

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN ON
BOARDS IN LEBANON: PATHWAYS AND STRATEGIES
TO MAINTAIN LEGITMACY

by
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ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

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Over the past decade, corporate boards have witnessed accelerated global demands to increase the diversity of their members, focusing on the inclusion of more women (Oldford et al., 2021). The inadequate number of women on boards has motivated legislators and policy makers around the world to implement gender quotas that require corporate boards to have a certain percentage of women members to avoid sanctions (Alessandra & Morten, 2021). This research project attempts to shed light on the pathways women take to make it on boards and examines their experiences once on boards, strategies adopted to maintain legitimacy, and legitimacy judgements towards their participation on boards by their male counterparts. Moving away from a focus on the link between board diversity and organizational performance, this project focuses instead on how and why women are appointed to boards, who are the women being appointed, what are some of the perceived multi-level challenges to serving on boards, what strategies do they adopt to maintain legitimacy on boards, and how they are perceived by their male counterparts. To do this, we adopt an institutional theory perspective (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008) and leverage the literature on legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby & Greenwood 2005, Tost, 2011 & Bitektine, 2011) and go beyond the organizational level alone to better incorporate societal and institutional level considerations. We also bring novel insights from an understudied context, Lebanon, opening the conversation about women and corporate boards to richer and more internationally relevant insights and contributions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, corporate boards have witnessed accelerated global demands to increase the diversity of their members, focusing on the inclusion of more women (Oldford et al., 2021). The inadequate number of women on boards has motivated legislators and policy makers around the world to implement gender quotas that require corporate boards to have a certain percentage of women members to avoid sanctions (Alessandra & Morten, 2021). In 2021, globally, 19.7% of board seats were held by women (Deloitte, 2021). This percentage varies by country and region, for example, in Europe 30.7% of total board seats are held by women with France (43.2%), Norway (42.4%), Italy (36.6%) and Belgium (34.9%) leading the numbers, noting that all of these countries had mandatory quotas (Deloitte, 2021). In North America, the percentages decrease to 24.3% including Canada at 27.8% and the US at 23.9%, both countries do not have mandatory quotas implemented. In the Middle East and North Africa, the numbers are still lagging the global figures where only 10.2% of board seats are held by women, and this percentage varies by country. For example, Egypt has 10% women board members, Morocco 8.7%, UAE 5%, Saudi Arabia 1.7% and Qatar 1.2% (Deloitte, 2021).

The topic of women on boards has garnered a wealth of data and research in different areas with varying focus points. For example, there is a burgeoning body of work around the relation between board gender diversity and firm performance (e.g. Adams & Ferreira, 2009; Bugeja et al., 2016; Campbell & Mínguez-Vera, 2008; Chen et al., 2017; Dobbin & Jung, 2011; Faccio et al., 2016; Lückerath-Rovers, 2013; Wilson & Altanlar, 2009), focusing on financial returns perspective (Carter et al., 2003; Srinidhi et al., 2011), a corporate governance and board effectiveness perspective (Adams &

Ferreira, 2009; Dhir, 2015), outcomes in CSR activities and reputation (Bear et al., 2010; Bilimoria, 2006), and compliance with ethics (Isidro & Sobral, 2015). In addition, many benchmark studies were developed to track the progress of Women on Boards numbers across countries and firms over time (e.g., Hoel 2008; Sealy & Vinnicombe 2012, Governance Metrics International, 2013; Catalyst 2020). Recently, there has also been an increasing number of studies that explore policies and national institutional factors, such as mandatory quotas, parental leave, provision of childcare services, etc. that aim to increase the number of women on boards (Alessandra & Morten, 2021). However, less research is available on the experiences, roles and responsibilities of women while on boards. For example, some researchers emphasize how gender quotas help to better leverage female talent and bring new perspectives (Francoeur, Labelle, & Sinclair-Desgagné, 2008; Tatli, Vassilopoulou, & Özbilgin, 2013), while on the other hand, others argue that quotas lead to the appointment of underqualified women who end up playing a much less active role on boards than their male counterparts (Ahern & Dittmar, 2012; Holzer & Neumark, 2000). This latter perspective further puts forward the argument that the implementation of gender quotas results in shareholders being forced to replace previous male directors by less competent women (Leslie et al., 2014; Ahern & Dittmar, 2012), which overtime may undermine the function of the board such that owners and shareholders may feel less confident in the policies imposed (Pande & Ford, 2011; Seierstad & Opsahl, 2011). This in turn affects the legitimacy judgements of women on boards. Public opinion about quotas has also been mixed, with some touting their ability to diversify boards quickly and others expressing concerns that they would not improve the quality of the boards if the new directors lack experience (Groysberg & Chen, 2016). Opponents of quotas say that such requirements could lead to a situation where some companies recruit women directors without regard for the match between their skills and

a firm's needs (Groysberg & Chen, 2016). Thus, it is important to study not only the gender of board members, but also other factors that explain board member effectiveness, and the perceived legitimacy judgements.

Another less researched area is related to the pathways that women take to get on corporate boards, and the factors that enhance or restrict them. For example, there are few research studies covering pathways to the boardroom (Westphal & Ithai, 2005; Colaco et. al., 2011), but it is generic and not focused on how this pathway can be similar or different if applied to women. Other research studies focused on investigating reasons for not having enough women on boards (Schneider et. al., 2021) and whether having women CEOs creates opportunities for appointing more women on boards and in executive positions (PR Newswire, 2021). There are also initiatives in some countries that aim at creating a pipeline for women who are qualified and available to sit on boards (Record, 2019). Therefore, more research studies are required to cover the factors that enhance or constrain pathways that can provide women with opportunities to have a corporate board seat.

This research project attempts to shed light on the pathways women take to make it on boards and examines their experiences once on boards, strategies adopted to maintain legitimacy, and legitimacy judgements towards their participation on boards by their male counterparts. Moving away from a focus on the link between board diversity and organizational performance, this project focuses instead on how and why women are appointed to boards, who are the women being appointed, what are some of the perceived multi-level challenges to serving on boards, what strategies do they adopt to maintain legitimacy on boards, and how they are perceived by their male counterparts. To do this, we adopt an institutional theory perspective (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008) and leverage the literature on legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005,

Tost, 2011, & Bitektine, 2011) and go beyond the organizational level alone to better incorporate societal and institutional level considerations. We also bring novel insights from an understudied context, Lebanon, opening the conversation about women and corporate boards to richer and more internationally relevant insights and contributions.

This project will therefore be structured in the following way. We start by presenting the case of Lebanon and reviewing the literature on institutional theory and legitimacy judgements to position and present our research questions in this context. We then present our methodology for conducting qualitative research on the pathways of women on boards in Lebanon, the strategies they adapt to maintain legitimacy and legitimacy judgments towards their participation on boards. We finally present our findings that we extracted from our qualitative research data analysis, along with recommendations.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW OF INSTITUTIONAL THEORY, LEGITIMACY JUDGMENTS AND THE CASE OF LEBANON

Mainly driven by notions of social equity related to gender parity (Øie, 2007) and by financial factors which aim at value creation (Carter et al., 2003), the shift toward gender equitable systems and related regulations is taking place globally but is not currently on the agenda in Lebanon.

Since 2019, Lebanon has been facing continuous challenges, starting with currency depreciation, intensified levels of inflation, Covid 19 pandemic, and the Beirut port explosion (ILO, 2021). These challenges caused the private sector to pursue survival strategies and thinking of women participation on boards fell further behind on the agenda of policy makers. However, as pointed out in a policy brief by UN Women (2020), enhancing gender equality is “part of the solution” (UN Women, 2020, p.1). Lebanon has a high female to male education ratio, where female and male education at primary years is almost equal and the percentage of females in high schools and colleges is higher than males (Borgen Project, 2018). However, with its highly patriarchal structure (Afiouni, 2014; Karam and Afiouni, 2014), Lebanon has one of the lowest women’s representation in parliament and government, and the rate of women’s participation in the labor market stands at a global low of 24.5% (Worldbank, 2022) where “Lebanon ranks 139 among 153 countries on economic participation and opportunity based on the World Economic Forum’ Global Gender Gap Index (2020)” (UN Women, 2020, p.1). This low percentage in female labor force participation is more accentuated on corporate boards, where female participation remains extremely low, around 6% according to statistics on listed companies done by the authors (Kompass Lebanon). Moreover, and based on an initial mapping of corporate boards composition in Lebanon, it seems that the few women who

made it to corporate boards have family ties with the CEO, which raises questions about the centrality of their role and render it interesting to further investigate pathways to the board for females in Lebanon, strategies adopted to maintain legitimacy, and legitimacy judgments by their male counterparts.

This concerning paradox between female's high education levels and low presence in management and corporate boards makes Lebanon an interesting context to (1) understand the institutional forces that facilitate/restrict women's access to corporate boards, (2) to shed light on women's adopted strategies to maintain legitimacy on boards, and (3) to understand male board member's perceptions of the legitimacy of women on boards, which represent the objectives of this study. Furthermore, most available studies on WOB are anchored in a positivist epistemology (Adams & Ferreira, 2009). Our qualitative approach, which is the first to be conducted in an Arab context, will allow us to glean rich insights with regards to women's access and participation on boards in an understudied context.

A. Literature review on institutional theory and institutional forces

Institutions represent the "rules of the game in a society, giving shape to collective and individual experience" (Sheridan et al., 2014, p.5). In the context of organizations, these rules take different forms, such as legal and obligatory forms that directly impact organizational behaviors, or values and beliefs that play a role in creating the culture of the environment that organizations belong to (Alessandra & Morten, 2021). In order to "survive, grow, acquire legitimacy, and satisfy stakeholders' expectations", organizations find themselves having to adapt to these institutional rules (or norms) (Alessandra & Morten, 2021, p. 3). Institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) offers a useful lens to understand how stakeholders respond to institutional forces or "pressures". These forces can be grouped into three categories - coercive, mimetic and normative (Di Maggio

& Powell, 1983). Coercive forces represent government-led actions (Blum & Fields, 1994) in forms of laws, rules and regulations. Mimetic forces are derived from shared understanding. It is about “common beliefs, shared logics of action and isomorphism” (Scott, 2008, p. 51). This category of force is also known as voluntary or laissez-faire approach (Labelle et al., 2015) whereby business leaders choose to mimic other successful organizations and appoint women directors with the intention of appearing as “gentlemen” in the eyes of the external environment (Farrell and Hersch, 2005; Peterson and Philpot, 2007). In this case, limited expectations are set on the contributions of the appointed women on board. This was, for example, the case in Norway, Spain and Italy before the legal quotas were announced (Alessandra & Morten, 2021). Normative forces reveal that the activities of organizations gain their legitimacy when they follow cultural norms (Allemand et al., 2014). Normative isomorphism includes “education, common background experience, and professionalization of a group” (Allemand et al., 2014). In the case of normative forces, appointments of board members is based on existing norms and beliefs of a specific industry in a given country (Van Ees et al. 2009).

While introducing and understanding the different institutional forces that influence organization behaviors, in the context of appointing women on boards, it is worth pointing out to the work of Grosvold & Brammer, 2011, and Terjesen & Singh, 2008, that highlights the importance of “national institutional systems in explaining cross-country differences in women’s representation on boards” (Sheridan et al., 2014, p. 15). Understanding “national institutional systems” requires deep analyses of specific contexts, such as we have done for the case of Lebanon, where we aim to analyze using our qualitative research and the concepts presented by the institutional theory and institutional forces, the country specific institutional forces that create or limit the pathways that women take to get a seat on the board and eventually earn their legitimacy.

B. Literature review on Legitimacy

For the past decades, there has been many research studies that examined the causes and methods by which institutional structures, norms and values within an organizational field are recognized as “authoritative guidelines for social behaviors” (Scott, 2005: 461). Building on these studies of institutional theory, legitimacy theories emerged by highlighting the “legitimacy benefit argument” (Jeong & Kim, 2018) based on the original work of Meyer & Rowan (1977) whereby they stated that “organizations that incorporate societally legitimated rationalized elements in their formal structures maximize their legitimacy and increase their resources and survival capabilities” (p. 352). Therefore, legitimacy of organizations can be obtained by complying with regulations and rules or by aligning with cognitive frameworks (Allemand et al., 2014). On the other side of the legitimacy benefit arguments, scholars have also studied the illegitimacy penalty. This penalty happens when organizations fail to conform to postulated frameworks, or legitimacy categories, set by external audiences, and are thus not considered as legitimate. These organizations end up facing illegitimacy penalties that eventually force them to comply with the set of structures, norms and beliefs (Zuckerman, 1999). Therefore, based on the work derived from institutional theory, it is argued that “distinctiveness can counteract the attainment of legitimacy” (Taeuscher et al., 2021, p. 2). To better understand the different definitions and scopes of legitimacy, we refer to the work of Bitektine where the author presents many different legitimacy definitions, scopes, and literature references (Bitektine, 2011, p. 4). For the context of our study, we refer to legitimacy using the definition provided by Suchman (1995) as “a generalized perception of organizational actions as desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions”.

However, it is worth noting that all the above legitimacy definitions focus on organizational legitimacy judgements. An important aspect of legitimacy is that it is a “generalized, collective perception, which, although composed of subjective legitimacy judgments of individuals is aggregated and objectified at the collective level” (Bitektine & Haack, 2015, p. 3). We noticed through our research a gap on assessing the legitimacy of the individuals within the organizations, which in turn can reflect on the legitimacy of women on boards. In more recent studies, such as that by Bitektine et al., 2020, it is argued that individual-level legitimacy judgements are concealed by macro-level consensus over the legitimacy of the organization.

Using the available legitimacy definitions lens, we reflect on the reasons that make the assumption of legitimacy for women on boards questionable. First, entry of women to boards of directors is a relatively recent phenomenon in most countries (Tersjesen, Sealy & Singh, 2009). Second, even with the push from governments and stakeholders, the presence of women on boards is still relatively low (Catalyst, 2020). Third, in many instances, women have gained entry to boards through regulatory quotas and other institutional pressures (Hughes, Paxton & Krook, 2017). This suggests that assuming legitimacy for women in these teams is perhaps erroneous and it is likely useful to explore the role of context in granting legitimacy to women. As mentioned in the study by Bitektine & Haack, 2015, although legitimacy is considered as “an asset “owned” by a certain actor (an individual, organization, or category of organizations), it still remains a social evaluation made by others” (p.3). We therefore examine, at “national institutional systems” level, the role of various institutional pressures in opening up / restricting women’s access to corporate boards and in affording legitimacy to women within boards, as well as the strategies women adopt to maintain their legitimacy on boards.

C. The case of Lebanon and our research questions

In Lebanon, the regulatory structure places women as second-class citizens (Salameh, 2014), and thus, do not encourage having more women in corporate boards. In the absence of the regulative driver, we will focus on the normative and mimetic forces in order to define what is socially and culturally acceptable in corporate behavior in Lebanon (Muthari & Gilbert, 2011), and what pressures help to study the ways through which women leadership is accepted and encouraged.

The prevalent patriarchy and family centrality in Lebanon (Karam & Afiouni, 2014) can be seen as an institutional factor affecting perceptions, judgments and behaviors of individuals (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), and can have implications for women's career opportunities and prospects (Nussbaum, 2003).

Against this backdrop, we seek to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceived institutional factors that restrict / open up women's access to corporate boards in Lebanon?

RQ2: How do these institutional factors shape the legitimacy judgments regarding the nature of women's participation (e.g. family / non family) and their roles (e.g. central, or ghost) on boards in Lebanon?

RQ3: What strategies do women engage in to maintain their legitimacy on boards?

CHAPTER III

METHODS OF INQUIRY AND ANALYSIS

Recent literature has emerged that underscores the lack of gender diversity on corporate boards while discussing associated implications. This same body of literature highlights the “urgent need” for more scholarship and theoretical development on board diversity (cf., Terjesen, Sealy, & Singh, 2009). To better understand the reasons behind the persistent underrepresentation of women on boards (WOB), scholars call for the need to access boards directly for data, as opposed to focusing solely on human capital, firm, and board characteristics. As Adams (2015) indicated, we need to move beyond quantitative measures of progress and instead investigate process-related inequalities in order to address change resistance that may be hindering progress.

A. Data collection

In response to this need, this paper adopts a qualitative approach in data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007) to investigate female board members’ pathways to the boards, strategies to maintain legitimacy, and board member’s legitimacy judgments of women board members. Such an approach will allow a better understanding of what regulates behavior and drives the board appointment process, particularly as it relates to the persistent underrepresentation of WOB.

Qualitative research has gained progress since the 1980s when it was rarely used in top management journals. In the last few decades, research papers using qualitative research became more frequently present in journals, and are being awarded for their quality, impact and ability to establish that there are a wide set of tools that can be used to contribute value using qualitative data (Howard-Grenville et al., 2021). Qualitative

research methods “allow a researcher to see and understand the context within which decisions and actions take place” (Myers, 2013, p. 5). Today, “we see wide variety in how qualitative research is conducted, presented, and contributes to vibrant conversations in organizational scholarship.” (Howard-Grenville et al., 2021 , p.1).

Interviews have always been the staple of qualitative research methods in management studies, and in particular for research dealing with organizational change (Langley & Meziani, 2020). Langley and Meziani (2020) presented five “interview genres” that play different roles in qualitative research. In our study, we will be using the “interpretive” genre that focuses on the respondent’s meanings, based on the assumption that one-on-one interviews provide the ability to draw on the “beliefs, perceptions and experiences” of the interviewees. This assumption is also mentioned in Brinkmann’s study (2016), where the author focuses on the importance that qualitative interviews should not be considered as a neutral instrument, but rather it represents a social practice that reflects on history and presents a defined context for interaction and knowledge production.

For the purpose of this study, we relied on purposeful sampling and included Lebanese organizations that have more than 150 employees and at least one woman on the board. In total, 39 local privately owned organizations were identified, of which 4 are publicly listed. From this population, we held one-on-one interviews with the woman on board (WOB) and the Chairperson of five different organizations. The sample of the interviewees is presented in **Table 1**, where they are identified with pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity. All five organizations included in the study offered favorable settings for data collection since they ranged across different industries and had different history for establishment. They present a fair representation of the business landscape in Lebanon for companies that are relatively considered big players.

Interviewee	Category	Age	Relationship to Chairperson	Organization's Industry	Organization's Size	Family-Owned	Publicly listed
Carla	Woman on Board	43	Daughter	Mechanical equipment and digital technologies	150-200 employees	Yes	No
Alex	Chairperson	70					
Mary	Woman on Board	51	Sister	Banking and Capital investments	250-499 employees	Yes	No
Micheal	Chairperson	54					
Hayat	Woman on Board	32	Daughter	Manufacturing	250-499 employees	Yes	No
Fares	Chairperson	64					
Mona	Woman on Board	44	Daughter	Retail, distribution, and supply chain	500-999 employees	Yes	No
Ralph	Chairperson	72					
Aline	Woman on Board	72	Independent	Logistics (branch of multinational firm)	150-200 employees	No	Yes

Table 1: Interviewees data

For the one-on-one interviews, we have developed two different interview protocols (as presented in the Appendix), the first addressed to female board members, and the other addressed for chairpersons to allow for different perspectives when analyzing data. As we developed these protocols, we focused on ensuring that we include broad open-ended questions to provide room for openness and flexibility as it will allow us to examine the beliefs and perceptions of the interviewees through allowing them to divulge in their experiences with all its “richness, diversity and complexity” (Langley & Meziani, 2020). The interview protocol addressed to women board members covered various themes and started with demographic questions, and an open-ended question asking about their career trajectory, and what were the main personal, social and environmental factors that got them to reach a board membership position. Other questions inquired about their experience as a board member, including challenges, rewards, perceptions by board members, and the behaviors and actions that they engage in to gain and maintain legitimacy. The final set of questions asked about their management style, and how those are perceived by other male and female board

members. This interview protocol was then adapted to chairpersons and inquired about the board composition and the rationale for bringing women on boards. The data gathered from these interviews will allow us to find out factors playing a role in the journey of women, as well as men's perceptions of the legitimacy of women on boards, and understand the main reasons that lead chairpersons to seek more gender diversity on their boards.

The interviews were conducted face to face in the organizations' offices or online. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded. Every interviewee was informed about the purpose of the study and gave consent that the findings could be published.

B. Data Analysis

The data collected in this study is derived from the one-on-one interviews that we conducted with women board members and chairpersons. For the analysis of the data collected, we transcribed verbatim all interviews and we used thematic analysis based on concept development (Gioia et al., 2013). Therefore, we use the Gioia method as the basis for our qualitative analysis approach.

Using Gioia's methodology and the enhancements thereafter (Gioia et al. 2013), we will start with a "1st-order analysis, which tries to adhere faithfully to informant terms" (Gioia et al., 2013, p.6). In this analysis, Gioia suggests that, as a first layer of analysis, we do not aim to group or distill categories, but rather identify all of them as they arise, which might lead to a big number of categories. The first-order analysis is done inductively, to remain close and true to the data. As we progress in our analysis, we start identifying the similarities and differences in these categories and grouping them which will lead us to the 2nd-order analysis. In this analysis, we follow an iterative process moving between the data and the theory to start conceptualizing the emerging

themes to help us build “a workable set of themes and concepts” (Gioia et al., 2013, p.6). We then further distill these themes into aggregate dimensions. At this stage, the research process transitions from the initial “inductive” form to an “abductive” form where theory and data are considered collectively as part of the analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). After completing our analysis at this level, we configure our data in a visual representation, that Gioia refers to as “data structures” with the aim of showing how we advanced from initial raw data to terms and themes, which supports the assumption of rigor in qualitative research (Pratt, 2008; Tracy, 2010). The described methodology will help us identify which institutional factors and pressures are at play in opening up or restricting women’s pathways to the board, how women maintain their legitimacy on boards, and how legitimacy judgments are made.

We used QSR Nvivo 12 as the software to allow selecting, sorting, and labeling direct statements, representing first-order, interviewee-centric codes, and then assigning these codes to second-order themes.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A. Our Findings

Based on the methodology described in the “Data Analysis” section, our first step was to review all interview transcripts and identify words and phrases used by the interviewees that represent an idea or concept. Where possible, we used the actual words and phrases as our “labels” to stay as close as possible to the interviewees’ own language. Given that we are sourcing data from two different perspectives, the WOB and the Chairpersons, we split the results of the coding process to reflect each perspective separately. We then used constant comparative methods to compare and contrast data across the interviewees within each perspective to create and maintain systematic distinctions among the labels. This allowed us to either add new data under existing labels or create new ones if they were analytically distinct. Through this iterative process, we were able to transform the initial 84 labels from the WOB perspective to 26 first-order codes and 63 labels from the Chairpersons perspective to 19 first-order codes.

Our second step consisted of identifying the similarities and differences in the first-order codes by following an iterative process, moving between the data and the theory, to start conceptualizing second-order themes. For WOB perspective, we aggregated the 26 first-order codes to 9 second-order themes, and for the Chairperson’s perspective, we aggregated the 19 first-order codes to 6 second-order themes. Our final step consisted of mapping the themes into aggregate dimensions that represent the research questions that we are seeking to answer using this qualitative approach. The results of this process were aggregated into data structures presented in **Figures 1 and 2**.

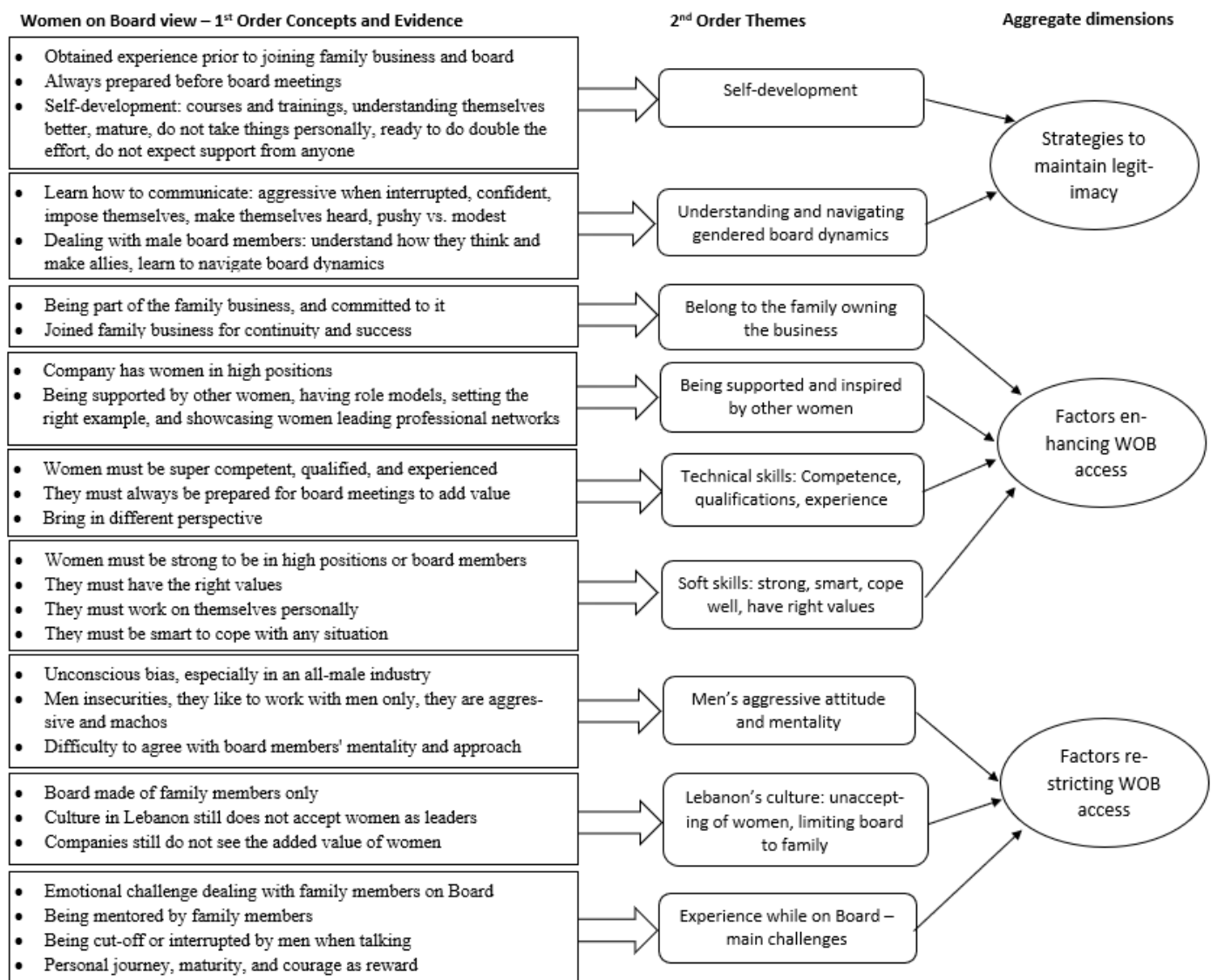


Figure 1: Data Structure – WOB perspective

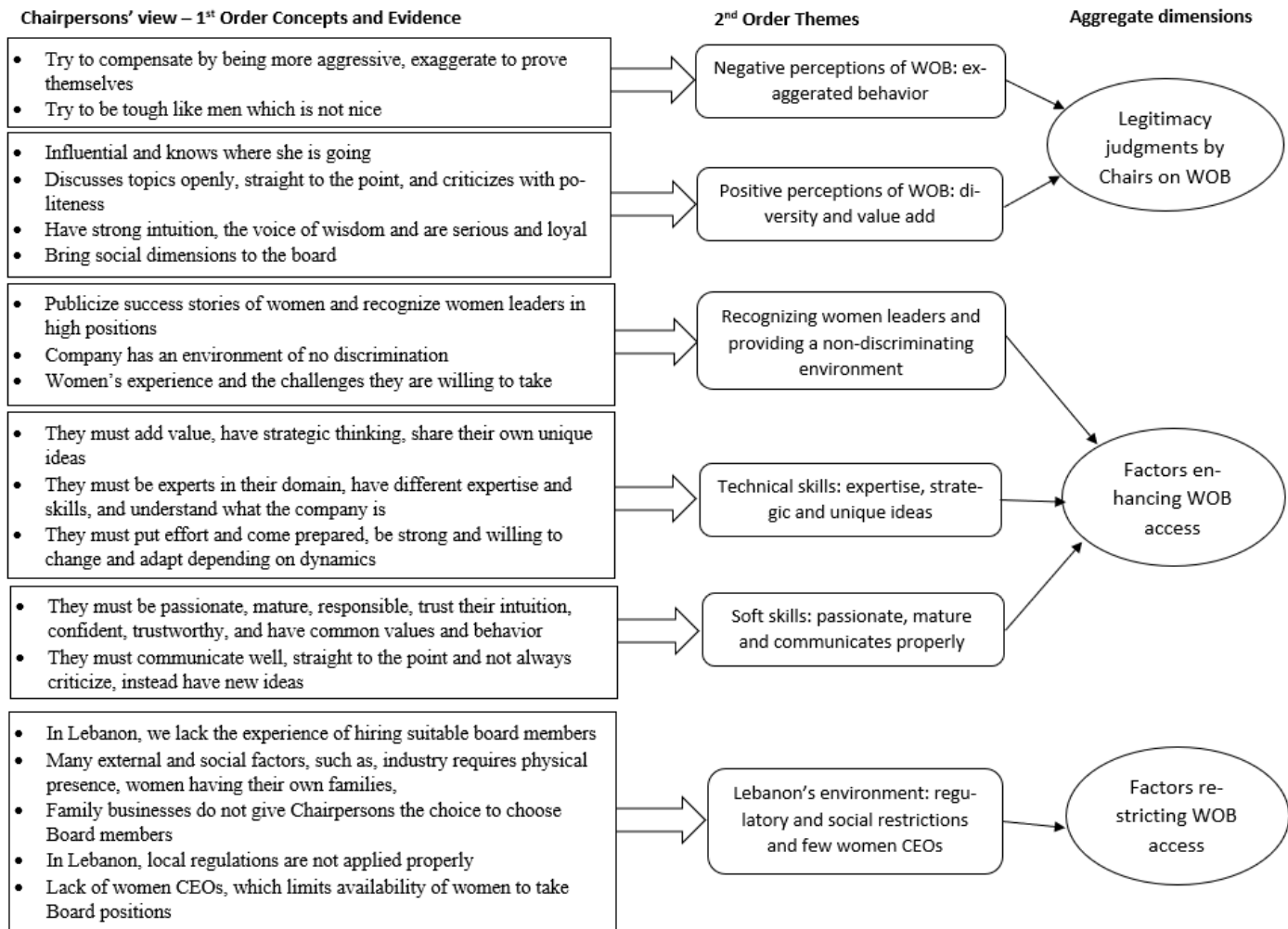


Figure 2: Data Structure – Chairperson’s perspective

By observing the data structures produced, we present our findings through referencing our research questions:

RQ1: *What are the perceived institutional factors that restrict / open up women’s access to corporate boards in Lebanon?*

As we analyzed the findings covering the institutional factors that play a role in opening up / restricting women’s access to corporate boards, we were able to group them as follows:

- Background of WOB: skills and family

The most prevalent factors across both WOB and Chairpersons' perspectives that were related to opening up women's access to corporate boards related to the technical and soft skills of the women in this position. As per the results, both WOB and chairpersons saw that a strong, capable, and experienced woman who can adapt to the board dynamics and communicate accordingly have higher chances of making it to the board. However, these factors alone are not enough, since even if a woman satisfies all of these conditions, she is met by the overarching restrictive factor that is not belonging to the family who owns the business. Therefore, interestingly, being part of the family who owns the business is an institutional factor that both enhances the women's access to boards if they are part of the family and restricts this access for women outside the family. For example, all the women who were interviewed, with one exception, are either the daughters or sisters of the chairpersons. They were motivated to join the family business by their fathers and brothers and gradually handled responsibilities up to being a board member. The only exception was one woman who established a company by herself, however, she was motivated to do so by her brother who provided her with the opportunity.

- Women in high positions and the support they provide to other women

Complementing the overarching institutional factor of being part of the family business, another institutional factor that came across both WOB and Chairpersons answers is the need to have women in high positions who support bringing other women to boards as independent members. For example, Carla mentioned that because she was on the board as part of the family, when the time came for the board to select its independent members, she ensured that they bring in one male and one female independent member. If it weren't for Carla on the board, it was not clear if the

Chairperson, Alex, would have thought of including a woman independent member. *“Selection is not my decision alone. We have a decision committee. They look at experience and what the candidate can bring to the company. Carla is part of the selection committee”*, Alex.

Building on this discussion, two chairpersons pointed out that in Lebanon, they do not know of many women in high positions, preferably as CEOs, to be considered for board membership.

“When a person wants to join a board, he or she cannot be a middle manager. They should have a CEO position. In Lebanon, there are not many CEO ladies, as a result not many ladies are on boards”, Alex.

“We look for women who have competence. In Lebanon, we don’t have a lot of women who have experience to be effective on boards”, Michael.

- Culture in Lebanon impacting board dynamics

Other restrictive factors that were brought up by the WOB included the mentality and approach of the men board members. For example, Aline who is a highly experienced woman that established a branch for a multinational company in Lebanon noted that she has resigned from her position as a board member of an organization due to the men’s aggressive attitude.

“Men were very aggressive. They had big ego. They were machos. It was not easy for me to sail during this period. There were three men who knew the culture of respecting women and their work, so with them, we did a great work. However, when their mandate ended and they were replaced, I resigned”, Aline.

This unveils that the culture in Lebanon still does not accept independent women making it to boards, which was also highlighted by other WOB.

“The culture in Lebanon is still difficult to accept women leaders”, Mary.

“Some men have insecurities, they don’t want women to be on their boards”, Carla.

This is also supported by the fact that three out of the five interviewees highlighted how they learned how to speak up when they are being cut-off and interrupted. Carla mentions how this is due to the existence of the unconscious bias, where it is normal for a man to interrupt a woman, but they do not accept it for themselves.

“Men don’t allow anyone to interrupt them while speaking”, Carla.

- Regulatory environment in Lebanon

It is also worth mentioning that different Chairpersons also brought up the regulatory environment of Lebanon as being a restrictive factor, whereby big organizations do not face any implication if they do not apply the rules of having independent board members. If the regulations were imposed, it could open up space for taking on board members outside the family. Without applying these regulations, Chairpersons restrict board members to family members only, and do not consider that they have a choice to select candidates based on set criteria.

“In Lebanon, we lack the experience of hiring suitable board members”, Michael.

Therefore, when applying the “national institutional systems” lens specific to Lebanon, we conclude that although women’s technical and soft skills play a role in opening up access to corporate boards, these skills are not considered unless the women are either direct family members of the family-owned business, or have a highly recognized position, which is at least a CEO position. In addition, the culture in Lebanon still plays a restrictive factor where women leaders are not accepted and men’s mentality and approach towards them can be aggressive and unwelcoming. Finally, the regulatory environment does not provide any incentives or penalties for organizations to ensure that they have independent board members.

RQ2: *How do these institutional factors shape the legitimacy judgments regarding the nature of women's participation (e.g. family / non family) and their roles (e.g. central, or ghost) on boards in Lebanon?*

We will consider the responses to this research question from the Chairpersons' perspective, as they are the ones who make the legitimacy judgements that influence women's participation and their roles on boards in Lebanon.

"If the Chairman is not a big sponsor, no matter what you do, it is a waste of time", Mona.

- Negative Perceptions impacting legitimacy judgements

Chairpersons had both negative and positive perceptions that shaped their legitimacy judgments of women's participation on boards. Interestingly, most of these perceptions are built around the women's behaviors and soft skills, rather than experience and technical skills. For example, Fares noted that he has been on different boards where he did not like how women presented themselves.

"At times, some ladies try to compensate by being more aggressive than needed... They exaggerate to prove themselves because they are ladies. When they add value there is no issue, but when they try to be tough like men it is not nice", Fares.

Another chairperson focused on the need for women to voice their criticism "positively and politely". Therefore, we can assume that the way women present themselves during board meetings shape legitimacy judgments by the Chairpersons as well as other board members.

- Positive perceptions impacting legitimacy judgements

Positive perceptions were focused on the women's intuition, seriousness, and loyalty. One chairperson, Alex, praised the direct and influential communication style of

a woman board member who is direct, concise, and therefore considered as “influential”. Another Chairperson, Ralph, highlighted how he is grateful for the “social dimension” that the WOB brought to the board. He admitted that his company is doing well on its sustainability and social responsibility aspects because it has WOB who always highlight the importance of these aspects and are leading major initiatives to help in their implementation.

Therefore, although Chairpersons highlighted the importance of women’s technical skills, expertise, and having attained high positions, such as the CEO position, they still referred mostly to women’s behaviors and communication skills when it comes to judging the legitimacy of their participation and effectiveness on boards.

RQ3: *What strategies do women engage in to maintain their legitimacy on boards?*

We will focus on the WOB perspective to analyze the results targeting the strategies that they adopt to gain and maintain their legitimacy on boards. All the women who were interviewed focused on the importance of self-development and improvement. They also highlighted how they learned the importance of adapting their communication style to the situations they are presented with.

- Self-development strategy

We will start by focusing on the self-development strategy. All the interviewed women had experience outside the family business before they joined, except for Mary who worked in one of the sectors of the family business. However, Mary currently plays a shareholder role in the business and her brother, who is the Chairperson, runs the various family businesses. For Hayat, who is the youngest WOB, she knew that she would

eventually join the family business, but she preferred to have independent experience first.

“I preferred having my own experience before joining the family business”, Hayat.

She says that with experience she learned how to work on her communication skills where she knows she must prepare well what she needs to present to ensure that she is “clear from the beginning and transparent”. For Carla, her self-development was more focused on a personal level.

“I sat with life coaches and psychologists. After that, I became aware of many things including what I was passionate about... I started to understand myself more, why I am feeling in a certain way / why am I thinking in a certain way”, Carla.

Carla claims that this personal journey helped her as she started taking senior roles up until she became a board member.

“I started to read the room and dynamics and understand why others are speaking in a certain way or doing a certain thing, which helped in not taking things personal”, Carla.

This also coincides with Mona’s strategy.

“At first I was assertive, but then I learned that it is not about me, I changed a lot and matured a lot”, Mona.

On the other hand, Aline focused her self-development on the technical side by taking trainings and courses, and always being ready to do double the effort to ensure she is on top of things.

“When you are a woman, you have to prove that you are qualified, so I was always working on my knowledge... I did not expect support from anyone”, Aline.

- Learning to navigate gendered board dynamics

The self-development journey for all of the interviewees fed into their ability to learn how to communicate and navigate gendered board dynamics. For example, by

learning how to understand board members and not take things personal, the interviewed WOB knew when to be aggressive when they are interrupted, as this happens frequently, and how to impose themselves and make themselves heard. They also learn when to be pushy and when to be modest. Therefore, they adopt different strategies based on the situation they are faced with and the mentality and approach of the other boards members. As Aline mentioned, she learned how to make “allies” in boards.

“We will agree on things, but when you don’t agree you explain your point and you are heard”, Aline.

This shows that the WOB all agree on a common strategy that is developing themselves to be able to navigate the different board dynamics. Therefore, WOB take on the responsibility of adapting their skills, and developing themselves to maintain legitimacy on boards. They find themselves assuming the role of understanding and accepting other board members and chairpersons to be able to fill their position in an effective manner and have the chance to be heard and influential.

B. Discussion of findings

The findings of this study open up different discussion avenues. Therefore, we will present the discussion following the theory on institutional factors where we identify within the national institutional systems the coercive, normative and mimetic factors, and end the discussion on each factor with recommendations that are applicable to Lebanon and can play a role in establishing pathways to WOB. In addition, using the legitimacy definition provided by Suchman (1995) as “a generalized perception of organizational actions as desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” which we adopted in our study, we will include

recommendations for women to maintain legitimacy on boards, and for men to adjust their judgements when it comes to women participation and effectiveness while on board.

- Coercive institutional factors

It is clear that the regulatory environment in Lebanon plays a major role in restricting women's access to boards. As highlighted in the findings, Chairpersons do not feel any pressure of applying regulations that would diversify their board composition, even beyond the family ownership of the business, let alone having gender diversity on board. Even though regulations do exist in Lebanon to have independent board members, the regulatory environment does not impose the application of existing rules, and therefore, the board seats get limited to family members, and women have less space and opportunities to join corporate boards. The improper application of existing regulations (although these regulations are not targeted at gender diversity) and absence of implications or penalties makes a recommendation of having quota regulations questionable. In a country where the application of regulations is not monitored and encouraged through incentives or penalties, additional regulations providing quotas for women on boards will not be effective, and can also be considered harmful if it does not ensure that qualified women are given the opportunity to sit on boards.

- Normative institutional factors

Based on our findings, it was evident that the culture in Lebanon still does not accept women leaders. This is substantiated by men's behaviors towards women, where they feel it is normal to interrupt them, and that women have to voice their criticism politely, otherwise they are considered aggressive and acting like men. Therefore, although both chairpersons and WOB agreed that technical and soft skills are important, they do not play a role if the cultural institutional factors are not fulfilled. If we follow the definition provided by Van Ees et al. (2009), in the case of normative institutional

factors, appointments of board members are based on existing norms and beliefs of a specific industry in a given country. In Lebanon, all major industries are male-dominated, and the existing norms and beliefs do not support women taking on leading positions in these industries, and if women are present, it will be because they are appointed by their fathers or brothers for being part of the family. Therefore, culture and norms play a restrictive factor for women to get on corporate boards.

- Mimetic institutional factors

As per the literature on institutional factors, mimetic factors represent shared understanding, logics of action, and common beliefs. One theme that emerged from the Chairpersons' perspective is the lack of suitable women candidates for board seats in Lebanon. This factor presented itself as a shared understanding and gave an excuse for the Chairpersons that justifies them not seeking women on their boards or the lack of women on other boards that they sit on. Therefore, it shows that the small numbers of women in leadership positions in Lebanon presents a restrictive factor to women on boards as it represents a mimetic factor. However, although the assumption of small numbers of women in leadership positions is true, there are many initiatives taking place in Lebanon that provide trainings for women on corporate governance and board responsibilities and duties. In addition, there is work being done on compiling a database that presents women in different areas of expertise, along with their positions and qualifications.

- Legitimacy judgements

Another avenue to consider for discussion is surrounding the legitimacy judgments of WOB. The findings of this study show intersectionality between how the chairpersons base the bigger weight of their legitimacy judgments on women behavior and ability to adapt to existing board dynamics and how WOB realize that their legitimacy

on boards is based on how they react in certain situations and their ability to take on the responsibility of understanding board dynamics and adapting accordingly. This brings on the question of why women are the ones who are expected to adapt and develop to gain legitimacy on boards, whereas men continue to act the way they are used to, which can be aggressive at times. Therefore, it was clear that the women on boards did not challenge the existing structures of the board dynamics or pursue strategies that would change them, instead they adopted strategies that would help them navigate these patriarchal structures. Although all the women who play an active role on the board of directors noted that they do feel valued and that their contributions are heard, they all said that they had to work on themselves, adapt and even change the way they usually react in order to reach this position.

Building on the Suchman (1995) definition of legitimacy, the interviewed WOB in Lebanon seemed to accommodate to the “generalized perception of organizational actions” that are seen as “desirable, proper, or appropriate” with respect to the chairpersons and the men board members. As was evident with the results of this study, these perceptions are constrained to the behaviors, attitude, and reactions of the WOB rather than the skills, expertise and experience they bring to the board.

C. Practical Implications

Following the discussion of the results of this research study, we provide some practical implications that organizations can adopt to leverage the capabilities of its existing women on boards, and to create pathways that would allow more women to be present on their boards. We do realize that country-level regulations, policies, and initiatives would play a key role in enhancing pathways to have more WOB and to instill change in the culture of accepting and seeking women to these positions, however, as our

study was focused on organizations, we will limit the scope of practical implications to the organization-level.

As a first step, we believe that organizational leaders should recognize and admit that patriarchy persists in their organization. Even if they believe that they have an open and diverse culture, the workplace is gendered through patriarchy to favor men. Recognizing and admitting the existence of patriarchal structures is a starting point for organizations to take action. For the scope of our study, we recommend the actions that target the institutional factors that were discussed in the “Discussion” section.

Starting with the coercive factors, we recommend that organizations implement policies that highlight the importance of having women executives and board members and the elimination of gendered workplace structures. They can start by taking action on closing gender pay gap, enhancing promotion and raises evaluations to ensure there will be no unconscious bias, and holding managers performing these evaluations accountable for their decisions. These policies will reflect on the organization taking serious steps to make sure gender bias at the workplace is being considered.

As for normative factors, we recommend that organizations work on raising awareness on topic areas that can open space for discussions and change within organizations. This can be done by offering mandatory training for all employees (men and women) on unconscious bias, gendered communication, and patriarchal structures. Chairpersons, board members, and executives should attend these trainings which will educate them on how they base their legitimacy judgements and at the same time serve the purpose of showing the employees of the organization that leadership is serious about heading towards a less gendered workplace.

Finally, at the level of mimetic factors, organizations that implement the above changes will act as role models for others. The employees of other organizations will be

expecting their own organization to take similar actions, and this will in turn reflect on the shared understanding and common beliefs of gender at the workplace, which at the level of the board can positively reflect on decreasing or removing the gendered dynamics.

When chairpersons and leadership admit the presence of patriarchal structure in their organizations, taking action will be easier, and they will be more open to reflecting on gendered dynamics and their legitimacy judgements, which allows them to take action to instill change at the organization level.

D. Conclusion

Using the institutional theory lens, this study aimed to cover a less researched area on the institutional factors that impact the pathways that women take to make it on corporate boards and the legitimacy judgements that are associated with it. We therefore covered the coercive, normative and mimetic institutional forces and how they present restrictive or enhancing factors when applied to the case of Lebanon. We also analyzed how legitimacy judgments are made by the chairpersons for the WOB, and the strategies that WOB adopt to gain and maintain legitimacy. The results of legitimacy judgments were driven by the institutional factors, as they were embedded in the culture, values, and beliefs of the chairpersons, and the strategies of the majority of WOB to gain legitimacy focused on adapting and changing themselves to meet what was expected from them as women on boards rather than challenging the legitimacy judgments and working on changing existing structures.

From a practical perspective, by shedding light on the institutional pressures that shape women's access to and nature of participation on corporate boards, we hope to encourage policy makers to draft legislative measures that will facilitate women's access to corporate boards, and we hope to provide women with practical insights to maintain their legitimacy on boards, while highlighting the opportunity for them to work with the

chairpersons and men on board to adjust the basis of their legitimacy judgments and take on the role of adapting organization-level strategies that will trigger change.

APPENDIX

1.1 Interview protocol for women on boards

I. Demographics

1. Age
2. Marital status:
 - a. Career stage upon marriage
 - b. If married, spouse occupation and job title
3. Number of children and ages
4. College major, highest education level achieved, professional designations
5. Elementary/high school type
6. country lived in longest before the age of 15

II. Current position

1. Describe the corporation(s) for which you are a Board member. What is the gender composition of the board(s)?

III. Career Trajectory and overall experience on board

1. Can you please tell us about your career trajectory from the start of your career to today? Was this easy or difficult? Why?
2. What is it like for you to be on a board? Is it satisfying, exciting, frustrating ...can you tell us about it?
3. Can you tell us about any mentoring or guidance when you joined the board?
4. If you think about a typical work day, what are some of the main stressors? What are some of the main rewarding aspects?
5. Do you have a formal or informal support network for your career? Can you tell us about it?

IV- Board room dynamics and communication

1. How do you perceive the boardroom dynamics and interactions? Does gender play a role in these dynamics? How?
2. In what ways do you believe the other board members value you and your contributions? Is there a difference in how you are perceived between male and female board members?
3. Can you tell us about some strategies you adopted to make you and your contributions more valued by other board members?

V- Participation on Boards

1. What factors restrict your effective participation on the board? What enhances it? Are these the same or different for members of the opposite gender?
2. Describe the strategies you use to influence other board members. How are these strategies similar to/different from those you see used by other male or female board members?
3. Do you engage in any activities to make it easier for other women to join corporate boards?

VI- Closing

1. If you could change two things about your board experience, what would these be? (Probe: Do you have any regrets for joining the board?)
2. What advice would you give other people who are considering becoming a board member? Would this be different for men versus women?

We've reached the end of our planned questions, is there anything we missed or information you feel is important for us to know that we have not covered?

1.2. Interview protocol for chairperson of the board

We started our study by looking for companies in Kompass website; we found approximately 500 companies then we filtered them by size then we started picking the best ones in Lebanon with both male and female board members and chairpersons.

I. Demographics

1. Age
2. Marital status:
 - a. Career Stage upon marriage
 - b. If married, spouse occupation and job title
3. Number of children and ages
4. College major, highest education level achieved, professional designations
5. Elementary/high school type
6. country lived in longest before the age of 15

II. Current position

1. Describe the corporation(s) for which you are a Board Director or member (probe one Type of business, Size (Revenues, employees), type (national/global), Length of time in business)

III. Board access

1. From your expertise and knowledge of boards, what are the most important characteristics in selecting members? What makes board members valuable on a board? (probe for personal, cultural, network factors)
2. How do you personally select your board members? If it is any different than above, can you tell us about it?
3. Many discuss the importance of having diversity on the board. Is this important and if yes what does this mean to you? Can you tell us about some of the reasons? (probe on various institutional pillars: regulative, normative, mimetic) (probe: to what extent do you seek to increase the representation of women and other minorities on boards)?

IV. Board room dynamics and communication

1. How do you perceive the boardroom dynamics and interactions? Does gender play a role in these dynamics? How?
2. What is your communication style? How is it perceived by other male/female board members? Did you have to change/adjust your communication style in order to be more convincing?

3. Do you provide a formal or informal support network to board members? Can you tell us about it? Do men and women need different networks? Do they benefit equally from such support?

4.

V. Board members' contribution

1. In what ways do you feel that female board members contribute/add value to the board? Is this seen or valued differently from different stakeholders
2. Can you think of some factors that might be restricting female board members' access to boards and/ or their effective participation on the board? Or some other factors that might be enhancing their access and contribution?
3. Can you share with us a success story where a woman on board was influential and valued on board? What do you think led to this success?
4. Can you share with us a story where a woman was not influential on board or was negatively perceived by board members? Why do you think this happened?

VI. Closing

1. What advice would you give men and women who are considering becoming a board director for a corporation?

We've reached the end of our planned questions, is there anything we missed or information you feel is important for us to know that we have not covered?

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