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## IMPACT OF GENDER ON USE OF WASTA AMONG HRM PRACTITIONERS

### **Abstract**

The practice of *wasta* dominates all aspects of Arabs' lives; it is a parallel inegalitarian system that categorizes people according to their connections. One of the epicenters of *wasta* is human resources management (HRM). This paper studies the concept of *wasta* in the Arab world by examining its use in HRM according to gender, in the case of the Jordanian public sector. Results obtained from 27 semi-structured interviews of HR managers indicate that though *wasta* is an important feature of HRM in general, there is a notable discrepancy between male and female employees, with the former displaying higher tendencies for using *wasta* than the latter. An explanation for this finding is the prevalent masculine nature of Jordanian society, which entails social caveats related to the traditional role of women. Professional determinants, such as gendered job segregation and variance in qualifications, also affect men's and women's access to *wasta*.

**Keywords:** *wasta*, HRM, gender, informal networks, social exclusion

## 1. Introduction

The word *wasta* in Arab countries refers to the practice of receiving preferential treatment from relatives, friends, or other acquaintances who are in positions of power or authority, to achieve gains such as getting a job or promotion (Loewe et al., 2007). Although *wasta* depends on the reciprocity of mutual benefits (Smith et al., 2012; Sidani and Thornberry, 2013), providers do not necessarily receive favors immediately from their beneficiaries; rather, they help others without being certain they will receive reciprocal favors (Ali and Weir, 2020). Moreover, reciprocal favors do not have to be extended to providers themselves; they can be delivered to any members of their families, friends, or acquaintances (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993; Hutchings and Weir, 2006a). Accordingly, *wasta* providers may never receive direct reciprocal benefits. However, like other forms of favor exchanges around the world, *wasta* transactions can produce social, political, or even economic returns (Teagarden and Schotter, 2013; Ali and Weir, 2019).

It is essential to study *wasta* because of its influential role in social, economic, and political spheres (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). In Arab countries, *wasta* is a key aspect of decision-making processes and a widespread cultural phenomenon and way of life (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993; Hutchings and Weir, 2006b; Al-Ramahi 2008), as well as deeply entrenched as a normal feature of society and culture (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993; Hutchings and Weir, 2006a; Weir et al., 2019). It is similar to *guanxi* in China (Hutchings and Weir, 2006a; Chen et al., 2013; Chen, 2016), *compadrazgo* in Latin America (Velez-Calle et al., 2015), *blat* in former Soviet countries (Ledeneva, 2006; Onoshchenko and Williams, 2013), “pulling strings” in the United Kingdom (Smith et al., 2012), *yongo*, *yonjul*, and *inmaek* in South Korea (Horak 2014; 2017), and *jinmyaku* in Japan (Horak, 2020). The importance of studying cultural phenomena

such as *wasta* lies in their potential to influence decision-making processes and determine the outcomes of business relationships (Velez-Calle et al., 2015).

Understanding how *wasta* pervades business activities also is relevant, for both managers and researchers (Iles et al., 2012), considering the growing economic significance of the Arab world, which offers investors and exporters lucrative opportunities across many business sectors and markets (Hutchings and Weir, 2006b; Weir et al., 2016). To ensure the effectiveness of their subsidiary operations in the region, international managers need to understand its mechanisms (Weir et al., 2016; Ali and Weir, 2020). In a recent systematic review of peer-reviewed journals, Ali and Weir (2020) demonstrate that despite studies of *wasta* in various contexts and according to different aspects and theoretical lenses, a research gap remains with regard to factors that affect its use, especially by human resources management (HRM) practitioners. Those factors, both individual and collective, include gender, age, origin, social class, and place of residence. Even if we have a general understanding of *wasta*, it remains limited, and more formal analytical and theoretical evidence is needed to make sense of the reality of *wasta* and its role in HRM. Therefore, we perform an in-depth analysis of one factor that may affect the use of *wasta*, that is, gender.

Our focus on gender as a determinant seeks to address a pertinent gap. Metcalfe (2006, 2007) points out that the nature of how gender dynamics shape management systems and organization practices in the Arab world has been neglected. Research on the role of women in management also is not well developed (Budhwar and Mellahi, 2006). In the Arab world, gender tends to be ignored as a category of social analysis, such that research focuses more on political participation and women's family roles and health issues, rather than detailed critiques of management systems and practices (Hutchings et al., 2010). Moreover, the Arab region offers a

distinct context (Afiouni, 2014), because its conservative, patriarchal sociocultural paradigms profoundly affect the development of women's careers (McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003; Metle, 2002). Overall, research on the gendered effects and organizational processes of HRM in the international realm remain limited (Hearn et al., 2006), even as gender and social change dimensions are increasingly recognized as important research topics for management and HRM.

## **2.Theoretical background**

### **2.1 Grasping the background of *wasta***

The practice of *wasta* in the Arab world can be understood as intervention on behalf of others or helping others attain something they cannot achieve alone (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993; Hutchings and Weir, 2006a, Hutchings and Weir, 2006b; Smith et al., 2012a; Brandstaetter et al., 2016). The word also refers to the use of power, leverage, or connections to overcome general standards of eligibility or qualifications, so it can create a generalized sense of injustice (Aldossari and Roberson, 2015; Alsarhan and Valax, 2020). The practice can take place within the same family or clan, as well as among friends, closed-group members, acquaintances, or members of political parties. However, family is the cornerstone and primary channel of *wasta* (Berger et al., 2015; Berger et al., 2019).

It is important to note that the word *wasta* can be both a verb and a noun. As a noun, it denotes a person who mediates or intercedes to achieve gain (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993; Ali, 2016; Ali and Weir, 2019). The process of *wasta* consists of three parties: the person in need (e.g., someone seeking a job), the provider (i.e., a person in a position of power, such as an HR manager), and an intermediary between them (i.e., a person with the ability to influence the provider) (Tucker and Bucton-Tucker, 2014; Aldossari and Roberson, 2015; Weir et al., 2016; Ali and Weir, 2020; Alsarhan and Valax, 2020). However, the third party is needed only when the first two parties are not strongly acquainted or related and the third party is strongly related to

both of them. Therefore, *wasta* can consist of only two parties if the person in need of a favor does not require an intermediary to reach the person in power (Alawamlah, 2013).

The tradition of *wasta* is rooted deeply in the cultures and collective narratives of many Arab countries (Brandstaetter et al., 2016). It stems from the Arabic social texture that emphasizes family connections and the social fabric (Weir, 2003). This culture reflects the tribalistic nature of Arab societies, which cherish norms such as solidarity, allegiance, sincerity, and mutual responsibility (Sharp, 2018). Contemporary Arab culture, as a byproduct of tribalism, prioritizes saving face, and there is a reluctance to say “no” or give answers that others do not wish to hear. Accordingly, Arabs cannot reject any seeker of *wasta*, because it is considered shameful to refuse others (Whiteoak et al., 2006).

Face-saving culture, as a gateway to *wasta*, also reflects the collectivist nature of Arab societies (Hofstede, 2003). People are inclined to be strongly committed to the groups to which they belong, such as families, tribes, or clans (Whiteoak et al., 2006). Group adherence shapes their lives. However, such commitment rarely is chosen or earned and instead is defined by birth into particular families or societies (Kropf and Newbury-Smith, 2016). This phenomenon creates a great challenge for expatriates who seek to gain access to *wasta*, which is granted predominantly by kin or clan, much like informal networks in other cultures, such as *yongo* in Korea (Horak and Yang, 2016).

Consequently, people provide *wasta* to their families, relatives, and friends whenever possible (Loewe et al., 2008), as a show of loyalty (Alwerthan et al., 2017). Moreover, *wasta* is entrenched in society, because it enhances people’s social status and improves their chances of success (Ta’Amnha et al., 2016). Shaming or shunning those who refuse to practice it for relatives renders it a self-sustaining enterprise that is capable of enduring.

The link between collectivism and social networks is not exclusive to Arab countries of course. Many collectivistic societies around the world feature various *wasta*-like institutional practices. For example, Velez-Calle et al. (2015) analyze *wasta* in the Arab world, *guanxi* in China, and *compadrazgo* in Latin America and argue the three regions show common trends in their power distance and societal patterns oriented toward collectivism. Kropf and Newbury-Smith (2016) confirm this link: “*Wasta*, like other types of negatively classified networking systems, is attributed to collectivist societies” (p. 5). Similarly, Aldossari and Robertson (2015) indicate that the widespread practice of *wasta* in Saudi Arabia pertains to the strong cultural norm of collectivism in that society. Other explanations for the widespread use of *wasta* include high levels of unemployment and poverty (Loewe et al., 2007); legislative gaps, complicated laws, wide ranges of discretion in the texts of regulations, and absence of formal legal structures (Loewe et al., 2007; Alreshoodi and Andrews, 2015; Berger et al., 2015); institutional voids and weak institutions structures (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993; Kilani and Sakijha, 2002; Loewe et al., 2007; Teagarden and Schotter, 2013; Sidani and Thornberry, 2013; Tucker and Bucton-Tucker, 2014); lack of awareness or trust of citizens in their public institutions or among citizens themselves (Loewe et al., 2007; El-Said and Harrigan, 2009; Kropf and Newbury-Smith, 2016); strong reciprocity norms (Loewe et al. 2007; Teagarden and Schotter 2013); the absence of a homogenous national identity (Barnett et al., 2013; Berger et al., 2015); and the nature of political systems, such as those that feature a patriarchal style, over-bureaucratization, and repression (Singerman, 1995; Loewe et al., 2007, 2008; Berger et al., 2015).

## **2.2 Studying *wasta* according to social capital and network theories**

Researchers identify *wasta* as a significant form of social capital in the Arab world (El-Said and Harrigan, 2009). The term can be defined as “a network of relationships in which the individual is embedded. These networks include family and kin relationships that provide social

support, a safety net in time of need, and even information and employment help” (Hofferth and Iceland, 1998, p. 575). In most Arab countries that suffer from a lack of law enforcement and an absence of accountability, social capital development has a more profound impact on society than it does in (mostly Western) countries that are transparent, fight corruption, and uphold the rule of law (El-Said and Harrigan, 2009).

There are two main types of social capital: bonding capital, which brings people who already know one another closer together, and bridging capital, which brings together people or groups who previously did not know one another (Gittell and Vidal, 1998). When individual people or groups seek *wasta* to achieve gains, the *wasta* can emanate either from providers in the same groups, origins, tribes, families, or geographical areas (bonding) or from those who do not share the same characteristics or do not participate in the same social groups or places (bridging) (AL-Husan et al., 2015; Alsarhan and Valax, 2020). However, in informal networks, social capital is a contested term; according to Horak et al. (2019), it is not well suited to describing informal networks such as *wasta*, *yongo*, *guanxi*, or *blat*. We still adopt a general view of social capital though, and we use it to explore *wasta* through the networks, actors, and capital that gets exchanged among actors. This perspective aligns with recent research on *wasta* that accounts for its complexity (Ali and Weir, 2020; Horak et al., 2020).

Although many scholars indicate that the use of social capital has positive outcomes for both holders and beneficiaries, it may lead to devastating results for others. According to Coleman (1988), several forms of social capital facilitate actions for some people but harm others. As Horak et al. (2020) explain, informal networking can lead to collusion, cliques, and other forms of unethical conduct in the workplace, such as a lack of transparency that leads to unfair HRM decisions with regard to hiring, promotion, compensation, or performance appraisals



(regardless of competence or merit, at the expense of more qualified others). These features can provoke a sense of workplace injustice.

According to Granovetter (1973, 1983), those who receive significant help from others in finding jobs rely on two types of ties: strong if the help emanates from relatives or friends or weak if it comes from acquaintances. Both types of ties may appear in *wasta*. Those who have few weak ties are deprived of information from distant parts of their social system and are confined to the local news of their close friends, putting them in a disadvantageous position in the labor market. Compared with friends and family, acquaintances are more likely to move in different circles, whereas close contacts likely to substantial overlap with people that the focal actor already knows, so they offer similar information and opportunities. Weak ties thus are more likely than strong ties to be bridges (Granovetter, 1983). To deepen our understanding of *wasta*, we adopt Ali and Weir's (2020) theoretical framework model from a social network perspective (Figure 1), which posits that because close friends and family members share the same *wasta* (such as A1A2A3; or B1B2B3; and C1C2C3), stronger ties increases the extent of overlap of their social circles and their opportunities for *wasta* (within the same group A,B,C). This type of *wasta*, which emanates from strong ties, should increase the motivation and commitment of providers of *wasta*, who thus are available and willing to help. Despite this advantage, strong ties suffer limited access, in that one person's *wasta* can be the same as that of the person's family members or close friends (group). When people seek *wasta* through acquaintances (i.e., weak ties) (A3B1; B1C1; B3C2), it provides more access to information and resources than are available in their own social circles (Groups A; B; C) and thus more alternatives and opportunities. Therefore, weak-tie *wasta* should be more influential than strong-tie *wasta*.

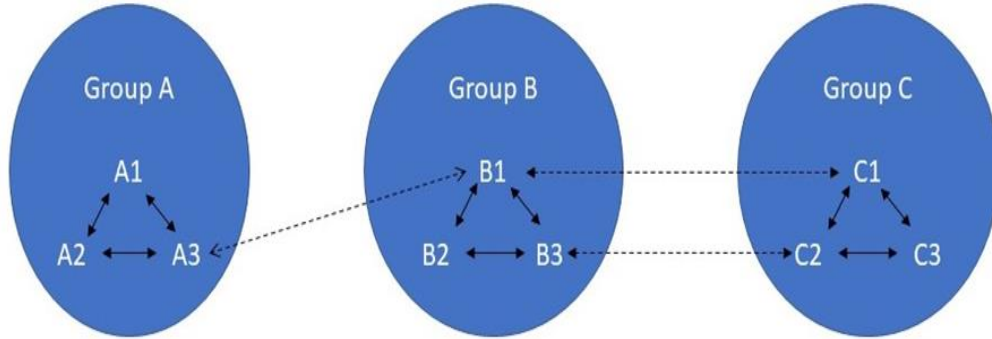


Figure 1: *Wasta* from a social networks perspective (Adopted from Ali and Weir, 2020)

In studying the role of gender in the process of *wasta*, we focus on Jordanian public organizations, for several reasons. First, the culture of *wasta* is rooted deeply and functionally, normatively, and politically embedded in Jordanian society (Jackson et al., 2019), to the point that “everything, no matter how simple it is, requires a *wasta* in Jordan” (El-Said and McDonald 2001, p. 77). This context thus creates a condensed, optimal case setting for taking a comprehensive view of *wasta*. Especially with regard to HRM and employment, *wasta* appears to be the primary way for Jordanians to gain employment (Branine and Analoui, 2006), because Jordanians do not trust public HRM systems (Aladwan et al., 2014). The majority of Jordanian families (65%) deem *wasta* necessary to get a job, and more than 33% of interviewed families said they relied on it to get a job for one of their family members (*The Jordan Times*, 2017).

Second, researchers and outsider (often Western) managers regard *wasta* as a corruption-like practice, so it is a sensitive topic (Fidler et al., 2011; Hooker, 2009). According to Vogel (2012), respondents who participate in research on corruption in the Arab world generally are hesitant to disclose their real views. But as Al-Ramahi (2008, p. 37) explains, “*Wasta* has been

an institutional part of Jordanian society since its creation,” which grants it a special status within contemporary Jordan. This special status, resulting from its institutional role since the inception of the Kingdom, can function as a normalizing factor that makes it easier to recognize and study the practice in Jordan than elsewhere in the Arab world.

After identifying the context of our study, and illustrating the importance of addressing the impact of gender on the use of *wasta* from a theoretical perspective; our paper will analyze the data collected from the field in order to elicit the practical and managerial implications of the research question.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Sample**

We rely on qualitative research (Yin, 1994), due to the exploratory nature of our study. We seek in-depth data to understand complex social constructions such as *wasta*, with a relatively small sample (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methods focus on ordinary events in natural settings (real life) and on people’s lived experiences (Amaratunga et al., 2002), which correspond to the configuration of *wasta*.

Our sampling strategy uses two types of purposive sampling: theoretical and snowball. We integrate both methods to create a sample capable of providing the most relevant and reliable information. Our final sample consists of 27 human resource (HR) managers. This relatively small sample size is considered adequate for our paper, because our priority is to develop in-depth understanding of informants’ lived experiences rather than generate generalized findings (Creswell, 2009). The selected HR managers come from public domains, ensuring that all our interviewees have encountered *wasta* at some point in their careers.

The focus on the public sector stems from its deep correlation to *wasta*. There is a general impression among Jordanians that *wasta* is synonymous with the public sector, because it often

is needed to overcome bureaucratic red tape (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993; Jones, 2016), especially with regard to HRM practices and recruitment. However, the consequences of *wasta* affect all of society, because they determine the functionality of public organizations, which provide the majority of the essential services the state offers citizens. That is, dysfunctional public organizations, compared with private-sector companies, tend to have a more direct influence on citizens' everyday lives, which supports the need to study the public sector. Our aim in selecting respondents with different degrees of experience is to ensure they have the necessary knowledge to answer in-depth questions on *wasta* and the ability to articulate insightful responses (Morse, 1998). Interviewees with varying tenures increases the range of possible exposures to *wasta*-related situations. Moreover, we interview highly qualified, well-educated participants to account for the complexity of *wasta* (Alsarhan, 2019; Ali, 2016) and the need for enlightened views on it.

Our sample also includes interviewees from different age categories, to monitor the evolution of perceptions of *wasta* across generations. We classified our participants into three age groups. However, we conducted only six interviews with people who were older than 60 years, because many employees retire at this age according to the Civil Service Bylaw. We also interviewed both men and women in different regions and organizations. The seven female HR managers we interviewed represent 26% of the total sample, consistent with the actual representation of women in management positions. According to an official study conducted by the Ministry of Public Sector Development in the first quarter of 2015, women accounted for 29% of total leadership and supervisory positions (*The Jordan Times*, 2015); that is, women in high management positions are underrepresented (Husseini, 2010; Banihani, 2020).

Participants	Age	Gender	Education	Nature of Public institution	Tenure
HA	>60	male	PhD	Ministry	>25
AH	<40	male	Postgraduate Diploma	Ministry	<12
MO	<40	male	Bachelor	Public Security Directorate	<12
SAU	40-60	male	PhD	SOE	12-25
HAS	>60	male	PhD	SOE	>25
AI	40-60	female	PhD	SOE	>25
IS	40-60	male	PhD	Public University	12-25
AB	<40	male	Postgraduate Diploma	Government Agency	<12
KH	40-60	male	Bachelor	Ministry	12-25
AL	>60	male	PhD	Government Agency	>25
BA	<40	male	Bachelor	SOE	<12
SAM	40-60	male	PhD	SOE	12-25
MU	40-60	male	PhD	Ministry	12-25
MO	>60	male	PhD	Jordanian Armed Forces	>25
FA	40-60	male	Bachelor	Ministry	12-25
HA	<40	female	Bachelor	Ministry	12-25
MA	40-60	male	Master	SOE	>25
OM	>60	male	PhD	Public University	>25
AA	40-60	male	Bachelor	Ministry	12-25
SU	<40	male	Master	Ministry	<12
OL	40-60	female	less than Bachelor	Municipality	12-25
SAL	40-60	female	Postgraduate Diploma	Government Agency	12-25
SAR	<40	female	Master	Ministry	<12
AB	40-60	female	Master	Ministry	<12
OS	<40	male	Master	Ministry	12-25
RA	>60	male	PhD	SOE	>25
FA	40-60	female	Master	Ministry	12-25

Table 1: Population characteristics

### 3.2 Data collection

We first constructed a broad description of the reality of the public sector, including HRM perspectives and realities, derived from 27 semi-structured interviews conducted in various public institutions. The interviews were between 1 hour and 24 minutes and 2 hours in length, and they took place almost entirely in the workplaces of the interviewees. With one-on-one approaches, we sought to create a setting favorable to in-depth conversations. These conditions encouraged an environment in which participants could speak openly and freely about their lived experiences (Smith, 2011). The dialogues between the interviewer and the participants were

bilateral, such that the interviewer asked questions but also occasionally commented on the answers and requested more details. We recorded all exchanges and subsequently generated transcripts of the interviews. For all interviews, we reviewed our notes for accuracy immediately following the interviews and before transcription.

The interview protocol featured multiple issues, including biographical information, management and HRM practices, and *wasta*. Levels of questioning followed a gradual pattern, such that we addressed contextual aspects before delving into core issues. Finally, to encourage interviewees to express themselves freely, we assured them and their organizations complete confidentiality and the anonymity of their contributions. We also researched newspaper articles, surveys, and public databases for additional information to corroborate, triangulate, and validate the interview results.

## **4. Evaluation and results**

### **4.1 Analysis procedure**

We adopted a thematic analysis process approach to deal with the collected data (Miles and Huberman, 1994), including the three steps of data reduction, data display, and data conclusion. We avoided using preconceived themes and instead allowed them to flow from the data. We also adopted Charmaz's (2006) approach to coding, which includes initial line-by-line and focused coding. We chose to code our transcripts manually, line-by-line, to avoid missing details expressed by the interviewees. It revealed main themes that demonstrate issues relevant to our research question (Miles and Huberman, 1994). With a constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), we also continued to gather information and compare it against the emerging themes, repeating the process until we attained saturation. To apply more rigor to our inductive research, we followed a Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) which includes two phases. The first-order analysis uses informants' terms, so we made little attempt to distill

categories, and the second-order analysis uses our concepts and themes. In our study of second-order categories, we began seeking similarities and differences among the first-order categories, such that the second-order categories emerged as a synthesis of the first-order categories. These interview data ultimately generated three key thematic areas: masculinist society, job segregation, and qualifications and skills.

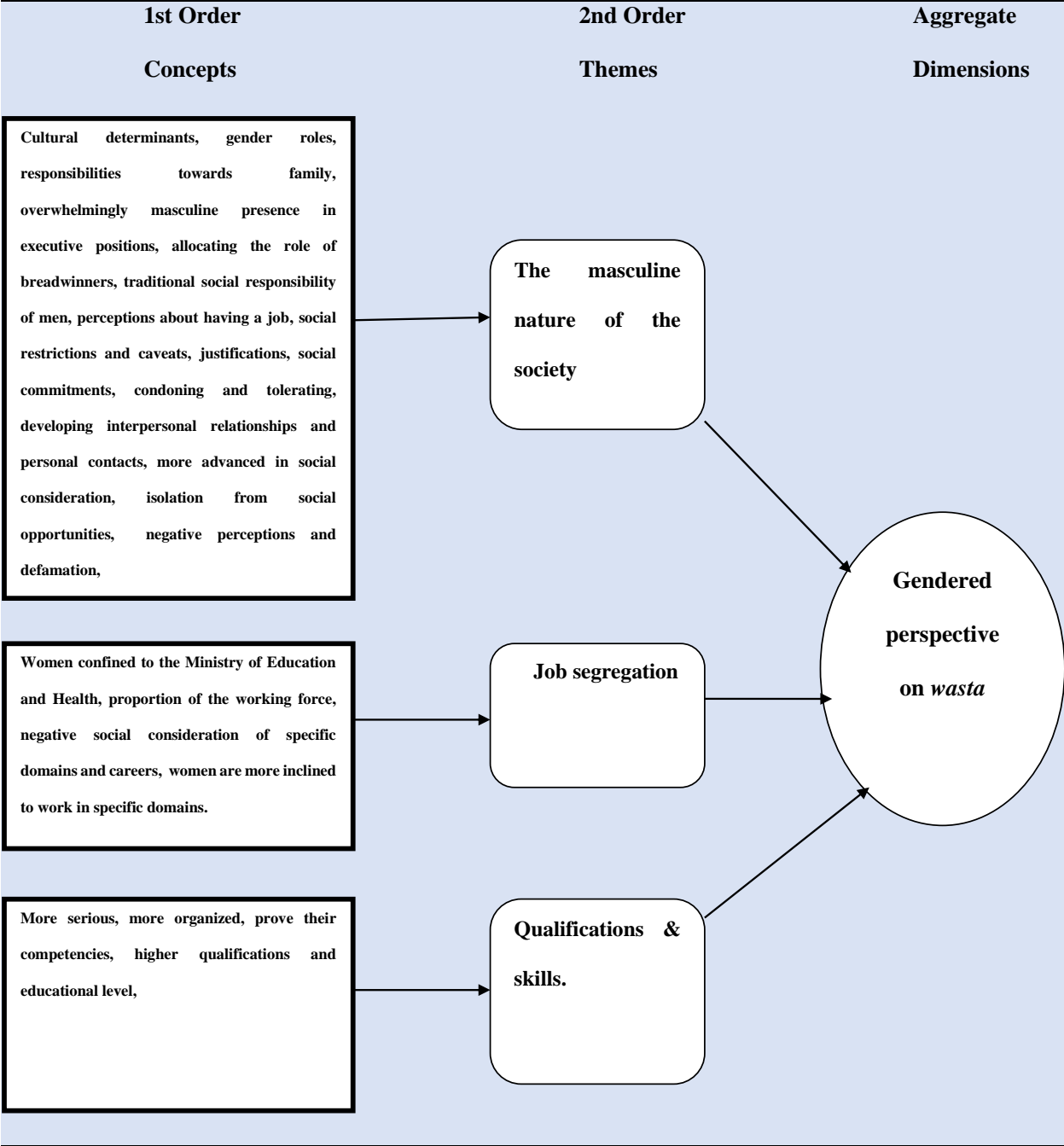


Figure 2: Data analysis structure (Authors’ elaboration based on Gioia et al., 2013)



#### 4.2 A gendered perspective on the use of *wasta*

Informal networks are crucial to the advancement of both men and women in managerial hierarchies (Metz and Tharenou, 2001). Similar to networks in the Western world, *wasta* in the Arab world exerts traditional influences on managerial advancement and career success, regardless of gender, age, educational background, country of origin, or hierarchal level (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). Therefore, both male and female Jordanians tend to use *wasta* in HRM practices in the public sector, as stressed by our interviewees:

*Wasta* has spread so that no one can dispense of it regardless of gender; all individuals without exception use *wasta* in large proportions. (SAM)

Unfortunately, all Jordanians regardless of their gender use *wasta* at the same level; I think the request for *wasta* varies depending on the type of service and the nature of the public institution where *wasta* is sought. (AI)

Even if anyone can have *wasta* (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010), these quests may vary in nature, need, goals, and magnitude. Many interviewees confirmed this argument:

I think *wasta* exists across gender and all Jordanians seek it whether male or female, with differences in degree and size. (HA)

All individuals in the Jordanian society equally use *wasta* in several HRM practices, but it is sometimes thought that men use more *wasta*. Is it just a cliché? I'm not sure. However, personal interests and reciprocity play a larger role in *wasta* than does gender. (FA)

These primary insights suggest the Jordanian case differs from other contexts in the Arab world, where the use of *wasta* is unequal according to gender, as is illustrated in Table 2, which details findings that *wasta* is an important determinant of women's career development in

different contexts, though the majority of women in these countries rely on their close male links (husbands, brothers, fathers) to access *wasta*.

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Country of Focus</b>	<b>Summary</b>
Bailey (2012)	United Arab Emirates	Emirati women suffer from an inability to capitalize on the “power” of <i>wasta</i> because they are obligated to rely on fathers or future husbands to broker their access to <i>wasta</i> ’ s desired resources.
Abdalla (2015a)	Kuwait, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates	Female managers resort less to <i>wasta</i> compared with their male counterparts.
Abdalla (2015b)	Kuwait, Tunisia, and Sudan	Women executives throughout their careers confront barriers such as lack of culture fit and exclusion from networks.
Tlaiss and Kauser (2010)	Lebanon	Female managers perceive their career progression to be affected by organizational culture and networks. They regard <i>wasta</i> as a powerful determinant of their career development.
Abalkhail and Allan (2015)	Saudi Arabia	Women in Saudi Arabia associate networking with their family members rather than with their professional networks.

Table 2: Examples from different contexts

Regarding the seemingly egalitarian use of *wasta* in Jordan, when we delve into deeper analytical questions, the respondents revealed more complex realities and major obstacles to women's use of *wasta* in the Jordanian public sector, which lead to variation in the nature of *wasta*.

#### ***4.2.1 Masculine nature of the society***

Women in the Arab world continue to face obstacles in progressing to management positions (World Bank, 2007), where they have just begun to rise to lower- and mid-level management positions; very few women reach senior positions (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). In Jordan, women are underrepresented in high management positions (Husseini, 2010; Banihani, 2020). One of our informants asserted:

There is a general consensus regarding the overwhelmingly masculine presence in decision-making positions in the public organizations compared with the number of women in the overall population. (FA)

Afiouni (2014) attributes this situation to cultural determinants in the Arab world, including Islam, patriarchy, and family centrality. Metcalfe (2006) suggests women's career constraints reflect strong gender roles in the Arab culture and the great overlap with their family responsibilities; gendered social contexts bar women's careers (O'Neil et al., 2008). This exclusion of women from leadership roles also can be attributed to the masculine Arab business culture (Weir, 2000), where having women in top positions "violates the social norm of men's higher status and superiority" (Powell 1999, p. 334).

Some women refuse promotions to avoid undermining their husbands (Marmenout, 2009). The exclusion of women is not limited to societal culture either but extends to corporate culture, which strongly favors men over women and impedes women's career advancement (Al-Lamki, 1999; Jamali et al., 2005). The absence of female role models is an organizational

concern that limits women's access to top managerial positions (Al-Lamki 1999; Wirth, 2001; Metcalfe, 2006, 2007; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011), and negative stereotypical perceptions of women managers persist (Powell, 2000; Duehr and Buono, 2006; Metcalfe, 2006, 2007; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010), along with the belief that management is a male domain. Arab men have difficulty accepting female managers as equals (Wood, 2008; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010).

Our interviewees explain that this overwhelmingly masculine presence in executive positions creates an unequal dynamic that influences employment achieved through the use of *wasta* in HRM:

It is obvious that young men benefit more from *wasta* since most ministers, deputies, general directors, CEOs, in Jordan are men. (MA)

Male job seekers find it easier to solicit their fellow male relatives or acquaintances in order to obtain *wasta* and get hired as opposed to women, for whom this process is naturally more difficult. (SAR)

In particular, Arab women are less likely to socialize with men (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993). The masculine nature of Jordanian and Arab societies also appears important for assigning men the role of breadwinner, consistent with the concept of *qiwama* protection in Islam, which relates to the importance of men's economic and welfare responsibility and care for women (Metcalfe, 2006, 2007). This social responsibility puts more pressure on men to have jobs and reliable sources of income and therefore to be more likely than women to seek *wasta* to procure income. There is consensus among our informants regarding these dynamics:

Men are more [users of *wasta*] of course, because the Jordanian society is a masculine society ... having a job by men is considered urgent and necessary due to social responsibilities put on them, whereas jobs for women are an added value and

supplementary source of income to improve the standard of living, and it is not a condition or an obligation. (AA)

International development reports on gender and employment in the Arab world also corroborate these insights, showing that gender and social relations are governed by a traditional patriarchal structure that recognizes men as the sole breadwinners (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2003; World Bank, 2003a, 2003b). Women's work is viewed as a luxury that provides opportunities for personal success, self-realization, and meaning outside traditional gender roles (Barnett and Hyde, 2001; Halpern, 2005).

The masculine nature of Jordanian society and cultural norms thus may provide justification for men to seek and employ *wasta* as much as needed to make gains for themselves or their families. Men have the freedom to use any means possible to build relationships and create connections, though those means also incur costs, including the social commitments (e.g., invitations, social gatherings, occasions) required to obtain *wasta* (Banihani, 2020). According to our participants:

... men generally seek and benefit from *wasta* on a larger scale than women in my opinion, which can be justified by the fact that Arab societies are predominantly masculine societies that condone the use of *wasta* for men as a means to achieving benefits and success. (SAL)

However, it does not provide a similar justification for female members who seek *wasta*, because social caveats and restrictions hamper these dynamics. Cultural and social norms of the Arab world prevent women from developing interpersonal relationships with men (Jamali et al., 2005; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). In a study of the experiences of female professionals working in three states in the Arab world (Bahrain, Jordan, and Oman), Metcalfe (2006) shows that the masculine

mentality common to those countries makes it difficult for women to develop important personal contacts with men. International development reports on gender and employment in the Arab world confirm these restrictions on interactions between men and women (UNDP, 2003; World Bank, 2003a, 2003b). Thus, gender is one of the factors that negatively influence a person's social inclusion (European Union, 2010). Most of our female interviewees alluded to this reality:

Jordanian society is a masculine society like other Middle Eastern societies, due to the fact that men are more advanced in social consideration in those societies which is wrong. Therefore, for me, men use *wasta* more than women. (SAR)

Men are more reliant on *wasta*; gender equality is not in favor of women, since the masculine mentality of the Jordanian society tolerates *wasta* when sought after by men only. (AB)

Bailey (2012) also asserts that Arab women believe their lack of *wasta* is tied to their isolation from social opportunities. Noting that *wasta* represents a form of social capital in both Jordan and the Arab world (Brandstaetter et al., 2016), Hogan (2001) stresses that a family's social capital is tied directly to the activities of the father, with little recognition of a mother's network of activities. Bair (1998) similarly finds that women are more inclined to borrow social capital from men. These findings explain the masculine monopoly over *wasta* in the Jordanian public sector. In this regard, Jordanian society is not exceptional among Arab countries: In a study of the Arab Gulf region, Abalkhail and Allan (2016) find women rely on male family members' connections to facilitate their careers and gain access to organizational opportunities. This finding concurs with studies that show networking favors men over women (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Singh et al., 2006). According to an interviewee:

If women are to benefit from *wasta*, it can be achieved through any of their male family or friends, fathers, brothers, husbands, uncles, cousins who seek *wasta* on their behalf even if they are able to do it alone. (MU)

Therefore, *wasta* is a strongly gendered institution, with relationships channeled through male connections (Metcalf, 2007). According to a female HR manager:

In cases where women are successful in practicing *wasta*, an important number of negative perceptions and a sort of defamation befall on these *wasta* actresses, thus harming their reputation and discouraging them from engaging in *wasta* in the future. (AI)

Jordanian men generally accept the responsibility of seeking *wasta* for their female relatives. The forbidden nature of *wasta* does not relate only to the negative image surrounding its use by women. Legally, *wasta* is an illicit behavior.

#### **4.2.2 Job segregation**

The highly patriarchal nature of Jordanian society favors a traditional division of labor (Metcalf, 2008). This job segregation reflects stereotypical views of female and male traits, linked to their aptitudes for certain occupations (Powell, 1999). Centrality of family, the importance of parent–child ties, and well-differentiated gender roles therefore influence women’s professional experiences (Karam and Jamali, 2013; Karam et al., 2013; Moghadam, 2004). Our interviews indicate that Jordanian women are more inclined to work in specific domains and not others:

Men make up a high proportion of the working force in the country.... The conservative nature of Jordanian society and social constraints which made women confined to the Ministry of Education and Health are also important factors to keep in mind. (AH)

Men use *wasta* more and more since they are working in the public sector in larger numbers than women. That is because of the bad and negative social consideration in the Jordanian society toward specific domains and careers. (MO)

According to official figures, Jordanian women constitute 45% of all public-sector employees, but in the health and education ministries, they make up 57% and 53% of employees, respectively (*The Jordan Times*, 2015). These figures may be the results of female workers being socially isolated in male-dominated organizations and having less access to developmental experiences (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014). Thereby, they are more likely to work in the two ministries. Karam and Afiouni (2013) demonstrate that Arab women mainly take positions that are contextually acceptable, so their employment revolves around the health, education, and social care sectors (Metcalf, 2008; Hutchings et al., 2012). Women's right to work in these traditional jobs is undisputed in most of the Arab world and allowed by religious circles (Sidani, 2005), because of the belief that these sectors give women more flexibility to meet their family roles.

#### ***4.2.3 Qualifications and skills***

Our findings also suggest that weaker use of *wasta* by women can be understood in light of their higher qualifications and educational levels: Jordanian women work harder to study and improve their competencies and skills. Banihani (2020) affirms that Jordanian women generally have higher education levels than men in similar jobs. Therefore, their need for *wasta* to achieve their goals is lower than that of their male counterparts:

Jordanian women are considered professionally more serious and organized when compared to men, whether during their studies (through school and university) or even afterwards in the workplace. (AH)



Women in Jordanian society seek to prove their competencies more than men, where on the other hand men prefer to develop and progress faster regardless of the means. (AB)

To the best of our knowledge, no prior research supports this argument. However, because women generally have access to *wasta* only through their fathers and husbands (Bailey, 2012), they may be incited to compensate by investing in their personal qualifications. Fortunately, Arab societies strongly support gender equality in education (Metcalf, 2006). Therefore, *wasta* seems to be a deterrent rather than asset for women's career advancement (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). In a sense, women are exempt from the process of *wasta*.

## **5. Practical implications**

These novel results shed new light on the relationship between *wasta* and gender differences. Noting global trends toward achieving gender equality in all aspects of life, we offer relevant guidance for international managers and organizations that are keen to promote female employment and achieve professional parity, by unveiling some realities and hidden systems that govern managerial practices in Jordan, as an example of the wider Arab world. By revealing the mechanisms through which *wasta* operates and obstructs women's access to high-level managerial positions, our findings can help managers find alternative pathways to engage more women in the labor force.

The practice of *wasta* draws on the predominant masculine mentality of the Arab world and Jordan. This mentality creates a negative stigma about women's access to managerial positions, which causes women to remain hostage to *wasta*, which is available exclusively to men. The first step toward changing this reality and countering the effects of these hidden systems is to reshape mentalities related to gender and management. This long-term effort can be initiated through awareness building and promotion of women's participation in the managerial sector. The responsibility for this action lies first with researchers, activists, and civil society

actors who are engaged in gender equality efforts. They should channel their efforts toward promoting positive perceptions of female managers. Such perceptions can encourage HRM practitioners to pursue active initiatives and policies that achieve actual change.

Legislation that sets strict requirements for employing some certain percentage of female workers could be a burden on HRM practitioners and organizations or jeopardize the business climate, so decision makers instead might create incentives to motivate organizations to hire more women. For example, recruitment of female candidates could be a key performance indicator. The inclusion of female workers who are qualified and talented, such that they surpass their male counterparts in intellectual, professional, and business potential, can improve the overall performance and outcomes of organizations. Making female recruitment a performance indicator might create momentum and encourage organizations to work on attracting and retaining qualified female professionals.

Moreover, HRM practitioners can work on management training and development programs aimed at women, such as cultural training designed to raise awareness and challenge traditional perspectives. Furthermore, training and mentoring programs aimed at women can help introduce them to the labor market and to various professions and career paths, as well as familiarize them with positive female examples and role models. Such role modeling is crucial to countering the lack of female role models in top managerial positions (Al-Lamki, 1999; Wirth, 2001; Metcalfe, 2006, 2007; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). Integrating women into the management sector also requires holding professional events and meetings that help them make contacts and create professional networks to overcome their implicit exclusion from the *wasta* system.

To make management a more attractive career choice for women, HRM practitioners might revise their policies related to topics of interest to female workers, such as maternity leave

(e.g., duration, possibility of extension, guaranteeing smooth returns to work) and wage equality (e.g., transparency in wage distribution for both genders in the same positions). Moreover, HRM practitioners can attract qualified female workers who seek to perform familial roles by “rethink[ing] their organization boundaries and the notion of the traditional employee” (Horak et al. 2019, p. 478). According to Horak et al. (2019), workers are turning away from long-term, traditional contracts in favor of more flexible, project-based assignments (freelancing, “gig” contracts), and skilled workers are leading this trend, because they prefer autonomy and work–life balance. Both HRM practitioners and talented female workers could exploit this trend: The former can benefit from the contributions and potential of female workers, and the latter can achieve professional success while maintaining a healthy balance with their personal lives and flexible working hours and locations (e.g., working from home).

## **6. Limitations and implications for research**

These findings provide a foundation for further research. By identifying gender as a factor that affects and shapes the use of *wasta* in HRM practices in the public sector, we suggest directions for studying this phenomenon, including research into other demographic and socioeconomic factors, such as age, social class, and origin. The methods we apply herein can be adapted to investigate various determinants of *wasta* and develop a deeper, more holistic understanding of its realities. However, these methods also suffer some limitations. With qualitative approaches, questions of generalizability are inherent. According to Myers (2009, p. 9), “a major disadvantage of qualitative research ... is that it is often difficult to generalize to a larger population.” All our participants work in the Jordanian public sector, and it would be interesting to conduct research in other contexts to observe different mechanisms of *wasta* in various workplace settings. Further research also could apply quantitative methods, retest our main outcomes, and check for correlations across the identified themes. In addition, employing

other sampling strategies, such as probability sampling that allows for more generalization of findings, could help establish more solid conceptions of *wasta* phenomena.

## **7. Conclusion**

We illustrate the concept of *wasta* in the Arab world with a framework based on social capital and networks. We argue that *wasta* represents both bonding and bridging forms of social capital with regard to seeking recruitment or promotions in the workplace. Various factors and considerations affect both the forms and levels of people's use of *wasta*. For better or worse, gender influences the use of *wasta* in the Jordanian public sector, so we offer insights for HR specialists and academics interested in understanding how HRM should function in this complex setting, especially in terms of female empowerment. Ultimately, we help clarify the gender-based management realities that affect the functionality of HRM systems.

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