.”**

Additionally, a clear theme that emerged in the participant interviews was the impossibility of maintaining the same level of balance in both work and family spheres. Therefore, the expression **“work-family balance,”** wherein the world of **“work”** exists on one side of a scale and the realm of **“family”** exists on the other side of the scale, appears to be inappropriate for Omanis. Rather, family is the valued universal end with work viewed as a means to that end. As one Omani gentleman put it, **“... balancing work is about the individual’s dedication to perform his work and his ability to complete it in the best manner so [emphasis added] in return he can meet the expectations of his family.”**

Notwithstanding the distortion inherent within the term **“work-family balance,”** Omani adults described work-family balance as their ability to achieve the role of the partners and their expectations in both work and family spheres. This issue was observed when participants were asked to define work-family balance in their own terms and when they were asked to describe the circumstances surrounding their last experience of balance (or a lack thereof). Omanis’ **“everyday”** or **“lay”** understanding of work-family balance is similar to that offered by Grzywacz and Carlson (2007), who defined work-family balance as **“accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his or her role-related partners in the work and family domains”** (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007, p. 459). The new issue to the literature is the observed variation in the meaning of **“accomplishment of role-related expectations.”** For most Omanis,

**“accomplishment”** meant doing everything expected, and doing so with a high degree of excellence. This dominant view seems to be understood as impossible in reality, as it was usually mentioned along with such caveats as **“trying hard”** or putting forth as much effort as possible. For a smaller set of participants, **“accomplishment”** simply meant meeting the basic requirements of work and family, whatever those are for a given individual. This observed variation is interesting because it calls attention to an essential element of Grzywacz and Carlson’s definition of work-family balance: the importance of expectations that are negotiated and shared. Furthermore, more concern needs to be given to the responsibilities embedded in expectations shared by role-related partners (e.g., employers and superiors or husbands and wives) — as opposed to those that are strictly self-imposed — in order to fully understand work-family balance.

It was also clear within the participant descriptions of work-family balance that this concept is temporal in nature, meaning it appears to have some transience for working Omanis. As simply stated by one participant, **“There is no set balance, meaning there is a period of balance sometimes and then during another period [there’s] none.”** The origins of this transience regarding work-family balance is partially predictable in that it follows major transitions such as getting married, having a child, encountering children’s developmental transitions like entering school, and/or job-related transitions. Although often assumed, this data provides the first evidence on how work-family balance is linked to the common life of working Omanis. Other scholars suggested that work-family balance can be characterized in terms of **“punctuated equilibrium”** (Majomi et al., 2003), wherein work-family balance is maintained for a period of time until something out of the ordinary happens that throws the system into disorder, until new, functional solutions are put into place to accommodate the source of the disorder. However, the metaphor of punctuated equilibrium has been attached to relatively idiosyncratic demands in the workplace (e.g., lost personnel and subsequent increased demands on remaining employees) or the family (e.g., child’s illness). Indeed, both the similarity of Omani participant descriptions of work-family balance and the notion of its transience suggest that work-family balance has a similar meaning outside Western societies, in countries such as Oman.

## 4.2. What is the Process Through Which Omanis Pursue Work-Family Balance?

Consistent with the argument that work-family balance is appreciated by working adults across many countries (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018), the data in this report clearly indicates that work-family balance is valued by Omanis. The manifestation of work-family balance in Omani families is highly consistent with a working definition offered by several participants of essentially giving work and family their appropriate due. When this happens, or when it is allowed, there is almost a flow-like state wherein the individual is completely focused in the moment and undistracted by external factors (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Importantly, as expressed by several participants, work-family balance does not just happen — it is created and strived for by individuals. By far the dominant force in the creation of work-family balance is one’s active pursuit of it, which is also evidence of its perceived value among Omani working adults. Working Omanis, like working adults in other parts of the world, pursue work-family balance largely by creating **“plans”** or **“organizing”** activities. This finding is interesting for at least two reasons, one of which is theoretical and the other situational. Theoretically, **“planning”** and **“organizing”** are interesting because the value of these activities is not immediate; the value only emerges when those plans are implemented, and that implementation requires coordination with role-related others. A decision to **“leave work at work”** can only be implemented if it is supported by the employer and does not result in any compromised performance. If performance is compromised, the decision to **“leave work at work”** will only last until performance is improved, perhaps through the acquisition of new skills or through better assignment distribution on the part of the supervisor, or until the compromised performance is no longer tolerated and the employee is terminated. The reality that **“planning”** and **“organizing”** are social activities undertaken in concert with others is consistent with the established notion that work-family balance is something arrived at socially, through interaction — perhaps negotiation — with role-related partners (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007).

Situational realities also make the strong role of **“planning”** and **“organizing”** in regard to one’s ability to achieve balance compelling. Interestingly, today’s working adults in Oman’s public sector very likely did not grow up in a family with dual earner parents. This is because many of the public sector jobs occupied by study participants were created over the past 20–30 years (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007). Therefore, these working adults have few working models to draw upon in regard to achieving balance between work and family in the modern economy. One illustration of this absence of working models is the reality that 89% of Omani women looking for work have not previously held a job at all (Al-lawatia, 2011). By contrast, most working adults in the United States today had dual earner parents while they were growing up, which would presumably create working models for them to draw upon, as today’s adults, to achieve work-family balance. The fact that working adults in Oman and the United States use the same basic strategies is intriguing because it suggests: 1) solutions to work-family balance among dual earner couples are not simply passed on to working adults in the United States, which begs the question of why; 2) despite more experience in the labor market, working adults in the United States have not found better solutions for achieving work-family balance; or most likely 3) the growing economies of both countries have outsourced the burden of maintaining work-family balance to working adults, without providing strong supports — which leaves workers to fend for themselves via personal planning and organizing.

Although not included in this sample, domestic workers were mentioned by several women in both the focus groups and in-depth interviews. Unfortunately, questions about domestic workers were not included in the semi-structured interview guide used in data collection, so comments made by study participants about domestic workers were not probed for further elaboration. Therefore, we are

not able to comment on the number of Omani families who hire domestic workers, the dominant tasks performed by those domestic workers and their weekly work hours, or the structure of domestic workers' employment and compensation which relates to work-family balance. Nevertheless, the simple comments expressed by participants about domestic workers suggest that their contributions to the Omani family's ability to achieve work-family balance are important. Indeed, they provide trusted supervision and care of children and reduce the burden of basic household chores.

### 4.3. Are Certain Challenges Pertaining to Work-Family Balance More Salient for Omani Working Women?

The meaning and manifestations of work-family balance among working Omanis are similar for both men and women. Likewise, descriptions of the strategies used to achieve work-family balance were similar for both. Both men and women agreed that **“work-family balance does not just happen,”** and that achieving work-family balance requires working with the role of partners in the workplace (e.g., supervisors, coworkers) and within the family (e.g., spouse, extended family, domestic workers) to devise and implement effective plans. Nevertheless, noteworthy differences between men and women surfaced. Several women, but no men, talked about changing jobs so that they were closer to home or the homes of family members (e.g., to reduce commute times or shorten the time spent away from family to perform bouts of work). This is reflected in job shifting, which includes exiting the labor force, and is more common among working Omani women than men (Al-lawatia, 2011).

The phenomenon of job shifting due to family considerations that was predominantly observed among women suggests at least three distinct scenarios may exist. First, it may suggest that gender segregation in the Omani labor force may disproportionately affect some women. Our data suggests that teachers, most of whom are women (Al-lawatia, 2011; Rassekh, 2004), are among those who receive appointments within schools in remote regions of the country. These appointments require a difficult family decision: either the whole family relocates to a remote region — perhaps compromising employment options for other adults in the family — or the teacher travels to this remote region alone leaving her family back home. A second scenario is that individuals who supervise women may or may not be attentive or sensitive to their female employees' family-related responsibilities. The fact that several of the study participants commented on the importance of a sensitive supervisor or director supports Al-lawatia's (2011) notion that many women are seeking female-friendly workplaces. The third scenario that may contribute to women exhibiting a higher rate of job shifting to achieve proximity to home is that women retain the lion's share of domestic responsibilities even in today's dual earner households. Even though roles in Omani families have been characterized as highly fluid (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007), several commenters have noted that tradition has not kept pace with current realities, with women

being stretched thin as they attempt to fully engage in paid work while still meeting societal expectations about their role within the family (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007; Chatty, 2000).

Evidence for both within this report and from external sources backs the conclusion that balancing work and family is more challenging for Omani women than for men. Within this report, there is evidence suggesting that women's success in balancing work and family rests heavily on their supervisor's supportiveness, their ability to plan and organize in coordination with their spouse or a domestic worker, and their ability to create new strategies to maintain balance as they and their family transition into new life stages. External evidence includes studies that show that women tend to exit the labor force at higher rates during childbearing and child-rearing ages, coupled with a documented desire among women for more family-friendly employers (Al-lawatia, 2011). Furthermore, notwithstanding the advancement of women into leadership roles within industry and government, women's voices remain comparatively silent in Oman's social and economic discourse (Chatty, 2000).

#### **4.4. What Role Does Public Policy Play in Supporting Work-Family Balance Among Omani Working Adults?**

Employers or public policies play an almost invisible role in the pursuit of work-family balance among Omani working adults. Only brief mention of two policies appeared in the comments of study participants, both of them by women. These two policies are the following:

The first was the expression of appreciation for what appeared to be informal workplace flexibility policies, whether they were related to flexible starting or ending times, or flexibility in the location of where work was performed. The second was reference to governmental initiatives to increase birth spacing (for recent evaluation of this initiative, see Islam, 2017). The invisible role of policies in supporting work-family balance lies in stark contrast to that found in some other parts of the world, where they are widely lauded by employees. Initiatives undertaken through legislative actions, including provision of medical and family leave, and strategic multisector partnerships including the National Initiative on Workplace Flexibility 2010, and the White House Forum on Workplace Flexibility, have raised expectations among U.S. adults that employers and government entities have some responsibility to provide support that allows adults to meet their responsibilities at work and home. Although the degree to which employers and the U.S. government have embraced responsibility for helping working adults to achieve work-family balance is debatable, it is clear that many working adults in the United States place a premium on employers that attend to the matter of work-family balance (Matos et al., 2017).

## CHAPTER FIVE: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study aimed at achieving an understanding of four main objectives: The first objective was to understand what the term work-family balance means to Omanis. The findings showed that work-family balance seemed to be understood among Omanis in a different sense than what the existing literature on the topic presents. It is characterized by the tranquil and peaceful state of individuals that allows them to meet their responsibilities, and their ability to fulfill their duties as family members and employees to the fullest extent possible.

The second objective looked into the process or the steps that Omanis undertake to achieve work-family balance. The findings, as discussed above in the previous chapter, showed that the participants use planning and coordination with their role partners and other family members such as spouses, close and extended family members or employers to create suitable arrangements to help with meeting family and work obligations, and responsibilities. This means that planning and coordination play a vital role in balancing between work and family.

The third objective aimed at pinpointing what the challenges for Omani working women are, given that in the Omani culture the women's priority is expected to be her family and managing its affairs. Thus, the study found that working women are pressured to meet all the expectations and excel in both spheres. Women seem to be struggling more to meeting balance between work and family in particular to reach a successful position. This is because achieving and reaching this success rests heavily on the cooperation of their role partners. The case is more complicated and pressuring when it comes to mothers with young children and infants as they require to exert more energy and effort to achieve the balance between work and family. In most cases, mothers have to get the support and help from domestic workers which showed that it has negative consequences on raising children and financial implications.

The fourth objective looked into the role of public policy in supporting work-family balance among the participants. They did not highlight specific work-family policies and the challenges they face due to their absence. However, they touched upon certain areas of concern that relate to maternity, child care, commuting and long distances.

The data from this study and the answers to the set research questions offer insights regarding various policy recommendations for Oman. The following recommendations are ordered in terms of priority and their potential for retaining the Sultanate's focus on modernization while adhering to fundamental cultural values, particularly those surrounding the family. On one hand, Omanis emphasized the centrality of family in their lives and the importance of being a parent as means to leading a good balanced life. On the other hand, they also value work and succeeding in their career. Doing their best in both realms is key in attaining WFB for them. Some of these recommendations were put forward following best practices around the world, that are believed to help employees achieve WFB, taking into consideration the Omani social and geographical context:

	Recommendation	Justification or Rational
1	Expand maternity leave policies in both public and private sectors so that these require a minimum of 98 days of paid leave that is separate from annual leave and is taken at the birth of each child as a strategy for reconciling one's increased family responsibilities with existing work responsibilities.	The importance of maternity leave was highlighted by participants to help women dedicate their attention to the infant and family (p. 40), thus, this recommendation was put forward to match the highest maternity leave in the GCC in terms of number of days. Also to be aligned with the ILO convention on maternity protection.
2	Implement mandatory breastfeeding hours in both the public and private sectors that require flextime policies around core operating hours to enable new mothers to continuing breastfeeding their infant for at least the first year following their resumption of work after maternity leave.	Both male and female participants emphasized the importance of allowing mothers to breastfeed their newborns (p. 40).
3	Contribute to the subsidization of high-quality child care for all children who are under the age of education in a way that is consistent with the financial support given to education. Providers of subsidized child care must provide evidence of "excellence" in care and prioritize children's cognitive and socioemotional development.	As child rearing is a theme that came up in the participants' responses, where they stressed that it is both a challenge to WFB but also contributes to achieving it. High-quality child care arrangements following best practices around the world such as on-site or near worksite child care facilities is proposed (p. 40), which will support Omanis in their journey of raising children.
4	Implement or expand leave policies to allow both mothers and fathers to use available sick leave to remain home with a sick child or dependent or to take a sick child or dependent to medical appointments.	A number of participants mentioned that they have to take permission from work to take their sick children to appointments or having to stay at home to take care of them, which is among the main disruptions to attaining WFB (p. 32). Stretching the concept of sick leave as to allow employees to take it when their children are sick will help parents to be there for their families whenever needed.
5	Reduce the Omani workweek hours to less than the current status of (40–48 hours).	Participants discussed the amount of time they spend in transportation to get to work as in traveling from one province to another.

6	Provide flexible working arrangements in both public and private sectors, so employees can make use of more time allocated to the family, in addition to the possibility of remote communication and the utilization of technologies in this regard.	A number of participants discussed the effect of commuting time and geographic distance from home to work on their ability to achieve WFB, especially women. Implementing such policy will help employees to connect with their families if they are not physically present at home. It also might increase work retention rates in some sectors as some women suggested that switching to different job closer to their homes was the solution (p. 56–57).
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In conclusion, based on the above recommendations, we recommend further studies be done on work-family balance in Oman. Such studies can be work-family balance in the private sector for both Omanis and expats. In addition, a national survey can be conducted to do a wider analysis of the subject.

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